

The History of the Reformation...Part 2

How
Christ
restored
the gospel
to his
church



Geneva: Hell and Home... 1536-1538

In 1536, Calvin went to Geneva against his will.

In 1538, Calvin was expelled from Geneva against his will.

In 1541, Calvin was recalled to Geneva against his will.

When I first wrote those three sentences it occurred to me that most people reading them for the first time were going to be apt to disbelieve them as being too simplistic. But, of course, they are all true. Anyone that has read much on the life of Calvin knows they are true. And yet for some reason I feel a compelling need to prove that they are true in much the same way, I think, Calvin felt a compelling need to explain his feelings regarding Geneva to his closest associates

You see, to understand the life of John Calvin rightly requires that a person have at least a cursory understanding of how Calvin understood the importance of Geneva. It requires a person to understand how he looked at his calling there.

What I mean by that is this. To understand Calvin rightly it is necessary to understand what Calvin believed about vocation and ministry and God's calling in his life. You see Calvin was able to hold the view that God's plan for his life and his own personal plan for fulfillment and happiness might very well look like two completely different things. Calvin was willing to concede that God might want him to be about something other than what he desired or would have chosen himself.

Now the fact that Calvin believed that God might call him to a place different than what he desired is easy enough to see regarding his initial call to Geneva. I made the point in our first lesson that Calvin had no intention of ever pastoring in Geneva. When he was called or compelled to stay in Geneva by William Farel he was actually in his way to Strasbourg. He was on his way to Strasbourg to pursue the life of a quiet scholar. Oh he wanted to be involved in the Reformation...make no mistake about that. But he wanted to be involved from the sidelines...from the comfortable vantage of one who feels the freedom to comment and criticize but whose bacon is not always in danger of being burned to a crisp.

That doesn't mean that he was necessarily adverse to danger. His book had proven beyond doubt that that was not the case. Still there is a difference in being in danger and being in danger in a particular place and committing yourself to a particular flock or people. That was something Calvin had not planned to do. He was not all that comfortable with the idea of staying in one place and learning the fears and foibles of a particular people.

Nevertheless, that is it seems what God wanted.

And we know the story of how it happened. Calvin was on his way to Strasburg with his brother Antoine and his sister Marie when a war, a war between Charles V and Francis I, caused them to take an unplanned detour through the city on the lake, the city of Geneva.

In his *Commentary on the Psalms* Calvin tells the story like this:

That my object was not to acquire fame, appeared from this, that immediately after I left Basle, and particularly from the fact that nobody there knew that I was the author. Wherever else I have gone, I have taken care to conceal that I was the author of that performance; and I had resolved to continue in the same privacy and obscurity, until at length William Farel detained me at Geneva, not so much by counsel and exhortation, as by a dreadful imprecation, which I felt to be as if God had from heaven laid his mighty hand upon me to arrest me. As the most direct road to Strasburg, to which I then intended to retire, was as shut up by the wars, I had resolved to pass quickly by Geneva, without staying longer than a single night in that city...Then an individual...discovered me and made me known to others. Upon this, Farel, who burned with an extraordinary zeal to advance the gospel, immediately strained every nerve to detain me. And after having learned that my heart was set upon devoting myself to private studies for which I wished to keep myself free from other pursuits, and 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;¹

In other words, Calvin kowtowed to the pressure Farel put on him because he believed that Farel was speaking the very will of God toward him. So you can see by Calvin's own words that he had no intention of landing in Geneva. But land he did and Farel and the City Council put him to work right away as a public

lecturer on the Bible. That is, he was not asked to be a pastor. He was not asked to interact with the Council. He was not even asked to preach. He was simply asked to teach the Bible.²

I love the way Herman Selderhuis puts it:

Any hope for peace in the academic climate of the College had thus failed. Until the day he died, Calvin would find no rest, even though he had always dreamed of living that ideal life of the scholar, burying himself in his studies far away from the worries of daily life.³

So Calvin was given the order to teach the Bible and teach the Bible he did.

