

The Reformation in Biblical Perspective
John Calvin – The Churchman
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November 1, 2009 – Evening Sermon

For some of us this will be a re-acquaintance, for others it will be an initial meeting with, I believe, the most influential servant of Christ since the Apostles, rivaled only in my opinion, in terms of impact in our lives, by the preaching of George Whitfield even though they are two different kinds of ministries, but John Calvin's is of great, great impact. We will look at three passages in this study - Galatians 3, Psalm 51 and then Esther. We will meet John Calvin in this study who is 500 years old this year. Galatians 3 was a key text in the life of John Calvin around which in its study, he recorded his sudden conversion.

Galatians 3:10-13 says, **10** *For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them."* **11** *Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith."* **12** *But the law is not of faith, rather "The one who does them shall live by them."* (This was the verse that thrilled his soul, unto his sudden conversion.) **13** *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"—*

Now, I'd like to look at Psalm 51. This is a very favorite Psalm of Calvin's when he wrote his commentary on the Psalms. He made special reference to this Psalm and I will tell you about that in just a moment. This, of course, is the marvelous Psalm of repentance in the life of David. Two verses from this Psalm stood out in Calvin's heart and mind. Psalm 51:10, 17 says, **10** *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.* **17** *The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

Now, finally I'd like to look at a passage in Esther to help with the set up of our study. I'd like to look at the words of Mordecai to this Jewish woman who is now in the court of the king and as persecution breaks out upon the Jewish people and those faithful Jews are now under the edict of death here is the word given to Esther from Mordecai. Esther 4:12-14a says, **12** *And they told Mordecai what Esther had said.* **13** *Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews.* **14** *For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish.*

Prayer:

Father, would You allow us in this time of study to become acquainted with this one whom You raised up for such a time as this that we might be blessed literally hundreds of years later, with Your church, with the clarity of the Gospel, with Your Word, with theological precision, with growing understanding, with the testimony of a saint who has gone before us, with the challenge of a life well lived, as a sinner saved by grace, with a challenge that our lives would follow after that same Savior, with that same heart of passion? Father, would You also illuminate for our minds and our hearts how glorious the grace of the Lord Jesus is for we live in specific times and who knows if we had not

been born for such a time as this. I thank You in Jesus' Name, Father for allowing us this time together, Amen.

The year was 1536 and it was an interesting one night stay that John Calvin thought he was going to have. In 1536 he was on his way to what he was absolutely convinced was his life calling and what he longed to do. His life calling was to be in a place called Strasbourg where he could become a teacher, writer and author. He would do what he believed no preacher, teacher, writer or author should ever take up a pen, pulpit or lectern without first submitting to others to be taught. So he submitted himself to a man by the name of Martin Butzer whom he longed to learn from and serve with in Strasbourg. Unfortunately there was much unrest in France, Germany and Switzerland and because of that there were treacherous days.

In 1536 the Reformation has now been going on for almost two decades. It is long enough for the spark and the flame of the wonderful reclamation of the Gospel of grace in Jesus Christ to have gone from a door in Wittenberg to spread to Italy, Switzerland, France, and Germany, starting into the Netherlands and even cracking the door in places like England. As it was spreading there was an immediate reaction of the Roman Church and it was one of persecution and in no place was that persecution more profound and more intense than it was in France. That was where Calvin's home was.

Calvin was born July 10, 1509. He was born in a place called Noyon about 60 miles north of Paris. His father's name was Gerard and his mother's name was Jeanne le Franc. They were married and had at least five boys and probably more than that but by the time Calvin was 6 years of age his mother had died. His father, Gerard, had much desires for his son's advancement. His son could advance as either a lawyer or a teacher or as a cleric. So he enrolled him in the University of Paris. Later on Calvin went to an Augustinian monastery for further study and all the while he was beginning to drink of this river that was now flowing.

He had something very much in common with Martin Luther. Both were under the influence of monasteries that were not Dominican, not Franciscan but were Augustinian. What St. Augustine had initiated hundreds of years earlier still had some left over embracing of Biblical orthodoxy, Christian truth and the authority of God's Word. So Calvin was increasingly influenced in these days.

In 1533 one of his teachers, Nicolas Cop, stood and delivered a sermon with great bravery, calling not for radical reforms but just Biblical reforms for the church there in France. He immediately was sought. His life was put under the ban and he fled for his life. It was thought that Calvin had actually written part of the address that he had given. So Calvin also came under scrutiny and was sought. Now, he was gone. He couldn't be found from 1533 on but he began to write.

