SOME PASTORS
AND TEACHERS
SOME PASTORS AND TEACHERS

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

— Ephesians 4:11-13
SOME PASTORS AND TEACHERS

Reflecting a Biblical Vision of What Every Minister is Called to Be

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—Ephesians 4:11-13

THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST
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Our Son
JOHN
Pastor and Teacher
and
For the Rising Generation
of
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INTRODUCTION

The title of Some Pastors and Teachers comes from Paul’s words in Ephesians 4:11. Echoing Psalm 68:18, he says that the ascended Christ has given certain gifts for the upbuilding of the church in unity and love. In particular, he mentions various ministries of the word of God that were exercised in the New Testament church. In the dignified language of the Authorized (King James) Version in which I first memorized the words: ‘He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists …’. These are foundational ministries (as Paul indicates in Eph. 2:20). But Christ has also made provision for the church’s ongoing growth and at its heart are ‘some, pastors and teachers’ (Eph. 4:11 KJV). Their ministry forms the theme, in one way or another, of the following pages.

Every book, no matter how recondite—even one on modal logic or pure mathematics—is part of the narrative of its author’s life. Some Pastors and Teachers is no exception, since most of my own life has been devoted to being a pastor and teacher, sometimes one more than the other, and sometimes both simultaneously. During these years I have often been asked to contribute essays or chapters to a wide variety of books—sometimes when my main task has been that of seminary teaching, but often while I have been serving in pastoral ministry. This volume contains a selection of these writings that reflect particularly on being a pastor and teacher, and on doctrines and themes especially relevant to the preaching of the gospel.

Many of these chapters were first published in relatively obscure places. But just as the main screens in major airports rearrange departure information, and we see the various flights arranged in order, so, one day, these essays seemed to self-select and rearrange themselves in my mind into a coherent whole.
One particular motivation lies behind Some Pastors and Teachers seeing the light of day. Many—probably most—of these chapters were written in the context of busy pastoral ministry, either in Scotland or in the United States—preaching, teaching, pastoral visiting, personal meetings, crises in the lives of individuals and sometimes the whole church, administrative responsibilities, and the wide and wonderful variety of activities that make up the average minister’s life. And since virtually all the essays were written by request, their writing has been squeezed into, or out of, an occasional hiatus in the sheer busy-ness of ministry life and the constant preparation involved in preaching anywhere between three and six times in the week. So, at some point in the writing of almost all these chapters I have heard an inner voice ask, ‘Whatever possessed you to agree to do this?’ Yet, however far short these various pieces fall, in each case the preparation of them did me good, enlarged my understanding a little, and fed into the day-to-day work of pastoral ministry. I hope, therefore, that these pages will encourage other ministers to allow themselves to be stretched a little beyond their normal pulpit or lectern preparation. There is no doubt that the wider reflection, reading, study and stretching involved can only strengthen and enrich long-term ministry.

Such stretching produces growth. Sometimes ministers can ‘waste’ the privileged time they have by studying only in relation to their next sermon. This does produce some growth, of course; but perhaps not growth that is constantly putting down deeper roots and producing richer fruit. Preachers need to be reading and studying more widely, and reflecting theologically if that is to be the case. For only then will our ongoing ministry be deepened and enriched.

Thus, in one sense at least, the undergirding message of these diverse chapters is: if you are a preacher, accept invitations or create opportunities to study, speak, or write on subjects outside of your usual diet of preparation. Yes, you may find yourself under a little pressure; but pressure can produce diamonds! You will grow personally as a result, and, God-willing, Paul’s exhortation will be fulfilled in your ministry:

Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have … Practise these things,
devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress. Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers (1 Tim. 4:13-16).

It can be an unnerving question to ask oneself, Has anyone in the congregation ever thought, far less said, about me, ‘He is making progress’?

There is a further consideration. I remember as a student reading a wise letter John Newton wrote to a younger Christian who was puzzled why one man’s ministry was more helpful to him than another’s. Newton well knew that the young and immature are prone to rank such preachers as Paul, Peter and Apollos (and usually in that order!). Some men may be more gifted than others, he explained; but that does not mean they are more sanctified. Further, God in his providence shapes ministers in different ways, with different gifts, impressing on them various aspects of the single burden of the gospel. While all must preach Christ crucified, some are stronger teachers than exhorters and vice versa; some have a special gift in exposing sin, while others excel in comforting the afflicted. The important thing is that each has his own gift, sovereignly distributed. So ‘use the gift Christ has given to you’ is Paul’s counsel (Rom. 12:6).

