

Teacher, Pastor, and Brother in Christ:  
Reflections upon Calvin's Theology, Ministry and Life,  
and their Importance for the Church Today.

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Submitted to:

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John Calvin has been, without a doubt, along with Martin Luther, the most famous reformer and, therefore, a figure and symbol of the Reformation Movement. The Reformed church is aware that since the early stages of his life, Calvin arose as a prominent theologian, and later, as a pious pastor. Nevertheless, because of this iconic character, sometimes we forget to speak of him as something else. After his conversion, around the year 1533, Calvin can also be acknowledged as our brother in Christ. And all three of these remain open conversations among Christians from the academic world to the local church pews. Therefore, I am convinced that John Calvin is still today quite crucial for the theological discourse at least in each every one of these areas.

*Teacher: Calvin's Theology Under Academic Scrutiny*

As we are celebrating this year the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Synod of Dordrecht, it might seem accurate to remember that it did not take even a century for the newly established Reformed Church to see the whole Calvinistic system of theology being attacked by those who followed Jacobus Arminius' teachings. This old debate continues to collect its toll from Protestantism even today. Now, 400 years later, far from having every theological issue settled, more voices have tried to enter the conversation.

The uprising of the so-called New Atheism, the Liberation Theology in Latin America, the philosophical theses of Molinism, among other views, are regularly bringing forth efforts from their representatives and scholars to present theological systems which are often at odds with Calvinism. Thus, Calvinists need to continue to develop cogent arguments both in favor of Calvinism as the true biblical system for theology, especially in topics such as soteriology, God's sovereignty, and human free will; and against other systems, as the ones mentioned, clearly revealing their inconsistencies, fallacies, and shortcomings.

Along with these debates taking place in the academic and theological arena, we ought not to forget that we are living an era marked by the ease with which information is obtained. Hence, every single day, more and more people are coming face to face with an enormous quantity of different worldviews which carry on different theologies with them.

Because of these all, I am persuaded that Calvinists are to engage in this kind of conversations not only from seminary classrooms and dissertation works, but also from the pulpit, from bible studies, and even web blogs as well. I am not saying with this that the survival of sound doctrine depends ultimately on Calvinists doing something for rescuing the church from the '*claws of heresy*'. I am entirely restful in the truth that it is Christ who builds His church, and that the gates of hell will not prevail against it (*Matthew 16:18*). However, it is also Christ who gave us His Holy Spirit through whom we receive power (*Acts 1:8*) to display gifts for the building of His church (*1 Corinthians 12:1-11*). And we are called to be faithful stewards of these gifts.

This means that, while error or heresy still exist and bring trouble into the church, God will raise up and enable faithful men to give a sound response for His glory. Also, this implies that there still need to be men who are committed to studying Calvin's teachings and theology, and even perhaps expounding in some doctrines for which Calvin didn't write as much as we would wish he had.

*Pastor: Calvin's Ministry in Geneva as a Model for the Reformed Church Today*

Alongside with his teachings, better known by us through his *Institutes*, Calvin was also a churchman and a pastor. And while his theology still is something that theologians should be occupied with, we need to remember that this theology naturally derives and manifests (for Calvin, at least) in a sound and biblical ecclesiology. This includes ministry practices of all sorts, from worship liturgy, to loving discipline application, and from true expository preaching up until the developing of new ministers as Calvin was engaged at the Genevan Academy. Hence, it is clear for me that Calvin still has very much to teach the Christendom in America and Latin America, where Calvinistic soteriology

might be enough for calling a church “Reformed,” about the true meaning of what is it to be a Reformed minister.

The pastoral mood of Calvin’s writings, both in his Institutes and in his Commentaries, also perceived in some of his (later) correspondence, display the heart of a man who loves his Savior so profoundly, that he cannot do otherwise with his Savior’s people: the church. This is something that ministers both within and outside reformed circles would do good to remember, and for future generations of pastors to be trained in.

With the blessings of technology, which made available for the laypeople to study directly under theologians like Dr. Richard Pratt Jr., Dr. R.C. Sproul, Dr. John Gerstner, Dr. John MacArthur, and Dr. John Piper, among others; it also came the curse of a generation of young men who have a more keen aspiration and more preoccupied to make themselves known, than that of making Christ’s name known among others. Thus, young men are filling seminaries, learning theory, and going back to churches with no desire to serve at all, particularly when this service requires self-denial from them or giving up some aspirations. We, young *want-to-be theologians*, often forget that Calvin loved the church so dearly, that he renounced to his long-life desire and dream to be a settled scholar at Basel to devout himself in all love and kindness to the people of Geneva.

As Martin Bucer took on Calvin a young man and turned him into a loving pastor, so we would do good in letting Calvin take this young generation and teach her how to love and serve the church.

There are people and institutions out there today making these kinds of efforts, thus, manifesting how Calvin is still vital in the developing and training of young pastors. I would like to mention Dr. Thomas D. Hawkes and his book named *Pious Pastors* as an example of this.

*Brother: Calvin’s Character and the History of the Church*

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*Brother: Calvin's Character and History of the Church*

Finally, we do want to remember Calvin as our brother in Christ. This implies that, as we do, he also had struggles and often erred in various ways.

For instance, at first, it was surprising for me to encounter Platonic phrases in his *Institutes* such as the body referred to as "*the prison of the soul.*" Now, we do know by the rest of his theology that Calvin did have a high view of the physical body and longed for the final day in which resurrection would take place. But still, we also need to recognize that he was not perfect even in the way he expressed himself at times. Or, what are we to think about the promptness and imprudence with which Calvin often uttered harsh letters against other people in his first years of ministry? What are we to say to defend our hero from the arrogant tones in which he did refer to people that had spoken of him so kindly such as Peter Kuntz? Not even Calvin himself would claim innocence from these accusations, and neither should we. Reading about Calvin having these immature attitudes, or about him publishing his *Epistola duae* against the advice of Capito, which perhaps speak of him as the first Stage-cage Calvinist, may lead us into different directions.

First, we may conclude the following: Calvin is not perfect. He never was, and this is good for the church. Calvin also was in the process of sanctification. He required and yearned for the gospel as well. He needed to repent and apologize now and then. Calvin, as well as we, was a creature dependent upon his Creator. These truths will help us de-attach from him and prevent us from making our brother a god.

Furthermore, all these remind us about the importance of studying church history and its characters. The more we keep ourselves from studying what truly happened, the more tempted we will be to turn our heroes into idols. At the same time, analyzing biographies such as Calvin's may help us cheer up, and rejoice that that same God who changed the arrogant young Frenchman into a godly hero of our faith, is also working in our lives, and turning us into the image, not of Calvin, but of Christ.

Hence, I am convinced and sustain, that as long as there are deep questions to be answered, loving pastors to be trained and fellow brothers struggling with sin and suffering and bearing with sanctification in their lives, Calvin's theology, life, and ministry are and will continue to be relevant, and worthy of being mentioned, studied and taught by the current theological dialogue both in the academy and in the church.

Lastly, we ought to remind ourselves that Calvin's teachings, life, and ministry have always had a bigger end which is beyond itself: they present Christ, as sovereignly given to the elect as propitiation by the Father, and with whom the church is eternally united through the Spirit. And this theme, the gospel theme, will always be relevant.