

TRINITY LECTURE 3 - Calvin - Teacher of Pure Doctrine

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Preacher: Scott Harrower

[0 : 00] Well, it's now my great pleasure to introduce to you Scott Harrower. Scott completed his theological studies for ordination at the end of 2004 at Ridley College and he was ordained in 2005 and he's currently assistant curate ministering at St Mark's in Camberwell and I know that he's doing a fantastic job across all the congregations there but particularly some great creative Bible teaching with the youth and young adults which I hear often includes using breakfast cereal as an illustration in sermons so perhaps you can talk to him about that over supper. Scott was also a missionary in Argentina. He speaks fluent Spanish unlike Rhys who speaks his German and like Rhys he's not going to do his lecture in another language but you can maybe talk to him about that as well his time in Argentina. We've also made mention during these three nights of the pets that each of our lecturers, each of our presenters have had and it should come as no surprise to you that Scott doesn't need a dog because he has three children, he and his wife Kate have three children, five and under, Dante and two twin girls, Grace and Angela and so they have them nipping at their heels constantly and only require the extra attention of Max the Rabbit.

Scott is doing his Masters of Theology in studies on Calvin's theology and so it's just a great privilege for us speaking on Calvin to us tonight. Would you join me in welcoming Scott?

Thanks, it's great to be here. Thanks Megan for making me feel so welcome tonight and thanks Rod. Thank you Rhys who's sitting up at the back. He's the person who's taught me the most about Calvin so thank you Rhys.

Church history is a study of how the Bible has been applied or misapplied in different contexts across time. We can draw great wisdom from how the Bible has been applied or misapplied in the past.

So tonight we've got a lot to learn and much to gain. I hope we're going to be encouraged by seeing God's continuing work for his people through John Calvin.

[2 : 37] My central point tonight is that John Calvin's contribution as a reformer was that he applied the word of God to the people of God. That's why I've called this talk Calvin, teacher of pure doctrine for the people of God.

I hope you've got a handout which you might have received as you came in. That's the structure of the talk on the first page and I'll be referring to the sum of Christian life, the denial of ourselves at the very end.

So if you'd like to follow the talk through, that would be great. So I'll be following the title of this talk as the outline for our discussion. Following an introductory remark about Luther and Calvin, I'll first speak about John Calvin's early life and his formation as a teacher.

Secondly, the significance of pure doctrine in Calvin's theology. And thirdly, his teaching and applying of this pure doctrine to the people of God. So if we could have the first slide.

There we are, that's Calvin's birthplace. As we've said, I'd like to make some distinctions between Luther and Calvin. God's people certainly needed a strong intervention in the early 1500s.

[3 : 53] And Rhys has spoken about Luther in all sorts of rich and descriptive ways on Tuesday night. I don't think I'll ever forget that. Luther was in the first wave of reformers.

And tonight we're going to look at Calvin who was only eight years old when Luther nailed his 95 theses to the cathedral door in Wittenberg in 1517. Luther's theology is all about the word of God.

And this word is the gospel of the preached word, the simple gospel of sins forgiven, and unmerited grace. And where the gospel was preached, said Luther, there was the church.

As simple as that. In Luther's theology, Jesus saves. But in Calvin's theology, Jesus is Lord. Jesus is Lord seated at the right hand of God.

And the Lordship of Christ in Calvin's theology sees him reigning over all the church through his spirit and word. Therefore, for Calvin, it's not sufficient that the word be preached.

[5 : 00] The word, the pure doctrine, needs to be preached, heard, and applied. Therefore, Calvin's reform looks very different to Luther's.

Whereas the gospel of justification by faith, based on the work of the cross, has been established and explained by the first generation of reformers, Calvin is part of the second generation of reformers whose work it is to apply the biblical truth to the people of God.

Therefore, it's right to say that Luther was primarily concerned with the purity of the gospel and Calvin was primarily concerned for the purity of the church.

Or to use management speak, which is really trendy these days, Luther's theology of the word may be said to lack the human infrastructure to support it. Calvin develops and implements the biblical infrastructure of the kingdom of God amongst God's people.

And that, again, is why I've called this talk Calvin, teacher of pure doctrine for the people of God. I'll come back to Calvin and his work shortly.