In those far-off student days, I began to believe that just as members of the body of Christ in general differ in their gifts, the same is true in some measure of ‘pastors and teachers’. All need to be able to teach. But Christ shapes each of us, by his word, through his Spirit, and in his providential dealings, to enable us to say to each other ‘the Lord Jesus has given me something to give to you’. That is as true of the brotherhood of pastors and teachers as it is of the whole body of Christ. Should we not therefore ask ourselves, ‘What gift has the Lord Jesus given to me for my fellow ministers?’

So, in this sense Some Pastors and Teachers is simply a way of saying, ‘These are some of the gifts that the Lord has given to me for others who have an interest in and a concern for the ministry of the gospel. I know the parcels are small; but I hope there will be something inside them that will be a blessing and an encouragement to you.’ And perhaps I may be allowed to add, ‘You also have received something from the Lord that you could give to other pastors and teachers, saying to them, “The
Lord gave me this—it is for you; I am your servant for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor. 4:5). Thus, I hope these pages will encourage brother ministers to say, ‘I think I could do something like that too’—whether by writing or speaking.

While this is a big book, it only seems long! For each chapter is an entity on its own. Readers can enter and leave at any point they choose. No chapter is completely dependent on the previous chapter, or for that matter on any other chapter in the book. I hope, therefore, that it may be a volume that readers will enjoy dipping into, here and there. Yet, as will be clear from the contents pages, it does have an overall shape, progressing from studies of three great pastors and teachers who have influenced me, to reflections on specific doctrines, and then on to the work of preaching and teaching the gospel. In this way, the book covers many, if by no means all, of the themes and tasks of Christian ministry.

Hidden underneath every book lies a network of its author’s connections and relations. Behind Some Pastors and Teachers lie all the joys and sorrows of life and ministry in three congregations and two theological seminaries, lived out of several different homes, in two continents and in three different states of the USA. To those who welcomed us in each of these ministry contexts I am deeply grateful.

The prospect of having one’s name attached to a book of this nature and size inevitably brings with it a fair share of self-doubt on the one hand and the fear of misplaced egotism on the other. Why, after all, would anyone think that essays one had published in the past deserve to be rescued from their obscurity and gathered into a more permanent form? I am therefore very grateful to the publishers and especially to my editor Jonathan Watson for their enthusiasm and encouragement. In addition, the whole project would have been impossible without the willingness of various publishers to allow it to come to fruition. I am grateful to them for their kindness and considerable generosity. They are separately acknowledged at the end of the book.

Many fellow pastors and teachers have been faithful friends and wise counsellors to me. Their encouragement has meant more to me than any of them knows or perhaps could imagine. When faced as a
young teenager with the claims of Christ I wondered if following him would mean losing friends. I knew the Lord’s promise that we give up nothing for him without receiving a hundredfold, with eternal life (even if with persecutions, Mark 10:28-30). That promise has been abundantly fulfilled. While an inadequate expression of my gratitude, these pages are a way of saying, ‘Here are some of the leftovers from the abundance of good food the Lord has given us in his word.’

I owe an unrepayable debt of love and gratitude to my wife Dorothy, to our four children, David, Peter, John and Ruth, and to their families. Their love, acceptance and loyalty have meant more to me than words can express. And beyond this stands the debt of debts owed to the One who has given me the privilege of being a ‘pastor and teacher’. He is the One

who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think,
according to the power at work within us,
to him be glory in the church
and in Christ Jesus
throughout all generations,
forever and ever. Amen.

(Eph. 3:20-21)

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON
September 2017
I. PASTORS AND TEACHERS: THREE JOHNS
CHAPTER ONE

JOHN CALVIN: PASTOR-TEACHER

JOHN CALVIN ranks as one of the most significant figures in the history of the Christian church. Unlike his older contemporary Martin Luther or the later John Wesley, he did not ‘found’ a denominational tradition as such, yet his impact on history in general and the history of the church in particular has been incalculable. From his influence on French literature to his contribution to democracy, he has been hailed as a pioneer. He bequeathed to later generations a small library of written material, but more than that, he exhibited an approach to Scripture, the gospel, and the life of the Christian that has inspired both scholarship and martyrdom. He was scholar, pastor, social and ecclesiastical reformer, political influencer, preacher, letter writer, theologian, and faithful friend.

Calvin is increasingly well served by the number of biographical studies in print.1 In this brief chapter, we can touch on only a small


The ensuing narrative, being introductory in intent, presumes rather than argues for a position on these debates. Readers who wish to investigate the disagreements further will find the different positions identified within the biographies.
selection of themes. In particular, we will focus attention on his family life, the events surrounding his conversion, his early ministry, his friendships, and some applications to be made from the life and providences of this magisterial Reformer.

