

John Calvin

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[0 : 00] Friends, today we're in between a sermon series and we've finished looking at the Sermon on the Mount. We're about to start a new series on church worship and the Lord's Supper and baptism.

So I thought we'd try something different today. As you know, our normal practice here is to work systematically through a passage of scripture. That's been my pattern for the four years I've been here.

However, as it turns out, this week marked the 450th anniversary of the death of one of the church's great theologians. This man, his theology lies at the roots of much of what we are about as Anglicans and also as Reformed evangelical Christians.

We owe this man a great debt. We stand on his shoulders. He was a great Bible teacher. In fact, his normal habit is like our habit here at Holy Trinity, that is to work systematically through the scriptures week by week.

He's a great theologian and much of his theology undergirds the prayer book, which structures our services, and much of what we do when we meet together here at Holy Trinity.

[1 : 06] And now the name of this theologian, this preacher, is John Calvin. So what I thought we'd do is take a break between Bible series and learn about God from Calvin.

Today, I'm going to pretend that I am him and we're going to interview him. That is, I've got my able assistant here who's going to interview him, i.e. me.

So let's get underway. And you've got to use your imagination a little. Hi. I'm special reporter Heather Reid. And today we have a special treat.

Courtesy of Time Travel International, I've asked John Calvin to visit us here. So we'll start by asking him a few questions about himself.

John, tell us about yourself. Sure. I'm a Frenchman. I was born in 1509 at Noy-Arne in northern France. I married Illet and I died of tuberculosis 450 years ago on the 27th of May, 1564.

[2 : 07] Boring. We know that there's lots more to John Calvin than that. We want some more, you know, intricate details, some more than just raw data and details, something of substance, something about what you said and did, you know, something that we can, you know, really get our teeth into.

Well, to tell the truth, I find all that pretty hard. I mean, I left firm instruction. I'm a man who left firm instructions in my will that I was to be buried in an unmarked grave. I'm generally quite shy.

I prefer to talk about God and about people other than myself. Perhaps we can get round things by my telling you of things other people said about me rather than me telling you about myself so much.

You see, even in my day, people had many negative things to say about me. For example, when the canons of the cathedral in my hometown of Noyon received word of my death, do you know what they did?

They celebrated and they gave thanks to God that a noted heretic had been taken from their midst. But their rejoicing was cut short when they discovered that the rumor of my death was premature.

[3 : 15] I lived on for another 13 years. Another Protestant, a man called Jerome Bolsek, He published a paper where he said that I was imperious, ill-tempered, a drunkard, a homosexual, an adulterer, and the like.

Now, some of what he said was probably true. I suspect I am a bit imperious and ill-tempered at times, but most of the other stuff was scurrilous, really. I was no drunkard, nor was I homosexual, nor was I an adulterer.

However, let me say that some attitudes to me haven't changed even in your day. Some contemporary Christians are somewhat embarrassed about me. They would prefer to keep me locked away in a historical closet, no time travel, all those sorts of things.

Why, some people have even told me that in relatively recent history, some people have been known to stand before my statue in Geneva and hurl eggs at my dual likeness looking down on them in the city of Geneva.

But it's not all negative, I should say. Some people almost worshipped me in my work. For example, the 156 Scottish reformer John Knox said that the Geneva I created was the most perfect school of Christ that ever was on earth ever since the days of the apostles.

[4 : 31] And others have gone so far as to depict me as the greatest teacher of Christian doctrine since Paul himself. Some people see me as the most infallible guide in every field of human endeavour from art and architecture to politics and economics.

In short, some love me, some hate me. Well, look, I'm a reporter and I've read all of those things. What we want to know is the nitty-gritty, the detail about you, what you think about yourself, your own assessment of yourself.

You're much more aggressive than the earlier question I have. Anyway, for myself, I like Martin Luther's summary of all Christians.

Luther said that all Christians are at one at the same time, both sinners and saints. I'm no exception. There were good things in my life. But there were also bad things, things I regret, things I wouldn't repeat if I had the chance.

For my own part, I quite like the assessment of Karl Barth, a theologian from the 20th century. He said these things of me. Calvin is a cataract, a primeval forest, a demonic power, something directly drawn from the Himalayas.

[5 : 44] Absolutely Chinese, strange, mythological. That was Barth's way of saying something really foreign. I lack completely, Barth said, the means, the suction caps, even to assimilate this phenomenon, not to speak of presenting it adequately.

What I receive is only a thin little stream. And what I can then give out is only a thinner extract of this little stream. I would gladly and profitably drown myself and spend all the rest of my life just with Calvin.

In fact, he had a photo of me on his wall. Let me stress, well, not a photo, but clearly a painting of me. But let me stress that I find all of this talk about myself pretty hard.

I'm naturally shy. I'm introverted. But I also want to listen to Paul. Paul said, we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord. Clearly, we're going to have to take a different tack here.

