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Teaching Notes

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## **An Introduction to the Life and Thought of John Calvin**



“It would hardly be too much to say that for the latter part of his lifetime and a century after his death John Calvin was the most influential man in the world, in the sense that his ideas were making more history than those of anyone else during that period. Calvin’s theology produced the Puritans in England, the Huguenots in France, the ‘Beggars’ in Holland, the Covenanters in Scotland, and the Pilgrim Fathers of New England, and was more or less directly responsible for the Scottish uprising, the revolt of the Netherlands, the French wars of religion, and the English Civil War. Also, it was Calvin’s doctrine of the state as a servant of God that established the ideal of constitutional representative government and led to the explicit acknowledgment of the rights and liberties of subjects. . . . It is doubtful whether any other theologian has ever played so significant a part in world history.”

J. I. Packer

“The longer I live the clearer does it appear that John Calvin’s system is the nearest to perfection.”

Charles Haddon Spurgeon

“[Calvin] easily takes the lead among the systematic expounders of the Reformed system of Christian doctrine. . . . Calvin’s theology is based upon a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He was the ablest exegete among the Reformers, and his commentaries rank among the very best of ancient and modern times. His theology, therefore, is biblical rather than scholastic, and has all the freshness of enthusiastic devotion to the truths of God’s Word. At the same time he was a consummate logician and dialectician. He had a rare power of clear, strong, convincing statement. He built up a body of doctrines which is called after him, and which obtained symbolical authority through some of the leading Reformed Confessions of Faith.... Taking into account all his failings, [Calvin] must be reckoned as one of the greatest and best of men whom God raised up in the history of Christianity.”

Philip Schaff

“Calvin is a cataract, a primeval forest, a demonic power, something directly down from Himalaya, absolutely Chinese, strange, mythological; I lack

completely the means, the suction cups, even to assimilate this phenomenon, not to speak of presenting it adequately. What I receive is only a thin little stream and what I can then give out again is only a yet thinner extract of this little stream. I could gladly and profitably set myself down and spend all the rest of my life just with Calvin."

Karl Barth, Letter to Eduard Thurneyson, June 8, 1922

## I. The Centrality of God in His Universe

### A. He Is the "I Am"

1. John Piper, Pastor's Conference, 1997: John Calvin: "The Divine Majesty of the Word"
2. Began with an overpowering focus on the awesome truth of God as the great "I Am"

***Exodus 3:13-14 Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" 14 God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"***

3. Piper's comments to fellow pastors:

"...think of the absoluteness of God's existence – never beginning, never ending, never becoming, never improving, simply and absolutely there to be dealt with on his terms or not at all.

Let it hit you, brothers: God – the God in whose name this conference gathers – never had a beginning. God never had a beginning! "I AM has sent me to you." And the one who never had a beginning, but always was and is and will be, defines all things. Whether we want him to be there or not, he is there. We do not negotiate what we want for reality. *God* defines reality. When we come into existence, we stand before a God who made us and owns us. We have absolutely no choice in this matter. We do not choose to be. And when we are, we do not choose that God be. No ranting and raving, no sophisticated doubt or skepticism, has any effect on the existence of God. He simply and absolutely is. "Tell them I AM has sent you."

If we don't like it, we can change, for our joy, or we can resist, to our destruction. But one thing remains absolutely unassailed. God *is*. He was there before we came. He will be there when we are gone. And therefore, what matters in ministry. above all things, is this God. I cannot escape the simple and obvious truth that God must be the main thing in ministry. Ministry has to do with God because life has to do with God, and life has to do with God because all the universe has to do with God, and the universe has to do with God because every atom and every emotion and every soul of every angelic, demonic and human being

belongs to God, who absolutely *is*. He created all that is, he sustains everything in being, he directs the course of all events, because "from him and through him and to him are all things, to him be glory [in our ministries!] forever" ([Romans 11:36](#)).

#### 4. My additional insight from the Westminster Confession of Faith

##### CHAPTER II.

##### *Of God, and of the Holy Trinity*

I. There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory, most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him; and withal most just and terrible in his judgments; hating all sin; and who will by no means clear the guilty.

