

## 77. Calvin (4) HIS FINAL YEARS

**P**ersecution raged in France.  
Stakes smoked.  
The gallows were everywhere.  
Betrayal lurked in every town and city.  
The Roman Catholics hunted the French Protestants like wild animals.  
They weren't safe anywhere.

On the other side of the Alps, just over the border, we find the city of Geneva. No stakes smoked there, and people could freely go to church. No wonder that many fled from France across the border to find rest and safety in Geneva and other Swiss cities. Daily refugees arrived in Geneva, having been driven out of their homes. Many of them had watched their beloved relatives cruelly put to death. They had escaped by the skin of their teeth. When they finally entered the city, worn out by misery and deprivation, they were kindly welcomed and cared for. Many decided to stay in Geneva and received Genevan citizenship. That meant that they could also vote in city council elections. Those French refugees would all vote against the libertines because they loathed the wickedness, they witnessed every day.

### 1555-ELECTIONS IN GENEVA

A turnaround happened in 1555 when council elections returned a pro-Calvin majority, and the libertines lost heavily. With their vote, the many French refugees firmly established the Reformation in Geneva, and the influence of, and respect for Calvin grew, and life became a bit easier for Calvin. Here we again see the golden thread of God's reign. The libertines in the city could no longer have it their way; now they had to submit to the laws of the new council.

But great dangers also threatened from outside Geneva. Powerful enemies surrounded the city: the pope, and in him the entire Roman Catholic Church, was one of the greatest enemies because he could not bear it that the light of the

Reformation was shining brightly in Geneva. They grasped at any opportunity to douse this light.

The kings of France and Spain, representing two powerful kingdoms, were also mortal enemies of Geneva. If these kings worked together, it would be easy to squash this protestant stronghold. This danger was real!

But the great heavenly King of His church ruled and watched. Those two powerful Roman Catholic monarchs did not trust each other, so nothing came of an alliance against Geneva. Their mutual jealousy prevented a war against Geneva. If that *had* happened, then humanly speaking, the city would be lost. Here we see the Lord's protecting hand. Not Rome, not the kings of Spain or France but God, the Lord, rules! Unhindered, Calvin could continue his work.

### CALVIN'S CONCERN FOR HIS SHEEP

One day we peep into Calvin's study. We see the great reformer sitting there, resting his head on his hand. He is pale and thin. At times he sighs deeply, and his eyes fill with tears.

Why, what's wrong?

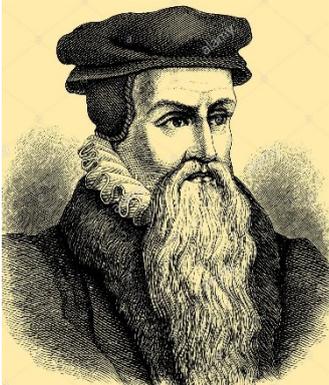
Did the libertines get the majority in the council again and are they making life difficult for him? No, not at all! Something else is worrying him...

In 1559 Calvin founded a university in Geneva to train young men for the ministry. Theodore Beza,



Calvin's university, established in 1559

a God-fearing man, became principal of that new school. Theodore was born in France in 1519. He was born into a noble family, and his father was a royal governor. He could study and became a



Theodore Beza 1519-1605

great scholar. God also opened *his* eyes for the deep corruption of the Roman Catholic Church. After fleeing France, he became a professor in the Swiss city of Lausanne and came to Geneva in 1590.

He became a great friend of Calvin and later succeeded him.

Many young men attended that uni. When this uni first opened, 162 students enrolled. The number increased every year, and in 1564, the year Calvin died, some 1500 students had enrolled. The students learned the ancient languages, Greek, Latin and Hebrew, Bible studies, confessions, and church order. In short, they became trained and qualified ministers.

Some famous men studied there: Marnix of Sainte Aldegonde, well-known in Dutch history, John Knox, the reformer of Scotland and Olivianus, one of the authors of our Heidelberg Catechism. What a blessing this university has been to many. When those young men finished their studies, they were sent to France, Belgium, The Netherlands and other countries. Full of courage and zeal they left.

However, soon news trickled back to Calvin, sad news.

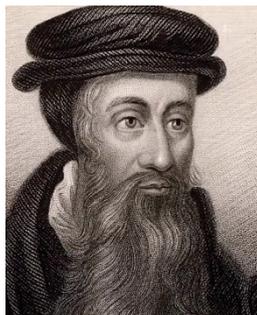
One new minister was arrested by the Inquisition and burned.

