

SESSION THREE

JOHN CALVIN AND AND THE SWISS REFORMATION

“It has been said that to omit Calvin from the history of Western Civilization ‘is to read history with one eye shut.’”¹

S. M. HOUGHTON

- The ‘Prince of Preachers,’ Charles Haddon Spurgeon asserted:

Among all those who have been born of women, there has not risen a greater than John Calvin; no age before him ever produced his equal, and no age afterwards has seen his rival.²

- Spurgeon maintained:

John Calvin propounded truth more clearly than any other man who ever breathed, knew more of Scripture, and explained it more clearly.³

CATHOLIC SON (1509-1523)

BRILLIANT STUDENT (1523-1533)

SUDDEN CONVERT (1533)

- We have Calvin’s testimony in his preface to his *Commentary on the Psalms* (1557):

¹ S. M. Houghton, *Sketches From Church History* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1980, 2001), 106.

² Charles H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography, Vol. 2: The Full Harvest, 1860–1892*, compiled by Susannah Spurgeon and Joseph Harrald (Carlisle, PA, and Edinburgh, Scotland: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1897–1900, 1987), 29.

³ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, Vol. X* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1976), 310.

Since I was too obstinately devoted 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 therein, that although I did not altogether leave off other studies, I yet pursued them with less ardour.⁴

- Five things should be noted about Calvin's conversion:
 1. Calvin had been immersed in the depths of Catholicism.
 2. He was so sunken down into Catholicism that only God could have rescued him. He attributed his conversion to God alone. No human instrument is even mentioned.
 3. His conversion brought an immediate and unexpected change in his life.
 4. God overcame his resistance to the truth of the gospel.
 5. He suddenly lost interest in the study of law and became absorbed with spiritual matters pertaining to God's Word.

BRILLIANT TEACHER (1533-1536)

- There, Calvin studied in solitude. He explained:

Being of a disposition somewhat unpolished and bashful, which led me always to love the shade and retirement, I then began to seek some secluded corner where I might be withdrawn from the public view.⁵

- At the astonishing young age, 25 and 26 years old, only one year after his conversion, Calvin completed the first edition of his greatest work, *The Institutes of Christian Religion* in August 1535. It was published March 1536.

⁴ John Calvin, *Preface to the Commentary on Psalms*, in *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety*, ed. Elise Anne McKee (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2001), 60. [Calvin, *Preface to the Commentary on Psalms*, 59.]

⁵ John Calvin, *Preface to the Commentary on Psalms*, in *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety*, ed. Elise Anne McKee (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 169.

- The *Institutes* were hailed as the single most important book to be written during the Reformation. It is the finest systematic theology by a Protestant Reformer, the manifesto of the Reformation—Calvin’s *magnum opus*.
- It was addressed to the king of France, Francis I, and explained the true nature of biblical Christianity. His dedication began:

For the Most Mighty and Illustrious Monarch, Francis, Most Christian King of the French, His Sovereign, John Calvin Craves Peace and Salvation in Christ.

From this you may learn the nature of the doctrine against which those madmen burn with rage who today disturb your realm with fire and sword. And indeed I shall not fear to confess that here is contained almost the sum of that very doctrine which they shout must be punished by prison, exile, proscription, and fire, and be exterminated on land and sea.⁶

UNEXPECTED PASTOR (1536-1538)

- Farel had introduced the Protestant movement there, and both urged and threatened him to stay and help the cause of the Reformation.

Farel, who burned with an extraordinary zeal to advance the gospel, immediately strained every nerve to detain me. And after having learned that my heart was set upon devoting myself to private studies, for which I wished to keep myself free from other pursuits, and find that the gained nothing by entreaties, he proceeded to utter an imprecation that God would curse my retirement, and the tranquility of the studies which I sought, if I should withdraw and refuse to give assistance, when the necessity was so urgent.⁷

- In response to Farel’s challenge:

If you do not assist us in this work of the Lord, the Lord will punish you.⁸

- Calvin was shaken, believing it to be the voice of God to him, and he agreed to stay and become the pastor of the church at Geneva (1536). Years later, he later wrote:

⁶ John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1960), 9.