II. God hath all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of himself; and is alone in and unto himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which he hath made, nor deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting his own glory in, by, unto, and upon them; he is the alone foundation of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom, are all things; and hath most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them, whatsoever himself pleaseth. In his sight all things are open and manifest; his knowledge is infinite, infallible, and independent upon the creature; so as nothing is to him contingent or uncertain. He is most holy in all his counsels, in all his works, and in all his commands. To him is due from angels and men, and every other creature, whatsoever worship, service, or obedience he is pleased to require of them.

##### B. He Created All Things for His Glory

***Revelation 4:9-11*** *Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, <sup>10</sup> the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: <sup>11</sup> "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."*

##### C. He Redeemed People for His Glory

***Revelation 5:11-12*** *Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. <sup>12</sup> In a loud voice they sang: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"*

##### D. The Staggering Poverty of the Modern Church

John Piper: “The glory of God rests only lightly on the modern evangelical church.”

David Wells: “It is this God, majestic and holy in his being . . . who has disappeared from the modern evangelical world.”

Leslie Newbigen: “I suddenly saw that someone could use all the language of evangelical Christianity, and yet the center was fundamentally the self, my need of salvation. And God is auxiliary to that. . . . I also saw that quite a lot of evangelical Christianity can easily slip, can become centered in me and my need of salvation, and not in the glory of God.”

## II. The Central Contribution of John Calvin: The Glory of God in the Word

John Calvin: [The central task of ministry is] to set before [man], as the prime motive of his existence, *zeal to illustrate the glory of God*. For we are born first of all for God, and not for ourselves.

John Piper: I think this would be a fitting banner over all of John Calvin's life and work – *zeal to illustrate the glory of God*. The essential meaning of John Calvin's life and preaching is that he recovered and embodied a passion for the absolute reality and majesty of God.

Therefore the unifying root of all of Calvin's labors is his passion to display the glory of God in Christ. When he was 30 years old, he described an imaginary scene of himself at the end of his life, giving an account to God, and said, "The thing [O God] at which I chiefly aimed, and for which I most diligently labored, was, that the glory of thy goodness and justice . . . might shine forth conspicuous, that the virtue and blessings of thy Christ . . . might be fully displayed"

### A. Luther: Focused on Justification by Faith Alone

1. Convinced that the Medieval Roman Catholic system of sacramental works could NOT result in justification
2. Understood from Romans 1:17 justification by faith alone
3. Made this the centerpiece of his reformation

### B. Calvin: Submitted Justification to the Glory of God

John Calvin: Concern for our salvation is LESS than concern for the glory of God:

I acknowledge, indeed, that the Lord, the better to recommend the glory of his name to men, has tempered zeal for the promotion and extension of it, by uniting it indissolubly with our salvation. But since he has taught that this zeal ought to exceed all thought and care for our own good and advantage, and since natural equity also teaches that God does not receive what is his own, unless he is preferred to all things, it certainly is the part of a Christian man to ascend higher than merely to seek and secure the salvation of his own soul. I am persuaded, therefore, that there is no man imbued with true piety, who will not consider as insipid that long and labored exhortation to zeal for heavenly life, a zeal which keeps a man

entirely devoted to himself, and does not, even by one expression, arouse him to sanctify the name of God.

Rick Warren at the SBC: "Can anyone tell me...?!!"

Calvin on justification (in *Reply to Sadoleto*): "You . . . touch upon justification by faith, the first and keenest subject of controversy between us. . . . Wherever the knowledge of it is taken away, *the glory of Christ is extinguished*".

John Piper: So here again you can see what is fundamental. Justification by faith is crucial. But there is a deeper root reason why it is crucial. The glory of Christ is at stake. Wherever the knowledge of justification is taken away, the glory of Christ is extinguished. This is always the root issue for Calvin. What truth and what behavior will "illustrate the glory of God"?

