Basic Course
Reformed History and Theology

Georg Plasger

Lektion 3

John Calvin, the Reformation in Geneva and the Beginnings of the Reformation in France

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1. John Calvin, the despot from Geneva?

Somewhat more is known about the person of John Calvin than about the person of Huldreich Zwingli. And this is understandable insofar as he was incomparably more effective than Zwingli. Nearly all Reformed churches in the world refer themselves back to him. The Reformed are often called Calvinists, although they do not so describe themselves.
But at the same time, one still often comes across very negative characterisations of Calvin, above all in Germany. He is the despot from Geneva who was extremely severe and ready to sacrifice all others to his school of thought; he had Servet executed; he represented to so-called doctrine of double predestination, according to which God elected some to salvation and the others to damnation etc. In 1936, the time of National Socialism, Stefan Zweig wrote the following book: "A Conscience against Power. Castellio against Calvin," and in a literarily adroit manner had meant the despot Hitler but had said Calvin – this also further contributed to the painting in dark colours of the picture of Calvin in the last few decades.
It is true that some of Calvin's characteristics will remain well-nigh foreign to the people of modern times. He is an ascetic who placed his whole life in the service of the Reformation and therefore could take severe action. But we must endeavour to perceive a different picture. For the fact that such a false picture of Calvin exists is also based upon the confessional disputes lasting into the 20th century. Above all in the 17th century, there were wrangles and quarrels between the confessions, in particular between Reformed and Lutheran Christians. The people defamed one another, made insinuations and no longer fairly represented each other. Much wrong was done on both sides, also by the Reformers. And in this context there arose above all in Germany, on the basis of the writings of many altogether influential Lutherans, a picture of Calvin which continued to be effective for over a hundred years and which even lives on today – even if in a toned down form – in some church-historical and popular portrayals.
For this reason, it is good not to be determined by prejudices but to look and question more precisely how Calvin lived, taught and worked.

2. Childhood and Student Years (1509-1535)

John Calvin was born on 10th July 1509 in Noyon in Northern France (about 100 km north of Paris). His actual name is Jean Cauvin. Calvin's father was the notary of the cathedral chapter there and therefore a layman among clerics and as such in a raised position. Already at the age of almost twelve, John Calvin got his first living – a part of the income of a particular parish (Chapel de la Gesine). Until 1523 Calvin went to school in his home-town. At the age of fourteen he was sent to Paris to the College de la Marche, a famous boarding school, at which Mathurin Cordier was head as Latin teacher. Cordier is known as the founder of a new pedagogy. And even if Cordier himself only gave Calvin Latin lessons for a short time, Calvin nevertheless admired him his life long. And moreover, Cordier was later appointed head and organiser of the school system in Geneva and Lausanne.
Only after a short time in the College de la Marche, Calvin moved in 1524 for unknown reasons to another boarding school, the College de Mantaigu, a stronghold of Roman-Catholic orthodoxy, which was considered a nightmare by the pupils. Nevertheless, Calvin seemed not to have suffered there all too much, but rather to have enjoyed a thorough education, above all in Grammar and in philosophy, but also in theology. Indeed, one of Calvin's teachers, John Mair or Major, has written a commentary on the gospels and defended the Roman doctrines against Wyclif, Hus and above all Luther. The doctrine of Luther had already got around and it was this that had to be thoroughly defended against. Probably Calvin got to know Catholic theology there on the basis of the Sentences of Peter Lombard (c. 1100 to1160), the church fathers, and also from Augustine (354 to 430).
Calvin made several friends, some of whom were open-minded in relation to the Reformation, and some who even joined it. Calvin had not yet done this himself – he found Luther's

polemic against Zwingli too vehement. Whether Calvin had read Luther's writings is unclear. In any case, Calvin did not join the Reformation but remained for the time being a faithful follower of the Roman Doctrine. One could describe Calvin as a Catholic humanist who insisted upon a renewal of the sciences, but not on a Reformation in the sense of Luther.
Indeed, in 1527, while Calvin was still at the college, the income of a second living arose.
At the beginning, Calvin's father had intended Calvin to study theology. However, he changed his plan, perhaps because he had disputes with the cathedral chapter in Noyon, perhaps also because he hoped for more possibilities for his son from another discipline, and steered him in the direction of law. Calvin began the study of law probably in 1528 in Orleans, then a very famous faculty. He worked doggedly and zealously, learnt Greek in a few months and was influenced continually by humanist ideals. Calvin left Orleans in 1529 and studied further in Bourges with the famous lawyer Alciat.
In 1531, Calvin found out that his father had become seriously ill, travelled to Noyon and was able to stay by his father in his last hours. The disputes of Calvin's father with the cathedral chapter had become so vehement that he had been excommunicated since 1529, which insulted him greatly.
After the death of his father, Calvin went to Paris. He was now independent and beside his juridical studies dedicated himself above all to literary studies. In Paris, King Franz I had founded a new humanist-oriented university, at which Calvin registered. In the Winter of 1531/32, Calvin composed a commentary on Seneca's "De clementia" – "on mildness" (treatise). This book made him well-known and numbered him among the leading humanist echelons in France. Then he returned to Orleans and completed his study of law as "Licentiate of law."

