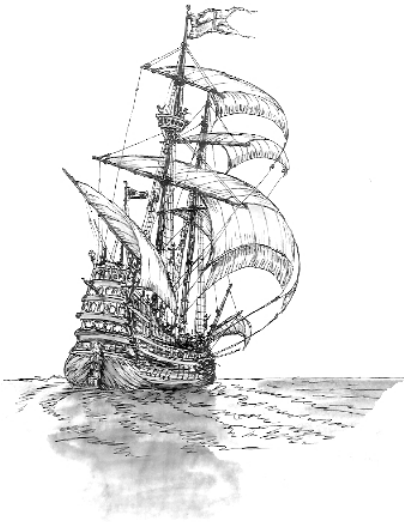


CALVIN 500 SERIES

500th Anniversary of the Birth of JOHN CALVIN
(10 July 1509 – 27 May 1564)



#1: The Admiral Of The Reformation Fleet



The Protestant Reformation, with its most memorable scene that of Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenburg, Germany, was ...

- God purging a polluted Church;
- God vindicating His own honour and spreading His glory in the earth;
- God peeling back the covers of darkness that had surrounded the people throughout the Dark and Middle Ages and permitting the light of His glorious gospel to illuminate the hearts and minds of men again.

Or, if we were to change the picture and use some maritime imagery, then the Reformation (from a human point of view) was a flotilla of chosen vessels, both large and small, equipped by heaven, that set sail across the seas of heresy and sin, to:

- launch an invasion against the forces of Satan,
- and install the crimson banners of the crosswork of Jesus Christ on citadel after citadel formerly occupied by the devil's hordes across Europe.

Many events were going on in the C16th that set the stage for the Reformation.

1) The world was changing.

- Royal power was growing (the feudal system diminishing), centralised monarchies were forming, and nations were emerging;

- Money economies were beginning (massive quantities of gold and silver flooded Europe, causing people, especially the British, Dutch, Italians and Germans, to become money-mad);

- Tremendous changes in medicine, mathematics, and physics were under way (1543 marked the origin of the Scientific Revolution - this was the year Copernicus published his 'De Revolutionibus' and set in motion a wave of scientific advance that would culminate with Newton at the end of the 17th century);

- a New World (America) was discovered at the end of the C15th.

Change was in the atmosphere ... globally!

2) The church was corrupt.

The Papacy and upper clergy were political and greed-filled. Simony (selling of church offices) was common. The pope had resorted to indulgences sales to fund the building of St. Peter's in Rome. The church, as an ostentatious and greedy place, contrasted sharply with Jesus of Nazareth's simple lifestyle.

The clergy had become lax, corrupt and immoral and the people began to take notice that the sacraments were shrouded in complacency and indifference.

[John Calvin, commenting on the plea for revival in Psalm 85:5-7:](#)

"Wilt Thou be angry with us for ever? wilt Thou draw out Thine anger to all generations? 6 Wilt Thou not revive us again: that Thy people may rejoice in Thee? 7 Shew us Thy mercy, O LORD, and grant us Thy salvation," [stated:](#)

"First, then, the question is not whether the Church suffers from many and grievous diseases, for this is admitted even by all moderate judges; but whether the diseases are of a kind whose cure admits of no longer delay

We maintain to start with that, when God raised up Luther and others, who held forth a torch to light us into the way of salvation and in whose ministry our churches are founded and built ... the use of the sacraments was polluted, and the government of the church was tyrannical" ('Necessity of Reforming the Church').

3) People were becoming literate - and wanted to read the scriptures.

The printing press, perfected by the moveable type of Gutenberg in 1451, had created the ability to produce books cheaply and in greater quantities. The printing press existed in over 200 cities by the end of the C15th, and half of the six million books printed were religious.

4) Pre-reformers, and early reformers had paved the way.

- John Wycliffe in England sought to translate the Bible into English (1320-1384);

- Jan Hus in Bohemia (1369-1415);

- Savonarola in Italy (1452-98);

- LeFevre in France (1435-1536);
- Erasmus (Netherlands 1466-1536) (who refused to join the Lutherans, or affirm the Catholics - Calvin did not criticise him as Luther did);
- Martin Luther (Germany 1483-1546);
- Ulrich Zwingli (Zurich, Switzerland 1484-1531);
- The Albigenses (12th and 13th century France);
- and Waldenses (who eventually joined the Reformed movement).