For Calvin, the need for the Reformation was fundamentally this: Rome had "destroyed the glory of Christ in many ways — by calling upon the saints to intercede, when Jesus Christ is the one mediator between God and man; by adoring the Blessed Virgin, when Christ alone shall be adored; by offering a continual sacrifice in the Mass, when the sacrifice of Christ upon the Cross is complete and sufficient", by elevating tradition to the level of Scripture and even making the word of Christ dependent for its authority on the word of man

### C. Awesome Vision Revolutionized Western Civilization

Geerhardus Vos, the Princeton New Testament scholar, asked the question in 1891,

What is it about Reformed (Calvinistic) theology that enables that tradition to grasp the fullness of Scripture unlike any other branch of Christendom? He answers, "Because Reformed theology took hold of the Scriptures in their deepest root idea. . . . This root idea which served as the key to unlock the rich treasures of the Scriptures was *the preeminence of God's glory in the consideration of all that has been created*".

It's this relentless orientation on the glory of God that gives coherence to John Calvin's life and to the Reformed tradition that followed. Vos said that the "all-embracing slogan of the Reformed faith is this: the work of grace in the sinner as a *mirror for the glory of God*"

### D. God... Christ... Glory... Word... Preaching

Calvin had seen the majesty of God in the Scriptures. This persuaded him that the Scriptures were the very word of God. He said, "We owe to the Scripture the same reverence which we owe to God, because it has proceeded from Him alone, and has nothing of man mixed with it".

His own experience had taught him that "the highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it". These truths led to an inevitable conclusion for Calvin. Since the Scriptures are the very voice of God and since they are therefore self-authenticating in revealing the majesty of God, and since the majesty and glory of

God are the reason for all existence, it follows that Calvin's life would be marked by invincible constancy in the exposition of Scripture.

### III. A Consuming Passion for Preaching to the Church

#### A. Unremitting Commitment to Sequential Exposition

Calvin had seen the majesty of God in the Scriptures. This persuaded him that the Scriptures were the very word of God. He said, "We owe to the Scripture the same reverence which we owe to God, because it has proceeded from Him alone, and has nothing of man mixed with it" (see note 42). His own experience had taught him that "the highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it" (see note 43). These truths led to an inevitable conclusion for Calvin. Since the Scriptures are the very voice of God and since they are therefore self-authenticating in revealing the majesty of God, and since the majesty and glory of God are the reason for all existence, it follows that Calvin's life would be marked by invincible constancy in the exposition of Scripture.

Commitment to sequential exposition:

Calvin's preaching was of one kind from beginning to end: he preached steadily through book after book of the Bible. He never wavered from this approach to preaching for almost twenty-five years of ministry in St. Peter's church of Geneva – with the exception of a few high festivals and special occasions. "On Sunday he took always the New Testament, except for a few Psalms on Sunday afternoons. During the week . . . it was always the Old Testament". The records show fewer than half a dozen exceptions for the sake of the Christian year. He almost entirely ignored Christmas and Easter in the selection of his text.

On Easter Day, 1538, after preaching, he left the pulpit of St. Peter's, banished by the City Council of Geneva. He returned in September, 1541 – over three years later – and picked up the exposition in the next verse.

#### B. Unrelenting Labors

To give you some idea of the scope of the Calvin's pulpit, he began his series on the book of Acts on August 25, 1549, and ended it in March of 1554. After Acts he went on to the epistles to the Thessalonians (46 sermons), Corinthians (186 sermons), pastorals (86 sermons), Galatians (43 sermons), Ephesians (48 sermons) – till May 1558. Then there is a gap when he is ill. In the spring of 1559 he began the Harmony of the Gospels and was not finished when he died in May, 1564. During the week of that season he preached 159 sermons on Job, 200 on Deuteronomy, 353 on Isaiah, 123 on Genesis and so on.

#### **Everything was exposition of Scripture:**

He wrote tracts, he wrote the great *Institutes*, he wrote commentaries (on all the New Testament books except Revelation, plus the Pentateuch, Psalms, Isaiah and Joshua), he gave Biblical lectures (many of which were published as virtual commentaries) and he

preached ten sermons every two weeks. But *all* of it was exposition of Scripture. Dillenberger said, "[Calvin] assumed that his whole theological labor was the exposition of Scripture". In his last will and testament he said, "I have endeavored, both in my sermons and also in my writings and commentaries, to preach the word purely and chastely, and faithfully to interpret His sacred Scriptures".

Everything was exposition of Scripture. This was the ministry unleashed by seeing the majesty of God in Scripture. The Scripture were absolutely central because they were absolutely the Word of God and had as their self-authenticating theme the majesty and glory of God. But out of all these labors of exposition, preaching was supreme.

