

## Martin Luther and John Calvin

Martin Luther and John Calvin, the two key leaders of the 16th century Reformation, were men of like faith, totally committed to God and His Word. The words from Ps. 143:2 "Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before you," reveal the core of their faith. Although Luther and Calvin were well known, they never met or spoke a word to each other: Neither was there a regular correspondence between them. Both leaders' influence is still felt throughout the world, yet the general interest has been more on Luther than Calvin. Luther is seen as the lone warrior heroically standing against the arrayed forces of the Roman Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire. Luther gained a more sympathetic image than Calvin because of his personal characteristics. Of all the leaders of the Reformation, Calvin's reputation has often been maligned and his views misrepresented.

### Luther the Man

Martin Luther was born in 1483 in Eisleben in Upper Thuringa (Germany), the son of a tough and industrious farmer-turned-miner. He has been portrayed as an outgoing man, living, praying, preaching, eating and drinking with zest and enthusiasm. He was quick to anger as well as to laughter. This perception is based on carefully kept contemporary records compiled in *Table Talk* of his informal conversations at mealtimes with students, guests, and friends. Frequently he said or wrote what he later came to regret, but once said, he refused to retract or retreat. At the same time, he was a sensitive man, moved by beauty of God's creation. He was also a prolific author. His booklets, tracts, and writings for special occasions and issues can fill a library. But the criticisms that have been consistently voiced against Luther came as a result of his own writings. For instance, in 1525, he wrote a fierce tract against the German peasants, who had fused his religious message with their own economic, political, and social demands and had risen up in rebellion. He did not mince words. With sharp language and boldness, Luther attacked the invasion of theology by philosophy. Some of the philosophers were referred to as "those grubs the philosophers," and he called Aristotle the "rancid philosopher." His 1543 work, *On the Jews and Their Lies*, has been blamed for either inaugurating or exacerbating German anti-Semitism. Henri Rondet says about Luther: "The father of the Reformation is not a systematizer. He [thinks] intuitively, he is a 'prophet', a tumultuous torrent, he loves crude images, he works his thought in paradoxes, and one commits a serious error by taking what he writes always literally."

Luther had a difficult time in his youth. There are repeated references, throughout his later writings, to his sufferings and deep soul agonies. He also had bouts of severe depression. He was searching for spiritual peace, but didn't find it until after a long study and struggle. He came to understand that salvation came not through works, but through grace and by faith (Rom. 1:17). His rediscovery of Pauline/Augustinian theology became the foundation of the Reformation as he declared that salvation was not something bought or earned but the free gift of a just and merciful God. In 1519, Luther

underwent what he called his "tower experience," when he suddenly became convinced of the truth of the certainty of the gospel - the unforgettable experience of switching from despair and uncertainty to true faith and conviction. This experience was decisive in his life, and dramatically symbolizes his discovery of the Gospel. Although his "tower experience" planted the seed for the Reformation, the event that brought him into open conflict with the prelates and later the pope was the scandalous sale of indulgences. The latter were used to obtain funds for the rebuilding of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome.

In matters of faith, Luther built on the foundation of Scripture. Yet he also put stress on personal experience. He leaves the impression that he ordered his summary of Christian doctrine in accordance with the despair-faith patterns of his own personal experience. In other words, a theologian is one who doesn't only use Scripture, but also teaches from what he has experienced in life.

## **Calvin the Man**

To understand John Calvin's works we must recognize the time and the place in which he lived. He was of the 16th century and not of the twenty-first. He was a second-generation Reformer, born in 1509 in Noyon, in northern France, twenty-five years after Luther (1483). He did not leave France until he was twenty-five. He considered himself a Frenchman and maintained a deep interest and concern for the welfare of his compatriots until the end of his life.

When Calvin came on the scene, the Middle Ages were nearing their end. Consequently, he straddled the border of an old and a new age. His struggles against the church of Rome were not new. He has been called the "Genevan Reformer". But, in fact, Calvin did not even bring the Reformation to Geneva; it had accepted the Reformation even before he had arrived. By the time he published his *Institutes* in 1536, he was only one of the many who advocated reform. This accounts for the way he dealt with the questions he faced. In an impressive manner he confronted society with the message of Scripture for every area of life.

