

Church History

Lesson 31 - John Calvin

Introduction

- We have previously looked the Reformation in Germany and the German speaking regions of Switzerland. We have also looked at the Anabaptist movement.
- Today we will move to the French Reformation, as it occurred initially in the Swiss speaking section of Switzerland around Geneva.
- The clear leader in this movement was John Calvin. As we will see, John Calvin became one of the most influential leaders in the history of the Church. But he has often been a very polarizing figure. Just to mention his name can cause strong reactions, more than even Luther or Zwingli.
- Often when people think of John Calvin, several negative things come to mind
 - A harsh, dictatorial leader who ruled Geneva with an iron fist
 - A man who personally caused the death of Michael Servetus
 - A man who was fixated on predestination
- But as we will see, these are all very inaccurate caricatures of a man who labored with all his might to serve God and the Church.

1. The Early Life and Conversion of John Calvin

- 1.1. Jehan Cauvin (his French name) was born on 10 July 1509, at Noyon, a town in Picardy, a province of the Kingdom of France. He was the first of four sons who survived infancy. His mother died of an unknown cause during his childhood.
- 1.2. Calvin's father Gerard had a prosperous career as a notary for the cathedral and as a registrar to the church court. As a result of connections within the church, he was able to secure financial support for the precocious young John, and he intended for John and his brothers to be educated for the priesthood.
- 1.3. By the age of 12 Calvin was employed as a clerk by the bishop, and he received the tonsure of a monk to symbolize his dedication to the Church.
- 1.4. Through these connections and financial assistance Calvin was able to attend College in Paris, where he was formally trained in Latin, and then began to study philosophy. During this time Calvin began to come into contact with the growing humanist movement, of which Erasmus was the most well known, but which had many notable leaders in France as well.
- 1.5. Around 1525 or 1526, Gerard had a falling out with local church officials which eventually led to his excommunication. During this time, he had John leave his training for the priesthood and begin to study law at the College in Orleans. Here Calvin continued to grow in his contact with leading humanist thinkers, especially Andreas Alciati. Consequently, by 1529 Calvin had learned Greek so he could study classical literature, including the New Testament.
- 1.6. After the death of his father in 1531, Calvin decided to return to Paris to pursue classical studies and to live the life of a scholar rather than a lawyer. In Paris, Calvin came into contact with the ideas associated with the Reformation.
- 1.7. Sometime during his time in Paris Calvin was converted. No one knows the precise date, as Calvin rarely spoke of himself and his own story in his writings. What we do know is that in Calvin's own words it was an "unexpected conversion" because he had been "stubbornly tied to the superstitions of the papacy." But this was no mere change in philosophy; Calvin indicated that his conversion was a surrender of his will

to the will of God. Years later, in his preface to his commentary on the Psalms, Calvin wrote “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 therein, that although I did not altogether leave off other studies, yet I pursued them with less ardour.”

- 1.8. It appears that Calvin initially simply grew in his faith as he studied Scripture and theology. However, the ideas of the Reformation were very controversial in Paris, particularly at the Sorbonne - a bastion of Roman Catholic orthodoxy. The situation came to a head when Calvin’s friend Nicolas Cop became the rector of the College Royal, and in his inaugural address on November 1, 1533 he spoke about the need for reform and renewal in the Roman Catholic Church. The address was greeted with great hostility by most of the faculty and Cop was forced to flee Paris and go to Basel, Switzerland. Many suspected that Calvin had actually written the speech, so he soon found himself forced to go into hiding. He remained in hiding as a fugitive over the next year.
- 1.9. However, in October 1534 a number of reform minded people in France hung signs (or placards) in various locations in France. However, one of them was hung outside the chamber where the king was sleeping, which caused great alarm, as there was fear of violent revolt. Consequently, “The Affair of the Placards” as it became known, greatly increased pressure on Protestants or anyone with Protestant leanings. Thus, Calvin was forced to flee France and to go to Basel, Switzerland as well. He arrived in Basel by January 1535.