**Early life**

Jean Cauvin\(^1\) was born on July 10, 1509, in the town of Noyon, some fifty miles north-east of Paris. He was the third of the four sons of Girard Cauvin,\(^2\) an official in the local cathedral. Girard appears to have been a rather difficult man. Calvin's mother, Jeanne, on the other hand, was reputed to be both a physically attractive and pious woman. Calvin later recalled times when she took him on pilgrimages as a small boy. He remembered kissing a relic. However, his mother died when he was about six years old.

It does not require profound psychological insight to suspect that this early loss left an indelible impression on Calvin. Simply from the personal point of view, it meant that he lacked the balance of his parents' personalities. The impression certainly arises from Calvin's writings that his relationship with his father was dutiful but not particularly affectionate. That said, it is noteworthy how reticent Calvin was throughout his life to entrust his inner emotional life to writing, and then only within the context of his deepest and most secure friendships.

Two particularly significant privileges arose from Girard's position as the legal adviser to the chapter of the Noyon Cathedral. The first was that his connections with the Montmor family provided young John with a private education alongside the Montmor children. For a child of Calvin's precocity of mind, this was indeed a privilege. It led, in turn, to his beginning further studies with them in Paris in his early teens.

The second was that young Calvin had access to what was essentially the medieval equivalent of a college scholarship. This was accomplished through the practice of granting benefices. Thus, while a student, Calvin was appointed to the 'livings' of several congregations. Of course, none of the pastoral responsibilities devolved on him. But he received the

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\(^1\) He did not adopt the formal Latin name Johannes Calvinus until the period in his life when aspirations to scholarship emerged.

\(^2\) His brothers were Charles, Anthony, and Francis.
income remaining after someone had been employed to fulfil those duties. By the time he graduated from the University of Paris, he would be ‘pastor’ of three congregations.

Arriving in Paris in the early 1520s (the precise year is debated), he spent his first few months studying at the Collège de la Marche. Providentially, his instructor there was Maturin Cordier, one of the finest Latinists of his time. Later in life, Calvin would dedicate his commentary on 1 Thessalonians to him, writing:

When my father sent me, while yet a boy, to Paris, after I had simply tasted the first elements of the Latin tongue; Providence so ordered it that I had, for a short time, the privilege of having you as my instructor, that I might be taught by you the true method of learning, in such a way that I might be prepared afterwards to make somewhat better proficiency. For, after presiding over the first class with the highest renown, on observing that pupils who had been ambitiously trained up by the other masters, produced nothing but mere show, nothing of solidity, so that they required to be formed by you anew, tired of this annoyance, you that year descended to the fourth class. This, indeed, was what you had in view, but to me it was a singular kindness on the part of God that I happened to have an auspicious commencement of such a course of training…

I derived so much assistance afterwards from your training, that it is with good reason that I acknowledge myself indebted to you for such progress as has since been made. And this I was desirous to testify to posterity, that, if any advantage shall accrue to them from my writings, they shall know that it has in some degree originated with you.¹

In that same dedication, Calvin also remembered the darker side of education in the Collège de la Marche. He noted that he was removed from Cordier’s tutelage through the less-than-tender care of ‘an injudicious man, who regulated our studies according to his own pleasure, or rather his caprice’.²

² Ibid.
From there, Calvin soon transferred to the Collège de Montaigu. Father Calvin’s aspiration was that his son should enter the priesthood, and de Montaigu was a kind of monastery for teens who intended to become priests.

Calvin recalled two things in particular about college life: first, the food was terrible (he later believed it contributed to the ruin of his own health and that of a number of his fellow students). Second, the college exacted enormous discipline. Classes began at 4 a.m. and continued (with some intermission) until at least 8 p.m. in the winter and 9 p.m. in the summer.

Calvin was a sponge for learning. His preparatory training in Latin, followed by studies in philosophy and rhetoric, led to a spoken and written style marked by simplicity, clarity, delicacy of phrasing, and powerful analytical argument.

Although his masterwork, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, evolved into a very large four-book treatise, Calvin early developed an unusual ability in and love for brevity and clarity. Clear communication was one of the passions of his life, whether he was writing letters, theological treatises, or commentaries, or preaching in his native French language. His clear, economic use of language, unburdened with complicated phrasing, allowed his message to come alive to those who read his works or listened to him preach.

Life at college meant lessons, exercises, and minor inquisitions, as well as bad food. But during that time, Calvin practised a rigorous self-discipline. Indeed, it may have been at this early time that he began a practice that would irritate his friends when he became a law student. At the end of every day, he made it a habit to review what he had learned during the day; then, the next morning, he would not rise from bed until he was sure that he remembered everything he had learned the previous day. In many ways, Calvin’s self-discipline explains his vast productivity in later life. Though the young man was not yet a believer, he was later

1 In the dedication of his Romans commentary to Simon Grynaeus, he recalled a conversation with him in which they were of one mind that ‘the chief excellency of an expounder consists in lucid brevity’. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, tr. John Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), p. xxiii.
conscious of the extent to which God was building into his life habits on which he would draw in order to minister to the glory of God.

