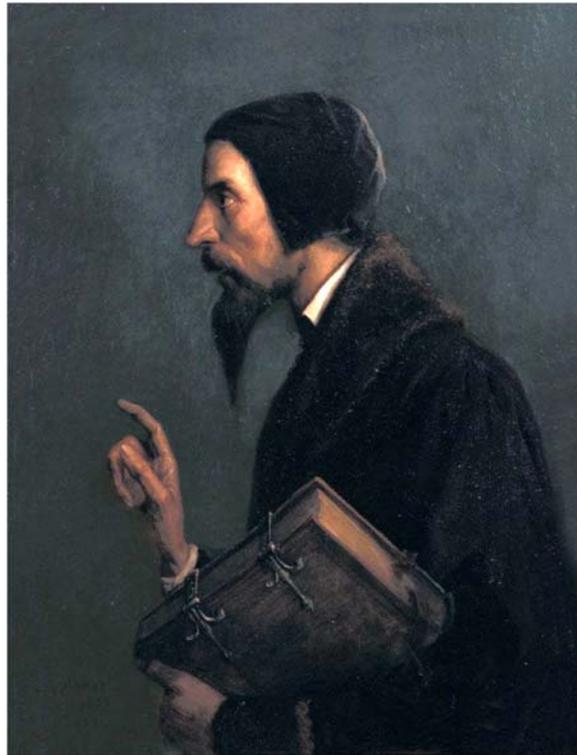


Remembering the Reformation John Calvin

29 October 2017
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After darkness, light



The plaza in front of Reformation Wall in Geneva is a great place to sit, especially when the sun is shining. I recently had the opportunity to explore Geneva and upon discovering the Wall I was struck by the number of young people talking and laughing in groups. There is space here, and light. Sitting beneath the hill on which the old city stands, surrounded by stone monuments and well-kept trees it is easy to feel comfortable and safe.

In the centre of Reformation Wall stands a 5 metre-high statue of John Calvin. When Calvin first arrived in Geneva in July 1536, 'comfortable' and 'safe' were not words that would have come readily to his mind. The 27-year-old scholar had been en route to Strasbourg when a local war forced him to take a detour. He entered Geneva expecting to spend a single night in the city. That evening, William Farel, the leader of Geneva's Reformers, visited Calvin at

his lodgings. Calvin was already converted to the Reformation and was known and respected for the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Farel urged him to stay in the city and help build a Reformed church. Occupying public ecclesial office was not something Calvin longed for. However, his protests did not impress Farel, who threatened him with a curse if he refused to assist. Fearing the curse and choosing to view the robust invitation as inspired by God, Calvin agreed to stay. The decision marked the beginning of Calvin's participation in a project into which he would pour all of his intellectual, emotional and spiritual strength. A project whose essence is captured in the addition of the motto of the Reformation to the official seal of the city of Geneva; *Post tenebras lux* – After darkness, light.

In his gospel John the evangelist wrote that, 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it'. For Calvin, 'light' required hard work. Geneva was a newly independent republic. It had only accepted the Reformation a few months before Calvin's arrival. Calvin understood that building a Reformed church in the city would require more than a declaration that the light had come. The word of God had to be taught and heard and acted upon by its hearers. For Calvin, Reformation in Geneva wasn't simply about a change in ideology and institutional tinkering. It was about the shining of the light of the gospel after the darkness of papist superstitions. It concerned all of life and it involved every citizen of the city. This project aimed at the complete reorientation of religious and civic life in line with what God had disclosed as his will in the Bible. A project that later Calvinists would call 'a holy commonwealth', 'a perfect school of Christ', 'a city on a hill'.

From his reading of Scripture Calvin understood that the failure of humans to keep God's law subjects us to the dreadful judgment of eternal death. The good news brought to light by the Reformers was that the Bible shows us that through faith in Jesus Christ, God has provided a method of deliverance from this miserable calamity. The Bible also taught that it is through God's grace that we are able to have faith in the atoning death and resurrection of Christ. In this way only are we justified and enabled to inherit the gift of eternal life. Calvin believed that if the gospel was preached faithfully and its implications for the Christian life clearly explained, it should be possible to witness the transforming work of God's grace in the lives of Geneva's citizens. However, Calvin also understood from his reading of the Bible that humans are by nature wilful and do not readily wish to submit to God. It followed, therefore, that as a compassionate pastor, concerned for the eternal destination of the members of his flock, Calvin had a vital task; regardless of riches or rank, he was to be diligent in encouraging all to submit to the discipline of the church, in order that all might live for Christ: In order that all might grow in reassurance of their salvation. The evidence for this would be an increasing holiness of life. Calvin was certainly hot-tempered in debate and frequently impatient with those who opposed him. But throughout his years in Geneva we are able to recognise him as a diligent pastor. Compelled by a conviction of God having called him to this work, and aware that he would one day appear before Christ to give an account for it, he exhibited enormous care and concern for the people of his city. This is not the same as saying that all of Geneva's residents welcomed his efforts.

Calvin's first stint of ministry in Geneva lasted two years. During this time he and Farel threw themselves into the task of creating a 'city on a hill'. But things were changing too quickly for some. Calvin and Farel's insistence that it was they and not the magistrates who should have the final say in church affairs didn't sit well with those who held power in the newly independent city. At this early stage in his work of Reform Calvin is open to the charge of immaturity. His impetuous nature failed to win friends and influence people.