2. Calvin at Basel and Geneva: 1536-1538

- 2.1. When Calvin arrived in Basel in 1535 he was an unknown young French scholar who had been forced to flee France because of his newfound faith. As such, he set about the quiet life of a scholar.
- 2.2. In March 1536, Calvin published the first edition of his *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The work, which was one of the first systematic expositions of the major doctrines of the Christian faith by a Protestant theologian, was a surprise overnight success. In 1536 it contained six chapters covering the basics of the faith using the familiar catechetical structure of the Ten Commandments, the Apostles Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the sacraments. It also had chapters on Christian liberty and political theology. Although the *Institutes* would grow to 80 chapters by its final edition in 1559, the core of Calvin’s theology remained unchanged from the first edition. It remains one of the most important writings in the history of the Christian Church.
- 2.3. Shortly after publishing the *Institutes* Calvin returned to France, largely for family business. However, when the Edict of Coucy declared that all Protestants had six months to reconcile with the Roman Catholic faith, Calvin realized that he could not stay in France. Consequently he decided to return to Switzerland.
- 2.4. Calvin decided to go to Strasbourg, a free Imperial City in the Holy Roman Empire. Strasbourg was a German speaking area, but it was a haven for Reformers. It was led the great Reformer Martin Bucer. Calvin intended to return to the quiet life of a scholar, working on a new edition of the *Institutes* and other writings.

- 2.5. However, at the time Calvin was trying to make his way to Strasbourg, military maneuvers between French armies and imperial forces blocked the road to Strasbourg. Consequently Calvin had to take a detour through Geneva. He only intended to spend one evening in Geneva and then continue his trek to Strasbourg.
- 2.6. Geneva had recently broken with Roman Catholicism and become a city embracing the Reformation. The leader in the town when Calvin arrived in 1536 was a fiery preacher named William Farel. Farel had begun the work of Reformation, but he lacked the skills and personality to successfully lead the work on his own. When Farel heard that the young scholar who had written the *Institutes* was in Geneva, he immediately he sought to speak with Calvin.
- 2.7. Farel implored Calvin to stay in Geneva and help the cause of the Reformation there. When Calvin tried to politely decline, stating that he intended to go to Strasbourg to live the quiet life of a scholar, Farel gave a fiery reply. In Calvin's own words: "Then Farel, who was working with incredible zeal to promote the gospel, bent all his efforts to keep me in the city. And when he realized that I was determined to study in privacy in some obscure place, and saw that he gained nothing by entreaty, he descended to cursing, and said that God would surely curse my peace if I held back from giving help at a time of such great need. Terrified by his words, and conscious of my own timidity and cowardice, I gave up my journey and attempted to apply whatever gift I had in defense of my faith." Thus, God had sovereignly interrupted Calvin's plans and brought him to Geneva.
- 2.8. Initially Calvin became a "reader", which probably meant that he taught the Scriptures. However, by 1537 Calvin was given the title of "pastor", though he never went through an official consecration ceremony.
- 2.9. During late 1536 and 1537, Calvin and Farel wrote a confession of faith, and articles for reorganizing the church in Geneva. This included the basic beliefs and practices that should govern the church, including the manner and frequency of celebrating the Eucharist, church discipline and excommunication, the use of congregational singing in the liturgy, and also a revision of marriage law. The council accepted these writings on the very day they were finished.
- 2.10. However, as time progressed, friction arose. In short, many in the city did not want full Reformation, and began to chafe under the church leadership of Farel and Calvin. Furthermore, they were not Genevan, but French, and Geneva feared their true loyalties lay with France.
- 2.11. At the same time, church leaders in Bern issued new rules for the Eucharist, including the use of unleavened bread. The council wanted these implemented in the church in Geneva immediately. Calvin and Farel protested that this was a church decision rather than a civil one, and wanted to have a meeting of church leaders in Zurich. The city council ordered them to adopt the new policies and to celebrate Eucharist on Easter. They refused, and did not give the Eucharist on Easter. A riot ensued during the service, and the next day the council ordered Farel and Calvin to leave Geneva.
- 2.12. Calvin and Farel appealed to Bern and Zurich. The resulting synod in Zurich placed most of the blame on Calvin for not being sympathetic enough toward the people of Geneva. It asked Bern to mediate with the aim of restoring the two ministers. The Geneva council refused to readmit the two men, who then took refuge in Basel.
- 2.13. Shortly thereafter, Farel went to lead the church in Neuchatel, and Calvin was invited to lead a French expatriate church in Strasbourg. Thus, by 1538, Calvin was in

Strasbourg, and his time in Geneva appeared to be an utter failure and near disaster. In fact, Calvin intended to spend the rest of his life in Strasbourg, serving as a pastor to the small church there and working on scholarly pursuits. He even requested and was granted citizenship in Strasbourg.