He began to write a number of commentaries, pamphlets and tracks but most notably he wrote a letter to the king of France and then he put a P.S. on to it. That P.S. became known as Calvin's Institutes or more precisely the Institutes of the Christian Religion. He started writing in 1533 and ended in about 1536 and as he ended he began to have it published. First he did 100 copies then 1,000 copies and then it began to infiltrate all around France. That's when he had to flee for his own life. He had only one place he wanted to go. He desperately wanted to go to Strasbourg.

From 1533 to 1536 he spent most of his time at a place called Basel. There in Basel he had met many of the Reformers and had come under their influence. He had

begun his very quiet life as a scholar, a teacher and a writer. He finally decided the place where many of the refugees of the Reformation were gathering and where there was much thought under the leadership of Martin Butzer, Strasbourg would be just the place. So he left Basel and headed for Strasbourg but because of the unrest he couldn't go there. He had to take a detour for just one night in a place called Geneva. That's all it was, just one night.

His limited fame but yet his fame had already preceded him but when he arrived he was immediately sought out by Gillaume Farel. This fiery red headed missionary, this wonderful reformer and preacher, this man of God who loved God so much, sought out John Calvin and said to him, "John Calvin, do you know what is taking place in Geneva? Many are flocking here. This is God's place for such a time as this and John Calvin you are God's man for this place." John Calvin later acknowledged in his letters how overwhelmed he was and somewhat intimidated but firm in his response. He said, "No, Sir Farel, you do honor me and you do challenge me but my calling is to be a scholar and a writer. I may teach but Strasbourg is where God has called me. It is there that I will be fulfilled." Farel would not let well enough alone. He would not let Calvin's word simply stand without challenge. His fiery red hair was matched only by his facial complexion. He came back to John Calvin and said to him, "Mr. Calvin I care not of your comfort and sense of calling. I tell you God has called you here and if you go to Strasbourg may there be a curse and an unrest upon you all the days of your life."

Calvin was not able to sleep that night. On the day of the morrow, submitted to the call of the Gospel ministry, at St Pierre's now known as St. Peter's Church in Geneva. The year was 1536 when he began his ministry and there he gave himself fully and completely to God's call. He and Farel became a tag team together. They would preach, challenge and disciple and God gave him a heart to do what God had called him to do. He sensed the calling but still longed for the quiet of his study for the free flowing of his pen and for the opportunity to influence others as he already had with his written materials. He believed that Farel was right and that God had called him there to Geneva.

One of the things that he did was he declared the centrality of preaching and the proper observance of the sacraments and he began to fence the table. That's a technical term that we use today and Calvin was one who brought meaning to it. Fencing the table, first of all said, you don't go through any priest to get to the table, you come to your Priest as the priesthood of every believer and you come to the table but when you come to the table you must come in a manner worthy of the Lord. So they would have seasons of preaching and self examination where they would prepare themselves for the Lord's Supper which would be delivered once a quarter. As they prepared themselves for the Lord's Supper you could only come upon approval of having taken time to examine yourself. There were some in the governing authority of Geneva where the state controlled the church and in that governing authority called the "Little Council" there were those who had a religious face and a decadent, sexually, immoral face. Calvin confronted them. He stood in front of the table and said, "You may not come until you repent. All of Geneva knows of your sins. You will not desecrate the name of the Lord by coming to the table in an unworthy manner." Farel stood next to him.

The result is that both men in 1538, just two years into their ministry, were banished from Geneva. Calvin left. Farel left. Farel went off and took another pastorate and now Calvin finally had his opportunity to go to Strasbourg which he did. He put

himself under the discipling ministry of Martin Butzer and began to engage in two plus years of what he called his “heaven upon earth in life and ministry.” It is there that he revised the institutes. He made a second edition of the Institutes of the Christian Religion. It would not be his last revision. He’ll have five more revisions but it is the one that is very much like the one you can check out of our church library or buy in the church bookstore. I believe it is the greatest statement of systematic theology that is available to any of us for study yet today.

He did another revision of that and did his commentary on 1 Corinthians. He re-edited his commentary on Psalms. He wrote the French Salter for worship. He wrote a commentary on Romans. He wrote his reply to Sadoletto. He edited the Institute and most of all he met Idelette. Idelette was a woman whose husband died in the plague there at Strasbourg. Idelette de Bure and her two children became the love of Calvin’s life. He married her and adopted the two children. He had his wife, his home, his study, his pen, his lectern, his calling and all was right with the world for John Calvin.

