

John Calvin – Reformed Theology

1. Calvin's History

- Last week we looked Martin Luther and justification by faith
- Before we take a look at John Calvin, I thought it would be useful to get some context in terms of dates and geography
- Luther
 - 1517 – 95 theses nailed to cathedral door in Wittenburg
 - 1521 – Diet of Worms Calvin
 - 1546 – Died
- England / Cranmer
 - 1527 – Henry VIII seeks a divorce with Catherine to marry Anne
 - 1532 – Cranmer appointed Archbishop by Henry
 - 1534 - Acts of Supremacy declaring Henry to be head of Church in England > Church of England still Catholic
 - 1547 – Henry dies
 - 1549-52 – Under reign of Edward VI, Cranmer drafts Book of Common Prayer 1549 & 1552 and the 39 Articles
 - 1553 – Cranmer burnt at the stake as a 'heretic' by 'Bloody Queen Mary'
- Calvin
 - Born 1509, died 1564
 - His period of influence 1540-50's
 - Some 20 years after Luther in Germany and about the same time as Cranmer in England
- **John Calvin**
- John Calvin was born in France in 1509
- That means he was only 8 yrs old when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door in Wittenburg in 1517
- In effect, he was a second generation reformer who learnt from and built on the work already done by Luther and others
- Initially Calvin was trained for career in the priesthood
- However, after a legal dispute Calvin's father had with the church, his father switched him to Law, where in 1532 at the tender age of just 23, he received his doctorate in Civil Law
- He clearly had a sharp & analytical mind who was also a master in French, Latin, Greek & Hebrew

- But when his father died, he abandoned his intended career in law and planned for a career as a humanist scholar instead
- About the time he completed his doctorate, Calvin was converted to Protestantism ... probably through his scholarly friends who were sympathisers of Luther's new ideas
- However, the impact of the Reformation in France was severely curtailed
- The French king didn't want to tolerate any type of revolutionary movement within his kingdom, and so the Huguenots [as the Protestants were called] were ruthlessly persecuted
- Many of them, including Calvin ended up fleeing France into Switzerland, after being branded a heretic
- **I**n 1536, intent on pursuing his academic career, Calvin headed for the city of Strasbourg and needed to stop overnight in Geneva just inside the Swiss border
- But someone recognised Calvin and tipped off an old acquaintance of his from Paris called William Farel
- Farel was a fiery preacher who had been labouring for some months in Geneva to bring the city to Protestantism
 - Farel knew that the city was only precariously Protestant, and needed a strong leader with good teaching
 - When he heard that Calvin was in town he literally saw it as a Godsend to his cause and he urged Calvin to stay and help with the work of reforming Geneva
 - However, Calvin declined, explaining that he was a scholar, not an administrator or preacher
 - But that didn't deter Farel, who thundered back telling Calvin that if he didn't stay and carry out God's assignment, he call down from heaven curses upon Calvin and his scholarly life!
- Calvin was obviously persuaded by Farel's threats and over the next 28 years Calvin worked with Farel and led the Reformation in Geneva
- Calvin started preaching from the Bible and together they succeeded in transforming the church and city
- It took some time, much perseverance and he wasn't without his enemies or controversies

- At one point, Calvin and the city council could not see eye to eye on a particular issue
- And so the Council banished Calvin from the city, where Calvin moved to Strasbourg and was given a job lecturing at the University where he settled down, married and wrote books
- But in 1541 the town council of Geneva changed their mind, and begged Calvin to return

- **Illustration – Bob Dwyer**
 - Back in 1983, Bob Dwyer was sacked as Wallaby coach and replaced by Alan Jones
 - 1988 Alan Jones was sacked and Bob Dwyer was reappointed Wallaby coach
 - Upon his return to the head position he addressed his players and is reported to have started his speech saying ...
 - “as I was saying, before I was so rudely interrupted ...

