

*Celebrating John Calvin - A Heart Offered to God*



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### **Introduction**

John Calvin was born on July 10, 1509. Therefore, we are here to celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth. In addition, since he wrote his final edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in 1559, this is also the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the writing of that monumental work. It has been my privilege to read John Calvin for nearly three decades.

It is not just a matter of reading the *Institutes*, but also of reading his *Commentaries*, his *Tracts & Treatises*, his *Letters* and his *Sermons*. It is indeed fortunate that we can read the works of Calvin. I have been convinced, first of all, for a very long time that Calvin is probably the most relevant of all the great intellectual geniuses of human history, simply because he was a Christian first and foremost.

Secondly, he continues to address the very issues that face the Church today, and thirdly, he addresses the issues that face us in society. It was his conversion that explains all that he was able to accomplish. What is greatly needed by the Church at the present moment, is a solid understanding of Calvin, because he speaks directly to our situation today. He also speaks to the Christian life with compelling force & deep understanding.

I hope to show you in this lecture that Calvin is to be read in order for us to claim that we are truly Protestant. This idea of being a Protestant has almost vanished from our vocabulary as Christians. Most Christians do not understand the Reformation, let alone being able to tell you anything about it. This sad state of affairs has led to a weak Church and weak Christians who are swayed by virtually every new idea that comes along. Almost every so-called modern idea wouldn't hold a candle to the ideas of the Reformers or the Puritans.

We ought to be ashamed of this prevailing standard among us. The evangelical Church has largely misunderstood Calvin. Even Martin Luther is seldom read by Christians today. The successors to Calvin, being the Puritans are also ignored. Yet in their day, they were spiritual giants. They knew their Bibles better than we do by far. They were aware of Church history intimately and profoundly. I have no objection if we say that these men and women were greater than ourselves, so let us we read them. To not read them is to be willfully ignorant of Church history and of our evangelical faith and heritage. In order for us to truly understand John Calvin – we must read him.

Now I am very thankful that we can read the works of Calvin. He is read primarily by those who identify with the Gospel as the Reformers preached it – by those who think that Calvin has something to say. What is necessary is for those who are Protestant and Evangelical to read him, who perhaps have a jaundiced view about him because of ignorance and antipathy that has been passed on from one generation of Evangelicals to another. I fully recognize

that someone of you here tonight may fall into these categories. So I hope to convince you that you ought to read Calvin.

George Bancroft, a Harvard professor during the nineteenth century, believed that the institutions of America were derived mainly from Calvinism through the Puritans.<sup>1</sup> Bancroft connected the impact that Calvin had upon Genevan society as being responsible for the founding of the Republic of America. Certainly his ideas were the cause of the great heritage that exists in this country – a heritage that is now virtually unknown or disowned. Bancroft acknowledges Calvin as virtually the founder of America.<sup>2</sup>

John Calvin belongs to the second generation of Reformers. He comes after Luther and Zwingli, however, in many respects he is above them. He must be ranked as the leading mind in the massive struggle that took place in the sixteenth century.<sup>3</sup> David Hall states that there are two kinds of leaders: (1) those who predict future changes, and (2) those who change future predictions.<sup>4</sup> The first kind

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## Bibliography

<sup>1</sup> George Bancroft, "A Word on Calvin, the Reformer," in his *Literary and Historical Miscellanies* (New York, 1855) 405ff; cited in Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. (1910; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 8:522.

<sup>2</sup> This phrase is Bancroft's, but is cited by Robert M. Kingdon in his *Calvin and Calvinism: Sources of Democracy*, (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1970) x111. Bancroft's quote is in his *History of the United States of America*, (Boston, 1853) 1:464.

<sup>3</sup> Williston Walker, *John Calvin, Revolutionary, Theologian, Pastor*, (Ross-Shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2005) 7.

of leader senses the direction and strives to get to the front of the event(s). The second kind of leader observes the direction and determines that it must be corrected. This was John Calvin.

It is fair to say then that Calvin has had a profound impact of which most Christians are unaware, and where they do think that they know something about Calvin, it is generally in the negative and stems from ignorance and/or antipathy.

It is my hope to correct some of these misconceptions and to inspire at least a desire to consider reading Calvin. You cannot read Calvin in a day – he must be read over a period of time, then he must be re-read and digested. So we must begin with Calvin's history and go from there.

## **Early Life & Education**

John Calvin was born in Noyon, France in the year 1509 on July 10. Noyon was a small town some 50 miles northeast of Paris in Picardy. He was born into a family of five children, 3 sons and 2 daughters born to his father Gerard Cauvin, and his mother Jeanne la France (Lefranc) of Cambrai. Very little is known of Calvin's mother – she died when Calvin was five. She was known for her religious piety and affection. Calvin recalled many years later in his 1543 treatise on relics that his mother took him to visit the Abbey of Ourscamp, which

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<sup>4</sup> David W. Hall, *The Legacy of John Calvin*, (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2008) 13.

was 4 miles south of Noyon where apparently he remembered kissing the alleged skull of St. Anne.<sup>5</sup> Calvin was the middle son. His father, Gerard was a clerical assistant in the close-by Cathedral complex with important connections. Calvin's early schooling taught him the basic rudiments. These would prepare him for his further schooling at the age of 12.

His father enrolled Calvin in the *College de Montaigu* in Paris 1521. His plan was for his son to study for the Roman Catholic priesthood. Calvin's studies were the usual of the day – he studied logic, rhetoric and the arts. It was a classical education. He was fortunate to receive training from two leading progressive Roman Catholic educators, John Major and Peter of Spain. He would have learned from Augustine about the depravity of man, original sin, and predestination.

Calvin learned the most important languages so necessary to be a good theologian, Latin, Greek and Hebrew. These languages ultimately would enable him to be such a profound exegete and commentator on the Bible and on the Church Fathers. During these studies as a young boy, Calvin learned Latin. It was arranged that he would study Latin and French grammar under Mathurin Cordier who just happened to be the best Latinist in France at that time. What is significant about Cordier is that many years later as an old man he

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<sup>5</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *John Calvin, His Life and Influence*, (Ross-Shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2004) 21.

came at Calvin's bidding to Geneva to teach in the Academy that Calvin founded. Calvin never forgot the debt he owed to Cordier for teaching him. In fact, this loyalty of Calvin is seen in other events as well. Calvin dedicated his commentary to 1 Thessalonians to Mathurin Cordier.

"It is befitting that you should come in for a share in my labors, inasmuch as, under your auspices, having entered on a course of study, I made proficiency at least so far as to be prepared to profit in some degree the Church of God.

When my father sent me, while yet a boy, to Paris, after I had simply tasted the first elements of the Latin tongue; Providence so ordered it that I had, for a short time, the privilege of having you as my instructor, that I might be taught by you the true method of learning, in such a way that I might be prepared afterwards to make somewhat better proficiency.

For, after presiding over the first class with the highest renown, on observing that pupils who had been ambitiously trained up by the other masters, produced nothing but mere show, nothing of solidity, so that they required to be formed by you anew, tired of this annoyance, you that year descended to the fourth class.

This, indeed, was what you had in view, but to me it was a singular kindness on the part of God that I happened to have an auspicious commencement of such a course of training. And although I was permitted to have the use of it only for a short time, from the circumstance that we were soon afterwards advanced higher by an injudicious man, who regulated our studies according to his own pleasure, or rather his caprice, yet I derived so much assistance afterwards from your training, that it is with good reason that I acknowledge myself indebted to you for such progress as has since been made.

