

Our title is a quote from a letter written by Calvin to his friend William Farel, “**my heart... as a sacrifice to the Lord.**”

This talk is designed to be an introduction to the man whose heart the Lord entered and made His dwelling place – the heart of a man whose whole life from the age of 23, like his heart was a sacrifice totally laid out for his Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

An Introduction because of a number of things:

(i) I am no expert – so you will not hear a Calvin scholar speaking!

(ii) Calvin is such a key figure in Christian history – esp in relation to Protestant Reformed Evangelical church – and we need at least an introduction to him.

(iii) This year is the 500th anniversary of his birth – born 10/07/1509 so what better time to get to know a bit about him!

(iv) I believe that we may well be deluged by material in magazines, books and conferences which will assume that we do know something about him! (eg Banner Ministers Conference – refer Programme)

S M Houghton quotes an un named writer who said that,

*“To omit Calvin from the history of the Western civilisation
is to read history with one eye shut”*

We want to be Christians with both eyes open – historically & theologically. We do not want to be blown about by every wind of doctrine & it is largely because Christians have not known their history that errors have come into (or have been repeated) in the church.

I want therefore to set Calvin’s life into context & introduce him to you as a man – to talk about him PERSONALLY then another time maybe we can take things a little further and talk about what he believed – where his theology lay & what his legacy is to us today THEOLOGICALLY (and indeed much wider than just theology – as the quote from Houghton hints).

This year is the 200th anniversary of the birth of Darwin & there will be great polemical debates issuing from that fact – as we are deluged with Darwin material as well – you will be either with Darwin or against him! You will find that the name John Calvin has a similar effect. There are those that hate him (& his teaching) as well as those who love his memory & espouse his teachings.

You may find it surprising but it is true that if you type “John Calvin” into Google you will find many articles – even complete web sites - dedicated to anti Calvin material. I quote:

www.jesus-is-savior.com

Calvinism is NOT Biblical Doctrine

“Calvin was a heretic who taught that God predestines men to salvation.

Calvin taught "selective salvation" where God selects who will be saved and who will not. These are Satanic heresies. Calvin also taught "irresistible grace" where God forces a person to be saved.”

You will see immediately that the vitriol against Calvin is born of a fundamental misunderstanding of scripture but this is not an isolated case.

There are those who misunderstand & misrepresent his great work of reform in Geneva – for example:

www.biblelife.org/calvinism

Calvin's Reign of Terror

“Calvin forced the citizens of Geneva to attend church services under a heavy threat of punishment. Since Calvinism falsely teaches that God forces the elect to believe, it is no wonder that Calvin thought he could also force the citizens of Geneva to all become the elect. Not becoming one of the elect was punishable by death or expulsion from Geneva. Calvin exercised forced regeneration on the citizens of Geneva because that is what his theology teaches.”

And further still, there those who even throw doubt upon his own personal salvation - the same website as above also asserts:

“John Calvin showed no signs of being a regenerate man. He became more murderous and cruel during his rule in Geneva. He showed no inclination to be conformed to the image of Christ as described in Scripture for those who have been saved”.

These are modern writers on modern websites but it has always been so. Jerome-Hermes Bolsec – a contemporary and once a man of the Reformation who eventually returned to his Roman Catholic roots and wrote a biography (of sorts) of Calvin, refers to Calvin as,

“Ambitious, presumptuous, arrogant, cruel, evil, vindictive – and much more! He says that his body, “wasted away to death as punishment for his sins and that he died cursing and swearing as a blasphemer!”

A little more up to date is the History of The Church of Christ by a Frenchman – Daniel Rops written in 1955. He refers to Calvin as a genius but,

“Something terrible and cold... with an exterior that was cold and powerful... the perfect type of fanatic and a dictator who loved few if any men”

What are we to say to such things written about a man who we might have expected was to all a hero of the faith and of the church. Let me quote Dr William S Barker Professor of Church History – Westminster Theological Seminary Philadelphia

“John Calvin has had his detractors ever since his own day in the mid 16th century right down to the approach of the 500th anniversary of his birth in the early 21st century. But these are mostly opponents of the gospel of Jesus Christ or people who have not taken the time to understand his writings or to get to know the man.”