3. Calvin in Strasbourg: 1538-1541

- 3.1. The three years in Strasbourg is generally considered the happiest years of Calvin's life. He was mentored by Martin Bucer, who in many ways became a spiritual father to Calvin. Here he pastored a small community of about 500 French refugees who eagerly embraced his leadership. He also settled into the life of scholarship that he so loved, producing major works. Finally, it was during this time that he became married.
- 3.2. Martin Bucer encouraged Calvin to pastor the French refugees in Strasbourg. Calvin ministered to 400–500 members in his church. He preached or lectured every day, with two sermons on Sunday. Communion was celebrated monthly and congregational singing of the psalms was encouraged. Here Calvin developed church life and worship as he envisioned and would later work to implement in Geneva. Unlike his time in Geneva, however, Calvin's labors here were well received and there was not controversy.
- 3.3. As for scholarship, in 1539, Calvin expanded and re-organized the *Institutes*. The 1539 edition had about 17 chapters, and was organized in a more logical, rather than Catechetical, format. This was done because Calvin was beginning to see the *Institutes* as a full statement of Christian doctrine rather than a simple introduction. Furthermore, in 1540 he published a major commentary on the Book of Romans. This book became a model for his later commentaries. He included his own Latin translation from the Greek text; exegesis of the passage, and an exposition to help Christian apply it. Calvin's approach in his commentaries was to write them for all believers rather than just scholars. As such he brought the gifts of one of the greatest scholars in history to the task of teaching everyday Christians.
- 3.4. Furthermore, during this time Calvin worked tirelessly for the larger Church and for unity. He participated in important theological conferences with Catholics at Frankfurt (1539) and Worms (1540) and then at the Colloquy of Regensburg (1541), where Protestants and moderate Catholics, under Cardinal Contarini, actually reached agreement on the doctrine of justification.
- 3.5. During this time friends began to urge Calvin to marry. Several candidates were presented to him. One was from a noble family - but she could not even speak French! Calvin was open to marriage, but his reasons were certainly not fleshly - or even romantic! He wrote to Farel "I am none of those insane lovers who when once smitten with the fine figure of a woman, embrace also her faults. This is the only beauty which allures me, if she is modest, decent, plain, thrifty, patient and able to look after my health." Eventually, someone mentioned Idelette de Bure, the widow of a prominent Anabaptist, Jean Stordeur of Liège. Calvin had apparently known her and her husband in Geneva. They were married in August of 1540. They had a happy marriage, although one often afflicted with pain. Calvin took in Idelette's two young children, and they had children of their own - all of whom died in infancy. Further, the pregnancies left Idelette sick. She never fully recovered and eventually died in March 1549 (long after they had returned to Geneva). After her death Calvin wrote to his friend Peter Viret "Truly mine is no common grief. I have been bereaved

of the best companion of my life, of one who ... would not only have been the willing sharer of my exile and poverty, but even of my death ... she was the faithful helper of my ministry.”