Let's think. You've already mentioned that you've had a lot of bad press with contemporary Christians. And I've read up a bit and have noted that most contemporary Christians know a couple of things about you.

[6 : 53] They know that you are the main exponent of the doctrine of predestination. Some of them are pretty cranky about that. And they know that you're responsible for the public burning of the noted heretic servetus.

If people were to remember you differently, how would you like them to remember you? Well, I'll give you an answer in a moment. But before I start, I do need to get a few things straight about what you said.

First, the doctrine of predestination. You know, of course, it's there in the Bible. It's been around a long time before me. It was thoroughly developed by Augustine in the fourth century.

Luther held it. It's just I spilled it out for everyone. Perhaps you should get your pastor here to give you a sermon on it sometime. Second, the issue of servetus.

Just a number of things to say. First, my job as a pastor was to protect the people of God. Second, he was a noted heretic.

[7 : 56] Third, I had warned the man that if he appeared in Geneva, I told him what would happen. Four, my contemporaries applauded me almost to a man.

And five, many people who are regarded as saints today persecuted heretics far more fiercely than I ever did. I'm tame beside them. Anyway, if you want an explanation, there's a good start.

Now, what was your original question again? That's right. What would I like people to remember? Well, what can I say? Although people took me as a leading light in the Reformation, I need to tell you, I was an extremely unwilling convert.

I was and am a recluse. I always wanted privacy and I wanted to live incognito. I would have been happy to sit in a library and just write book after book after book.

But God and my friends would have absolutely nothing of it. They wouldn't leave me in peace. And so they pushed me into everything. Let me just give you an example. When I left France, I was heading to Germany with the express purpose of being able to live in peace in some unknown corner of the world.

[9 : 01] I headed off to Basel and I started writing my first book of the Christian faith. A book that you know of as the Institutes of the Christian Religion. I need to tell you, it was a bestseller overnight.

I think that was because it spoke clearly to the age we lived in. It was addressed to the King of France, who was keen on destroying the Reformation. I wanted him to know that we were not sectarians, bent on overthrowing him.

We're just honest citizens. Our only desire was to restore the purity of the gospel. The other reason, of course, for its popularity was that it met a desperate need of our age. You see, we desperately needed a written manual of instruction in basic Christianity.

Anyway, see what I mean? I saw obscurity, but God sort of thrust me into the limelight. And all of a sudden, overnight, I was famous. A bestseller. People began viewing me as an up-and-coming spokesman for the Reformation.

And that's when God did it again. See, we were journeying, and I was hoping to finally settle down and get away from the limelight, go to my long-desired life of leisure and study.

[10 : 05] It so happened that we were staying in this place called Geneva. I must say, I wasn't too impressed with Geneva. I thought it was a bit of a hole, actually. Anyway, there was a reformer there.

His name was Farrell. Farrell was working on turning the whole city into a living model of a true Christian city. He heard I was in town, and he burst into my hotel room.

And he begged me to stay and help. And I told him, I was terribly ill-suited for the task. Could better serve the cause by quietly studying and writing. Then Farrell pulled out the really big guns, and I'd had it, really.

He was bursting with zeal for the gospel. And he told me that God would curse my leisure and the quiet of my studies if I withdrew and refused to help. Terrible thing, isn't it? I couldn't resist.

He was right. I stopped my journey, and I stayed to help. You see what I mean? I actually wanted to be remembered for my writings. And it's still what I want. They're my best work.

[11 : 06] Okay. You like to write. You've written. Why don't you tell us a bit about your writings? I mean, a lot of people here may never have read something you've written. So if we wanted to start reading, where would we start?

Well, there are six sorts of writing projects I took. First, there was this thing called, that I've told you about, the Institutes of the Christian Religion. It went through six editions, and it grew each time. Basically, it's a summary of Christian doctrine.

My aim in writing it was to open up a way for all the children of God into a right and good understanding of Christian scripture. A second thing I did is I wrote commentaries.

The aim of these works was to complement my Institutes. I wrote commentaries on Genesis to Joshua, Psalms and all the prophets except Ezekiel 21 to 48, and all of the New Testament books except 2 and 3 John, and you won't be surprised at the last one, Revelation.

When I was in Geneva, I preached twice every Sunday, and every other week I preached Monday to Friday as well. People used to take down what I said in shorthand, and some of those sermons are available in your age, and many of them have become what you read as my commentaries.

[12 : 19] And then I wrote tracts and treatises and then liturgical and catechetical writings, and I put the Psalms into verse for French speakers. I wrote a confession of faith and a thing called a catechism. Catechism is a sort of question and answer thing where you train your children, and young Christians about what Christians believe.

You know, you have this question and you give an answer which teaches people about what Christian faith is. Now, you might like to read a section of the Christian life that I wrote in my Institutes of the Christian Religion.

