

## 76. JOHN CALVIN (3): SECOND GENEVAN MINISTRY AND HIS STRUGGLE WITH THE LIBERTINES

While wickedness kept getting worse in Geneva, Calvin arrived in Basle. Soon he received a call from Strasbourg some 400 km north of Geneva. Due to the fierce persecutions in France, many Protestants fled to Strasbourg and joined the refugee congregation established there. Those refugees asked Calvin if he would come to Strasbourg as their shepherd and teacher. Calvin refused. Now that he is finally in Basle, he wants to remain in Basle.

However, they persevered. Three times he received a call from the French refugee congregation in Strasbourg, and finally, Calvin no longer dared to refuse. He accepted that call and moved to Strasbourg.

He spent three good years in that city. He cared for those poor refugees like a father.



*Saint-Nicolas Church, Strasbourg, where Calvin preached in 1538.*

His preaching encouraged and comforted them as Calvin understood what it was to be hunted and persecuted.

He visited them in their homes and discussed their difficulties with them. He also gave lessons and wrote various books.

Indeed, he was very productive in Strasbourg.



*Calvin and his wife Idelette van Buren*

During that time, he met and married a widow called Idelette Van Buren. Their marriage lasted for only nine years; then she died. She was a good wife for Calvin. When he was sick, and that happened quite often, because he was not strong, she lovingly nursed and cared for him.

Her first husband had died of the plague. She had two children by her first marriage. The children of her marriage with Calvin all died when very young. Some tell us that they had only one child. Others write about three children who all died at a young age. It was sad and tragic for Calvin when she died in 1549. By then Calvin was no longer in Strasbourg but in Geneva again, the city which had banished him.

### CALVIN RETURNS TO GENEVA

While living in Strasbourg, Calvin sought contact with the German protestants. He never met Luther but did meet his friend Melancthon. Those two theologians had in-depth conversations at a diet in Frankfurt. They parted as friends.

That friendship remained until Calvin died in 1554. But it never developed into a close relationship between the Lutherans and the Calvinists.

After the banishment of the Protestant ministers who had given guidance in Geneva, it went from bad to worse. The libertines rejoiced. They had gained the victory. Now they could give free rein to their wicked desires and continue their sinful lifestyle without restraint. The people did not respect the ministers who were still in Geneva. They were unable to restrain the spirit of wickedness which ruled the city.

True, there were still faithful people who deplored the fact that the libertines had banished Calvin and Farel, but they couldn't do anything about it. Calvin wrote a tender letter to those friends in Geneva, encouraging them to persevere and continue the struggle against the tidal wave of wickedness which engulfed the city.

However, the libertines held the majority, also in the city council, and they were in control. No, it did not go well. A French refugee even called Geneva 'Sodom'! The city was heading for ruin.

Another danger threatened the city: Rome is scheming to get Geneva back under her control. Remember how the papacy was abolished in 1535 by the protestant city council. Now Rome wants Geneva back again.



The 'peacemaker' Jacopo Sadoleto 1477-1547

Church which needed attention, but those issues could be talked about, and changes can be made, can't they? Only, Calvin was a man they had to watch out for. He was a dangerous man who would undoubtedly receive his punishment in hell.

*If a preacher is not first preaching to himself, better that he falls on the steps of the pulpit and breaks his neck than preaches that sermon.*

Joh Calvin

Such was the tone of this 'friendly' letter. Ah, Rome wanted the 'best' for Geneva. She would gladly spread her 'motherly' arms over Geneva. The Catholic clergy were *moved* with pity and would *love* to bring the poor, straying, and misguided city onto the right path again. But...

Cardinal Sadoleto did *not* write about the strappado which Rome used in France to torture and kill the martyrs! No, for Geneva, he only had sweet, flattering words, full of compassion.

That's why this letter was so dangerous!

The bird chirped with a sweet warble. That's how Rome tried to lure Geneva back into its net. They pretended to be ever so accomodating and friendly, but if their ruse succeeded, Rome would show her true colours: the stakes would smoke in Geneva and executioners would light the fires. 'Disobedient' sheep would face the strappado and other instruments of torture! That letter frightened the citizens of Geneva. Return to Rome?

Never!

Someone must answer that letter - but who? Nobody dared to tackle it.