And this I was desirous to testify to posterity, that, if any advantage shall accrue to them from my writings, they shall know that it has in some degree originated with you."  
**(GENEVA, 17th February 1550.)<sup>6</sup>**

The *College de Montaigu* has been described as filthy and lice-ridden. It was under the control of a fierce man by the name of Noel Bedier who required all of his students to speak Latin and not French. John Major's influence on Calvin can be seen in that he stressed going to original work for interpretation and the best interpretation was to be found in the literal interpretation and not in any allegorical interpretation. Calvin would later give precedence to the literal reading of Holy Scripture. At the *College*, Calvin learned the art of

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<sup>6</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Thessalonians*, vol. 21 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, repr. 2005, 22 vols.) 234.

disputation and questioning which enabled him to argue so well in his later work. Many of the things that Calvin learned at this college, he would later describe in his famous reply to Cardinal Sadoletto, as,

"mere sophistry and sophistry so twisted, involved, tortuous and puzzling that scholastic theology might well be described as a kind of esoteric magic. The denser the darkness in which anyone shrouded a subject and the more he puzzled himself and others with preposterous riddles, the greater his fame for acumen and learning."

It is entirely possible that Calvin encountered the teachings of Martin Luther during these early years. Luther was already 25 when Calvin was born. As a student for the priesthood, Calvin would have received the tonsure (the shaving of the crown of his head). Calvin would have completed his training and probably received the equivalent of a master's degree at the age of either 17 or 18.

In 1528, Calvin's father decided to send his son to Orleans and Bourges to study law. It seemed as if his father was experiencing some problems with the Cathedral at Noyon from which he enjoyed certain privileges. With the loss of these benefits due to this confrontation (whatever it was precisely), Gerard determined to send John to Orleans and Bourges to study law.

Calvin thus went to study law in obedience to his father's wishes. Orleans and Bourges had the reputation of being delightful

places at which to study in comparison to the college in Paris. This was in comparison to the austere and ascetic life that the *College de Montaigu* had required. Calvin however was very rigorous in his studies and did not relax his regimen. One of his contemporaries, Nicolas Colladon in 1565 recorded that Calvin in Orleans would take a very light supper, study till midnight, and then waking early would lie in bed recalling and thinking over what he had learned the evening before.

Theodore Beza believed that this discipline strengthened the retentive abilities of his remarkable memory, as well as deepened his ability to debate and think on his feet with this memory ever-present with him. At the same time, Calvin suffered physically from dyspepsia, which dogged him for the rest of his life.

There can be no question that Calvin was a brilliant student, but he was not someone to rest in this native ability - he worked and labored hard and deep. His ability to analyze and get to the point of the matter enabled him to win many debates and when you read the *Institutes* and his *Commentaries* you immediately become aware of this ability and skill. So well trained was Calvin, that he was often asked by his teachers to teach in their place at times.

It was in Orleans and Bourges that Calvin made the acquaintance of the German Melchior Wolmar, one of the preeminent Greek scholars and teachers of the age. Here was Calvin then at age 19 learning the Greek language from probably the best teacher in the

world at that time. Remember that he learned Latin from Mathurin Cordier, the master of that language, and now he sits at the feet of another master learning Greek. Wolmar had established a boy's boarding school in Orleans. You might be interested to know that a nine year old boy was there in 1528 by the name of Theodore Beza as a student under Wolmar.

Beza would in later years become Calvin's successor, and there can be no question of the superior ability of Beza in the Greek tongue than even Calvin. Do we not see the hand of God in his gracious providence weaving the lives of these young boys and men together, so that in later years they would defend and promote the Protestant and Evangelical cause with such great ability?

In 1531, Gerard Cauvin died. Calvin owed a great debt to his father for enabling him to continue to study. The privileges that Gerard was not able to enjoy (in terms of study) he freely and willingly gave to his sons. He worked for them it would appear, so that they could enjoy the fruits of that which he was not able to.

Calvin's father's death freed him from parental obligations to study law, even though it appears that he had finished his course and obtained his degree. Within a month of his father's death, Calvin went to Paris to continue classical humanistic studies. This move indicates that the study of law was not something that Calvin had desired yet he did it because his father desired it.

Francis I had appointed "royal lecturers" to teach Latin, Greek and Mathematics in what would become the College de France. French education was now focused on the humanistic new learning, and Calvin was an eager student of this humanism. He already had command of Latin and Greek so he could pursue deep studies of the classical scholars. In addition to further studies, Calvin now began to study Hebrew under Francios Vatable. Calvin's brother Antoine had come to Paris also.

In 1532, Calvin published his first book. It was a humanist commentary on Seneca's book *On Clemency (de Clementia)*. Seneca, of course, was counselor to Nero and a Roman Stoic philosopher. It was Calvin's first and only book as a humanist student. It was composed in superb Latin. Calvin poured his heart into it. He hoped it would make a great impression on the scholarly world. He paid for the publication with his own money. It did not sell well.

Calvin's point in his commentary on Seneca's work was to stand on the shoulders of that ancient philosopher and give advice to King Francis I, the current King of France, and any other king for that matter. These kings should rule their people wisely, justly and mercifully. Calvin made 3 rather insignificant references to biblical passages.<sup>7</sup> One concerned the wrath of a king, the second, a reference to Romans 13, and the third, a reference to the responsibilities of masters and servants.

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew Pettegree, "Reformation and Counter-Reformation," in *A World History of Christianity*, edited by Adrian Hastings (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 258.

## **Conversion**

The year 1532 was thus a disappointment to Calvin. However, 1533 proved to be otherwise for the young Calvin. Calvin was familiar with Lutheran ideas from a number of sources. Firstly, the "new religion" was making its voice heard. Melchior Wolmar was familiar with Lutheran teaching and no doubt passed some of it on to Calvin. Calvin's cousin Olivetan was familiar with Lutheranism, and quite possibly, he had been reading Luther and Zwingli for himself.

It was during this year that John Calvin was converted. He makes no mention anywhere of any human agency in his conversion. His only recorded instance, is found in his commentary on the Psalms in the preface. He says,

"Thus it came to pass, that I was withdrawn for the study of philosophy and was put to the study of law. To this pursuit I endeavored faithfully to apply myself, in obedience to the will of my father; but God by the secret guidance of his providence, at length gave a different direction to my course. And first, since I was too obstinately addicted to the superstitions of Popery to be easily extricated from so profound an abyss of mire, God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame, which was more hardened in such matters than might have been expected from one at my early period of life. Having thus received some taste and

knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with so intense a desire to make progress in such godliness that I pursued the rest of my studies (law) with less ardor."<sup>8</sup>

Robert Reymond believes that a veiled account of Calvin's conversion exists in his reply to Cardinal Sadoletto, dated September 1, 1539.<sup>9</sup> This may or may not be.

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<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, Calvin's Commentaries, 22 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, repr. 2005, in vol. IV) vol. I, xl – xli.

<sup>9</sup> John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises*, Vol. 1, *Reply by John Calvin to Letter by Cardinal Sadolet to the Senate and People of Geneva*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1958) 61 - 62. - "I, O Lord, as I had been educated from a boy, always professed the Christian faith. But at first I had no other reason for my faith than that which then every where prevailed. Thy word, which ought to have shone on all thy people like a lamp, was taken away, or at least suppressed as to us. And lest any one should long for greater light, an idea had been instilled into the minds of all, that the investigation of that hidden celestial philosophy was better delegated to a few, whom the others might consult as oracles — that the highest knowledge befitting plebeian minds was to subdue themselves into obedience to the Church. Then, the rudiments in which I had been instructed were of a kind which could neither properly train me to the legitimate worship of thy Deity, nor pave the way for me to a sure hope of salvation, nor train me aright for the duties of the Christian life. I had learned, indeed, to worship thee only as my God, but as the true method of worshipping was altogether unknown to me, I stumbled at the very threshold. I believed, as I had been taught, that I was redeemed by the death of thy Son from liability to eternal death, but the redemption I thought of was one whose virtue could never reach me. I anticipated a future resurrection, but hated to think of it, as being an event most dreadful. And this feeling not only had dominion over me in private, but was derived from the doctrine which was then uniformly delivered to the people by their Christian teachers... "When, however, I had performed all these things, though I had some intervals of quiet, I was still far off from true peace of conscience; for, whenever I descended into myself, or raised my mind to thee, extreme terror seized me — terror which no expiations nor satisfactions could cure. And the more closely I examined myself, the sharper the stings with which my conscience was pricked, so that the only solace which remained to me was to delude myself by obliviousness. Still, as nothing better offered, I continued the course which I had begun, when, lo, a very different form of doctrine started up, not one which led us away from the Christian profession, but one which brought it back to its fountain head, and, as it were, clearing away the dross, restored it to its original purity...My mind being now prepared for serious attention, I at length perceived, as if light had broken in upon me, in what a style of error I had

The German liberal church historian, Adolf von Harnack described Calvin as the man who never smiled, yet listen to what Calvin said - "laughter is a gift from God." <sup>10</sup>

Calvin began to read and study the Bible deeply in Paris. The result of his studies led him to teach others and he began to acquire a reputation. It has been debated as to whether Calvin had a hand in writing the address delivered by his friend, Nicholas Cop who was the rector of the university, yet the result of this address caused Calvin and Cop to flee Paris for their lives. Why would Calvin feel the need to flee unless he were somehow involved? We know that Calvin's room was ransacked by the law, his papers were confiscated and all of his correspondence apprehended. One tradition has Calvin sneaking out of his window dressed as a vinedresser with a hoe over his shoulder.