By the time Calvin graduated from college, his father had left the cathedral. He was about to be excommunicated in 1528, and, later—were it not for intervention from the family—would have been buried in an unconsecrated grave. In the uncharacteristically autobiographical introduction to his *Commentary on the Psalms*, Calvin guardedly recorded how his father changed his mind and decided that young John should study law rather than prepare for the priesthood. The reason—or at least the one that was given—was, Calvin says, that Girard now believed the legal profession held much better prospects for his son than the church. So Calvin dutifully went to study law, first at the University of Orléans and later at the University of Bourges.

At this time, Calvin says in the introduction to his *Commentary on the Psalms*, he was ‘addicted to the papacy’. By this, he doubtless meant he had a prejudicial acceptance of and commitment to the medieval Roman Catholic Church with its sacramental way of salvation, and that he lived in conformity to its teaching and obedience to its authority.

Though Calvin does not say so, during his time in college he must have been exposed to the new gospel of the Lutherans. Indeed, he surely would have known of Luther’s tracts since they had been under examination by theological professors of the Sorbonne in the early 1520s. No doubt student fascination with the current trends of the academy marked early sixteenth-century Paris as much as it did the Sorbonne of the mid-twentieth century. It is virtually inconceivable that Calvin did not have strong opinions. Indeed, he virtually admits as much, as we see in his admission in the introduction to his *Commentary on the Psalms*. But this was to change.

**Calvin’s conversion**

Calvin studied law at the University of Orléans and at the University of Bourges (where he also studied Greek literature with Melchior Wolmar, with additional classical studies in Paris). As a post-graduate student, he now came under the spell of the new humanist movement with its motto of *ad fontes*—returning to the literature of antiquity and to the study of its languages. All of this, in Calvin’s case, bore fruit in his earliest
publication, a commentary on Seneca’s work *De Clementia*, published in 1532. It would be, he hoped, the first step on the ladder of academic advance. He was to be disappointed. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say God providentially would disappoint him. Neither humanism nor a career in academia could answer the needs in Calvin’s mind and heart.

Calvin’s stubborn allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church now found itself under the pressure of evangelical influences, not least from the entourage of remarkable friends who surrounded him. They shared his passion for learning the old languages, but also—earlier than Calvin—they were developing an interest in and love for the Christian faith in its more primitive New Testament form. Erasmus’ *Greek New Testament* had been published in 1516, and some of Calvin’s friends were studying it carefully. They were coming to realize that Luther’s views on justification were not, after all, idiosyncratic and heretical, but in fact were founded on basic New Testament teaching.

This ‘crack’ led to the growing realization that the late medieval Roman Catholic Church’s theology of salvation could never lead to spiritual certainty. While the church’s position was not codified until the Council of Trent (1545–63), the teaching enunciated by that council simply underlined the current view that the only way to have assurance of salvation was by canonizable levels of holiness or by a special divine revelation. Cardinal Robert Bellarmine, perhaps the most formidable Roman Catholic theologian of the sixteenth century, gave striking expression to this when he claimed that assurance was the greatest of all Protestant heresies.

The way of salvation, according to the Roman Church, was dependent first on the grace given at baptism, then progressed through a person’s various life experiences governed by the sacraments of the Church. One did what one could (*facere quod in se est*) until one’s faith was (through the grace of the sacraments) fully formed in perfect love for God (*fides formata caritate*). At this point, ‘by grace’ (i.e. through the sacramental system) a person became actually righteous in himself and therefore could be accounted righteous in God’s sight. Justification in this sense was claimed to be ‘by grace’, but it was not ‘by faith alone’. Rome regarded any different teaching (such as Luther’s doctrine of the justification of
the ungodly in his ungodliness) as a ‘legal fiction’. Thus, for Rome, grace involved the infusion, not the imputation, of righteousness; sinners were justified because grace made them justifiable.

This system rendered assurance virtually impossible. How could one know one had ‘done enough’? The system left ordinary men and women without certainty of faith. Without assurance, the people were bound to the sacramental system of the Church, fair game for the sale of indulgences, and deprived of all joy in salvation.

Judging by the emphasis Calvin would later place (in various contexts) on certainty in the Christian life, it seems likely that coming to an assured knowledge of God and the forgiveness of sins in Christ was a major element in his conversion. Now he and his young friends were beginning to read in the pages of their Greek New Testament of ordinary men and women who abounded in pardon, assurance, joy and freedom, certain that nothing could separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus. In the New Testament, people experienced the love of God poured into their hearts by the Holy Spirit from the very beginning of the life of faith.