5) The fall of Constantinople brought waves of scholars into Europe who reminded the Westerners to get back to the original sources, and this also spurred the Renaissance.

All these things - and more - produced a suitable environment for a John Calvin to be used of God. The stage was set for the actor to come on the scene.

“Actor,” did I say?

I should have used the term, “Admiral.” Because, even allowing for Martin Luther being a prominent member of this fleet, John Calvin was in the foremost ship.

The Admiralty was formerly the authority in the United Kingdom responsible for the command of the Royal Navy. Originally exercised by a single person, the office of Lord High Admiral was from the C18th onward almost invariably put “in commission” and was exercised by a Board of Admiralty.

[1] JOHN CALVIN – HIS ADMIRALTY.

To confer this title on Calvin is not to take glory from God (this would be the last thing John Calvin could be accused of doing). He is forever the sole King and Head of His Church – but as far as the regular ‘fishermen’ who swell the ranks of that Church are concerned, Calvin is properly regarded as an “Admiral” among them.

(a) HIS STATURE.

“Many Presbyterians greet the news that 2009 will mark the 500th anniversary of John Calvin’s birth with a yawn, a roll of the eyes, or even a derisive snort,” is the comment of one author (Small).

“Why are we so dismissive of our forebear in the Reformed tradition?”

- *Lutherans adore Martin Luther.*
- *Methodist hearts are strangely warmed by John Wesley.*
- *Anglicans even have a sardonic fondness for Henry VIII.*

- But Presbyterians are uncertain about John Calvin and his legacy. Calvin is not a Reformed idol."

Nor should anyone treat him that way. But Presbyterians can still recognise and appreciate how he molded Reformed churches and how his legacy continues to shape them today.

He laboured to make the Scriptures understandable through regular preaching. He brought education to the masses even as he trained ministers. He developed theologically informed ethics that undergirded emerging Western political structures. Sadly, few recognise this influence today.

It has been said:

"It is hard to put one's arms around Calvin; it is like putting one's arms around the Pacific Ocean."

Without question, Calvin's influence towers over all.

- Schaff identifies the Reformation as the second most important event to Christ's life itself, and at the centre of the Reformation stands John Calvin; the greatest theologian since the apostles, and the greatest influence on the church since Peter and Paul.
- Spurgeon said that, among all those born of women, there has not arisen one greater than Calvin.

During our recent holiday in Spain, my family took a ride on 'Magnus Colossus' – a wooden roller coaster in Terra Mítica.

Official statistics (there is a roller coaster database!) reveal the following details about this ride:

Length: 3772'
Drop: 118'
Speed: 57.2 mph

'Magnus Colossus' is a good name for it!

And this, too, would be a fair description of John Calvin!

How did God bring this about? By what means did He propel this man forward and equip him for the elevation to which he ascended?

(b) HIS SCHOOLING.

John Calvin was born July 10, 1509, in Noyon, France, (when Martin Luther was 25 years old and had just begun to teach the Bible in Wittenberg).

He was born into a staunch Roman Catholic family, and a quick scan of his 'family tree' will reveal that he came from lowly stock.

- His paternal grandfather was a barrel-maker and boatman,

- his mother's father an innkeeper,

- however, his own father, Gerard, had improved his lot in life to become a successful lawyer. His practice brought him into the society of the local gentry and cathedral clergy. In fact, the local bishop employed Calvin's father as an administrator in the town's cathedral.

John received a 'side benefit' from these connections: he was to be educated privately with the sons of the aristocratic De Montmors (therefore John's playmates and classmates in Noyon (and later in Paris) were aristocratic and culturally influential in his early life), and as a result of those church connections, he was also to be given one or two chaplaincies in the cathedral (effectively university grants).

STUDIES FOR PRIESTHOOD

Gerard planned a career in the church for his son. He wanted him to become a priest.

The path to this career lay through the University of Paris. There he would take the arts course and then go on to the nine years of study for the theological doctorate. After that, he would trust the De Montmors' patronage and his own talents to reach the higher levels of preferment.

So, when he was 14 (some say 12), his father sent him to Paris to study theology, first at the College de Marche in preparation for university study. His studies there consisted of seven subjects: grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. Toward the end of 1523 Calvin transferred to the more famous College Montaigu.

