



John Calvin and Worship in the Church

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Introduction

It has been over five-hundred years since the birth of John Calvin. For most people today, “the name Calvin is only known in a vague sense”¹ and has come to be represented with critical, condescending, and unhappy attitudes.

Historians, on the other hand, recognize John Calvin as one of the most amazing men of the last five hundred years, and as a man who has had a profound impact on the civilized world. Calvin and **Calvinism** have indeed, “been linked to the rise of democracy, capitalism, and modern science,”² among other things.

Scholars recognize Calvin as a theologian and biblical scholar whose work is still worth considering today. Church historians refer to Calvin as the major theologian in charge of Reformed Christianity—a representation of the Christian faith that has millions of followers in countries across the globe four and a half centuries after its introduction to the world.

Calvin was very much, “a leader and writer”³ whose work had an impact on the lives and worship of many congregations. In fact, he has influenced thousands of church leaders, theologians, and scholars.

In this study guide, we’ll take an introductory look at John Calvin including who he was, his beliefs, influence and more. We will also study Calvin’s views on worship within the church and how his views influenced the way worship was (and still is) conducted in many Reformed congregations.

A Polarizing Figure

John Calvin’s life and work have always been contentious but no less impactful. Throughout history people loved and admired him, while others despised and hated him. However, whether you love or hate him, you would have to agree that Calvin had a superb mind and influential will that had a great impact on the advancement Western civilization.

John Calvin has had many critics. Even in his own time these critics railed at him—they would even name, “their dogs after him—and sometimes laughed at him”⁴ and some even said that his wife passed away of boredom. Even modern critics have been ruthless. Will Durant, the author, wrote, “But we shall always find it hard to love the man who darkened the human soul with the most absurd and blasphemous conception of God in all the long and honored history of nonsense.”⁵

However, on the positive side Calvin’s friend **Theodore Beza** (1519-1605) wrote a small biography on Calvin to give answers to Calvin’s critics. Beza’s adoring work conveys a spirit of emotional warmth, noting that, “in the common intercourse of life, there was no man who was more pleasant.”⁶

Beza finished his biography on Calvin this way, “Having been a spectator of his conduct for sixteen years...I can now declare, that in him all men may see a most beautiful example of Christian character, an example which it is as easy to slander as it is difficult to imitate.”⁷

The “Pilgrim-Pastor”

Calvin was not a man who lived to impact future generations. Rather, he was a spiritual pilgrim who was rediscovering apostolic Christianity in the Bible and trying to serve as a steadfast preacher of the Word in his day and to the church of his day. Calvin’s greatest influence “was as a purifier of the Christian religion and a reformer of the church”⁸ in his day. He was primarily a pilgrim and a pastor. All of his power came from that reality.

Calvin emphasized the effectiveness “of his life as a pastor in his own time”⁹ rather than his future influence. For example, Calvin’s friend William Farel wanted him to print his study on Genesis, Calvin answered Farel by saying,

*As to my observations on Genesis, if the Lord shall grant me longer life and leisure, perhaps I will set myself about that work, although I do not expect to have many hearers. This is my especial end and aim, to serve my generation; and for the rest, if, in my present calling, an occasional opportunity offers itself, I shall endeavor to improve it for those who come after us. I have a mind to set about writing several things, but as my wife is now in ill health, not without danger, my attention is otherwise engaged.*¹⁰

Calvin was, above all, a pastor in his own day who had a devotion for the good news of Christ. It was this good news and that devotion that would ultimately move nearly one million people to saving faith.

Calvin expressed a faith, hope, and trust in God. Years after his death, a Roman Catholic Spanish soldier in the Netherlands said he’d rather face an army than a single Calvinist who believes he’s doing God’s will. Reformed Christianity was not really a gentle and harmless faith. It was one that was both powerful and moving.

How Calvin Viewed Worship within the Church

While in Geneva Calvin worked to reform public worship. It was one of the key matters he took on. He knew that Sunday worship was how most Christians encountered God and where they often came to a knowledge of His truth. As such, he wanted to make sure that worship was conducted in accordance with God’s Word.