There was only one man who could do it, and that was...Calvin. They travelled to Strasbourg to ask him if he would answer that 'sweet' letter, full of flattery and ... Calvin did! Six days he worked on that letter, and his answer was so clear and irrefutable that Sadoleto did not dare to write a second letter. Calvin's letter remained unanswered.

In the meantime, many citizens of Geneva became tired of the blatant wickedness in the city. This sinful lifestyle may not continue.

In 1540 they had already asked Calvin to come back as he was the only one who could again establish boundaries. But Calvin emphatically declined to return to Geneva. He was not *that* foolish! He was only too glad not to be in Geneva. Oh no, he wouldn't even think about it. However, Geneva persisted. In 1541 he received a second call. Calvin declined again. He did not want to

leave his beloved congregation in Strasbourg. He wrote back: "You should call Viret." But Viret was physically too weak to handle the stress. That task would demand too much of his energy. For the third time, some citizens of Geneva went to see him and begged him to come back. Farel sent a letter as well in which he sharply ordered Calvin in the name of Jesus Christ to go back to Geneva.

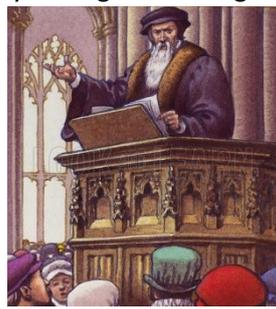
And yes, then it became too much for Calvin. He didn't dare to refuse. With a heavy heart, he promised to come. Great was the joy in Geneva when his decision became known, but the refugee congregation of Strasbourg was sad to see their beloved minister leave.

Calvin went, although leaving Strasbourg was difficult. He knew that many struggles awaited him. Calvin went in obedience to God, Who called him to that task. In September 1541 he entered Geneva again and was received with great joy. The council increased his salary to 500 Swiss florins per year, a substantial wage for those days. In addition, he would receive twelve measures of grain and two kegs of wine, and as proof of appreciation that Calvin had been willing to come, the council of Geneva had a new gown made for him. We would say: "He received a new suit!"

Calvin returned to Geneva, who would have ever imagined that? The man whom they had driven away so shamefully three years ago is back again! Nothing is impossible with God. He inclines the hearts according to His counsel.

### CALVIN RIGHTS MANY WRONGS.

The first time Calvin entered the pulpit, he continued his bible studies, where he left off three years ago (1538). Immediately he addressed the issues at hand, the sinful lifestyle of the libertines. At Calvin's advice, the city council issued new laws against lying, blasphemy,



*The first time Calvin entered the pulpit, he continued his bible studies, where he left off three years ago (1538).*

dishonouring parents, adultery, prostitution, dancing, gambling, visiting taverns and wilful neglect of the church services. Transgressors got severely punished.

Calvin drafted a new church order in which he addressed the need to separate the authority of the state (city council) and church, specifically regarding the authority to exercise church discipline. At first, the city council did not agree with that. They insisted that punishing sin is the task of the civil government (Rom 13). Calvin firmly opposed that thought. Only when church discipline fails, and the sinner shows no repentance, the civil magistrates may step in and apply *their* penalties. (Remember that the civil authorities of Geneva enforced church attendance.)

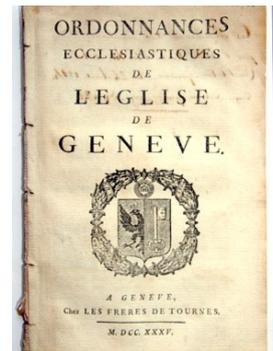
Calvin was entirely right in this. The authority to excommunicate a member belonged to the consistory, not to the city council.

Calvin wrote a catechism as well: '*The Genevan Catechism.*' The City council made sure that the people obeyed the new laws.

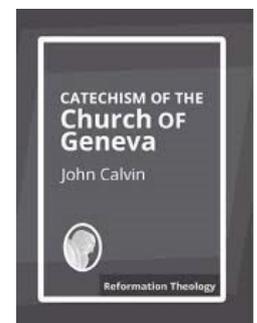
The libertines disagreed with all of this! They wanted to continue their sinful lifestyle.