That is what we are aiming to do tonight – “to get to know the man – then you can judge for yourself and maybe you will want to know more & start to read for yourself about this remarkable man.

I want to divide Calvin’s life into three parts, namely:

1. 1509 – 1533 - From birth to new birth
2. 1533 – 1541 – A time of many Changes
3. 1541 – 1564 – Geneva – The City of God on earth

1. 1509 – 1533 - From birth to new birth

Like most children, Calvin's parents wanted the best for him and tried to ensure that his early life and education would lead to a fruitful and wealthy adulthood. His mother (**Jeanne**) died when he was only a boy so it was his father (**Gerard**) in particular who championed the cause of his son. What John's father did not realise was that the unseen hand of a greater Father in heaven was over seeing all the events of John's early life - and those events were so very significant for the future as we shall see.

John was born in Noyon in Picardy, France – his Father was a highly esteemed man of the City – solicitor to the Roman Catholic Bishop of the Cathedral of Noyon. He moved in the higher realms of society and John grew up among the rich and educated as well as the “outwardly” religious. He was taught refined manners, bearing and social graces. Prior to the Reformation, the Catholic church was in effect the only church and there was little true godliness, much superstition and no evangelical gospel. As a boy for example John's mother had once taken him to a nearby town where there was a relic of St Anne – her skull – and John was allowed to kiss it !

John proved extremely bright and intelligent even as a young boy and at the age of just 14 he was sent away to Paris to begin his “adult” studies in earnest. His father had decided that he would have a career in the church and he would study theology – John had no true convictions and was blind to the truth of God's Word but he obliged his father by throwing himself into his studies.

Because of his father's connections John had been given a “benefice” (a financial income) from the Cathedral of Noyon and his position was secure among the young of the wealthy studying Grammar, Logic, Latin, Poetry and Arithmetic and a course in Theology.

The influences of his youthful studies were immense – some of the best experts in their fields were to be found in Paris. **Mathurin Cordier** for example taught him Latin and would later join Calvin in Geneva as a supporter of the reformation. Calvin dedicated his Commentary on 1 Thessalonians to Cordier.

Things were however changing in the spiritual & theological landscape of Europe at this time – when Calvin was only 8 years old there had been the sound of a hammer driving a nail into the front door of Wittenburg church in what is now Germany – on 31st October 1517 **Martin Luther** nailed up his 95 Theses and had signalled the beginning of the Reformation.

Calvin did not know much about Luther as yet (in fact the two never did meet) but Lutheran teaching was beginning to infiltrate into the University of Paris – one **Jacques Lefevre** who was to be such an influence on Calvin's best friend **William Farel** was strongly instrumental in this reformation teaching being disseminated among the students.

Calvin's education was well and truly steeped in Catholic dogma – later in life looking back he said that what he learned was:

“Mere sophistry and so twisted, involved tortuous and puzzling that scholastic theology might well be described as a kind of esoteric magic. The denser the darkness in which anyone shrouded a subject

and the more he puzzled himself and others with preposterous riddles, the greater his fame for acumen and learning.”

He achieved the equivalent to a Masters degree (usually awarded at around 21 yrs) by the age of 17. But then came a sudden change in direction. His father thought that John would be better off as a lawyer so arranged for him to transfer to Orleans University to study under the leading professor in France. His mind was certainly capable of such a challenge - in fact he found himself teaching younger students as his course progressed! Sadly however, his theology and his legal studies had driven him down the route of humanism & further from the truth although he still remained in the Catholic church.

But then came three particular providences that steered him forwards:-

Firstly, he studied Greek under a man called **Melchior Wolmar** who had Lutheran sympathies and who gave Calvin a number of works by Luther – including, “The Liberty of The Christian Man” in which Luther had carefully laid out the doctrine of Justification by Faith – the central tenet of the Reformation truth rediscovered by Luther as a young Augustinian monk.

Secondly, Calvin’s cousin, **Pierre Olivetan** also came to Orleans. Hhe was a true Christian and he too had Lutheran sympathies. His influence on Calvin before his conversion appears significant.

