

Business with God: The Life of John Calvin

A young Frenchman, a lawyer who was 30 years old, wrote these words in 1539, “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.” That young man had recently been converted to the Protestant faith. He lived in the city of Strasbourg. His name was John Calvin.

As we study the life of Calvin, let us remember those words from Calvin, “We are not our own. We are God’s.” I will begin with a prayer from Calvin. Calvin wrote many prayers, and the one I have chosen to use today is Calvin’s “Prayer for the Morning.” It was a prayer that he wrote for his people to use in their times of prayer in the morning. Let us join together in this prayer from Calvin.

“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, in order 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.”

I will describe Calvin’s life in this lesson. I will say some things about the life of this remarkable man. In the next lesson I will focus particularly on Calvin’s theology. As a boy and young man, Calvin’s life was largely controlled by his father. His father was a very ambitious assistant to the bishop of Noyon. Calvin’s grandfather had been a boatman on the river near that French town. Calvin spoke of himself as being from the common people. Calvin’s father was quite ambitious, particularly for his son, who had apparently shown great intellectual gifts since his early years. Calvin’s father arranged for Calvin to be tutored with the sons of an aristocratic family. Calvin received his early education in the context of that family. That probably explains Calvin’s aristocratic manner and elegant bearing. Soon he was sent to the University of Paris, the Sorbonne, where he studied and graduated with a degree in the arts.

Thinking that Calvin would become a priest, and hoping that he would rise in the Catholic Church, Calvin’s father changed his mind. He suggested that Calvin go to study law. Calvin said that his father discovered that lawyers made more money than priests, so his father thought it would be good for Calvin to follow that career. So, without enthusiasm but in obedience, Calvin went into law. He studied at two of the finest law schools, which were in Orleans and Bourges. Then he began to cast about in order to figure out what he was going to do in life. He did not want to be priest, and he did not want to be a lawyer either. Young John Calvin wanted to be a scholar. He wanted to write books and have people read them. He set out to make a name for himself in the world of scholarship. At that time, he was

controlled by his own ambition. He published a commentary on a book by the old Roman Stoic philosopher named Seneca. The book was called *On Mercy*. Even though Erasmus had written on Seneca, Calvin did not hesitate to write on him also. Calvin's commentary came out in 1532.

Apparently, not many people read it, and Calvin did not receive the fame that he had hoped to receive by writing the book.

Yet, something very important happened to Calvin about that time. He describes some of that experience in the preface to the Psalms commentary he wrote many years later. That is one of the few times that Calvin writes much about himself. Luther wrote much about himself, and he talked about himself. We can discover something about the heart of Luther much more easily than we can about Calvin, because Calvin was quite reluctant to speak much about himself. In writing his commentary on the Psalms, however, he did include something about his story, his testimony, in the preface. Those words are very important because he wrote so few words about himself elsewhere.

Calvin said that as he was going along, ambitious and determined to make a mark for himself in the world, and "God turned my course in another direction...By an unexpected [perhaps the word should be translated sudden] conversion, He tamed to teachableness a heart too stubborn for its years." That was Calvin's way of saying that he was converted and brought into God's family. The first question we may ask about Calvin's conversion is when it happened. We are not exactly certain when it happened. Scholars have tried to determine the year. The dates tend to range from 1532 to 1534. When he wrote the Seneca commentary, there is no evidence that he was a Protestant Christian. Perhaps one would not expect to find evidence in that source, but there is no evidence that he had experienced the kind of conversion that he writes about in the Psalms commentary.

In 1534 he resigned his ecclesiastical benefices, which was the money he was receiving from the Catholic Church that his father had arranged for him to pay for his education. Everybody was doing that at the time. Calvin received the money from the church in exchange for fulfilling a particular office in the church, which he did not really do. His father arranged for someone else to fulfill the duties of the office at minimal cost, and the extra income from two benefices went to Calvin to support him in his career. When a sixteenth-century person gave up money from the church in that manner, it certainly meant that the person was no longer Catholic. That means that by 1534 Calvin was a Protestant. He was in his mid twenties at the time he was converted.

The next question we might ask about Calvin's conversion is who led him to Christ. What was the influence that brought him into the Protestant faith? Calvin said, "God turned my course." He did not mention anybody's name in his testimony. He simply said God did it. We can almost be assured that Calvin had been reading Luther. In one of his writings, Calvin called Luther "my father in God." Luther's impact on Calvin was quite significant. There were other evangelism-minded French friends of Calvin. He had perhaps heard the Protestant message from them. We simply do not know the human instrument that God used to bring Calvin to faith.