- Dwyer must have been a Calvinist, because Calvin did the same thing ...
 - Upon his return to Geneva Calvin got back in the pulpit and continued preaching right where he left off three years previously

- During Calvin's time in Geneva, the city became the model Protestant city in Europe – both in its theology and administration
 - As a result, many Protestants flocked to Geneva when forced to flee their own country because of persecution including
 - John Knox who led the Reformation in Scotland
 - Thomas Cranmer who drove the Reformation in England, came to Geneva to learn from Calvin and his model
 - Between 1550–1562 approximately 7,000 immigrants flocked to Geneva this in a city whose normal population was 10,000
 - Most were Huguenots from France or those fleeing England under the Catholic monarch - ‘Queen Mary’

- John Calvin is quite possibly one of the Reformation’s greatest theologians and biblical scholars
- One of Calvin’s greatest legacies is he is the father of our modern systematic theology

- Throughout his life ... Calvin wrote The Institutes of the Christian Religion

- 1,521 pages of systematic theology that all Moore College students are required to be well acquainted with
- It is quite brilliant - Calvin had the ability to synthesise what the entire Bible has to say on topics such as
 - Creation, sin, judgment, Lords Supper, Baptism, Salvation, Sovereignty of God etc
- Amazingly Calvin wrote his first draft within 2 years of converting to Protestantism at the age of just 27!
- He revised & expanded it several times to what it is today
- His theology is more thorough, thought-through, balanced and systematized than that of Luther
 - Because he was so brilliantly able to synthesise the Bible into such a clear and systematic way ... he stands head and shoulders above all other theologians in terms of the influence and clarity he has brought to biblical / reformed Christianity
 - So much so, that Reformed theology is often referred to as Calvinism
- For all his academic, political and administrative brilliance, Calvin's first priority was faithfully teaching the Word of God
- He did this through preaching daily; lecturing in theology; writing Bible commentaries, revising the Institutes
- In 1564 Calvin died and at his own insistence was buried in an unmarked grave

2. Calvin's Theology

- Central to Calvin's thought ... which is especially as seen in his Institutes of the Christian Religion, was the sovereignty of God
- As Calvin read through the Bible it was plain to see God's kingly, supreme rule and authority over the entire universe
- God's sovereignty is seen in a number of ways
- First is his sovereignty over creation
 - God is the creator of the universe
 - He made it, he sustains it, and it is under his control
 - He spoke the world into being ...
 - He can part the Red Sea, bring plagues of locusts on Egypt, cause great floods, bring drought on the land

- He brings the rains, the snow, the sun, the wind, the seasons, the crops
- He is sovereign over his creation
- Secondly he is sovereign over events of this world
 - As you read the Bible you see time and time again, that God is sovereign over all that happens
 - He caused Joseph to be sold as a slave to Egypt so he might be there to save his family from famine
 - He raised up the Assyrians and Babylonians to bring judgment on the Israelites for their idolatry and sin
 - He caused a man to be born blind so that Jesus could heal him and reveal his glory to those around him
 - He caused angels to bust open prison cell doors so that the Apostles could escape
 - He caused Judas to betray Jesus so he could go to the cross for the sins of the world
- So God is sovereign over creation, over the things that happen in this world and in our lives ...
- ***God's work in salvation***
- However the category of God's sovereignty that the Bible speaks of the most and that Calvin summarised the best ... is God's sovereignty in salvation
 - That is, the way God works to draw sinners to himself
 - Open their eyes to the truth of the good news of Jesus
 - And moves them to repentance and faith
- God's sovereignty in salvation is seen right throughout the Bible – both OT and NT
 - One of the those passages is Ephesians 1
 - Unpack it with some help from Calvin who said that Ephesians is his favourite letter in the NT > page 1156
- Right from the start the Apostle Paul is reminding the Christians in Ephesus of all their spiritual blessings they have as followers of Jesus
- In the verses that follow he lists off some of those blessings they have in Christ
- v5 – Adopted as sons of God