Although the new theological teachings of individuals like Martin Luther and Jacques Lefevre d'Etapes were spreading throughout Paris, Calvin was closely tied to the Roman Church, studying at institutions which, at that time, were untouched by the Reformation in Germany, steeping his mind in Medieval theology.

While in Paris he changed his name to its Latin form, *Ioannis Calvinus*, which in French became Jean Calvin. During this time, Calvin's education was paid for in part by income from a couple of small parishes.

The arts course was almost completed by the mid-1520s.

Calvin had proved himself to be an excellent scholar, a good Latinist, proficient in the philosophy taught in those days, and qualified to take up the intensive study of theology.

CHANGE OF PLAN

But suddenly all the plans fell through. When Calvin was 19, his father Gerard had a major dispute with the church, changed his mind about his son's vocation and told him to leave theology and study law.

John, dutiful son that he was, submitted to this change of plan, and the next five or six years saw him at the University of Orleans and Bourges, attaining some distinction in his new field of study.

The effects of the Renaissance - a new approach to the arts and scholarship; a revolution in thinking and taste - were by this time apparent all over Europe.

- Greek was steadily making its way as a necessity and not a mere ornament in the scholar's equipment.

- Printing presses were supplying cheap editions of the Greek and Latin classics.

- There were already half-a-dozen editions of the Greek New Testament and as many of the Hebrew Old Testament - some of the results of "the divine art of printing," as Bullinger called it.

It was a revolution almost as great as that which has occurred in our own day, corresponding to the personal computer, word processing, desktop publishing, CAD (computer-aided-design) programmes.

Calvin, too, came under the influence of the Renaissance. During these years Calvin:

- mastered Greek, and, a little later, Hebrew,
- developed a taste for good writing,
- read widely in the classics,
- added Plato to the Aristotle he already knew,
- and he completed his law course.

His father died in May of 1531, when Calvin was 21.

Calvin felt free then to turn from law to his first love, which had become the classics. He published his first book, a Commentary on a Latin treatise 'De Clementia' by the Roman philosopher, Seneca. This first book was published in 1532, when he was 23 years old.

However, during those years when he was studying law, a more profound influence than that of the Renaissance had overtaken him.

By the mid-1520s Martin Luther's position was clear. In many countries Luther had a strong following and his friends were making use of the easy dissemination of ideas by printing to reach a wider audience. There were also "Lutherans" in Paris and in Orleans.

And Calvin met them!

It is known that by 1527 Calvin had developed friendships with individuals who were reform-minded, bringing him into contact with the message and the spirit of the Reformation

(c) SALVATION.

We do not know the exact time or the precise circumstances of Calvin's conversion to the evangelical faith. Evidently, for Calvin himself, the important thing was not when it happened or how it happened, but the change itself and the results of the change.

What we do know is that by the year 1533 something dramatic had happened in his life to pitch John Calvin among the ranks of those who were wholly devoted to Christ and to the cause of the Reformation.

He befriended Nicolas Cop, the rector of the Collège Royal in Paris. This friendship resulted in trouble for Calvin when Cop preached at the opening of the winter term at the University of Paris and was branded a heretic after calling for reform in the Catholic Church, and called to account by the Parliament for his Lutheran-like doctrines.

Cop fled the city to Basel, and Calvin was forced from Paris. The connection with Cop was so close that some suspect Calvin actually wrote the message that Cop delivered.

The controversy expanded when, on the evening of October 18, 1534[?], anonymous attacks against the Mass were posted on public buildings, fueling the violence in the city. A general persecution broke out against what King Francis I called, “the cursed Lutheran sect.”

So, by 1533, Calvin had definitely crossed the line to embrace the Reformed Faith.

Calvin very seldom talked about himself; but he writes about his conversion in the preface to his commentary on the Psalms:

“God drew me from obscure and lowly beginnings and conferred on me that most honorable office of herald and minister of the Gospel What happened first was that by an unexpected conversion he tamed to teachableness a mind too stubborn for its years—for I was strongly devoted to the superstitions of the Papacy that nothing less could draw me from such depths of mire. And so this mere taste of true godliness that I received set me on fire with such a desire to progress that I pursued the rest of my studies more coolly, although I did not give them up altogether. Before a year had slipped by anybody who longed for a purer doctrine kept on coming to learn from me, still a beginner and a raw recruit.”