⁷ John Calvin, *Preface to the Commentary on Psalms*, in *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety*, ed. Elise Anne McKee (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2001), 178. [Calvin, Preface to the *Commentary on Psalms*, 61.]

⁸ Theodore Beza, *The Life of John Calvin*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin Translation Society, 1844; reprinted by Back Home Industries, 1996), 24, 26.

By this imprecation I was so stricken with terror, that I desisted from the journey which I had undertaken.⁹

- This path of being a pastor was not a road Calvin would have chosen. It was the invisible hand of God that thrust him into this role.

In short, while my one great object was to live in seclusion without being known, God led me about through different turnings and changes, that He never permitted me to rest in any place, until, in spite of my natural disposition, He brought me forth to public notice.¹⁰

STRASBOURG EXILE (1538-1541)

- At the invitation of Martin Bucer, Calvin withdrew to Strasbourg, to withdraw from the public eye.
- But Bucer threatened him much as Farel had earlier.

I resolved to live in a private station, free from the burden and cares of my public charge, when that most excellent servant of Christ, Martin Bucer, employing a similar kind of remonstrance and protestation as that to which Farel had recourse before, drew me back to a new station.¹¹

- Once again, Calvin was thrust into the public arena in ministry.

Alarmed by the example of Jonah which he had set before me, I still continued in the work of teaching. And although I always continued....studiously avoiding celebrity, yet I was carried, I know not how as it were by force to the imperial assemblies, where willing or unwilling, I was under the necessity of appearing before the eyes of many.¹²

REFORMING PASTOR (1541-1555)

⁹ John Calvin, *Preface to the Commentary on Psalms*, in *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety*, ed. Elise Anne McKee (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2001), 178. [Calvin, *Preface to the Commentary on Psalms*, 61.]

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Preface to the Commentary on Psalms*, in *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety*, ed. Elise Anne McKee (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 169.

¹¹ Calvin, *Preface to the Commentary on Psalms*, 180.

¹² Calvin, *Preface to the Commentary on Psalms*, 180.

- Calvin reassumed his Genevan pulpit on September 13, 1541. He entered his pulpit and began his exposition at exactly the next verse from where he had stopped—three and a half years earlier. The statement it made was intentional. This church will be ruled by God’s Word. There Calvin remained there the rest of his life.

- Upon his return, Calvin announced:

If you desire to have me for your pastor, correct the disorder of your lives. If you have with sincerity recalled me from my exile, banish the crimes and debaucheries which prevail among you....I consider the principal enemies of the gospel to be, not the pontiff of Rome, nor heretics, nor seducers, nor tyrants but bad Christians....Of what use is a dead faith without good works? Of what importance is even truth itself, where a wicked life belies it and actions make words blush? Either command me to abandon a second time your town and let me go and soften the bitterness of my afflictions in a new exile, or let the severity of the laws reign in the church. Re-establish there pure discipline.¹³

PREEMINENT EXPOSITOR

- Calvin’s book studies were often protracted, lasting more than a year. For example, Calvin preached:

Acts, 189 sermons (1549, 1554)
 a shorter series on some of the Pauline letters (1554, 1558)
 Harmony of the Gospels, 65 (1559, 1564)
 1 Corinthians, 110 sermons
 2 Corinthians, 66 sermons
 Galatians, 43 sermons
 Ephesians, 48 sermons
 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 46 sermons
 1 Timothy, 55 sermons
 2 Timothy, 31 sermons
 Titus, 17 sermons

- During this same time, on weekday mornings he preached series of sermons on:

Genesis, 123 sermons (1559-1561)
 Deuteronomy, 200 sermons (1555-1556)
 Judges, a short series (1561)
 1 Samuel, 107 sermons
 2 Samuel, 87 sermons (1561-1563)

¹³ Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250-1550* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 184. [Ozment, *Age of Reform*, 366.]