[6 : 13] But what I want to do first is I want to give you three little snippets which gives us an insight into Calvin's life as a child and a teenager and these snippets will give us an insight into what unreformed France looked like.

The first snippet is of Calvin's hometown in France where Calvin was born on July 10, 1509. Calvin was born in Neuillon and his town was a town of devout people who prided themselves on the fact that their town had a portion of the hair of John the Baptist, a fragment of the crown of thorns, and the very hotly contested remains of a local saint.

That's snippet one. Snippet two is Calvin's single enduring memory of his mum who died when she was young. And that memory is of him going with his mum to worship at a shrine for St. Anne.

That's what they did together. They went to a shrine of St. Anne and worshipped there together. The third snippet is that at the age of 12 Calvin was given the benefits of a small chapel.

So he got an income from a small chapel which his dad obtained for him. And later when he was 18 he received the cure of a small church.

[7 : 44] So he was the minister of a small church but he never went there. He just got the income from the small church. So basically Calvin was paid to be a totally fictitious minister of this church.

So there we have three snippets from Calvin's own life which show us what the context of unreformed France looks like. Relics are objects of worship.

Saints are objects of worship and we see a terrible model of what Christian ministry looks like. Welcome to unreformed France. If we could have slide number two.

I chose this one because he looks really friendly. That sort of Santa Claus Calvin. We're going to look at Calvin's development as a teacher. Calvin the teacher.

By the age of 14 Calvin's teachers and all those around him had recognised that he was a very, very bright young guy and they decided he should study further afield.

[8 : 44] They were going to wait but the plague visited his town so his dad quickly packed him off and sent him off to study theology in Paris. Within a few days of his arrival in Paris Jean Valéry who was an Augustinian preacher like Luther became the first victim of the reformation in France because he was born he was burnt at the stake.

Reform was in the air when Calvin arrived in Paris. Part of the significance of Calvin's time in Paris lay in the fact that Calvin studied under one of the greatest teachers of his time Cordier.

I think the significance of Cordier can't be overestimated. Cordier had been employed to teach the senior level boys Latin and also the art of debating and public speaking.

The problem was though that Cordier found that the standard of Latin was so low in the senior classes that what he did was he took on some extra work and he taught the junior classes as well and under God's sovereignty Calvin happened to be in one of those junior classes.

So Calvin gets this teacher he wasn't even meant to get and this teacher wasn't just brilliant on rhetoric public speaking and debate but Cordier was brilliant on teaching methodology.

[10 : 09] Cordier held really original views on how to teach well. He believed there were better ways to get boys to work than persistently flogging them. He'd reward them, he'd encourage them, he'd use illustrations and Calvin's just soaking all this up.

So Calvin learns both content and methodology from one of the greatest teachers of his age. Calvin acknowledges his debt to Cordier because he dedicated his 1550 commentary on one Thessalonians to Cordier.

And also, and this is a nice little insight into Calvin's character, when Cordier was an old man, many many years later, after they'd parted company in Paris, Cordier was looking for somewhere to go and die and spent his last couple of years, but he couldn't find anywhere.

What Calvin does, basically he takes him in, he appoints him to the academy in Geneva and looks after the man until he dies. Absolutely brilliant. It shows us how much Cordier influenced Calvin and how much Calvin appreciated that.

Calvin's learning in Paris was further strengthened when he transferred to another college, which ironically trained men to be columns of the Roman church and necessary to its direction.

[11 : 31] I don't think they knew what was going on. And equally ironic is that the head of this institution had in 1521 condemned the works of Martin Luther and said that they were more offensive than those as Muhammad.

So Calvin was in a decidedly anti-reformation context, which held a more positive view of Islam than of the Reformed faith. However, God and his purposes prevail.

And Calvin's studies were great. He learned a lot about the Bible. He might have learned the wrong take on it, but at least he became very familiar with the Bible. And he also studied classic works such as the sentences of Peter Lombard, who's a great medieval theologian.

Also, this environment encouraged readiness in debate, the power of lucid exposition, and it taught students to argue logically from first premises and never to use terms which they haven't defined.

So Calvin learned a lot and we can see that this environment prepares him to be a great teacher. However, in 1528, Calvin's dad fell out with the Roman Catholic Church.