1. During this time, the situation in Geneva deteriorated. The Roman Catholic Cardinal Jacopo Sadoletto wrote a letter to Geneva to attempt to woo them back into the arms of the Roman Catholic Church. In it Sadoletto, who was a brilliant humanist scholar in the Erasmian tradition, argued that the Reformers had impure motives, and closed with two imaginary individuals standing before the judgement seat of God. The Roman Catholic may not understand their faith, and certainly does not agree with the immorality of some leaders, but he has trusted the Church - and is therefore received by God. On the other hand, the supposed Protestant has to admit that the real reason he rejected the Roman Church was to be able to indulge his own sinful passions. In one of the strangest turns in history, Geneva admitted they had not one who could successfully write a reply to Sadoletto, and asked for outside help. It was agreed that the person for the task was John Calvin - who they had recently run out of town. Calvin agreed, and in 6 days wrote his now classic reply. He simply dismantles Sadoletto's entire argument, and shows the truth of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and that this was actually the position of the early church, and therefore it is Rome who has left the Church, not the Reformers! Calvin's reply was effective and ended any thought that Geneva would return to the orbit of Rome.
2. Eventually, as things continued to deteriorate in Geneva and church attendance dropped, they appealed to have Calvin come back as pastor. As one can imagine, this was not what Calvin personally desired. When Farel implored Calvin to return (for Farel was too busy to do so himself), Calvin replied that he would prefer 'a hundred deaths to this cross.' However, Farel and others eventually prevailed, and against his own wishes and best interests, Calvin agreed to return to Geneva.

2. Calvin's Return to Geneva: The Tumultuous Years (1541-1555)

- 2.1. To stress his devotion to the Bible, Calvin's first sermon in Geneva picked up the text exactly where he left off on Easter Sunday in 1538! This act also expressed his determination to establish the Genevan church on the firm foundation of Scripture. Scripture - not Calvin, or the city council - was to be the authority in Geneva.
- 2.2. Calvin then set about reforming the church in Geneva according to Scripture. In addition to the regular preaching of Scripture, and the changes to the worship liturgy, he instituted four main offices to oversee the life and discipline of the church in Geneva. The four main offices were: pastors, teachers, elders, and deacons. The twelve elders together with the ministers formed the Consistory, which was responsible for the moral supervision of the city.
- 2.3. Pastors were principally charged with preaching the Scriptures, administering the sacraments, and exercising discipline jointly with the elders. Teachers were to serve the church through education of clergy as well as maintaining doctrinal purity. Elders were duly appointed laymen focused on discipline within the community, especially ensuring church attendance and moral behavior. Deacons were responsible for poor relief and overseeing the hospitals. The deacons especially concentrated on ministry to the poor, the orphans, and the sick. As refugees began to flood into Geneva, these offices took on greater significance. Woodbridge and James (Kindle Location 3319).

- 2.4. One of the ironies is that Calvin, as far as we know, was never officially ordained as a pastor.... It may be that he was made a “pastor” by the city council of Geneva rather than the church. In any case, there is little doubt that he was de facto the senior pastor of Geneva. Woodbridge and James (Kindle Locations 3339-3340).
- 2.5. The moral tone of the city was reinforced by the frequency of church services established in Geneva. On Sunday mornings there were multiple sermons in each of the three parish churches at dawn, midmorning, and midafternoon as well a children’s catechism class at noon. Also, on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, sermons were preached in each of the three churches. Woodbridge and James (Kindle Locations 3340-3343).
- 2.6. Calvin followed the lectio continua approach and usually expounded two to five Scripture verses in an hour. It was his practice ordinarily to preach five times a week — the Old Testament on weekdays, the New Testament on Sunday morning, and the Psalms on Sunday evening. Woodbridge and James (Kindle Locations 3346-3348).
- 2.7. For Calvin, the pulpit was a sacred place. By nature diffident, Calvin came alive in the pulpit and poured out his heart in preaching. ... For Calvin, preaching had a kind of sacramental quality in which the Holy Spirit — the hidden energy — is actively present and communicating grace to the people. Woodbridge and James (Kindle Locations 3349-3352).
- 2.8. Additionally, Calvin was involved, along with the other pastors, in visiting the sick, ministering to individuals and families, and leading the company of pastors. Furthermore, he spent a great deal of time in correspondence with other Reformation leaders. All in all, it was an exhausting regimen. One of his fellow preachers, Nicholas Calladon, wrote, “I do not believe there can be found his like. I don’t believe there is any man in our time who has more to listen to, respond to, write, or do.... [he] never ceased working day and night in service to the Lord.” Woodbridge and James (Kindle Location 3357). Such a huge workload regularly required Calvin to work 16 to 18 hours a day - which some believe (along with his overly strict diet) led to an early death at the age of 55.
- 2.9. Beyond the four offices, two ecclesiastical organizations were established to facilitate their responsibilities. The Venerable Company of Pastors was composed of pastors and teachers and met weekly (Fridays) for the study of Scripture and quarterly to oversee ecclesiastical affairs, especially education, ordination, and mutual discipline. More significant was the consistory, a mixed body of clergy and laymen (five pastors, twelve elders, and ten magistrates) whose main concern was enforcement of morality. According to the Ecclesiastical Ordinances, every home was to be visited annually by a pastor and elder to ensure moral conformity. To facilitate the visitations, the city was divided into three parishes: St. Pierre, St. Gervais, and la Madeleine. Woodbridge and James (Kindle Locations 3319-3324).
- 2.10. It should also be stressed that Calvin did much personal pastoral care. Contrary to many portrayals of Calvin as the detached, cold demagogue, Calvin deeply cared for the flock under his care, weeping with those who wept, and rejoicing with those who rejoiced. He certainly was ultimately committed to God and His Word, but this led him to care for the flock and to constantly point them to Christ.
- 2.11. During the next twelve years, the Consistory and the government of the city clashed repeatedly, for the ecclesiastical body, following Calvin’s promptings, sought to regulate the customs of the citizens— who were also the members of the church— with a severity not always matched by the government. By 1553, the opposition had

