

The History of the Doctrine of Justification...



How
Christ
preserved
the good
news in
history

The Work of Christ Calvin: The Reluctant Reformer...

We have been looking for the last nine weeks at the two great tethers that keep the church attached to biblical Christianity. Those two tethers are:

- (1) Who was Christ?
- (2) What did Christ accomplish on behalf of his people?

What we have seen is that the church struggled early on with maintaining the truth about Christ's identity. But most of those struggles were settled with the formulation of the great, early creeds of Nicea and Chalcedon. Christ's identity as the God-man was not seriously questioned until the Enlightenment of the 18th century. Which was providential because there were plenty of other battles to fight concerning the work of Christ in redemption.

In the last two lessons, we learned how Luther came to a biblical understanding of the "righteousness of God". We saw how, in a way, that understanding was

built upon the labors of Augustine, Anselm and others. But we also saw where Luther did what no reformer had ever dreamed. Luther separated from the catholic church. He did so reluctantly. One could even say that Luther was cast out of the Catholic church, instead of saying that he separated from it. What Luther wanted was reform. What he got was a Reformation. The question as to how the Reformation was to continue was yet to be answered. If it was going to be sustained, it would be necessary for the next generation to keep it going. In Germany, Luther's mantle fell on Phillip Melancthon. But what was to be the state of the Reformation outside Germany.

John Calvin was eight years old when Martin Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the door in Wittenburg. Almost nothing is known of his early life. We do know that his father sent him to college at the age of twelve and that the school he attended was a despicable place. We didn't learn that from Calvin. We learned it, rather, from one of the school's most famous students, Erasmus. In one book Erasmus recorded his impressions of the school as lice infested, with the constant smell of open latrines. He said the school was in disrepair and that thugs, who were both vicious and brutal, inhabited it. He discusses the school in a dialogue between two students.

FIRST: From what coop or cave did you come?

SECOND: From the College de Montaigu.

FIRST: Then I suppose you are full of learning?

SECOND: No, just lice.

The school that Calvin attended was in one of the vilest parts of Paris. It was dangerous especially for the students because they were required to wear cassocks, so every criminal and pervert on the street knew who attended the

school. They were easy prey. Eventually, the school found the neighborhood to be so vile that they undertook an enormous project for those days. The school had buildings on both sides of the street, and those became so concerned for the safety of the students crossing the street from one side to the other that they built an elevated sky walk which crossed all the way across the street from one building to the next. It was a vicious place, filled with pedophiles and prostitutes. It was called "Rue des Chiens" because of the deposits that the dogs made and because of the fact that the street was an open sewer.

In either 1527 or 1528 AD, Calvin's father made Calvin leave Paris and his study of theology to move to Orleans and begin a study of law. Calvin followed his father's instructions dutifully. IN one place Calvin says that his father wanted him to study law because there was more money in it. Other historians say that Calvin's father was excommunicated from the church, denied access to communion. Remember that. As a result, Calvin's father in anger toward the church demanded that his son leave the study of theology for something less political. Calvin was 19 years old.

From the period of 1528 to 1532 AD, Calvin studied law. He studied Latin, Greek and Hebrew. It was a basic part of the humanist education in those days. At the same time, Henry VIII was divorcing his wife for his new love Anne Boleyn and Luther's doctrine was invading France. The church was outraged at the progress Lutheranism was making in France. At some point before 1533 AD, Calvin was converted. Eventually, a man named Nicholas Cop was elected as the pastor at the University of Paris. At the start of the New Year, Cop delivered a sermon in which he called for reform of some of the church's more startling abuses. The

church in France had absolutely no intention of allowing what happened in Germany under Luther to happen in France. They ordered Cop to be arrested. They also ordered Calvin to be arrested. For the next year Calvin laid low. He stayed with friends first here and then there. He hardly recounted any specific details of his life during that time except that one person he stayed with had a library with over 2000 volumes in it. But that was Calvin. In October of 1534 AD, Calvin decided that things were sufficiently hot in France and left for Basle in Switzerland.