[12 : 44] So he decided, well, young John Calvin isn't studying theology anymore, he'll become a lawyer. So Calvin had to leave Paris and went to Orléans. Now Calvin's studies in law went very well.

He even got to do a doctorate in law. After this, he published a commentary on Seneca's De Clementia. Seneca was Emperor Nero's teacher and he wrote a book on clemency, that's what that was about, and Calvin wrote an academic work commenting on Seneca's own.

Seneca's written by a very confident person, if you ever get to read it, a person who was very confident of their own ability, and it was written in order to secure an academic position for himself, which it did.

Therefore, we can see that Calvin was, on many occasions, identified as a very gifted student. He was taught by very able teachers who modelled great teaching, and he saw himself as a suitable teacher.

with the publication of De Clementia, and his appointment as a dean of a college within the University of Orleans, and his subsequent doctorate in law, Calvin the teacher was well formed, but there was one thing missing.

[14 : 01] The word of God, pure doctrine, to use Calvin's own language. This was missing in his life. We can see Calvin's sources of authority when we have a look at De Clementia, this book that kind of made him famous early on.

He quotes 57 Latin authors, 22 Greek authors, refers seven times to the writings of the early church fathers, but there are only three quotations from the Bible.

And even worse, these references show us that he was only familiar with a very corrupted version of the Bible, a corrupted version of the Greek text of the Bible called the Vulgate.

Calvin needed his own reformation by the word of God. The Christocentric whirlwind of faith had yet to turn him around. Could we have slide three?

Calvin, teacher of pure doctrine. So we're going to see how we've got this teacher formed, Calvin, and how pure doctrine turns him around.

[15 : 14] In 1532, towards the end of his own studies in law, Calvin experienced what he called a subita convergio, a sudden, unexpected conversion.

God worked in his life and moved him from darkness to light. Calvin puts it as follows at the opening of his commentary in the Psalms, and it's a great story.

I endeavored faithfully to apply myself to the study of the law, in obedience to the will of my father, of course. But God, by the secret guidance of his providence, at length gave a different direction to my course.

At first, since I was too obstinately devoted to the superstitions of potpourri to be easily extricated from so profound an abyss of mire, God, by 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 so intense a desire to make progress therein, that although I did not altogether leave off my other studies, yet I pursued them with less ardour.

[16 : 37] Before a year elapsed, all who had any desire after purer doctrine were continually coming to me to learn, though I myself was a novice.

Therefore, we can see in John Calvin's conversion, a conversion in which he understood God to be at work through, in his own words, pure doctrine, or, in his own words, the taste and knowledge of true godliness.

True knowledge of God and conversion go hand in hand. And in Calvin's particular case as a person, we can see from his own testimony that conversion and true knowledge go hand in hand with a teaching ministry.

Conversion and the knowledge of God go hand in hand with the teaching ministry. As soon as he becomes a Christian, the underground church brings him in to teach them in their Bible study groups.

God had been preparing John Calvin as a teacher, and then with the knowledge of God on top of that, suddenly we've got a great Christian teacher. Therefore, now we have Calvin, the teacher of pure doctrine.

[17 : 55] Calvin's turn from the Roman Catholic practices of the day to a biblical and historical Christianity was not just a move from one denomination to another. Calvin turned to God in the New Testament sense of the word, repentance, away from sin, towards God through faith in Jesus Christ.

For Calvin, the pure teaching of the scriptures was what we need to be reformed individually and corporately as Christians. A year after Calvin's conversion, the French reformers, and there was a small group of them, decided to make their position clear.

They wanted reform in France. Let's change this nation. Let's change the church in this nation. The unlucky person to go forward was a man called Nicholas Kopp.

He was a rector of the University of Orleans, and he gave the customary address which was to be delivered on All Saints Day. The text on which he preached was blessed are the pure in spirit.

And in French style, it was just straight out. Kopp's address focused on the human inability to fulfill God's law, the need for the saving work of Christ alone.

[19 : 17] Calvin had a hand in writing this speech, and it's not surprising when you have a look at the speech, you see many Calvin-like phrases, such as the plea for an untarnished and exact interpretation of the gospel.