A manufacturer of playing cards, who lost most of his income, abused Calvin and ridiculed the council of Geneva. Someone heard him and reported it. An officer promptly arrested the man. As punishment, he had to walk bareheaded, dressed in a penitential garment, with a burning torch in his hand, through the streets of Geneva. When he arrived at the marketplace, he had to kneel and ask for forgiveness.

The libertines were furious when they heard that! They stirred up the people. They shouted and threatened. The streets were full of tumultuous crowds.



*Calvin's church order*



*Calvin's catechism*

Fights started.

As soon as Calvin heard that, he rushed outside and tried to stop the fighting. That was courageous because it was very dangerous. The rage of the libertines now turned against him. They would have beaten him to death if his friends had not rescued him. Yet he was not deterred by this incident. He continued tirelessly, and severe penalties were enforced on those who transgressed the laws. For example:

One day a man and a woman were arguing so severely that the man began to beat up the woman. A passerby intervened, saying to the hotheaded man: "Man, you shouldn't do that, you should be ashamed of yourself!"

"What," roared the man, red with anger: "What, aren't I allowed to do that? Neither God, nor devil, nor authority, nor church can stop me." Terrible words, aren't they? An officer arrested and imprisoned him. Rightly so, he deserved that.

Another time a father and son went hunting. Because the son was not paying attention for a second, the fox they were chasing managed to escape. His dad became so angry he started swearing and cursing at his son. When that became known, he also was arrested and thrown into prison. For three days he received nothing but bread and water and also lost his hunting permit.

Three young workers had organised a party. They drank too much alcohol and became loud and violent, annoying the neighbours. Their punishment? In prison for three days on bread and water.

We could give many more examples, but these are enough to give us an impression of the situation in Geneva. The libertines knew no bounds. True, the punishments were severe, and Calvin was very strict, but he had to be, or nothing would ever change. In all this, Calvin sought God's honour and the wellbeing of his fellow men.

The libertines used every opportunity to heap ridicule and scorn on Calvin. Terrible! They branded him as a Cain!

Some called their dog 'Calvin' to insult him as deeply as they could. However, Calvin continued steadily in his daily task. He did not allow himself to be distracted by anything or anyone. He was immovable.

The libertines had the majority in Geneva's city council. One Sunday, the consistory stopped a libertine councillor from partaking in the Lord's Supper because he openly lived in sin.

That councillor refused to submit to the consistory's decision and eventually the city council got involved. They demanded that the consistory withdraw her decision and allow him to participate.

Calvin refused and warned them that if the councillor came to the table, he would be barred!

You can imagine the whole congregation waited tensely. How would this unfold? So much depended on it.



*Calvin refusing the Lord's supper*

When Calvin ascended the pulpit that Sunday morning, he looked pale but was determined to stand firm. Calvin *may* not give in because it concerns God's honour. The table is prepared, and Calvin invites the communicant members to come to the table. The tension in church mounts. Calvin serves Holy Supper and ... the libertine councillor does not come.

He was not even in church. The council of Geneva had secretly sent him a message that he must withhold himself from the table of the Lord. The morning service passes calmly and undisturbed.

In the afternoon, Calvin preaches again. His many hearers look up surprised and listen breathlessly.

No one has trouble with sleepiness because it sounds like Calvin is preaching his farewell. He warns the congregation seriously of the threatening danger and admonishes them to stand firm in the truth. He tells them that he has always worked for their welfare and salvation. It sounded like a farewell sermon!

The congregation senses Calvin's emotion, and it affects them. Is Calvin standing in the pulpit for the last time?

No.

Why then did he preach 'farewell' that Sunday afternoon?

Well, Calvin was expecting it to be the last time. He was counting on it that the council would banish him for the second time because he had defied them. That's why he preached his 'farewell'. He wanted to warn his congregation one last time. He expected a messenger from the city hall to come at any moment to bring the news that he must immediately leave the city. But it did not happen.

Although the counsellors did not like it that Calvin had not obeyed them, they did not dare to banish him again because they knew very well that he was the only man who was able to check the wickedness in the city.

Perhaps you think: "But the majority of the council was libertine! They are the ones who *want* the freedom to sin, don't they?"