He was accepted as a gifted Bible teacher right from the start. Those genuinely interested in the Bible thronged to listen to his simple yet elegant expositions of the Word of God. They loved to hear him speak and they especially loved the way he made the Bible come alive.⁴ One printer from Basle wrote him in 1537 saying, "I hear you are lecturing with usefulness and great applause on St. Paul's epistles."⁵

Still, Calvin was not asked to pastor or to preach and to be perfectly honest he was still far from being anything like a household name. Selderhuis notes that right after Calvin's arrival in Geneva Farel approached the City Council about giving him a small salary to help sustain him and that the clerk who was taking minutes of the meeting couldn't quite remember Calvin's name and so simply referred to him in the minutes as "that Frenchman."⁶ Obviously such anecdotes hint that early on none of the Council members realized how important Calvin

would later prove to be.⁷ It didn't take long, however, for his extraordinary ability and intellect to shine through.

In October of 1536, the pastors at Geneva were asked by a number of the pastors at Strasbourg to participate in a disputation with a number of Catholics at Lausanne over the merits of the Reformation. Though Calvin was not a pastor he was asked to go along presumably to help him get his feet wet in disputations against Rome. Calvin sat and listened without speaking at all until one of the Catholics accused the Protestants of not knowing or understanding the Church Fathers.⁸ Before Calvin realized what he had done, he responded to the Catholic making the charge by reeling off a long string of quotes and their exact locations that left the mouths of all those listening, even Farel, hanging open in shock.

The Catholic opponent was dumbfounded and as a result the Protestants won the debate not so much on the content of what they had to say or argue as by the fact that the Catholics were from that point on completely gun shy no longer thinking they knew more than their Protestant counterparts. Calvin's stock doubled.

Near the end of that same year, the City Council decided to go ahead and to make him a Pastor along with Farel and Viret and Calvin conceded to their wishes. I want you to think about that for a moment. Calvin was chosen as a pastor at Geneva though he had no degree in theology and had never been examined...two things that he thought were absolutely essential. One of his friends, du Tillet, even questioned whether his call was really from God at all.

Herman Selderhuis writes this:

The matter of divine calling was so fundamental for Calvin that one who really wanted to hurt him did best to attack him on this very point. Louis du Tillet, a friend of Calvin who became estranged when he went back to Catholicism, apparently knew this well. "I wonder whether you have actually been called by God, for you have only been called by men."

He repeated the same thing later that December when he wrote, I can only conclude that you have not received a call to the ecclesiastical office from God.⁹

How painful that must have been for Calvin to be attacked by his old friend who now deserted both him and the Reformed faith. Calvin responded as best he could.

As to my resuming the charge, I could indeed have wished to be believed and taken at my word; and had I only had to do with those whom you might consider too inconsiderately and obstinately determined on setting men to work, I should have been in no hurry to do so; but when the most moderate of them all threaten that the Lord would find me out as he did Jonah; and when they come to such words as these, "Suppose to yourself the Church to be lost through your fault alone. What better course of repentance lies open to you than to dedicate yourself wholly to the Lord? You who are endowed with such gifts, with what conscience can you decline the ministry which is offered to you?" What else to do I knew not...I concluded that I had no alternative, in such a state of perplexity, but to follow that which I thought was pointed out to me by the servants of God. I give you my hearty assurance that care about the body would not have brought me to that conclusion, for I had seriously pondered the question of setting about the gaining of a livelihood for myself in some private station, which I think is not altogether impossible; but I have decided that the will of God has otherwise disposed.¹⁰

Now I have been making the point that Calvin was called to Geneva against his will. He was pressured contrary to everything he longed to do to take up a ministry in Geneva. Now I wouldn't want you to get the idea that he was

immediately loved by everyone. He wasn't. His gift of preaching was recognized immediately but even that had its critics. Still they recognized his preaching and teaching were something special and crowds flocked to hear him speak. But other areas of his pastoral ministry and oversight were much less appreciated. He and Farel were opposed almost from the start regarding the issue of church discipline.

I want to simplify what happened regarding the issue of church discipline in Geneva between 1536 and 1538. I want to do that for the sake of time and because those of you that are interested will want to study the issue more closely than I have time to dedicate to the subject.

