

## 75. JOHN CALVIN (2): FIRST GENEVAN MINISTRY

After Zwingli was murdered in 1531 in the bloody battle at Kappel, close to Zurich, it seemed as if the Reformation in Switzerland would crumble. But God decreed differently! The enemies of the Reformation rejoiced, but they rejoiced too soon. The light of the truth would soon shine brighter than before.



*'...near the beautiful lake of Geneva'*

In our thoughts, we go to Geneva near the beautiful Lake of Geneva, a city with about 12,000 inhabitants. Geneva is a very ancient city. History books tell us that Geneva already existed before the Christian era. In the days of Charlemagne (aka Charles the Great, 747-814), the town already enjoyed independence and was governed by bishops.

In 1532 the city of Berne sent a few Reformed ministers to Geneva. The most prominent were *William Farel* and *Pierre Viret*. Their preaching



*Charles the Great.*

met with much resistance from the Roman Catholic Church. Satan did his best to prevent the Reformation from taking hold in Geneva.

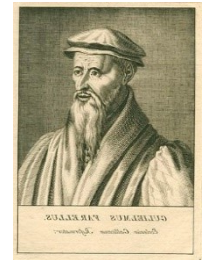
The following years would be a time of much struggle and suffering.

### **WILLIAM FAREL**

William Farel was an exceptionally zealous preacher.

He was born in France in 1489.

As a youth, he was a passionate Roman Catholic, but like Calvin, he studied the scriptures. God blessed this study and opened Farel's eyes to the errors of the Roman Catholic Church. Then he could no longer keep silent about the truth of the scriptures, and being passionate about it; he attacked Rome vehemently in his preaching and writings.



*Gulielmus Farel  
1489-1565*

As persecution was raging in France at the time, his life was soon in danger. So he fled to Switzerland. Full of fire and enthusiasm, he, Viret, and others preached the gospel in Geneva and surrounding towns, and God blessed that preaching. Rome's response was mean and deadly.

For example, a Roman Catholic servant girl added poison to the soup for the ministers' dinners. Only Viret ate some of that soup, fortunately not too much, but he still became seriously ill. Pierre Viret slowly recovered, but his health was fragile for the rest of his life. Farel



*Viret: 1511 – 1571.*

happened to come home late that night, so he escaped death by poisoning. Their enemies had not succeeded with this wicked plan; none of the ministers died. The servant girl, Antonia Vax, was executed in 1535.

Rome's cunning and ruthless attack on the ministers had the opposite effect to what they had planned. Many Genevans turned against them, and their influence waned.

The situation in the city itself was terrible. The Roman Catholic clergy lived in the most shameful sins. Even the bishop set a bad example. Besides the clergy, there was the party of libertines. This group of liberals lived sinful and

shameless lives. They held drinking parties till late at night. Then the peace of the night was often rudely shattered by the shouting of drunk men and women.

Satan had set up his throne in Geneva; he thought he reigned supreme there. Farel, Viret and others fought a difficult battle against this. The Roman Catholic clergymen opposed the work of these ministers in every possible way. The same applied to the libertines; they would not listen to the earnest warnings of these faithful ministers. Farel admonished them sharply for their wicked and godless lifestyle and called them to repentance.

Despite all opposition, the Reformation slowly gained influence and support. In August 1535, the government of Geneva officially accepted the Reformation: they abolished the papacy and forbade the mass. That was a massive setback for the Roman Catholic Church. Yet the struggle was far from over because the libertines incited the people against the reformed ministers.

True, the city council of Geneva supported the Reformers. They made various laws to keep sin in check.

Blasphemy was made punishable.

They forbade playing cards and gambling.

Taverns were prohibited from selling liquor during church services or after 9 pm.

These were all good things.

A few months later, the city council passed a law for shops to remain closed on Sundays and made church attendance compulsory.

Whoever stayed home from church without good reason was fined.