1 Kings, a series (1563,1564)
 Job, 159 sermons (1554-1555)
 Psalms, individual, 72 sermons
 Psalm 119, 22 sermons
 Isaiah, 353 sermons (1556-1559)
 Jeremiah, 91 sermons
 Lamentations, 25 sermons (up to 1550)
 Ezekiel, 174 sermons (1552-1554)
 the Minor Prophets and Daniel (1550-1552)
 Daniel, 47 sermons
 Hosea, 65 sermons
 Joel, 17 sermons
 Amos, 43 sermons
 Obadiah, 5 sermons
 Jonas, 6 sermons
 Micah, 20 sermons
 Nahum, we do not have the record
 Zephaniah, 17 sermons ¹⁴

- James Montgomery Boice wrote concerning John Calvin:

Calvin had no weapon but the Bible. From the very first, his emphasis had been on Bible teaching. Calvin preached from the Bible every day, and under the power of that preaching the city began to be transformed. As the people of Geneva acquired knowledge of God's Word and were changed by it, the city became, as John Knox called it later, a New Jerusalem from which the gospel spread to the rest of Europe, England, and the New World.¹⁵

OPPOSED PASTOR (1541-1555)

- Through the underhanded influence of the Libertines, the City Council overrode the church's decision, and Berthelier and his associates came to church to take the Lord's Supper with swords drawn, ready to fight. With bold audacity, Calvin descended from the pulpit, stood in front of the Communion table, and said:

¹⁴ Robert L. Reymond, *John Calvin: His Life and Influence* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2004), 84.

¹⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace?*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 83-84.

These hands you may crush, these arms you may lop off, my life you may take, my blood is yours, you may shed it; but you shall never force me to give holy things to the profaned and dishonor the table of my God.”¹⁶

- Philip Schaff writes:

The adversaries of Calvin were, with a few exceptions, the same who had driven him away in 1538. They never cordially consented to his recall. They yielded for a time to the pressure of public opinion and political necessity; but when he carried out the scheme of discipline much more rigorously than they had expected, they showed their old hostility, and took advantage of every censurable act of the Consistory or Council. They hated him worse than the pope. They abhorred the very word “discipline.” They resorted to personal indignities and every device of intimidation; they nicknamed him “Cain,” and gave his name to the dogs of the street; they insulted him on his way to the lecture-room; they fired one night fifty shots before his bed-chamber; they threatened him in the pulpit.¹⁷

SUCCESSFUL LEADER (1555-1564)

- Among the exiles was John Knox, Scotland’s greatest Reformer. Knox would call Calvin’s Geneva:

The most perfect school of Christ that ever was in this earth since the days of the apostles.¹⁸

- This major work, the *Institutes*, underscored the supremacy and glory of God in all of Christian theology. This God-centeredness by Calvin prompted the luminous Benjamin B. Warfield to write years later:

Here we have the secret of Calvin’s greatness and the source of his strength unveiled to us. No one ever had a profounder sense of God than he.¹⁹

VISIONARY EDUCATOR (1559)

¹⁶ William Wileman, *John Calvin: His Life, His Teaching, and His Influence* (Choteau, MT: Old Paths Gospel Press), 96. This famous line has also been rendered as: “I will die sooner than this hand shall stretch forth the sacred things of the Lord to those who have been judged despisers.” Beza, *The Life of John Calvin*, 71.

¹⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol. VIII* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1910, 1984), 496.

¹⁸ Lindberg, *Sourcebook*, 196.

¹⁹ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Calvin and Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1932, 2000), 24.

BIBLE SCHOLAR (1560)

MASTER COMMENTATOR

- John Murray writes:

Calvin was the exegete of the Reformation and in the first rank of biblical exegetes of all time.²⁰

CHURCH PLANTER (1555)

- The sending of preachers throughout Europe began in 1555. According to historian Mack P. Holt, it is known that

In the less than twenty-five years between Calvin's arrival in Geneva and the outbreak of the civil wars in France, more than a million French men and women had been converted to Protestantism.

- Alister McGrath says that

At the opening of the momentous year 1562, the number of [elders and deacons] in France had risen to 1,785.

- The reports presented by researchers are astounding:

"A study of eighty-eight agents sent out on 105 missions during the period 1555-63" highlights the "early successes of Calvinism" and confirms "the impression that the movement held a special appeal to the urban middle class."