Then thirdly, during his studies at Orleans, Calvin’s father died in 1530 and the strong influence that had held Calvin was now broken. He had published his first (and only) Law book but the response to this was disappointing. As Robert Reymond says of Calvin, he was:

“A brilliant young scholar possessed of one of the most thoroughly trained legal minds of his time – taught by the best authorities in all Europe in all subjects in which he was schooled.”

... but he was disillusioned and at a loss – what now?

It was probably during 1533 (at the age of 23 or 24) when God intervened in Calvin’s life and his direction was changed dramatically. Calvin is silent on the exact date but he does describe what happened - in his introduction to the Commentary on the Psalms published 1557

“Since I was too obstinately devoted to the superstitions of Popery to be easily extricated from so profound an abyss of mire, God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame, which was more hardened in such matters than might have been expected from one at my early period of life. Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with so intense a desire to make progress therein, that although I did not altogether leave off other studies, I yet pursued them with less ardour”

We note that he attributed this change exclusively to God and mentions no human agency – “God ... subdued my mind”, he says. He was truly “born again from above!

(Obviously the contributor to the website we mentioned at the beginning, that tells us that he was not a regenerate man has never taken the time to read what Calvin wrote of this experience of God!)

2. 1533 – 1541 – A time of many changes

After his conversion Calvin left Orleans & returned to Paris where he sought out those of the Reformed cause – mainly Lutherans of course (there were no Calvinists as yet!)

He became a friend of **Nicholas Cop**, a Lutheran supporter who was soon to become the Rector of the University in Paris. Recognising his considerable abilities, Cop asked Calvin to write an inaugural address for him - and so appeared Calvin's first piece of Reformation literature although never formally attributed to him. The speech basically called for the complete reformation of the church. It was not popular in Catholic France and the authorities consigned it to the flames and put out an arrest warrant for Cop – and Calvin – who already was under suspicion as a supporter of Cop's Lutheran ideals. Calvin was a trained theologian and a brilliant lawyer but he was now a fugitive. Tradition has it that he escaped from the City out of a window, climbing down a sheet and dressed as a vine dresser, carrying a hoe over his shoulder.

The Reformation was beginning to divide Europe politically, not only in Germany where particular areas declared themselves for or against reform but also across other countries like France. Calvin fled to where he would be sure of support and refuge from those in high places.

It was at this time that he probably started his great work on what would become, The Institutes of The Christian Religion – his magnum opus! What he wrote now he wrote with the trained mind of both a lawyer and a theologian but also with a mind illuminated by the Holy Spirit to the inspired truth of scripture. He would over the coming years revise it a number of times as that illumination & his understanding increased.

Back in the early days at Paris he had met Lefevre who was now an aged man – he had tried to stay within the Catholic church and to reform it from within – of course this is what Luther in essence tried to do as he too never left Roman Catholicism. Having met Lefevre again Calvin was convinced that his route forward should now be to leave the church – He set off for Noyon where he resigned his benefices and returned to live with a friend in Paris. He was now without financial means, was cast upon the kindness of friends and was in some danger of his life.

This was a time of persecution for supporters of the reformation movement. It increased markedly because of what became known as the “Placard Incident” when those sympathetic to the reformers placed placards during the night all around the city in prominent places calling for reform. This included the bedroom door of the King – Francis 1. No wonder he reacted harshly and called for drastic action! Many were caught & whipped, their tongues cut out or were even burned alive as heretics. Some were friends of Calvin.

The pages of the “Institutes” that were written already were now published by Calvin in 1536 and remarkably the publication has a dedication at the front to:

*His Most Christian Majesty the most mighty and illustrious
Monarch, Francis King of the French, His Sovereign”*

It is really a plea to the King on behalf of those who were subjects of the King but who had come to true faith in Christ and who had sided with the reformers – a plea not to deal with his subjects in such a way. His plea was for justice – setting out the theology of the reformers in the context of the political framework of the day.

Willisiton Walker Professor of Church History at Yale University says of this publication:

“... it was not merely a handbook of theology which marked its young author as the ablest interpreter of Christian doctrine that the Reformation age had produced, but it was prefaced by a bold yet dignified and respectful letter addressed to King Francis which at once placed Calvin at the head of the French reformers and revealed him in the highest degree as a man of leadership.”