Much more clear are comments that Calvin made later, as he describes how he had been struggling to live out the Catholic faith with zeal, and then had experienced a sudden and unexpected conversion:

“... When, lo, a very different form of doctrine started up, not one which led us away from the Christian profession, but one which brought it back to its fountain ... to its original purity. Offended by the novelty, I lent an unwilling ear, and at first, I confess, strenuously and passionately resisted ... to confess that I had all my life long been in ignorance and error

I at length perceived, as if light had broken in upon me, in what a sty of error I had wallowed, and how much pollution and impurity I had thereby contracted. Being exceedingly alarmed at the misery into which I had fallen ... [I] made it my first business to betake myself to thy way [O God], condemning my past life, not without groans and tears.

God, by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with [an] intense desire to make progress.”

Evidently, Calvin was a genuine believer who had been converted by the true Gospel.

This caused his soul to cry out:

**O Christ, He is the Fountain,
The deep, sweet well of love ...!**

Calvin's Prayer at the end of his commentary on **Jeremiah 17** further reveals his mind on salvation: *"Grant, Almighty God, that as we are wholly nothing and less than nothing, we may know our nothingness, and having cast away all confidence in the world as well as in ourselves, we may learn to flee to thee as suppliants, and so put our trust in thee for our present life and for eternal salvation, that thou alone mayest be glorified."*

Never could it be alleged of John Calvin that he was half-hearted in his Christianity; he was a totally committed Christian – in his own words, *"inflamed with [an] intense desire to make progress."*

CALVIN'S SEAL

It is interesting to note that he later adopted a personal seal - his logo - that signified his willingness to sacrifice all to the service of the Lord. This seal pictured a burning heart in a hand reaching up to Heaven, and was accompanied by this motto: *"Promptly and Sincerely in the work of God."*

[This was an emblem of Calvin's heart towards God.](#)

And his service was nothing short of whole-hearted!

(d) SERVICE.

What form would his ministry take?

Calvin knew what *he* wanted.

He wanted the enjoyment of literary ease to promote the Reformed faith as a literary scholar. That is what he thought he was cut out for by nature. But God had radically different plans - as he has had for many of us.

When persecution arose in Paris, Calvin escaped and was forced into hiding – here and there, throughout France. Eventually, he had to leave the country altogether. He found refuge in Basel, Switzerland, between 1534 and 1536.

The Institutes, then Geneva

To redeem the time "he devoted himself to the study of Hebrew."

[Then, in March of 1536, he published the first edition of the 'Institutes'](#) – the book with which his name will always be associated— 'Calvin's Institutes.' This production would go through five enlargements until its final (and present) form in 1559.

The word "Institutes" does not convey much to us.

It would be better to translate the title as, 'Principles of the Christian Faith,' or, 'Instruction in the Christian Faith.'

This book was intended as an elementary manual for general readers who wanted to know something about the evangelical faith. The first part of the title expressed this aim: "The Principles of the Christian Faith, containing almost the whole sum of godliness and whatever it is necessary to know about saving doctrine."

Calvin later wrote that, when he undertook the work, "*all I had in mind was to hand on some elementary teaching by which anyone who had been touched by an interest in religion might be formed to true godliness. I laboured at the task especially for our own Frenchmen, for I saw that many were hungering and thirsting after Christ and yet that only a very few had any real knowledge of him.*"

MAJOR DISAGREEMENTS

The first three chapters take up 81 pages, in the 1536 edition. They form the heart of the book. Between the Roman Catholics and the Reformers, there were three major disagreements:

- on the Church,
- the Sacraments,
- and Justification.

The last had already been fully explained, and the first was kept for the final chapter. Two chapters were given to discussion of the Sacraments of the Roman Church not recognised by the Reformers. These two chapters, with 106 pages, are longer because the subject was so important. Into the final chapter are packed three topics: Christian liberty, the authority of the Church, and political government.

The fact that the length of the last three chapters is double that of the first three indicates a second purpose of the book. This was to make clear to non-evangelicals, whether strong Roman Catholics or Renaissance "humanists," where the Reformation stood doctrinally. Ridiculous ideas were current, identifying the Reformers with various ancient heresies, with extreme and anarchistic Anabaptists, and with moral permissiveness. Calvin, therefore, wrote the 'Institutio' as a confession of the faith of evangelicals, showing their orthodoxy to the great creeds, their loyalty to established political order, and their acceptance of the moral demands of God's law. There should have been no need after this for anyone who could understand Latin to plead ignorance of the Reformation faith.