From the time Calvin became a pastor at Geneva in 1536 he and Farel wanted to impose a measure of order on the church. The church, that is the congregation at Geneva, was a rowdy bunch. There were interspersed among the faithfully reformed a number of Anabaptists and a number Libertines.

Now Calvin had no intention of establishing anything like a police state either then or later on in Geneva. What he really wanted to accomplish was to impose a consistent measure of discipline that would touch the heart of the people of Geneva. What Calvin wanted was the very thing Jesus had argued for in Matthew 18. To Calvin the institution of church discipline was not only crucial to maintaining order in Geneva, it was commanded biblically. And it had in addition to everything else the threefold design of protecting Christ's honor, bringing the sinful to repentance and finally protecting the innocent from the wicked influence of notorious sinners.

Calvin and Farel's plan to bring discipline to the City of Geneva had a three prong design. It involved catechizing the young, having believers agree to a common confession of faith and instituting discipline through the use of the sacraments. Now the first part of that went off without a hitch. Calvin produced a catechism to train Geneva's children and new converts in the rudiments of the faith. After that he produced a Confession of Faith...a Confession to which everyone in Geneva was expected to subscribe. It was the recommendation of the pastors at Geneva that failure to subscribe to the Confession lead to expulsion from the city. Finally, the pastors divided the city up into various wards and chose elders to shepherd the people. They were to be an encouragement to their people, to help with the catechesis of their children and to warn those engaged in scurrilous behavior that failure to repent of their sinful deeds would lead to excommunication.

Now at first the Council agreed with Calvin and Farel about forcing the city to subscribe to the approved confession of faith. But later on changed their minds when they saw just how many people in Geneva were not going to sign it. Calvin and Farel, of course, blasted the Council from their pulpits and promised to withhold the Lord's Supper from anyone that failed to subscribe to the confession of faith. But in January 1538, the Council of Two Hundred decided that no person could be barred by any minister from the Lord's Supper.

Now the issue of the Lord's Supper is really where most of the contention lay, Calvin wanted the church to take the Lord's Supper every time the Word was preached...at a very minimum...once a week. But the Council decided that once a week was too Romish and that the Lord's Supper would only be distributed

once a month. Calvin responded by saying that that was fine and that the four churches in Geneva would cycle through in order each month...one celebrating it the first week of the month, another the second and so on. Of course, the Council saw that that meant pretty much having the Lord's Supper every week and it responded against Calvin by deciding that the Lord's Supper would only be celebrated once a quarter.¹¹

Still things might have worked out had not newly elected council members tried to bring the sacraments completely under the control of the council. They decided they were going to make their ministers follow the exact same policies of the City of Bern on whom they were very dependent for protection. As a result, the Council demanded that their preachers baptize using a font and that they serve only unleavened bread in communion. Earlier Calvin had made it clear that the type of bread used or the type of wine used fell under the category of "things indifferent." So technically speaking the ministers didn't really care about the new rules being imposed. What they cared about was what the Council was trying to impose its will over things that biblically fell under the supervision of its ministers. One of the four preachers in the city, Elie Corault, protested so loudly against the council from his pulpit that the Council forbade him to preach at all. The next Sunday he entered the pulpit anyway and was arrested. Calvin and the other preachers protested his arrest and announced they were not going to administer the sacraments during the upcoming Easter service.. They too were forbidden to preach. The next Sunday Calvin and Farel both mounted their pulpits and announced they not only were not going to administer the sacraments but they were no longer going to preach the Word. That was the last

straw for the council. They ordered Calvin and Farel both out of the city within three days.

Calvin left the next day. He left so fast that he didn't even take his library with him. He went first to the City of Bern, Geneva's neighboring city and protector and tried to argue against his dismissal. He still felt God's design on his call to Geneva and feared giving up his charge too quickly. The Council at Bern refused to intercede on his behalf. He went back to Geneva to try to hold a few private meetings and collect his things but was forbidden entrance into the city. He was a stranger in foreign land once again.

He went to Strasbourg...the place he had originally been headed three years before when he stopped for a night in Geneva.