Emile Doumergue, the foremost biographer of John Calvin with his six-volume life of Calvin, said, as he stood in the pulpit of John Calvin on the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Calvin's birth, "That is the Calvin who seems to me to be the real and authentic Calvin, the one who explains all the others: Calvin the preacher of Geneva, molding by his words the spirit of the Reformed of the sixteenth century"

## IV. How God Shaped John Calvin

### A. The Fledgling Reformation

1. Martin Luther was 25 years old when Calvin was born
2. Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the Wittenberg Castle door when Calvin was 8 years old
3. The fundamental principles of the Reformation: the "Five Solas"
  - a. Sola Scriptura: "based upon the Scripture alone"
  - b. Sola fide: "by faith alone"
  - c. Sola gratia: "... "by grace alone"
  - d. Solus Christus: "in Christ alone"
  - e. Soli Deo Gloria: "to the glory of God alone"
4. Luther made his famous stand on the Word of God at the Diet of Worms in 1521, when Calvin was 12 years old
5. Luther's towering example, courageous stands, and preaching/teaching/writing ministry forged a Reformation in Germany that stood as a beacon for other reformers

### B. Calvin's Birth and Education

1. Born on July 10, 1509, in Noyon, France (sixty miles northeast of Paris)
2. Parents: Gerard and Jeanne Cauvin



- a. Father a financial administrator for the Catholic bishop of the Noyon diocese
  - b. Raised his son (John) to be a priest in the Roman Catholic church
  - c. When Calvin was 11, Gerard used his influence to get John a chaplaincy position at the Noyon Cathedral
3. At age 14, Calvin was sent to the University of Paris to study theology in formal preparation of being a priest
    - a. The University of Paris was at that time steeped in Medieval Catholic theology and untouched by the “Lutheran heresy”
    - b. Calvin would have learned little of Luther’s doctrines initially
  4. When Calvin was 19, his father ran afoul of the Catholic authorities and commanded his son to stop studying theology and study law instead; which Calvin did for three years in Orleans and Bourges
  5. During these years, Calvin mastered Greek and studied medieval philosophy through the works of Duns Scotus, William Occam, and Gabriel Biel
  6. 1531: When he was 21, Calvin’s father died and Calvin felt free to pursue his true love, the classics... Calvin was a true “humanist”, loving the classical literature of the ancient world
  7. 1532: Published his first book, a *Commentary on Seneca*

### C. Calvin’s Conversion

1. Calvin is a very private individual and says very little about himself in his sermons or writings... so we know very little about the details of his conversion
2. BUT by November of 1533, it is clear something dramatic had happened in his life
3. Luther’s thoughts had by this time been widely disseminated and Calvin must have come in contact with Reformation ideals
4. In the winter of 1533, His friend, Nicholas Cop, preached a sermon at the opening of winter term at the University of Paris; the language of the sermon gives evidence that it is possible that Calvin may have helped write the message
5. The Parliament under King Francis I called Cop to account for his Lutheran-like doctrines; Cop fled the city, as did Calvin, as a general persecution broke out from King Francis against “that cursed sect of Lutherans”

6. So, by this time, it was clear that Calvin had crossed the line and become a Christian

7. How? This is the closest testimony we have:

Seven years later, he describes how he had been struggling to live out the Catholic faith with zeal:

. . .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 . . . to its original purity. Offended by the novelty, I lent an unwilling ear, and at first, I confess, strenuously and passionately resisted . . . to confess that I had all my life long been in ignorance and error. . . .

I at length perceived, as if light had broken in upon me, [a very key phrase, in view of what we will see] in what a sty of error I had wallowed, and how much pollution and impurity I had thereby contracted. Being exceedingly alarmed at the misery into which I had fallen . . . as in duty bound, [I] made it my first business to betake myself to thy way [O God], condemning my past life, not without groans and tears.