Years later he tells us about another obligation that he felt press upon him as he wrote his Institutes:

"But lo! while I lay hidden at Basel, and known only to few people, many faithful and holy persons were burnt alive in France It appeared to me, that unless I opposed [the perpetrators] to the utmost of my ability, my silence could not be vindicated from the charge of cowardice and treachery. This was the consideration which induced me to publish my Institutes of the Christian Religion It was published with no other design than that men might know what was the faith held by those whom I saw basely and wickedly defamed."

So when you hold the Institutes of John Calvin in your hand, remember that theology, for John Calvin, was forged in the furnace of burning flesh, and that Calvin could not sit idly by without some effort to vindicate the faithful and the God for whom they suffered. I am persuaded that we would do our theology better today if more were at stake in what we said.

In 1536, France gave a temporary amnesty to those who had fled. Calvin returned, put his things in order and left, never to return, taking his brother Antoine and sister Marie with him.

He intended to go to free city of Strasbourg and continue his life of peaceful literary production. But he wrote later to a friend, *“I have learned from experience that we cannot see very far before us. When I promised myself an easy, tranquil life, what I least expected was at hand.”*

PROVIDENTIAL ROADBLOCK

A war between Charles V and Francis I resulted in troop movements that blocked the road to Strasbourg. Calvin and his little company had to take a detour into what we now call Switzerland, and then approach Strasbourg from the south. They got to Geneva, a safe town for them, since it had declared for the Reformation a month or two earlier. Here they put up at an inn for the night, intending to resume their journey in the morning.

However, before the evening was out, it had come to the ears of the fiery leader of the Reformation in the city of Geneva, William Farel, that the author of the ‘Institutio’ was in the city.

Farel was beside himself with work and worry, as he strove to organise and establish a newly formed church. Organising was not his strong point, and he only had a small number of helpers. Now, (as he viewed the situation), he had been given a man who would prove an ideal assistant.

Straight to the inn went Farel. He offered Calvin the role of assistant. Calvin, however, was obdurate. He was a scholar, a writer, not a pastor or administrator. William Farel would have to find someone else. Calvin was headed for Strasbourg in the morning.

At last Farel, baffled and frustrated, swore a great oath that God would curse all Calvin’s studies unless he stayed in Geneva.

Calvin had always had a tender conscience, and now, *“I felt as if God from heaven had laid his mighty hand upon me to stop me in my course ... and I was so terror stricken that I did not continue my journey.”*

It was a meeting that changed the course of John Calvin’s entire life – and of history, not just for Geneva, but for the world.

History is full of “what ifs.” If there had not been troop movements and skirmishes blocking the route to Strasbourg, if they had reached Strasbourg in a day or two, and if Calvin had settled there for life, the history of Europe, England, and America would have been vastly different. In retrospect one has to marvel at the providence of God that he should so arrange armies to position his pastors where He would.

Never again would Calvin work in what he called the “tranquility of studies.” From now on, every page of the forty-eight volumes of books and tracts and sermons and commentaries and letters that he wrote would be hammered out on the anvil of pastoral responsibility.

IN GENEVA

He took up his responsibilities in Geneva first as Professor of Sacred Scripture, and within four months was appointed Pastor of St. Peter’s church - one of the three parishes in the 10,000-person town of Geneva.

In everything that followed, this belief that God had called him to work here, and not somewhere else, never wavered.

This belief was challenged only once. He and Farel were banished from Geneva eighteen months later (in April of 1538). The City Council was not altogether happy with Farel or Calvin because they did not bow to all their wishes. Calvin breathed a sigh of relief and thought God was mercifully releasing him from the crush of pastoral duties so he could give himself once again to his studies.

STRASBOURG

But when Martin Bucer found out about Calvin’s availability, he did the same thing to get him to Strasbourg that Farel had done to get him to Geneva.

Calvin wrote, *“that most excellent servant of Christ, Martin Bucer, employing a similar kind of remonstrance and protestation as that to which Farel had recourse, before, drew me back to a new station. Alarmed by the example of Jonah which he set before me, I still continued in the work of teaching.”*

His ministry in Strasbourg turned out to be the happiest period of his life.