All that was well-meant, but the people of Geneva, stirred up by the libertines, resented it.

They hated to have their freedoms curtailed. They wanted the space to retain their sinful lifestyle.

The spiritual war in Geneva was very severe.

Farel felt the enmity and the hatred of the people. He noticed secret opposition and underground resistance everywhere. He felt that he could not

cope with it for much longer; he prayed to God for help:

"O Lord, please send a man who is stronger than me."

It was his daily prayer before the throne of grace. And God answered that prayer.

Help would come.

The man God would use to curtail the wickedness of Geneva was already on his way.

His name?

John Calvin!

### CALVIN COMES TO GENEVA

In the previous chapter, we wrote that Calvin roamed a lot after his flight from Paris. First, he went to Basle, where he was reasonably safe and completed writing the Institutes. In the winter of 1535, Calvin left Basle and wandered through Italy.

He stayed in the castle of Dutchess Renata of Ferrara. She was a sister of the French king, Francis I, who was a fierce persecutor of the Protestants. Renata secretly chose the side of the Reformation. Calvin,

weary from his roaming, found a short respite there. However, the Roman Inquisition did not take long to find his hiding place. The pope warned Renata's husband, the Duke of Ferrara, a strict Roman Catholic, and Calvin had to flee quickly to save his life.

Some writers tell us that the Inquisition captured him while fleeing, but Renata sent disguised horsemen who freed him. We are not sure if this story is true. What is true is that they forced the

Dutchess to turn Catholic again. They even took her children from her! How cruel of Rome! They made her officially join the

Roman Catholic church again, but she secretly corresponded with Calvin until her death.

However, because of this, Calvin lost his hiding place and was chased around the countryside again. During his wanderings, he visited the



*Renata of Ferrara  
1510-1565*

"O Lord, please send a man who is stronger than me." Rev. Farel

Waldenses in the valleys of the Western Alps and preached there.

He then travelled to France to settle some family affairs. He was betrayed to the Inquisition and again compelled to flee. This time he decided to travel back to the city of Basle. He was safe there and could rest from the many hardships and continue his studies.

On that journey from France to Basle, he stayed in Geneva for one night, which determined the course of his life! How crystal clear we see God's providence here, Who governs and directs our lives. Calvin *had* to travel through Geneva because a man begged God for help in that city. That man was William Farel!

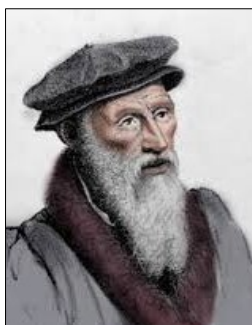
God had ordained for Calvin to work in Geneva. In our mind, we see Calvin sitting in his room that evening. He plans to continue his trip to Basle the next morning.

That 27-year-old had experienced so much in his short life already! So many close scrapes with death, narrowly escaping the hands of his fanatical persecutors! But the Lord had always preserved and protected him.

Did he think about those miraculous escapes and protection of God that evening?

We do not know.

#### FAREL VISITS CALVIN



Farel (1489-1565)

Suddenly he is startled by a knock on the door, and a moment later, a stranger enters his room.

That man is ... Farel, the courageous preacher from Geneva!

Farel had heard that the author of the famous book *'The Institutes'* was

in the city.

He immediately decides to visit Calvin.

He is *just* the man he needs.

*He* is the man who must help him in the severe struggle against the libertines! He wastes no time and quickly moves through the dark streets of Geneva to the place where Calvin is staying. He

enters Calvin's room, and soon the two men are engaged in a serious discussion.

Farel, who is twenty years older than Calvin, explains the situation in Geneva. He tells him how the city council supports the Reformation. He tells Calvin about the new laws to curb the licentiousness in Geneva. He tells him about the stubborn resistance of the libertines.

He describes the severe struggle they are fighting. He then asks him kindly but urgently to remain in Geneva. Oh, Calvin *must* help him in that fierce struggle.