- If you're an adopted child, your parents aren't your natural parents ... but they treat you as though you are one of theirs
- And they love you and provide for you and you get to share in all the blessings and inheritance of being part of that family
- So it is with us and God
 - We're not naturally part of God's family because we are by nature sinners
 - But God by his grace, brings us into his family so that we get to share in all the blessings and inheritance of being children of the Father in heaven
- In order to be adopted God needs to redeem us and provide for the forgiveness of sins > see that in v7
 - Our spiritual blessings mean God has paid the price to redeem us out of our slavery to sin
 - He has done that through Christ's death on the cross in our place
 - And because the debt for our sin is paid by Jesus ... God is able to forgive us
- Each of those things ... adoption, redemption, forgiveness ... are all things that need to be done to a person by someone else
 - You & I are passive in each of those things
 - You cannot adopt yourself > a child cannot put themselves up for adoption
 - You cannot redeem yourself > someone else needs to pay it
 - You cannot forgive yourself > the person who you've wronged is the only person who can forgive you
- We're passive in receiving all those spiritual blessings ... because God is the one, the only one, who adopt us, forgives us and redeems us
- The work of God in doing those things is reiterated in how he does it
- He **chooses** people according to his plan and will
 - Chose us before the creation of the world – v4
 - Predestined us to be adopted as his sons – v5
 - Freely gives us his grace – v6
 - Made know to us his plans and purposes for the world – v9 & 10
- Summarised in v11
 - In him (Jesus) we were also **chosen**, having been **predestined according to the plan** of him who works out everything in conformity with **the purpose of his will**

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- As Calvin says *"The cause of our salvation did not proceed from us, but from God alone"*
 - In his commentary on Ephesians, Calvin expounds it like this
 - *v4 - The very time when the election took place proves it to be free; for what could we have deserved, or what merit did we possess, before the world was made? How childish is the attempt to meet this argument by the following sophism! "We were chosen because we were worthy, and because God foresaw that we would be worthy." We were all lost in Adam; and therefore, had not God, through his own election, rescued us from perishing, there was nothing to be foreseen.*
 - If we hadn't worked it out ourselves, Calvin makes it plain that God choosing to people has nothing to do with them living a good life
 - God doesn't look into the future and foresee some people who are better than others and think
 - "I know they will be a good person, I'll choose them and them and them ... and I can foresee that they won't be very nice so I won't choose them and them and them"
 - As Calvin explains ... all people are lost in Adam, we all share the disposition and nature of our first father
 - Result is ... if it did depend on God looking into the future to see some who might be worth choosing ... he would choose none
 - But God in his mercy, chooses some, by grace, completely undeservingly, before time and apart from our works ... to be adopted, redeemed and forgiven and so share in all the spiritual blessings that come through faith in Christ
 - As Calvin says
 - *How comes it then that some men are religious, and live in the fear of God, while others give themselves up without reserve to all manner of wickedness? If Paul may be believed, the only reason is, that the latter retain their natural disposition, and the former have been chosen to holiness.*
 - *"... therefore, God does not inquire what we are, and is not reconciled to us by any personal worth. His single motive is the eternal good pleasure, by which he predestined us."*
 - *If men should evade every other argument, election shuts their mouth, so that they dare not and cannot claim anything for themselves.*
 - God is sovereign in our salvation
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- **Application**

- If you're sitting there hearing this for the first time ... there are probably one or two questions rattling around in your brain
- A lot of people hear this truth that God is sovereign in salvation, and then wonder ...
 - "does that make me robot?"
 - "If God has chosen some before the creation of the world, then what choice do I have"
- Here's the paradox that we see throughout the Bible
 - That God **is** sovereign in salvation, **but at the same time** God calls on men and women **to respond** to him in **repentance and faith**
- For example
- When Jesus started teaching and preaching he said *"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. **Repent and believe the good news!**"* (Mark 1:15)
- When the Philippian jailer asks Paul "what must I do to be saved" ... Paul says "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31)
- He doesn't say ...
 - "Our God is a sovereign God who chooses some to be saved and I'm not sure whether he's chosen you or not ... but hopefully it will work out for you"
 - No ... he tells him to believe and he will be saved
- There must be a response to the good news that God has acted in and through Jesus death on the cross to graciously save people from judgment for their sin and give them every spiritual blessing
- So both things are true – it's a paradox
 - God sovereignly chooses to saves some through Jesus
 - As people hear the good news of Jesus they need to respond in repentance and faith
- Second question ppl often ask is, if God is sovereign in salvation ... then why not choose everybody?
 - Clue is seen in v6 & v12 ...
 - God's choosing to save some is so that his glory might be revealed and he be praised