Well, after preaching the sermon, Nicholas Kopp was quickly deemed to be a heretic, and he had to flee. The police received evidence that Calvin was involved in crafting the sermon, so he had to escape as well.

Calvin escaped under a false name, Desperville, he called himself, and though his money was stolen during the escape, he travelled far and wide for a couple of years, searching for a new home.

Who said church history is boring? This is the stuff of the best airport novels. During these wandering times, Calvin wrote and published the first draft of his most influential work, The Institutes of Christian Religion, which we commonly refer to as The Institutes.

The first version of The Institutes of the Christian Religion appeared in March 1536. Initially, it was a popular level handbook of the basics of the faith, a little bit like an introduction to Christianity that John Stott would write, that sort of book.

[20 : 44] However, it went through several editions and its purpose changed. Though its purpose changed, what we see in The Institutes is pure doctrine in action.

It wasn't a replacement for the Bible. It was to be used with the Bible and with Bible commentaries. It was a summary of the faith and it explored all the different aspects of the faith.

So it meant that as you were preparing a sermon or listening to a sermon, you didn't have to plumb every single theological point and explain everything all at once.

You could go ahead, prepare your sermon, prepare your commentary without having to go into full depth because you knew that if you really wanted to suss anything out, you had your commentaries. So the commentaries go with the Bible.

They're not a replacement for it or anything like that. So that's the commentaries. The final version of The Institutes of Christian Religion is comprised by four books.

[21 : 53] This is my Institutes of the Christian Religion. There are two volumes but there are four books and they're very, very meaty as you can see. It's a full exposition of the faith based on the Apostles' Creed.

The central idea is the knowledge of God. Surprise, surprise. Remember, Calvin's conversion is all about the knowledge of God and knowing God. So the four books are as follows.

Book one is about the knowledge of God, the creator. Book two is about the knowledge of God, the redeemer. You know how Rod was talking about redemption and being brought back?

Knowledge of God as redeemer in Christ. Book three is the way in which we receive the grace of Christ. And book four are the external means or aids by which God invites us, and get this, into the society of Christ and holds us therein.

So it's a very comprehensive theology that we see in the Institute. Institute. I'd like to make two comments about the Institute.

[23 : 02] Firstly, I've mentioned that Calvin was a teacher. Well, Calvin saw God as one too. Calvin saw God as a teacher who knows his audience.

That's part of what made Calvin a great teacher. Calvin understood his audience. And Calvin says that God is a teacher and that God knows his audience. Therefore, God knows our capacity as human beings, and he communicates to us in a way that we understand.

He speaks to us in a manner we can comprehend. God accommodates the knowledge of himself to our limitations. This is Calvin's doctrine of accommodation.

Just as an adult speaks in simpler, yet no less truthful language when dealing with children, so God speaks to us. God speaks to us via the Bible, and we understand this as the Holy Spirit enables us to understand.

One author has said that in a sense, the Bible is God's baby talk to us. Now, this might be going a bit too far, but it's kind of right, because it captures Calvin's understanding of God speaking to us in a way we can understand in the Bible.

[24 : 19] And that theology of accommodation is right through the Institutes and right through Calvin's theology. The second comment I'd like to make is about theology and theologians.

Calvin believed that theology was about the heart and the head and the hands in terms of the action that stems from theology.

Theology was about the knowledge of God and the transformation of the whole person. Theology was a holistic and warm discipline for the glory of God.

Theology wasn't cold. It wasn't speculative. It wasn't detached. Theology was never for theology's sake.

It was always for God's sake. Calvin was especially concerned about speculative theologians, the overly curious, the ones who wanted to work out, for example, what was God doing before he created the world?

[25 : 22] Well, Calvin's answer to that was that God was preparing a special hell for curious people. If we could have slide four. There we go.

That's Geneva, where most of Calvin's ministry happens. Now, my first point was the way in which God formed Calvin to be a teacher.

Secondly, Calvin turning to pure doctrine, to a pure understanding of Jesus. So now we have Calvin, teacher of pure doctrine, and we're going to complete the sentence with, for the people of God.

Calvin, teacher of pure doctrine for the people of God. We're going to see Calvin's application of the saving work of Jesus, pure doctrine, to the everyday lives of the people of Geneva in particular.

