

# HERE WE STAND

*The Lives That Shaped the Reformation*

## John Calvin

### John Calvin (1509-1564)

#### Introduction

- Calvin, the final and arguably most influential Reformer, has a uniquely polarized legacy ("Calvinphobia" vs. "Calvinolatry")
  - Admirers (e.g., Spurgeon) call him near-perfect in theology and among history's greatest; critics (Swaggart, Durant, Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church) call him damning, blasphemous, and a "cruel dictator"
  - Goal: move past these extremes to a balanced look at who Calvin really was
- 

#### Early Beginnings

- Born 1509 in Noyon, France, to a rising Catholic family; mother died when he was 3-4; father Gerard worked for the local bishop and connections sent Calvin to the University of Paris at age 13
  - Father's church scandal/excommunication redirected Calvin from theology to law (opposite of Luther's path)
  - Trained as a humanist (*ad fontes*), mastering Latin, Greek, and Hebrew to study original sources
  - 1532 dissertation critiquing Erasmus's reading of Seneca flopped, leaving Calvin discouraged and at a dead end
  - Little is known about his conversion (unlike the expressive Luther); Calvin briefly describes it as God suddenly subduing and softening his stubborn mind
- 

#### On the Run (1534)

- Forced to flee France after the Cop affair; the 1534 Affair of the Placards sparked severe persecution of Protestants
  - Settled in Basel, producing a French Bible translation and the first edition of the Institutes (an instant bestseller)
  - Detoured through Geneva en route to Strasbourg and met fiery reformer William Farel
  - Farel urged the shy, reluctant Calvin to stay and pastor Geneva, even cursing him if he refused
  - Terrified, Calvin abandoned his plans and stayed to serve in Geneva
- 

#### Pastorate in Geneva (1536-1538)

- Calvin's first Geneva pastorate (until 1538) was marked by intense hostility, fueled by anti-French sentiment and resistance to Reformation practices

- Mobs rioted outside his house and threatened to drown him; Calvin described dreading Geneva above all places
  - On Easter 1538, Calvin and Farel refused to administer the Lord's Supper to a disorderly congregation, insisting pastors—not the council—governed the Table
  - The furious council expelled both men, freeing Calvin to head to Strasbourg as he'd wanted
- 

### Happy Years in Strasbourg (1538-1541)

- Wrote the second edition of the Institutes (showing his own genius) and his first commentary, on Romans
  - Married Idelette de Bure; lost their infant son and later Idelette herself, but raised her two children and lived amid his brother's large family
  - Formed a close, father-son-like bond with pastor Martin Bucer
  - Bucer shaped Calvin's views on church polity, worship (acapella psalm-singing), and church discipline—especially fencing the Lord's Table from unrepentant members
- 

### Return to Geneva (1541)

- In 1539, Cardinal Sadoletto urged Geneva to return to Catholicism, attacking Calvin and Farel as false teachers
  - Unable to find help elsewhere, Geneva's council turned to Calvin, who (encouraged by Bucer) wrote a famous, persuasive reply defending Reformed doctrine
  - The letter restored his reputation, and Geneva's council begged him to return
  - Reluctantly, Calvin agreed and went back to Geneva, where he'd remain for the rest of his ministry
- 

### Pastorate in Geneva pt.2

- Returning to Geneva in 1541, Calvin resumed preaching at St. Pierre exactly where he'd left off three years earlier, with no grievances aired
  - Preached *lectio continua* (verse-by-verse through books), often multiple times a week, without a manuscript, alternating NT on Sundays and OT on weekdays; over 2,500 sermons survive in transcription
  - Produced an enormous body of work: ~35 volumes of letters, plus catechisms, tracts, confessions, liturgies, and treatises
  - Wrote 50+ commentaries covering most of the Bible, prized for brevity and clarity; praised by Arminius and later historians as among the greatest biblical interpreters ever
- 

### Institutes of the Christian Religion

- The Institutes (1,800 pages) was Calvin's greatest achievement, giving Reformation ideas the systematic structure Luther and Zwingli never provided—earning him the title "architect of Reformed theology"
- Lloyd-Jones argued the Reformation needed a systematic theologian to survive, and Calvin filled that gap at a pivotal, fragmented moment for the movement

- The Institutes is notably pastoral (especially on prayer) and can be read devotionally; year-long reading plans exist for those wanting to work through it
  - Opens with its famous claim that knowledge of God and knowledge of self are inseparable—pushing back on modern "self-discovery" by arguing we only truly know ourselves through knowing God
  - Also addresses Scripture's clarity, truth, and sufficiency, arguing we know the Bible is God's Word through the Holy Spirit's internal testimony, not external proofs
- 

## Doctrines of Grace

- Predestination/election ("Calvinism") is a minor, non-original part of the Institutes—absent from the first edition and barely discussed in his catechisms—but flows from his high view of God and low view of man
  - Calvin held a monergistic view of salvation: spiritually dead sinners cannot cooperate in salvation; God alone effectually calls, saves, and preserves the elect
  - On the problem of hell, Calvin appealed to Romans 9 (the potter's right over the clay) and noted an asymmetry: God actively saves the elect but only passively gives the non-elect over to their sin; this is a Christian, not uniquely Calvinist, problem
  - Calvinism is often wrongly seen as anti-missions—Calvin's Geneva became a missionary hub via Geneva College (the "school of death"), sending 88+ pastors back to France, helping Reformed churches there grow from a handful to ~2,000 by 1564
  - Calvin also sent the first Protestant missionaries to Brazil in 1556, though the mission failed
- 

## Challenges to the Ministry

- Calvin worked relentlessly despite severe chronic health problems, remaining faithful throughout
  - His greatest internal opposition came from the Libertines, an antinomian faction claiming grace made lifestyle irrelevant
  - In 1553, Calvin physically shielded the Lord's Table from the unrepentant Libertine Berthelier, declaring he'd rather die than dishonor it
- 

## Servetus Affair (1553)

- The 1553 Servetus Affair is Calvin's most cited controversy: Servetus, a Spanish physician and anti-Trinitarian writer, was a wanted heretic across Europe
  - After early contact (including Servetus mocking Calvin's Institutes with critical annotations), Servetus fled to Geneva, where Calvin had him arrested
  - Calvin repeatedly visited him in prison urging repentance; he was not in political power, and Geneva's council—after consulting other Protestant cities, who unanimously recommended execution—ordered Servetus burned
  - Calvin had requested the more merciful option of beheading, which was rejected
  - Supporting the execution of a heretic reflected the near-universal view of the era, not a uniquely Calvinist failing
-

## Death

- Calvin died on May 27, 1564, at age 54 in Geneva, after a long decline from chronic illness (migraines, joint pain, likely tuberculosis)
- Preached his last sermon in early 1564, then withdrew from ministry but stayed mentally active and engaged through correspondence
- In his final days, friends and pastors visited him often; he remained humble, viewing himself as a sinner saved by grace rather than a figure worthy of honor
- Buried in an unmarked grave per his wishes, deflecting attention from himself to God