

**PROTESTANT  
REFORMATION: JOHN  
CALVIN AND  
PREDESTINATION**



# PROTESTANT REFORMATION: JOHN CALVIN AND PREDESTINATION

## Description

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, including excerpts from John Calvin's famous book, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain Calvin's basic arguments behind salvation through predestination and how the spread of his ideas left an indelible and lasting legacy on the Protestant Reformation in Europe in the 16th century and later with the Puritans would settle the New England colonies in the 17th century.

## Subjects

World History, European History, US History, English / Language Arts

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Reformation Wall, Geneva
- University of Geneva
- College Calvin, Geneva
- Cemetery of Kings, Geneva
- Museum of the Reformation, Geneva
- John Calvin Museum, Noyon, France

## Essential Questions

- Who was John Calvin? Why is he considered a giant in the Protestant Reformation?
- What was Calvin's philosophy on salvation and free will? Where did he get his ideas? Were Calvin's ideas on salvation accepted in 16th century Europe? If so, by whom?
- How did Calvin's theology spread into a worldwide movement? What influence did he have on English Puritans, including those that came to America in the 1620s and 1630s?

## Academic Summary

### **Of the Eternal Election by Which God has Predestinated Some to Salvation And Others to Destruction**

The predestination by which God adopts some to the hope of life, and adjudges others to eternal death, no man who would be thought pious ventures simply to deny; but it is greatly caviled at, especially by those who make prescience its cause. We, indeed, ascribe both prescience and predestination to God; but we say, that it is absurd to make the latter subordinate to the former (see chap. 22 sec. 1). When we attribute prescience to God, we mean that all things always were, and ever continue, under his eye; that to his knowledge there is no past or future, but all things are present, and indeed so present, that it is not merely the idea of them that is before him (as those objects are which we retain in our memory), but that he truly sees and contemplates them as actually under his immediate inspection. This prescience extends to the whole circuit of the world, and to all creatures. By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestinated to life or to death. This God has testified, not only in the case of single individuals; he has also given a specimen of it in the whole posterity of Abraham, to make it plain that the future condition of each nation lives entirely at his disposal: "When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel. For the Lord's portion is his people; Jacob is the lot of his inheritance," (Deut. 32:8, 9). The separation is before the eyes of all; in the person of Abraham, as in a withered stock, one people is specially chosen, while the others are rejected; but the cause does not appear, except that Moses, to deprive posterity of any handle for glorying, tells them that their superiority was owing entirely to the free love of God. The cause which he assigns for their deliverance is, "Because he loved thy fathers, therefore he chose their seed after them," (Deut. 4:37); or more explicitly in another chapter, "The Lord did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because you were more in number than any people: for ye were the fewest of all people: but because the Lord loved you," (Deut. 7:7, 8). He repeatedly makes the same intimations, "Behold, the heaven, and the heaven of heavens is the Lord's thy God, the earth also, with all that therein is. Only the Lord had a delight in thy fathers to love them, and he chose their seed after them," (Deut. 10:14, 15). Again, in another passage, holiness is enjoined upon them, because they have been chosen to be a peculiar people; while in another, love is declared to be the cause of their protection (Deut. 23:5). This, too, believers with one voice proclaim, "He shall choose our inheritance for us, the excellency of Jacob, whom he loved," (Ps. 47:4). The endowments with which God had adorned them, they all ascribe to gratuitous love, not only because they knew

that they had not obtained them by any merit, but that not even was the holy patriarch endued with a virtue that could procure such distinguished honor for himself and his posterity. And the more completely to crush all pride, he upbraids them with having merited nothing of the kind, seeing they were a rebellious and stiff-necked people (Deut. 9:6). Often, also, do the prophets remind the Jews of this election by way of disparagement and opprobrium, because they had shamefully revolted from it.