I also want to comment on what really happened to Calvin in his conversion. Calvin described it this way, "God tamed to teachableness a mind too stubborn for its years." It was not a slow enlightenment. It was a sudden conversion, an unexpected conversion. In his Psalms commentary, Calvin used the illustration that he was like a horse going down a road when God suddenly pulled on the reins and turned him around. Calvin then found himself going somewhere else controlled by Someone else. Most people in the sixteenth century who became known in scholarship or ministry adopted a motto. Luther did, and Calvin did as well. Calvin's motto was a hand outstretched with a heart in the hand. The words that he wrote for his motto were, "My heart I give you, O Lord, promptly and sincerely." It is, of course,

one thing to say that is one's motto, and another thing to live up to it. In some remarkable ways, Calvin put it into practice. One of the best books on the life of John Calvin is called *The Man God Mastered*, by Jean Cadier. If you read that book, you will realize that in many ways Calvin did what he set out to do, which was to offer his heart to the Lord promptly and sincerely.

The place of his ministry was Geneva. He was in Geneva twice. The first time he ended up serving the Lord in the church at Geneva without expecting to be there, nor even wanting to be there. It became unsafe for Calvin to stay in France. As he became more well-known as a Protestant leader, even though he was a young man, it was dangerous for him to remain in France. It was especially dangerous after he published his *Institutes* at Basel in 1536. When that book went out with Calvin's name on it, he became a marked man. He left France to go to Strasbourg. He wanted to live the life of a scholar there. Calvin was the kind of person who loved to spend all his time in his study. He planned to leave France and go to Strasbourg where he could do that. Strasbourg had become a Protestant city. It was Calvin's ambition to become a scholar and serve the Lord through his scholarship. It became necessary for Calvin to take a detour, however, because of the war between the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, and the French king, Francis I. He planned to go south to Lyon, then to Geneva, and then up to Strasbourg. Somebody has called that "the divine detour."

When Calvin reached Geneva, expecting to spend a night or two and then be on his way, he met a fellow Frenchman named William Farel. Farel had been converted to the Protestant faith. He had begun reform in the French-speaking area of Switzerland. At the L'Abri community in Huémoz, the study center is called "Farel House," named for William Farel, who preached in that area of Switzerland and began the reform there. By 1535, with the support of Bern, which had become Protestant through the preaching of Zwingli and Bullinger, Geneva was led to the Protestant position. Farel went there in order to preach the Gospel, convert people, and establish the church. Farel was a pioneer in worship and doctrine. Primarily, however, Farel was a preacher. He has been called a "hot gospeler" because he preached fiery sermons. There is a statue of Farel in Neuchatel that shows him in action preaching, with his Bible above his head.

When Calvin arrived, Farel knew something about him and realized that he was the man Farel needed to stay in Geneva to help in the work there. Farel could get things stirred up, but he needed Calvin to teach, consolidate, and organize. Farel made that proposal, but Calvin said "no, thank you," and that he was on his way to Strasbourg to become a scholar. He could not turn down Farel that easily. As Calvin explained later in his preface to the commentary on Psalms, "Farel besought God to curse my retirement and the tranquility of my studies if I should withdraw and refuse to give assistance when the necessity was so urgent." I am not recommending that we follow Farel in that. We cannot know God's will for someone else so clearly. Yet, I believe God had a hand in that exchange. Calvin himself said so, saying, "I felt as if God from heaven had laid His mighty hand upon me to stop me in my course." Somewhere else Calvin said, "God thrust me into the game." That time it was clear that the human instrument was Farel.

Calvin and Farel spent two years at the church in Geneva. They were preaching, catechizing, organizing, and setting up church discipline. Geneva was not quite ready for them, however, and in a couple of years it became clear that the church in Geneva preferred that they leave. Calvin and Farel were greatly mistreated. Genevans named their dogs Calvin, so they could kick their dogs. They would shoot off guns outside his bedroom windows at night, simply to bother him. They threw rocks through his windows when they saw him studying. It was not a good relationship between the pastor and the church. Soon the city council expelled Calvin and Farel.