As both a pastor and preacher, Calvin regularly directed public worship. He put together both books and liturgy for his churches in Strasbourg and Geneva. He pushed hard for the creation of the **Genevan Psalter**, which eventually grew to encompass all of the Psalms in a rhythm that encouraged congregational singing.

Calvin’s reforms on worship practices reflected his thorough examination of the theology of worship, and several important influences impacted his thinking on worship reform. Of course, the Bible was the most important, and Calvin was a firm believer in putting all of his ideas to the test of what the Bible said. However, Calvin was not an individualist. He also sought Biblical wisdom and insights about worship from other Christians.

For instance, he analyzed the ancient church fathers to learn about their worship practices. Calvin’s title for the Genevan service book, *The Form of Prayers and Manner of Ministering the Sacraments according to the Use of the Ancient Church*, reflects his genuine desire to follow the wisdom of the fathers. Calvin also acknowledged Augustine and Chrysostom’s influence in his “Preface” to the *Genevan Psalter*.¹¹

Among Calvin’s contemporaries, **Martin Bucer** (1491-1551) of Strasbourg influenced his understanding of worship the most. Calvin closely followed Bucer’s liturgical approach after his time in Strasbourg. Fittingly, Calvin’s liturgy in Geneva on Sunday mornings was extremely similar to Bucer’s.

Worship Is a Way of Life

Calvin was particularly worried about the worship environment at the church in Geneva. He preached in Geneva’s cathedral church, St. Pierre’s, which he also “purified.” The church’s interior was stripped of all religious symbols, including crosses. As a side note, today, the outside cross on the pinnacle of St. Pierre’s is no longer there. However, Calvin did not remove it. It simply was not replaced after being struck by lightning.

While Calvin followed the basic shape of ancient worship orders, he was determined to eliminate human-created ceremonies in order to achieve biblical simplicity. In Calvin’s clarification of the Lord’s Supper, he gives a concise summary of his idea of the worship service:

The Lord’s Supper might be most properly administered, if it were set before the Church very frequently, and at least once in every week in the following manner: The service should commence with public prayer; in the next place, a sermon should be delivered; then, the bread and wine being placed upon the table, the minister should recite the institution of the supper, should declare the promises which are left to us in it, and, at the same time, should excommunicate all those who are excluded from it by the prohibition of the Lord; after this,

prayer should be offered, that with the same benignity with which our Lord has given us this sacred food, he would also teach and enable us to receive it in faith and gratitude of heart, and that, as of ourselves we are not worthy, he would, in his mercy, make us worthy of such a feast. Then either some psalms should be sung, or a portion of Scripture should be read, and believers, in a becoming order, should participate of the sacred banquet, the ministers breaking the bread and distributing it, and presenting the cup, to the people; after the conclusion of the supper, an exhortation should be given to sincere faith, and a confession of the same; to charity, and a deportment worthy of Christians. Finally, thanksgivings should be rendered, and praises sung, to God; and to close the whole, the Church should be dismissed in peace.¹²

The Sunday morning service in Geneva followed the ancient church's pattern of viewing the public worship service as divided into two parts: the Word and the Lord's Supper.

This was the liturgy that Calvin followed each Sunday morning, except Communion was not part of the service each week. Calvin desired to have Communion weekly but was unable to obtain approval from Geneva's government. In 1561 Calvin, writing about the frequency of Communion stated, "I have taken care to record publicly that our custom is defective, so that those who come after me may be able to correct it the more freely and easily."¹³ Only a quarterly Communion was allowed by the Geneva city council, but this was more than the yearly Communion that most medieval Christians received.

As mentioned earlier, Calvin was very much influenced by Martin Bucer during his time at Strasbourg while he was ministering to French exiles there, and he wanted to use Bucer's order of service when he returned to Geneva. William Maxwell, the author of the book *A History of Christian Worship*¹⁴ outlines the liturgy that both Bucer and Calvin used in Strasbourg and what Calvin used for the French exiles in Strasbourg and what Calvin used in Geneva.¹⁵

While Calvin was perfectly satisfied to utilize the "form prayers and liturgies in the Sunday morning service,"¹⁶ he also acknowledged the importance of worship. Prior to beginning the regular Sunday service, Calvin's "Form of Prayers" says: "On ordinary Meetings the Minister leads the devotions of the people in whatever words seem to him suitable, adapting his address to the time and subject of the Discourse which he is to deliver, but following Form is generally used on the Morning of the LORD'S Day."¹⁷

