

Church History 101
Lesson 23
The Reformation Continues: John Calvin

Key Concepts: John Calvin (1509-1564) was one of the most important and influential theologians of the Reformation. He is credited with pioneering a new set of doctrines and church government. The churches that followed him would come to be known as Reformed (rather than Catholic or Lutheran). These churches include Reformed, Congregational and Presbyterian.

The Story: Calvin was born into a French Roman Catholic family. His parents initially desired that he study for the priesthood, but eventually decided he could make more money by being a lawyer, and so sent him to study law (1529). In 1533 however Calvin had a religious conversion in which he believed himself called to reform the church. His reforming activities at first caused him to hide from the authorities and then to flee from France to the Protestant city of Basel.

While in Basel, Calvin wrote the first edition of his Institutes of the Christian Religion. These volumes were intended to defend the Reformed faith and to serve as basic instruction for Christians. He would continue to update the Institutes throughout his life and they would form the theological foundation for all Reformed churches. Through a series of circumstances Calvin ended up in Geneva where he joined another reformer, William Farel. The next year, 1537, Calvin took up the duties of pastor, which included preaching (he would preach over 2,000 sermons), teaching, baptisms and weddings. Together, Calvin and Farel, drafted articles reorganizing the church. These included rules on communion (how to and how often to serve it), excommunication (who had the power and what were the rules), worship (what should the liturgy look like) and marriage. These rules still inform much of what Reformed churches do today.

After a brief exile in Strasberg (Calvin was not always popular), the Basel city council invited him back and agreed to his division of ministry into Pastors (to preach and administer the sacraments), Doctors (to teach), elders (to provide discipline) and deacons (to care for the poor and needy). They also agreed on a separation of powers between the church and the state, with the church only having power over religious matters. Calvin's return, was not greeted with enthusiasm by all in Geneva. There was a significant group of secular citizens who objected to his imposition of a strict code of religious/moral conduct. Because they ran the city council they could constrain his power, which they did for a period of about nine years. However in 1555 Calvin's followers elected a new council which supported him. From then until his death (1564), his authority was unquestioned.

The heart of Calvin's theology, as expressed in the Institutes, was Biblical concept of the Sovereignty of God. For Calvin, sovereignty meant that God had all power and did not share it with anyone or anything (for if God did share power then God could not be sovereign). This meant that everything that happened in the world happened as a direct result of the action of God. Thus there was no free will or even free choice. (None-the-less Calvin was clear that human beings were responsible for their sinful actions.) This lack of free will, or free choice, even extended into the arena of salvation. In a doctrine called Election, Calvin argued that some people are elected (chosen) by God for salvation, while others are not. This is the basis of predestination (meaning God sets our destination in the afterlife), a belief with which Presbyterians have long been associated. While this doctrine may seem odd to us, it was greeted by many as a comfort; a comfort because they could be assured of salvation whereas in the medieval Roman Church there were no guarantees.

Questions

1. Where do you see some of Calvin's reforms still at work in the Presbyterian Church today?
2. How would you describe the sovereignty of God?
3. Would you take comfort knowing that God has chosen you for salvation? Why or why not?