

## John Calvin

Another important religious reformer was the French theologian John Calvin. Having been converted to the ideas of the Reformation in the early 1530s, he wrote a book, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Written in 1536, the book attempted to systematize the ideas of the Reformation. By then, Calvin had been forced to leave Paris because of his beliefs. He was invited to Geneva to help establish the Reformation there, but his ideas about how Christians should live

were too harsh and again he had to flee. However, in 1541, he was asked to return to Geneva, where this time he was able to establish a model government based on religious principles. Calvin ordered that stained glass windows, altars, and similar “distractions” be removed from churches. Dancing, fancy clothes, games, and other worldly “pleasures” were banned. According to Calvin, living a moral life was serious business.

Among the important teachings of Calvin are the following:

- Like Luther, Calvin believed Christians are saved through faith alone, not works.

- Like Luther, Calvin believed that the Bible was the only reliable source of God’s teaching.

- Like Luther, Calvin rejected the authority of the pope.

- Calvin rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation.

- Calvin also believed in predestination, that God decrees that certain people—the elect—will be saved and others will be sent to hell. (By contrast, the Catholic Church teaches that through free will, people make their own choice for salvation or damnation.) Calvin argued that the Bible said God was all-powerful and all-knowing. If God is all-knowing, he must know who will be saved and who will be damned. And if he knows who goes to heaven and who goes to hell, then how can people have free will?

- People must constantly strive to be good, and worldly success was an indication that a person was one of the elect (was saved).

- Fancy church decorations, like pictures of saints and the Virgin Mary, statues, elaborate altars, and stained glass windows (all very popular in Catholic churches) were corruptions of pure, genuine, simple Christianity. Calvin based his argument on the Ten Commandments, one of which is a prohibition of “graven images.” Since statues and other decorations were “graven images,” Calvin judged them to be improper.

- Calvin also protested against some rituals that had become traditional in the Church, against fancy priestly garments, and against observation of countless saints’ days. In each case he pointed to the conduct of the earliest Christians and argued that many rituals, garments, and festivals had been added to the Church many years after the time of Jesus. Calvin wanted to reform the Church so as to return to the simplicity of the early Christians.

Calvin was an effective preacher and his influence was felt across Europe. Calvinism, as his religious thought became known, spread to France (by the Huguenots), the Netherlands, Scotland (by John Knox and the Presbyterians), and England (by the Puritans). The Puritans, who ultimately settled Massachusetts Bay Colony, had their roots in Calvinism. Many Christians in America today are partly or wholly Calvinist in their views.