Some of Calvin’s friends were beginning to speak more openly about their new discoveries. One of them was Calvin’s cousin, Pierre-Robert Olivétan, whose diligence in study rivalled Calvin’s own. Eventually Olivétan would translate the Bible into French—and his cousin John would write the preface (1534). Calvin also was beginning to move in the circles of reform of which King Francis’s sister, Marguerite of Navarre, was the guardian, and which included her confessor, Gérard Roussel.

Another friend was Nicholas Cop, who would deliver the Rector’s Address at the University of Paris in November 1533. Theodore Beza, Calvin’s colleague and successor in Geneva, and an early biographer, believed that Calvin himself was the author of the speech. The speech is interesting for its combination of the old and the new. It expresses the movement toward New Testament Christianity; but while there is protest, there is not yet Protestantism. In any event, Calvin fled Paris in the maelstrom that followed. In 1534, the incident of the Placards (when anti-Roman placards were posted throughout Paris—including, reportedly, on the king’s bedchamber door) meant that Paris was a city
permanently closed to Calvin. He was beginning to preach now and even to write model sermons, but all of the implications of the pathway on which he had started were not yet clear.

What happened to bring him fully into the Reformation movement? All we know from Calvin’s own hand is that God subdued him to docility by a sudden (or unexpected) conversion. It is tempting to think that he was referring to what we would call his ‘conversion experience’, but perhaps it is a description only of its beginnings, in which his stubborn spirit became teachable. Certainly his full confession of being an ‘évangelique’ would wait for his forfeiture of his benefices in the realization that since others were giving their lives for the gospel he must not remain hidden, even if he still aspired to the life of a scholar. He had, at last, grasped what would be a central motif in his developed theology—everything we need is provided for us in Christ, plus nothing.¹

Scholars have discussed what passage of Scripture most influenced Calvin’s conversion. Ford Lewis Battles, who translated the 1960 English edition of the Institutes, argued that it was Romans 1:18-32 because of the way the Institutes is divided into the knowledge of God the Creator and the knowledge of God the Saviour in Jesus Christ.² Romans 1 certainly did have a profound influence on Calvin’s theology. But Calvin may also have been influenced by Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Certainly he keeps returning in his writings to the theme that the Christian loses everything for Christ but gains everything through him. Whether we live or die, Christ is ours (Phil. 1:21; 3:7-11). From one standpoint, Calvin lost everything by giving himself in faith to Jesus Christ.

By whatever means, whether slow or sudden, Calvin’s conversion took place. His stubborn addiction to the papacy was broken and his heart subdued. From that time forward, the great motto of his life became, ‘Lord, I offer my heart to thee, promptly and sincerely.’ His personal symbol (apparently designed by himself) was an open hand with a heart between the letters J and C. Still in his twenties, he now clearly belonged to Christ.

He was part of a widespread movement involving many young people. It is easy to forget just how young they actually were. Many of them were arrested for their faith; numbers were executed. One of those who was put to death was Calvin’s landlord in Paris. Calvin’s own room was searched. He and his friends became hunted criminals. By the time he was twenty-six, he was a man on the run; he had become a pilgrim and would live the rest of his life as a refugee. His ambition remained solitude and study; but now there also burned within him a passion to serve his fellow believers.

In 1536, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* came from the press. It was at first a six-chapter catechetical work which only gradually grew into the substantial work of theology with which we are familiar today. The final (Latin) edition was printed in 1559 (French translation, 1560).

Calvin’s first concern was merely to produce a work that would edify Christians and, to some extent, serve as an apology for the Reformed faith. In the face of criticism and hostility, he wanted to prove that fidelity to Scripture characterized the new evangelicals. He wrote an extensive prefatory letter to King Francis I of France, defending the Reformation against a whole series of false accusations.

**Calvin’s ministry**

Calvin was on the run. In a relatively short time, he traversed Europe, moving through Italy and Switzerland. He returned briefly to Noyon in 1536 to gather members of his family and some friends to accompany him to Strasbourg, where he could continue his scholarly life. But they could not go directly there because of troop movements. Instead, they decided to enter Switzerland near Geneva. The plan was to stay for a night before moving on to Strasbourg.