But young Calvin firmly shakes his head.

Oh no, he refuses to even think about it!

He is leaving Geneva early the next morning!

He is going to Basle, where he will find the rest he so desperately needs. There he will be able to study. He believes he is much too young to be a minister in Geneva. He is not ready for that at all!

However, Farel does not lose courage.

"Please do stay here! We cannot do without you. God's church in this city needs you. You *must* remain."

He *pleads* with the young Calvin.

However, Calvin shakes his head decisively and remains deaf to the pleading of the much older Farel.

"No, I won't do it. I *want* to go to Basle, and I'm *going* to Basle."

Farel perseveres for hours, but Calvin does not yield. No matter what Farel says, it does not help. Finally, Farel gets up. A tired, sad, and grim expression covers his furrowed face. He stands directly in front of Calvin, looks at him with piercing, sharp eyes, and solemnly says:

"Do *you* refuse to offer your help to the church of Christ in Geneva?

Do you want peace and devote yourself to your study?

Very well, then I tell you in the name of Almighty God that you do not seek the cause of Jesus Christ but *yourself*. But your peace and study will be cursed by God!"

Farel speaks these words forcefully.

He turns around and goes away. His heart cries within him.





*...Farel speaks these words forcefully.*

<https://fineartamerica.com/art/farel>

Calvin turns deathly pale when he hears Farel's curse. For a moment, he sits motionless in his chair, crushed.

"God will curse your peace and study!"

Those terrible words echo through his head.

His whole body trembles and he wipes the clammy sweat from his forehead.

He staggers to his feet and calls Farel back.

Immediately Farel turns around, wondering what Calvin wants.

Calvin answers with a trembling voice that he no longer dares to refuse and will remain in Geneva.

He will not go to Basle.

A broad smile suddenly brightens the face of Farel. He spontaneously puts out his hand and gives Calvin a firm handshake.

"Good night, my young friend! We will speak some more tomorrow!"

Again, he goes away. His heart rejoices, and as he hurries home, he fervently thanks his heavenly Father, wiping away a tear of thanks.

Now a vastly different life begins for Calvin. Every day, he had to explain a portion of the Bible to large crowds.

The city council never discussed any form of payment or salary with Calvin, and he was too modest to ask for it. Five months later, they gave him a small present. That was scandalous. The Bible teaches that the labourer is worthy of his wage.

Calvin did not call attention to himself, yet he became the leader of the Reformation in Geneva. That happened because the Lord had given him exceptional abilities and the spiritual gifts of knowledge and discernment.

### THE DEBATE IN LAUSANNE, OCTOBER 1536

One day the people of Berne schedule a debate in Lausanne, a small town 60 km from Geneva. Farel, Viret and Calvin go as well. The first few days, Calvin does not say a word; he listens. As a newcomer, he modestly keeps himself in the background. Farel is the leading spokesman.

The Roman Catholic clergy vehemently attack the doctrine of the Reformation. Farel passionately defends it. The debate lasted some days. Then a Roman Catholic clergyman stands up and accuses Farel of ignoring the church fathers.

Before Farel can answer, the young Calvin stands up and proves from the ancient church fathers that not the Protestants but the Roman Catholics distort the doctrine of those church fathers. From memory, he quotes entire portions of sermons from Chrysostom and Augustine. He flings a challenge at all those Roman Catholic clergymen and all of Rome that they must read the church fathers better; then it will be obvious who is right.

Friend and foe stare at him, open-mouthed. Both parties are astounded by the precise and confident way this young man presents the teachings of the church fathers. The audience is deeply impressed. Calvin sits down as though nothing unusual has happened. Nobody expected this from the new young minister. The Roman Catholics were left with no arguments to defend their position, and with a red face, they sit down.

The awesome result of this debate is that it establishes the Reformation in Lausanne, and within three months, eighty monks and one



*The Cathedral of Lausanne where the debate was held.*

hundred and twenty priests converted to the Reformation. What a rich blessing!