Another sighs in prison and got tortured. So many, who cheerfully left Geneva, never returned.

Rome raged against those Calvinist



Marnix van St Aldegonde



John Knox



Caspar Olivianus

ministers with unequalled cruelty. God alone knows how many became martyrs.

That's why Calvin was so sad and sighed so deeply. He had just received the news that the Inquisition had arrested two promising, young, ministers. Was this not enough to make one depressed?

"O God," he groaned, "may I continue with this work? You know how many strong young, men are sent to their deaths." Understandably, Calvin shuddered at times. He was safe in Geneva, but as soon as his students crossed the border, they were in danger of their life every moment. Treachery lurked everywhere. Danger threatened everywhere. They died as martyrs in all sorts of terrible ways. And yet it was not cowardice that kept Calvin in Geneva. He had often shown that he was no coward.

But Calvin could not be spared in Geneva. His task and calling lay there. He was the driving force behind everything. He was the man on whom everything depended.

In those anxious moments, the Lord strengthened him. He received courage and strength from God to keep going in his seemingly hopeless task. Although many were martyred, many survived as well and spread the gospel.

*No Calvin, your work is not in vain!*

The labour of those who survived bore fruit, much fruit.

That's why Calvin *must* continue with his work. That's why he *must* persevere in his God-given task. But it was not always easy for him.

No, we will not worship him, but we must acknowledge the Lord for what He has given us in

John Calvin.

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## CALVIN, A MAN WITH SPECIAL GIFTS

He has been a man of exceptional significance in God's Church. The enormous amount of work this man has been able to accomplish in his short life (55 years old) is nothing short of amazing and incredible. He gave himself completely in the service of God's Kingdom. Especially in Geneva: He worked day and night.

He preached every day.

He taught theology at the university.

He faithfully visited the sick in his congregation.

Every day he had 'visiting hours' to advise people who asked for his help. He attended and conducted numerous meetings.

He wrote many books, from commentaries to pamphlets.

He wrote hundreds and hundreds of letters to government officials, consistories, and anybody else who asked for his advice.

If the Lord had not strengthened Calvin, he would never have been able to do it all. Amazingly, he did all this work while suffering ill health: gout plagued him, as well as kidney stones, fever and arthritis, severe headaches, and intense stomach aches after every meal. Eventually, tuberculosis attacked his badly weakened body. Add to this list the spiritual tension to which he was exposed continuously: the struggle with the libertines and the mockery and scorn which they flung at him, the persecution, and the narrow shaves with death. If he had had an iron constitution, we could understand him handling a heavy workload. But the opposite was true. During his younger years, his health had received a blow because he studied till far in the night. And later, he never allowed himself any rest. His doctor repeatedly prescribed rest for him, but he had no time to rest. Sometimes he was irritable, which was understandable; he was human like all of us.

When we know all this, we can only be astonished that he managed to do so much. He demanded the impossible of himself.

It is not surprising that he was old before his time.

In all his labour, he sought the honour of God and the well-being of the church. That was his life's

motto: *'My heart I offer to You o LORD, promptly and sincerely'.*

He worked for unity in the church, but never at the expense of the truth. He would have gladly seen the German and Swiss churches united. But he was not successful in that. The great stumbling block



*My heart I offer to You  
o LORD, promptly and  
sincerely'*

was Luther's teaching of consubstantiation. Calvin was not allowed to agree with a doctrine that says that the Lord Jesus was bodily present in the bread and wine. That's why all his attempts to unite those churches failed.

Calvin took care of every aspect of God's church. Calvin fought for freedom for the church. The church had to be free to preach the true doctrine and exercise church discipline. With tooth and nail, Calvin opposed the interference of the state in ecclesiastical matters. He showed church and state the boundaries of their authority.

## CALVIN CHANGED THE LITURGY

It was customary to have various choirs in the Roman Catholic Church. The choir boys did the singing, instead of congregational singing. Calvin changed this: he abolished those choirs and replaced it with congregational singing. With the help of others, he put some psalms to rhyme. He realized the great importance of communal singing of psalms. The Lord used that congregational singing of the psalms for the comfort and encouragement of His people.

Calvin removed images, crosses, and candles from the church buildings because all those things obscured the sound preaching of the Word. He also had organs removed from churches as they had too prominent a place in the Roman Catholic worship.