It's very important to understand Calvin's motivation for bringing the saving, and pure gospel to people's lives. Calvin's sometimes portrayed as a tyrant.

[26 : 31] However, in his 1553 commentary on John, Calvin talks at length about the fact that the end point of God the Father's love isn't God the Son.

It's the people of God, and that God's love flows like a fountain down to the people of God. Calvin knew how much God loves his people, and he knew how much, therefore, was God's love for them, and therefore that the whole gospel should be applied to the whole of their lives.

That's Calvin's motivation for applying pure doctrine to people's lives. Because in God's eyes, God's people have a high priority.

To understand the setting of Calvin's ministry, it's worth noting that before Calvin arrived, Geneva, which was a city of commerce, was run by a Roman Catholic prince-bishop.

And though the city had allowed Reformation teaching about justification by faith, it wasn't a reformed city. It hadn't been reformed as a city.

[27 : 43] It hadn't been turned around by the gospel. The church there hadn't been taken from a warped church to a true church. A reformation needed to happen in Geneva.

On May 21st, 1536, the people of Geneva pledged to live according to the gospel. So Calvin took a very Aussie attitude from this, and he said, right, you want a Reformation?

Well, you'll get one. And he got on with it. It's no surprise that in applying the lordship of Christ and the saving work of Christ to the entirety of people's lives, led to big issues.

About what? About discipline, of course. Because we're dealing with people's lives. And Christian discipline is that great valley which lies between preaching the gospel and taking the gospel in.

Church discipline, therefore, was a great emphasis of Calvin's work. And he's a great model for us. The worst thing you can do is to leave God and faith as mere ideas.

[28 : 48] No, they're realities. And reality is where rubber hits the road. The reality of trying to apply church discipline meant that within two years, Calvin had to hit the road.

He had to hit the road out of Geneva. Calvin clashed with the ruling council over the matter of Christian discipline with relation to people who continued in sin yet wanted to receive communion.

And also, and more deeply, the issue was whether the ruling council of Geneva ruled over the church or what was the nature of that relationship. A conflict led to Calvin being thrown out of Geneva in 1538.

In fact, Calvin had to leave in such haste that he took none of his possessions. He nearly drowned trying to cross a river which was swollen by a storm that raged about him.

It was a terrible experience. Calvin arrived at the next town where he could find shelter, destitute, penniless. And far more painful for Calvin was the fact that his first experience of evangelical activity had come to a disastrous end.

[30 : 05] You know, he lost his confidence and he even questioned really whether he could serve God in a role in the church. He decided to revise the institutes and never to return to pastoral ministry in Geneva again unless the Genevans invited him.

He was very hurt. However, it needs to be said in defense of the Genevans that Calvin must have been familiar with an earlier version of how to win friends and influence people.

I think this version was called how to not make friends and how to alienate people. Calvin was a little bit too strong-willed for the Genevans. Sometimes it's not the gospel alone which is offensive.

Sometimes it's us and sometimes it was Calvin. Calvin's lack of tact proved to be a stumbling block for the gospel.

Anyway, Calvin eventually found shelter in Strasbourg. He stayed there for three happy years. He himself calls them happy years. Strasbourg was a city which had been unified under the Reformation and not divided by it.

[31 : 21] In Strasbourg, Calvin was the content pastor of a congregation of 400 people. Two features of his ministry are worth noting. Firstly, with reference to him being a teacher of pure doctrine, as well as regular preaching in the church, Calvin lectured three times a week on the fourth gospel and the epistle to the Corinthians.

And in 1540, he published the first of his commentaries on the epistle to the Romans, of course. Above all, there appeared on August 1st, 1539, a second and greatly enlarged version of the Institutes, which placed Calvin at the very front line of theologians in the European continent.

And in terms of Calvin's work for the people of God, the greatest thing that came out of his time in Strasbourg was that Calvin successfully introduced a system of ensuring purity of doctrine, life, and church government in which he would later implement in Geneva.

So, in a sense, Strasbourg was the test model and he found a way of implementing church discipline there, which he would later take to Geneva. This would be expressed as the 1541 ecclesiastical ordinances.

So the Genevans did invite Calvin back. He returned in 1541 and he stayed there to 1564 when he died. So the great thing about this is that with Calvin, we see a long ministry.

