

Titus 1

Calvin

Tim Anderson 10/9/17

The English poet and church of England minister, John Donne said,
"No man is an island entire of itself;

every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main."

What Donne said of the person is also true of the church.

The church is not an island.

It exists as part of the broader society it lives in.

The General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia
met in Maroochydore this week.

One of the topics of discussion was the church's response
to the redefinition of marriage.

There were some very encouraging motions passed.

I emailed one around to the church.

But why were we talking about that subject?

Because we live as part of the nation of Australia,

and that subject is right at the forefront of our national discourse.

We are not an island.

We worship the Lord Jesus as part of the Australian community.

We're thinking about the reformation at the moment.

For Christians,

the Reformation is the big happening of the 16th century.

But for the rest of the world,

something else was going on in the 16th century.

Who can tell me what it was?

That's right. The renaissance.

The renaissance is the big news of the 16th century.

What happened in the renaissance?

Well if you want someone to tell you about the art work,

you'll need to speak to someone who knows about art.

But from the perspective of scholars,

there was a big movement towards getting back to the original sources.

For centuries, scholars had been commenting on

what other scholars said
about what other scholar said.
When the Renaissance came along,
people thought to themselves,
"How about just reading the original document
and working out for yourself what it says?"
What a novel thought!
You can just discard centuries of tradition
about how things are interpreted,
and just go back and read them for yourself.

Well the reformer we are looking at today is John Calvin.
And this stuff about the Renaissance is important background to Calvin.
Because he was affected by the Renaissance
before he was affect by the Reformation.

As we look at Calvin,
I must acknowledge John Piper,
whose teaching on Calvin has heavily influenced this sermon.
Calvin was born July 10, 1509, in Noyon, France,
when Martin Luther was 25 years old
and had just begun to teach the Bible in Wittenberg.

When he was 14,
so 8 years after Luther nailed the 95 thesis to the church door,
Calvin's father sent him to study theology at the University of Paris,
which at that time was untouched by the Reformation in Germany.
Even though there was already a reformation in full swing
happening in Germany,
it hadn't got to France.
So Calvin's first exposure to theology
was being taught Medieval church thinking.

But five years later (when Calvin was 19)
his father ran afoul of the church
and told his son to leave theology and study law,

which he did for the next three years at Orleans and Bourges.

His father died in May of 1531, when Calvin was 21.
Calvin felt free then to turn from law to his first love,
which had become the classics.

He published his first book, a *Commentary on Seneca*,
in 1532, at the age of 23.

Seneca was a contemporary of Jesus.

But he lived in ancient Rome.

And he was a leading Stoic Philosopher, not a Christian.

So Calvin's first work is Renaissance work.

He's going back to the original sources of the classics
and producing a commentary on them for his own day.

That is the work of a Renaissance scholar.

And his commentary on Seneca was greeted with acclaim.

He became one of the youngest big name thinkers of his era.

Completely outside of the church.

A scholar in the academy.

Then somehow over the next two years,

Calvin was exposed to the teaching of Luther.

And what he saw was Luther doing the same thing for Christianity,
that Calvin had done for Seneca.

Going back to the original sources,
and rediscovering what it was actually on about.

Doing what the Renaissance tried to do for all scholarship
to the task of understanding Christianity.

Here's how he wrote about it.

He had been struggling to live out the Catholic faith with zeal:

". . .when, lo, a very different form of doctrine started up,
not one which led us away from the Christian profession,
but one which brought it back to its fountain . . . to its original purity. "

Was Calvin bowled over and converted straight away?

No he was not.

But eventually God softened his heart.

Here's how he wrote about it.

" Offended by the novelty,
(this novel Lutheran doctrine)

I lent an unwilling ear,

and at first, I confess, strenuously and passionately resisted . . .

to confess that I had all my life long been in ignorance and error. . . .

I at length perceived, as if light had broken in upon me,

in what a sty of error I had wallowed,

and how much pollution and impurity I had thereby contracted.

Being exceedingly alarmed at the misery into which I had fallen . . .

as in duty bound,

[I] made it my first business to betake myself to thy way [O God],

condemning my past life,

not without groans and tears."

So Calvin has been converted by the gospel of Jesus.

But it's a bit different than for Luther.

For Luther the lynch pin is justification by faith.

God's righteousness comes to him by faith alone.

This realisation was the unifying idea for Luther's life.