Calvin's conversion had brought him into contact with persecution. For the rest of his life, he would never forget those of his countrymen who suffered for the evangelical cause.

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wallowed, and how much pollution and impurity I had thereby contracted. Being exceedingly alarmed at the misery into which I had fallen, and much more at that which threatened me in the view of eternal death, I, as in duty bound, made it my first business to betake myself to thy way, condemning my past life, not without groans and tears. And now, O Lord, what remains to a wretch like me, but instead of defense, earnestly to supplicate thee not to judge according to its deserts that fearful abandonment of thy word, from which, in thy wondrous goodness, thou hast at last delivered me."

<sup>10</sup> B.B Warfield, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Creation," *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, repr. 1981) 5:297

Calvin later developed a seal that reflected his life from this moment on. It was a heart resting in an open hand with the motto beneath saying, "My heart, I give you, O Lord, eagerly and sincerely."

In May 1534, Calvin found himself in his hometown of Noyon. He resigned all of his church benefices, and severed all ties with the Roman Catholic Church. From Noyon, Calvin made his way back to Paris at considerable danger to himself. There he met the Spanish physician, Michael Servetus for the first time. Servetus had just published a book called *On the Errors of the Trinity*. He challenged Calvin to a debate. Calvin showed up at the arranged place, but Servetus never came. Calvin would later send Servetus a copy of his *Institutes* and remind him some 20 years later that he, (Servetus) had not kept the appointment in Paris.

Serious persecution broke out in France in 1534 as a result of the "Placard Incident." This was an attack on the Mass. Apparently a placard managed to find its way to the door of the king's bedchamber. This enraged Francis I. You can read the full text of the placards in Ford Lewis Battles translation of the *1536 Institutes*.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ford Lewis Battles, *John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1536 Edition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 339 – 342.

The placards stressed that Christ was the only sufficient sacrifice, and that his priesthood invalidated all other priesthoods, and therefore the Roman Catholic Mass as well. The French biographer, Bernard Cottret<sup>12</sup> states that the epistle to the Hebrews became the cornerstone of the French Reformation. It cut across in the space of one night the entire French kingdom. The demarcation line for France became not justification by faith or even Holy Scripture itself, but rather the Mass separated the French Catholic from the French Evangelical.

Francis I's persecution was very severe. He imprisoned and fined evangelicals. He slit the tongues of many of them. He had them tortured and whipped, and he had many burned slowly over fire. Calvin published in 1536 his first edition of the *Institutes* as a defense for his persecuted countrymen, and he addressed the preface to Francis I. In every subsequent edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin included this prefatory address to Francis I.

In 1535, Calvin made his way to Basel where he lived for a year under an assumed name (Marin Lucianus). In Basle he wrote the Latin preface for his cousin Pierre Olivetan's French translation of the Bible. Calvin continued over the years to revise this translation (1536, 1538, 1539, 1540, 1543, 1546,

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<sup>12</sup> Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography*, translated by M. Wallace McDonald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 83.

1551) With the help of Theodore Beza (also a countryman) he produced the French "Geneva Bible" that would go on to dominate French speaking Protestantism for 200 years, in addition to the Pilgrims.

In Basel, Calvin worked on his first edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He hurried to finish it when he heard that his friends, Milon, de la Forge, du Bourg & Poille had been burned at the stake.

In addressing Francis I, Calvin did not ask for mercy, but rather that the king exercise justice. He claims that the French evangelicals are the legitimate heirs of the New Testament faith, and that they represent the one, holy, catholic and apostolic faith. He claims that the faith of the New Testament is not some new novelty, but is the true faith, and that Rome has wandered away from the true faith. The faith of the Protestants was not new, it was not uncertain, it was not unknown – on the contrary, everything about Rome proved that they had abandoned true Christianity.

He shows that the Church Fathers actually support the Protestant cause and not Rome's. He shows that French Protestants taught the faith of the Bible contrary to Rome's teaching which elevated tradition above the Bible. In fact, Rome lacks the true marks of the Church – the preaching of the Word

of God and the correct, lawful and biblical celebration of the Lord's Supper.

We have no knowledge of whether Francis I ever read Calvin's address to him. Francis eventually found that he needed the help of the German Protestants to deal with Charles V of Spain in a war that broke out in 1536. An edict was announced which permitted French persecuted evangelicals to return to France, but the conditions that were attached to their return were not viewed favorably by Calvin. Protestants were supposed to renounce their faith after a period of 6 months.

What Calvin had done by writing his *Institutes* in 1536 was to set down for the first time in writing the theology of the Reformation. It was mark of leadership. Truth was plainly written for all to read. The *Institutes* utilized Scripture references to prove their points.

The *Institutes*, as Cottret observes, "crossed a threshold."<sup>13</sup> In 6 chapters, Calvin dealt with such subjects as The Law of God, Faith, Prayer, the Sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, Rome's false worship, Liberty for Christians, Civil government and Church authority.

In 1536, Calvin left Basel and travelled with his friend Louis du Tillet. He spent nearly 8 weeks in the home of the

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<sup>13</sup> Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography*, 112.

Protestant Duchess Renee, the daughter of Louis XII of France, wife of the son of Lucrezia Borgia and sister-in-law of Francis I. In 1564, when Calvin was on his death-bed – he wrote his last letter to her. While staying with her, he asked her to use her influence to help the persecuted French believers. She was unable to, and was herself imprisoned. Her children were taken from her and given to strangers and reared in the Catholic faith. Such was the price of being a Protestant

Calvin took a short trip back to Basel and Paris and then in 1536, with his brother Antoine and half-sister set out for Strasbourg in July. He arrived in Geneva on August 5, planning to spend just the night there and then move on the next day. He hoped to settle in Strasbourg in the life of a scholar. The reason he arrived in Geneva, was because he had to make a long detour in order to avoid war between Francis I and Charles V.

This overnight stop became, next to Calvin's conversion, the defining moment of his life. Geneva had become a Protestant city through the fiery preaching of William Farel. Farel has sometimes being called, the "Elijah of the French Reformation." Utterly fearless, powerful in proclamation, he had arrived in Geneva in 1532. He was 20 years older than Calvin. He heard that the young author of the *Institutes* was in town, and so went to visit him. He urged Calvin to remain in Geneva and help the Reformation cause. Calvin protested that he was fit only for a scholar's life of writing. William Farel raised his

voice and thundered at Calvin that God Almighty would curse him if he preferred the scholar's life over the cause of Christ in Geneva. Calvin was absolutely terrified. He later said that he felt as if the hand of God from on high had reached out and arrested him.

That momentous decision to stay in Geneva would have major ramifications, that would be felt throughout the world in the centuries to come. He began his labors in Geneva in September 1536 as "Reader of Holy Scripture." The records of the Little Council that governed Geneva recorded Calvin simply as "*ille Gallus*" – "that Frenchman."