[33 : 00] We see what a long ministry looks like in applying the word of God to people's lives. It's not like some of the other reformers that were around Europe at the time who have short ministries.

So we don't really get to see what the theory looks like in practice. But with Calvin, we get to see what the theory looks like in practice. So Calvin returns to Geneva on the basis that the Genevan magistrates said, yep, no worries.

We're going to reform Geneva and it will be according to your ecclesiastical ordinances. Basically, this document sets out a fourfold structure by which to order and maintain discipline and discipleship in the church.

There are four different roles of leadership and service and these roles of leadership and service spill out into society. It's not just for the church. It influences society as well.

So there are four roles. First, you've got your pastors. These people are to open up and apply the scriptures to the people of God through preaching and also they are to administer the sacraments.

[34 : 05] Secondly, we've got doctors and those are people responsible for theological education of ministers as well as having responsibility for the discipleship of everyday Christians.

Thirdly, we've got elders and these people oversaw the moral life of the community. Their role was to meet with pastors to review cases of ungodly life amongst the people.

Fourthly, we have deacons and these people oversaw the social welfare for the sick and the poor. This was a radical program and it's quite comprehensive.

And this program was successfully implemented over a number of years. So order comes to Geneva. However, in Calvin's own life, we begin to see personal disorder.

Could we have slide five? Thanks. There we go. These are some stamps that I found pictures of on the internet. That's Calvin. That's his wife, Idette, over there.

[35 : 11] John Calvin had married his wife, Idette, in Strasbourg and their marriage brought him great happiness. However, their only son, Jacques, died shortly after birth in 1541.

Idette never recovered from this loss and sadly she died only eight years later in 1549. This shows us that Calvin had experienced great suffering and his response to the suffering is quite instructive.

Calvin mourned the loss of a, quote, an excellent life companion and her loss was, and I quote, a very cruel thing for me.

What Calvin rested on at this time of loss was the sovereignty of God and God's love and care. So we see in his life personal disorder and this was even made worse by his own health deteriorating.

He suffered long periods of sickness and near incapacity and for some time he even had to be carried to the pulpit to preach. So we see throughout his period in Geneva, the second period, that Calvin was greatly challenged on a personal level yet he never lost his love for God and God's people.

[36 : 37] Calvin's theology was done in the context of a real life lived amongst real people experiencing the real difficulties of life. Calvin wasn't a removed ivory tower theologian.

He was in the midst of a normal life. No wonder Calvin wasn't a dry theologian because we see the nature of his trust in God despite the pain of living in a fallen world.

Despite this personal disorder, Geneva became a model for what a church should look like and it became a missionary centre. What's most significant about Calvin's second period in Geneva was the length of this ministry, 20 years.

So we see what a reformed church looks like. In addition, the effect of the Genevan model of reforming a church was seen by many Protestant refugees from all over Europe.

So they arrived in Geneva, they saw what a reformed church looked like and then they took it back to their own homes when they were allowed to go back. So for us Anglicans, many refugees from England saw Geneva as a reformed city, they took it back to England and Scotland and they tried to pressure their governments through various means to reform the Church of England.

[37 : 53] And we see this best expressed in the Elizabethan Puritans. And for us today, our understanding of what it means to be Anglican means that there is a strand of this Calvinist theology within our Anglicanism.

The last point I'd like to make about Geneva is a related one. Geneva became a missionary centre from which pastors trained in Geneva were sent into regions where there were no reformed ministries.

This ministry missionary activity helps us to do away with any suggestion that Calvin's theology of election of believers meant that there was no need for mission and evangelism.

So it's worth noting. Geneva was reformed. And why? Well, Naffey, who's a great scholar of Calvin, says that, and I quote, the single most important element of Calvin's success was probably his pulpit ministry.

So there we have it. John Calvin, teacher of pure doctrine for the people of God. And what would Calvin have us take away from a lecture such as this?

[39 : 05] Well, if you take out your handout, you'll see on the back there's an autobiographical piece of rhetoric where Calvin drives home the fact that we are not our own, but we are God's.

Remember, we're under God and under his will. Take your time at home to read that. That's what Calvin would have us do, to have our whole lives under God's word and to be reformed as individuals and corporately.

Thank you.