

A full-length figurine of John Calvin, a bearded man in black academic robes holding an open book. The figurine is set against a dark grey background and is framed by a thin orange border. The text "JOHN CALVIN" is overlaid in large orange letters, and "J.R. Broome" is overlaid in white letters below it.

# JOHN CALVIN

J.R. Broome

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## Preface

This year (2009) marks the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the birth of John Calvin. He was by far the greatest of the Reformers. Luther, Melancthon and Zwingli had been used of God in the groundwork of the Reformation, but there was a need for a reformer who could rise above the confusion of contention to survey the whole field of Scriptural truth and present it as one harmonious whole. Calvin possessed great intellectual and spiritual gifts which exactly fitted him for this work.

Converted between 1528 and 1533, educated at Paris and Orleans Universities in Theology and Law, brought out of the Roman Catholic Church to devote himself to the preaching of the Gospel and to the exposition of the truth, he undertook the great work of systematising the whole scheme of divine truth, bringing out in order and harmony all the doctrines contained in the Word of God. To systematise divine truth and church organisation according to God's Word was the peculiar achievement of John Calvin.

The first edition of his great work, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, was published (in Latin) at Basle in 1536, when he was twenty-seven years of age. Calvin described it as 'a little booklet containing the summary of the principal matters...that people should be informed what faith was held.'

His works have survived for over four hundred and fifty years and made a lasting impact in the Netherlands, Scotland, England and the United States. The Five Points of Calvinism -

- (1) The Total Depravity of Man;
- (2) Election;
- (3) Particular Redemption;
- (4) The Effectual Call of God;
- (5) The Final Perseverance of the Saints;

- are to be found in the *Canons of Dort* (1619), the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647), the *Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England* (1562), the *Savoy Declaration* (1658) and the *Particular Baptist Confession of Faith* (1689).

In Church order his influence was greatest in the Netherlands, Scotland and Ireland, where a Presbyterian form of Church governance was established. Doctrinally, he had considerable influence in England during the Reformation and later in the Puritan era, and in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century among the Particular Baptists, the Independents and the English Presbyterians.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, between 1843 and 1856, the Calvin Translation Society in Edinburgh published fifty-two volumes of his works in an English translation. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century a number of his works have been reprinted by the Banner of Truth. Considering that he died at the early age of fifty-five, the extent of his work was extraordinary.

## John Calvin

CALVIN was born at Noyon in France on the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 1509. His father worked for the local Roman Catholic bishop, managing the business affairs of the Cathedral. Educated for a time in Noyon, he went to Paris at the age of fourteen to the College of La Marche, where he received a good grounding in Latin, the international language of Europe at the time. This was to be of such great use to him in his writings for the Reformation — a language which he used for the first and many later editions of his famous work, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

After leaving La Marche he went to the College of Montaigu in 1526. This was a part of Paris University, and a training college for Catholic priests. Calvin was a keen scholar and rose early to study.

At the time the Reformation was well under way. The Diet of Worms had been held in 1521 and in 1525 Luther had published *The Bondage of the Will*. Calvin came from an orthodox Roman Catholic background and it seemed most unlikely that he would be affected by the Reformation. But one of his cousins, Olivetan,

came to Paris at this time, frequently saw him and had discussions with him about the burning issues of the day. The effect on Calvin was to cause him to have doubts about the Roman Catholic Church, which he had always trusted.

It also brought him into conviction of sin. One day he witnessed in Paris the burning of one of the early Protestants. This showed him how great faith these men were given to endure the flames. It made him ask how he would have died in such circumstances. He then took the advice of his cousin and began to read the Bible.

Later in his life in 1557, in the Preface to his *Commentary in the Psalms*, he wrote, 'I was taken from the study of philosophy and put to learn law, from which, nevertheless, God in His secret providence finally turned me in another direction. At first, although I was so obstinately given to the superstitions of the Papacy that it was extremely difficult to drag me from the depths of the mire, yet by a sudden conversion He tamed my heart and made it teachable; this heart which, for its age, was excessively hardened in such matters.'

Earlier in a letter written in 1539 he had said, of the Protestants, 'There was one thing especially which kept me from believing these people, that was reverence for the Church. But after I had sometimes listened and

suffered being taught, I realised that any such fear that the majesty of the Church might be diminished was vain and superfluous. And when my mind had been made ready to be truly attentive, I began to understand, as if someone had brought me a light, in what a mire of error I had wallowed and had become filthy and with how much mud and dirt I had been defiled. Being then grievously troubled and distracted, as was my duty on account of the wretched state into which I had fallen, and yet more on account of the knowledge of eternal death which hung over me, I judged nothing more necessary to me after having condemned with groans and tears my past manner of life, than to give myself up and betake myself to Thy way.'

Here we have in Calvin's own words the way in which the truth was revealed to him. Like many servants of God, he rarely spoke of God's work in his own soul. Two things stand out. Firstly, his obstinacy, and secondly, how the Lord tamed his spirit and called him suddenly to understand the truth. His deep reverence for the Roman Catholic Church was similar to Luther's.

Now he turned his mind from a career in the Church, which he had been pursuing in Paris, and went to Orleans University to study law. He was looking for a career in the world. He moved on to Bourges, still following his studies in law. There he learnt Greek, which was to equip him later in life to understand the New Testament in its original language.