again come to power, and Calvin's political position was precarious. Gonzales (p. 83).

- 2.12. This struggle with the city council meant that Calvin was on the verge of being banished throughout most of his time in Geneva. Contrary to the modern picture of Calvin the harsh dictator, the reality is that Calvin was not even a citizen of Geneva during this time, and thus could not even vote! His only power was that of persuasion.
- 2.13. However, during this time Geneva became a refuge for many fleeing persecution from the Roman Catholic Church, especially from France and also from Scotland and England. In fact, during Calvin's two decades back in Geneva the population grew from around 10,000 to about 20,000 - almost all from refugees. Of course, most of these refugees had come to Geneva specifically because they longed for the reforms Calvin was instituting there. As many of these refugees became voting citizens, this angered some native Genevan's who still viewed Calvin as an outsider.
- 2.14. In 1553 Calvin declared that one of his opponents was not to be admitted to the Lord's Table - which the city council said did not lay within his power. Such decisions still belonged to the city council rather than the leadership of the church. However, Calvin, believing he was about to be banished again, bravely stood at the Lord's Table and declared "I will die sooner than this hand shall stretch forth the sacred things of the Lord to those who have been judged despisers." Amazingly, however, the city council did not banish him.

3. Calvin and Servetus (1553)

- 3.1. At this time Michael Servetus, a well known Spanish physician arrived in Geneva. Servetus was a brilliant physician (he discovered the pulmonary circulation of the blood). However, Servetus was a notorious heretic who denied the deity of Christ, the Trinity, and original sin. Calvin and Servetus had corresponded before, and Calvin had even travelled in secret to Paris at great danger to meet with Servetus to try and convince him of his heresy and to win him to the faith - but Servetus had not shown up. Certainly, Servetus knew that he would not be welcomed in Geneva and would in fact be treated as a heretic.
- 3.2. Servetus had been arrested by the Roman Catholic Church in France and sentenced to death, but he escaped. Inexplicably, he came to Geneva and went to a church service where Calvin was preaching. He must have known what a risk this was, but he did it anyway. He was recognized and arrested.
- 3.3. Some in Geneva who opposed Calvin took up Servetus's cause, arguing that he had been accused of heresy by Catholics, and therefore that he should be seen as an ally. But the government of the city asked the advice of the various Protestant cantons of Switzerland, and all agreed that Servetus was a heretic, not only by Catholic standards, but also by Protestant ones. Gonzales (p. 84).
- 3.4. What is clear is that Calvin did not act as judge, jury, or executioner in the trial; he never possessed that kind of power. Woodbridge and James (Kindle Locations 3393-3394).
- 3.5. Calvin served as the prosecution's expert witness in the trial. Calvin was, after all, the leading theologian and one who had direct knowledge of Servetus's views. After consultations with other Protestant cities (Basel, Bern, Schaffhausen, Zürich, and Wittenberg), there was a unanimous agreement that Servetus's views were heretical

and he should be burned to death according to the standards of sixteenth-century justice. Woodbridge and James (Kindle Locations 3397-3400).