3. When did Calvin's Conversion to the Reformation take place?

The question of when Calvin experienced his conversion to the Reformation is the object of countless investigations, in which the documentary evidence is sparse. Calvin himself reports that he experienced such a conversion (subita conversio). In his commentary on the Psalms of 1557 Calvin remembers in retrospect:

> *"I was at first so stubbornly devoted to the superstition of the Papacy that I could only be extracted from such deep mud with difficulty. Then by a sudden conversion God made my heart tame and compliant, although at my age I was already very hardened in these things. And when I had for the first time reached some knowledge of the true piety, I was immediately seized by a great desire to exploit it, and although I didn't completely give up what was left of my studies, I pressed ahead with them considerably less vigorously. Now I was completely astonished when, even before a year had passed, all who had a desire for the pure doctrine gathered around me in order to learn from me, although I was still myself almost a beginner."*

Calvin writes this in retrospect but he reports no date. It must have been before 4th May 1534, for at that time Calvin went to Noyon and renounced his living – which is to be understood as a consequence of his turning away from Catholicism. The conversion could also have taken place already in 1533. That is to be accepted if Calvin was involved in the drawing up of the so-called Cop-talk. But that is uncertain.
The doctor Nikolaus Cop, rector of the Paris University, at which Calvin studied, held an address for the opening of the semester in the church of the Mathurin on 1st November 1533. This address, an interpretation of the beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount, was in content a praise of the Gospel. Cop therefore declared his belief in the Reformation. The Franciscans, in whose church the talk was held, accused Cop immediately of heresy, and a few weeks after the talk, Cop fled from Paris to his home-town Basel. A controversial point of discussion in Calvin-research is the question of whether Cop's talk came at least in part from Calvin. If that is true, Calvin would already have been of Reformational conviction in

Autumn 1533. In October 1534 the so-called Poster Affair took place in Paris. Posters against the mass were put up in public. On them the "Lutherans," as those of Reformational conviction were described, were named as initiators of the conspiracy against the public order and religion. Calvin had aroused attention in the run up to the poster action by declaring openly his Protestant faith and by canvassing for it energetically. In any case, Calvin also fled from Paris and searched for a quiet residence where he would be able to continue his studies. He intended to write a catechism for the French speaking Protestants. So he took off to Basel in the first few weeks of the year 1535.
Ultimately, one will have to be careful in the precise dating. It may have been an individual event for Calvin, but it could also have been a matter of a longer process. However, the following result remains decisive: Calvin had experienced a "conversio" by the year 1534 – a turning to the Gospel, which led to distinct consequences.

4. From the first to the second Stay in Geneva (1536-1541)

In Basel, Calvin lived under the pseudonym "Lucianus," an anagram of Calvinus. He worked further on his Protestant catechism for the French Reformed, and in August 1535 finished his work. It was available in print March 1536. Besides the writing of his catechism, which he called "Institutio christianae religionis" (Institutes of the Christian Religion), he further studied the bible, works of Martin Luther, Philipp Melanchthon and even Martin Bucer. It was here at the latest that he learnt Hebrew and read the Scholastics. He must have accomplished an immense work quota.
In April 1536, just after his Institutes had appeared, Calvin went to Paris and met up with his brothers and sisters. Then he intended to go further to Strasbourg, where he wanted to meet Bucer and others. However, Calvin could not take the direct route, for war was again prevailing between King Franz I of France and the Emperor Karl. And so he travelled across Lyon and Geneva. This had consequences.
For in Geneva there were famous scenes between Wilhelm Farel and John Calvin. Calvin reports on this himself:

