



## Three Reformers Used by God

### Martin Luther

Martin Luther was born in Germany in 1483. He was only nine when Christopher Columbus discovered America. When he was a young student his schoolmaster made a "prediction" saying that one of his students would one day turn the world upside down. The schoolmaster did not know that Luther would do that and become famous.

Most people during Luther's time had very little education and were filled with fear. They believed that God would punish them for every mistake they made. Luther, one of them, was in much fear of God's anger. One day lightning struck a tree near him and he was so frightened that he made his vow to become a monk. At the age of 22 he entered the monastery to devote his life to prayer and study. He made much effort to please God perfectly and earn God's forgiveness. He needed to do many things in order to please God, such as scrubbing more floors, begging more money for the monastery, spending hours in long prayers and studying the Bible seriously.

Luther also thought that the life and work of a monk was God-pleasing and would earn him special merit with God. But in all these things, he found little peace of mind and soul. He fasted and beat his body with whips in order to prove the sincerity of his deep sorrow for his sins.

During his trip to Rome he came to a Roman Catholic church and he decided to climb a long stairway on his hands and knees. The church claimed that this stairway had been moved from Jerusalem and was the one Jesus had climbed on His way to His cross. On each hard step Luther said a prayer, asking God to release his dead grandfather from purgatory to heaven but he thought this would not answer his prayer and he became unsatisfied.

Pope Leo X wanted to build in Rome, the largest and most beautiful church in the world, but he needed lots of money for this project. So he decided to sell "indulgences" to people who worried about purgatory. The "indulgences" which the pope planned to sell were slips of paper promising the buyers less time in purgatory for themselves or their beloved ones. One Catholic monk named Tetzel, as "a good salesman," started selling indulgences. Luther was so disgusted with the idea of selling indulgences that he preached against it and wrote the famous 95 theses (reasons) why Tetzel's sale was wrong. He nailed them on the church door so everyone could read them. It happened on October 31, 1517, and shook the church world.

However, he still struggled to search for an answer to his fear of God's anger and to earn God's forgiveness of sins through good works. One day he was reading the Bible and the words of Romans 1:17, '*The righteous shall live by faith.*' really hit him. He finally realized that by faith alone he could receive God's gift of forgiveness. He was at last freed from his old fears that he needed good works to earn salvation and became born again.

Luther married Katie, a former nun when he was 42 and they had six children. He translated the Bible into the German language, the language of his people.

He was excommunicated from the Church for his "heresy," claiming that the majority of the church's teachings on salvation by works were false. His famous words, "*Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen.*" were spoken in front of the emperor with princes, noblemen, bishops, and scholars who tried to persuade him to recant his beliefs.

He died in 1546 at the age of 62. The greatest discovery he ever had from the Bible was justification by faith only that turned the world upside down. If it were not for Luther we would be

under Roman Catholic rule today! To God be the glory for His free grace to give us righteousness through faith, not by good works. Amen!

## **John Calvin**

John Calvin is a very famous person in the history of the Christian world. Some people love him, while others hate him. He is very well-known, and in this article I will try to introduce him to you.

On July 10, 1509, John Calvin was born in Noyon, France. He was one of six children. Martin Luther was an unconverted monk, aged 26, at the time when Calvin was born. Luther just started the Reformation by nailing the 95 theses when Calvin was about eight years old. Calvin was destined to become a Catholic priest but chose instead to study law with his father's encouragement because his father was about to be excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church. When he was nineteen years old he earned the degree of Doctor of Laws.

Calvin had already experienced his 'unexpected' conversion in 1533, like Paul's unexpected conversion on the way to Damascus. It was then that Calvin grasped Protestantism. At the age of 26 or 27, he wrote *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. This book has been called the most influential and most important book of the Reformation. One day Calvin made a trip to Frankfurt, Germany, to meet Philip Melancthon, the great friend of Martin Luther. He had never met Luther but he esteemed Luther greatly, and Luther had a very high opinion of Calvin. God used Luther to begin the Reformation and God used Calvin to carry the Reformation through.

*Dr. Francis Nigel Lee wrote about Calvin's health saying, "his health was poor, throughout his life. A chronic insomniac, he averaged but two hours of sleep per night. He ate little, and had severe indigestion. He often suffered from the most violent attacks of migraine. He contracted asthma, hemorrhoids, intermittent fevers, and arthritis of an almost unbearably painful nature. Yet he worked incessantly, against all odds, until in 1564, at 55 years of age, he finally succumbed to tuberculosis."*

On his way to Strasbourg, Germany, in 1536, he just wanted to spend one night in Geneva, but the man named William (Guillaume) Farel persuaded Calvin to stay and assist in the city's Reformation movement. Calvin declined because he wanted to continue his studies in Germany but Farel once said to Calvin, *"I declare to you, in the name of God Almighty – your studies are an excuse! If you do not now give yourself to this work with us – God will curse you! For then, you will be seeking yourself – and not Christ!"* Sure enough, Calvin trembled and said, *"...by a terrible forswearing from Farel – as if God from heaven violently grabbed me with His hand."* Both Farel and Calvin stayed in Geneva (at that time Geneva was an ungodly city) but for a short time both were forced to leave because of the non-reformed city council's political and religious reasons.