He had no intention of founding a new church and a new organization; he claimed to be doing no more than to restore the face of the early church as one cleans and restores an old painting. Calvin passionately sought for the restoration of the Church Catholic of the Apostles and the Fathers, and he sought to realise this in the unity of the Church of Europe, other than that one which held allegiance to Rome. During his ministry in Geneva, for more than thirty years, he developed a reputation as a systematic and organized leader both in practical terms (as in how to set up a church and a consistory), and theologically because his famous *Institutes for the Christian Religion*, provided a framework for readers to understand the Scriptures from the Calvinist perspective.

Many think of Calvin as a cold, judgmental, and inflexible theocrat. The 19th century historian, John Fiske described Calvin as "the constitutional lawyer of the Reformation, with vision as clear, with head as cool, with soul as dry, as any old solicitor in rusty

black ...His sternness was that of the judge who dooms a criminal to the gallows." But historical evidence shows that Calvin attracted many, varied, and warmly attached friends who spoke of the sensitiveness and the charm that were beneath his shy and withdrawn manner in public life. And judging by his correspondence, he was a caring man. If one thing stands out especially from Calvin's letters, it is his concern for people and their salvation. He aimed to revive believers who were in a fallen state. He could not share in their failure, but he urged them to leave the past to God, who would wipe clean the soiled page with His forgiveness, and to face the future with confidence, asking God for His strength. He corresponded with kings, princes and potentates of the world. "It is a great matter to be a king," Calvin writes to the young King of England, Edward VI, "but I am sure you count it far greater to be a Christian." And there was no religious leader of any importance in the whole of Europe with whom Calvin didn't correspond. He also wrote to prisoners and martyrs. His letters encouraged them, gave answers to the false charges of their adversaries, opened a perspective of the heavenly kingdom, and assured them that no drop of blood would be shed in vain.

As a second generation Reformer, Calvin had not only to make a sharp distinction between his theological outlook and the church of Rome, but he also had to distinguish his view of Protestantism from preexisting ones. Calvin did not call himself a lawgiver nor a prophet nor an apostle. He wanted to lead the way to Christ – a preacher, a pastor. His great learning was combined with an intense love for God. He wrote, "There is no religion without faith, and no true piety without the love for God (*Institutes* ch. I, 2,1). The strength of Calvin's theology is in its Scriptural approach. His aim was the pure interpretation of the Word of God. Fresh and profound were his insights, given with lucid precision evident in all his writings. Predestination was a cornerstone of his theology, but it also became a huge stumbling block. During his lifetime, this doctrine was resisted and the resistance never ceased. But the more his view was criticized, the more determined Calvin was to defend it. For Calvin, predestination was the realization that salvation cannot be made dependent on human decisions. Unlike Luther, Calvin advocated the separation of church and state. He did not recognize any right of the state to interfere with the affairs of the church. Luther, on the other hand, recognized the ruler of a state as the supreme bishop.

Ever since his death in 1564, and indeed even before it, the name and theology of John Calvin have aroused intense feelings and emotions. To some, he is a great hero. To others, he is anathema. The very fact that Calvin has been much studied and attracted so much attention speaks of the significance of his place in theology and Church history. Calvin is still known and discussed today, precisely because his ideas took root and spread, first throughout Europe, and then worldwide. The polemical passages in his *Institutes* and other writings have abiding value because Calvin always based his arguments on the Holy Scriptures. His concern was the exposition and true meaning of the Word of the Lord (cf. ch. II, 5,19).

## **Calvin and Luther**

Calvin and Luther may have been contemporaries, but that does not obliterate the fact that there was a great difference in age of more than 25 years. When Luther nailed his well-known theses against the selling of indulgences to the door of the Wittenberg Church in 1517, Calvin was only eight years old. When Calvin's *Institutes* were published in Basle in 1536, and he began to make a name for himself, Luther was already past the age of 50 with only one decade ahead of him. And in 1546, the year of Luther's death, Calvin was in the heat of the struggle at Geneva while the period of his triumph and spreading influence was only beginning.

Calvin was indebted to Luther. He repeatedly showed his deep respect for Luther without feeling duty-bound to withhold criticism of some of the teachings of Luther in which he was in disagreement. He recognized Luther as a special servant of God. He called him "An excellent ambassador for Christ." The two Reformers were of different nationalities. Luther was every inch a German, while Calvin on the other hand was French. Both of them had mastered Latin, yet neither of them used Latin exclusively. Each one of them composed an important part of his writing in his mother tongue. Consequently, to both men, a large percentage of their writings remained mutually inaccessible. Calvin broke with Rome and joined the movement, which already had been in existence for more than fifteen years, and had already made Europe feel its ground swell. Luther did not break away from Rome; he was, rather, driven out. He was excommunicated after being called to retract. Calvin, who began writing nearly twenty years after, did not have to face the question of separation. The breach was a fact. He simply knew that Rome persecuted "Lutherans," that she handed them over to the state to be burned, and that she accused them falsely of subversion.