- In a 1560 letter, Calvin reports the following:

Meanwhile, the truth of the gospel is breaking forth. In Normandy our brethren are preaching in public, because no private house is capable of containing an audience of three and four thousand persons. There is greater liberty in Poitou, Saintonge, and the whole of Gascony. Languedoc, Provence, and Dauphiny possess many intrepid disciples of Christ.²¹

- Joel Beeke is right when he concludes that:

²⁰ John Murray, "Calvin as Theologian and Expositor," in *Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol. One* (Carlisle, PA, and Edinburgh, Scotland: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976, 2001), 308.

²¹ Jean Calvin, Jules Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin: Compiled from the Original Manuscripts and Edited with Historical Notes, Vol. 4* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1858), 137.

A negative view of Calvin's evangelism is a result of (1) A failure to study Calvin's writings prior to drawing their conclusions, (2) A failure to understand Calvin's view of evangelism within his own historical context, and (3) Preconceived doctrinal notions about Calvin and his theology to their study. Some critics naively assert that Calvin's doctrine of election virtually negates evangelism.²²

INDOMITABLE WORKER (1564)

- The Reformation historian J. H. Merle d'Aubigne wrote of Calvin's tireless drive:

On Sundays [Calvin] conducted divine service, and had daily service every other week. He devoted three hours in each week to theological teaching; he visited the sick, and administered private reproof. He received strangers; attended the consistory on Thursday, and directed its deliberations; on Friday was present at the conference on Scripture, called the *congregation*; and, after the minister in office for the day had presented his views on some passage of Scripture, and the other pastors had made their remarks, Calvin added some observations, which were *a kind of lecture*.... The week in which he did not preach was filled up with other duties; and he had duties of every kind. In particular, he devoted much attention to the refugees who flocked to Geneva, driven by persecution out of France and Italy; he taught and exhorted them. He consoled, by his letters, 'those who were still in the jaws of the lion;' he interceded for them. In his study he threw light on the sacred writings by admirable commentaries, and confuted the writings of the enemies of the Gospel.²³

- On April 6, 1564, Calvin wrote to Bullinger:

Although the pain in my side is abated, 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 last twelve days. An ulcer in the hemorrhoid veins tortures me even when sitting down or lying in bed, so that I could not bear the agitation of riding. Within the last three days the gout has also been very troublesome. You will not be surprised, then, if so many sufferings make me lazy. I can hardly be brought to take any food. The taste of wine is bitter.²⁴

²² Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality: A Practical Biblical Study from Reformed and Puritan Heritage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2004), 54.

²³ J. H. Merle D'Aubigné, *History of the Reformation in Europe in the Time of Calvin, Vol. VII* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1880, 2000), 82.

²⁴ As quoted in T.H.L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1975), 151-152.

CONCLUSION

- Beza testified:

Having been a spectator of his conduct for sixteen years, I have given a faithful account both of his life and of his death, and I can now declare, that in him all men may see a most beautiful example of Christian Character, an example which it is as easy to slander as it is difficult to imitate.²⁵

- Calvin towers over the centuries as the greatest biblical expositor and commentator of the church. One of his biographers writes:

Whether friend, disciple, or foe, none could fail to recognize Calvin's transcendent ability. He might be slandered, the worst of motives might be imputed to him by traducers, but none who knew him could doubt his devotion to his cause. With all his frequent arrogance towards men, Calvin's spirit was humble towards God. To do and to teach His will was undoubtedly his prime intention...He submitted to his long bodily enfeeblement as from the wise hand of God. In the crises of his life, his conversion, his first settlement in Geneva, and his return to the difficult ministry in that turbulent city, he sacrificed ease, scholarly honours, and personal inclination to what he deemed the imperative voice of God. He put God first. In the strength of that conviction that God had chosen his task, he fought his battles and did his work.²⁶

May we in this day commit ourselves to these same priorities once again. May we give ourselves to the pursuit, the proclamation, and the practice of the Scripture. May it reign in our churches yet again. May it usher in a new Reformation.

²⁵ Beza, *The Life of John Calvin*, 117.

²⁶ Williston Walker, *John Calvin: The Organizer of Reformed Protestantism 1509-1564* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 196.