Calvin finally arrived at Strasbourg, the place he originally wanted to go. He spent three years there. They are sometimes called “the golden years” in Calvin’s life. They were three wonderful years in Strasbourg. He had a mentor there, a friend. Calvin needed somebody to come alongside him to show him how to get along with people and lead them and preach. Martin Bucer was a wonderful friend and mentor to Calvin. He was an Erasmian Dominican who was converted through the preaching of Luther in Strasbourg. He had served in that city since 1523. Much influence came into Calvin’s life through that important friend and mentor, Martin Bucer.

Calvin also developed a ministry in Strasbourg. Bucer did not allow Calvin to sit and study. There was too much to do in those days. There was a congregation of 500 French refugees in Strasbourg, and Calvin became the pastor of that congregation. He preached and counseled almost every day, and he became a beloved minister. He learned how to serve effectively in the church in a settled, rather than in a pioneering, ministry. God needed to take Calvin to Strasbourg to allow him to do an internship with Martin Bucer.

Calvin eventually went back to Geneva, but before he did so he found a wife in Strasbourg. She was Idelette de Bure, a widow with two children. There is a book called *Idelette*, which is an historical novel written by Mrs. John Gerstner, and which tells the story of this remarkable woman with an historical novel approach. I am fond of that book and particularly of Mrs. Gerstner’s dedication. She dedicated the book to her husband. The dedication says, “To my husband, John Gerstner, a professor of church history, without whose help this book would have been far less accurate but far more interesting.” Calvin and Idelette married. He wrote to his friend William Farel, “She is not only good and honorable, but also handsome.” Calvin and Idelette had a wonderful life together, but only for nine short years. They loved each other very much, and their marriage was something like Martin Luther’s and Katie’s relationship. Calvin spoke about her as “a precious help and an excellent companion.” Their only child died within a few days of being born. Idelette had two children from her first marriage. Those children lived with John and Idelette. Calvin said the death of their child was “a severe wound.” It comforted him to know that “God is Himself a Father, and He knows what is best.”

In 1541 Calvin was recalled to Geneva. The Genevans realized that they needed Calvin, so they sent a delegation to ask him to come back. Professor Gonzalez says in his book that Calvin went back “without hesitation.” That is not accurate, however, because Calvin did hesitate, and he fought against the move for quite a while. He wrote to Farel in 1540, when he knew what was happening, that he would “rather submit to death a hundred times than to that cross on which one had to perish daily a thousand times over.” Then the next year Calvin wrote to Farel, “But when I remember that I am not my own, I offer up my heart, presented as a sacrifice to the Lord.” That is a wonderful thing that Calvin said, because it brought his motto into action. He was putting into practice what he had said he wanted to characterize his life, which was obedient service to God.

In 1541 Calvin went back to Geneva, the city where he would spend the rest of his life serving as pastor in the church of Saint Peter’s, which was the large church on the hill. The shape of Calvin’s ministry over the next 23 years was marked by several things. Calvin wanted the quiet life of a scholar. He wanted to write books. Yet God kept him doing the work of a busy pastor.

The first emphasis of Calvin’s ministry was his service as a preacher and teacher. That was how he saw himself. He identified himself in his will as “minister of the Word of God in the church of Geneva.” For 23 years he preached regularly from the high pulpit in San Pierre to great congregations of people. Calvin not only preached on Sundays, but also on several other days of the week. He usually preached five times per week. He preached without notes, but we have his sermons because people wrote down

what he said. Groups of people wrote them down so that if one person missed a word, then another person might catch it. They would compare notes and put together Calvin's sermons. There are many of Calvin's sermons, at least 2000, that were recorded. Calvin preached in French, and they were written in French. Some have been translated into English, but not many.

Calvin was very concerned with what we now call "expository preaching," as Zwingli had been. He preached through books of the Bible, verse by verse. On the first Sunday he was back in Geneva, in 1541, after being expelled almost three years before, the room was full of people waiting to hear what he was going to say. People may have been somewhat ashamed, and they might have expected Calvin to reprimand them for the way they had treated him before. The moment was very tense when Calvin stood up to deliver his first sermon back in Geneva. When he stood up, he said, "You remember three years ago I was on this verse, and today we take it up here." He went right on to the next verse without any preceding comments. Nothing could have been less dramatic but more effective at illustrating what Calvin saw as very important in ministry.