True, but some libertines liked gaiety and little feasts, who did not think that drinking parties were so bad, but did not want it to go to the *extreme*. They were "*moderate*" libertines. They thought Calvin was far too strict and they opposed that, but they were happy that he fought the more severe and sinful behaviours. That's why those libertines did not banish him because then they would not be able to control the situation. It is true, they were enemies of Calvin, and yet they wanted to use him to keep things within bounds.

Calvin had no easy task in Geneva. That task was too heavy for him, but the Lord sustained him and gave him strength.

We must tell one more story.

### Calvin refused to admit a libertine to the Lord's table.

Even after Calvin had been preaching as pastor in St. Peter's church for over fifteen years, the immorality was a plague, even in the church. The Libertines boasted in their license. For them, the "communion of saints" meant the common possession of goods, houses, bodies, and wives. So, they practiced adultery and indulged in sexual promiscuity in the name of Christian freedom. And at the same time, they claimed the right to sit at the Lord's table. The crisis of the communion came to a head in 1553. A well-to-do Libertine named Berthelier was forbidden by the Consistory of the church to take part in the Lord's Supper but appealed the decision to the Council of the City, which overturned the ruling. This created a crisis for Calvin who would not think of yielding to the state the rights of excommunication, nor of admitting a Libertine to the Lord's table. The issue, as always, was the glory of Christ. He wrote to Viret, "I . . . took an oath that I had resolved rather to meet death than profane so shamefully the Holy Supper of the Lord. . . My ministry is abandoned if I suffer the authority of the Consistory to be trampled upon and extend the Supper of Christ to open scoffers. . . I should rather die a hundred times than subject Christ to such foul mockery" The Lord's day of testing arrived. The Libertines were present to eat the Lord's supper. It was a critical moment for the Reformed faith in Geneva. The sermon had been preached, the prayers had been offered, and Calvin descended from the pulpit to take his place beside the elements at the supper table. The bread and wine were duly consecrated by him, and he was now ready to distribute them to the communicants. Then suddenly a rush began begun by the troublemakers in the church in the direction of the supper table... Calvin flung his arms around the sacramental vessels as if to protect them from sacrilege, while his voice rang through the building: "These hands you may crush, these arms you may lop off, my life you may take, my blood is yours, you may shed it; but you shall never force me to give holy things to the profaned, and dishonour the table of my God." "After this," says Beza, Calvin's first biographer, "the sacred ordinance was celebrated with a profound silence, and under solemn awe in all present, as if the Deity Himself had been visible among them".

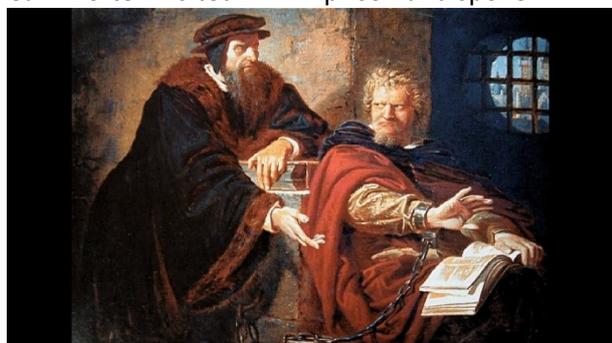
### MICHAEL SERVETUS

In 1553, a stranger walks through the gate into Geneva. That is nothing unusual. This stranger finds his lodgings. Soon some policemen enter his room and arrest him. They leave the inn and head straight for the prison building where he is locked up in a cell. What is going on, who is that stranger?

A thief?  
A robber?  
A murderer?  
No, none of those. This person is more dangerous still.  
He is a blasphemer!  
His name is Michael Servetus.

He was born in Spain. His father is Spanish, and his mother French. His parents allowed him to study, and he could learn exceptionally well. Soon he was the best student in the class. Eventually, Servetus became a great scholar, but he misused the intellect God had given him. He wrote books and delivered speeches in which he taught unscriptural and even blasphemous doctrines. He was a dangerous heretic. The Roman Catholic Inquisition had arrested him and condemned him to death. However, Servetus managed to escape from prison and fled to Geneva. As soon as Calvin heard that Servetus was in the city, he had him arrested. Calvin knew Servetus because he had met him before, and he had also read that wicked book he had written. If that man persisted in his errors, he was not allowed to live any longer.

