

Another Side of John Calvin

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Reformation Men and Theology, lesson 9 of 11

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Calvin is often pictured by his opponents as hard, cold, stern and calculating. He was actually a man of meekness and peace who avoided all dissension so long as it pertained to private affairs. He was a very meek and shy person, and always felt that he was not equal to the task set before him.
- B. However, when God and his kingdom were attacked, Calvin rose to exert the authority of his calling to the ministry that God had given him. Then he felt himself the instrument of the Most High and became relentless. All gentleness disappeared.

II. CALVIN'S TEMPERAMENT

- A. Calvin, at times, could be quite irritable, but much of this can be attributed to his ill health. He was plagued with constant headaches which hardly ever left him. The pain was so intense that many nights he could not sleep. He also had some kind of disease of the trachea which, when he spoke too much, caused him to spit blood. Several attacks of pleurisy prepared the way for consumption, of which he finally died. He had acute hemorrhoids, the pain of which was unbearably increased by an internal abscess that would not heal. Several times intermittent fever laid him low, sapping his strength and constantly reducing it. He had gallstones and kidney stones in addition to stomach cramps and wicked intestinal influenzas. To top it all off, he had acute arthritis. In one of his letters to a friend he said, "If only my condition were not a constant death struggle."
- B. This man was able to accomplish great things even though he was sickly much of his life.

III. CALVIN'S LABOR

- A. Calvin was an incessant worker who was always doing something for his master Jesus Christ. He wrote *The Institutes* and commentaries on almost every book of the Bible. He wrote other works and carried out prolific correspondence with most of the prominent Reformers in Europe and England. Calvin was the chief administrator for the church at Geneva, and he carried out his pastoral responsibilities with great care and concern. He rarely refused anyone counsel if it was a serious need. Calvin also preached or taught twice a day, and three times on Sunday.
- B. Even on his death bed, he continued to work on unfinished material and, whether orally or by correspondence, he took part in the affairs of the church. He would often whisper, "O Lord, how long?" Men begged him to rest, but he refused, saying, "Bear with me that God find me watching and waiting and busy at his work until my last sigh."

IV. CALVIN'S COURAGE

- A. We have often heard of the bravery of Luther as he faced the enemies of the gospel, but we forget that Calvin was just as brave as he stood for his biblical convictions.
- B. Calvin came very near to losing his life several times because of an unbending attitude towards the free thinkers and libertines in Geneva.

"The heroism of Luther is well known. Let us look at the equally courageous actions of John Calvin for our examples. On December 16, 1547, the Libertines, sworn enemies of Calvin, gathered in the Senate House in Geneva determined to destroy the Reformer. Unusual circumstances made it appear that they would succeed. At the risk of his life, Calvin appeared in the midst of the armed crowd. Amidst loud cries for his death, he stood with folded arms and looked the agitators in the face, No one struck him down. Then, advancing through their ranks with his breast bared, he challenged them, 'If you want blood, there are still a few drops here; strike then!' No arm was raised. Calvin slowly ascended the stairway and addressed a meeting of the Council of Two Hundred which was in session. Descending the stairs, he faced the crowd again accompanied

by one of the city councilors. He called for silence and addressed the people with such energy and daring that tears flowed from many eyes and the crowd retired in silence.

“The opposition soon made other plans to destroy or discredit the Reformer. One of these resulted in a direct confrontation between Calvin and the Council of Two Hundred. The issue was the excommunication of Philibert Berthelier, the Council’s secretary, by the consistory of the Church of Geneva in 1551 and his absolution by the State Council in 1553. The following Sunday was communion. Calvin preached in St. Peter’s, and at the close of the sermon declared that he would never profane the sacrament by giving it to an excommunicated person. Over his head on the pulpit his emblem was set: a heart aflame in an outstretched hand offered to God. His famous motto was embossed on the dark-red velvet pulpit cover: Soli Deo Gloria. Raising his voice and lifting up his hands, he exclaimed, in the words of St. Chrysostom: “I will lay down my life before these hands give the sacred things of God to those who have been branded as his despisers.