Calvin absolutely believes this.

But the unifying idea is the glory of God.

He's recognised that up until his conversion

his life had not been giving God glory.

And after his conversion,

his one goal is to give God glory

in the way he conducts the rest of his life.

If you wanted to choose a key verse for Calvin,

then Rom 11:36 would not be a bad one.

"For from him and through him and for him are all things,

to him be glory forever! Amen."

For Calvin, the need for the Reformation was all about God's glory:

Rome had "destroyed the glory of Christ in many ways

— by calling upon the saints to intercede,

(that is, it was normal before the reformation,
to pray to the saints and ask them to ask the Father for you.
But this takes away Jesus' glory)
because Jesus Christ is the one mediator between God and man;
by adoring the Blessed Virgin,
(that is, it was normal before the Reformation to worship Mary
but this takes away Jesus' glory because)
Christ alone shall be adored;
by offering a continual sacrifice in the Mass,
(that is the church taught
that the priest is actually offering a sacrifice that takes away sins
when he does communion.
But this takes away glory from Jesus
because his sacrifice is the only one that takes away sins ...)
the sacrifice of Christ upon the Cross is complete and sufficient",
by elevating tradition to the level of Scripture
and even making the word of Christ
dependent for its authority on the word of man.
That is before the Reformation,
the Scriptures which are Christ's word,
stood below the pope in authority.
Because the Pope could tell you what they meant.
And you were bound to accept his word for it.
This takes glory away from Jesus,
because his word is not the final authority.
So for Calvin, at every step along the way,
it's all about bringing glory to Jesus.

Well that's an extraordinarily important insight.
How we get our sins forgiven is not the key question.
It's an important question.
But we get our sins forgiven for a reason.
And that reason is so we can bring glory to God.
If you want to learn one thing from Calvin,
here it is,
the most important question for the Christian is this.

"How can I bring glory to God?"

Well Calvin has had his breakthrough moment.

He's been converted.

What does he do next?

How is he going to bring glory to God?

Well the first thing he needed to do was get out of France.

His life was in danger.

France was not Germany.

There were no Protestant princes to protect you in France.

So Calvin fled to Basle in Switzerland.

And he thought to himself,

"What gifts has God given me?"

And he decided that God had called him to be a scholar.

He thought I'll hide here in Basel,

and I'll write a systematic introduction to the Protestant faith.

Here it is.

At least an English translation.

A slim volume.

Calvin's Institutes of Christianity.

Here we are

500 years after Luther nailed the 95 theses to the church door,

and this book is still one of the most influential books in the church.

If you want to become an Anglican Minister up in Sydney,

you have to read this book before you can start at Bible College.

They won't take you until you've read it.

A couple of years back,

I started reading it to my kids as a bed time story.

We got about 150 pages in.

Well Calvin could have happily spent the rest of his life in Basel.

Serving Jesus, glorifying God by writing for the Reformation.

But God had other ideas.

A temporary amnesty was declared for those who had fled France.

Calvin popped back to put some of his financial affairs in order
and visit siblings.

But then when he was travelling out again,
there was a war on.
Troops were blocking the road.
and he was forced to detour via Geneva.
When he got to Geneva,
the leader of the Protestant Church there sniffed him out.
William Farel was his name.
Now Farel had read some of Calvin's writings,
and he knew that this man was a far greater leader than himself.
So he basically said to Calvin,
"What are you doing retreating back to your study to write books?
We need you to come and run our church here in Geneva."
Calvin said,
"No way, Hosea.
I'm called to be a scholar."
Farel said,
"You are needed here.
If you wuss out,
may God curse your retirement to the study."
And so Calvin gave in.
Here's how he puts it.
Farel, who burned with an extraordinary zeal to advance the gospel,
immediately 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."

So Calvin became the pastor in Geneva.
And he set about trying to organise the church

so it would give glory to God.
That's where our reading from Titus comes in.
Paul left his young colleague Titus on Crete
with instructions to organise the church there.
He was to appoint elders to lead the flock.
And he was to rebuke people who lead the flock astray.
And that was how Calvin saw his job in Geneva.

But not everybody was particularly keen on having a pastor
who rebuked people who lead the flock astray.

Funny that.

People often don't like being rebuked.

Now let it be said,

that Calvin saw some things going on
that were in serious need of rebuke.

For example.

You know that bit in the creed where we say,
"I believe in the 'communion of saints'."