Remember Calvin, the writer was still only 26 yrs old!

Just before its publication, in 1535 Calvin fled under an assumed name (**Martin Lucanius**) to Basel & then Geneva in Switzerland. He intended to stay only one night having undertaken a long detour (because of the war being waged by Francis ! & Charles V) to eventually get to Strasbourg where he intended to settle into a life of study and writing.

Someone else now comes onto the scene who had other plans for Calvin! A man who stands side by side with Calvin still in Geneva – in stone! – **William Farel**. Sometimes called the “Elijah of the Reformation”, Farel was a fearless and faithful pastor of the church in Geneva and had heard all about Calvin! Having heard that he had arrived in the City he found out where he was and paid him a visit. Calvin was somewhat over awed by this literal giant of a man, who was also 20 years his senior.

Let Calvin tell us what happened!

“Farel, who burned with an extraordinary zeal to advance the gospel, immediately strained every nerve to detain me. And after he had learned that my heart was set upon devoting myself to private studies, and finding that entreaties were in vain, he went on to say that God would curse my retirement and the peace of study that I sought if I withdrew and refused him help when the need for it was so urgent.

I was so terror stricken that I abandoned the journey I had planned; but I was so sensible of my natural shyness and timidity that I would not bind myself to accept any particular office.”

So began his first period – just under two years – in Geneva. You could say that he was “pressed in” by Farel, but not long later they were both “thrown out” by the City authorities!

At this stage we need to pause and just try to summarise what Geneva was like in those days and how it was run – its social, political and religious make up. Without that knowledge what happens from hereon in both the first (& second much longer) stay of Calvin in Geneva does not make much sense. Reymond describes the situation as, “*Geneva’s Byzantine Factional Politics*”.

Geneva was run as an independent, autonomous City – its religious life dominated every other aspect of life for all its 15,000 or so inhabitants. The ruling hierarchy was made up of:

- The General Council – made up of the heads of the larger families & met twice per year.
- The Council of Two Hundred
- The Council of Sixty (almost an irrelevance in terms of power - all on this Council were members of the Two Hundred.
- Council of Twenty Five – Known as The Little Council - who were effectively the ruling Council of the City and who sat three times per week.

Calvin and Farel were Pastors in the City; which had at its spiritual hub the Cathedral Church of St Peters – by far the most dominant building of the City skyline. The City Councils had declared for the Reformation and the Pastors in the City were extremely influential in City life. Not all were happy however with the strict biblical standards of Calvin and Farel and these opponents became known as “Libertines”, who wanted a less strict moral and ethical rule of life.

Conflict came when the Little Council sought to impose its will upon church matters in such things as church discipline, where Calvin & Farel insisted that the church alone should have the oversight. Calvin published a document called, “*Articles for The Organisation of The Church and its Worship.*” He had formulated a structure for a church based on New Testament principles & while Geneva was eventually to be the place where that structure would become a reality; the time was not yet.

The Little Council would not accept the stance of the two Reformers and unceremoniously dismissed them from their roles and from the City! They left on 25th April 1538 – Calvin to Strasbourg (where he had intended to go in the first place!) and Farel for Neuchatel where he Pastored a church until his death in 1565 (however we are not done with this “Elijah” figure yet!).

Calvin was disappointed and for a while it seemed as if his dream of a, “City of God on earth” was dashed. He was still only 28 years old remember and just under three and half years later he would return & things would be very different indeed.!

The years in Strasbourg were certainly not wasted years :-

- here he became the Pastor of a 500 hundred strong church
- he was able to develop his church structure and organisation thinking further & refine it, which was to be invaluable for his return to Geneva.
- he published his own book of Psalms & Hymns for public worship
- he published his first Bible Commentary – Romans
- he spent time revising and republishing his Institutes
- And... He got married !

Calvin was not a great, “wooer of women”, he had set down his criteria for a wife and commissioned Farel and another of the famous names from this period **Martin Bucer**, to find such a woman. Here are his criteria:

“I am none of those insane lovers who, when once smitten with the fine figure of a woman, embrace also her faults. This is only the beauty that allures me – if she be chaste, obliging, not fastidious, economical, patient and careful for my health.”

