

The Gates Of Hell Shall Not Prevail...

Lessons from The Story Of The Church

John Calvin

“...in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often... besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches.

2 Corinthians 11:27 – 28

Between 1521 and 1531 the Reformation took a strong hold in both Germany and Switzerland but in the ten years that followed the reform movement lost momentum becoming more and more confused and fragmented. The split between Lutheran, Radical and Reformed was not the end of it, for within each of those groups there were further divisions. The break-up of Catholic Europe into warring religious factions seemed to many devout people like a judgement from God. On top of that, the way the Protestant Churches of Germany and Switzerland meekly accepted state control left many disillusioned and with little enthusiasm for further reform. Maybe the papacy was the only way to guarantee the unity and freedom of the church after all.

However in the 1540's Protestantism made a marked recovery and it came about through the growth and consolidation of its Reformed wing. With the exception of the Scandinavian countries and most of northern Germany Reformed teaching and practice supplanted Lutheranism to become the dominant Protestant influence throughout Europe. From its beginnings in four city states in Switzerland Reformed Christianity spread with startling speed across France, southern Germany, the Netherlands, England, Scotland and many parts of Eastern Europe. What is more, it produced writings of such high spiritual and theological calibre that many of them are still widely studied today.

This development was largely down to the work of five key figures: Ulrich Zwingli, Heinrich Bullinger, Martin Bucer, Peter Martyr and John Calvin.

Martin Bucer

From 1523 onward, under Martin Bucer's guidance the reformation in Strasbourg took a middle path between the positions of Luther and Zwingli. His views on the nature of the church, its government and its relationship to the state had a big influence on the practices later adopted by John Calvin in Geneva.

In 1549 Bucer was forced to leave Strasbourg and was invited to settle in England where he taught theology at Cambridge and so had a significant influence on the theology of the Church of England.

Peter Martyr

Peter Martyr taught Old Testament studies in Strasbourg from 1543 until 1547 when he too went to England, at the invitation of Archbishop Cranmer, to help reform the English church. He wrote a number of influential commentaries and has been credited by Calvin as the man who brought the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper to perfection.¹

John Calvin

John Calvin was born at Noyon in France on 10th July 1509. His father intended him for the priesthood and at the age of fourteen he was sent to study the classics at the University of Paris. After graduating at nineteen he was ordered by his father to change course and was sent to Orleans to study law.

1 Martyr argued that although the bread and wine are nothing but symbols in themselves, they are also instruments used by the Holy Spirit to feed us spiritually with the body and blood of Christ.

During his university years Calvin was deeply influenced by the writings of the German Reformers. It was also in these years that, in his own words:

“By a sudden conversion God tamed to teachableness a mind too stubborn for its years; for I was so strongly devoted to the superstitions of the papacy that nothing less could draw me from such depths of mire.”

John Calvin (Preface to his Commentary on the Psalms)

Having returned to Paris, Calvin openly sided with the persecuted Protestants there. Being forced to flee from King Francis I he found refuge in Basel in 1535. Basel, at that time a Protestant stronghold, was a refuge for many others including Erasmus, Henry Bullinger, and William Farel.

In Basel he assisted in the translation of the Bible into French and produced the first edition of his “Institutes of The Christian Religion,” a summary of Christian doctrine.

A Providential Detour

After little more than a year, Calvin left Basel for Strasbourg where he intended to live a quiet life as a Christian scholar. Being forced to make a long detour he found himself in the city of Geneva where he intended to spend the night before continuing his journey.

Geneva was an independent city state, not at that stage part of the Swiss confederation. In 1532 William Farel, a French reformer, had spent some time there attempting to bring about reform. He was expelled but he returned and by 1535 freedom of worship had been granted to Protestants, the mass was suppressed and all monks and nuns had been driven out of the city. This dramatic turnaround was as much from political as from religious motives, for Geneva was struggling to maintain its independence.

Farel bullied Calvin into remaining in Geneva to help establish the Reformation there, threatening him with the curse of God upon his peaceful life if he should refuse.

“By this imprecation I was so stricken with terror, that I desisted from my journey. I felt as if God had laid His mighty hand on me to arrest me.”

