

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 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,"

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.”¹

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.”² 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

1. George Bancroft, “A Word on Calvin, the Reformer,” in his *Literary and Historical Miscellanies* (New York, 1855), 405ff; cited in Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. (1910; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 8:522.

2. Cited by Alister McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990), 247.

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

3. The most recent history of this university recounts several abortive efforts, including one in 1420 under Roman Catholic authority and the attempt by Francois de Versonnex in 1429. See Marco Marcacci, *Histoire de l'universite de Geneve 1558–1986* (Geneva: University of Geneva, 1987), 17. For a pre-history of the Genevan Academy, see also William G. Naphy, "The Reformation and the Evolution of Geneva's Schools," in Beat A. Kumin, ed., *Reformations Old and New: Essays on the Socio-Economic Impact of Religious Change, c.1470–1630* (London: Scholar