The minister, according to Calvin, leads the believers in worship. The pastor speaks to the people on behalf of God and on behalf of God to the people: "For neither the light and heat of the sun, nor any meat and drink, are so necessary to the nourishment and sustenance of the present life, as the apolitical and pastoral office is to the preservation of the Church in the world."¹⁸ Ministers, in particular, speak for God as the pastor faithfully preaches the Word of God: "it is a good proof of our obedience when we listen to his ministers, just as if he were addressing us himself."¹⁹

Calvin also believed that the congregation actively participates in worship. For example, he believed the congregation must actively listen to the Word of God being preached by the pastor in faith. Moreover, they must join the minister in prayer and lift their own minds and hearts to God and should join in the singing of God's praise. Calvin held that God's people are called to reverent participation in such activities.

Music's Place in Worship

In Calvin's Geneva, singing praises to God was an essential part of worship. Calvin understood the power of music, both the good and bad, he wrote, "we find by experience that it has a sacred and almost incredible power to move hearts in one way or another. Therefore we ought to be even more diligent in regulating it in such a way that it shall be useful to us and in no way pernicious."²⁰

Calvin was very careful about how he used music. In comparison to the late medieval period's musical developments, Calvin tremendously simplified the use of music in worship. He removed choirs and musical instruments that were part of worship services, though this effect was limited to wealthy churches only.

By instituting congregational singing, he significantly increased the importance of music for most Christians. Calvin believed that singing in unison a cappella preserved the simplicity of singing and the congregation's unity the best. As such, musical instruments were not to be used to accompany congregational singing.

Additionally, Calvin considered singing to be an especially heartfelt way of praying, so it was an important part of worship. Calvin said: “As for public prayers, there are two kinds. The ones with the word alone: the others with singing.”²¹ Calvin was persuaded that the Psalms were the most appropriate songs for Christians to sing as prayers:

Moreover, that which St. Augustine has said is true, that no one is able to sing things worthy of God except that which he has received from him. Therefore, when we have looked thoroughly, and searched here and there, we shall not find better songs nor more fitting for the purpose, than the Psalms of David, which the Holy Spirit spoke and made through him. And moreover, when we sing them, we are certain that God puts in our mouths these, as if he himself were singing in us to exalt his glory.²²

Calvin believed he was restoring the ancient church's use of music, which had been sanctioned by the Bible. Calvin realized that the ancient church did sing strictly (or almost strictly) Psalms in sync without instrumental accompaniment by studying the church fathers (notably Athanasius, Chrysostom, and Augustine). Calvin believed that he was purging and cleansing the church of the current musical developments that were found in the Western Church. In fact, the Roman Catholic Church according to Calvin introduced a variety of corruptions, including musical instruments and advanced hymnody.

On the subject of using instruments to aid the music, Calvin realized that the fathers were correct in their understanding that the New Covenant required the abandonment of musical instruments used during public worship:

To sing the praises of God upon the harp and psaltery unquestionably formed a part of the training of the law, and of the service of God under that dispensation of shadows and figures; but they are not now to be used in public thanksgiving. We are not, indeed, forbidden to use, in private, musical instruments, but they are banished out of the churches by the plain command of the Holy Spirit, when Paul, in 1 Cor. xiv 13, lays it down as an invariable rule, that we must praise God, and pray to him only in a known tongue.²³

Calvin saw the musical instruments used in Old Testament Temple worship as possessing their own voice or tongue and adding a sound to worship that was not produced by human voices. In the New Covenant, he believed that only understandable human voices must be utilized in worship.

Therefore, Calvin saw how New Testament worship was different from Old Testament worship. The New Testament ushered in a New Covenant for worship that brought simplicity to worship. As such, “musical instruments were among the legal ceremonies which Christ at His coming abolished; and therefore we, under the Gospel, must maintain a greater simplicity.”²⁴

While he was not opposed to the use of instruments in spheres of life outside the church, Calvin was also critical of using instruments to support congregational singing within the church because he did not want the instruments to over-power the singing. Thus, he eliminated instruments from the worship service completely.