God, by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame. . . . Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with [an] intense desire to make progress"

#### **Piper on the Work of the Spirit in Calvin's Conversion and Doctrine:**

How this happened is extremely important, and we need to see Calvin himself describe it in the *Institutes*, especially Book I, Chapters VII and VIII. Here he wrestles with how we can come to a saving knowledge of God through the Scriptures. His answer is the famous phrase, "the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit." For example, he says, "Scripture will ultimately suffice for a saving knowledge of God only when its certainty is founded upon the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit" (I, viii, 13). So two things came together for Calvin to give him a "saving knowledge of God" – Scripture and the "inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit." Neither alone suffices to save.

But how does this actually work? What does the Spirit do? The answer is not that the Spirit gives us added revelation to what is in Scripture but that he awakens us, as from the dead, to see and taste the divine reality of God in Scripture, which authenticates it as God's own word. He says, " Our Heavenly Father, revealing his majesty [in Scripture], lifts reverence for Scripture beyond the realm of controversy" (I, viii, 13). There is the key for Calvin: the witness of God to Scripture is the immediate, unassailable, life-giving revelation to the mind of the majesty of God manifest in the Scriptures themselves.

Over and over again in his description of what happens in coming to faith you see his references to the majesty of God revealed in Scripture, and vindicating Scripture. So already in the dynamics of his conversion the central passion of his life is being ignited.

We are almost at the bottom of this experience now. If we go just a bit deeper we will see more clearly why this conversion resulted in such an "invincible constancy" in Calvin's lifelong allegiance to the majesty of God and the truth of God's Word. Here are the words that will take us deeper.

Therefore illumined by [the Spirit's] power, we believe neither by our own [note this!] nor by anyone else's judgment that Scripture is from God; but above human judgment we affirm with utter certainty (just as if we were gazing upon the majesty of God himself) that it has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men. (I, vii, 5)

“The internal witness of the Spirit in John Calvin is a work of enlightenment whereby, through the medium of verbal testimony, the blind eyes of the spirit are opened, and divine realities come to be recognized and embraced for what they are. This recognition Calvin says, is as immediate and unanalyzable as the perceiving of a color, or a taste, by physical sense – an event about which no more can be said than that when appropriate stimuli were present it happened, and when it happened we know it had happened” J.I. Packer

#### D. A Reformer in the Making

1. Calvin fled Paris in the middle of the night, lowering himself out of a window by means of sheets and escaping to safety in the guise of a vinedresser with a hoe on his shoulder
2. Calvin then suffered imprisonment for a short time, then fled to the estate of Louis du Tillet... a wealthy sympathizer of the Reformation cause
3. In this “quiet nest”, Calvin had the opportunity to spend five months in du Tillet’s extensive theological library
4. He pored over the Bible and the works of Augustine and other church fathers
5. God used Calvin’s astonishing genius, hard work, and this quiet retreat time to shape him into a theologian in a relatively short amount of time
6. Shortly thereafter, Calvin settled in Basel, Switzerland and began writing the great work of his life, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1534-1536); this work, in five ever-expanding editions, would become the defining masterpiece of Reformation systematic theology, a legacy for centuries to come; the work was dedicated to King Francis I to help explain the faith of the Protestants he was persecuting:

But lo! while I lay hidden at Basel, and known only to few people, many faithful and holy persons were burnt alive in France. . . . It appeared to me, that unless I

opposed [the perpetrators] to the utmost of my ability, my silence could not be vindicated from the charge of cowardice and treachery. This was the consideration which induced me to publish my *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. . . It was published with no other design than that men might know what was the faith held by those whom I saw basely and wickedly defamed.

#### 7. Piper's comment:

So when you hold the *Institutes* of John Calvin in your hand, remember that theology, for John Calvin, was forged in the furnace of burning flesh, and that Calvin could not sit idly by without some effort to vindicate the faithful and the God for whom they suffered. I think we would, perhaps, do our theology better today if more were at stake in what we said

#### E. Strange Providence Brings Him to Geneva

1. After a temporary amnesty was granted to French exiles, Calvin returned briefly to France where he collected his belongings and his brother Antoine and sister Marie; he then departed France for the rest of his life, intending to settle in the southern German city of Strasbourg
2. While en route to Strasbourg, Calvin was redirected because a war had broken out between Charles V (the Holy Roman Emperor) and Francis I of France resulting in troop movements that blocked the road to Strasbourg; Calvin was forced to detour through Geneva, Switzerland

John Piper: In retrospect one has to marvel at the providence of God that he should so arrange armies to position his pastors where he would!