> *"The shortest route to Strasbourg, where I wanted to return at that time, was obstructed because of the war. Therefore, I intended to travel through here quickly, without stopping longer than a night in the town. The Papacy had been abolished in this town a short time ago by the upright man of whom I have already spoken [Farel], and by Master Pierre Viret. However, things did not stand as they should, and there were malicious and dangerous divisions and groups among the inhabitants. Then someone discovered me… [du Tillet] and told the others. As a result, Farel (since he was seized by a wonderful zeal to foster the gospel) immediately made every effort to stop me from leaving. And after he had heard that I wanted to be free for my own studies, and when he saw that he could not achieve anything through pleading, he went so far as to curse me – that God would damn my peace and my studies if I drew back in such an emergency and failed to help and assist. These words frightened me and shook me up so deeply that I gave up the journey I had undertaken. However, because of my fear and shyness, I did not want to be obliged to take up a particular office."*

The Reformation had been introduced in Geneva in 1535 and Farel had already achieved a lot. However, since the Reformation was introduced in Geneva on the part of the town council in order to emphasise the independence of the town Geneva in relation to the bishops, the Reformation in Geneva lacked a deep-rootedness in respect of content. The Roman-Catholic party was still influential, and Farel felt that it was too much for him alone. And so it was convenient for Calvin to remain in Geneva, and not as pastor or preacher but rather as "teacher of Holy Scripture in the Geneva Church." But he was very soon called upon to preach and to help in the building up of the church as well.

In 1537 Calvin made the suggestion to the town council of a new organisation of the church. In this a basic characteristic of Calvin's theology becomes clear: always at stake for him is the form of the church and how it lives. It is true that he intends no exclusive community of the elect – this was the concept of the Anabaptists. Rather, Calvin understands the church as a community of those who belong to it by choice. Therefore he and Farel drew up a confession of faith (Confession de foi), which was supposed to be signed by all Genevans "in order to establish who agrees with the Gospel and who wants rather to belong to the kingdom of the pope than to the kingdom of Christ."
In addition to this he introduced some further changes. Psalms were sung in the church services – still today a distinguishing feature of Reformed communities worldwide.
A catechistic instruction was devised and a catechism written, much shorter than the Institutes and clearly dependent upon Luther's Small Catechism.
But the town council had difficulty with Calvin's suggestions of reform. The proposals were only agreed with after much hesitation. The situation escalated when they were presented to the inhabitants of Geneva, who were happy to sign the confession of belief. But many did not want this, and so through this failed experiment the tension between the Catholics and the Protestants grew. It was indeed a mistake on Calvin's part to want to succeed in this respect.
The opposition to Calvin grew. Elections were held in Geneva in 1538 and the parties of opposition, which were by in large Roman-Catholic, took the victory. Besides the general unrest among the people, the Anabaptists were preoccupied with additional problems. And there were major, and in some cases dogmatic, accusations raised against Farel and Calvin, for example, that Calvin was an Arian and denied the divine nature of Christ.
This insinuation misses the mark in terms of the content of Calvin's theology; he is in no way a theologian in sympathy with Arianism. However, Calvin rejected the accusations. Therefore the matter was brought to Bern, where Calvin's position aroused suspicion. Although this had no consequences, Calvin's position in Geneva was nevertheless weakened through these insinuations. The opposition won the majority in the elections of 1538 and the new council forbade Calvin and Farel to preach on Easter Sunday. Calvin and Farel disregarded this command and so were relieved of their office and had to leave the town within three days.
It seems that the Geneva episode had no lasting significance, since Calvin was only in Geneva for two years.
Calvin intended to return to Basel and to take up his studies again there. Farel was called to Neuchatel in July. Friends criticised Calvin for his obstinacy and he also realised that he had behaved wrongly and too stubbornly, and drew the conclusion that he was not cut out for public effectiveness, but should instead lead a quiet scholarly existence.
So he refused for a long while the plea of the Strasbourgers to come to them and take charge of the French refugee-community there as pastor. But he finally came because Martin Bucer and Wolfgang Capito requested it so insistently. Strasbourg was one of the most significant centres of German Protestantism in 1538. Although they had followed the Wittenberg Reformation in 1536, Bucer and Capito retained independence, also theologically. Bucer is to be regarded quite simply as the most important leader of the negotiations of the Protestant party.
Calvin thus became pastor of the French refugee-community and constructed it on the model of the Strasbourgers, taking over their order of service and reworking it only slightly. Besides this, however, he held a professorial chair in exegesis at the newly founded high school, where he interpreted John's Gospel and then several Pauline epistles. His commentaries were also printed.
Above all, he worked on a new edition of his Institutes, which appeared in 1539. If previously this had been more like a detailed Catechism, which moreover still oriented itself on Luther's theology, it was now a substantial textbook of dogmatics in its own right.
The time in Strasbourg was entirely taken up. Each week he held four sermons, his lectures, he worked on his books and even undertook several trips to participate in talks on religion, e.g. in Frankfurt Main in 1539. It was there that Calvin made the acquaintance of Melanchthon, and a friendship between them arose. Luther's closest co-worker thus became a