## CALVINS DEATH

The year 1564 drew near. Calvin's health deteriorated rapidly. In February that year he preached for the last time. He became progressively weaker. Two months later, in April, he went to church for the last time. He could not walk anymore, but friends carried him there. They celebrated Holy Supper that morning. With trembling hands, he took the bread and wine. There, he again saw and confessed that he was saved by grace alone.



*The city councillors farewell Calvin*

No, we do not elevate him to sainthood as Rome does to so many. Rome teaches that saints are holy in and of *themselves*, but that is a lie. True, in God's Word believers are called saints, that is holy (set apart) *in Christ*.

When he felt his end was near, he farewelled the ministers and wished to attend one more city council meeting to farewell the councillors, but that was not necessary. The council made it easy for him. They visited his house instead to bid him farewell. You can be sure that that was a moving moment. His old friend Farel also came to his deathbed to encourage him.



*Farel farewells Calvin*

undoubtedly say: "The memory of the just is blessed." His doctrine, often referred to as Calvinism, spread all over the world.

Indeed, God delivered His church out of the darkness of Rome's false doctrine. Is that still understood today? How many Calvinists in our days are in league with Rome and dare to say that they share their faith with Rome? What do you think?

## QUESTIONS

1. How did the libertines lose ground in Geneva?
2. How did God spare Geneva from attack by the French and Spanish?
3. Identify Theodore Beza.
4. Describe the education received at the University in Geneva.
5. List and identify three famous students of this university.
6. How did God use the students of this university? What trials did they endure?
7. List the many duties of Calvin in Geneva.
8. How did these duties undermine his health? What further factors helped to undermine his health?
9. Why did no union occur between Lutheran and Calvinist churches?
10. What does the expression "freedom for the church" mean?
- 11 How do we use organs in our church services?

12. How did Calvin simplify the church service?

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

1. What is the ecumenical movement today?  
What is its danger?
2. Is simplicity in the church service a characteristic of most religious services today?  
Explain.
3. Should Calvin have united with Luther despite the difference regarding their views on the Lord's Supper? Explain.

## LAST DAYS OF CALVIN'S LIFE

On the 19th of May, two days before the Pentecostal communion, Calvin invited the ministers of Geneva to his house and asked to be carried from his bedchamber into the adjoining dining-room. Here he said to the company: "This is the last time I shall meet you at table,"—words that made a sad impression on them. He then offered up a prayer, took a little food, and conversed as cheerfully as was possible under the circumstances. Before the repast was quite finished he had himself carried back to his bed-room, and on taking leave said, with a smiling countenance: "This wall will not hinder my being present with you in spirit, though absent in body."

From that time he never rose from his bed, but he continued to dictate to his secretary. Farel, then in his eightieth year, came all the way from Neuchâtel to bid him farewell, although Calvin had written to him not to put himself to that trouble. He desired to die in his place. Ten days after Calvin's death, Farel wrote to Fabri (June 6, 1564): "Oh, why was not I taken away in his place, while he might have been spared for many years of health to the service of the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ! Thanks be to Him who gave me the exceeding grace to meet this man and to hold him against his will in Geneva, where he has laboured and accomplished more than tongue can tell. In the name of God, I then pressed him and pressed him again to take upon himself a burden which appeared to him harder than death, so that he at times asked me for God's sake to have pity on him and to allow him to serve God in a manner which suited his nature. But when he recognized the will of God, he sacrificed his own will and accomplished more than was expected from him, and surpassed not only others, but even himself. Oh, what a glorious course has he happily finished!"

Calvin spent his last days in almost continual prayer, and in quoting comforting sentences of Scripture, mostly from the Psalms. At times he suffered excruciating pains. He was often heard to exclaim: "I mourn as a dove" (Isa. 38:14); "I was dumb, I opened not my mouth; because thou didst it" (Ps. 39:9); "Thou bruise me, O Lord, but it is enough for me that it is Thy hand." His voice was broken by asthma, but his eyes remained bright, and his mind clear and strong to the last. He admitted all who wished to see him but requested that they should rather pray for him than speak to him.

On the day of his death he spoke with less difficulty. He fell peacefully asleep with the setting sun towards eight o'clock and entered the rest of his Lord. "I had just left him," says Beza, "a little before, and on receiving information from the servants, immediately hastened to him with one of the brethren. We found that he had already died, and so very calmly, without any convulsion of his feet or hands, that he did not even fetch a deeper sigh. He had remained perfectly sensible and was not entirely deprived of utterance to his very last breath. Indeed, he looked much more like one sleeping than death.

<https://zwingliusredivivus.wordpress.com/2015/05/27/the-last-days-of-john-calvin-and-his-death>