In his Matthew commentary, John Calvin tells the story of the scribe who came to Jesus and told him that he would follow him wherever he went (Matt. 8:19). Calvin writes,

"we must bear in mind that he was a scribe who had been accustomed to a quiet and easy life, had enjoyed honor, and was ill-fitted to endure reproaches, poverty and persecutions, and the cross. He wishes indeed to follow Christ, but dreams of an easy and agreeable life and of dwellings filled with every convenience, whereas the disciples of Christ must walk among thorns and march to the cross amidst uninterrupted afflictions. The more eager he is, the less he is prepared. He seems as if he wished to fight in the shade and at ease, annoyed neither by

sweat nor by dust, and beyond the reaches of war...let us therefore, look upon ourselves as warned, in his person, not to boast lightly and at ease that we will be the disciples of Christ, while we are taking no thought of the cross or of afflictions; but on the contrary, to consider early what sort of condition awaits us. The first lesson, which Christ gives us upon entering his school, is to deny ourselves, and take up his cross."<sup>14</sup>

This is Calvin speaking from experience.

## **Geneva**

Calvin's first ministry in Geneva is dated from 1536 to 1538. Geneva was governed by the Little Council – a 25 man team, (4 Magistrates who had great power, the City Treasurer and 20 others). The Little Council elected the Council of Two Hundred which handled all the daily business issues of the city. The Little Council met 3 times a week and exercised the most executive power in the city. Virtually all of Calvin's ministry in Geneva had to contend with the Little Council.

In October 1536, an incident occurred which enhanced Calvin's standing. The city of Lausanne was considering voting as to whether it should become a Protestant city or not. William Farel took John

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<sup>14</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke*, vol. 16, Calvin's Commentaries, 22 vols (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, repr. 2005) vol. 1, 388.

Calvin along for the debates. In these debates, the Roman Catholics would state their position and the Protestants would state theirs. This debate has been called the "Lausanne Disputation."

For 3 days, John Calvin listened which made Farel a little mad. He wanted Calvin to take part but there was only silence. The debate was considering a total of 10 Theses drawn up by the Protestant Pieter Viret.

On October 5, the debate reached Thesis 3 and was debating the statement that "Christ withdrew for us in corporeal presence." The Roman Catholic priest Mimard, began by reading his speech in which he accused the Reformers of holding in low esteem the teachings of Augustine and other Church Fathers regarding the physical presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper because they feared that these authorities were against them.

In the great cathedral of Lausanne as Mimard uttered these words, John Calvin rose to his feet. Every eye turned to look at this 26 year old young man. He began to speak.

"the reproach which you have made here today concerning the holy doctors of antiquity constrains me to say one word to remonstrate briefly how wrongly and groundlessly you accuse us in this connection. (At this point, Calvin begins to paraphrase the church fathers from memory). Cyprian says, speaking of the present

matter that now occupies us in Book 2 of the Letters, Letter # 3 – Calvin paraphrases Cyprian. Tertullian refuting the error of Marcion said – he paraphrases Tertullian. The author of the unfinished commentaries on Matthew that are attributed to St. John Chrysostom, in the 11<sup>th</sup> homily about in the middle, said – he paraphrases the source. Augustine in Epistle 23, very near the end said – he paraphrases Augustine. In the book *Against Adiamantus*, about the middle, Augustine declares – he paraphrases Augustine. At the beginning of Augustine's Homily on the Gospel of John about the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> section, he declares, "while this age endures, it is necessary that the Savior be on high...his body which ascended into heaven in one place...' How will you then reconcile the view that the body appears on all the altars, is enclosed in all the little black boxes, is every day and at the same time in a hundred places. In the book, *De Fide ad Petrum Diaconum*, chp. 19, Augustine says – here he paraphrase Augustine. In the epistle *ad Dardanum*, Augustine testifies – here he paraphrases the source. Calvin goes on to say, "the whole world is easily able to understand with what audacity you reproach us with being contrary to the ancient doctors. Certainly if you had seen some of their pages, you would not have been so foolhardy as to pass judgment as you have done, not even having seen the evidence. I advise you and beseech you to charge us no

longer with contradicting the ancient doctors in this matter with whom we are very much in accord."

Calvin then sat down. The cathedral was absolutely silent. Then Jean Tandy, a Franciscan friar stood up and spoke.

"it seems to me that the sin against the Holy Spirit that the Scriptures speak of is the stubbornness which rebels against manifest truth. In accordance with what I have just heard, I confess to be guilty. Because of ignorance, I have lived in error and I have spread false teaching. I ask God's pardon for everything I have said and done against his honor; and I ask pardon of all of you people for the offense which I gave with my preaching up until now I defrock myself henceforth to follow Christ and his pure doctrine alone..."<sup>15</sup>

That day the city of Lausanne adopted the Protestant cause. The Roman Catholic priest, Mimard gave himself to the Protestant faith. I ask you all here tonight, what do we know of such things? This is conversion simply by proclaiming truth.

Back in Geneva, Calvin was concerned, that in order for the city to be truly reformed, it needed a faith to confess. He wrote his *Confession of Faith of 1536, A Catechism of the Church at Geneva*

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<sup>15</sup> I am indebted to Robert Reymond's biography for this section. See Reymond, *John Calvin: His Life and Influence*, 59 – 61.

for teaching children, and he wrote his *Articles on the Organization of the Church and its worship at Geneva*.

Geneva's Councils reacted strongly to the Articles that Calvin wrote especially on the issue of church discipline. We must remember that at this time, there was connection between Council and Church. Calvin wanted independent exercise of discipline for the Church. He wanted it separated from the Council.

In 1537 the Council of 200 ordered all citizens of Geneva to assent to Calvin's *Confession*, and stated that those who refused would be banished. Well, the vast majority of people refused to assent – so the Council had a problem because it couldn't banish such numbers.

Calvin had also argued that the persons who were unworthy (living sinful lives) should not partake of the Lord' Supper. He further argued that the Church alone had the right to impose upon those who did so disciplinary measures – i.e., withhold communion from these persons.

Those who refused this, would be further disciplined and excommunicated. The Council, however, did not see it the way Calvin did and they refused to agree to this. They stated that the Supper should be given to all who came, and they (the Council) reserved the right to determine who would be refused or not and who would be excommunicated or not.

We do not think of these difficulties with magistrates and government in our time, because we recognize that the State has no right to interfere in the Church, nor does the Church prescribe to government how they should govern except to hold them to a moral compass.

These were Calvin's difficulties during the years 1536 – 38. Things got so bad that both Farel and Calvin eventually refused to celebrate the Lord's Supper in their churches because of the prevailing immorality of the people attending. On April 23, 1538, the 2 Councils ordered Farel and Calvin without a hearing to leave Geneva within 3 days.

On April 25, 1538, both Reformers left Geneva. In some ways this left, I think, a shock upon Calvin. He was convinced that God had directed him to Geneva through Farel, and yet now he was dismissed. He had so earnestly desired that Geneva be a City of God on earth.

Calvin then went on to Berne, Zurich, and then to Basel with no income and no future prospects. From here, both Calvin and Farel would receive calls to minister elsewhere. For Calvin – this would be in Strasbourg.

## **Ministry in Strasbourg**

Strasbourg was in German territory. Today we know it in France. William Farel accepted a call to go to Neuchatel in July 1538 where he ministered until his death in 1565. Calvin accepted a call to go to Strasbourg in September 1538. Here he would remain until 1541. He was urged to go to Strasbourg by the German Reformer Martin Bucer who had himself been in Strasbourg since 1523.

Bucer had originally been a Dominican monk who became a Lutheran. He married in 1522 after leaving the Dominican order, and suffered excommunication from the Roman Catholic Church. He made his way to Strasbourg and became the leading Reformer in that city.

Bucer was a moderate man, which sometimes caused Calvin some irritation. But Bucer was patient with Calvin. Here in Strasbourg, John Calvin organized a church for the French Protestant refugees fleeing France due to intense persecution. He called it the "little French Church." It had between 400 and 600 refugees. Strasbourg proved to be a turning point again for Calvin.