According to Calvin, instruments were created to gradually wean the Jews away from the world's sinful ways: “that he [God] might lead men away from those vain and corrupt pleasures to which they are excessively addicted, to a holy and profitable joy.”²⁵ The puerile instruction given to the Jews, however, was rendered obsolete and detrimental to spirituality by the new maturity of the church that Jesus introduced:

But when they frequent their sacred assemblies, musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting up of lamps, and the restoration of the other shadows of the law. The Papists, therefore, have foolishly borrowed this, as well as many other things, from the Jews...but we should always take care that no corruption creep in, which might both defile the pure worship of God and involve men in superstition.²⁶

Calvin's consideration for proper worship included the tunes for the Psalms as well. Over the years, he closely monitored the work of the *Genevan Psalter* to guarantee the appropriate music, and by God's providence he was honored with songwriters of extraordinary talent, such as **Louis Bourgeois** (1510-1559).

Calvin conveyed his basic viewpoint on music by saying: "Touching the melody, it has seemed best that it be moderated in the manner we have adopted to carry the weight and majesty appropriate to the subject, and even to be proper for singing in the Church."²⁷ Put simply, the music for church songs must be both reverent to God and singable to the congregation.

Calvin's cautious attitudes toward music mirrored those of the church fathers, all the way back to Plato. Calvin praised Plato's attitude toward music. In his "Preface" in the *Genevan Psalter*, and elsewhere he says: "we all know by experience what power music has in exciting men's feelings, so that Plato affirms, and not without good reason, that music has very much effect in influencing, in one way or another, the manners of a state."²⁸

Calvin thought that Plato and the church fathers had given voice to the effects of worship according to the Bible. Because of the power of music, it needed to be handled with care:

And in truth we know by experience that singing has great force and vigor to move and inflame the hearts of men to invoke and praise God with a more vehement and ardent zeal. Care must always be taken that the song be neither light nor frivolous; but that it have weight and majesty (as St. Augustine says), and also, there is a great difference between music which one makes to entertain men at table and in their houses, and the Psalms which are sung in the Church in the presence of God and his angels.²⁹

The *Genevan Psalter's* tunes do indeed display a phenomenal range of emotion, faithfully mirroring the feelings of the Psalms from which they had been composed.

Conclusion - Calvin the Man

For Reformed Christians, John Calvin is a hero. He is a hero because he was such a gifted biblical teacher. His commentaries and systematic theology are still standards of brilliant scholarship and sensitive faith. While not everyone will always agree with Calvin and while some certainly do not regard him as a complete authority, Reformed people keep following Calvin's theological map in general.

What was it like to be friends with John Calvin? One image emerges from Calvin's own letters and from biographers of the sixteenth century. In Bruce Gordon's book on John Calvin he wrote about Calvin as, "serious, though not without a sense of humour, intense and deeply spiritual."³⁰ Calvin believed that discipline wasn't just for the church; he lived a disciplined life himself.

He was a man who was passionate about learning about God, particularly as God made himself known in the Bible. Calvin was reassured that the Bible must be at the center of our worship and service to God, and he dedicated himself to the daily and diligent study of Scripture throughout his life. It was through this study that he learned the depths of his own sin, the power of Christ for his salvation, and how to continue living as a pilgrim in this sin-cursed world.

Calvin had flaws, but at the very least, he was aware of them. It's one thing if you're aware of your flaws and pleading with God, "I messed up again, would You please help me?"³¹ It's another thing to be the type of person where everyone else knows about your flaws except you.

Bruce Gordon also wrote in his book about Calvin, "However, one of his greatest strengths in his later career was an acute awareness that despite remarkable confidence in his calling and intellect, he remained dangerously prone to moments of poor judgment on account of his anger."³² That was surely his besetting sin and he understood it.

John Calvin was a flawed, sinful man who was used by God because he put his trust in God's Word, and his influence can still be felt today, both in the realm of theology and in the simplistic style of worship still employed in many contemporary Reformed congregations.