Luther and Calvin appreciated each other's work. In a letter to Bucer in Strasbourg in 1539, Luther sent his regards to Calvin. He mentioned that he had learned of a few of Calvin's writings. The *Institutes* was probably one of them. It is true that in many respects there is no difference between Calvin's ideas and that of Luther's, but it is not true that he is only a duplicate of Luther. Calvin had Luther as a starting point, and without difficulty, he remained loyal to his great predecessor. But at the same time, he also surpassed him, especially in his view of the Lord's Supper and church organization. In the history of church and culture, he has an independent place next to Luther.

For Calvin, Luther was the first, the pioneer of the Reformation. He defended Luther, describing his work as the work of God. When Calvin addressed the Diet of Speier in 1543, demonstrating the necessity of a reformation, he declared that it was not the work of human beings: "God roused Luther and the others, who carried the torch ahead, in order to recover the way of salvation; and by whose service our churches were founded and established."

For Luther, justification of faith was the shibboleth of the Reformation, but for Calvin it was the fear of the Lord, living in the presence of God in every area of life. He opposed the privatization of the faith, and refused to compromise with Rome. What then was the key difference between Luther and Calvin? It was not the doctrine of predestination.

There was little difference between Luther and Calvin here. In fact, it was also taught by other Reformers. The sacrament of the Lord's supper was a key difference between him and Luther.

## **The Lord's Supper Controversy**

Against Calvin, Luther taught the real presence in the Lord's Supper. Luther did not agree with the Roman Catholic dogma of transubstantiation, which teaches that "In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist 'the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, *the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained*'.... It is by the conversion of the bread and wine into Christ's body and blood that Christ becomes present in this sacrament" (p. 383 f. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*). Luther taught instead the doctrine of consubstantiation. In his *Small Catechism*, he defined the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper as "The true body and blood of our Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, for us Christians to eat and to drink." Its purpose, he continued, "is shown us by these words, 'Given and shed for you for the remission of sins.'...For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation." Luther stated that "Even though a knave takes or distributes the Sacrament, he receives the true body and blood of Christ, just as truly as he who [receives or] administers it in the most worthy manner. For it is not founded upon the holiness of men, but upon the Word of God."

Calvin criticized Luther's view because it involves a localization of Christ's presence. In a letter to Martin Bucer in 1538 he wrote regarding Luther, "How foolishly he erred when he stated that the bread is the body itself." He also wrote to the Council of Geneva stating that he could not change his mind about Luther's view as he didn't want to betray the truth.

Calvin affirmed the presence of the living Christ in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper by the action of the Holy Spirit. Despite the vast distance of space between us and the ascended Christ, we are united with Him through the hidden power of the Holy Spirit. Calvin believed that Christ was "truly and efficaciously" present in the Lord's Supper, but in a spiritual sense, and through the mysterious intervention of the Holy Spirit, the communicant partakes spiritually of Christ's body" (cf. *Institutes IV, 17, 18*). He said at the Synod of Berne (1537), "Thus we must recognize that his Spirit is the bond of our participation with him, in such a way that he truly feeds us on the substance of our Lord's flesh and blood, to give us by sharing in them life and immortality. This communion of his flesh and blood Christ offers in his holy supper under the symbols of bread and wine, and he presents this to all who celebrate it duly in accordance with his lawful institution." Neither Luther nor Calvin changed their minds. For sound Scriptural reasons, Calvin could not accept Luther's view. This break with the Lutherans deeply hurt Calvin.

## **Conclusion**

Luther and Calvin were not perfect Reformation heroes without major flaws or faults. They were human and subject to errors, wrong-doing and sin as we are. They had their differences, but never lost their appreciation for each other. In a letter which Calvin wrote to Luther, but which he never received or read, for Luther's friend Melachton, did not think it advisable to deliver it to him, Calvin asked Luther's opinion about a certain matter which gave him much trouble. Beautiful and magnificent is the ending of this letter. "For I would preferably converse with you personally, not only on this matter, but also on other matters. But that which is not granted to us on earth, will presently, I hope, be imparted to us in the Kingdom of God. Hail to you, most excellent man, servant of Christ, and honoured father. May God bless you always through his Spirit until the end, to the mutual well being of his church."

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