- 3.6. Both Farel and Calvin made last-ditch efforts to persuade Servetus to recant, but again it was in vain. Calvin even appealed for a more humane form of death, but his request was denied. Servetus was burned to death on October 27, 1553, Woodbridge and James (Kindle Locations 3407-3409).
- 3.7. The Servetus affair marked a turning point for Calvin. Adversaries had dogged his every step almost from the beginning of his arrival in Geneva. But his opponents' failure to exploit Servetus's execution to their advantage led to greater influence for Calvin. With the increasing influx of persecuted refugees, especially French, he was able to build a strong, supportive constituency in Geneva. As a sign of his newfound stature, he was finally granted citizenship in Geneva in 1559. Woodbridge and James (Kindle Locations 3410-3414).

4. Calvin's Final Years: The Years of Growing Influence (1555-1565)

- 4.1. By 1555, Calvin's position in Geneva was finally secure. After years of tumult and seemingly always being on the verge of exile again, Calvin was finally given a free hand in Geneva. There was by this time a large community of refugees (almost half the population of the city) who eagerly desired the reforms Calvin was trying to institute. During this time Calvin not only consolidated the reforms of the church in Geneva, but he also turned Geneva into a center of international influence and missions.
- 4.2. In 1559, Calvin saw the fulfillment of one of his fondest dreams in the opening of the Genevan Academy, under the direction of Theodore Beza— who would eventually succeed him as theological leader of the city. Gonzales (p. 84).
- 4.3. For Calvin, however, Geneva was never an end in itself. He considered the city a refuge for persecuted Protestants, an example of a disciplined Christian community, and a center for ministerial training. Enthusiastic students from all over Europe came to Geneva to see what John Knox called "the most perfect school of Christ that ever was on earth since the days of the Apostles." Shelley (p. 260).
- 4.4. During this time leaders from France, England, Scotland (including John Knox), the Netherlands and elsewhere were in Geneva and learned from Calvin and the church in Geneva. They then took what they learned and returned to their own countries to implement these beliefs and practices. Thus, Calvinism - a term Calvin would have not liked - became the most vigorous and widespread form of Protestantism over the next 150 years, finding deep roots in the aforementioned countries and then in the colonies in America.
- 4.5. The great majority of those refugees who descended on Geneva came from France. Stirred by a deep desire to return to their homeland to spread the gospel, French refugees approached Calvin for direction, and he set about preparing them for their mission. He believed that a good missionary is a good theologian, so he trained them theologically, tested their preaching ability, and examined their moral character. Woodbridge and James (Kindle Locations 3565-3567).
- 4.6. Nicolas Calladon records that 151 missionaries were sent from Geneva in 1561. Calvin remained intimately involved with these missionaries, offering counsel even after they had returned to France. Woodbridge and James (Kindle Locations 3568-3569).