Calvin was not only a preacher and teacher, but he was also a Reformer. Even more than Luther, Calvin believed that the church, personal life, worship, culture, and all of human existence must come under the control of God and be reformed by the Word of God. B. B. Warfield said it well when he said, "Calvin found Protestantism a mob and transformed it into an army." Calvin was active in the reform of the church. As he created a polity for the church in Geneva, and the surrounding area of the city, he brought into existence the basic structure of what we now call Presbyterianism. Presbyterians can trace their origins back to Calvin's ecclesiastical ordinances in the church at Geneva.

Calvin also worked for the independence of the church in spiritual matters. Calvin did not believe in separation of church and state, as people do today. He did believe, however, that the church, rather than the state, should be in control over spiritual matters, particularly in discipline leading to excommunication. In the preaching of the Word, the exercising of discipline, and the administration of the sacraments, Calvin believed the church should be independent of the state. It took him a long time to convince the city fathers, the councils in Geneva, to agree with that. It was not until 1555 that the power of excommunication was held by the consistory rather than by the councils.

Calvin also worked to create a biblical form of worship, a liturgy. He wrote the *Form of Church Prayers and Hymns*. The church in Geneva had a wonderful service of biblical worship and praise to God.

I also want to explain something about Calvin's relationship to the state. People often misunderstand this issue and misrepresent Calvin at this point. Contrary to what you may have heard, Calvin was not a dictator of Geneva who was ruling the city with an iron hand. Alister McGrath wrote, "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 December 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." He did have influence in the city, but he did not control the government of Geneva. The councils were composed of powerful men. Calvin did urge and cajole and plead, but he did not and could not command.

Calvin was not the dictator, and Geneva was not a theocracy. Many popular books on history refer to a theocracy in Switzerland, where the Old Testament was applied and the city was governed according to the Mosaic Law. None of that is true. There was, of course, close connection between church and state. But the laws of Geneva were not Old Testament civil laws. Geneva was not a theocracy, and Calvin was

not a Theonomist. Calvin taught the principles of love and justice as exemplified in the laws of the Old Testament, but he did not teach that the laws themselves were to be carried out in the life of the state.

Heresy in Geneva, as well as everywhere else in sixteenth-century Europe, was not only considered blasphemy against God but also a civil crime. So, people were put to death for heretical views in the sixteenth century. That happened in Geneva in the famous incident with Servetus.

Servetus was burned in 1553 for blasphemies against the holy Trinity. It was not true that people were constantly being put to death in Geneva. Very few people were executed for heresy in Geneva, perhaps only two. Yet still, two were executed. Calvin was involved, although McGrath has said that his role was somewhat peripheral. It did not happen at a time when Calvin was in great favor with the council. They carried out this decision apart from Calvin, although he did not oppose it, and Servetus was put to death. One of Calvin's opponents, who had at one time been a Calvinist but became something else, whose name was Castellio, wrote a book called *Concerning Heretics: Whether They Ought to be Persecuted*. Costellio said, "To kill a man is not to destroy a heresy; it is just to kill a man." Calvin had not advanced to that point, however, and neither had Geneva. It took many more deaths and many more years before there was anything that approximated the writings of Costellio.

The year 1559 was a great year in Geneva. The final and definitive edition of Calvin's *Institutes* came out in that year. There was no monument to Calvin in Geneva until the early part of the twentieth century. On the 400th anniversary of his birth, Reformed people around the world gave money to erect something called the Reformation Wall in Geneva. It is part of a lovely park with other statues that depict scenes of the Reformed church history in different countries. The Reformation Wall depicts four men who were leaders of the church and who were together in Geneva in 1559. The four men are Farel, Calvin, Beza—who was Calvin's successor and the leader of the Academy, which became the University of Geneva—and also John Knox. They were three Frenchmen and a Scot. The Reformation Wall depicts their activity together in Geneva in 1559.

Calvin died just five years later. He was 55 years old. He asked that there be no monument or marker of his tomb, so I am not sure what he would have thought of the huge 15-foot statue of him that now stands in Geneva. He was buried in the common cemetery in the town. In "The Minutes of the Little Council," which was the council he had often fought with, it is recorded, "God gave him a character of great majesty." His friend and successor in the church and the Academy in Geneva, Theodore Beza, wrote, "Now that Calvin is dead, life will be less sweet and death less bitter."