The lady who eventually fitted the bill was **Idelette de Bure**, a widow from his congregation. Her husband had been brought to the Reformed Faith by Calvin earlier before he died. Idelette had two children from her first marriage.

Also in 1539 a somewhat strange providence of God brought Calvin back to the attention of the Little Council in Geneva. He was asked to respond to a certain **Cardinal Sadeleto** who had endeavoured to persuade the Genevan Council to return to the Catholic Faith – his arguments were strongly reasoned and the Council had struggled to find anyone to adequately lay out a reply to the Cardinal; to refute his claims and just as strongly lay out a counter Biblical & Reformed position. The only man they could turn to was the man they had thrown out of the City – John Calvin & he duly obliged!

This, coupled with the gradual breakdown of law & order in Geneva and the poor quality of the spiritual leaders who had succeeded Calvin & Farel, convinced the Genevan Council that they should invite Calvin to return.

The question was, “should he go”? Here we meet Farel again! He wrote a strongly worded letter to Calvin urging him to follow his sense of calling that had, “*bound him*” to the City all through the last few years and to return.

Calvin wrote back to Farel – what he says is very interesting:

“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, presented as a sacrifice to the Lord... I submit my will and my affections, subdued and held fast, to the obedience of God.”

On 13th September 1541 he returned to the City and immediately to his pulpit in St Peters, where on his first Sunday he continued from exactly where he had left off in his exposition the last Sunday he had left – some three and a half years before!

3. 1541 – 1564 – Geneva – “The City of God on earth”

Here now Calvin really begins his work in the City with which he is always associated. There were many struggles (mainly in the earlier years of this period) but eventually triumphs too. And the last ten years of his life saw his influence, not only in Geneva but throughout Europe, grow to great heights.

The Little Council was far more amenable now to his strong moral standards and welcomed his newly formed, “Consistory” made up of Magistrates and also Pastors & Ministers who jointly dealt with the rule of law in the City.

Calvin emphasised a Biblical work ethic in all men and clear moral standards. He prohibited begging on the streets and brought in many social reforms. John Knox, who came to Geneva and sat under Calvin’s teaching and influence in these years before returning to Scotland, said that this was,

“ The most perfect school of Christ that ever was on earth since the days of the Apostles”.

Calvin oversaw the creation of a truly Protestant Reformed church with the church alone deciding on matters of church regulation and discipline. Its government and

practice in terms of oversight, rule and baptism was Presbyterian and was to become the basis for churches across not only Europe but eventually to America and across the world.

Calvin's church actually had four office holders, namely Pastors (to preach and administer the sacraments), Doctors (to teach), Elders (to "amicably admonish those they see are at fault and leading a disorderly life"), and Deacons (to watch over the poor and sick).

Whilst not directly being involved in its actual production the influence of Calvin on the Geneva Bible was very significant and this version of the Bible became the main Protestant version across Europe right through to, and beyond the production of the Authorised Version in England in 1611.

In 1559 Calvin founded the Geneva Academy which became the first Protestant University in the World. Calvin was its Professor of Theology and **Theodore Beza** (who stands in stone next to Calvin on the other side from Farel also became a leading figure). Beza wrote a biography of Calvin within weeks of his death – this is still in print from Evangelical Press.

Many men (like John Knox, Miles Coverdale and John Foxe – writer of Foxes Book of Martyrs) came to Geneva (mainly because of persecution at home) were influenced by Calvin, trained and then went out through the whole of Europe as Pastors and teachers of the Reformed school. The birthplace of English and American Puritanism is arguably here in Geneva at this time.

The output of Calvin during this time is phenomenal : -

- He preached over 4000 sermons (2000 of which are preserved – all through the work of one man – **Denis Raguerier** – who took them down in a form of short hand & then transposed them to written form)
- He wrote Commentaries on almost every book of Bible – 45 volumes in total
- He wrote Catechisms, Confessions of Faith, Treatises on various theological subjects and debates of the times, Exposures of Catholic dogma – eg Veneration of Relics
- He produced counter material to the "Council of Trent" which was a great attempt by leading scholars and Catholic churchmen to return to pre Reformation practices.
- His known letters number 4,271 in total (inc 163 to his great friend Farel) & many to Heads of State / Kings and Church leaders – many are almost treatises in themselves!
- His Institutes were revised again and a final Latin (and later French) version was published in 1559 – Reymond describes him as a,

"master exegete" and "a wholesale plagiarist of scripture!"