I tell you what, though. I hear that you've been working through the Lord's Sermon on the Mount. Well, if we get time, right at the end, I might tell you some thoughts about the Sermon on the Mount that I wrote down.

After all, helping people to know and understand scripture was a passion for me, the passion for me. Okay, let's go back a bit. You said that you're an unwilling conscript to the reformed faith and the reformation itself.

So how did you get started? How did it happen? Well, as I said, it was unintentional. The thing is, I was the right person at the right time. See, I was a second-generation reformer.

[13 : 27] When Martin Luther nailed his theses to the door at the church in Wittenberg, he started this massive thing that just caught the attention of people everywhere. And everyone was so optimistic and confident that we'd win the day.

However, by the end of a decade, Luther's sort of apocalyptic optimism had turned to near despair. Things didn't quite go as planned. We were all divided amongst ourselves and the Catholics were resurgent and we needed to focus.

And it just so happened that Geneva and my writings gave us just that focus. I didn't plan it that way, but God obviously did and the reformation got a much-needed second kick. Now, you mentioned Martin Luther.

Well, he was a colourful man. I've read some of his dinner table conversations. And this colour was reflected in his family life. So what can you tell us about your personal life?

You know, marriage, family, kids, all that sort of stuff we want to know. Oh, yes, Martin. You should interview him sometime. He'd keep you all very interested, very entertained.

[14 : 34] He's that, you know, I'm that introverted Frenchman. He's that extroverted, colourful, exciting, exuberant German. He's a very different man from me. I'm pretty boring beside him.

Let me give you an example. Take Martin for a moment. His dad wants him to study law. Well, he has this spectacular experience in the woods one day where he meets God. And the end result is he immediately forgets everything his father wanted and becomes a monk.

Not me. My father wanted me to study for the priesthood, so I did. Then my father wonders if law might be a little bit more lucrative. Well, I do the right and boring thing. I go off and study law, as dad says.

But let's talk about my marriage for a moment. You see, when I was a pastor in Strasbourg, hard to believe, I know, but I was probably the most eligible bachelor in the city.

All my friends were matchmaking, and so I sent them a wish list. I told them that I was not of the wild race of lovers who, at first sight of a nice, fine figure, embrace all the faults of their beloved.

[15 : 35] No, in all things, I'm very careful. What matters for me is not form, but substance. And I was allured by chastity, by someone not too nice or fastidious, but by an economical and patient woman, by someone who might be interested in my health and well-being.

Well, as it turns out, I found such a woman. Her name was Italette, and she was a member of my own congregation. A friend who married us said that she was upright and honest and even pretty.

As for children, well, we did have one child, Shark. He was born prematurely. He died in infancy. We both loved him deeply. We greatly grieved at his death. Nevertheless, we consoled ourselves with the knowledge that God is our Father, and God knows what is best for his children.

If you've been going through the Sermon on the Mount, you'd know this, wouldn't you? You see, but let me return to Italette. She died sometime before me, and I was again deprived.

She was such an excellent life companion. And I know that she would have followed me in exile, sorrow, and even into death if it had been necessary. Well, John, you said you weren't willing to talk about yourself, but you've actually told us quite a bit.

[16 : 51] And it's really nice to hear about your love for Italette. But we've heard about your doctrine of predestination.

Why don't you tell us about one theological truth that's important for your Christian life? Okay. But before I do this, I need to clarify some things.

For example, I need to clarify some of the differences between myself and some of the so-called Calvinists who followed me. See, my followers took things I said and perhaps pushed them too hard.

I don't agree with some of their conclusions. Perhaps it would be more helpful for me to tell you about some of the differences, say, between me and Luther. On the basis of Scripture, you see, I agree with Luther that justification by faith, that is trusting in what Jesus has done, is the main hinge on which true religion turns.

Again, on the basis of examining the Scriptures, I agree with Luther that we are Christians, that God's law accuses us before we are Christians.

[17 : 59] I agree with Luther that it does so that in order that we might turn to Jesus and be forgiven through his death on the cross. It's after that that Luther and I have some difficulties and some of that has to do with the place of Old Testament law in the believer's life and all of those sorts of things.

And you could read up about that. What I'm saying is that God's grace, though, the sum of what I believe is that God's grace brings a demand with it. And that demand is that we live a godly and holy life.

That's our intense focus and that's our heroic pursuit. Now, theological truths. I know you've been working through the Sermon on the Mount, so I thought I'd say something that relates to that. And brings back our mind into the Sermon on the Mount.

You see, one theological truth I valued extremely was the doctrine of assurance. That is, being sure that you are right with God through the work of Christ.

So is the fact that we are in union with Christ. But prayer is critical and crucial for me. So let me just reflect on it because the Sermon on the Mount taps into this.