- For three years Calvin served as the pastor to about 500 French refugees in Strasbourg, as well as teaching New Testament;
- He also wrote his first commentary, on the book of Romans,
- and put out the second enlarged edition of the ‘Institutes.’

INSTITUTES EXPANDED

Since 1536, Calvin had been doing some hard reading, especially in the Church fathers. He had also been doing some hard theological thinking and had the benefit of stimulating discussions with other theologians. He realised the ‘Institutio’ needed more breadth.

He now put it out with the unashamed claim of presenting a comprehensive statement of “well-nigh the whole sum of our wisdom, worth calling true and solid wisdom.” This was not so much a revision as a rewriting, though with much of the earlier material incorporated into it.

- The six chapters swelled to seventeen.
- The catechism form was abandoned, in favour of a broader treatment centering loosely round the concept of wisdom, with its two parts – the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves.

But now for a 'romantic interlude'

MARRIAGE

Perhaps the most important providence during this three-year stay in Strasbourg was finding a wife. Several had tried to get Calvin a wife. He was 31 years old and numerous women had shown interest. Calvin had told his friend and matchmaker William Farel what he wanted in a wife: *"The only beauty which allures me is this - that she be chaste, not too nice or fastidious, economical, patient, likely to take care of my health."*

He found his partner - after, we are told by one biographer, some "prosaic wooing" (unimaginative courtship) - in the form of an Anabaptist widow named Idelette Stordeur who had joined Calvin's congregation with her husband Jean. In the spring of 1540, Jean died of plague and that August 6, 1540, Calvin and Idelette were married. She brought a son and daughter with her into Calvin's home.

RETURN TO GENEVA

But then - after three years of 'freedom' in Strasbourg - Geneva wrote and begged him to return. Chaos in their city convinced the city fathers that maybe Calvin and Farel were not so bad after all. On 1 May, 1541, the City Council rescinded the ban on Calvin and even held him up as a man of God.

[It was an agonising decision for Calvin, because he knew that life in Geneva would be full of controversy and danger.](#)

Earlier in October he said to Farel that though he preferred not to go; in fact, he would rather die a thousand deaths than return to Geneva as he feared Geneva more than any other place on earth: *"yet because I know that I am not my own master, I offer my heart as a true sacrifice to the Lord."*

This was another example of Calvin's motto dictating the course of his life. Once again, the picture on his emblem that included a hand holding out a heart to God with the inscription, 'prompte et sincere' ("promptly and sincerely") proved to be a good policy to adopt.

In the long struggles which followed, his human desires were for freedom; but he was a soldier placed in a field of battle by his Captain (or an Admiral positioned by the will of the Lord High Admiral of Heaven and Earth)! He must stay in that position, contesting that battle, until his Master ordered otherwise.

So, on Tuesday, 13 September, 1541, Calvin entered Geneva for the second time to serve the church there until his death on May 27, 1564.

His return to Geneva from Strasbourg in 1541 was a different matter from his first entering the city.

- Back then he had been a mere passer-by;

- Now he was an important and influential personage, close friend of leading Reformers like Martin Bucer and Philip Melancthon, and the author of three more books.

It was back to Geneva as an established theologian that Calvin went. He could make his own terms and was obviously in a position of great moral advantage. It is to his credit that

he strove to curb his temper and his self-will (both too evident in his first period in Geneva) and to be patient with opposition.

MANDATE TO ORGANISE

Calvin's mandate was to organise the form of the church in Geneva. He did this, ... but his extremely heavy work load meant that he also played his full part in the day-to-day work.

- He preached twice every Sunday and every day of alternate weeks.
- In the weeks when he was not preaching, he lectured three times (he was the Old Testament professor).
- He took his place regularly on the Consistory, which met every Thursday.
- And he was either on committees or incessantly being asked for advice about matters relating to the deacons.

It should not be thought that he was in any way the ruler or dictator of Geneva. He was appointed by the City Council and paid by them. He could at any time have been dismissed by them (as he had been in 1538). He was a foreigner in Geneva, not even a naturalised citizen, until near the end of his life.

His great authority was a moral authority, stemming from his belief that, because he proclaimed the message of the Bible, he was God's ambassador, with the divine authority and power behind him.