friend of Calvin. Calvin had great respect for Luther throughout his life, and Luther also expressed positive views about Calvin. At the same time, however, Calvin had trouble with the pigheadedness of Luther in the last years of his life.
Calvin found that the Lutheran communities laid too little emphasis on church life and complied still too much with the Roman-Catholic liturgies and forms of mass. He also found the dependence on the regional rulers extremely problematic.
The situation in Strasbourg seemed favourable for Calvin, and it looked like Calvin would remain there for a long time. In 1539, he received citizenship in the small Republic, in accordance with his own wishes. His financial situation also improved after his initial obligation to buy a proportion of his own books.
Those in his circle had it in mind to marry him off. The thought did not appear to have come to him of his own accord. Two attempts failed. Finally Calvin agreed to marry Idelette de Bure. She was the widow of an Anabaptist, who himself had converted. In 1540 Farel came from Neuchatel in order to marry them.

Meanwhile in Geneva several unpleasant things had happened. After the departure of Farel and Calvin much in the church life had become disorderly. Friends of Calvin in Geneva attempted not to acknowledge the disciples of Calvin and Farel, which caused Calvin to intervene. He demanded the acknowledgement of new pastors. This achieved pacification, but only in an unstable manner. Bern attempted to gain control over Geneva. Then the disciples from the town were hunted down. A conflict was feared, and possibly even an armed one. The Reformed party brought some of their opponents to see that order would only be reestablished if Calvin were to be called back as soon as possible. On 20th October 1540 a legation set out from Geneva to Strasbourg in order to persuade Calvin to return to Geneva. Calvin hesitated – and refused. Even Farel placed himself in the service of the Genevans and sought to persuade Calvin, but without success. Bucer wanted to keep Calvin in Strasbourg. The whole attempt lasted in all for more than half a year, and finally Calvin agreed to return for a few weeks. On 13th September 1541 Calvin arrived once more in Geneva, but contrary to his plans, stayed there not only for a few months but for the rest of his life.

5. The Building up of the Geneva Church

When Calvin returned to Geneva, his first sermon was a continuation of the last. He acted as if there had been no break. Calvin picked up seemlessly from his time in 1538. But his position in Geneva was now inevitably more powerful – he had been called back to order the town and church.

Calvin could not, however, achieve all this. He did not succeed, for example, in getting the Lord's Supper to be celebrated every Sunday. The Bern regulation was adopted, according to which it only took place every quarter of a year.
There were conflicts in other respects as well. Calvin wanted to introduce church discipline further and to see it more widely practised. That is, for the consistory to have the possibility to summon and question the members of the community who were guilty of an offence against the doctrine or morality, and if necessary to rebuke them, using excommunication at the extreme. The town council, however, thought that that was going too far, fearing a jurisdiction besides the political leadership. After some argument, Calvin won through, but not without concessions and only fully in 1555.
Today we find such kinds of church discipline problematic. For the rights of the individuals seem thereby to be limited. This was not what concerned Calvin. He was of the opinion that a community that knows who it is must also respect how those who belong to it should behave, and that in the event of flagrant infringements it must be asked whether real community can be maintained. Incidentally, Calvin felt led and supported in this respect by Matthew 18, where it speaks of the handling of offences of members of the community.

The question of church discipline also led to the most conflicts with the Geneva council. More important in *The Church Constitution*, however, is the way in which the community itself is led. And in this regard, Calvin's understanding of the fourfold office became influential in the life of the church. The church rule consists of four offices: the pastors, teachers, elders and deacons.