So Calvin (aged 31) went to Strasbourg and met his future wife named Idelette, a widow with two children. Idelette was a daughter of an Anabaptist preacher or leader. They were married in 1539. Idelette bore him three children, but they all died in infancy. However, Calvin acted as a father to her two children from her first marriage. Idelette died in 1549 after only ten years of marriage to John. He never remarried.

Calvin returned to Geneva in 1541 after the Genevan people begged him to help again in reforming the church. He stayed in that city for the rest of his life. He accomplished much there. For example, he supported good hospitals, a proper sewage system, protective rails on upper stories to keep children from falling from tall buildings, special care for the poor and handicapped people and the introduction of new industries. He sought to improve the life of the city's citizens in many ways.

Calvin also established the famous Geneva Academy. It became a model for many other Protestant universities of later years. Theodore Beza, one of his closest friends, was the first professor and also Calvin's successor. During the first year the school already had 900 students from all over Europe. This school, where Calvin himself taught theology was highly regarded by the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism, and John Knox who said, *"the almost perfect school since the days of the apostles."*

Dr. Lee also wrote: *"Calvin preached 200 sermons annually, and also gave a further 200 lectures and Bible studies each year. Thousands of his letters have been lost; yet his collected works still fill 59 weighty volumes."*

He died on May 27, 1564. His body was wrapped in a white sheet and placed in a simple wooden coffin. There were no speeches at his grave and no stone marks it. Two months later people did not know exactly where he had been buried. No doubt, Calvin's Reformed theology has greatly influenced the Protestant world. Dr. Lee also said, *"Like the righteous Abel of old, Calvin too — though dead, still keeps on speaking"* (Hebrews 11:4).

## **John Calvin's theology of evangelism and mission work**

Often many people have misunderstood John Calvin. According to some of his writings on the doctrine of predestination, he believed that according to God's Word God from the foundation of the world has chosen or elected a people to be saved out of the human race for the good pleasure of His will. Because of this, people wrongly assumed that John Calvin did not support evangelism or mission work.

For example, Jimmy Swaggart, one of the American televangelists, once said, *"Calvin has caused untold millions of souls to be damned."* Calvin was hated/loved by many Christians. Why? The main reason is because of his teaching on predestination that causes many to be offended or inspired. Many people have thought that it is useless to preach the gospel to all if God had already predestinated some people to be saved. They would ask, "Why bother to evangelize or send out missionaries if God had already decided who would be saved before the foundation of the world?" Often people say Calvinists do not support evangelism or missions. One way to settle this argument is to look at what John Calvin believed about the gospel and whether he supported missions during his time.

First of all, did John Calvin believe in the free offer of the gospel? The free offer of the gospel means to preach the gospel to everyone, not to God's elect only. The book *"Calvin's Wisdom"* written by Graham Miller, quoted some comments by John Calvin. I give you three of them.

- *"(God) calls all men to Himself, without a single exception, and gives Christ to all, that we may be illumined (shined) by Him."*
- *"God commands (the gospel) to be offered indiscriminately to all."*
- *"It is our duty to pray for all who trouble us; to desire the salvation of all men; Christ kindles for all indiscriminately the torch of His gospel; but all have not the eyes of their minds opened to see it, but on the contrary Satan spreads the veil of blindness over many."*

Those comments clearly show that John Calvin believed that the gospel is to be preached to everyone. If you read more of his writings, you would be astonished – certainly from what he said about the free offer of the gospel. Calvin emphasized both, the sovereignty of God and man's responsibility, as found in the Word of God.

Secondly, did John Calvin support mission works during his time? Yes, he did! One example is that Calvin sent missionaries to Brazil.