- 4.7. Although it is not well known, the Genevan missions enterprise was an extraordinary success. The historical data indicate that in 1555 five Protestant churches were established in France. By 1559 that number jumped to more than one hundred churches. And by 1562, scholars estimate that more than 2,150 churches were planted in France with the support of the Genevan consistory. It is estimated that there were some 3,000,000 Protestants in France by the time of Calvin's death in 1564. Woodbridge and James (Kindle Locations 3578-3579).
- 4.8. As a French-speaking city, Geneva naturally was involved in France, but the consistory also sent missionaries to Italy, the Netherlands, Hungary, Poland, and the free imperial city-states in the Rhineland. In what was one of the most ambitious Protestant missionary efforts of the sixteenth century, Geneva even sent missionaries to what is now Brazil. Woodbridge and James (Kindle Locations 3586-3588).
- 4.9. Philip Hughes's assertion: "Calvin's Geneva was nothing less than a school of missions and a dynamic center of missionary concern and activity." Woodbridge and James (Kindle Locations 3597-3598).
- 4.10. This all does not even mention perhaps the most lasting contribution to the spread of the Reformed Church through the work of John Knox and others in England. Through the Geneva Bible (first published in 1560) and the personal labors of the pastors who had been nurtured and trained in Geneva, the Puritan party had a massive influence in England. Furthermore, even many Anglican leaders looked to Calvin as a leader. Ultimately this spread to America and was the major influence in the Great Awakening, and many of the missions movements which spread out from America.
- 4.11. Calvin's extraordinary work ethic eventually took its toll. After years of sleep deprivation (he slept only four or five hours a night), often one meal a day, and overwork, his body finally gave way. Moreover, his last years were complicated with a variety of physical ailments, including intestinal parasites, hemorrhoids, kidney stones, arthritis, tuberculosis, and headaches. Woodbridge and James (Kindle Location 3604).
- 4.12. Yet, even on his deathbed Calvin continued to work. When friends begged him to stop, he replied, "What? Would you have the Lord find me idle when he comes for me?" Woodbridge and James (Kindle Locations 3605-3606).
- 4.13. Calvin would not have viewed himself as a victorious Christian, but merely as a weak servant. For all of his intensity and conviction, he retained a real humility even at the end of his life. He requested and was granted burial in an unmarked grave. Woodbridge and James (Kindle Location 3610).
- 4.14. Calvin died on May 27, 1564 at the age of 55, having accomplished more in those years than most men would in two lifetimes.

5. Calvin's Theological Contributions

- 5.1. During his life Calvin taught and wrote tirelessly. It is estimated that on average he preached ten sermons over each two week period. In addition to his massive *Institutes*, he wrote commentaries on every book of Scripture except the historical books of the Old Testament and the books of 2-3 John and Revelation. Many of these commentaries were taken originally from notes based on his lectures to students and ministers that were reworked for publication. He also wrote many theological treatises, a catechism, the liturgy for the French church, and set the

Psalms for singing as part of the liturgy. As noted above, these works spread far and wide, and had a massive influence on the theology and practice of churches in France, the Netherlands, England and Scotland, parts of Germany and Hungary, and ultimately America.

- 5.2. The greatest work of Calvin was undoubtedly the *Institutes*. In its final 1559 edition it stretched to almost 1800 pages (in the English translation). Calvin produced it originally in Latin, and then translated it into French. It is one of the greatest expositions of the doctrines of the Christian faith. It is full of biblical references, and also quotes from theologians of the early church. It is a massive undertaking to read it, but it is well worth the time! It is virtually impossible to overstate the importance of this work on the subsequent history of the Church.
- 5.3. Many think of Calvin's theology as being centered on predestination. This is actually false. Michael Reeves notes that in the 1559 version of the *Institutes* the topic of predestination is not covered until page 920, and that it occupies just 67 out of 1,521 pages - about 4% of the pages. Calvin was clearly not fixated on predestination, and in fact its place within the *Institutes* and his other writings only grew as people began to attack the doctrine and he attempted to answer their objection. However, it is true that Calvin unabashedly taught the doctrine of predestination by God's Sovereign decree according to His own pleasure rather than based on foreseeing our response. He did not delight in the doctrine (he even admitted how difficult it is); but he simply taught it because he saw it in the Word of God. As in everything else, Calvin believed his job was to simply exposit God's Word. Thus, popular or not, he must teach it.
- 5.4. The actual center of theology is probably more on the glory and sovereignty of God. Historian Bruce Shelley says that if Luther's central verse was "The just shall live by faith", for Calvin it was "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." For Calvin, everything revolved around God and His glory. God was great and humans were small. God was sovereign, and we were to obey. Ultimately, predestination is simply one part of his overall belief in the sovereign glory and majesty of God.
- 5.5. Calvin also expended a great deal of effort in working on the disputes over the Lord's Supper. Along with the other Reformers, he rejected transubstantiation. However, he sought a middle way between the positions of Luther and Calvin. As Gonzales notes "On this point, Calvin followed the lead of his friend Martin Bucer, the reformer of Strasbourg, who took an intermediate position between Luther and Zwingli. Calvin affirmed that the presence of Christ in communion is real, although spiritual. This means that such presence is not merely symbolic, nor is communion a mere devotional exercise; rather, there is in it a true divine action for the church that partakes of the sacrament. On the other hand, this does not mean that the body of Christ descends from heaven, nor that it can be present in several altars at the same time, as Luther claimed. Rather, in the act of communion, by the power of the Holy Spirit, believers are taken to heaven and share with Christ in a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. Gonzales (p. 85).
- 5.6. In 1549, Bucer, Calvin, the main Swiss Protestant theologians, and several others from southern Germany, signed the Zürich Consensus, a similar document. Also, Luther had been pleased with the publication of Calvin's *Institutes*. Therefore, the difference between Calvin and Luther on the presence of Christ in communion should not have been an insurmountable obstacle to Protestant unity. Gonzales (p. 85).