“A crowd of Libertines surged forward to the table. Calvin, descending from the pulpit, stood before the table. With drawn sword a Libertine cried, ‘Administer communion to us or you will die.’ His head thrown back and his arms extended over the sacred elements, Calvin responded that although they might cut off his arms, shed his blood, and take his life, they would never force him to give holy things to the profane and dishonour the table of his God. The crowd was stunned, and a long silence followed the dramatic moment. Perrin, one of the city syndics opposed to Calvin, quietly ordered Berthelier not to approach the table. After the crowd withdrew, Beza reports, communion was celebrated ‘in profound silence and under a solemn awe, as if the Deity Himself had been visibly present among them’” (*The Banner Of Truth*; “The Reformers: The Secret Of Their Greatness”; Eugene Osterhaven).

- C. Until 1555, Calvin never had free reign in Geneva. He had many enemies who hated him, and he was open to constant ridicule that most men would not have tolerated. A wife of a leading stateman in Geneva was disciplined for dancing at a wedding (secretly she was a Libertine). In response, she called Calvin a “pig” and a “lowdown liar.”

“He could not walk across the street without being mocked, ‘There he goes, neighbor. I prefer to hear three dogs barking than to listen to him preach.’ ‘Did you know, hell has only two devils, and there goes one of them!’ Children called after him, twisting his name, ‘Cain, Cain!’ More than one dog answered to the name ‘Calvin!’ (Stickelberger, *John Calvin*).

V. CALVIN’S HUMILITY

- A. Calvin was basically a humble man. He rarely thought he was equal to any task, but found his strength in Christ. He was not even made a citizen of Geneva until seventeen years after his second entry into the city.
- B. On April 25, 1564, Calvin dictated his will. In it we see the marks of a humble Christian:

“In the name of God, I, John Calvin, servant of the Word of God in the Church of Geneva, weakened by many illnesses . . . thank God that he has shown not only mercy toward me, his poor creature, and . . . has suffered me a partaker of his grace to serve Him through my work . . . I confess to live and die in this faith which He has given me, inasmuch as I have no other hope or refuge than His predestination upon which my entire salvation is grounded. I embrace the grace which He has offered me in our Lord Jesus Christ and accept the merits of His suffering and dying that through them all my sins are buried; and I humbly beg Him to wash me and cleanse me with the blood of our great Redeemer, as it was shed for all poor sinners so that I, when I shall appear before His face, may bear His likeness.

“Moreover, I declare that I endeavored to teach His Word undefiled and to expound Holy Scripture faithfully according to the measure of grace which He has given me. In all the disputations which I led against the enemies of the truth, I employed no cunning or any sophistry, but have fought His cause honestly. But, oh, my will, my zeal were so cold and sluggish that I know myself guilty in every respect; without His infinite goodness, all my passionate striving would only be smoke, indeed the grace itself which He gave me would make

me even more guilty; thus my only confidence is that He is the Father of mercy who as such desires to reveal Himself to such a miserable sinner.”

VI. CALVIN’S INSIGHT

- A. Calvin was a wise man even from the days of his youth, but age made him even wiser. He was a rare phenomenon in the history of the Church.
- B. His last exhortation to the members of the City Council was:

“If our state is to continue, then the house of God which He has erected therein must not be dishonoured, for He says He will honor those who honor Him and despise those who despise Him. There is no higher power than that of the King of all kings and the Lord of all lords.

“I say this that we may serve Him truly according to His Word and become ever more established in it. Each of us has his weaknesses: let each examine himself carefully and fight against them. Some are cold, devoted to their business but show no concern for the church. Others are slaves of their passions. Again others whom God has endowed with gifts use them not.

“You older ones be not jealous of the gifts which the younger generation has received, but be glad and praise the Lord who has given them.

“And you younger ones, be humble and seek not to achieve greater things than you can do: for youth is seldom void of ambition and tends to despise opinions of others.”

VII. CALVIN’S HERITAGE

- A. Calvin was committed to the Bible, a proclaimer of the true gospel and a faithful teacher of the whole counsel of God. He, more than anyone else, would have detested the term “Calvinism,” for he only wanted to be known as a man of God’s infallible Book.

- B. Calvin is to be judged by the fruit of his ministry, and the monument he has left us by God's grace is "every republican government on earth, the public school system of all nations, and the Reformed Churches throughout the world holding the Presbyterian System."
- C. Whether a person agrees or disagrees with all of Calvin's theology, every Protestant is indebted to this man. Lord, give us some more Calvins!