

The Denial of Ourselves

I suppose that for many reading this article, the direction that your life has taken includes many unexpected twists and turns and has brought you to where you are now by a mostly circuitous route. We'll all make many choices in our lifetime, e.g., where to live and work, who to marry as well as where to attend church, etc. Although we make daily choices for a myriad of reasons, one important biblical principle is that our lives are not to be lived merely for ourselves. To illustrate this point, I want to turn to the pages of church history and look briefly at the life of a man who gave of himself unselfishly, for God's glory and for the benefit of others.

Church historian Philip Schaff writes, "History furnishes no more striking example of a man of so little personal popularity, and yet such great influence upon the people; such timidity and bashfulness combined with such strength of intellect and character, and such control over future generations." The man that he's referring to is, John Calvin. Calvin was born in the small town of Noyon, France on July 10, 1509. He studied theology, among other things, at Paris and in 1528 he graduated with a Master of Arts degree. He was later convinced by his father to pursue a career in law. Although Calvin had been a committed Roman Catholic, his studies began to take him in markedly different directions.

The exact circumstances and date of his break with Rome are not known. He hadn't sought to be a leader in the Protestant Reformation, but God, in his providence, brought Calvin to Basel in Switzerland in 1535. He had both the training as well as the desire to write and the first edition of his "Institutes of the Christian Religion" appeared in Basel in 1536. This first edition was 516 pages and dealt with basic doctrines of the Church. It was written in Latin and enjoyed immediate success.

Although there was much turmoil in the Church at this time, Calvin wanted no part of it. He believed that his gifts were not as a pastor or leader, but rather those of a scholar and author. He decided to settle in Strasbourg, (on the border of France and Germany), a city where the Protestant cause was already victorious and where he could quietly settle down to a life of writing. But the direct route to Strasbourg was closed by military operations and he had to make a detour through Geneva. God had other plans for this quiet intellectual.

At this same time a man named William Farel, a leader of the Protestant missionary movement, was in the city of Geneva. Calvin arrived with the intention of staying no more than a day. But Farel found out that the author of the "Institutes" was in town. Calvin later records what happened on that day in Geneva. He writes that Farel, who "burned with a marvelous zeal for the advancement of the gospel," presented him with several reasons why his presence and his talents were needed in Geneva. Calvin listened respectfully to this man who was 15 years his senior, but refused his plea. When all other arguments failed, Farel appealed to the Lord with a

threat directed at Calvin. “May God condemn your repose, and the calm you seek for study, if before such a great need you withdraw, and refuse your succor and help.” Calvin was stunned and would later simply write, “...these words shocked me and broke me, and I desisted from the journey I had begun.”

Calvin would spend much of the rest of his life in Geneva working at preaching, teaching and writing. Plagued by ill health, he nevertheless preached an average of 5 times a week and wrote commentaries on nearly every book of the Bible. When his associates urged him to slow down for the sake of his health, he sternly replied, “What! Would you have the Lord find me idle when he comes?” John Calvin worked tirelessly and died on May 27, 1564. He literally used up his life in the service of his Savior.

Christians for hundreds of years have benefited greatly from the writings of John Calvin. One of his many strengths is that he knew, “....how to integrate doctrinal belief with practical application for daily life.” Calvin understood clearly that what we truly believe is reflected in how we live our lives. He also taught, in his writings and by example, that our lives are not to be lived merely for ourselves. We’ll begin our scriptural investigation of this truth in my next article.

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