

Eternal Security ~ Part 9

The Protestant Reformation and John Calvin ~ Part 2

In my last post, we began to explore the Protestant Reformation and John Calvin. In this post, we will continue to explore Calvin's influence on the Reformation and society in the sixteenth century and beyond.

Calvin's Teaching and Influence on Theology ¹

The Huguenot scholar Joseph Scaliger in the generation after Calvin described him as "alone among the theologians." Clearly he was the greatest theologian of his age. Yet he consistently tried to make the Scriptures, as interpreted by the Holy Spirit and experience, the source of his ideas. *"Let us not,"* Calvin admonished, *"take it into our heads either to seek out God anywhere else than in his Sacred Word, or to think anything about him that is not prompted by his Word, or to speak anything that is not taken from that Word."*

In the past some have said that the sovereignty of God was Calvin's central teaching. Today many Calvin scholars argue that he made no attempt to reduce the biblical message to any one central idea, but rather appreciated and retained the biblical teachings in their complexity, affirming, for example, both human responsibility and God's sovereign control, as well as other teachings that seem inconsistent when paired.

Behind everything that he wrote is the idea suggested earlier by Augustine of Hippo (345-430) that God created human beings for fellowship with Himself. Lacking that fellowship, they are miserable and disoriented. Thus Calvin began his *"Institutes of the Christian Religion"* by stressing that all wisdom comes from a knowledge of God and of ourselves. The God-man relationship was so basic for Calvin that he argued that in knowing God we learn of ourselves, and vice versa.

Knowledge meant much more to Calvin than intellectual exercise. Rather, theological knowledge requires a moral response by the whole human personality. The whole person, including mind and body, is engaged in the spiritual relationship. The one goal of that "knowing" experience is the worship of God in obedience and gratitude.

Calvin also emphasized that what we know about God is strictly limited to what God has revealed. He has revealed in Scripture only what is profitable for human beings to know for a covenant relationship with him. Consequently, Calvin taught that Believers should not engage primarily in theological speculation but in moral edification. Knowledge that does not lead to holiness is off course. The "why" of God's actions has not been revealed but remains a secret bound up in his inscrutable counsel. The Christian must simply affirm with the Bible that God is intimately connected with the universe and that He accomplishes *"all things according to the counsel of His will"* (Ephesians 1:11^{ESV})

Calvin's Teaching and Influence on Education and Church Government

In addition to theology, two areas in which Calvin made major contributions are education and church government. The excellence of his own educational training is attested by the fact that his writings have had a lasting effect on the French language. He is considered one of the creators of modern French prose. Perhaps more important, he encouraged the development of universal education. Calvin was convinced that for every person to be adequately equipped to *"rightly divide"* God's Word, he or she had to be educated in language and the humanities. To that end he founded an academy for Geneva's children, believing that all education must be fundamentally religious. The city's university grew out of the academy, linked to evangelical preaching and offering an education comparable to the finest in Europe. Some have called the University of Geneva Calvin's "crowning achievement."

¹ Most of the information in this post is taken from the "AMG Concise Church History" by John Hunt.

Calvin's ideas on church government, which have had a powerful effect on political theory in the West, are regarded by other scholars as his greatest contribution. The representative form of government he developed was organized so that basic decisions are made at the local level, monitored through a system of ascending representative bodies, culminating in a national "general assembly" with final authority. At each level, power is shared with the laity, not controlled exclusively by the clergy or administrative officials. In emergencies the local church can function without meetings of the upper-level bodies; in the midst of a hostile culture the church cannot be destroyed by silencing the minister. As a result, the Calvinist church was able to survive, even flourish, under adverse conditions. It experienced severe persecution in Holland under Spanish occupation, in France (except during brief periods of toleration), in England under Queen Mary, in Scotland, in Hungary, and elsewhere.

In my next post, we will tackle the actual tenets of **Calvinism**.