Then came a letter from Geneva that said, “Would you forgive us of such a terrible action. We have taken steps so that church will not be under the control of the “Little Council.” We call you to come back as God’s man for our church.” Farel would not go. Farel decided to stay where he was. But Calvin, under great duress finally submitted to that call and returned to Geneva with this comment that he wrote in his letter, “I now return to Geneva. There is no place under heaven where I am more fearful and would not want to be, but I have been called and I must go.”

Whenever I read that in the life of John Calvin I am always struck with the way we talk about doing ministry in terms of self fulfillment. I believe there is an element, when God has gifted you and called you and you do what He has called you to do, of joy that is unspeakable. It is an enormous privilege. I know from being called to be a minister of the Word of God. It is an extraordinary privilege that God allows me to do that but here’s what I do know. One does not enter into ministry of one’s spiritual gifts and calling for self fulfillment. One enters into them to fulfill the ministry. The Apostle Paul said, “I have fought the good fight. I have finished the course. I have been poured out as a drink offering. Timothy, fulfill your ministry.” (1 Timothy 4:5-7). It is not going to the ministry to be fulfilled. Fulfill your ministry. Pour yourself out as a drink offering. With burnt offerings you have ashes left but with drink offerings there is nothing left. Just pour yourself out.

Calvin left where he wanted to be for personal fulfillment to go where God had called him to be for such a time as this. He searched his soul and it was in the re-editing of his Psalms that he gave birth to his life motto. Psalm 51:10, 17 says, **10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.** And this became his motto. I offer my heart to you O Lord promptly and sincerely. So with his heart offered and the call before him he returned and took up his ministry on September 16, 1541. He stepped up into the pulpit of St. Peter’s. Here is the man who had been run out and banished. He had been ridiculed, robbed of the ministry, sent away and now returned. He said that this was the one place he wouldn’t want to go and that there was no place under heaven where he was more fearful.

They had taken great pains. I have a pencil drawing of Calvin and if you want to see the real deal go to the Beason Chapel over at Samford University. It’s there under the

list of Reformers. In this picture Calvin is holding his institutes and he has his Geneva gown. If you look closely you will see that it is fur lined. Someone asked me why I don't wear the Geneva gown all the time instead of just periodically. I am waiting for you to line it with fur and then I will wear it all the time. Actually that was one way for them to simply tell him what they then wrote. They provided him with a home, a carriage, furnishings, a stipend, expenses for his hospitality ministry, Geneva gown and they built a high pulpit in the center of the sanctuary so that the Word of God stood elevated in its preaching. Then they wrote in the minutes, "Be it resolved that we will keep John Calvin properly here always" yet he was fearful. Look at what had been done to him and his enemies had not left Geneva. What would he preach his first Sunday?

As many of you know John Calvin was committed to expositional preaching so when John Calvin stepped into the pulpit on September 16, 1541, barely over two years since he had been banished from that pulpit, he opened the Bible and his sermon was from the next verse that he had preached his last time in that pulpit. It wasn't a topical sermon it was just the next verse of Scripture. He then continued into his pastorate from 1536 until he died and he would be a pastor for 27 years. Half of his adult life would be spent in the pastoral ministry. From 1541 to 1555 he was under continual assault. Dogs were named after him. There were threats upon his life. He had to have body guards when he would walk from his house to the church. He would arrive at the church and there would be notes upon the pulpit threatening his life. This would not only come from anti-reformation but it would also come from the people of Geneva. But under that duress from 1541 to 1555 he faithfully, lovingly, firmly and courageously would preach the Word of God.

From 1555 until his death in 1564 there were wonderful days. There were days of great fruitfulness but in that first half of that second pastorate there the days were overwhelming. He had been there for a couple of years. He had had this international church and his writing back in Strasbourg, now he is back for his third ministry and while under assault he stayed the course. As a pastor he again tackled the issue of Communion. They established three churches in Geneva. There was St. Peter's, St. Gervais and St. Rive. He recruited two fellow pastors who would fill the pulpits of the other two churches while he was what we would call the senior pastor at St. Peter's. He would preach every Sunday two times at St. Peter's and one time at one of the other churches. He would alternate between Gervais or Rives. So that means he would preach three times every Sunday and then there were worship services offered five days every week. So he would end up preaching eight sermons each week, 3 on Sunday and 5 during the week which would end up totaling around 27 to 32 sermons a month. He would preach regularly and focus upon prayer, Word and sacrament.