Paradoxically, one of Calvin’s friends, Louis du Tillet, let slip that the young man travelling through Geneva was in fact the author of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. William Farel, who had come to Geneva to lead the work of reformation, sought Calvin out. Geneva had recently embraced the Reformation, but it had not yet been transformed into an

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1 ‘Paradoxically’, since du Tillet later returned to the Roman Catholic Church. In God’s providence, the remarkable ministry of Calvin in Geneva was thus in part effected by someone who rejected the ministry for which Calvin stood.
evangelical city, and Farel believed Calvin was the man Geneva needed. Calvin resisted Farel’s appeal. The story is best told in his own words:

I had resolved to continue in the same privacy and obscurity, until at length William Farel detained me at Geneva, not so much by counsel and exhortation, as by a dreadful imprecation, which I felt to be as if God had from heaven laid his mighty hand upon me to arrest me. As the most direct road to Strasburg, to which I then intended to retire, was shut up by the wars, I had resolved to pass quickly by Geneva, without staying longer than a single night in that city. A little before this, Popery had been driven from it by the exertions of the excellent person whom I have named, and Peter Viret; but matters were not yet brought to a settled state, and the city was divided into unholy and dangerous factions. Then an individual who now basely apostatised and returned to the Papists, discovered me and made me known to others. Upon this, Farel, who burned with an extraordinary zeal to advance the gospel, immediately strained every nerve to detain me. And after having learned that my heart was set upon devoting myself to private studies for which I wished to keep myself free from other pursuits, and finding that he gained nothing by entreaties, he proceeded to utter an imprecation that God would curse my retirement, and the tranquillity of the studies which I sought, if I should withdraw and refuse to give assistance, when the necessity was so urgent. By this imprecation I was so stricken with terror, that I desisted from the journey which I had undertaken.¹

So Calvin stayed in Geneva. On more than one occasion in the years that followed, he might have believed that by staying in Geneva he was experiencing rather than avoiding the curse of God! The Genevans had separated from the Roman Church, but they were not ‘set apart for the gospel of God’ (Rom. 1:1).

The ministry there was far from being a sinecure. The early years (1536–38) proved to be a nightmare. Many were opposed to the preaching of the word of God. During Calvin’s sermons, there were all

kinds of unseemly noises, as well as irritating chattering and mockery of the preacher. Even later, the Register of the Consistory of Geneva reads like a chronicle of spiritual indifference on the part of church members.

As the word of God came forth from the pulpit in Geneva, stressing the urgency of faith, repentance, and sanctification, opposition intensified. People would shoot their guns outside Calvin’s residence while he was trying to sleep. They would set their dogs on him in the street—indeed, some of them named their dogs after him (without affection). Near-constant friction developed between the ministers and numbers of the citizens, and also between the ministers and the city government.

The crisis point was reached on Easter Sunday of 1538, when Calvin and other ministers preached but then refused to serve the Lord’s Supper. They were told to leave the city when replacements could be found. A few days later, they were told to leave without delay. By the end of the week, Calvin was in exile again. In his own words, ‘I was banished from Geneva.’

It is not difficult to imagine how low Calvin must have sunk at that point. ‘Naturally of a timid, soft, and pusillanimous disposition’, and now with what must have felt like a disastrously brief ministry, it is not surprising that he had little taste to begin again. What he most needed was a wise minister to come alongside him, put his hand on his shoulder, and say: ‘Join me here. Watch how we do things here. Pick up the vibrations of what ministry means. Learn all over again. We will give you opportunity, we will encourage you, we will pray for you, and we will minister to you.’

That is exactly what Martin Bucer, the seasoned pastor of Strasbourg, did for Calvin. But Calvin did not bend easily. Like Farel before him, Bucer encountered resistance to his proposal. Bruised and wounded, he simply wanted to go back to his books. But Bucer had exactly the biblical model to bind Calvin’s conscience—Jonah:

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

1 Calvin, Comm. Psa., I:xlii-xliii.
2 Ibid.
example of Jonas, which he set before me, I still continued in the work of teaching.¹

Bucer encouraged Calvin to lead a congregation of French refugees, which numbered about five hundred. That may well be the ideal size for a church: everyone can know everyone else in such a congregation; the pastor can know his sheep by name; everyone can know the pastor; and a wide variety of gifts is likely to be present. Calvin grew as he preached God’s word and ministered to his new people. He also thought through many issues of worship and church life.

At this stage Calvin was single, and seems to have had little thought of marrying, and had a great desire for privacy. His friends, however, were determined to find him a wife. Calvin respected their authority, as they introduced him to one woman after another. Indeed, they went so far as to fix a wedding date for Calvin and a young lady of their choice. Calvin might have married were it not for the fact that he learned more about the lady. When he did, he wrote that he would have needed to have lost his mind to have married her!

In August 1540, Calvin married Idelette de Bure, the widow of an Anabaptist convert. She had a little boy and girl. They enjoyed a happy, but short, marriage. In July 1542, she bore him a son, Jacques. He was a premature baby and died in infancy. In the grief of that loss, Calvin wrote about the Fatherhood of his God and bowed to confess that he knows best what is for the good of his children. But the sense of loss remained with him throughout his life.