Calvin often visited him in prison and spoke



*Calvin often visited him in prison*

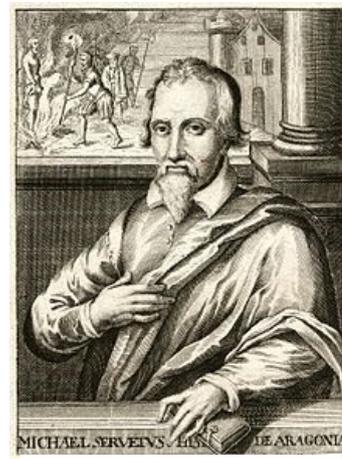
earnestly with him, encouraging him to repent. But he was not successful. He was insulted and abused by Michael Servetus. With gentleness and great patience, Calvin pointed out to him the wickedness of his actions and errors. But nothing helped. Servetus hurled the worst and most abusive names at him.

Just listen.

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<sup>1</sup> For more detail on this story see:  
<https://thefaith.org/2019/12/18/the-sad-story-of-michael-servetus-and-john-calvin/>

Red with anger he roared at Calvin: "Criminal, villain, liar, malicious quarrelsome fellow, ridiculous dwarf, you don't understand a thing! You don't know the truth. Aren't you ashamed of yourself? You lie, miserable scoundrel!" He continued in that vein for a while. Isn't that terrible? How dare he! He does not even want to listen to Calvin.



*Michael Servetus 1511-1553*

Servetus had friends among the libertines in Geneva, and he hoped that the city council of Geneva would free him. Even more, he secretly hoped that they would banish Calvin and that they would allow him, Servetus, to replace him. That's why he was so awfully rude to Calvin. If that had happened, the church of the Lord in Geneva would have perished. But God watched over His own for good. That which Servetus had secretly hoped and expected did not happen.

The council of Geneva asked for advice from various Reformed Swiss cities. All those cities promptly recommended that this dangerous, hardened, stubborn heretic should be put to death immediately so that he would no longer destroy the church of the Lord with his blasphemous doctrines.

Subsequently, the city council condemned Servetus to death on the stake<sup>1</sup>. When Calvin heard this, he tried to change the death penalty on the stake to death by the sword. The city council refused to change the punishment. That was disappointing. They could easily have changed it!

On 27 October 1553 Servetus was tied to the stake, and soon his body was consumed by the flames.

Calvin's opponents criticised him saying that he was no better than Rome with their persecutions. Even the Roman Catholic Church accused Calvin of being guilty of Servetus' death. It was very hypocritical of Rome to criticise Calvin as they persecuted, tortured and killed tens of thousands of followers of the Reformation. Besides, Calvin had not desired that death. He had done everything he possibly could to mitigate that death penalty. It was not his fault that he failed. The council of Geneva would not listen to him. Once again, it was a pity that they burned Servetus. It would have been better if they had listened to Calvin and had put him to death by the sword. However, it has happened, but nobody can blame Calvin, as he had tried to prevent this.

## QUESTIONS

1. Why did Calvin settle at Strasbourg?
2. Describe the work of Calvin in Strasbourg.
3. Identify Idelette Van Buren.
4. Describe Geneva under the libertine rule.
5. How did Rome attempt to regain control of Geneva?
6. List two reasons why the Genevans asked Calvin to return.
7. Why did Calvin return to Geneva when he knew trials awaited him there?
8. How did Calvin try to repress the wickedness within the city?
9. Under the new church order instituted by Calvin, the following became true. Tick the true statements:
  - a. The final authority in church matters rests with the civil government.
  - b. The final authority in church matters rests with the consistory.
  - c. When church discipline fails, civil authorities must apply physical or monetary punishment.
10. List three reasons why the punishments imposed upon the transgression of the laws were severe.
11. Why did the consistory refuse to allow the libertine councillor access to the Lord's Supper? How did the council react? How did Calvin resolve this?
12. Why wasn't Calvin banished a second time?
13. Summarise the life of Servetus before he arrived in Geneva.
14. Why was Servetus imprisoned?
15. What action did the council take regarding Servetus?

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Read Article 36 of the Confession of Faith and the accompanying footnote. Why isn't heresy punished by the state today? Should it be? Explain your answer.
2. How did the years in Strasbourg benefit Calvin?