Instantly, Calvin becomes famous. That is not his intention at all, but God gives him that grace and honour. Calvin remains humble.

This victory does not put an end to the battle in Geneva. The struggle continues. Calvin experiences difficult and testing years there, but no matter how great the opposition, Calvin doesn't yield an inch but stands firm because it concerns God's honour.

Who shall win this struggle?

### THREE MEN LEAVE GENEVA

On the 25th of April 1538, three men leave the city of Geneva. They are Farel and Calvin, the two Protestant ministers who worked and preached in Geneva. Between them and supported by them walks another minister, an old blind man. Where are they going, and why are they leaving the city of Geneva? They must leave the city because the city council has banished them!

What?

Banished?

How is that possible?

That is a sad story.

In the first part of this chapter, we explained how the Genevan city council had made various laws to restrain the wickedness, such as blasphemy,

playing cards, gambling, and many other sinful practices.

Calvin had introduced strict church discipline.

He also wrote a simple church order: The Lord's Supper was to be administered once a month. The *church council* was to withhold those who made themselves guilty of offensive sins.

Calvin insisted that church discipline is the task of a *consistory*, not civil authorities. The state must not interfere with ecclesiastical matters.

The consistory applied church discipline diligently.

For example:

They put a member under discipline for running a gambling house; another had sworn a false oath and was also put under discipline.

Calvin was strict, but in Geneva, he *had* to be.

Many people opposed these measures.

They did not want to let go of their sinful lifestyle. They wanted the freedom to live in sin.

The libertines give voice to their sentiments by making mocking rhymes about Farel and Calvin which they sing in public. The resentment against the faithful ministers increases.

In February 1538, city council elections are due in Geneva. The libertines enjoy a landslide victory.

From now on, most of the new city council consists of libertines, those fierce enemies and opponents of Calvin and Farel. You understand that it now becomes extremely difficult for the protestant ministers to do their tasks. The libertines block them wherever they can; they repeal or ignore the newly introduced laws. Drinking parties and orgies, and other wicked parties last till the early morning hours. Wickedness rises to a climax.

Easter approaches. The city council of Geneva commands that the churches must celebrate the Lord's Supper on Easter Sunday.

The ministers firmly refuse!

What?



Celebrate the Lord's Supper under such conditions?

No way!

That way, they will shamefully defile the table of the Lord.

That can and may not happen!

The night before Easter, there is a lot of rioting in Geneva. People continually bang on the windows of the homes of the faithful ministers. Rude voices disturb the silence of the night:

"Throw the traitor into the Rhone River!" they yell. The 'traitor' is *Calvin*! He did not sleep at all that night. That was impossible with that noise. The next morning, Easter morning, the ministers go to church, although the council had forbidden it. Surrounded by brothers who had armed themselves, they ascend the pulpit. Both Calvin and Farel preach an earnest penitential sermon but do *not* celebrate Holy Supper that morning. That is impossible under these circumstances. On that happy feast day, remembering Christ's resurrection, sad events happen in Geneva. There is much confusion and tumult in the city and the churches. They shout and threaten, but Calvin and Farel do not yield one inch. The libertines do not get their way.

Two days later, the council notifies the ministers that they must leave the city!  
They are banished!

And so, on the 25th of April 1538, we see them go through the gates and leave the city. Farel went to



Banished from the city of Geneva.  
<https://calvinthereformer.jouwweb.nl/>

Neuchatel, a town in the North of Geneva, where he served as a minister until his death. Calvin travelled to Basle, aiming to study peacefully. Finally, they disappeared in the distance. The libertines rejoiced, and the devil celebrated too!

It *seemed* as if the Lord had lost the battle in Geneva.

It *seemed* as if the devil had gained the victory.

And yet...