Twenty six years later on his deathbed Calvin remembered that, "They chased me away like a dog."¹²

At Strasbourg he stayed with friends until his friend Martin Bucer, the pastor there, made arrangements for him to take up the pastorate of the small French refugee congregation already in the city. He threw himself into the work and there managed to work out a system of biblical discipline that actually worked. The refugees there blossomed and grew under his extraordinary preaching. They learned to love holiness and the biblical discipline and order Calvin implemented. Sinners were confronted and repented. Children grew up being catechized. The sacraments were protected against blatant sinners and the Word...the Word was preached with power and conviction.

The French church at Strasbourg grew. Calvin too grew.

Under the discipleship of Martin Bucer Calvin learned how to minister to his flock. He learned how to listen to his people. He learned how to reach out to them and pray for them. He learned how to ache when they ached and he learned to be patient with their failures even as he urged them on to holiness.

All the while Geneva was falling apart.

Rivalries in the city meant it went through a number of pastors quickly. There was a real measure of disorder and anarchy and for awhile it appeared as if Geneva might fall out of the Reformation altogether. It didn't help the next year when Cardinal Sadoleto wrote an open letter to the people of Geneva urging them to throw off the reformation and come back to Rome. Sadoleto pointed out that Geneva fallen on hard times because of its sinful rejection of Catholicism and that the difficult circumstances Geneva currently faced were the result of the schismatic sinfulness of the Reformers. The people at Geneva wanted to respond to Sadoleto's letter but found that there was no one left in the city up to the challenge. There was no one like Calvin capable of mounting an intelligent well ordered response to Sadoleto's letter. So, the Council at Geneva appealed to Calvin in Strasbourg to write a response to Sadoleto and surprisingly Calvin agreed to do so. What he wrote turned out to be a remarkable letter. It was such a compelling response to Sadoleto that it stopped the movement back to Rome in its tracks. It also got the people of Geneva to thinking about what they had done.

Before long they appealed to Calvin to come back to Geneva and take up his pastorate there. Calvin said no. The Council in Geneva appealed to Peter Viret, one of Calvin's dearest friends to appeal to Calvin to return. Viret wrote Calvin a letter and recommended that Calvin consider going back to Geneva if for no other reason than his health. Calvin told him no.

I read that passage of your letter, certainly not without a smile, where you shew so much concern about my health, and recommend Geneva on that ground. Why could you not have said at the cross? for it would have been far preferable to perish once for all than to be tormented again in that place of torture. Therefore, my dear Viret, if you wish well to me, make no mention of such a proposal.¹³

Later on Geneva appealed to Farel to appeal to Calvin. Farel had already taken a pastorate in nearby I suspect they reasoned that he had convinced Calvin once before. Perhaps he could do it again. Calvin said no.

Whenever I call to mind the state of wretchedness in which my life was spent when there, how can it be otherwise but that my very soul must shudder when any proposal is made for my return? I pass over entirely that disquietude by which we were perpetually tossed up and down, and driven from one side to another, from the time when I was appointed your colleague. I know indeed from experience, that where so ever I might turn, all sorts of annoyances were strewn in my way; that if I would live to Christ, this world must be to me a scene of trial and vexation: the present life is appointed as the field of conflict. But, at the same time, while I call to mind by what torture my conscience was racked at that time, and with how much anxiety it was continually boiling over, pardon me if I dread that place as having about it somewhat of a fatality in my ease. You yourself, along with God, are my best witness, that no lesser tie would have been sufficient to retain me there so long, had it not been that I dared not to throw off the yoke of my calling, which I was well assured had been laid upon me by the Lord. So long, therefore, as I was thus bound hand and foot, I preferred to suffer even to the uttermost extremity, than for one moment to entertain those thoughts that were apt to arise in my mind of changing my place of abode, — thoughts which often stole in upon me unawares. But now that by the favor of God I am

delivered, should I be unwilling to plunge myself once more into the gulf and whirlpool which I have already found to be so dangerous and destructive, who would not excuse me?¹⁴

Geneva stayed after Farel to stay after Calvin. He wrote him several times. Calvin kept saying no.