He was now pasturing a flock. He was learning the needs of desperate people, and his great learning was now put to practice. He began to lecture in the city's gymnasium, and these lectures proved to be so successful, that others began to hear of them. His fame as a teacher and preacher was beginning to rise.

During his time in Strasbourg, Calvin began more work on his Institutes. The 1536 Edition had been published successfully. Now Calvin began to expand the work. His pastoral experiences and insights began to show themselves in the *Institutes* from this period on.

The *Institutes* grew from a mere 6 chapters to 17 chapters. Calvin now included material on the knowledge of God, repentance, justification, predestination, and the Christian life to mention a few.

Meanwhile, back in Geneva conflict still continued between the Councils and the ministers who had replaced Farel and Calvin. It was at this time of unrest and uncertainty, that the Roman Catholic Cardinal, Sadoletto launched his attempt to recover Geneva to the Roman Church. He wrote a letter to the Genevan authorities urging them to return to the faith. The Little Council sought help from the Council in the city of Berne. The Council in Berne said that the only man who could reply to Sadoletto was John Calvin, and they asked him to do it.

Calvin wrote his masterful reply to Cardinal Sadoletto in 6 days. It was dated September 1, 1539. By September 5, it was in Geneva. It is regarded as one of the greatest assaults upon the Roman Catholic Church in terms of being a defense of the Protestant Faith and cause. Calvin literally tore Sadoletto apart. Every Protestant immediately knew that here was a man who knew what it meant to be Protestant.

He demolished Sadoleto's arguments appealing to the antiquity of the Roman Catholic Church. He demolished Sadoleto's appeal to Church tradition. In the space of almost 12 days, John Calvin laid out for every Protestant just what being a Protestant was all about. Geneva now looked at Calvin with new eyes.

Calvin would continue to work in Strasbourg. He published his first commentary on Romans, his first of many, on virtually all the books of the Bible.

In 1540, Calvin married Idelle de Bure, a widow in his congregation. She was the mother of 2 children, a boy and a girl. William Farel performed the simple and plain ceremony. Calvin had previously been responsible for bringing her Anabaptist husband (and Idelle herself) to the Reformed faith, but he had of course, since died. Calvin had originally asked Farel and Bucer to find a wife for him, stating these terms as his conditions,

"I am none of those insane lovers who, when once smitten with the fine figure of a woman, embrace also her faults. This only is the beauty which allures me – if she be chaste, obliging, not fastidious, economical, patient, and careful for my health."

Calvin said of Idelle, that he would rather travel to eternity in her shoes than in anyone else's in the whole world. Their marriage lasted 9 years. It was spectacularly happy. Idelle,

however, had various illnesses over the span of their marriage. She gave birth to their only son, Jacques who was born on July 28, 1542. He died 22 days after his birth. A daughter also apparently died at birth, and Idellete miscarried once. Idellete herself died on March 29, 1549. Calvin wrote to Farel,

"I am no more than half a man since God recently took my wife home to himself...I am forced to go on, but I hardly have courage to do so."

Calvin had promised to care for Idellete's children, which he subsequently did. The Roman Catholics believed that Calvin's lack of children was a judgment from God upon him, but he said in reply, that he had myriads of spiritual children all over the world of whom Rome was unaware.

In September 1540, the Little Council of Geneva issued a call for John Calvin to return to Geneva. The city was facing uncontrollable gambling, fighting in the streets by brawlers, drunken behavior, adultery, public indecency, and just plain general anarchy by the citizens. The Council believed that Calvin was the only man who could stem the tide. Calvin was not sure as to what he should do. He wrote to Farel telling him that he would rather face "a hundred deaths than that cross."

In March 1541, a Colloquy was called for at Regensburg where the discussion in the presence of the emperor focused on justification

and the Lord's Supper. It also sought to bring a healing to the breach that existed between some Catholics who considered themselves somewhat evangelical and the Protestants. The Catholics insisted on their doctrine of transubstantiation, with Calvin resisting it as unbiblical, and refusing to tolerate it.

Nothing came of Regensburg. It paved the way for Rome to orchestrate the Council of Trent in 1545. Calvin used the time to try and heal the breach between the Lutherans and Zwinglians over their disagreements on the Lord's Supper. He believed that their disagreement was a hindrance to the advance of Protestantism.

Calvin wrote his *"Brief Treatise on the Lord's Supper"* in 1541 in which he advocated his position as mediating between Luther and Zwingli. There has been a recovery in our time of Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper to the good of the Church, I might add. Calvin's view was that Christ's spiritual presence was present at the Lord's Supper appropriated by faith.

In 1541, Calvin finished his French edition of the Institutes translating it from his Latin 1539 edition. His French edition is a classic, and is highly regarded as a landmark in French prose, highly distinguished in his use of language, and remarkably clear in its simplicity. He wrote it for his French-speaking countrymen. It is pastoral and beautifully readable.

Farel sent Calvin one of those famous missives again, urging him to leave Strasbourg and return to Geneva. Calvin however had laid his heart out previously in his reply to Sadoletto, so perhaps Farel's letter was not necessary to get Calvin to return.

He returned to Geneva on September 13, 1541 and here he would labor until his death in 1564. He wrote to Farel saying,

"had I the choice at my own disposal, nothing would be less agreeable to me than to follow your advice. But when I remember that I am not my own, I offer my heart, presented as a sacrifice to the Lord...I submit my will and my affections, subdued and held fast, to the obedience of God."

And so he came to Geneva the second time.

### **Geneva 1541 – 1564**

Calvin returned to Geneva a mature pastor, a renowned scholar, a gifted preacher and teacher. He began his ministry in Geneva after his three and a half year exile, by ascending the pulpit at St. Pierre's Church and turned to the exact passage where he had concluded previously those three and half years ago, and commenced to preach where he had left off. He did this to demonstrate that he regarded the Christian ministry as a calling from

God that can never be dissolved by the actions of men. He had only interrupted his office of preaching for a time.

Let me say a few words about Calvin as a preacher, because this is what he did for the remainder of his life in addition to his writing and seeking to influence Geneva.

Calvin believed that the pulpit above everything else was central to the worship of God in the church. He did so for the simple reason that the Bible is to be sovereign over every Christian's life. Since he believed in the authority of Scripture, he believed that exposition of the Bible should be verse by verse, week after week. T.H.L Parker (one of Calvin's excellent biographers) states that,

"for Calvin the message of Scripture is sovereign, sovereign over the congregation and sovereign over the preacher."<sup>16</sup>

Theodore Beza, claimed in 1561 that over 1000 people heard John Calvin daily. Parker says in his biography that,

"those in Geneva who listened Sunday by Sunday, day after day, and did not shut their ears...received a training

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<sup>16</sup> T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) 39.

in Christianity such as had been given few congregations in Europe since the days of the fathers."<sup>17</sup>

Calvin preached when he returned to Geneva twice every Sunday, once on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. In 1542, he was urged to preach more frequently, which he began to do, but he soon found the burden too heavy, so he was released from this regimen of preaching. From 1549, it was his practice to preach twice every Sunday, and then on alternate weeks every day of the week. What modern preacher can even begin to comprehend this remarkable labor? During the week, he preached from the Old Testament, and on Sundays he preached from the New. Sometimes his second sermon on Sundays was from the Psalms.

The year 1549 was significant, because in this year certain individuals in his congregation were concerned that what Calvin was saying would be lost to antiquity unless he was recorded. They appointed a Frenchman, Denis Raguenier who had developed a remarkable shorthand which enable him to record Calvin's sermons of about 6000 words each. He did this in an unheated church with his quill pen and ink winter and summer for the better part of an hour at a time. From this time on until Calvin's death in 1564, his sermons were recorded. Calvin took no hand in editing them or checking them.

