

Lecture 8 – “Business with God”: The Life of John Calvin

“It is not enough to have our eyes open and to note well and mark what God does during our whole lives, but we must profit from ancient histories. In fact this is why our Lord has wanted us to have some notable judgments left in writing, so that the memory of them would remain forever. And we should not only profit from what is contained in Holy Scripture, but when we hear what is spoken by the histories written by the pagans, we should also have the prudence to apply to ourselves what God has done.” John Calvin

“You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.” 1 Corinthians 6: 19, 20

Background Reading

Gonzalez, ch. 7

Prayer

Calvin’s prayer “for the morning”

“My God, my Father and Preserver, who of thy goodness hast watched over me during the past night, and brought me to this day, grant also that I may spend it wholly in the worship and service of thy most holy deity. Let me not think, or say, or do a single thing which tends not to thy service and submission to thy will, that thus all my actions may aim at thy glory and the salvation of my brethren, while they are taught by my example to serve thee. And as thou art giving light to this world for the purposes of external life by the rays of the sun, so enlighten my mind by the effulgence of thy Spirit, that he may guide me in the way of thy righteousness. To whatever purpose I apply my mind, may the end which I ever propose to myself be thy honor and service. May I expect all happiness from thy grace and goodness only. Let me not attempt anything whatever that is not pleasing to thee....Do thou add more and more to the gifts of thy grace until I wholly adhere to thy Son Jesus Christ, whom we justly regard as the true Sun, shining constantly in our minds. In order to my obtaining of thee these great and manifold blessings, forget, and out of thy infinite mercy, forgive my offenses, as thou hast promised that thou wilt do to those who call upon thee in sincerity. Amen.”

“Business with God”: The Life of John Calvin

“We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us, therefore, not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us, therefore, forget ourselves and all that is ours. Conversely, we are God’s: let us, therefore, live for Him and die for Him. We are God’s: let His wisdom and will, therefore, rule all our actions. We are God’s: let all the parts of our life, accordingly, strive toward Him as our only lawful goal.” Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1539)

I. Youth and Education

- A. “A man from the common people”
- B. The arts at Paris (1528) and law at Orleans and Bourges (1531)
- C. Commentary on Seneca’s *On Mercy* (1532)

II. Conversion (“an unexpected [or sudden] conversion”)

- A. When? 1532-34
- B. Who? “God...turned my course”
- C. What? “He tamed to teachableness a mind too stubborn for its years (Calvin’s motto: “My heart, I give you, O Lord, promptly and sincerely.”)

III. Geneva (1536-38)

- A. The role of William Farel (1489-1565)

B. Expelled!

IV. Strassburg (1538-41)

A. A mentor—Martin Bucer (1491-1551)

B. A ministry

C. A wife—Idelette de Bure (1540)

V. Geneva Again (1541-64)

A. Reluctant but willing—“[I would rather] submit to death a hundred times than to that cross [Geneva], on which one had to perish daily a thousand times over” (1540); “But when I remember that I am not my own, I offer up my heart, presented as a sacrifice to the Lord” (1541).

B. The shape of Calvin’s ministry

1. Preacher and teacher (“minister of the Word of God in the church of Geneva”)

2. Reformer (“Calvin found Protestantism a mob transformed it into an army” [B. B. Warfield])

a. Church

(1) Basic structure of Presbyterianism (*Ecclesiastical Ordinances of the Church of Geneva*)

(2) Independence of church in spiritual matters

(3) Worship (Form of Church Prayers and Hymns)

b. State

(1) Calvin not a dictator

“Calvin was only granted bourgeois status at Geneva in his old age; he never became a citizen of the city. He could not stand for office and, until Dec. 1559, could not even vote in city elections; nor did he have privileged access to, or direct influence over, the city council at any point during his career.”

“Calvin could and did urge, cajole and plead; he could not, however, command.” (Alister McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* 109, 125)

(2) Geneva not a theocracy

(a) Principles of Old Testament civil laws

(b) Heresy was a civil crime

-Burning of Servetus in 1553

-McGrath—Calvin’s role “somewhat peripheral” (*A Life of John Calvin*, 105)-Castellio—*Concerning Heretics: Whether They Ought to be Persecuted*

C. Reformation Monument—Farel, Calvin, Beza, Knox (1559)

D. Calvin’s death (1564)

1. Minutes of the Little Council—“God gave him a character of great majesty.”

2. Theodore Beza—“Now that Calvin is dead, life will be less sweet and death less bitter.”

Questions from Class

Was Calvin sick most of his life? What was the problem?

How did Calvin struggle with the execution of Servetus?

What was Calvin’s relationship to the arts?

When did Idelette die?

For Further Study**A Life of John Calvin* by Alister McGrath

Valuable, recent biography, especially good on background and setting. Perhaps makes Calvin a little more irascible than necessary.

**The Man God Mastered* by Jean Cadier

A delightful short biography by a fellow Frenchman.

**John Calvin: A Biography* by T. H. L. Parker

Presents Calvin as “a doctor of the Catholic Church” who lived at a time when “the Western Church had become provincial.” Parker’s little *Portrait of Calvin* is especially fine.

**Idelette* by Edna Gerstner

An historical novel about the wife of Calvin by the wife of John Gerstner. She dedicates the book “to my husband, a professor of church history, without whose help this book would have been far less accurate but far more interesting.”

A. Read the “The Author’s Preface” from *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* by John Calvin.

Usually extremely reticent to speak about himself (he is no Luther!), John Calvin in his preface to his commentary on the Psalms (1557) gives us important information about his own life.

*Why is he moved at this place to give something of his “personal testimony”?

*How does Calvin describe his own personality or disposition? Does this fit with your idea of what Calvin was like?

*According to Calvin, why did he write the *Institutes*?

*Why did Calvin return to Geneva from Strassburg?

*Who were Calvin’s enemies? How did they attack him? How did Calvin respond?