Be this as it may, let those who would ascribe the election of God to human worth or merit come forward. When they see that one nation is preferred to all others, when they hear that it was no feeling of respect that induced God to show more favor to a small and ignoble body, nay, even to the wicked and rebellious, will they plead against him for having chosen to give such a manifestation of mercy? But neither will their obstreperous words hinder his work, nor will their invectives, like stones thrown against heaven, strike or hurt his righteousness; nay, rather they will fall back on their own heads. To this principle of a free covenant, moreover, the Israelites are recalled whenever thanks are to be returned to God, or their hopes of the future to be animated. "The Lord he is God," says the Psalmist; "it is he that has made us, and not we ourselves: we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture," (Ps. 100:3; 95:7). The negation which is added, "not we ourselves," is not superfluous, to teach us that God is not only the author of all the good qualities in which men excel, but that they originate in himself, there being nothing in them worthy of so much honor. In the following words also they are enjoined to rest satisfied with the mere good pleasure of God: "O ye seed of Abraham, his servant; ye children of Jacob, his chosen," (Ps. 105:6). And after an enumeration of the continual mercies of God as fruits of election, the conclusion is, that he acted thus kindly because he remembered his covenant. With this doctrine accords the song of the whole Church, "They got not the land in possession by their own sword, neither did their own arm save them; but thy right hand, and thine arm, and the light of thy countenance, because thou hadst a favor unto them," (Ps. 44:3). It is to be observed, that when the land is mentioned, it is a visible symbol of the secret election in which adoption is comprehended. To like gratitude David elsewhere exhorts the people, "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, and the people whom he has chosen for his own inheritance," (Ps. 33:12). Samuel thus animates their hopes, "The Lord will not forsake his people for his great name's sake: because it has pleased the Lord to make you his people," (1 Sam. 12:22). And when David's faith is assailed, how does he arm himself for the battle? "Blessed is the man whom thou chooses, and causes to approach unto thee, that he may dwell in thy courts," (Ps. 65:4). But as the hidden election of God was confirmed both by a first and second election, and by other intermediate mercies, Isaiah thus applies the terms "The Lord will have mercy on Jacob, and will yet choose Israel," (Isa. 14:1). Referring to a future period, the gathering together of the dispersion, who seemed to have been abandoned, he says, that it will be a sign of a firm and stable election, notwithstanding of the apparent abandonment. When it is elsewhere said, "I have chosen thee, and

not cast thee away," (Isa. 41:9), the continual course of his great liberality is ascribed to paternal kindness. This is stated more explicitly in Zechariah by the angel, the Lord "shall choose Jerusalem again," as if the severity of his chastisements had amounted to reprobation, or the captivity had been an interruption of election, which, however, remains inviolable, though the signs of it do not always appear.

### **On Double Predestination**

... In conformity, therefore, to the clear doctrine of the Scripture, we assert, that by an eternal and immutable counsel, God has once for all determined, both whom he would admit to salvation, and whom he would condemn to destruction. We affirm that this counsel, as far as concerns the elect, is founded on his gratuitous mercy, totally irrespective of human merit; but that to those whom he devotes to condemnation, the gate of life is closed by a just and irreprehensible, but incomprehensible, judgment. In the elect, we consider calling as an evidence of election, and justification as another token of its manifestation, till they arrive in glory, which constitutes its completion. As God seals his elect by vocation and justification, so by excluding the reprobate from the knowledge of his name and the sanctification of his Spirit, he affords an indication of the judgment that awaits them.

*John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1536*

### **Of Justification**

I. Those whom God effectually calls, He also freely justifies, not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; nor by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on Him and His righteousness by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.

II. Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and His righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification: yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but works by love.

III. Christ, by His obedience and death, did fully discharge the debt of all those that are thus justified, and did make a proper, real and full satisfaction to His Father's justice in their behalf. Yet, in as much as He was given by the Father for them; and His obedience and satisfaction accepted in their stead; and both, freely, not for anything in them; their justification is only of free grace; that both the exact justice, and rich grace of God might be glorified in the justification of sinners.

IV. God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect, and Christ did, in the fullness of time, die for their sins, and rise again for their justification: nevertheless, they are not justified, until the Holy Spirit does, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them.

V. God does continue to forgive the sins of those that are justified; and although

they can never fall from the state of justification, yet they may, by their sins, fall under God's fatherly displeasure, and not have the light of His countenance restored unto them, until they humble themselves, confess their sins, beg pardon, and renew their faith and repentance.

VI. The justification of believers under the Old Testament was, in all these respects, one and the same with the justification of believers under the New Testament.