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<sup>17</sup> T.H.L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Louisville, KY; Westminster/John Knox Press, 2007 edition) 119

Between 1549 – 1554, he preached on Sundays, a 181 sermons on Acts, a shorter series on Paul's letters during 1554 – 1558, 65 sermons between 1559 and 1564 on the harmony of the Gospels.

During the week days, he preached a series on Jeremiah and lamentation through 1550, the minor prophets and Daniel (1550 – 52), 174 sermons on Ezekiel 1552 – 54), 159 on Job (1554 – 550, 200 on Deuteronomy (1555 -56), 342 on Isaiah (1556 – 59), 123 on Genesis (1559 – 60), a short series on judges (1561), 107 on 1 Samuel & 87 on 2 Samuel (1561 – 63, and series on 1 Kings (1563 – 64).

I do not know of one single modern preacher who comes close to this production. These were delivered between the years of 1549 and 1564 – a mere 15 year period. It is a prodigious feat. We modern preachers like to claim that we are serious expository preachers, but none of us are like Calvin period.

John Calvin preached without notes – no manuscript – no outline. Just his Greek New Testament and Hebrew Old Testament went into the pulpit with him. One of the great privileges you will ever undertake is to purchase for yourself a copy of Calvin's sermons and then read them. You will feel the flame of passion burning in them. Calvin's remarkable memory, knowledge of the Bible and his wide reading stood at hand as he preached. We must not think that he did

not prepare, but we recognize the little time which he had. He said himself that,

"if I should enter the pulpit without deigning to glance at a book, and should frivolously think to myself, "oh well, when I preach, God will give me enough to say", and come here without troubling to read or think what I ought to declare, and do not carefully consider how I must apply Holy Scripture to the edification of the people, then I should be an arrogant upstart."<sup>18</sup>

Calvin believed that the Lord's Supper should conclude every service where the Word of God was preached. This was his ideal but he never achieved this in Geneva.

Steven Lawson recently wrote that Calvin's preaching was,

"biblical in its substance, sequential in its pattern, direct in its message, extemporaneous in its delivery, exegetical in its approach, accessible in its simplicity, pastoral in its tone, polemic in its defense of the truth, passionate in its outreach and doxological in its conclusion."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Parker, *John Calvin*, 119.

<sup>19</sup> Steven J Lawson, "The Preacher of God's Word," in *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine and Doxology*, ed. Burk Parsons (Lake Mary, Fla.: Reformation Trust, 2008) 72 – 79.

Joel Beeke further says that it was "practical and experiential in its emphasis."<sup>20</sup>

Apart from Calvin's preaching and his writing, he had many things to work out with the Councils of Geneva. His main struggle was to set the Church free of State interference. As a result of Calvin's labors, society gradually began to improve in Geneva. John Knox would later say that it "was the most pure school of Christ that ever was on earth since the days of Christ."

Social life began to improve in the city, a solid and reliable work ethic was developed, begging was prohibited, but the poor were helped. The ideal of a free Protestant Church unencumbered by any state regulations was what Calvin envisaged and ultimately would achieve. Every protestant church that enjoys any liberty in fulfilling its functions apart from State interference and control is the direct fruit and result of John Calvin.

The production of the Geneva Bible and its dominance in the French speaking world for 200 years contributed to Calvin's cause. In 1555, Calvin's assistants and fellow pastors began to infiltrate the congregations of France with well-trained preachers and teachers. In 1559, Calvin founded his famous Geneva Academy which became the first Protestant university in the world, and the training home for future Reformed and Calvinistic preachers and teachers. More than

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<sup>20</sup> Joel Beeke, *The Soul of Life: The Piety of John Calvin*, (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2009) 23.

1000 students came to listen to John Calvin and his close friend, Theodore Beza as they daily taught.

In case we are tempted to devalue education or training, let me share with you some of the results of the Geneva Academy. First of all, Guido de Bray would graduate and go on to write the magnificent *Belgic Confession* of 1561. Secondly, Caspar Olevianus along with Zacharias Ursinus would write the outstanding *Heidelberg Catechism* of 1563. (also Miles Coverdale, John Foxe and John Knox). Other students went out into the rest of the world. The Geneva Bible would land upon the shores of the New World influencing generations of Pilgrims and Puritans.

At the time of the Revolutionary War, it has been estimated that 3 million people lived in the Colonies. 900,000 were of Scottish-Irish descent, 600,000 were Puritan English, 400,000 were of Dutch, German, reformed and Huguenot descent. This means that at last two-thirds of America's Revolutionary fathers had been trained in Calvin's religious and political thought.

Calvin's *Commentaries* in Latin and French permeated the Evangelical world. I think that today very few individuals read Calvin's commentaries, not because the commentaries are unworthy to be read or are out of touch with today, but because Calvin has suffered from neglect and mis-characterization. On the contrary, Calvin's *Commentaries* still hold their own along side any commentary

produced today. They are accurate, profound, pastoral and to the point. In fact, Calvin loved brevity, and he wrote with that in his mind.

Calvin wrote 3 Catechisms for Geneva (1537, 1542, 1545). He wrote a number of Confessions of Faith.<sup>21</sup> He wrote tracts and treatises against the practices of the Roman Catholic Church, the Anabaptists and the Libertines.<sup>22</sup> He wrote 2 major defenses of predestination, and 2 of the Lord's Supper.

Calvin wrote excellent dedications in his *Commentaries*. Most of them to kings and queens and others in high places. They are interesting to read. We have already seen that he wrote the *Institutes* addressing them to Francis I of France.

## **The Institutes of the Christian Religion**

As I said in my introduction, that if we want to know Calvin we must read Calvin. Now I am fully prepared to face the fact that many do not want to read Calvin. They either are not interested nor inclined. However, if you are anti Calvin – is it because you have read Calvin, or heard or read what others have either said or written about Calvin? This is the issue. I have no issue with those who read Calvin and disagree with him, but I have personally heard Calvin reviled

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<sup>21</sup> The Zurich Consensus of 1549 & 1551, the Geneva Consensus of 1552, and the French Confession of 1559 & 1562.

<sup>22</sup> See Calvin's Tracts & Treatises for these. Also *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, edited by J.K.S Reid (Library of Christian Classics; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), Volume XXII.

because a Google search on the Internet said he was one of the worst of men. This is sheer nonsense.

We must not forget that Calvin suffered greatly in Geneva. He was mocked and jeered at. Gunshots were fired at him leaving their marks on his door as he managed to get inside. He was called a dog at times. No - Calvin has suffered and he continues to suffer through neglect.

My aim in this lecture is to stimulate you to read Calvin. I know that some of you do. We do not nor should we agree with Calvin in everything that he says. However, any careful reading of Calvin would immediately increase our theological understanding. Calvin measured everything by the Bible. He was careful in his interpretation disagreeing with the Church Fathers openly when he considered them wrong.

To know Calvin you must read him. But what should you read? First of all, there are excellent works about Calvin. The literature is immense. There are superb biographies about Calvin. The first one written was by his good friend and successor, Theodore Beza. I also recommend to you - Robert Reymond, T.H.L Parker, Bernard Cottret and Williston Walker who have written excellent biographies. If you want to try and get a view of Calvin's thought then you could read Gary Crampton's, *What Calvin Says*.

Let me direct you however, to John Calvin himself. The *Institutes* must have first place. Calvin published the *Institutes* over a number of years. The first edition appeared in 1536 when Calvin was just 26 years old and not long converted. Other Latin editions followed in 1539, 1543, 1545, 1550, 1553, 1554, and 1559. French editions also existed (esp. 1541).

Only 4 translations have been made in English of the 1559 edition. The first was by Thomas Norton in 1561 which is now out of print. The second by John Allen 1813, also out of print. I am fortunate to have copy of this edition. The third by Henry Beveridge in 1845, which is in print and available in very readable English. The final available English version is the 1960 translation by Ford Lewis Battles and edited by John T. McNeill. This is the edition that is most used by students. It is excellent to read. The 1541 French edition of the *Institutes* is available in English and the 1536 Latin edition is also available in English.

