

John Calvin — From Second Reform in Geneva to Death (1541—1564)

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Reformation Men and Theology, lesson 8 of 11

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. From 1536 to 1538 Calvin had great authority in Geneva. This was his first attempt at reform, but he pushed the reform too quickly, for the city was not ready for any kind of stern discipline. The city council removed Calvin and Farel from Geneva and Calvin went to Strassburg for three years. This was undoubtedly a great time of discouragement for Calvin.
- B. In Calvin's absence, matters deteriorated sadly in Geneva. Some of its citizens came to realize that he had been right in seeking a church in which Christian law would rule. They saw, as he did, that infidelity was the root cause of their troubles. After various political conflicts, and when their freedom seemed in danger, the people of Geneva implored Calvin to return. On September 13, 1531, amid great rejoicing and enthusiastic ovation, Calvin entered Geneva a second time. In this ordeal, God worked a tragedy into a blessing, creating a situation in which the people of Geneva welcomed Calvin and his reform.

II. CALVIN'S SECOND REFORM (1541-1564)

- A. It is easy to see the wonderful providence of God in bringing John Calvin back to Geneva. This free and independent city with its democratic institutions was at that time, of all the places in the world, the most admirably fitted to be the scene of the great reformatory labors of Calvin.
- B. Upon his return to Geneva, Calvin drew up a Church Order, a set of rules for governing of the church. It was based upon the teaching of Scripture that Christ has ordained four offices in the church: pastors, teachers or professors, elders, and deacons. The cornerstone of Calvin's form of church government was the office of elder. Pastors were to preach and to exhort the people. Elders were men of unusual stamina and spiritual insight who supervised the people, and visited and assisted the pastors. Deacons were general servers. Through

this type of government, based on the Bible, Calvin was able to instruct and discipline the people spiritually.

Calvin labored to set forth a theocracy that would be an example of Christian life and government, and also be a citadel of evangelical truth that would conquer the power of Rome in all other lands.

- C. Calvin put great emphasis upon Christian education. He knew that the Reformation would only be effective as people knew and obeyed God's Word. He devised a catechetical system for the young which was carried all over Europe. Primary and elementary schools were set up to educate the people, so they could be better Christians. Calvin established the Academy at Geneva, the first Protestant University, where thousands of young men were trained for the ministry of the Word. From these efforts, the gospel and Presbyterianism spread all over Europe. John Knox, like thousands of others who came to sit as admiring students at Calvin's feet, found there what he termed "the most perfect school of Christ that ever was on the earth since the days of the apostles."
- D. For the next twenty-four years, Calvin labored in Geneva to bring about an effective reform in that city of Switzerland and in all of Europe. Apart from *The Institutes*, Calvin also wrote many other works, including commentaries on most of the Old and New Testament books. Calvin was the greatest exegete and the prince of commentators of the Reformation. He had a thorough knowledge of Greek, Hebrew and Latin, and through the printed page he supplied the Protestants with ammunition to fight the Roman Church. One feels amazed at the extent of his work. Arminius, the originator of a theology opposed to that of Calvin's system, gave an unbiased opinion of Calvin's works, saying:

"Next to the study of the Scriptures, I exhort my pupils to pursue Calvin's commentaries, which I extol in loftier terms than Helmick himself; for I affirm that he excels beyond comparison in the interpretation of Scripture, and that his commentaries ought to be more highly valued than all that is handed down to us by the library of the fathers; so that I acknowledge him to have possessed above most others, as rather above all other men, what may be called an eminent gift of prophecy."

- E. Calvin was also responsible for putting much of the Bible into the French language so the people could read God's Word. Calvin's works had a further effect in giving form and permanence to the then unstable French language in much the same way that Luther's translation of the Bible molded the German language.
- F. It was Calvin's theology and form of church government that triumphed in the Protestant Church of France, the Reformed Church of Germany, the Church of Scotland, the Reformed Church in Hungary, the Reformed Church in Holland and in Puritanism in Old and New England.
- G. Calvin died in the year 1564 at the early age of 55. Beza, his close friend and successor, described his death as having come quietly in his sleep, and then added:

“Thus withdrew into heaven, at the same time with the setting sun, that noble brilliant luminary, which was the lamp of the Church. On the following day and night there was intense grief and lamentation in the whole city; for the Republic had lost its wisest citizen, the Church its faithful shepherd, and the Academy and incomparable teacher.”

III. CALVIN AND THE BURNING OF SERVETUS

- A. The one event in Calvin's life that has cast a shadow over his fair name, and which has exposed him to the charge of intolerance and persecution is the burning of the heretic Servetus. Calvin's enemies have played this event to the hilt. Facts have often been withheld or misconstrued so as to put Calvin in a bad light. That the burning of Servetus was a mistake is admitted by all. History knows only one spotless being — Jesus Christ, the savior of sinners. All others have marks of infirmity in their lives.
- B. Servetus was a Spaniard who opposed Christianity, both in its Roman Catholic and Protestant forms. He denied the Trinity and was the most audacious and even blasphemous heretic of the sixteenth century. He opposed the teaching of justification by faith and infant baptism. Servetus was a very strange person, and to understand him we have to look into his background. He had a split personality, and perhaps some of this can be traced to the fact he was castrated at the age of five. He was religious and superstitious, but not Christian. He followed astrology like a religion and consulted the stars rather than the Bible for guidance. He was a proud, vain and arrogant man.