John Calvin

Together Calvin and Farel set about making Geneva into a model Christian community. They attempted to introduce strong church discipline in the city but met resistance from the city council who wanted to retain authority over the church. As a result both Farel and Calvin were banished from Geneva in April 1538.

Calvin spent the next three years in Strasbourg where he pastored a congregation of French refugees, taught theology and wrote the first in his series of Biblical commentaries. He worked closely with Bucer in these years and learned much from him.

Geneva Calls Again

Toward the end of 1540 changes in the city council opened the way for the citizens of Geneva to ask Calvin to return. Fearing the task ahead of him, he hesitated at first but finally yielded and returned to the city in September 1541. The Sunday after his return he ascended the steps to his pulpit, opened the Bible at the same page at which he had left off three and a half years before and took up the next passage as his text.

Calvin’s vision was not only to build up a true Christian Church in Geneva but also to make it into a true Christian city. He struggled for many years against all kinds of opposition and never achieved all he wanted to but what he did do was quite remarkable.

He persuaded the city council to enforce severe laws to regulate the moral life of the people and to introduce measures to improve the social, economic and cultural life of the community. The authorities established free education. They introduced strict health and hygiene laws. They provided free latrines for every home, built a hospital and a place of residence for the homeless, set up an employment agency and organised a system of social care for the poor and aged.

Alongside the spiritual influence of the church these and other measures transformed the city and eventually Geneva did become a near-perfect pattern of a Reformed community.

Protestant refugees flocked there from all over Europe, helped with the work and returned to their homelands with the Reformed faith. Among them was John Knox, the Reformer of Scotland.

The Power Of The Word

Calvin never held any office in Geneva other than that of pastor of the Church of Saint Peter. He exercised his influence only through the power of the spoken word. He preached not only on Sunday but also on three weekdays, he gave theology lectures twice a week and he expounded the Bible on Friday at a conference he called the assembly.² Calvin reformed the city by preaching.

Reformed Practice

Like Zwingli, Calvin believed that nothing should be done in worship that God had not expressly commanded. Unlike Zwingli he was committed to congregational singing, rather than reciting, of the Psalms which were sung in Geneva without any instrumental accompaniment.

He established a form of church government whereby the pastors and elders of the churches in a recognised district met together to exercise spiritual oversight over the affairs of all the churches. This form of church government came to be known as Presbyterianism.

An Enduring Legacy

Calvin provided the Reformed churches with a clear, solid theology in the “Institutes.” After the first edition produced in 1535 there were a number of revisions in which the work was expanded. The fourth and final edition was published in 1559. The Institutes were never intended to introduce new ideas. Shaped by Calvin’s extensive knowledge of the early church fathers in general and by the teaching of Augustine in particular they attempted to demonstrate the beliefs of the New Testament Church and to present those beliefs in a clear and ordered fashion.

The Institutes were backed up by Calvin’s commentaries, which cover most of the Bible, and by his lectures, many of which have also been published. His written works are still widely used and the theology he articulated so clearly has stood the test of time.

Calvin also gave the Reformed churches a pattern of church government and worship that was strong and enduring.

In the city of Geneva he held up an ideal which inspired and gave new momentum to the Reformation. His correspondence with Reformed leaders throughout Europe made the Reformed faith into an international movement. He made Geneva the centre of a great Protestant missionary movement where pastors, teachers, theologians and missionaries had their training. The Genevan Academy which he founded in 1559 began with 162 students. Within six years more than 1600 men were studying there.

By nature Calvin was shy and retiring. Physically, he was a weak and sickly man, his health made worse by frequent fasting, study and nights without sleep and yet, with the help of God, he has left an enduring legacy greater than that of any of the Reformers. He died in 1564 at the age of 54 and after a simple funeral was buried in an unmarked grave. Before he died his friends advised him to curtail his activities. He replied, “Do you want my Lord to find me idle?”

Questions For Discussion

- What evidence of the influence of John Calvin can you see in the Church today?
- What can we learn from the example of John Calvin?

For Further Study

A more detailed account of the life of John Calvin is available in the Christian Focus publication “John Calvin” by Williston Walker. For an easy introduction to Calvin’s theology see “Truth for All Time — a brief outline of the Christian faith” published by Banner of Truth.

² In the assembly a pastor read and briefly expounded a passage of Scripture, another made comments on what had been said and then anyone was free to speak or ask questions.