

Who was John Calvin? 4: His ministry and effect.

We have explained the massive international influence of Calvin's Institutes, which continues to this day, but it is largely forgotten that the western world would not be as it is without Calvin. Some of the best state leaders were Calvinists, including King Edward VI. Many schools, seminaries, universities, libraries, books, magazines, and charitable works owe their origin or development to Calvin. Of his own Academy in Geneva John Knox said it was, 'the most perfect school of Christ on Earth since the days of the apostles.' Many religious movements, churches and even peoples were greatly influenced by him. Some characteristics of nations resulted from his theology, we have mentioned the Protestant work ethic that built certain prosperous societies, but Swiss neutrality, Elizabethan political power, Puritan ethics and spirituality, the work of Reformation in Scotland, England, America, and Holland plus the great 19th century missionary movement all owe a debt to Calvin. Other effects include parliamentary democracy, limited monarchy, civil and religious toleration, the rights of civil liberty, humanitarian aid, Christian culture and even scientific research. Just as Luther helped to develop modern German, so Calvin was instrumental in influencing modern French. I am told that students of Calvin's linguistic contribution have even been converted while studying the language of the Institutes. Yet certain supposed 'Christians' (usually Arminians and Dispensationalists) continue to pillory this godly man.

To summarise Calvin's ministry in few words we could say that he was first of all determined to expound a truly Biblical theology. He wanted to understand what God had revealed and share it simply with others. In doing this he was a brilliant communicator; he once said that 'the chief excellence of an expositor is lucid brevity'. He was God-centred in his works and sought to explain God's sovereignty and glory above all things. In his ministry he denied himself, even to the degree of damaging his health to serve others. He sought no glory or position of power, but merely wanted to serve God faithfully. James Packer summarises him best: 'Bible-centred in his method, God-centred in his outlook, Christ-centred in his message ... [with] a passion that God should be glorified' [Collected Shorter Writings, 4.162.].

It is really impossible to do justice to the contribution of Calvin's ministry in this small space. Notable theologians have claimed to be only able to skim the surface in a series of lectures on him, so great was his work. I would simply recommend reading his *Institutes* and see for yourself, or even just the short first edition now available as, *Truth For All Time*, by Banner of Truth. Perhaps only Martin Luther, the spearhead of the Reformation, came as close as having as great a godly influence as John Calvin.

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