Through all these things there is no doubt that Calvin succeeded Luther in becoming the major leader and most influential figure of the Reformation from this time – particularly after Luther's death in 1547.

There were times of great sadness & we are reminded that Calvin was a man of deep feeling as well as strength of resolve and discipline. Let me mention four:-

1. His wife bore him a son, **Jacques** on 28th July 1542 but tragically he died after only a few days. Calvin said at the time:

“The Lord has certainly inflicted a severe and bitter wound in the death of our baby son but the Lord himself is a father and knows what is good for his children”.

2. In 1549, Idelette died and Calvin was left alone for the last 15 years of his life. He loved her dearly, she was truly his helpmeet. He wrote:

“I have been bereaved of the best companion of my life, who if our lot had been harsher, would have been not only the willing sharer of exile and poverty, but even of death. While she lived, she was the faithful helper of my ministry. From her I never experienced the slightest hindrance.”

3. Thirdly we must mention what has become known as the, “Servetus Affair”. Often this one blot on Calvin’s time in Geneva is raised to condemn him and unfairly so. Good men have come to his defence but often have been shouted down by Calvin’s detractors.

Who was Servetus? What happened to him?

On 27th Oct 1553 **Michael Servetus** was burnt alive at the stake in Geneva as a heretic, within the law of the City & this with the full knowledge and agreement of Calvin.

(We need to know a bit more but much has been written and I commend Reymond’s book to you in this respect as he takes 15 pages over it and applies the lessons right up to date).

It was a commonly held view in those days that heretics should be exposed and put to death. The Catholics certainly practised it and sad to say, at times those who supported reformation of the church did too. Calvin had certainly exposed Servetus as a man pedalling serious heretical teachings. These concerned the Trinity and therefore the key doctrines of the nature of God and the Deity of Christ. (Interestingly the Catholics had also condemned the man and would have burnt him if they had got to him first!)

Calvin actually did all he could to persuade Servetus to change his stance and way back in 1536 he had first challenged him following the printing and circulation of a book entitled, *“On the Errors of the Trinity.”* He had sent him a copy of his Institutes and urged him to read it. At his trial Calvin said to Servetus,

“ You know that at that time (17 years before) I was ready to do everything for you and did not even count my life too dear that I might convert you from your errors”.

But sadly the time came for his sentence and Calvin did finally have to agree to the Genevan Council order to, “death by burning”.

We have to see and understand this matter in the context of its time, Calvin’s overall life and work, the context of Calvin’s great reluctance to take this action and his considerable efforts to persuade the Council of a different form of punishment. Nevertheless Servetus was executed and that we cannot deny.

Lastly we need to see Calvin’s great work at this latter part of his life in the light of his rapidly failing health.

Up until his early thirties Calvin had been of fairly robust health but in later life the long hours of study, poor diet, lack of exercise and the loss of his wife caused him to go downhill physically. He spent long nights in study or prayer & fasting. He spent many of those nights without sleep & his diet was not good. He suffered from catarrh, inflammation of the nose (which caused his nose to run continually), asthma, indigestion and migraine headaches. He contracted a form of malaria from which he never fully recovered. Towards the very end of his life he became arthritic, suffered from pleurisy, gum disease and eventually malignant tuberculosis. Knowing all this makes his dedication, hard work and achievements even more remarkable.

A reference to a few of those achievements is essential before we close this review of Calvin's life.

For many years he had remained a, "foreigner" – A Frenchman in Geneva -but he was eventually granted citizenship (the title of a "bourgeois of Geneva"). He was accepted and appreciated by most – although there were those who still tried to distract & divert him by interrupting his preaching and opposing his reforms – they were however a minority.

What then came together in his later years in the City was all that he had worked for.