a) The pastors are first of all to preach and teach, second, to administer the sacraments (baptism and Eucharist) and third, to visit the sick. Once a week the assembly of the pastors of the area met, interpreted the bible together and practised reciprocal censorship.
b) The teachers have the task of "instructing believers in the salutary doctrine." In the narrowest sense this is the explanation of the bible, both Old and New Testaments. Because this involves both knowledge of the languages and general education, such instruction is also the task of the teachers, in order that "this instruction brings gain."
c) Twelve elders were chosen each year by the two councils. Together with six pastors chosen by their colleagues they made up the consistory. This consistory had the task of keeping an eye on church order amongst the members of the church. The consistory and its members were to "admonish in a friendly manner those who they see slipping up or living in an disorderly manner." The members of the consistory were thus concerned for the community's way of life, but nevertheless also for participation in the services and doctrine. When they detected contempt or abuse, they were in the first place to admonish in all friendship. If this were not enough, they could effect excommunication and the reporting of an offence with the worldly authorities. Both happened extremely rarely, however. Most often the consistory was occupied in settling arguments, often between those who were almost allies. The consistory met once a week on Thursdays. *The Church Constitution* defines the spirit in which the consistory was to act, as follows: "All this should always be so moderate, however, that no oppressive severity can prevail, and equally the rebukes should be nothing other that a means of salvation, to lead the sinners again to our Lord." The consistory was neither supposed to intervene in the sphere of worldly power, nor in the general customary jurisdiction.
d) The deacons have two tasks: support of the poor and caring for the sick. The first activity consisted in the organisation of alms and its distribution to the needy. To this there also belonged the feeding of the poor. The second consisted in the running of the hospitals and the hostel for foreigners. There was free treatment for the poor and a teacher was employed in the hospital for the children. (All quotations come from *The Church Constitution*.)

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On church offices (from *The Church Constitution* of 1561)

"There are four areas of responsibility or kinds of office, which our Lord has created for the leadership of his church: first the pastors, then the teachers, next the elders and fourth the deacons. Therefore, if we want to have a well-ordered and unscathed church, we must keep to this form of its leadership."
The task of the pastors "is to proclaim the Word of God, both in public and to individuals: to teach, exhort, reprimand and criticise. However, they should also administer the sacraments and carry out brotherly rebukes together with the elders or representatives of the council."
"The particular task of the teachers consists in instructing the believers in the salutary doctrine in order that the purity of the gospel is neither clouded by ignorance nor by heresy."
The task of the elders "consists in keeping an eye on the lifestyle of each believer and admonishing those they see slipping up or living in a disorderly manner."

The deacons are responsible for receiving, distributing and administering charity for the poor … , looking after and caring for the sick, and feeding the poor."

Questions for further Work

Question 1.
How are the four offices defined?

The offices are defined in respect of their tasks, and that means, functionally. They are not defined by their bearers. And that means that *what* the current bearers have to do is important, and not *who* does it. With this it is made clear that the community as a whole, as that in which completely defined tasks are to be fulfilled, is understood as the body of Christ. And these tasks define the offices. The number four is historically conditioned. In the Institutes the office of the pastor is merged with that of teacher. And in Calvin's view, the number four does not have to be a conclusive. Insofar as a community decides to take up other tasks, there can be further offices.

Question 2.
Which office is given precedence?

Ultimately no office is given precedence. It is clear that the office of the pastor involves the most part-functions, and that aspects of the teaching office and the office of the elder are united. It is nevertheless not "given precedence," but is associated with the other offices. Thus it becomes clear that neither the pastor, nor any other, prevails in a community, but ultimately Christ alone.

Question 3:
Who leads the community?

The leadership of the community is constituted by the pastor and the elders. Together they take responsibility for the life of the current community. There is no other figure given precedence over them – no bishop or superintendent. This implies a conception according to which the individual community is understood for Calvin as the body of Christ: church is the assembly, the community, which is also visible as such. Church is not first of all an entity above the community and the individual communities only representatives or satellites of the "independent territorial Church" (*Landeskirche*). No, the highest and decisive dimension is the locally existing community. Above the leadership of the community there is no authority. In this there is once more reflected the constitution of the Swiss Confederation and of Geneva. However, it is not enough simply to ground Calvin's doctrine of the church historically in this way – and thus to relativise it. It has become a good Reformed principle to take as one's starting point the individual communities and to understand the unions of communities not as superordinate, but rather as connecting, authorities. The "Synodal-presbytarian Church Constitution" still present in many churches today is a consequence and result of this recognition of Calvin.

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It thus becomes clear that inside the locally existing community there are defined tasks to be to be seen to, such as those belonging to the area of teaching and education, as well as others which touch upon social dimensions. The offices in the community are to be understood by these tasks, and that means in terms of function. This functional understanding of office distinguishes Calvin from all sacramental understandings. This is to be seen in the fact that one only holds office as long as one performs it. The office is not bound to the person but to the community. With this conception, clear distinctions from Lutheranism become nameable.

In the latter, there is a concentration on the one ordained office of proclamation and administration of sacraments, which is bound to the person and not to the community.

Besides his activity in Geneva, Calvin was called upon to unite the different Protestant movements. In respect to the Lord's Supper, he reached an agreement in 1549 with the people of Zurich in the so-called "Consensus Tigurinus" (Zurich Consensus). It was actually here that something like a "Reformed understanding of the Lord's supper" first arose.