Calvin was often sick throughout his life. It is difficult, even for doctors, to determine what illnesses people had in those times because symptoms were described in various ways that do not always correspond to our modern understanding of medicine and illness. There are some rather terrifying descriptions of Calvin's illness from himself in his letters. He wrote at great length about some of the things he experienced. We know he suffered greatly from migraine headaches. It seems that he had many things wrong with him. Before he died, he was propped up on pillows in his bed and he continued writing, working on a commentary. He was writing a commentary on Ezekiel. He had written commentaries on most of the Bible, but he had not finished Ezekiel. He was about halfway through Ezekiel, but an unfinished sentence indicates that he did not get any farther. As he was writing, his friends told him that he did not have to do it. They said he had done plenty and he ought to get some rest. His response was, "Would you have the Lord come and find me idle?" He was not a man to take much time off. Yet, John Knox from Scotland was rather startled to find Calvin bowling on Sunday. I do not know if Knox was surprised because it was Sunday or simply because Calvin was bowling.

It has been asked how Calvin came to a decision regarding the execution of Servetus. Calvin and the church in Geneva wrote to other churches, asking what they would do regarding Servetus. Servetus had been condemned by the Catholics also, but they were careless enough to let him get away. After that he went to Geneva. He was a strange man. He was a brilliant doctor, but a very erratic genius. Servetus went to Geneva, thinking that he would confront Calvin in his own city. He thought he would perhaps convert Calvin to his Unitarian faith. The scene was thus set for the tragedy that followed. Calvin struggled with it by trying to find out what other churches would do, such as the Lutherans. Everybody said Servetus deserved to die. Calvin struggled with it further in hoping that he could influence the city council to use some other form of execution besides burning. Calvin was on record saying, "Do not burn him." That was the cruelest form of execution, and Calvin opposed it. When all was said and done, however, Calvin approved of the execution. I do not think we can fully exonerate Calvin from that. There is a statue in Geneva that is a marker to Servetus. It was put there by Calvinists out of concern for what Calvin had done. We should be willing to say it was wrong, but we should also understand the context of the event. It was a very different context from our world today. Even as we say it was wrong, we need to accurately describe the situation and why it occurred. In studying history, we need to be as sympathetic as we can to the setting, but we may still reserve judgment from our point of view today. I say that because some day I want people to do that for us. One day people will say, "Those people of the late twentieth century did many bad things."

People also wonder about Calvin's relationship to the arts. His position was somewhere between Luther and the radicals. The radicals destroyed things rather easily. Luther wanted to preserve most things. There was not much iconoclasm in Geneva. Some things were taken down. Some art was donated by Catholics who were eventually converted to Protestantism and they then took it back. There was not much destruction of art, but rather a slow change of attitude toward religious art in church. Calvin was not opposed to theater or art in culture. He did include music in church, with tunes written by Calvinists. Music was important to Calvin, and you can read the *Institutes* to find out how much Calvin loved and appreciated the arts. It is unfortunate that much of the art of that time, much of which was religious art, was destroyed. People did not simply take it down and store it.

Finally, I want to note that Idelette died in 1549. She and Calvin were married for nine years. Calvin was an introverted person. He was not quick to share his emotions, as Luther was. It was a struggle for him to express himself. That may be due to his French background, his aristocratic training, or simply his personality. It is difficult to find the emotions of Calvin's own heart in his sermons. The place to find them is in his letters. You can find the real Calvin, the humanness of Calvin, in his letters.

One story that illustrates the humanness of Calvin deals with his friend, Pierre Viret, who was from Lausanne, where Calvin went to school. Viret was a Reformer in Lausanne. One day Calvin wanted to send a message to Viret, and the way to do that was to ask a couple of students from the Academy in Geneva to take it. Calvin did that. He wrote the message, sealed it up, and then gave it to one of the students to take to Lausanne. Then he had another thought, so he held up the students, wrote another message, and gave it to the other student. When Viret received the two letters, he read the first one, which had to do with the business that Calvin wanted to transact. The second letter said, "Dear Pierre, I do not have anything to add to the first letter. But when I saw that this other student was disappointed that he did not have a letter to carry to Lausanne, I thought I would write another one. Please act very surprised when you read this." That was the humanness of John Calvin. There is a book entitled, *The Humanness of John Calvin*. There is no such book called "The Humanness of Martin Luther," because everybody knows that Luther was human.

“Therefore, seeing that we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1).