Never before had a whole City been so thoroughly regulated and run for religious purposes – almost the whole city came to church on Sunday to hear the word of God. Attendance was actually enshrined in City law and fines were imposed on those who refused! The city was divided into areas, with ministers responsible for each part. Calvin preached at three services each Sunday (daybreak / noon / afternoon) and services on Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

All children went to school – which in effect was a "Christian school" with a whole range of subjects as well as religious instruction. After school the brightest went to the Academy. Calvin effectively was the head of the whole educational system in the city. Prizes were awarded throughout, for diligence as well as achievement.

Laws were passed (and welcomed by the population) regulating drinking, buying and selling, morals and even dress! It could be said that Calvin's mark was on every part and activity of the city and Biblical principles were the principles he sought to apply to all.

You can see why his detractors down through history have opposed him – mainly because they would oppose his Bible based approach. There were Libertines then – there are many in our nation today who would hate the Genevan model of society!

After a period of worsening ill health, Calvin preached his last sermon on 6th February 1564 and was eventually confined to bed. The Little Council met at his bedside and there are touching reports of those times where he asked their forgiveness for his shortcomings and thanked them for all that they had done to assist him.

In May that year he wrote a last letter to his dear friend Farel,

"Farewell my best and truest friend... it is enough that I live and die for Christ who is the reward of His followers in life and in death."

In his letter he told Farel not to come – but he did ! (although he had left again before Calvin died).

On 27th May 1564 Calvin passed into the presence of his Saviour – just short of his 55th birthday.

He requested that his funeral be a simple affair lest his followers in their grief should create the cult of a new saint. He is buried – at his instruction – in an unmarked grave so no one today can be exactly sure where in the grave yard his remains are laid.

Not long before his death he had brought together around his bedside a number of fellow Pastors and he spoke these words to them:-

“I have had many faults... and all that I accomplished was of little significance...”

“As for my doctrine I have taught faithfully and God has given me grace to write; which I have done as faithfully as I could... I have always aimed at being simple.

“I have written nothing out of hatred to anyone but have always set before me what I thought was for the glory of God”.

So ended the life of one who S M Houghton calls,

“Perhaps the greatest of all Christian Teachers since the time of the Apostles”.

And says of him,

“Of all the Reformers, none has conferred greater benefits upon the Church of God.”

What can we learn from his life?

There is so much but let me highlight just two things in particular:

Firstly - One of Calvin's great themes of course was the Sovereignty of God and it is wonderful to see how this Sovereign God overruled in the life of Calvin so that he became the man he was and achieved what he achieved for God. He was:

- **born** as the Reformation began – with Zwingli / Luther / Melancthon and others of the earlier reformation period
- **schooled** in just the right disciplines and at the highest level
- then **“born again”** so that his highly trained mind might be sanctified and used by God to take that Reformation work on.
- **His first time in Geneva** was a useful trial run / his time in Strasburg was a clear time of preparation & sharpening of all the instruments he would use on his return.
- **He then was enabled** by God to rise to a position where he could receive the reformation baton from Luther & take it on :
 - o theologically through his writings (his Institutes & Commentaries etc)
 - o ecclesiastically – taking the church in Geneva out of Rome and into independency from the state
 - o socially through his reforms and emphasis on real Christian living
- **then he was able to pass that baton on to many others** who would take the Reformation truth throughout all Europe & beyond.

Secondly – a challenge to us if we see Calvin as only a Theologian – he was truly that BUT he was a Pastor and a teacher of “PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY”.

This is a rather lengthy quote from the IVP New Dictionary of Theology but it makes the point:

“Calvin took the lead in defining new forms of Christian life and work, of church & community life, which, under the newly discovered teaching of the Bible and the power of the Spirit, were relevant to conditions in Europe in his day. Moreover he was able to help his contemporaries to attain a clarity of vision and an orderliness in theological thought and expression, which gave them a firmer grasp of the gospel in its fullness.

At the same time, by the power of his preaching and the convincing clarity and simplicity of his teaching, and his practical ability & moral integrity... he was conspicuously successful in achieving his aims in his own city-parish.

His whole life-work, therefore is an important and challenging illustration of how our theology, if it is healthy, should be related to our life situation.

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