Ray Van Nestle wrote, *"Calvin's missionary zeal is attested to by the fact that within 25 years from the time Calvin began his ministry — there were 2,000 Reformed churches and about half a million Calvinists in France alone! Calvin sponsored missions throughout Europe and even as far afield as Brazil."* Another writer, Dr. Peter Hammond, wrote, *"Whether or not one agrees with all of Calvin's views or actions, one must admit the great Reformer's teachings (including predestination) do indeed support evangelism and mission work."*

Charles Spurgeon, considered a prince of preachers, wrote of Calvin,

*"John Calvin is looked upon now, of course, as a theologian only, but he was really one of the greatest of gospel preachers. When Calvin opened the Book and took a text, you might*

*be sure that he was about to preach 'Through grace are ye saved, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.'*"

John Calvin was actually a soul-winner and had a zeal for his mission work to spread the gospel to all. His doctrine of predestination did not hinder his zeal at all, but served to increase his zeal for evangelism and mission works.

## **John Knox**

John Knox was born near Edinburgh, Scotland in 1513. At that time, the Roman Catholic Church was the major religion in that country. Knox went to St. Andrews University to prepare for the priesthood, studied the Bible, and read the writings of St. Augustine and early Church Fathers. He was ordained as a Catholic priest at the same time as John Calvin began the Reformation in Geneva. He became dissatisfied with the moral and spiritual corruption of the Catholic Church. He was attracted to the Lutheran teachings (doctrines of grace) of George Wishart and became a close friend of Wishart. Because Wishart was "illegally" preaching the gospel in parts of Scotland he was arrested and was burned at the stake by Catholic authorities. This caused Knox to renounce Catholicism and switch to his Protestant faith.

How did Knox become saved or profess his faith in Jesus Christ?

*James Kennedy wrote, "Knox also found there a Bible, which he had not seen before, and he began to read. His eyes fell on those words in John 17:3, 'This is eternal life, that they might know Thee the only true God and Jesus Christ whom Thou has sent.' The Spirit began to work more heartily in the heart and life of John Knox, and slowly the light of the Gospel broke upon him."*

One of the greatest influences upon Knox's thinking and life was John Calvin's books. James Kennedy explained that Knox's faith began in a monastical library; he was looking at the books condemned by the Roman church and found *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* by John Calvin. Kennedy also said that Knox was very zealous and went to Geneva to seek out this John Calvin whose *Institutes* had so inspired him. He sat under the teaching of Calvin for several years and then returned to Scotland to continue the Reformation there.

Edward Panosian wrote about what Knox thought of Calvin's school,

*"In a letter to a friend, Knox wrote a sterling tribute to the moral quality of life in Geneva, calling it 'the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the apostles.' In other places I confess Christ to be truly preached; but manners and religion to be so seriously reformed, I have not yet seen in any other place besides."*

Knox was married to his first wife when he was about 38 years old, and they had two sons. However, his wife died several years later. When Knox was 50 years old, he was married to a second wife who was only 17 years old and bore him three daughters. It is interesting to note that marriages between elderly men and young girls were not at all uncommon in the sixteenth century, but Calvin had condemned this practice as undesirable.

John Knox was a man of courage and zeal and also a man of prayer. One time, he prayed and said, *"Great God, give me Scotland, or I die."* Mary Queen of Scots one time said, *"I fear the prayers of John Knox more than all the assembled armies of Europe."* The King of Scotland said of Knox upon his death, *"Here lies a man that never feared the faces of men."*

In 1560, the Scottish parliament officially renounced Roman Catholicism and adopted the Reformed Faith for Scotland. Knox and five other men drew up a confession of faith for Scotland known as Scots Confession of 1560.

*James Kennedy also wrote, "Historians tell us that when Knox was born, Scotland was the nation of Europe most sunk in ignorance and superstition and the absence of the Gospel. And yet, when John Knox died, Scotland had been totally transformed and had become a*

*model and paragon of Christian knowledge and virtue. Knox had, like the apostles of old, turned the world, or at least his nation, upside down!"*

Knox suffered a stroke and died two years later in 1572 when he was 59. It is also interesting to learn what both Calvin and Knox had contributed to America.

*Walter Lingle wrote, "How fortunate the colonies were to have Presbyterians of the Reformed tradition come to America to help build a nation, influence the affairs of government, build educational systems, and instill a strong work ethic. The heritage of John Calvin, communicated to the Scots through John Knox, greatly affected emigrants that played a vital role in this effort. Calvin's ideas and Knox's good works provided the basic structure for American civilization."*

Interestingly, the German historian, Leopold von Ranke, asserted that *"John Calvin was the virtual founder of America. John Knox played a vital role."*

As Knox had a great burden for Scotland and prayed to God, *"Oh God, give me Scotland, or I die"*, it is my prayer that all Deaf preachers would agree to join with Knox and say to God, *"Oh God, give me Deaf people, or I die!"* Amen!

Jari Saavalainen

© 2014 Copyright by the Reformed Church in die U.S. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.

The views expressed are not necessarily those of the editors or official positions of the RCUS.

[www.christianstudylibrary.org](http://www.christianstudylibrary.org)