Although Calvin’s closest male friend at this time was his brother Antoine, who shared the house, there is little doubt that Idelette was his heart. Her health was precarious, however, and after a few years of illness, she died in 1549. Calvin deeply grieved her loss. He wrote to Viret with stark simplicity: ‘I have been bereaved of the best companion of my life … she was the faithful helper of my ministry.’²

The Strasbourg period was perhaps the happiest in Calvin’s life. But in the sixteenth century, no one was ever far from pain and loss. In one

¹ Calvin, Comm. Psa., Ixlii-xliv.
year of his sojourn there (1538), Calvin nursed his friend Farel’s nephew prior to his death from the plague, and lost his friend and blind fellow pastor Elie Couraud, who had worked with him in Geneva, and his brilliant cousin Olivétan. But exercising iron discipline in this season of great loss, he accomplished two significant things. While growing into pastoral ministry, he revised the *Institutes*, expanding it from a small volume to a large book. He also conceived what we might call ‘The Calvin project’—a one-man production of a biblically rooted theology (the *Institutes*) accompanied by a series of commentaries on the entire New Testament. He began with the book of Romans.

Calvin realized that the new Reformation church needed doctrine that could be taught and applied clearly, and that men and women needed to understand how the message of the gospel derives from, and is shaped by, Scripture. At the same time, he saw how the Scriptures could be expounded in the form of commentaries. It is remarkable, given the workload he carried (preaching five, six, or seven times each week, lecturing, writing letters, working on various writing projects, studying, attending many meetings, counselling), that he almost succeeded in completing his New Testament exposition (only 2 and 3 John and Revelation lack comment). Thus, as people studied Scripture, Calvin reasoned, they would have two kinds of works to help them: a volume of theology that would teach them the contours of the gospel and provide a road map, and commentaries that would demonstrate how the doctrine was both constituted and confirmed from divine revelation. The goal of the project was to produce all-Bible and all-doctrine Christians, whose lives were transformed by the renewing of their minds (Rom. 12:1-2).

Although Calvin was exiled from Geneva during this time, he continued to have contact with the Genevans, even though the relationship remained strained and difficult. In March 1539, the Genevans received a letter from the Roman Catholic Cardinal Jacopo Sadoleto. He was deeply scathing about the Reformation, but graciously invited the Genevans to return to the fold of Rome. They had no local resources adequate to answer Sadoleto, so they asked Calvin to respond. His reply to the cardinal is one of the small masterpieces of Reformation writing. Sadoleto had spoken about the judgment seat. Calvin's
response expounded the privileges of grace that marked the confession an evangelical believer could make at that judgment seat.

In 1540, he was asked to return to Geneva. His response was predictable. He wrote to Farel on March 29, 1540: ‘Rather would I submit to death a hundred times than to that cross on which one had to perish daily one thousand times over.’ Nevertheless, he eventually agreed to go, but only on loan for six months. He returned to the pulpit, made a few remarks, and then began preaching on the same passage he had left off expounding a few years before. In a profound sense, it was the first day of the rest of his life.

Calvin remained in Geneva and gave himself to its people and its transformation over the quarter century that followed until his death in 1564. All was not plain sailing. But he was a more seasoned minister now. He knew better how to lead, how to pastor, how to care, and, not least, how to endure to the end. The result was what John Knox called ‘the most perfect school of Christ on earth since the days of the apostles.’

Lessons from the life of Calvin
During most of his time in Geneva, Calvin lived on the edge. The edge in this case was enormous political pressure. He was not a citizen of Geneva; he was a refugee until a few years before he died. He had no formal political power. In addition, for many years he faced an underlying hostility to his presence and his ministry. As late as the 1550s, Calvin remained convinced he would have to leave Geneva again. Only in 1555 did the city fathers give the church the right of excommunication, thereby ceding spiritual authority. He also laboured under great personal pressure due to attacks from his enemies, some of whom had originally enticed him to come back to Geneva.

There were other trials, too, such as ‘The Servetus Affair’ in 1553. Michael Servetus, who had a history with Calvin, had already been condemned and placed under sentence of death for heresy throughout Europe, and he soon was charged in Geneva, especially for his anti-trinitarian teaching. A deeply unstable figure, he seems to have come to Geneva deliberately to challenge Calvin to refute his views. He was

1 Calvin, Letters, I:75.
offered the opportunity to return to France to be tried as a heretic, but he begged to be tried in Geneva, perhaps hoping that Calvin would refuse to deal with the issue in the light of the ongoing insecurity of his position. Nonetheless, the Council of Geneva convicted Servetus of heresy and ordered him to be burned at the stake. Calvin argued for a more humane death, but his request was refused.

Another difficulty Calvin had to deal with was Jérôme-Hermès Bolsec, a strange and unstable former Carmelite father. He was a physician (and spy) in the court of Renée of Ferrara. He settled near Geneva in 1550. While he expressed appreciation for much of Calvin’s teaching, he had a deep distaste for the biblical doctrine of predestination.

