



JOHN CALVIN: HIS LIFE AND INFLUENCE





John Calvin has had his detractors ever since his own day in the mid-sixteenth century right down to the approach to the 500th anniversary of his birth in the early twenty-first century. But these are mostly opponents of the gospel of Jesus Christ or people who have not taken the time to understand his writings or to get to know the man. Dr. Reymond tells the story of Calvin's life and thought in a compact and compelling way that will serve to acquaint readers with the warm human character of Calvin and make them want to study his writings. His description of Calvin's masterful statement at the Lausanne Disputation of 1536 is by itself worth the price of the book.

*Dr. William S. Barker
Professor of Church History, Emeritus
Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

Theologian Robert Reymond (author of *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*) sets forth the life of John Calvin in four chapters (originally four lectures given at the Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida). Reymond's book is succinct and comprehensive, appreciative and probing, historical and theological, scholarly and pastoral. Especially valuable is Reymond's treatment of the burning of Servetus in which he summarizes William Cunningham's five considerations that ameliorate to some degree Calvin's involvement in the tragedy – and adds eight further points of his own. There are three appendices including a useful annotated list of recommended Calvin biographies.

*Dr. David B. Calhoun,
Professor of Church History,
Covenant Theological Seminary, St Louis, Missouri*

This refreshing new book about John Calvin, from a highly respected author and educator at Knox Theological Seminary, deserves the serious attention of all who call themselves Presbyterians. Dr. Reymond sheds new light on a famous and familiar name. His writing style is scholarly and authoritative, but at the same time anecdotal and intensely interesting reading. It belongs in every church library where access is afforded to theologian and layman alike.

*Dr. D. James Kennedy,
Senior Minister,
Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, Fort Lauderdale, Florida*





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Robert L. Reymond



CHRISTIAN FOCUS





Robert L. Reymond is Emeritus Professor of Systematic Theology at Knox Theological Seminary, Fort Lauderdale Florida. Prior to Knox, Dr. Reymond taught seven years in the Graduate School of Religion in Bob Jones University and 22 years at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis. He has lectured in Korea, Japan, England, Scotland, Israel, Jamaica, Malawi, and South Africa, and has served pastorates in Tennessee, Georgia, Missouri, and Illinois. He has authored numerous books including *John - Beloved Disciple* (ISBN 1-85792-628-5), *Paul - Beloved Disciple*, (ISBN 1-85792-497-5) and *Jesus - Divine Messiah* (ISBN 1-85792-802-4).

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DEDICATION

To
William Mackenzie,
Publisher of Christian Focus Publications, who
—like Thomas Platter and Balthasar Ladius of Basle in 1536,
Wendelin Rihel of Strasbourg in 1539, 1543, and 1545,
Jean Gerard of Geneva in 1550, and
Robert Stevens (Estienne) of Geneva in 1553 and 1559,
who published the several Latin editions of John Calvin’s
Institutes of the Christian Religion—
has published in our times the works of numerous authors
who stand in the tradition of the great Genevan Reformer,
I dedicate with appreciation
this book.





PREFACE

This monograph contains with some minor revisions and additions the four popular lectures that I gave to a large audience at the Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida on consecutive Wednesday evenings in February 2002.

Just as Abraham Kuyper, when invited to give the Stone Lectures at Princeton University in 1898, “could not hesitate a moment as to my choice of subject,” namely, the subject of Calvinism,¹ so also I, having been granted my choice of topics for the series by the minister in charge of the four evening meetings, in less than twenty-four hours of reflection chose for my lecture topic the life and influence of John Calvin, the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformer, both because of his immeasurable (and continuing) historical and theological influence on the world and because the average twenty-first-century Christian knows very little about him and all too often what they do know or have heard about him has been badly distorted. The words “Calvin” and “Calvinism” evoke ideas of the “reign” of a religious dictator in sixteenth-century Geneva or perhaps of God “manipulating” his creatures either to heaven or to hell.

So from lecture material for my course, “Calvin’s *Institutes*,” that I offer at Knox Theological Seminary, I wrote the four lectures, taking my original audience on a journey through Calvin’s intellectual and spiritual

¹Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 12.





development, first from his youth, then through young manhood, then to the brilliant, energetic young Reformer that he became during his first Geneva period, and finally to the maturer Reformer into which he developed, first at Strasbourg, and then during his second Geneva period. In connection with this last period I addressed head-on Calvin's part in the most significant blight on Protestant Geneva's reputation, namely, the burning of Michael Servetus.

It will be obvious to my readers who are familiar with the Calvin literature that I have "fished in many waters" for the factual information contained herein. I make no pretense that this work plows totally new ground unless it be in the selection and arrangement of the material. Rather, it attempts, as the title implies, to introduce the reader who is unfamiliar with Calvin to this amazing Frenchman and his thought and major accomplishments. I only request that the Calvin scholar who might honor me by reading this monograph would remember that no author can say everything he would like to say about Calvin in four hour-long lectures.

I have tried to give credit in the footnotes to those Calvin biographers who have made some unique observation about him or who have reported some interesting detail about Calvin beyond those that all his biographers record. To keep the lectures "user-friendly" for the theological beginner I have placed where I could the more technical information in the footnotes. Of course, I did not read the informational footnotes when I delivered these lectures to their original audience, but readers should definitely read them. In my opinion, they contain much valuable information, especially about other prominent reformers of the time.

I offer these expanded lectures now to the broader Christian reading public in the hope that, as the Reformed world approaches the fifth centennial celebration of Calvin's birth on July 10, 2009, this remarkable Frenchman's life





and ministry will challenge Protestant Christians today to take more interest in their historical heritage and to read for themselves “the *opus magnum* of Christian theology”² and the most influential systematic theology ever written, namely, John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.³



²John Murray, “Introduction,” to Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947), 1.

³Because of its freshness and footnotes I recommend Ford Lewis Battles’ translation of Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill and published simultaneously in 1960 as volumes XX and XXI in The Library of Christian Classics by the Westminster Press in the U. S. A. and the S. C. M. Press in Great Britain. Henry Beveridge’s 1845 translation for the Calvin Translation Society, republished by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company in 1947, is also a fine, trustworthy translation.