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On the Understanding of the Lord's Supper. (Passage from *Institutes* IV, 17, 1-2. Trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, Vol. 20 and 21 in *The Library of Christian Classics*, London: SCM press, 1961).

[God] has willed, by giving his pledge, to assure us of this continuing liberality. To this end, therefore, he has, through the hand of his only-begotten Son, given to his church another sacrament, that is, a spiritual banquet, wherein Christ attests himself to be the life-giving bread, upon which our souls feed unto true and blessed immortality [John 6:51]. …
First, the signs are bread and wine, which represent for us the invisible food that we receive from the flesh and blood of Christ. …
Now Christ is the only food of our soul, and therefore our Heavenly Father invites us to Christ, that, refreshed by partaking of him, we may repeatedly gather strength until we shall have reached heavenly immortality.
Since, however, this mystery of Christ's secret union with the devout is by nature incomprehensible, he shows its figure and image in visible signs best adapted to our small capacity. Indeed, by giving guarantees and tokens he makes it as certain for us as if we had seen it with our own eyes. For this very familiar comparison penetrate into even the dullest minds: just as bread and wine sustain physical life, so are souls fed by Christ. We now understand the purpose of this mystical blessing, namely, to confirm for us the fact that the Lord's body was once for all so sacrificed for us that we may now feed upon it, and by feeding feel in ourselves the working of that unique sacrifice; and that his blood was once so shed for us in order to be our perpetual drink. … Hence, he also calls the cup "the covenant in his blood" [Luke 22:20; I Cor. 11:25]. For he in some measure renews, or rather continues, the covenant which he once for all ratified with his blood (as far as it pertains to the strengthening of our faith) whenever he proffers that sacred blood for us to taste.
Godly souls can gather great assurance and delight from this Sacrament; in it they have a witness of our growth into one body with Christ such that whatever is his may be called ours.

Questions for further Work

Question 1.
What is the point of the Lord's Supper?

The Lord's Supper represents the love of God the Father. He does not leave his own alone, but has given human beings the Lord's Supper in order that they may be certain of his care for them. Therefore, at stake in the Lord's Supper is not that God expects or demands something from humanity, but in the first place that God does something good for humanity.

Question 2.
Who is fed in the Lord's Supper? To whom does the Lord's Supper give something?

In the Lord's Supper, the body is fed with bread and wine. That is the outward act. But this is by no means what is actually at stake. Rather, with the bodily food there is joined a second meaning in the Lord's Supper: just as the body is nourished bodily – that is the outward sign of bread and wine – so also is the soul spiritually nourished. And to the soul is granted the

very body and blood of Christ. The pair of concepts, body and blood, refers to the pouring out of blood and the giving up of the body of Jesus Christ on Good Friday and Golgotha. This has happened. And it brings salvation, forgiveness of sins, new life etc. to humankind. And in the celebration of the Lord's Supper it is not only remembered, but the meaning of this happening is brought home to the participants so that they take to heart the reason of its celebration. The Lord's Supper is the "signifying pledge" of salvation. It vouches for it. The human being has something to chew and gulp. In this way, the promise that Jesus Christ is present in the Holy Spirit is made clear for him sensually. Therefore Calvin says, "our souls are fed with Christ just as bread and wine sustain the bodily life." The Lord's Supper should strengthen faith.

Question 3.
Are the bread and wine the body and blood of Jesus Christ?

No. They are in the Roman-Catholic understanding and also in the modified Lutheran position. Luther wanted to insist with this emphasis on "is" that the salvation of Good Friday "really" happened. Calvin likewise emphases the "reality" of the salvation of humanity which happened in the representative death of Jesus Christ on Golgotha. However, this does not depend for him on the transformation of the elements into body and blood. The elements remain elements and are not transformed. They strengthen the human, as they intend to make him certain of the fact that "salvation applies also to you." The elements provide – in connection with the Word – certainty, but they do not mediate salvation or accomplish it. Calvin saw the danger of tying Christ down to the elements and so giving the elements too much attention. No, Christ is not bodily present in the Lord's Supper. But he is nonetheless present in his Spirit, who unites the receiver with Christ.

Question 4.
Is the Lord's Supper necessary for salvation?

No, necessary for salvation it is certainly not. Then it would become an indispensable component of redemption. Then not enough would have happened on the Cross. And then too little would be made of the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the Cross. It is nevertheless not unimportant to celebrate it. Indeed, Calvin wanted it to be celebrated every Sunday. (He was not able to achieve this in Geneva.) For the human needs to have brought home to him what is granted to him. The Lord's Supper should make the human being certain that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ applies to him, has happened for him.