- C. Servetus had fled to Geneva from Vienna, France. Before he came to Geneva, he corresponded with Calvin, and Calvin did all he could to help this man see the truth of Christianity, but with no success. Servetus regarded Calvin as the pope of orthodox Protestantism whom he was determined to convert or overthrow. When Servetus first came to Geneva, he tried to align himself with the liberal city council that was somewhat opposed to Calvin. Calvin apparently sensed this danger and was in no mood to permit Servetus to propagate his errors in Geneva. Hence he considered it his duty to make so dangerous a man harmless, and determined to bring him either to recantation or to deserved punishment. Servetus' actions were in one sense sedition — because in a theocracy there is a mixture of state and church, his attempt to overthrow the church was an attempt to overthrow the government of Geneva. Servetus was promptly arrested and brought to trial.

Calvin and other pastors in Geneva spent days with Servetus, trying to help him to see the error of his way, but Servetus was as hard as stone. He was convinced that the liberal council would throw Calvin out and let him out of jail.

- D. The trial of Servetus was left to the civil court, which charged him with fundamental heresy, falsehood and blasphemy. The city council at this point was not favorable to Calvin. The libertines hoped to use the Servetus situation as a means of getting Calvin expelled from Geneva. The court's decision was:

“Inasmuch as you, Michael Servetus of Villanueva in the Spanish kingdom of Aragon, have been accused of terrible blasphemies against the holy Trinity, against the Son of God and other principles of the Christian faith, whereas you have called the Trinity a devil and a monster with three heads, whereas you went about to destroy poor souls by your horrifying mockery of the honor and majesty of God, too wicked to be mentioned, whereas refusing to be taught in any way, you called Christian atheists and magicians, whereas, whereas, whereas . . .

“We, the mayor and judges of this city, having been called to the duty of preserving the church of God from schism and seduction, and to free Christians of such pestilence, decree that you, Michael Servetus, be led to the place of Champel and be bound to a stake and with your book be burned to ashes, a warning to all who blaspheme God.”

The verdict was “guilty,” and the sentence punishment by fire. Calvin, agreeing that Servetus should be put to death, opposed the state’s method of execution and pleaded for the sword to be substituted for the fire. The council refused Calvin’s request. The final responsibility for the burning rested with the city council, not Calvin.

Had Servetus been executed in any other way than by fire, his death would have passed almost unnoticed.

- E. Calvin considered Servetus the greatest enemy of the Reformation and honestly believed it to be the right and duty of the state to punish those who offended the church. This act was based on the Old Testament principle of death for heretics (Lev. 24:16). Calvin also felt himself providentially called to purify the church of all corruptions, and to his dying day he neither changed his views nor regretted his conduct toward Servetus.
- F. We should not be too hard on Calvin in the matter of Servetus, for the spirit of the day among all, except the Anabaptists, whether Catholic or Protestant, was to put heretics to death. The treatment of heretics was an error of the age, and we dare not judge Calvin by our twentieth century standards. We must remember that Servetus was given a fair court trial, which lasted over two months, and that he was sentenced by the full session of the civil council in accordance with the laws which were then recognized throughout Christendom.

It should be noted that only Servetus was put to death in Geneva and no one else. No Catholic or Anabaptist was ever executed in Geneva for the sake of his religious conviction.

- G. Calvin’s course in regard to Servetus was fully approved by all the leading Reformers of the time. Melancthon, Bucer, Bullinger, Farel and Besa all felt that Calvin and Geneva dealt fairly with Servetus. The city council sought the advice of the other cities in Switzerland as to the fate of Servetus and received the following answers:

From Zwingli’s city: “No severity is too great to punish such an offense. Our preachers are in total agreement with what Calvin thinks of his doctrine.

From Schaffhausen: “Stop the evil, otherwise his blasphemies, like a crawfish, will eat away the members of Christ!”

From Basel: “Do what lies in your power to convince him of his error. If he persists in his folly, then use the power which is entrusted to you by God to prevent him by force from any further injury to the Church of Christ.”

Even Melancthon stated to Calvin in a letter, “I have read your book in which you clearly refuted the horrid blasphemies of Servetus . . . To you the Church owes gratitude at the present moment, and will owe it to the latest posterity. I perfectly assent to your opinion. I affirm also that your magistrates did right in punishing, after regular trial, this blasphemous man.”

Public opinion has undergone a great change in regard to this event, and the execution of Servetus which was fully approved by the best men in the sixteenth century is entirely out of harmony with twentieth century ideas.

- H. When Servetus was informed of the decision of the council, he was stunned at first, and then began to rant and rave like a mad man. Again, Calvin went to Servetus, hoping to lead him to Christ, and said to him:

“Believe me, never did I have the intention to prosecute you because of some offense against me. Do you remember,” he spoke now with a tender voice and not in a tone of reproach, “how, in danger of death, I wanted to meet you in Paris sixteen years ago in order to win you to our Lord? And afterwards when you were a fugitive was I not concerned to show you the right way in letters until you began to hate me because you were offended by my firmness? But let’s not talk about me, nor of the past! Are you thinking of asking forgiveness of the everlasting God whom you have blasphemed on so many occasions? Are you thinking of being reconciled to the Son of God?”

Servetus became quite serious and humble as he faced the certainty of death. He asked Calvin to forgive him, and perhaps he asked Christ for forgiveness also. It is recorded that he spent the last twenty-four hours of his life repeating over and over again, “Jesus, Son of the eternal God, have mercy upon me!”

- I. In Geneva at this very hour, on the place where Servetus was burned, is an inscription placed there by later followers of Calvin which says:

“As reverent and grateful
sons of Calvin,
our great Reformer,
repudiating his mistake, which was the mistake
of his age,
and according to the true principles of the
Reformation and the Gospel
holding fast to the freedom of conscience,
we erect
this monument of reconciliation
on XXVII October MCMIII”