The Calvin 500 Series
The LEGACY OF JOHN CALVIN

HIS INFLUENCE ON THE MODERN WORLD

DAVID W. HALL
To all our friends around the world who helped make Calvin 500 possible; especially to Ambassador Faith Whittlesey, Guillaume Taylor, and the Parish Council of St. Pierre Cathedral, our gracious hosts in Geneva.
CONTENTS

A Chronology of John Calvin's Life     9

Ten Ways Modern Culture Is Different because of John Calvin     11
  1. Education: The Academy     13
  2. Care for the Poor: The Bourse     15
  3. Ethics and Interpretation of the Moral Law: The Decalogue     18
  4. Freedom of the Church: The Company of Pastors     20
  5. Collegial Governing: The Senate     22
  6. Decentralized Politics: The Republic     24
  7. Parity among All Professions: The Doctrine of Vocation     27
  9. Music in the Vernacular: The Psalter     31
       Epilogue     36

John Calvin: A Life Worth Knowing     43
       Calvin's Life     45
       Calvin's Friendships     66

7
Contents

Calvin’s Death  71
Epilogue: Humility  76

Tributes: Measuring a Man after Many Generations  83
Baptists  83
Anglicans  98
Independents  104
Methodists  106
Roman Catholic  110
Conclusion  111
A Chronology of John Calvin’s Life

1509  Born in Noyon (July 10)
1521  Enrolled in the College de Montaigu in Paris
1528–33 Studied law in Bourges and Orleans
1532  Published De Clementia (first book, a commentary on Seneca)
1533–34 Experienced a sudden conversion; fled Paris
1534  Resigned his Roman Catholic chaplaincy
1534–35 Resided in Basle
1536  Composed first edition of Institutes of the Christian Religion (March)
1536  Arrived (July) and settled in Geneva as pastor
1538–41 Exiled to Strasbourg (April); pastored Protestant exiles there
1540  Married Idelette de Bure
1541  Returned to Geneva (September 13); drafted his Ecclesiastical Ordinances
1542  Appointed to a committee to revise the Genevan Edicts
A Chronology of John Calvin's Life

Birth of Calvin's son (July 28), Jacques, who lived only two weeks
Published “The Form of Church Prayers,” an early Reformed liturgy

1543 Received a home near St. Pierre from Genevan civic leaders
Published The Bondage and Liberation of the Will; On the Necessity for Reforming the Church

1544 Published a Brief Instruction . . . Against the Anabaptists

1549 Death of Idelette Calvin; Theodore Beza relocated to Geneva

1550 Published Concerning Scandals

1558 Founded the Academy of Geneva (dedication service in June 1559)

1559 Revised and completed final edition of Institutes of the Christian Religion

1564 Death of Calvin (May 27)
Ten Ways Modern Culture Is Different because of John Calvin

An international celebration of the five hundredth anniversary of John Calvin’s birth (and the 450th anniversary of the final edition of his magisterial *Institutes of the Christian Religion*) will commence in 2009 (see [www.calvin500.org](http://www.calvin500.org) online for more information). For those who have heard little or primarily negative things about the Genevan Reformer, an obvious question might be “why?” A brief review of ten areas of culture that were irrevocably changed by the influence of Calvin and his band of brothers is in order. Love him or hate him, Calvin was a change agent—and one whose influence was for the better. The light Calvin brought to society made the world a fundamentally different place after his life’s work began to be displayed.

Some, in a day that was less prejudiced, thought that Calvin’s accomplishments were dramatic. Writing in the middle of the nineteenth century, Harvard Professor George Bancroft ranked Calvin among “the foremost of modern republican legislators,”
The Legacy of John Calvin

who was responsible for elevating the culture of Geneva into "the impregnable fortress of popular liberty, the fertile seed-plot of democracy." Bancroft even credited the "free institutions of America" as being derived "chiefly from Calvinism through the medium of Puritanism." Moreover, he traced the living legacy of Calvin among the Plymouth pilgrims, the Huguenot settlers of South Carolina, and the Dutch colonists in Manhattan, concluding: "He that will not honor the memory and respect the influence of Calvin knows but little of the origin of American liberty."

Calvinism, when all is over and done with, may be more worthy of international celebrations than many other movements. When various ideological movements throughout history are assessed, the Genevan Reformer's positive cumulative impact is greater than that of Rousseau, Nietzsche, Marx, and many other philosophers. Certainly, few if any ministers or theologians will make greater contributions to political, societal, or cultural change than did Calvin.

Careful thinkers and students of history may even find the quincentenary of Calvin's birth to be an opportune time to evaluate the correctness of C. S. Lewis's surprising comment that modern observers need to comprehend "the freshness, the audacity, and (soon) the fashionableness of Calvinism." That is a well-placed challenge. Moreover, that fashionableness to which Lewis refers may explain how and why even some of the most stridently anti-Calvinist thinkers of a later day—venomous enemies of Calvinism, actually, like Thomas Jefferson—would employ mottoes from the Calvinistic Huguenots of old to justify resistance to tyrants on American shores. Even if contemporary researchers remain studiously blind to Calvin's immense legacy, there may have been a day when his legacy

was far more apparent. We can be forgiven if our concerted aim is to rehabilitate an image that actually gave us much good.

There are two kinds of leaders: (1) those who predict future changes, and (2) those who change future predictions. The first type sees trends and quickly claims a place on the leading edge of change, thereby fitting in with those inevitable trends. That is the kind of leader who senses the direction of a parade and runs to be at the head of the procession. The second type—and Calvin was certainly one of these—observes the trajectory but determines that it needs correction. Calvin was an event-maker who changed the parade route and left a very large imprint on Western history. Below are ten short summaries of some of the changes produced as a result of his legacy. As you will see, life after Calvin was irrevocably different than it had been before him.

If, indeed, the reader has a higher appreciation for Calvin after beginning with his accomplishments in this section, he or she would do well to continue on to the brief sketch of Calvin’s life in part 2 followed by tributes from some unexpected quarters in part 3 below.

1. Education: The Academy

Calvin broke with medieval pedagogy that limited education primarily to an aristocratic elite. His Academy, founded in 1559, was a pilot program in broad-based education for the city. Although Genevans had sought for two centuries to establish a university, only after Calvin’s settlement there did a college finally succeed.3