I guess many Anglicans today

would think it means something to do with the communion service.

But it's not about that.

The word communion actually means fellowship.

I believe in the "fellowship of Christians".

That means we are all united together in the gospel.

We are a team.

We are Jesus' team.

But some people in Geneva said,

we are a fellowship together.

We should share everything we have,

just like in the early church in Acts 2.

And so they did.

Including their wives.

It was like the sexual revolution of the 1960s except in the 1540s.

So Calvin said,

"Hold on.

You can't do that.

And if you do, I won't give you communion."
Well there were in fact all sorts of tensions.
And some people thought Calvin was too hard line.
And there were disputes
about what matters should be the province of the church
and what matters should be decided by the city council.
Calvin wound up getting kicked out of Geneva for three years.
Until they worked out they really did need him.
And Calvin worked out some matters where he was being too hard line,
and assured them that he would tread more gently.

What are the legacies of Calvin that we should take hold of today?
First of all, Calvin was the one
who best made use of the insights of the Renaissance for the church.
It seems incredible to us.

But in the church before the Reformation,
it just was not a priority to teach people the Scriptures.
The church leaders have been taught the Scriptures.
They can tell you everything you need to know.

So what do you want to read the Bible for?
But Calvin said let's get back to the original sources.
We want to hear the voice of Christ,
not the voice of the someone else.

And so Calvin began the practice of preaching sequentially
through books of the Bible.

If that's how God has given us his word,
If God has had it written down so that it makes sense read out.
Then that's how we ought to preach it.

When Calvin came back to Geneva
after being kicked out for three years.

He began preaching from the very next verse after his last sermon there.

Now Calvin was not the first person to ever do that.

John Chrysostom in the 4th century had done the same thing.

But it was the first time for hundreds of years.

And Calvin didn't so it just a bit.

Twenty times a month he preached new sermons.

That's tremendous commitment
to getting God's word to transform lives.
But Scripture is where we most clearly see God's glory.
And everything we do is about displaying God's glory.

Secondly, Calvin saw that God has a plan to transform the world.
In Geneva, Calvin didn't only organise the church.
He organised a schools, hospitals, looked after refugees,
and organised a sanitation system for Geneva
that made it one of the cleanest cities in Europe.
Calvin had a vision for Christianity that would transform society.
And he did that whilst remaining totally focused
on bringing people into a living faith in Jesus.
Many Christians today who speak of transforming society
leave out the part of the transformation
from which everything else springs,
a response to God's grace in Jesus.

Thirdly and I think most importantly,
Calvin had a single minded focus on the glory of God.
It was why he did everything he did.
Even when he got it wrong,
he did it because he was trying to glorify God.
Why did Calvin build schools?
Because people can't know God through the Bible if they can't read.
It glorifies God for people to be able to read.
Why did Calvin subject the people of Geneva to strict church discipline,
banning people from receiving communion
if they wouldn't repent of their sins?
Because it glorifies God when people amend their lives
and live to his glory.
And it dishonours Jesus,
when people who are flagrantly disrespecting his word,
pretend to honour him at the Lord's Supper.
Calvin said,
"I should rather die a hundred times

than subject Christ to such foul mockery."
This wasn't Calvin being a meddlesome controller
of other people's freedom.
This was Calvin being a diligent pastor,
eager for his flock to bring glory to God.

Well I said earlier,
there's a single idea from this sermon.
I'm not sure that it's entirely just
to condense someone's life
who wrote a work as monumental as Calvin's Institutes,
down into one question.

But anyway.

Here's the question.

How can I bring glory to God?

That was a unifying question for Calvin.

It guided his response to every situation.

How can I bring glory to God?

You have to soak yourself in the Scriptures to answer that question.

Otherwise you will be just imagining what God wants
instead of listening to what God wants.

But the questions is crucial.

How can I bring glory to God?

If you only think about having your sins forgiven,
then once they are forgiven you can spend your life on the golf course.

But for Calvin, you have to live for the glory of him who saved you.

Sometimes that will mean

giving up the seclusion of writing as a scholar,

in order to be a pastor in a town where as Calvin described his life:

"I have lived here amid continual bickerings.

I have been from derision saluted of an evening before my door
with forty or fifty shots of an arquebus [a large gun]."

Whatever it takes.

How can I bring glory to God?

"For from him and through him and for him are all things.

To him be glory forever more."