3. Calvin intended only to stay there one night...
4. His goal in life was to be a quiet scholar nestled in some secluded place writing theological works... God had other plans!!
5. William Farel, the fiery and zealous leader of the Reformation in Geneva, heard that Calvin was staying there for one night and went to deal with him quite boldly:

Farel, who burned with an extraordinary zeal to advance the gospel, immediately learned that my heart was set upon devoting myself to private studies, for which I wished to keep myself free from other pursuits, and finding that he 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. By this imprecation I was so stricken with terror, that I desisted from the journey which I had undertaken

6. Basically, Farel said, “May God curse your life of quiet study while we go in need of Reformation!”
7. Calvin settled in Geneva and began his pastoral ministry there

#### F. Banished to Strasbourg

1. Calvin and Farel began immediately working on improving church life in Geneva
2. Drew up a confession of faith and an oath for the 10,000 citizens of Geneva to bring about clear reform in the city
3. BUT they soon met strong opposition
4. Key issue: Calvin and Farel desired to keep the Lord’s Table pure from open sinners by excommunication
5. This issue eventually led to their expulsion and legal banishment from the city in 1538

Piper: “Calvin breathed a sigh of relief and thought God was relieving him from the crush of pastoral duties so he could be about his studies. But when Martin Bucer found out about Calvin's availability, he did the same thing to get him to Strasbourg that Farel had done to get him to Geneva.

Calvin wrote, “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. Alarmed by the example of Jonah which he set before me, I still continued in the work of teaching.”

6. They went to Strasbourg where for three years (1538-1541) Calvin pastored a Protestant congregation of approximately 500 French-speaking refugees
7. Calvin also taught in the local theological institute there, wrote his first commentary (Romans) and completed the second edition of his *Institutes*
8. He also met a widow named Idelette de Bure Stordeur, a member of his congregation; her former husband John Stordeur and she had been listed as Anabaptists and with him she’d had a son and a daughter; Calvin married her in 1540 when he was 31 years old
  - a. This marriage was no romantic match, but Calvin cherished her deeply
  - b. They suffered together a miscarriage, the loss of a daughter at birth, and the loss of a two-week old son

Of that loss, Calvin wrote: “The Lord has certainly inflicted a bitter wound in the death of our infant son. But He is Himself a Father and knows what is good for His children.”

c. Idelette died of tuberculosis in 1549 at the age of 40

d. Calvin wrote to his friend Pierre Viret a few days after her death:

“I have been bereaved of the best companion of my life, of one who, had it been so ordered, would not only have been the willing sharer of my indigence, but even of my death. During her life she was the faithful helper of my ministry.

From her I never experienced the slightest hindrance. She was never troublesome to me throughout the entire course of her illness; she was more anxious about her children than about herself. As I feared these private cares might annoy her to no purpose, I took occasion, on the third day before her death to mention that I would not fail in discharging my duty to her children. Taking up the matter immediately, she said, ‘I have already committed them to God.’ When I said that that was not to prevent me from caring for them, she replied, ‘I know you will not neglect what you know has been committed to God.’ Lately, also, when a certain woman insisted that she should talk with me regarding these matters, I, for the first time, heard her give the following brief answer: ‘Assuredly the principal thing is that they live a pious and holy life. My husband is not to be urged to instruct them in religious knowledge and in the fear of God. If they be pious, I am sure he will gladly be a father to them; but if not, they do not deserve that I should ask for aught in their behalf.’ This nobleness of mind will weigh more with me than a hundred recommendations.

e. Calvin never remarried

#### G. Returning to Geneva

1. Meanwhile... the City of Geneva was in an increasingly bitter struggle
2. Amazingly, they came to realize that Calvin had been right after all, and wanted him back as pastor
3. May 1, 1541, the City Council rescinded the ban on Calvin and even held him up as a man of God.
4. BUT Calvin didn’t want to go back... would YOU?!!

Earlier in October he said to Farel that though he preferred not to go, "yet because I know that I am not my own master, I offer my heart as a true sacrifice to the Lord". This became Calvin's motto and the picture on his emblem included a hand holding out a heart to God with the inscription, *prompte et sincere* ("promptly and sincerely").