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6. Some theological trends

Calvin's theology is many-faceted and thorough. Calvin's Institutes (the final version of which comes from the year 1559) was the first comprehensive Protestant dogmatics. In it, the Reformational innovations are penetrated in dispute with the Scholastic tradition and in constant dialogue with the whole of Scripture, Old and New Testament. Two connected poles characterise Calvin's thought, as becomes clear in the Institutes. First there is the emphasis on glory, the greatness and omnipotence of God, which give themselves to be known in Jesus Christ. And the second emphasis, subordinated to the first, is the theme of the salvation of humankind. In this, Calvin proves to be a (nonetheless independent) disciple of Martin Luther. Both – God's glory and the salvation of humankind – belong together, God's glory appearing precisely in his activity for humanity, in his incarnation and his redemption of humankind.

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"Knowledge of God and Self-Knowledge." (Passage from ibid. *Institutes* I: I, 1-2)

Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern. In the first place, no one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God, in whom he "lives and moves" [Acts 17:28]. For, quite clearly, the mighty gifts with which we are endowed are hardly from ourselves; indeed, our very being is nothing but subsistence in the one God. Then, but these benefits shed like dew from heaven upon us, we are led as by rivulets to the spring itself. Indeed, our very poverty better discloses the infinitude of benefits reposing in God. The miserable ruin, into which the rebellion of the first man cast us, especially compels us to look upward. Thus, not only will we, in fasting and hungering, seek thence what we lack; but, in being aroused by fear, we shall learn humility. … Thus, from the feeling of our own ignorance, vanity, poverty, infirmity, and – what is more – depravity and corruption, we recognize that the true light of wisdom, sound virtue, full abundance of every good, and purity of righteousness rest in the Lord alone. To this extent we are prompted by our own ills to contemplate the good things of God; and we cannot seriously aspire to him before we begin to become displeased with ourselves. For what man is all the world would not gladly remain as he is – what man does not remain as he is – so long as he does not know himself, that is, while content with his own gifts, and either ignorant or unmindful of his own misery? Accordingly, the knowledge of ourselves not only arouses us to seek God, but also, as it were, leads us by the hand to find him. Again, it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself. For we always seem to ourselves righteous and upright and wise and holy – this pride is innate in all of us – unless by clear proofs we stand convinced of our own unrighteousness, foulness, folly, and impurity. Moreover, we are not thus convinced if we look merely to ourselves and not also to the Lord, who is the sole standard by which this judgement must be measured. For, because all of us are inclined by nature to hypocrisy, a kind of empty image of righteousness in place of righteousness itself abundantly satisfies us."

Questions for further Work

Question 1.
What does Calvin understand by wisdom?

Human wisdom (sapientia), according to Calvin, is ultimately not to be described in terms of any special human ability, life-experience or particular knowledge. The human being is to be called wise if he himself realistically assesses and knows who God is and what God does. Although one can place Calvin entirely within the French Humanism of his time – his commentary on Seneca's "De clementia" proves this – and although Calvin never renounced the methodology of Humanism, one can perceive clearly in this how much the Reformational emphasis stands at the centre: not education, not humanity, not noble life-experience, but knowledge of self and of God stand at the centre.

Question 2.
What does self-knowledge consist in, according to Calvin?

According to Calvin, self-knowledge does not mean the knowledge of our own strengths and abilities, but the situation of the human in relation to God. And in view of God, the human knows his ignorance, vanity, poverty, infirmity, depravity and corruption. This is humankind's sin. However, sin is not describable without relation to God – it is not a neutral, externally detectable, negative human quality, that Calvin describes here. Rather, the human, who himself perceives himself in his relation to God, knows that he is not the one he was created to be and that he needs God's attentive care to become again what he is supposed to

be. Self-knowledge is therefore not to be considered in isolation but is aimed at the knowledge of God: without knowledge of God there is no self-knowledge.

Question 3.
What does the knowledge of God consist in, according to Calvin?

According to Calvin, knowledge of God is more than simply knowing that God exists. Knowledge of God consists in knowing God as he is. And indeed, who he is in respect of sinful humanity. That is, God does not condemn this ignorant, vain and depraved human being, but turns to him. God is perfect righteousness, wisdom and virtue – he is also the creator of the human being and does not abandon him but gives him a new future. God is the author of everything good – to know this, according to Calvin, is knowledge of God.

Question 4.
How are knowledge of God and of self connected? Which stands at the beginning and which comes second?