## QUESTIONS

1. List the two Protestant ministers sent to Geneva.
2. Identify William Farel.
3. How was the work of Farel and Viret opposed?
4. Who were the libertines?
5. What improvements were made in Geneva in 1535?
6. List the laws of the Council of Geneva, designed to restrain sin.
7. Identify the Duchess of Ferrara.
8. Why did Farel visit Calvin at his lodgings?
9. Why did Calvin refuse to help Farel at first?
10. How did God use Farel to convince Calvin that it was his duty to remain in Geneva?
11. How did Calvin spend his time during the first months?
12. How did Calvin defend the truth in Lausanne?
13. List two results of the debate in Lausanne.
14. What new rule did Calvin introduce concerning the Lord's Supper?
15. Under whose authority should church discipline be, according to Calvin?
16. How did the libertines oppose the administration of church discipline?
17. How were matters brought to a climax on Easter Sunday? Explain the circumstances.
18. Why were Farel and Calvin banished? Where did each of them go?

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Why did the words of Farel shake Calvin so much?
2. What might Calvin have expected if he refused to heed the Lord's calling? Which Biblical prophet declined to heed the Lord's calling?
3. Why is church discipline necessary?
4. Farel and Calvin were commanded to celebrate Holy Supper on Easter Sunday. Were they right to refuse to do so? Explain your answer.
5. List one Biblical figure who also protested that he was incompetent or too young for the work to which the Lord called him.

## REVIEW

Determine whether the following statements are true. If they are false, make the statement true. If they are true, tick them as true.

1. Luther's basic question was, "How will God obtain His honour?"
2. The Council banished Calvin and Farel because they refused to hold the Lord's Supper on Easter morning.
3. Farel fled to Basle and Calvin to Zurich.
4. The Catholic Cantons of Switzerland stopped the food supply of the Protestant cantons.
5. Viret drank from the cup of poison.
6. Zwingli opposed both celibacy and purgatory.
7. Zwingli believed in the doctrine of consubstantiation as Luther did.
8. Zwingli taught that bread and wine signify the body and blood of Christ.
9. Zwingli taught that the Lord's Supper is both a sign and a seal.
10. Nicholas Cop delivered a typically Catholic inaugural address as rector of the university.
11. Due to disagreement with the clergy, Calvin's father desired that Calvin study law.
12. The strappado was an instrument of the Inquisition, similar to the rack.
13. Calvin wrote The Institutes in Basle.
14. Calvin was an apologist.
15. The city of Basle sent Farel and Viret to Geneva.
16. The libertines opposed church discipline in Geneva.
17. Renata of Ferrara was a friend of the Reformation.
18. Calvin quoted the church fathers, Jerome and Ambrose, in refuting the Roman Catholics in Lausanne.
19. Church discipline must be administered lest the name of God be blasphemed.
20. Zwingli married Catherine von Bora, an escaped nun.
21. Zwingli opposed the abolishment of serfdom in Switzerland.
22. The spokesman for the bishop of Constance was John Farel.
23. Zwingli abolished both holy days and the popish mass in Zurich.
24. Zwingli publicly broke with the Roman Catholic Church and established the Swiss Reformed Church in Switzerland.
25. Zwingli died as a martyr.
26. Calvin was a chaplain at the age of 22 years.
27. The Duke of Ferrara attempted to deprive Geneva of its independence.
28. Strong drink was not permitted in Geneva after 8 pm.
29. In 1538 the Council of Geneva consisted mostly of libertines.
30. Calvin read the writings of Zwingli while in Paris.
31. Calvin studied theology at the University of Orleans.
32. Calvin fled from Paris, disguised as a peddler.

## RESEARCH TOPICS:

1. Read a biography of either John Calvin or Guillaume Farel. Prepare a report on some aspect of their lives not covered by your text.
2. Draw a map of Switzerland, divided into the various cantons. Place the major cities as mentioned in your text. Shade the areas which were Protestant.