*Westminster Confession of Faith, 1646*

For the first thousand years of Christianity, there was only one church, generally called the "Christian" church by historians. The pope, who lived in Rome, held immense power over the entire population in Europe. Over the centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire in 476, the church, called "Catholic" after the Great Schism with the Orthodox Church after 1054, flexed its control over monarchs and the nobility as well. As literacy and education waned during the medieval period, the Church militant seemed to be the only one who could understand the scriptures and thus the mind of God. Europe stagnated for centuries. Heretics, those who dared to challenge the Church's teachings, were put through the inquisition, a church show trial designed to prune the Church of its dead branches. Those convicted of heresy, many of who had been tortured to extract confessions, often had their souls purified by burning at the stake.

By the high Middle Ages, the Catholic Church had developed an idea behind salvation that Christians had to earn their way into heaven. The first and primary part of this notion had to do with membership in the Catholic Church itself. Accordingly, anyone who sought salvation outside the Church was outside of God's grace, a line of thinking that held the Church together century after century. Heretics, those who challenged church teachings, were also considered to be outside God, which in turn led to the excesses of the inquisition. As the centuries went on, the papacy also developed a series of acts called sacraments, designed as ways for Christians to show they had faith in Christ. These sacraments could only be done inside the Church, which in turn led to even more reliance on the papacy for salvation.

On 31 October 1517, Luther wrote his now famous "95 Theses", a series of arguments against the excesses of the Catholic Church, and then (according to legend) nailed them to the Church door in the center of Wittenberg, Germany for all to see. His works, published in German on the new printing presses for all to read, led to an explosion of other reformers, and set the stage for the Protestant Reformation. In essence, Luther had opened the door for others to question the Church through different interpretations of scripture.

In 1536, almost twenty years after Luther's challenge, John Calvin, a French lawyer and theologian living in Geneva, Switzerland, published a book called Institutes of the Christian Religion. Originally published in Latin but subsequently translated into different European languages, Institutes outlined Calvin's basic philosophies on what has been called "predestination" as a prerequisite for salvation. Like many Christian reformers during the Reformation, Calvin was most interested in finding the true road to heaven. As he struggled to understand the word of God, Calvin came to a logical

argument regarding salvation. Under Calvin's ideas, since God is eternal and all-knowing, He alone knows, and has always known, who is going to heaven at the end of time. Such thinking relies on the idea that the Bible is the word of God and therefore must be true.

If God knows everything, then Calvin believed it stood to reason that he knew who would ultimately be saved. Since God was eternal, He had always known who would be saved. In simplistic terms (and Calvin himself was never simple), God made a list of those to be saved at the beginning of time and thus the list itself was eternal. Salvation was a gift from God to those who were on the list. Those not on the list had no hope for eternal salvation. They were only working to stay in God's grace while they were here on Earth. Consequently, those on the list who fell out of God's grace (highly unlikely in Calvin's opinion) would still go to heaven, but would also incur God's wrath here on Earth. Calvin believed that his name, of course, was on the list, as did everyone who followed his line of thinking. Calvinist ideas about predestination spread across Europe, to Scottish Presbyterians and the Dutch Reformed Church, and his ideas also had a profound effect on the Puritans who would later settle colonial New England.

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, including excerpts from John Calvin's famous book, Institutes of the Christian Religion (1536), students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain Calvin's basic arguments behind salvation through predestination and how the spread of his ideas left an indelible and lasting legacy on the Protestant Reformation in Europe in the 16th century and later with the Puritans who would settle the New England colonies in the 17th century.

### **Objectives**

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain John Calvin's ideas behind salvation through predestination.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how the spread of Calvin's ideas across Europe left an indelible and lasting legacy on the Protestant Reformation.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how Calvin's ideas influenced the Puritans who would settle New England in the 17th century.

## Procedure

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: What was the Protestant Reformation? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – John Calvin (25 min)
- Video – John Calvin (5 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the sources and articles about John Calvin and his works (20 min)
- Suggestion: AP/Advanced students should concentrate on primary sources.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: John Calvin (20 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail John Calvin's basic arguments behind salvation through predestination and how the spread of his ideas left an indelible and lasting legacy on the Protestant Reformation in Europe in the 16th century and later with the Puritans who would settle the New England colonies in the 17th century.