That he was involved in so much that went on in Geneva, from the City constitution down to drains and heating appliances, was simply due to his outstanding abilities and sense of duty. He made good his offer of himself in 1541 as "the servant of Geneva."

(e) SORROWS.

Life was hard and harsh ...

(i) MENTALLY ... THROUGH PAINFUL BEREAVEMENTS.

DEATH OF HIS SON

His first son, Jacques, was born 28 July, 1542, and two weeks later died. He wrote to his friend Viret, "*The Lord has certainly inflicted a severe and bitter wound in the death of our baby son. But He is Himself a Father and knows best what is good for his children.*"

This is the kind of submission to the sovereign hand of God Calvin rendered in all of his countless trials.

DEATH OF HIS WIFE

Idelette was never well again. They had two more children who also died at, or soon after, birth. Then on 29 March, 1549, Idelette died of what was probably tuberculosis.

Calvin wrote to Viret, "*You know well how tender, or rather soft, my mind is. Had not a powerful self-control been given to me, I could not have borne up so long. And truly, mine is no common source of grief. I have been bereaved of the best companion of my life, of one who, had it been so ordained, would have willingly shared not only my*

poverty but even my death. During her life she was the faithful helper of my ministry. From her I never experienced the slightest hindrance. She was never troublesome to me throughout the whole course of her illness, but was more anxious about her children than about herself. As I feared these private worries might upset her to no purpose, I took occasion three days before she died, to mention that I would not fail in discharging my duty towards her children.”

Calvin never remarried. And it is just as well. The pace he kept would not have left much time for wife or children. His acquaintance, Colladon, who lived in Geneva during these years describes his life:

“Calvin for his part did not spare himself at all, working far beyond what his power and regard for his health could stand. He preached commonly every day for one week in two [and twice on every Sunday, or a total of about 10 times every fortnight]. Every week he lectured three times in theology He was at the Consistoire on the appointed day and made all the remonstrances Every Friday at the Bible Study ... what he added after the leader had made his declaration was almost a lecture. He never failed in visiting the sick, in private warning and counsel, and the rest of the numberless matters arising out of the ordinary exercise of his ministry. But besides these ordinary tasks, he had great care for believers in France, both in teaching them and exhorting and counseling them and consoling them by letters when they were being persecuted, and also in interceding for them Yet all that did not prevent him from going on working at his special study and composing many splendid and very useful books.”

He was, as Wolfgang Musculus called him, “a bow always strung.”

(ii) PHYSICALLY ... THROUGH POOR HEALTH.

The burden of work and responsibilities was turned into crushing labour by his continual poor health.

- Overwork in his law-student days had impaired his digestion.
- This in turn, increased by his excitable and nervous disposition, brought on migraines.
- Later, his lungs became affected, perhaps through too much preaching and talking, and he was incapacitated by lung hemorrhages.
- As if all this were not enough, he was tortured by bladder stones and the gout.

And yet he drove his body beyond its limits.

- When he could not walk the couple of hundred yards to church, he was carried in a chair to preach.
- When the doctor forbade him to go out in the winter air to the lecture room, he crowded the audience into his bedroom and gave the remaining lectures on Malachi there.
- He lamented a month when his output had been a ‘mere’ 20 sermons and 12 lectures; you can hear the drivenness in this letter to Falais in 1546: *“Apart from the*

sermons and the lectures, there is a month gone by in which I have scarce done anything, in such wise I am almost ashamed to live thus useless.”

- To those who would urge him to rest, he had the wondering question, *“What! Would you have the Lord find me idle when he comes?”*

(iii) SOCIALLY ... THROUGH DEATH THREATS.

The opposition Calvin faced in Geneva was not reasoned opposition raised in the course of debate.

This opposition took the form:

- of actual physical intimidation,
- of men setting their dogs on him,
- of the firing of guns outside the church during the service,
- of people trying to drown his voice, or put him off by loud coughing while he preached,
- even of anonymous threats against his life.

“He was not unfamiliar with the sound of mobs outside his house [in Geneva] threatening to throw him in the river and firing their muskets.”

On his deathbed Calvin said to the pastors gathered, *“I have lived here amid continual bickerings. I have been from derision saluted of an evening before my door with forty or fifty shots of an arquebus [a large gun].”*

In a letter to Melanchthon in 1558, he wrote that war was imminent in the region and that enemy troops could reach Geneva within half an hour. *“Whence you may conclude,”* he said, *“that we have not only exile to fear, but that all the most cruel varieties of death are impending over us, for in the cause of religion they will set no bounds to their barbarity.”*

(iv) MORALLY ... THROUGH RAMPANT SIN.