5. On September 13, 1541, Calvin returned and settled in Geneva and would never move again; the reformation of Geneva would now become the focus of the rest of his life
6. As we already noted, the day Calvin returned, he picked up right where he'd left off in sequential exposition of the word; expository preaching was to be the centerpiece of his program for Reformation... day after day, week after week, year after year
7. This ministry would make the lake city of Geneva the brightest light for the Gospel in all the world

#### H. A Growing Influence Throughout Europe

1. During this tumultuous time in Europe, there was religious refugees all over Europe; many ended up settling in Geneva
2. Two groups in particular were significant: French Protestants known as Huguenots; and "Marian Exiles"—English Protestants fleeing "Bloody Mary", the Roman Catholic daughter of King Henry VIII
3. There were also other refugees pouring into Geneva—from Germany and Italy in particular
4. In a short time, Geneva's population doubled to over 20,000
5. One of these exiles was John Knox, the future reformer of Scotland
6. He made a very famous statement about the City of Geneva years after Calvin had been working diligently in reform:

[John Knox, in a letter to a friend] Geneva is "the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the Apostles. In other places I confess Christ to be truly preached; but manners and religion to be so seriously reformed, I have not yet seen in any other place besides."

7. Calvin also carried on an amazing and profound correspondence (letters) with important figures—reformers, Kings/Queens, Dukes, etc. always seeking to advance the cause of Christ

#### I. Astonishing Perseverance Through Trials

##### 1. Unremitting labor

Wolfgang Musculus called him, "a bow always strung."

Colladon says "he was for many years with a single meal a day and never [took] anything between two meals . . ." His reasons were that the weakness of his stomach and his migraines could only be controlled, he had found by experiment, by continual abstinence. But on the other hand, he was apparently careless of his health and worked night and day

with scarcely a break. You can hear the drivenness in this letter to Falais in 1546: "Apart from the sermons and the lectures, there is a month gone by in which I have scarce done anything, in such wise I am almost ashamed to live thus useless". A mere 20 sermons and 12 lectures in that month!

## 2. Terrible sickness

To get a clearer picture of his iron constancy, add to this work schedule the "continuous ill health" he endured. He wrote to his physicians in 1564 when he was 53 years old, and described his colic and spitting of blood and ague and gout and the "excruciating sufferings" of his hemorrhoids. But worst of all seemed to be the kidney stones that had to pass unrelieved by any sedative.

## 3. Bitter persecution from enemies in Geneva... the Libertines

On top of all this pressure and physical suffering were the threats to his own life. "He was not unfamiliar with the sound of mobs outside his house [in Geneva] threatening to throw him in the river and firing their muskets". On his deathbed Calvin said to the pastors gathered, "I have lived here amid continual bickerings. I have been from derision saluted of an evening before my door with forty or fifty shots of an arquebus [a large gun]".

One of the most persistent thorns in Calvin's side were the Libertines in Geneva. But, here too, his perseverance was triumphant in a remarkable way. In every city in Europe men kept mistresses. When Calvin began his ministry in Geneva in 1536 at the age of 27, there was a law that said a man could keep only one mistress (see note 37). Even after Calvin had been preaching as pastor in St. Peter's church for over fifteen years, the immorality was a plague, even in the church. The Libertines boasted in their license. For them the "communion of saints" meant the common possession of goods, houses, *bodies and wives*. So they practiced adultery and indulged in sexual promiscuity in the name of Christian freedom. And at the same time they claimed the right to sit at the Lord's table (see note 38).

The crisis of the communion came to a head in 1553. A well-to-do Libertine named Berthelier was forbidden by the Consistory of the church to eat the Lord's Supper, but appealed the decision to the Council of the City, which overturned the ruling. This created a crisis for Calvin who would not think of yielding to the state the rights of excommunication, nor of admitting a Libertine to the Lord's table.

The issue, as always, was the glory of Christ. He wrote to Viret, "I . . . took an oath that I had resolved rather to meet death than profane so shamefully the Holy Supper of the Lord. . . . My ministry is abandoned if I suffer the authority of the Consistory to be trampled upon, and extend the Supper of Christ to open scoffers. . . . I should rather die a hundred times than subject Christ to such foul mockery" (see note 39).