## Extension

### On tour: Reformation Wall, Geneva

While on tour, students in Geneva can visit the International Monument to the Reformation, commonly known as the “Reformation Wall”, on the ground of the University of Geneva. Erected in 1909 for the 400th anniversary of Calvin's birth (and the 350th anniversary of the founding of the school), the massive wall is a monument to many reformers from across the world, including Roger Williams (who founded the colony of Rhode Island). At the center of the memorial are huge statues (each over 15 feet tall) of John Calvin and other Swiss reformers. On either side of the statues is the Calvinist motto, “Light After Darkness” (referring to the belief that Calvin opened people's eyes).



## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- [www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.v.xxii.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.v.xxii.html)  
Of the Eternal Election, By Which God Has Predestinated Some to Salvation, and Others to Destruction (primary source). From Calvin's Institutes on the Christian Religion, book 3, Chapter 21.
- [www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/calvin-predestin2.asp](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/calvin-predestin2.asp)  
John Calvin: On Double Predestination (primary source). From the Modern History Sourcebook at Fordham University.
- [www.reformed.org/documents/wcf\\_with\\_proofs/](http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/)  
Of Justification (primary source) – from the Westminster confession of Faith
- [religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/sacred/charity.html](http://religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/sacred/charity.html)  
John Winthrop: A Model of Christian Charity (primary source) – John Winthrop, leader of the Puritans who settled the Massachusetts Bay colony in 1630
- [www.theologian-theology.com/theologians/john-calvin-predestination/](http://www.theologian-theology.com/theologians/john-calvin-predestination/)  
Calvin on Predestination (academic article). Great information on the basics of predestination as articulated by Calvin. Highly recommended for students and teachers.
- [www.historylearningsite.co.uk/John\\_Calvin.htm](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/John_Calvin.htm)  
John Calvin (website) – from the History Learning Site (UK)
- [www.calvin.edu/about/john-calvin/](http://www.calvin.edu/about/john-calvin/)  
John Calvin (website) – basic narrative on Calvin from Calvin College (MI)
- [www.greatsite.com/timeline-english-bible-history/john-calvin.html](http://www.greatsite.com/timeline-english-bible-history/john-calvin.html)  
John Calvin (website)
- [www.covenanter.org/JCalvin/johncalvin.htm](http://www.covenanter.org/JCalvin/johncalvin.htm)  
John Calvin (website)
- [www.slideshare.net/marshascott/john-calvin-reformation](http://www.slideshare.net/marshascott/john-calvin-reformation)  
John Calvin - Reformation (PowerPoint). From Marsha Scott, Social Studies Instructor at Calvary Baptist School (NC).
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.biography.com/people/john-calvin-9235788](http://www.biography.com/people/john-calvin-9235788)  
John Calvin: The Origins of Calvinism (video). This 3-minute video, produced by the Biography Channel, provides a great overview of Calvin's life and theology. Appropriate, and recommended for all students and classes.

### Background Information

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Calvin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Calvin)  
John Calvin – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calvinism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calvinism)  
Calvinism – Wikipedia article

- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/switzerland/Geneva](https://www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/switzerland/Geneva)  
On the Road: Geneva – from Passports Educational Travel
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/switzerland/john\\_calvin](https://www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/switzerland/john_calvin)  
On the Road: John Calvin – from Passports Educational Travel

### **Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans**

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/sir-thomas-more](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/sir-thomas-more)  
Reformation England – Sir Thomas More
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/english-reformation](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/english-reformation)  
Reformation England – An Overview
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/reformation-britain-pilgrimage-of-grace](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/reformation-britain-pilgrimage-of-grace)  
Reformation England – Pilgrimage of Grace 1536-37
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/anne-of-cleves](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/anne-of-cleves)  
Reformation England – Anne of Cleves: Henry's 4th Wife and Beloved Sister
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/protestant-reformation-french-huguenots](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/protestant-reformation-french-huguenots)  
Protestant Reformation – French Huguenots
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/martin-luther-95-theses](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/martin-luther-95-theses)  
Protestant Reformation – Luther and the 95 Theses 1517
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/switzerland/john-calvin-and-predestination](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/switzerland/john-calvin-and-predestination)  
Protestant Reformation – John Calvin and Predestination

### **Key Terms**

- Calvin
- Elect
- Predestination
- Protestant
- Puritans
- Reformation
- Reformed Churches