In every city in Europe, men kept mistresses.

When Calvin began his ministry in Geneva in 1536 at the age of 27 there was a law that said a man could keep only one mistress.

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, especially in the form of the so-called Libertines. They were a sixteenth century version of the same group at Corinth who boasted in their license. By the “communion of saints,” they understood the common possession of goods, houses, bodies and wives. So they practised 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!

Calvin opposed them - and they made life difficult for him!

The point of mentioning all these woes in Geneva is to set in bold relief the invincible constancy of John Calvin in the ministry that God had called him to.

I came across a phrase while researching this message: **His Invincible Constancy in the Ministry.**

We must remember that during all this turmoil, Calvin had not relinquished his many other responsibilities. He continued preaching and lecturing, commentaries and other books were written, many hundreds of letters were dispatched to every part of the civilized world, and he had worked away at the 'Institutes.'

WORKLOAD UNRELENTING

Never satisfied, Calvin made his greatest and final revision in the winter of 1558, when severe illness gave him leisure from ordinary tasks.

- The work was greatly increased in bulk, the 21 chapters of 1550 now became 80.

- These 80 were completely recast into four "books," corresponding to the four parts of the Apostles' Creed on, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, and the Church.

Only five years remained to him after 1559. They were years of increasing sickness and weakness—years, nevertheless, of unremitting toil.

- He again translated the 'Institutes' into French.

- He wrote the large commentary on the Pentateuch and translated that also.

- He continued to preach, lecture, and perform his ordinary duties until February of 1564.

And nothing stopped him until death stopped him at age 54, dying in the arms of Theodore Beza.

Calvin died on 27 May, 1564, with the Psalms on his lips: "How long, O Lord?" (**Psalm 6:3**: "My soul is also sore vexed: but thou, O LORD, how long?").

When Calvin passed on, this world lost a:

- **brilliant teacher ...**

- Spurgeon said that Calvin propounded the truth more clearly than any man who ever breathed,

- Schaff called him the king of commentators,

- and John Murray said Calvin was the exegete of the Reformation;

- **faithful pastor ...**

He pastored half of his life - 27 years, serving three pastorates, of which two were in Geneva;

- prolific author ...

- The Institutes were published when he was 27, and they grew with revisions from 85,000 to 450,000 words.
- The commentaries were his largest undertaking – 45 large volumes of over 400 pages each, covering 75% of the Bible;
- Sermons and letters were printed;
- catechisms;
- confession of faith;
- devotionals,
- book on church order - in all, his collected writings fill 59 large volumes;

- zealous reformer ...

Truth had to have an impact, not remain a theory - and with Calvin, it did!

- vibrant church planter ...

Calvin was very missions-minded. He sent out 88 missionaries from Geneva that were known, but many more not known, for their own safety. Through their efforts, Calvinistic teaching took root in France, and the Gospel was published increasingly, with growing fruit.

- an indomitable worker ...

Calvin was tireless and unwavering in his focus.

GRAVESTONE

Nearing his journey's end, Calvin gave strict instructions that he be buried in the common cemetery with no tombstone. He wished to give no encouragement to those who might make it a Protestant shrine. Today, his grave site is unknown.

LEGACY?

Calvin may have finally worn out in 1564, but his influence has not.

- Outside the church, his ideas have been blamed for and credited with (depending on your view) the rise of capitalism, individualism, and democracy.
- In the church, he has been a major influence on leading figures such as evangelist George Whitefield and theologian Dr. Henry Cooke, as well as entire movements, such as Puritanism. Church denominations with the names 'Presbyterian' or 'Reformed' (and even some Baptist groups) carry forward his legacy all over the world.

WHAT WOULD HE MAKE OF THIS ANNIVERSARY?

This past week, Christians around the world observed 10 July, 1509, as a turning point in world history. The man who ridiculed relics and requested no tribute in death might

shudder at the notoriety. But he would certainly appreciate learning how his voluminous writings have circulated the globe and equipped generations of gospel ministers.

The earthly 'Admiral' of the Reformation Fleet he most certainly was!