Eventually, the row over church government led to his exile. He made his way to Strasbourg. Here he ministered to a small congregation of French refugees. He continued his studies and married a widow named Idelette. By all accounts, the two forged a deep and affectionate partnership. But while Calvin was flourishing in Strasbourg the church in Geneva was diminishing. In 1540 the desperate magistrates asked him to return. Calvin was appalled at this prospect writing, 'I would prefer a hundred other deaths to that cross, on which I should have to die a thousand times a day'. Eventually, however, he conceded, writing, 'a solemn and conscientious regard to my duty prevailed with me to consent to return to the flock from which I had been torn – but with what grief, tears, great anxiety and distress I did this, the Lord is my best witness'.

In 1541 Calvin returned to Geneva. His fears were not unfounded. His struggle for spiritual independence of the church in Geneva and for the practice of rigorous discipline was long and often bitter. He writes of being derided at the door of his house and was often frightened for his safety. He was yelled at and insulted in the street. Dogs were set on him. He also endured a terrible personal loss. Idelette gave birth to their son prematurely. The child died and Idelette was so weakened by the experience that eventually she too died. Calvin was devastated and told a friend that he had been deprived 'of my excellent life companion' and that it was 'a very cruel thing for me'.

During his years in Geneva, in spite of attacks, personal pain and the scale of the task, Calvin's capacity for the work to which he believed he was called was enormous. He wrote prolifically, producing catechisms and commentaries on almost all the books of the Bible. He reworked his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* three times so that the final edition stretched to 80 chapters. He established an academy for training Reformed pastors. He preached in St Peter's cathedral every day and twice on Sundays.

While I was visiting the city I found the place that his house once occupied – now replaced by an impressive eighteenth-century building behind an imposing wall. It's just around the corner from the cathedral. I walked back and forth, trying to imagine what it might have been like for Calvin to move around in the city. The medieval streets would have been narrow and dark, lined with tall buildings crowded, in Calvin's day, with increasing numbers of French refugees. I tried to imagine how Calvin might have felt as he travelled between his home and the cathedral or lecture hall. The tolling of the same bell that marked the hours in Calvin's day added to the atmosphere. I considered the concerns that may have occupied his mind as he engaged in the daily rhythm of praying, reading, preaching, teaching, writing, conversing, advising and arguing. Inside the cathedral is the pulpit from which he preached. Beside the pulpit Calvin's chair is displayed. The arms are worn with use. I imagined their owner gripping them as he wrestled in thought or prayer, or as he considered his response to a difficult challenge in debate. While in the cathedral I also noted the wide communion table, its top covered with a simple white cloth and bearing a single object – a large Bible, open at the 10th chapter of Esther. This is the brief closing chapter, in which Mordecai is finally established and recognised as one who has sought the good of his people and interceded for the welfare of all his descendants. This is how the cathedral would like us to remember Calvin, as one who, driven by a love for God, worked with all his might for the good of the people of Geneva and those who would come afterwards.

Taking on the spiritual leadership of a city in turbulent times is not something many would readily seek. And in fact, Calvin did not seek it. What he did seek and choose was to be obedient to what he believed was God's will; to use his intellect and his determination to transform Geneva into a Christian commonwealth. He trusted God with all his heart, in plenty and in need, and to Calvin, God proved faithful, strengthening him and giving him grace to persevere through numerous trials and setbacks. God certainly used Calvin to achieve significant things in Geneva and ultimately to bring glory to Himself. Calvin's influence on the church beyond Geneva and on culture in the West has been profound. When Calvin first came to the church in Geneva he found almost nothing in it. There was preaching, but that was all. There was no Reformation and everything was in disorder. By the time he died the city was transformed, scores of Reformed pastors had been sent out to establish and lead a vast network of Reformed churches and Calvin had the respect of the city and many beyond it. The city of Geneva has not always found it easy to love Calvin but without doubt owes him a great debt of gratitude. As a theologian he was intelligent and visionary. On the whole he engaged his opponents with panache, but also, on occasion, with bitterness. He experienced the joy of marriage and the devouring pain of widowhood. He was a devoted friend and he loved music and good food. He had a lively wit, enjoyed laughing and was able to poke fun at his own reputation for austerity.

In his final days Calvin gathered the members of the Little Council. He asked for their forgiveness where he had not done all he should and explained that his intentions had been good. He made a point of saying that if he said that God had not used him at all he would be a hypocrite. He begged their pardon for his bad temper and impatience, which was a part of his nature of which he was ashamed. He urged them to put their trust in God, not to be envious or to hate one another but to ask God to lead them by his Holy Spirit. He reminded them of their obligation in God's sight to the church and the city of Geneva in adversity and prosperity. Two weeks before his death he wrote to Farel, 'Since it is God's will that you should outlive me, remember our friendship. It was useful to God's church and its fruits await us in heaven. I draw my breath with difficulty and expect each moment to breathe my last. It is enough that I live and die for Christ, who is to all his followers a gain both in life and in death'.

The 5 metre-high stone statue of Calvin dominating Reformation Wall highlights his enormous impact on the church across the globe and on Western culture. I am not sure that it is a tribute with which Calvin himself would feel comfortable. Calvin left very little behind. Hardly any of his personal belongings survive; a few letters, books and objects. The house he lived in, close to the cathedral in Geneva, was demolished in the early eighteenth century. He was buried – at his own wish – in an unmarked grave. As such, there are no relics to speak of, no shrine to attract a cult. Calvin had his wish; our attention is focused on his work and his faith and ultimately on the God whom he sought to serve and whose grace is extended to us at all times and enables us to receive the free gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.



Reformation Wall, Geneva, September 2017

This address is dedicated to an American friend of Ridley Hall whose generosity made it possible for me to spend two days in Geneva researching Calvin.