In Basle, he was able to keep up with the events of the Reformation. One reformer was poisoned in Geneva. One of his friends was burned at the stake in Paris. Everywhere the Reformation was being related to the radical anarchy of the Peasant's War in Germany and to the anabaptists. Calvin was furious at the charge. He wrote a short theological work to explain to the king of France what the Reformation stood for. Listen to part of his introduction.

To his most Christian Majesty, the most mighty and illustrious Monarch, Francis, King of the French, his Sovereign;

John Calvin prays Peace and Salvation in Christ.

Sire, When I first engaged in this work, nothing was farther from my thoughts than to write what should afterwards be presented to your Majesty.

But when I perceived that the fury of certain bad men had risen to such a height in your realm, that there was no place in it for sound doctrine, I thought it might be of service if I were in the same work both to give instruction to my countrymen, and also lay before your Majesty a Confession, from which you may learn what the doctrine is that so

inflames the rage of those madmen who are this day, with fire and sword, troubling your kingdom.

Let not a contemptuous idea of our insignificance dissuade you from the investigation of this cause. We, indeed, are perfectly conscious how poor and abject we are: in the presence of God we are miserable sinners, and in the sight of men most despised - we are (if you will) the mere dregs and offscourings of the world, or worse, if worse can be named: so that before God there remains nothing of which we can glory save only his mercy, by which, without any merit of our own, we are admitted to the hope of eternal salvation.

It was 1535 AD, Calvin was 26 years old and the book was called the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin left Basle and visited Italy, then took a short trip back to France to settle some family affairs. The book was an instant smash hit. It was read and admired immediately. But no one knew anything about the author. In 1536 AD, Calvin decided to return to Switzerland. Calvin's book was famous and Calvin was virtually unknown. This time he intended to go to Strasbourg and study and work with the legendary Martin Bucer. He never made it to Strasbourg. There was a war going on directly in the path to Strasbourg so Calvin decided to do a one night layover in a city named Geneva, but one of the pastors there, a man by the name of Guillaume Farel, what is it with men named Farel, found out Calvin was there, realized this was the very man who had written the Institutes, and begged him to stay on in Geneva and help with the ministry. Calvin refused. He argued that he had planned to commit himself to study at Strasbourg. Farel was furious. But it's better if I let Calvin tell it.

Nobody there knew that I was its author. Here, as everywhere, I made no mention of the fact, and intended to continue doing the same until finally Guillaume Farel kept me at

Geneva, not so much by advice and argument, as by a dreadful curse, as if God had laid his hand upon me from heaven to stop me. I had intended to go on to Strasbourg; the most direct road, however, was closed by the wars. I decided to pass through Geneva briefly, without spending more than one night in the town. A little while previously, popery had been driven out by the good man I have mentioned, and by Pierre Viret (He's the reformer that was poisoned). Things, however, were still far from settled, and there were divisions and serious and dangerous factions among the inhabitants of the town. Then someone discovered me and made it known to others. Upon this Farel (who burned with a marvelous zeal to advance the gospel) went out of his way to keep me. After having heard that I had several private studies for which I wished to keep myself free, and finding that he got nowhere with his requests, he gave vent to an imprecation, that it might please God to curse my leisure and the peace for study that I was looking for, if I went away and refused to give them support and help in a situation of such great need. These words so shocked and moved me, that I gave up the journey I had intended to make.

So, Calvin's introduction to ministry in Geneva had a unique beginning. He started working with Farel there in organizing the church and promoting the theology of the Reformation. But it wasn't long until Farel and Calvin ran into trouble. Calvin had drawn up a confession to which he and Farel wanted all the inhabitants of the town to subscribe and the council objected. But one particular issue got them into trouble. Farel and Calvin wanted, as ministers of the church in Geneva, to have the right to deny access to communion to anyone who was living an openly scandalous life. The town council denied them the right to make such decisions and demanded that they submit to the authority of the council. Calvin and Farel began to preach against and openly criticize the council. Finally,

the council had all it could take and expelled them from the city. In effect, they fired both Farel and Calvin.