- 5.7. But the followers of the great teachers were less flexible than their masters. In 1552, Joachim Westphal, a Lutheran, published a treatise against Calvin in which he declared that Calvinist views were surreptitiously making their way into traditionally Lutheran territories, and offered himself as the champion of Luther's views on communion. Gonzales (p. 85).
- 5.8. Melancthon refused to attack Calvin, as Westphal demanded. But the net result was a growing distance between those who followed Luther and those who accepted the Zürich Consensus, who were then called Reformed in contraposition to Lutherans. Gonzales (p. 85).
- 5.9. Therefore, during this early period the main characteristic of Calvinist or Reformed theology was not its doctrine of predestination— on which the Reformed generally agreed with Lutherans. What actually distinguished the Calvinists from the Lutherans was their understanding of communion. Gonzales (pp. 85-86).

6. The Lasting Legacy of John Calvin, and Resources for Further Study

- 6.1. As noted above, it is hard to overstate the lasting legacy of Calvin. Through his writings and his followers, his influence has been very widespread and has grown over time. Though he chose to be buried in an unmarked grave so no one would make a hero or saint out of him, his influence has been massive.
- 6.2. While Calvin certainly had many faults, including anger and a demanding personality which required undying loyalty from associates, he was a man of immense talents and an incredible work ethic. As his biographer Bruce Gordon notes, Calvin had the fault of believing that he was smarter than anyone he ever met - but he was probably right! And this incredible intellect was fused to one of the strongest work ethics ever known. He ceased tirelessly throughout his 55 years - no matter the opposition, no matter how bad his health. And at the end of it all he felt he was simply an unworthy servant of the Matchless God who had mercifully saved and called him.
- 6.3. Calvin was also a man of great personal godliness. For him the Christian life was not primarily about intellectual assent, but rather obedience to the will of God as we are empowered by the Holy Spirit. This also became a hallmark of those who followed Calvin and his theology. It is no mistake that the so called "protestant work ethic" really finds its roots in Calvin and his followers.
- 6.4. The greatest contribution of Calvin theologically is his grand view of God. For Calvin, God was always big and man small. He always focused on God and His glory, and taught that man must find his place in humble embracing of God and His will. This was true life and true joy. Again, it is no mistake that the most famous catechism question in English comes from the English followers of Calvin: What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy Him forever.
- 6.5. Despite his often negative reputation, Calvin is properly judged the great theological heir of Augustine and the theological refiner of Luther's theological insights. He belongs in the pantheon of the greatest theologians in all of church history. Woodbridge and James (Kindle Locations 3669-3671).
- 6.6. Resources for further study
 - 6.6.1. The Unquenchable Flame by Michael Reeves
 - 6.6.2. The Reformation of the 16th Century by Roland Bainton
 - 6.6.3. John Calvin: Pilgrim and Pastor by W. Robert Godfrey - best introductory biography on Calvin
 - 6.6.4. John Calvin by Bruce Gordon - the most in depth modern biography of Calvin

- 6.6.5. The Institutes of the Christian Religion by John Calvin
- 6.6.6. The Letter of Sadoleto and Reply of Calvin
- 6.6.7. Audio - Kevin DeYoung - All Men Ate Like Grass - The Life of John Calvin (The Gospel Coalition National Conference, 2017) - A fantastic and encouraging overview of the life of Calvin

Next Class: The Reformation in Great Britain

Reading: Chapter 8 - The Reformation in Great Britain

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