The Lord's day of testing arrived. The Libertines were present to eat the Lord's supper. It was a critical moment for the Reformed faith in Geneva.

The sermon had been preached, the prayers had been offered, and Calvin descended from the pulpit to take his place beside the elements at the communion table. The bread and wine were duly consecrated by him, and he was now ready to distribute them to the



communicants. Then on a sudden a rush was begun by the troublers in Israel in the direction of the communion table. . . . Calvin flung his arms around the sacramental vessels as if to protect them from sacrilege, while his voice rang through the building:

"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." "After this," says, Beza, Calvin's first biographer, "the sacred ordinance was celebrated with a profound silence, and under solemn awe in all present, as if the Deity Himself had been visible among them" (see note 40).

#### 4. Threat of military conquest by Roman Catholic armies, resulting in his inevitable arrest, torture, and execution as a heretic

In a letter to Melanchthon in 1558, he wrote that war was imminent in the region and that enemy troops could reach Geneva within half an hour. "Whence you may conclude," he said, "that we have not only exile to fear, but that all the most cruel varieties of death are impending over us, for in the cause of religion they will set no bounds to their barbarity"

### J. Faithful to the End

#### 1. John Calvin's Last Will and Testament: April 25, 1564

In the name of the Lord – Amen. I, John Calvin, minister of the word of God in the church of Geneva, finding myself so much oppressed and afflicted with various diseases, that I think the Lord God has determined speedily to remove me out of this world, have ordered to be made and written, my testament, and declaration of my last will, in form and manner following: First, I give thanks to God, that taking compassion on me whom he had created and placed in this world, he not only delivered me by his power out of the deep darkness of idolatry, into which I was plunged, that he might bring me into the light of his gospel, and make me a partaker of the doctrine of salvation, of which I was most unworthy; that with the same goodness and mercy he has graciously and kindly borne with my multiplied transgressions and sins, for which I deserved to be rejected and cut off by him; and has also exercised towards me such great compassion and clemency, that he has condescended to use my labor in preaching and publishing the truth of his gospel. **I also testify and declare, that it is my full intention to pass the remainder of my life in the same faith and religion, which he has delivered to me by his gospel; having no other defense or refuge of salvation than his gratuitous adoption, on which alone my safety depends. I also embrace with my whole heart the mercy which he exercises towards me for the sake of Jesus Christ, atoning for my crimes by the merits of his death and passion, that in this way satisfaction may be made for all my transgressions and offenses, and the remembrance of them blotted out.** I further testify and declare that, as a suppliant, I humbly implore of him to grant me to be so washed and purified by the blood of that sovereign Redeemer, sited for the sins of the human race, that I may be permitted to stand before his tribunal in the image of the Redeemer himself. I likewise declare, that according to the measure of grace and mercy which God has vouchsafed me, I have diligently made it my endeavor, both in my sermons, writings, and commentaries, purely and uncorruptly to preach his word, and faithfully to interpret his sacred Scriptures. I testify and declare that in all the controversies and disputes, which I have conducted with the enemies of the gospel, I

have made use of no craftiness, nor corrupt and sophistical arts, but have been engaged in defending the truth with candor and sincerity.

But, alas! my study, and my zeal, if they deserve the name, have been so remiss and languid, that I confess innumerable things have been wanting in me to discharge the duties of my office in all excellent manner; and unless the infinite bounty of God had been present, all my study would have been vain and transient. **I also acknowledge that unless the same goodness had accompanied me, the endowments of mind bestowed upon me by God, must have made me more and more chargeable with guilt and inactivity before his tribunal. And on these grounds I witness and declare, that I hope for no other refuge of salvation than this alone – that since God is a Father of mercy, he will show himself a Father to me, who confess myself a miserable sinner. ...**

...

John Calvin.

2. Calvin died on May 27, 1564 in the arms of Theodore Beza, his successor

Beza's assessment of Calvin:

“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.”

## V. Personal Testimony: What John Calvin Has Meant to Me

- A. Five Points of Calvinism
- B. Forest and the Trees
- C. “Calvin is a cataract...”
- D. Radical God-Centeredness