Farel went his way, and Calvin finally made the trip to Strasbourg that he had always intended to make. While in Strasbourg, he became the pastor of the French refugees that had gathered there. Though he struggled with poverty while there, he even had to sell off part of his beloved library to exist, it was an important time for Calvin to gain experience. During his time at Geneva, he had tried many new ideas without success; the city council had always been there to overrule his innovations. Now at Strasbourg, he was able to implement and revise some of his earlier ideas. Calvin changed from being the young, inexperienced novice, to being a confident, and seasoned pastor. Then something happened in Geneva that literally changed the course of history.

In those days, the cities in Switzerland were independent, truly independent. Some cities made pacts with other cities in which they agreed to come to the mutual protection of each other should they be attacked. It is hard for us to imagine, but each city operated like an independent country. Each city council decided the religious direction of their city. Just a decade before the city council of Geneva had decided under the influence of Farel to accept the theology of the Reformation. The entire population had voted they were going to be Reformed rather than Catholic. Now with the firing of Farel and Calvin, the Catholic Church began to court the city to come back over to the Roman church. Cardinal Sadoletto, one of the most pastoral and gentle of the Catholics, wrote the city an open letter in which he offered an evaluation of the Reformation. He criticized, without fear of response, the central tenants of everything the reformers stood

for. He pleaded with the city to come back into the Catholic fold. In his open letter, Sadoletto does one of the most interesting things. He pictures two men standing before God in the Day of Judgment. The first man he shows as a faithful Catholic. Look how he pleads with God for forgiveness based upon his faithfulness to the church. Secondly, he shows a Reformed man before God at the judgment. Watch how Sadoletto presents what the Reformed will argue. But first, let's listen to Sadoletto's Catholic man standing before God in the judgment.

Being instructed by my parents, who learned from their fathers and forefathers, that I should, in all things, obey the Catholic Church, and observe its laws, admonitions, and decrees, as if You, O Lord, had made them, and seeing that almost all who bore the Christian name and title in our days, and even before, were of the same opinion, all of them venerating this very Church, as the mother of their faith, and regarding it sacrilege to depart from her precepts, I studied to approve myself to You by the same faith which the Catholic Church teaches. And though new men had come with the Scripture much in their mouths and hands, and attempted to add novelties, to pull down the ancient, to argue against the Church, to snatch away from us the obedience which we all gave, I still adhered to that which had been delivered to me by my parents, and observed from antiquity, with the consent of most holy and most learned Fathers; and although the actual manners of many priests were such as might incite my anger, I did not abandon my sentiments. For I concluded, that it was my duty to obey their precepts, as You God, had commanded in the Gospel, while you alone should be the only Judge of their life and actions. Since I was myself stained by many sins, I could not be a fit judge of others. For these sins, I now stand before You imploring not strict justice, O Lord, but rather Your mercy and readiness to forgive.

Next listen to how Sadoleto has the Reformed man plead his case before God.

Almighty God, where I saw the manners of priests almost everywhere corrupt, and saw the priests, nevertheless honored and wealthy, it inflamed my mind, and made me their opponent; and when I saw myself, after having devoted so many years to literature and theology, without that place in the Church which my labors had merited, while I saw many unworthy persons exalted to honors and offices, I undertook to the attack those I thought displeasing and unacceptable to You. And because I could not destroy their power without first trampling on the laws enacted by the Church, I induced the people to condemn those rights of the Church she had long enjoyed. If these rights had been decreed in General Councils, I said do not yield to the authority of Councils; if they had been instituted by ancient Fathers and Doctors, I said the Fathers were wrong; if by Roman Popes, I said they wrongly assumed their authority. In short, I argued all of us should shake off the tyrannical yoke of the Church, which forbids meats, which observes days, which makes us confess our sins to priests, which orders vows to be performed, and which binds with so many chains of bondage men made free, O Christ, in You; and that we should trust to faith alone, and not also to good works, to procure us righteousness and salvation. Seeing, especially, that You paid the penalty for us, and by Your sacred blood wiped away all faults and crimes, in order that we might thereafter be able to do, with greater freedom, whatsoever we wanted. For I searched the Scriptures more cleverly than those ancients did. Having thus by repute for learning and genius acquired fame and estimation among the people, though, indeed, I was not able to overturn the authority of the Church, I was, however, the author of great treason and schism in it.