He would re-work the church as a leader of the church. He established communion four times a year but they alternated the four times a year among the three churches so that if you lived in Geneva you would always have every month a church that you could go to for communion, even though each church had communion once a quarter. They established a couple of mission churches that they would also minister to and take the opportunity. He established the first guidelines for the proper separation of the church and the state. In that sense what was meant was that the state could not control the church. He wrote a book of Church Order to guide in funerals insisting that the Gospel be shared and invitations to Christ at every marriage and every funeral.

He then wrote a Catechism that was used to educate all of the children. From that Catechism came a commitment to education in the public education that was sponsored by the church in which all were invited including women, which was unheard of in that day. Then he established a higher level of education and that was called the University of Geneva. Here's a side note. David Hall a contemporary biographer of John Calvin, has uncovered the evidence that even all the way down to the late 1700s the University of Geneva has such a reputation that in a desire to get a proper education in the colonies, Thomas Jefferson actually negotiated with Switzerland to move the University of Geneva from Switzerland all the way to Virginia. The deal was almost struck and it fell through at the last minute and so Jefferson then established what is known today as the University of Virginia.

In that Geneva Academy he had a special curriculum for the training of ministers. Every minister was required three years of what we would call academic education and three years of apprenticeship education. He believed that every minister should not go to the Academy until one already had their gifts tried in the church. Upon the clear hand of God on that person in terms of their calling, then they could be moved to the Academy for their education and then brought back for apprenticeship in the church. So he married apprenticeship in the Academy with the development of ministers and he literally had a hand in the development of hundreds of pastors, missionaries and evangelists, perhaps thousands. Geneva doubled and sometimes tripled in size with refugees from the Reformation. Those that came Calvin organized an entire mercy ministry of the deacons of the three churches to reach out to those who were in need and then to begin the process of incorporating them, educating them and preparing them. Most of them wanted to go back to their countries but while they were there they properly ministered to them and prepared them as God brought the mission field to them where they could train them to send them back to the places where they would go.

He established the church and he did not believe that they needed to reinvent the church for the new age. He believed all they had to do was to go back to the Bible and Apostolic simplicity of the church. So he said the church was here to make disciples with prayer, Word and sacrament in worship and in teaching. Having established that he established what he saw was the four offices of the church – the office of pastor, the office of teacher which we would call discipler today, the office of elder and the office of deacon. Under deacon he created two orders and they were deacons who led the church in mercy and deacons who led the church in administration. As he began to put this together in terms of the church and establishing it, he then led the church officers in their visitation ministry of all the members and particularly of the sick.

On three different occasions plagues struck Geneva. Many were dying of the officers of the church as they would visit the plague ridden homes. The consistory of the church passed a resolution requiring that John Calvin not visit homes but to leave that to the rest of them as his public ministry from the Word was so important. Calvin never answered yes or no and what they didn't know was that Calvin continued quietly his ministry of visitation in homes at the risk of his own life. More than that when Calvin would find out about the persecution, particularly of his beloved French Huguenot church in France under persecution, he would take long trips in the middle of the week to visit these persecuted pastors and missionaries to pray with them, encourage them and spend time with them that they might be bold for the Lord.

As a preacher he was committed to expositional preaching and somebody in the consistory had enough sense because of these wonderful sermons to get a secretary. So they hired two secretaries who would create manuscripts of the sermons. You can imagine with almost 30 sermons a month what was being produced. After the French Revolution the treasury trove of Calvin's manuscript sermons was discovered in the French Revolution and there was an edict to burn them. Much of it was burned but some of it was saved from which we now have 44 volumes of Calvin's commentaries. We are so much richer for that.

As an author particularly in the latter part of his life he had an opportunity to re-work the Institutes of the Christian Religion or Calvin's Institutes with the final edition coming out in 1559. This is available for us today. He then translated the Bible into what is known as the Geneva Bible and it was the richest translation up until recent years. It was the Bible that settled America. The colonists who came here did not bring the King James. They brought the Geneva Bible with Calvin's notes attached to them. In fact, William Shakespeare acknowledged the Geneva Bible as having the greatest influence on his style of writing and of course influenced even the King James translation of the Bible years later.

He had this notion that you needed to sing the Psalms but you needed to sing with joy. So he liberated the Psalms from the chants of the middle age and he put new tunes to them. He was ridiculed for the contemporary music. In fact, they called it the Geneva jigs of John Calvin but he was firmly convinced that there ought to be music for contemplation and for celebration thus Calvin's Salter are the Geneva jigs that became the worship hymnal of the churches of Geneva.