In 1542 and 1543, the Sorbonne ordered the burning of Calvin's *Institutes*. This burning was conducted in front of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. The *Institutes* were vilified by Roman Catholics since Calvin had become their worst enemy. Will Durant, the modern American historian describes the *Institutes* as the most eloquent, fervent, lucid, logical, influential and terrible. He says that because of predestination, Calvin darkened the human soul with the most absurd and blasphemous conception of God in all the long and honored history of nonsense. How ignorant Will Durant is.

On the other hand, B.B Warfield says, that the *Institutes* lie at the foundation of all Protestant theology. Warfield, writing on the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Calvin's birth in 1909, said that the *Institutes* retain unquestioned preeminence as the greatest and most influential of all dogmatic treatises.

Albrecht Ritschl, a liberal theologian, said that the *Institutes* are the masterpiece of Protestant theology. William Cunningham, the superb 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish Reformed theologian states that the *Institutes* are the most important work in the history of theological science...exerting directly and indirectly the greatest and most beneficial influence upon the opinions of intelligent men.

The 1559 edition of the *Institutes* comprises 80 chapters divided into 4 books. Remember that the 1536 edition only had 6 chapters. The structure of the 1559 edition is laid out generally in accordance with the Apostles' Creed.

**Book 1** – The Knowledge of God the Creator

**Book 2** – The knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ

**Book 3** – The Way in which we receive the grace of Christ

**Book 4** – The External Means or Aids by which God Invites us into the Society of Christ and holds us therein.

Book 1 – God, Book 2 – Christ, Book 3 – The Holy Spirit, and Book 4 – the Church and Sacrament

What Calvin set out to do was to achieve a work that was, first of all, biblical in every way. The Battles translation of 1960 has 40 pages of Scripture references (2474 OT citations & 4330 NT citations). Calvin was a master exegete of Scripture. This is a huge lesson for us today.

Many feel that the study of the original languages belongs only to the seminary or university. Personally, I do not agree. It belongs to the Church, and therefore Christians who want to seriously study their Bibles should make attempt to use the original languages with all of the helps available at hand.

Secondly, the *Institutes* are Reformed. John Calvin would not have like the name Calvinist. He would have approved of the acronym TULIP to define his theology, but he probably would argue that TULIP is not all there is. I like TULIPS – the S standing for the Sovereignty of God. So now you know there are 6 points of Calvinism. Why are the *Institutes* "Reformed?" Let me say, because I think they are completely Protestant – they are against Rome. Secondly, they elevate God to his proper place. God is the Sovereign Majesty for John Calvin. The *Institutes* are Trinitarian primarily. Thirdly, the *Institutes* are a handbook of biblical piety – let the heart of man feel that God is with him and man will surrender to Him.

Calvin teaches us in the *Institutes* that Creation or natural revelation need the Scriptures for true interpretation. You cannot

understand Creation without the Bible. The Holy Spirit is needed to help us, since he is the author of Scripture.

Calvin stressed that if you want to know God, this knowledge of God is found in the Bible alone. Yes, Creation is evidence that God exists, but to know God personally, you need the Word of God.

Calvin saw the continuity that exists between Old and New Testaments. Unlike the Dispensational quagmire that surrounds us today with its discontinuity between the Testaments, Calvin saw no discontinuity. The Old needs the New to be understood.

Calvin understood the significance of the 3-fold office of Christ as prophet, priest and king. This is how Christ is revealed to us in the Scriptures.

Calvin clearly understood as Luther did, that justification was by faith – it was the sum of all piety.

Calvin simply restated Augustine's doctrine of predestination. Election was not discovered by Calvin. It was Jesus who spoke of it as did every apostle, as did the Church Fathers. In fact, he only discusses election in Book 3 of the *Institutes*.

Calvin has marvelous sections in the *Institutes* on the Law of God, faith, the subject of prayer, the Christian life – especially in terms of self-denial, Church discipline, the Lord's Supper, the

Christians calling and work (Protestant Work ethic) and Civil government.

David Hall has suggested that Calvin has helped us in 10 ways: Our culture is different because of Calvin. There is education, caring for the poor, ethics and law, church freedom, balanced government, republicanism (decentralized politics), labor, economics and profit (capitalism), music, and the printing of books.<sup>23</sup>

### **Calvin's Final Years**

The labors of Calvin in Geneva were not easy after his return. It was only late in the 1550's that Calvin had secured Geneva as a bastion of Protestantism a place where persecuted Protestants could be at home and peace. It eventually became a center for evangelical faith. Calvin endured much hardship. He was eventually made a citizen of Geneva in 1559.

Calvin's health issues plagued him to the end. He suffered great migraines and to help with the pain, he ate only one meal a day and that very sparingly. His discipline was remarkable. He suffered from the quartan fever in 1558/9, and then injured his lungs through a coughing spasm brought on by overstraining his voice in the pulpit. He suffered from stones, gout and a bad stomach, and eventually pulmonary tuberculosis worked its way through him.

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<sup>23</sup> David W. Hall, *The Legacy of John Calvin*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2008) 13 – 36.

By 1563, he often would have to be carried to continue his work. He wrote to Heinrich Bullinger on April 6, 1564,

"the pain in my side is abated, but my lungs are so full of phlegm that my breathing is difficult and short. A stone in my bladder has been very troublesome for the past 12 days. Add to that my anxiety. All remedies have so far proved ineffectual. An ulcer in the hemorrhoid veins tortures me even when sitting down or lying in bed. Within the last 3 days, my gout has been very troublesome. You will not be surprised then, if so many sufferings make me lazy. I can hardly take any food. The taste of wine is very bitter."<sup>24</sup>

Calvin concluded his preaching with his 65<sup>th</sup> lecture on Ezekiel in the afternoon of February 2, 1564 with this prayer,

"Grant, almighty God, since we have already entered in hope upon the threshold of our eternal inheritance, and know that there is a certain mansion for us in heaven after Christ has been received there, who is our head and the first fruits of our salvation, grant, I say, that we may proceed more and more in the course of thy holy calling until at length we reach the goal and so enjoy the eternal

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<sup>24</sup> Parker, *John Calvin*, 186

glory of which you afford us a taste in this world, by the same Christ our Lord. Amen."<sup>25</sup>

He made his will on April 25 and summoned the Little Council on April 27. He thanked them for all their kindness to him. He asked their pardon that he had not done all that he should have done. He asked pardon for his bad temper and impatience, which was part of his nature of which he was ashamed. He told them to put their trust in God in everything.

On April 28, he met with all the ministers of Geneva. He told them that he had often been ill, but was now so weak that he fainted so easily when in bed. He told them that when he first came to Geneva, there was virtually no reformation. There was idolatry everywhere. They set dogs upon me and called me "Wretch, Wretch".

To William Farel, he wrote one last time, "since it is God's will that you should outlive me, remember our friendship. It was useful to God's church and its fruits await us in heaven. I do not want you to tire yourself out on my account. I draw my breath with difficulty and expect any moment to breathe my last. It is enough that I live and die for Christ, who is to all his followers a gain both in life and in death."

Farel surprised him one last time with a visit. John Calvin died at 8 o'clock in the evening on May 27, 1564 in full control of his mind that he had used so tirelessly for the Church of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>25</sup> Parker, *John Calvin*, 186

## **Conclusion**

Let me conclude with a word about the only negative issue in Calvin's life that has dogged his steps until today. It was the burning at the stake of Michael Servetus, the Spanish physician for his heresy. Servetus denied the doctrine of the Trinity and the Deity of Christ. He stated that the Church had substituted for God a three-headed dog. He was viewed as a blaspheming heretic.

Calvin wrote many letters to Servetus urging him to repent of his errors. Servetus broke off all correspondence with Calvin, and then entered the city of Geneva. He was arrested and burned at the stake of August 13, 1553. Calvin was the leading Protestant witness against Servetus because he was the leading Protestant in the city. Calvin was not the prosecutor.