There was a clamor in the city to reconsider what the council had done a decade before. The council wanted to respond to Sadoletto's arguments but they did not have anyone left in the city with the eloquence to write such a response.

The council did not want to fall out of the Reformation, and yet they saw an increasing influence gathering in the city to go back to the Catholic church. Finally, in desperation, they wrote to Calvin asking him to respond on behalf of the city of Geneva. Calvin was willing to do so, even anxious to do so. His response is a model of restraint and clarity of thought. Near the end of his letter, he used Sadoletto's image of a man standing before God. Listen to a short sample:

I, O Lord, as I had been educated from a boy, always professed the Christian faith. But at first I had no other reason for my faith than that which then everywhere prevailed. Your Word, which ought to have shone on all Your people like a lamp, had been taken away, or at least suppressed to us. And lest anyone should long for greater light, an idea was put into our minds, that such things were better left to a few, whom we might consult. Then, the basics in which I had been instructed were of a kind which could neither properly train me to legitimate worship, or to a sure hope of salvation, or for the duties of the Christian life. I had learned to worship You only as my God, but as the true method of worship was unknown to me, I stumbled right from the start. I believed, as I had been taught, that I was redeemed by the death of Thy Son from liability to eternal death, but the redemption I thought of was one whose virtue could never reach me. I anticipated a future resurrection, but hated to think of it, as being a dreadful event. This was not my private feeling, but was derived from the doctrine which was delivered to the people by their Christian teachers. They preached of Your clemency, but confined it to those who deserved it. They placed this desert in the righteousness of works, so that the one who

received Your favor was the one who reconciled himself to You by works. Meanwhile, the did not disguise the fact, that we are miserable sinners. Obtaining forgiveness they pointed out, was by making satisfaction for offenses. This satisfaction was enjoined, after confessing all our sins to a priest, first, to ask pardon and absolution; and, secondly, by doing good to erase from Your memory our bad actions. Lastly, in order to supply what was still wanting, we were to add sacrifices and solemn expiations. Beyond this they bade us flee to the saints for intercession from your anger.

Though I had some intervals of quiet, I was still far-off from true peace of conscience; for, whenever I raised my thoughts to You, extreme terror seized me which no satisfactions could cure. Still, as nothing better was offered, I continued the course which I had begun, when, lo, a very different form of doctrine started up, not one which led us away from the Christian profession, but one which brought it back to its fountainhead, and, as it were, clearing away the dross, restored it to its original purity.

Calvin's work is so clear and precise Sadoleto chose not to respond. The people of Geneva chose to stay with the Reformation and they asked Calvin to come back to Geneva. He anguished at the prospect. I particularly like the way Ronald Wallace puts it:

Seldom can an invitation to a pastorate have been received with so much reluctance. He was convinced that Geneva was largely to blame for what had happened previously and his memories of it brought fear: "Not a day passed in which I did not ten times over wish for death." He had regarded it as a singular act of the kindness of God when he was forcibly thrown out, for only the sanctity of his call had kept him at his post so long. Set free through such a merciful deliverance by God, who could blame him for not wanting to

replunge himself "into the gulf and whirlpool" which he had already found to be so dangerous and destructive. His letters show feelings of abhorrence and despondency. But he recognised that the will of God often goes contrary to our own inclinations and self-interest. He consulted others, and when he found he had to go back expressed himself vividly:

As to my intended course of proceeding, this is my present feeling; had I the choice at my own disposal, nothing would be less agreeable to me than to follow your advice. But when I remember that I am not my own, I offer up my heart, a slain victim for a sacrifice to the Lord ... I submit my will and my affections subdued and held fast to the obedience of God.