- God reveals to us his true nature ... his sovereign power, his grace mercy and love by choosing people who don't deserve to be saved
- As we understand and see what God has done in and through Christ ... his glory is revealed and he receives the praise he deserves
- If he saved everyone, not only would that not be just ... it would be like a judge letting every prisoner out of jail ...
- But it would mean no-one would know God's true character ... and he would not get the praise and glory due to him
- And so the wonder of God's choosing some is not that he withholds mercy from some, but that he would show mercy to anyone at all

3. Calvin's Legacy

- As Calvin took the people of his day back to the scriptures and taught them the sovereignty of God in salvation ... for many, it was a whole new way of thinking
 - What they learnt is the Catholic Church doesn't determine your salvation
 - Participating in the sacraments isn't the determining factor of whether you have eternal life
- It is God and God alone who chooses to graciously save some and redeem them, adopt them, and forgive them so that they can share in all the spiritual blessings
- For the people of that time this would have been hugely comforting
 - No longer did they need to live their lives constantly worrying about doing all the right things
 - No longer did they need to fear the uncertainty of time in purgatory
 - Because the truth is, those in Christ had been chosen before the beginning of creation
 - God had set his seal on them before time
 - Their salvation was not on shaky ground, there was no need to doubt God has been planning this since the beginning of the world!
- For all his brilliance as an academic and systematic theologian ... Calvin was above all a teacher of the Scriptures with a pastor's heart
- And teaching the truth of God's sovereignty in salvation was one of the best legacies he could leave to those he taught and for us today
- Because with such a confidence in God and assurance in one's salvation means that fear gives way to joy and obligation gives way to praise

- To know that God has chosen you before the creation of the world **despite** your sinfulness ... is a mind-blowing and heart transforming reality
- As we understand it more and more we can marvel at just how an amazing thing it is that God would be so gracious and loving towards us ... even though we are so totally undeserving

- And so that's why we praise him
 - That's why we start services singing songs of praise
 - That's why we praise him in our prayers
 - That's why we want to serve him, give our life to him, give our money towards his mission and make him the Lord of our life
- Because we rejoice and praise him because of his grace in choosing to save us

- The other thing that this truth does to us is ... it humbles us
 - To be a humble person is a good thing
 - Pride is an ugly characteristic and a root of much sin
 - It makes us impatient, judgmental, self-righteous, careless and rude
 - Most significantly pride causes us to turn our backs on God and think we don't need him
- So humility before God and others is a good thing

- But you can't make yourself humble can you?
 - You can't just pull up your boot straps and resolve to be more humble
 - Even if you do succeed for a while ... what does that lead to?
 - Pride!

- To the extent that the truth of God's sovereignty penetrates your heart, it will humble you
- It will humble before others because what this doctrine teaches us is
 - you and I are all sinners ...
 - that none of us are therefore morally better than anyone else
- When we get that it helps us to
 - Treat others as human beings just like us
 - Not pass judgment on others
 - To love others who are not like us ... including our enemies
 - To show grace to those who offend us

- It will humble before God because you know

- that there's nothing you can contribute to your salvation
- that God chose to save you despite your sinfulness
- that God would bless you, adopt you, redeem you, forgive you ... even though you deserve none of it

- Calvin was a great man of history and we stand on his shoulders today
 - He took the church back to the scriptures and reminded us all of the wonderful sovereignty of God in salvation
 - That our eternal future depends not on our feeble efforts which are destined to fail
 - But on God's will and purposes set forth before the beginning of time

- And with that doctrine rooted in our hearts and minds we can know for certain as the Apostle Paul says in Romans 8:30
 - And those he predestined, he also called;
 - those he called, he also justified;
 - those he justified, he also glorified

- May we praise God and glorify him by his amazing grace '... has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.'
- Amen

PRAY