In the first, you point out that I ought not to desert the Church of Geneva; in the other, you also strongly enforce the desirableness of hastening my return, that Satan may not throw some hindrance in the way should we make a more lengthened sojourn. To the former I can make no other reply than what I have been always in the habit of returning, that there is no place under heaven of which I can have a greater dread, not because I have hated it, but because I see so many difficulties presented in that quarter which I do feel myself far from being equal to surmount. Whenever the recollection of former times recurs to my mind, I cannot but shudder throughout with heartfelt alarm at the thought, that I may be forced to expose myself a second time to these sort of contests.¹⁵

Finally Farel went to see Calvin face to face on behalf of Geneva and Calvin finally relented and agreed to go back. But he didn't rush. In fact, he took a full year to get all his affairs in order. He wasn't in any real hurry because he knew he would be a Geneva the rest of his life however long that was to be. Besides he was going back to Geneva with a new found sense of patience and resolve. He was also going back to Geneva with something he had not had when he left...a wife.

When Calvin made it back to Geneva in 1541 a full year after he had agreed to go back, he apologized for being a bit late. The first Sunday back he mounted the pulpit at St. Peter's and opened his Bible. The congregation braced itself for the chastisement it fully expected from the vindicated and victorious Calvin but that is not what happened. Instead Calvin asked them to open their Bible to the exact

place he had left three years earlier when they had run him out of town. It was Calvin's way of taking up right where he had left off...as if he had never been gone.

And the rest is history. Calvin stayed in Geneva till he died in 1564 and instituted his vision for a Christian city. He did not always get what he wanted and he offered his resignation several times only to have it refused and his heart stomped on publically. He was mistreated and abused and loved and admired. He was both hated and honored.

He buried his wife there.

He buried his son there.

When he died in 1564, he too was buried there insisting on being buried in an unmarked grave. So when you go to Geneva today you won't find any grave marker with Calvin's name on it. Partly that was because he didn't want his grave to become a monument and partly because, I think, not having a grave in any one location sort of gives a person the feeling that he is buried everywhere in Geneva.

Only a few months after Calvin's death, August 1564 to be precise, Theodore Beza composed a preface for the posthumous French edition of Calvin's commentary on the book of Joshua: it took the form of a brief biography of the reformer. Describing the death of Calvin, Beza recalled the sadness that invaded Geneva on the announcement of the death of the prophet of God: "The following night, and the day after as well, there was much weeping in the city. For the body of the city mourned the prophet of the Lord, the poor flock of the Church wept the departure of its faithful shepherd, the school lamented the loss of its

true doctor and master, and all in general wept for their true father and consoler, after God."¹⁶

Let's pray.

¹ John Calvin, Preface to his *Commentary on the Psalms*.

² Alister McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 96.

³ Herman J. Selderhuis, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 53.

⁴ Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva, and the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 16.

⁵ T.H.L Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 80.

⁶ Selderhuis, 53.

⁷ Timothy George, "John Calvin: Comeback Kid" in *Christianity Today* September 9, 2009. George writes: "Calvin's ministry was thus developed "on the boundary," to use Paul Tillich's phrase. Calvin himself was a refugee and always looked with longing toward his native France. (The first mention of Calvin in the registers of Geneva referred to him as *ille Gallus*, "that Frenchman"!) A sense of displacement and homelessness underlay his difficult dealings with the local authorities in the city."

⁸ McGrath, 96.

⁹ Selderhuis, 66.

¹⁰ John Calvin, Letter to Louis du Tilet, Letter 27, 20th October 1538.

¹¹ Selderhuis, 79.

¹² Selderhuis, 82.

¹³ John Calvin, Letter to Peter Viret, Letter 47, 19th May 1540.

¹⁴ John Calvin, Letter to William Farel, Letter 54, 27th October 1540.

¹⁵ John Calvin, Letter to William Farel, Letter 61, 1st March 1541.

¹⁶ Max Engammare, "A Prophet without a Prophecy" trans. by Francis M. Higman in *Church History* 67 no 4 D 1998, p 643-661