[19 : 08] You see, in my view, prayer is fundamentally an expression of trust in our Heavenly Father for His goodness. You see, prayer is therefore what I call our chief exercise of faith.

Faith is the mother of prayer and prayer is the true proof of your faith. You can see this in the Prophet Zechariah. The Prophet Zechariah sets prayer in the very first place.

According to him, prayer is the chief part, the main thing of religion. Prayer is deeply rooted and grounded in God's promises and depends upon God's promises. So the normal sort of attitude of us, the saints of God, is to come to God and to plead with God on the basis of what He has promised in His Word.

Therefore, the Word of God, can you see, actually leads us into prayer. So my advice to you is that there's nothing more efficacious in our prayers than to be reading your Bible and setting God's Word before you and to base your requests before God on His Word.

It's as though God in His Word has dictated out to us, out of His own mouth, what we are to ask Him for. We are to come to God fully confident that God is near.

[20 : 27] And as we pray, focus on His Word, we reap the fruits of His promises. But let me tell you, prayer is not a barren task. It's based on the Word of God, but it's aided and abetted by the Spirit of God.

After all, the Holy Spirit sort of arouses in us assurance, desires, and sighs so that what is born within us is something that in our natural powers we couldn't do.

So through the Spirit, we pray from the heart. We pray with boldness, while at the same time being filled with fear and reverence and solitude. In prayer, you see, our cares are greatly lightened, aren't they?

Through the help of the Spirit, our confidence is in obtaining what we ask of God. And that grows and grows and grows. So, yes, I do urge you to be people of prayer.

And your prayers are never in vain. Our prayers, your prayers, they're never in vain. God hearing our prayers is an abiding part of His glory. He might as well soon deny Himself as to become deaf to our petitions.

[21 : 39] But let me just go back a bit. Let me return to my first word on prayer. You might remember I said prayer is the chief exercise of our faith. Well, if that's so, then thanking God is the chief exercise of our godliness.

Return and thank God. It's also the means by which God opens the gates of prayer. Yes, I can't emphasise the importance of prayer enough. It is the chief exercise and expression of our faith in God.

You see, we pray because it springs from our faith and trust in God. So, I urge you to be people of prayer. And as you've learnt in the Sermon on the Mount, what should you do?

Ask. Seek. Knock. And remember also what Jesus went on to say in the Sermon on the Mount. When you ask, seek and knock, then be confident.

Our prayers will not be fruitless before God. Our Father will be gracious to us as His Son Jesus said. He will listen to our prayers. So, be confident when you come to God in prayer.

[22 : 46] Venture freely to call upon God through Jesus. You see, God is very ready and prepared to listen to us as He makes clear, as Jesus makes clear in the Sermon on the Mount.

His riches are at our command. Provided we ask. You see, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reminds us of the manner by which our gracious Heavenly Father is pleased to bestow on us His gifts.

Though He gives everything freely to us, He urges us to exercise our faith as we come to Him and ask, seek and knock. And He longs to grant our requests by bestowing those blessings that flow out of His undeserved mercy and goodness.

These are just some of the comments that come from my commentary on the Gospels and on the Sermon on the Mount. Perhaps you might like to get hold of it and read it. And my hope and prayer is it will help you understand the Scriptures more.

I should mention something else in terms of reading. If you wanted something, as I said before, to read of mine that would help you in everyday Christian living, read my section on the Christian life in my Institutes of the Christian Religion.

[23 : 52] I'm sure your pastor could tell you how to get hold of it. Anyway, I've rambled on a bit. You can see I'm very passionate about this. Perhaps you've got another question for me, though. Well, thanks for sharing that.

But we're running out of time. So I wonder if you have one thought that you think would be ideal to leave us with.

Well, as you know, my writings are voluminous. And so one is not enough. So I'll try two. When I wrote a catechism, that sort of thing designed to help people grow in their Christian faith and understand their faith, I had two opening questions and responses.

So first, question number one. What is the principal goal of human life? So what's the main goal of Christian life? Answer? It is to know God.

Okay, what's the principal goal of human life? To know God. Question two. Why do you say that? Answer? Because he created us and put us on the earth to be glorified in us.

[25 : 02] And it's surely right that we should dedicate our lives to his glory since he is the source of our life. Do you understand that? So question one.

What is the principal goal in life? To know God. Why do you say that? Because God has created us and put us on the earth to be glorified in us. And it's surely right if that's the case, if that's why God placed us here, that we dedicate our lives to his glory since he is the source of our life.

At this point, I'm going to pray. So let's pray. Our Father God, we thank you that you are the generous God who loves to give good gifts to his children and who yearns that we seek.

Ask, knock. Father, we thank you that you have made us for you to know you.

And you've created us and put us on the earth to be glorified in us. And so please help us, we pray, to dedicate our lives to your glory because you are the source of all life, even ours.

[26 : 12] We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.