So Calvin went back, and western civilization was never the same. The gospel was defended and defended and defended all over again. And much of the doctrinal understanding we now possess was forged out on Calvin's anvil in Geneva. His understanding of justification was expounded clearly and accepted by men like John Knox, who brought the Reformation to the English speaking world through Scotland.

Calvin promoted public education, established hospitals and works of mercy for the poor that were virtually unknown in his day. He was not, as many secular historians argue, the dictator of Geneva. Calvin had his own views, sometimes he was able to persuade the city council and sometimes he was not. He got reforms in worship. Calvin, for example, did not believe in instrumental accompaniment to singing. Luther believed that it was all right to have an orchestra. Zwingli wanted no music of any kind, not even singing. Calvin always wanted communion to be given every time there was preaching, every Sunday at a very

minimum. The council thought such an idea was too radical, too much of a departure from Catholicism. They approved of communion quarterly, beyond that they would not go.

But for all of that, Calvin is known and should be known for his clear exposition of the gospel. He was a reluctant reformer. He was a private man. When he died, he was buried in a common grave at his own request, no marker, no pomp, no fanfair. For Calvin, it was unimportant that he not become an object of admiration. It is because of that very kind of self-deprecation that we cannot help but admire him. Listen to Calvin:

First, we maintain, that of what description soever any man's works may be, he is regarded as righteous before God simply on the footing of gratuitous mercy; because God, without any respect to works, freely adopts him in Christ, by imputing the righteousness of Christ to him, as if it were his own. This we call the righteousness of faith: that is, when a man, made void and empty of all confidence in works, feels convinced that the only ground of his acceptance with God is a righteousness which is wanting to himself, and is borrowed from Christ. (NRC)

Other Quotes by Calvin

The ground of our justification, therefore, is that God reconciles us to himself, from regard not to our works, but to Christ alone, and, by gratuitous adoption, makes us, instead of children of wrath, to be his own children. So long as God looks to our works, he perceives no reason why he ought to love us. Wherefore, it is necessary to bury our sins,

and impute to us the obedience of Christ (because this is the only obedience which can stand his scrutiny), and adopt us as righteous through his merits. (NRC)

We maintain, then, that at the commencement - when God raised up Luther and others, who held forth a torch to light us into the way of salvation, and who, by their ministry, founded and reared our churches - those heads of doctrine in which the truth of our religion, those in which the pure and legitimate worship of God, and those in which the salvation of men are comprehended, were in a great measure obsolete. (NRC)

Then, as to the doctrine of free will, as preached before Luther and other reformers appeared, what effect could it have but to fill men with an overweening opinion of their own virtue, swelling them out with vanity, and leaving no room for the grace and assistance of the Holy Spirit? (NRC)

It is certain that, before Luther became known to the world, all men were fascinated by these impious dogmas; and even in the present day, there is no part of our doctrine which our opponents impugn with greater earnestness and obstinacy. (NRC)

When Luther at first appeared, he merely touched, with a gentle hand, a few abuses of the grossest description, now grown intolerable. And he did it with a modesty which intimated that he had more desire to see them corrected, than determination to correct them himself. The opposite party forthwith sounded to arms; and when the contention was more and more inflamed, our enemies deemed it the best and shortest method to suppress the truth by cruelty and violence. (NRC)

Any man who considers how Luther and the other reformers acted at the outset, and how they afterwards proceeded, will deem it unnecessary to call upon us for any defense. When matters were still entire, Luther himself humbly besought the pontiff that he would be pleased to cure the very grievous disorders of the church. Did his supplication succeed? The evils having still increased, the necessity of the case, even had Luther been silent, should have been stimulus enough to urge the pope to delay no longer. (NRC)

Calvin says of Luther, when he was loading him with abuse, 'Let him call me a dog or a devil, I will acknowledge him as a servant of Christ'.