On Fridays, Calvin met in what was essentially a group Bible study for local ministers and others, known as les Congrégations. At one of these meetings, Bolsec brought up the subject of predestination, critiquing Calvin full-on. He did not realize that Calvin was at the meeting and was listening to the whole performance. Needless to say, Calvin was not greatly impressed or pleased. Bolsec became an implacable enemy from that time on. He wrote much against the Reformer that was libellous and destructive. Calvin was haunted by such attacks, as well as the less sophisticated but ongoing opposition to the gospel and the Reformation.

How, then, was the work in Geneva transformed from a quasi-political reformation to a genuine gospel reformation?

First, prayer changed the city. One of the first things Calvin did on his return from Strasbourg was to institute a weekly day of prayer. While there was regular preaching each weekday, Wednesdays were set aside for prayer from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. At these times, as well as in the regular private prayers of the congregation and the regular prayers in the worship services, the people and the ministers prayed for the benediction of God on the city and on the growing number of churches that were being planted outside of Geneva.

The second thing that transformed Geneva was the ministry of the word of God. Sermons were preached on Sunday mornings and afternoons. On weekdays, Calvin preached three times during the week (and when his strength allowed it, he preached every day). Beza says about

\[\text{Les Congrégations} \text{ had been inaugurated by Farel in 1536.} \]
a thousand people crowded into the cathedral in Geneva to listen to this frail, asthmatic man as he preached the word of God. He worked the word of God like a potter into the clay of God’s people in Geneva, sometimes preaching ten times a week, perhaps forty minutes or more each time. Besides that, he gave three lectures on the Old Testament to students each week, went to Consistory meetings on Thursdays, and participated in the Congregation. (Imagine having Calvin at your group Bible study!)

Clearly Calvin’s mind was always at work, always fertile. But his life was not only a constant round of sermon preparation, prayer, lectures, writing, and conferences. Earlier in his ministry life, in a note to Farel (1539), he wrote:

When the present messenger wished to carry along with him the beginning of my book, there were still twenty leaves, which it required me to revise. In addition, there was the public lecture and I also had to preach; four letters were also to be written; some disputes to settle, and to reply to more than ten interruptions in the meantime. You will therefore excuse if my letter should be both brief and inaccurate.¹

With such enormous pressure, it makes sense that several years later (1551), Calvin wrote to Heinrich Bullinger, ‘I am so much exhausted by constant writing, and so greatly broken down by fatigue, that I frequently feel an almost positive aversion to writing a letter.’ At that point, Calvin was given secretaries to take down his dictation.²

Space forbids further elaboration of the life of this remarkable man whom God raised up. Calvin was far from perfect. But often the measure of a man is to be assessed not so much by his height as by the obstacles he overcomes in order to grow. By that canon of assessment, Calvin was even more remarkable. During most of his ministry, he was a sick man. He suffered from malaria and tuberculosis; he also had a heart problem, gout, migraines, and kidney stones (the remedies being almost worse than the stones themselves). He had digestive problems and often suffered from insomnia. Yet Calvin was constantly critical of himself

¹ Calvin, Letters, I:132.
² Ibid., II:304.
and his shortcomings. He lived physically and spiritually on the edge. At times he could be irritable. It was a wonderful reality, then, to this tightly wound man, living under such great pressure, that Jesus Christ was so kind.

That thought—the kindness of Christ—serves as a fitting reminder of Calvin's deep Christ-centredness. It would be difficult to exaggerate the extent to which this was true. He had found in Christ the wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption he needed. Indeed, he found all he needed in Christ, and urged others to search nowhere else. It is therefore not difficult to imagine that he may indeed have been involved in the writing of the only hymn (in distinction from metricized psalms) that has ever been attributed to him:

I greet Thee, who my sure Redeemer art,  
My only trust and Saviour of my heart,  
Who pain didst undergo for my poor sake;  
I pray Thee from our hearts all cares to take.  

Thou art the King of mercy and of grace,  
Reigning omnipotent in every place;  
So come, O King, and our whole being sway;  
Shine on us with the light of Thy pure day.  

Thou art the life, by which alone we live,  
And all our substance and our strength receive;  
O comfort us in death's approaching hour,  
Strong-hearted then to face it by Thy power.  

Thou hast the true and perfect gentleness,  
No harshness hast Thou, and no bitterness;  
O grant to us the grace we find in Thee,  
That we may dwell in perfect unity.  

Our hope is in no other save in Thee;  
Our faith is built upon Thy promise free;  
Come, give us peace, make us so strong and sure,  
That we may conquerors be, and ills endure.
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