As I said, he established visitation and visited beyond the borders particularly to the French Huguenot churches. He trained missionaries. From 1555 to 1556 they trained and sent 100 church planters to France. By 1562 those 100 churches had become 2100 churches in France. Most of them were small parish churches but not all of them. The French Huguenot church at Montpellier numbered its membership at 6,000. At Toulouse they numbered their membership at 9,000. Calvin trained missionaries for Poland, Hungary, the Netherlands, England, Scotland and one missionary you can remember from Scotland who was trained by Calvin was John Knox. He trained and sent 37 missionaries across the oceans to land in the Americas to plant a church in Rio de Janeiro, at least that is what it is called today. I know what you are thinking – "I think I'd take a call to Rio de Janeiro." You wouldn't have in 1562. It is thought that all of those missionaries lost their lives as they went to plant the Gospel there. Calvin would regularly preach and then he gradually came to the end of his life, having already picked his successor, with the approval of the consistory, who was Theodore Beza. Beza would come and lead the church to other great victories in and for Christ.

I thought I would end by reading two paragraphs from a book I recommend to you. It is called John Calvin; A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine and Doxology. It contains a number of chapters written by different pastors and the one I am going to share is the closing paragraphs from chapter 5 that was written by me, who I have an interest in his ongoing breath and life. I had the privilege to write the chapter called the Churchman of the Reformation. May I also recommend to you if you want your children to have the opportunity to read about John Calvin I would encourage you to get the paperback book titled After Darkness Light by Catherine McKenzie of Christian Focus. It's a wonderful

little primer on the life of John Calvin. A wonderful biography is by David Hall and its entitled A Heart Promptly Offered. But the book I'm about to share from has some amazing scholars and theologians who have authored this book minus one (me) who I think you would greatly enjoy what they had to write in here.

I want to conclude by sharing this from the book in concluding the study on Calvin's life.

On May 27, 1564, Beza, Calvin's handpicked and publically affirmed successor wrote this concerning the death of John Calvin. On May 27 with the setting sun, the brightest light that was in the world, for the guidance of God's church, was taken back to heaven. What an epitaph for a churchman and pastor. Calvin carried out his pastoral ministry tirelessly through leading, preaching, teaching, writing, shepherding and evangelizing. It flowed from a man who was called of God to be a pastor of people, a pastor of pastors, a pastor of the persecuted and a pastor of the Reformers. His pastoral ministry impacted entire nations, even nations yet to exist such as the United States of America. Amazingly this world transforming pastoral ministry flowed from a man whose chief character trait was submission. He submitted to his father's command matriculate at the University of Paris. Then he submitted to his father's demand to change his studies from theology to law, a subject which he distained. He submitted to the call of God through Farel and became the pastor of St. Peter's in Geneva. He submitted to the entreaty of Butzer to become a pastor and leader in Strasbourg, even though fearful and redisent he submitted to God's Providence and returned to Geneva and St Peter's. Willingly he submitted to the persecutions of his adversaries as they named their dogs Calvin, sent life threatening notes, sought to intimidate him by sending mobs to the church and his home, he patiently submitted to life long excruciating physical sufferings exacerbated by the demands of the pastorate and preaching. Observers in Geneva and in his own letters record the multiple attacks of kidney stones, hemorrhages of blood that he coughed up while in the midst of preaching, multiple ailments of a disease of the gastrointestinal system that produced extended periods of bed ridden pain and chronic hemorrhaging. His diet was severely limited in an attempt to minimize his pain. Calvin freely poured out his life upon the altar of pastoral ministry and it was ultimately the result of submission, mostly and completely to Christ his Lord. It was a submission that was nurtured by the joy of salvation by grace and propelled by the majesty of his preeminent Savior. This world changing and history transforming ministry flowed from a candle lit study where a man on his knees would devour the pages of Scripture, carried the burden of the needs of others, faithfully served his Lord and Savior. Who was this man? It was John Calvin, the churchman, the brightest light given by God, for the guidance of His church for such a time as this.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the time that we could be together. We are also grateful to learn that we have been redeemed from the curse of the law through Christ who was cursed and hung upon a tree. We are grateful that the light of lights has given light in this world, pastors even called stars in the hand of the Savior. Those seven stars that guided the churches in the book of Revelation that the church might be a lamp stand lit to proclaim the Gospel to the world. Father, we are in times again where we need such men and women for such a time as this. Raise up Godly men for the pulpit I pray. Raise up Godly

men and women to take the Gospel on mission and on message to the world. Father, raise up again the lovers of Christ who love His church, who respond to the call of Christ who is the head of His church and Father, gladly give themselves with hearts sincerely and promptly offered, I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.