Appendix A - The Liturgy of the Word

Stras. German, 1537	Stras. French, 1540	Geneva, 1542
Confession of sins	Scripture Sentence: Ps. Cxxiv. 8	Scripture Sentence: Ps. Cxxiv. 8
Scriptural word of pardon (1 Tim. 1)	Confession of sins	Confession of sins
Absolution	Scriptural word of pardon	Prayer for pardon
Psalm. Hymn, or Kyries and Gloria in excelsis	Metrical Decalogue sung with Kyrie eleison (Gr.) after each Law	Metrical Psalm
Collect for Illumination	Collect for Illumination	Collect for Illumination
Lection (Gospel)	Lection	Lection
Sermon	Sermon	Sermon

The Liturgy of the Upper Room

Stras. German, 1537	Stras. French, 1540	Geneva, 1542
Collection of alms	Collection of alms	Collection of alms
Preparation of elements while Apostles' Creed sung		
Intercessions and Consecration Prayer	Intercessions	Intercessions
Lord's Prayer	Lord's Prayer in long paraphrase	Lord's Prayer in long paraphrase
	Preparation of elements while Apostles' Creed sung	Preparation of elements while Apostles' Creed sung
	Consecration Prayer	
	Lord's Prayer	
Exhortation	Words of Institution	Words of Institution
Words of Institution	Exhortation	Exhortation
		Consecration Prayer
Fraction	Fraction	Fraction
Delivery	Delivery	Delivery

Stras. German, 1537	Stras. French, 1540	Geneva, 1542
Communion, while psalm or hymn sung	Communion, while psalm sung	Communion, while psalm or Scriptures read
Post-communion collect	Post-communion collect	Post-communion collect
	Nunc dimittis in metre	
Aaronic Blessing	Aaronic Blessing	Aaronic Blessing
Dismissal		

Sources

¹ W. Robert Godfrey. *John Calvin: Pilgrim and Pastor* (Wheaton: Crosswalk), 7.

² *Ibid.*, 7.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁵ Will Durant. *The Reformation (The Story of Civilization, Part VI)*, (New York: Simon & Schuster), 490.

⁶ W. Robert Godfrey. *John Calvin: Pilgrim and Pastor* (Wheaton: Crosswalk), 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

¹¹ *Preface to the Psalter* <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/ccel/eee/files/calvinps.htm>

¹² John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Book IV Chapter XVII Section XLIII), 703-04.

¹³ David T. Koyzis. "The Lord's Supper: How Often?" *Reformed Worship* citing Bretschneider, *Corpus Reformatorum*, XXXVIII, i, p. 213.

<https://www.reformedworship.org/article/march-1990/lords-supper-how-often>

¹⁴ William D. Maxwell. *A History of Christian Worship: An Outline of Its Development and Forms* (Grand Rapids: Baker), 114-15.

¹⁵ See Appendix A

¹⁶ W. Robert Godfrey, 72.

¹⁷ John Calvin. *Treaties on the Sacraments, Catechism of the Church of Geneva, Forms of Prayer, and Confession of Faith*, (Edinburgh: Calvin).

¹⁸ John Calvin. *Institutes*, 318-19.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 275.

²⁰ *Preface to the Psalter* <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/ccel/eee/files/calvinps.htm>

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ John Calvin. *Commentary on the Book of Psalms Vol. II* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books), 98.

²⁴ John Calvin. *Harmony of the Law Vol. I* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books), 263.

²⁵ John Calvin. *Commentary on the Book of Psalms Vol. 6* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books), 320.

²⁶ John Calvin. *Commentary on the book of Psalms Vol. 4* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books), 539.

²⁷ *Preface to the Psalter* <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/ccel/eee/files/calvinps.htm>

²⁸ John Calvin. *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books), 440.

²⁹ *Preface to the Psalter* <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/ccel/eee/files/calvinps.htm>

³⁰ Bruce Gordon. *Calvin* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), 144.

³¹ Kevin DeYoung. "The Weakness of Man and the Permanence of the Word: The Life of John Calvin" Sermon: Christ Covenant Church. Matthews, NC.

<https://christcovenant.org/sermons/the-weakness-of-man-and-the-permanence-of-the-word-the-life-of-john-calvin/>

³² Bruce Gordon. *Calvin* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), 91.



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