It must be remembered that the sentence at that time for both Protestant and Roman Catholics regarding serious heresy was death. Calvin would have been one among many. It appears as though Servetus provoked and stirred up enmity against himself. He accused Calvin before the Little Council of being a blasphemer, an imposter, a miserable wretch, a hypocrite, and that Calvin's property should be awarded to him in the event that the council should ever put Calvin to death.

Servetus had previously being convicted of heresy and condemned to die, but had escaped the authorities in Vienne, France.

Calvin seems to have exerted his influence to have Servetus executed by the sword. It was the Protestant cities of Zurich, Basel, Geneva, Schaffhausen and Berne that agreed to put Servetus to death – it was not Calvin. It was the secular Genevan Little Council that agreed to put Servetus to death – it was not Calvin.

It must also be remembered that Geneva never burnt one Roman Catholic for his faith, contrary to what that Church did to Protestants. So Calvin must not be viewed as the primary source for the burning of Servetus – He was not. The burning of one heretic is the burning of one too many, as Robert Reymond says.<sup>26</sup>

So much for the Michael Servetus affair.

## **Correspondence**

Let me say a few words about John Calvin's correspondence. It was extensive and far reaching. He wrote hundreds of letters. There are great letters between Calvin and Farel in which he discusses the trials and tribulations of the ministry. In many ways, Farel was like Barnabas in introducing Calvin to his work in Geneva. There was never any disagreement between them, except when Farel in his old age desired to marry a much younger woman, and Calvin refused to give his blessing because of the obvious ramifications that would have occurred.

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<sup>26</sup> Reymond, *John Calvin*, 118.

There is correspondence with the English Archbishop Thomas Cranmer urging closer union with the Reformed Churches. Calvin wrote to the King of England, Edward VI, son of Henry VIII and Jane Seymour a number of times. He wrote dedications to Edward, especially in his commentary on Isaiah. Edward was much in favor of the Reformation, unlike his father who made the break with Rome but for his own purposes, namely, divorce and remarriage.

There is correspondence with John Knox of Scotland who studied under Calvin in Geneva. There are letters to Heinrich Bullinger, the Swiss Reformer, who continued Zwingli's work. There are letters to Philip Melancthon, the successor to Martin Luther.

Perhaps the most famous of Calvin's letters are addressed to the 5 prisoners of Lyons. These young men were Martial Alba, Peter Escrivain, Charles Favre, Peter Navinheres, and Bernard Seguin. In April 1552, these 5 young men who had been instructed in the School of Theology at Lausanne returned to France. They initially made their way to Geneva, spent time with Calvin whom they knew, and then continued on with their journey. They met a fellow traveler on the road and went together to Lyons. He urged them to visit him at his home in Ainay.

They went there and were arrested. Their imprisonment brought them great sufferings, and Calvin wrote to them as soon as he heard of their imprisonment. The following year in May 1553, the five men were led to the stake and burned to death. Martial Alba who

was the oldest among them and the last to be led to the stake asked the Lieutenant in charge one last request, that he might kiss his brethren. This was granted and he said to each of them, "adieu, adieu, my brother". The fire was then kindled, and in the midst of the flames, you could the voices of the five, "courage, my brothers, courage."

Calvin had written his last letter to them a few days before their death. He wrote,

"you do not go away at a venture in leaving this world – you know that you have certainty of heavenly life, and you are assured of your gracious adoption by our God – you go to your inheritance. That God should have appointed you to be his Son's martyrs, is a token to you of his superabounding grace. There now only remains the conflict to which the Spirit of God not only exhorts you to go, but even to run. It is indeed a hard and grievous trial, but we should not think it strange that afflictions should continue even though the wicked seem to escape justice. I shall beseech God that he would vouchsafe you his grace, that being stayed upon him, you may in no wise waver, but rather grow in strength, that he would keep you in his holy protection and give you assurance of it, that you may be able to despise all that is of the world. As for the sickness you have endured, it is well for you to consider that God in this way wishes to prepare you for a better place by a

greater conflict, so that the flesh being entirely subdued, you may be able to resign yourselves more to God. God will deliver us and will Himself wipe away all the tears from our eyes."<sup>27</sup>

## **Friends of Calvin**

We would be remiss not to mention some of Calvin's great friends. There was William Farel, Theodore Beza. Peter Viret primarily in the ministry among others. Calvin never forgot his friends even from his youth. He never forgot the debt he owed to some of them. Theodore Beza would be the last Reformer to live to the following century and to preach in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, dying himself in 1605 after a long and useful life.

Before John Calvin died, he asked to be buried simply with no tombstone to mark the place. He was buried in the common cemetery in Geneva, the day after he died wrapped in a shroud and encased in a simple wooden coffin without ceremony or pomp. To this day, we do not know the burial place of John Calvin. If we did, we might very well have made a shrine to the man, and thus have been guilty of that superstitious idolatry which he fought against all his life.

John Calvin, it was said was of medium height, possessing a somewhat dark complexion with eyes that were startling clear even to death. He possessed a broad forehead, a scanty beard, always

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<sup>27</sup> *Letters of John Calvin*, (Banner of Truth Trust, 1980) 134 – 138, 143 – 145, 152 – 155.

carried himself with refinement. If you had met Calvin, you probably would have remarked later about his intellect and spirit, his vivacity and earnestness, his keen penetration, his kind and open conversation. It was said, that men felt the power of his intellectual and moral control all the more, because his physical stature did not reveal what was contained in the frame. Calvin would readily have confessed to you that he was prone to impatience and irritability, and he struggled all his life to subdue and master his sins and faults. He is a striking example of the process of sanctification through mortification.

Theodore Beza put his sermons at 286 annually with about 100 lectures in addition. His work rate was prodigious. On top of all this, he worked steadily and constantly on his *Institutes* and the *Commentaries in addition to his Letters and Tracts and Treatises*. It was a monumental output. He was a creative theologian of the highest rank. He loved Augustine, held himself in debt to Martin Bucer. As a systematizer of the Christian faith – he has absolutely no equal or rival. Both friends and foes alike recognized the great gifts of John Calvin. He was God's gift to his Church.

He did not have the opportunity in Geneva as he did in Strasbourg to mingle with the common people every day due to his work, but he often surprised his fellow ministers with what he knew. Genevans knew him as the man who secured for them the doctrines of the Reformation, and Geneva itself became completely Reformed.

Calvin spoke with brevity and great simplicity for someone so deeply intellectual. He did not speak fast but he spoke with directness. He kept long hours in the study. His sleep was not enough. By 5 or 6 in the morning, books would be brought to him and his secretary would take down dictation as he spoke it. He liked to work in bed for a while because of his physical illnesses. He would exercise in his room by walking around and around for between 15 to 30 minutes. He sometimes would play games at the urging of others.

And now, as we conclude this lecture, it remains only to ask the question of ourselves. Shall we continue the work of Calvin or not? It needs continuing more than ever at this time. How shall we do this?

We must read our Bibles hungrily, first and foremost. We must understand that Christ himself laid down the need for theological interpretation, when he spoke of the things concerning himself found in all the Old Testament. We must follow apostolic method and see that every apostle followed the theological method of our Lord, even developing for us a doctrine of the church. We must never venture from biblical truth. We must never think that we can adopt some new method. Like Calvin, we must return to the Bible first. We must compare Scripture with Scripture and we must above all listen to the voice of Christ in Scripture.

We need a Reformation again in the world. It requires men and women who need to give everything they have to knowing God. It requires husbands and wives to be committed to the cause together.

It requires boys and girls to be taught and to be able to look to parents and teachers as examples. I fear that we do not think of these things, but that we are mundanely working our way through the morass of life to the end.

John Calvin spoke to every area of life. Let us read this teacher of the Church. Let us read him with eyes wide open, not prepared to accept everything, but to take the good and reject that which is not for us, which we shall find to be very little indeed.

May we all like John Calvin offer our hearts to the Lord, promptly and sincerely.

***"cor meum tibi offero Domine prompte et sincere"***