In the above passage, it seems to be the case that self-knowledge precedes knowledge of God. First the knowledge of one's own sinfulness, in order to perceive from there the love and grace of God dedicated to this sinful human being. This sequence is in itself conclusive and right. However, this sequence is not exclusive. For the way leads, for Calvin, from self-knowledge to knowledge of God, but also from there back to self-knowledge again. God's grace and majesty, so Calvin, causes the human to know who the human is in reality: not righteous, but a sinner. In his execution of the Institutes, Calvin discusses, in line with this, first the knowledge of God (book I) before (at the beginning of book II) he thematises self-knowledge.

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Calvin's so-called doctrine of double predestination, which is rightly problematic for us today, is to be understood in the context of his interest in redemption and the certainty of redemption. It is not human trust that is decisive for salvation, because then the human being would continually look to his faith and be preoccupied about its quality. God alone is the one who elects and rejects. The doctrine of predestination preserves the sole effectiveness of God in the matters of salvation and of faith.
It is the same God who is attested in the Old and New Testament. There is thus no distinction in principle to be made between both parts of the bible. Rather, what is promised in the Old Testament is already reality in the New. In the Old Testament, the gospel is there dimly, and in the New, the light is itself present. So far go the similarities, without the differences being denied. For it is the one covenant of God with humanity that is attested in the whole bible.
Also for this reason, the law, for Calvin, is not there in the first place for the knowledge of sin (as for Luther), but the actual point of the law is to orientate one's life according to the commands of God. And that applies in the Old as in the New. It is true that we also perceive in the commands our sinfulness, but that does not cancel their actual aim to show to us the good will of God.

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The Understanding of the Law. (Passage from ibid. *Institutes* II, 7, 12.)

The third and principal use [of the law], which pertains more closely to the proper purpose of the law, finds its place among believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already lives and reigns. For even though they have the law written and engraved upon their hearts by the finger of God [Jer. 31:33; Heb. 10:16], that is, have been so moved and quickened through the directing of the Spirit that they long to obey God, they still profit by the law in two ways.

Here is the best instrument for them to learn more thoroughly each day the nature of the Lord's will to which they aspire, and to confirm them in the understanding of it. It is as if some servant, already prepared with all earnestness of heart to commend himself to his master, must search out and observe his master's ways more carefully in order to conform and accommodate himself to them. And not one of us may escape from this necessity. For no man has heretofore attained to such wisdom as to be unable, from the daily instruction of the law, to make fresh progress toward a purer knowledge of the divine will.
Again, because we need not only teaching but also exhortation, the servant of God will also avail himself of this benefit of the law: by frequent meditation upon it to be aroused to obedience, be strengthened in it, and be drawn back from the slippery path of transgression. In this way the saints must press on; for, however eagerly they may in accordance with the Spirit strive toward God's righteousness, the listless flesh always so burdens them that they do not proceed with due readiness.

Question 1.
Who does the law apply to in its principle use?

The law, which is in the first place the Ten Commandments, applies in its principle use to believers. There are also other uses of the law, including the knowledge that humanity cannot keep it completely. This function is emphasised strongly by Martin Luther: the human cannot fulfil the demands of the law, and thus cannot do what he is supposed to do – and just this causes him to ask about grace. Calvin also recognises this dimension of the law. However, the doctrine of the law is not yet completed with it. The law is also there for the faithful and their life in faith. And indeed, not only to show them how much they are referred to the grace of God, but also to make clear to them God's will for their life. Therefore the law is not a burden but the faithful desire to do it.

Question 2.
What is the proper purpose of the law?

The law intends to help the faithful to do God's will. To be sure, the faithful can be certain that God by his Holy Spirit does not leave humanity in the lurch, but rather fulfils them and so gives them a right inner orientation. However, the law nevertheless helps and offers instruction and exhortation.

Question 3.
What does the instruction of the law consist in?

The Instruction of the law consists in bringing the Christian people closer to the nature of God and thus to the will of God. Believers need this continually, says Calvin, in order to obtain always anew directions in respect of God's will. No-one has understood or grasped the will of God once and for all. The law, i.e. the commands, show what God expects from humanity. And to this extent the law says something about God's will. In view of the Ten Commandments, for instance, this means that not only something meaningful from a humanitarian perspective is demanded in the commandments, but that they give expression to who God is and what he would like to happen. Not to commit murder, for instance, means then that God would like humans to live…

Question 4.
What does the instruction of the law consist in?

The law also exhorts us to do what the law demands. To be sure, it is the case that on the basis of their closeness to God Christians are actually on the right way. And the much quoted statement of Luther, "a good tree brings good fruit," belongs also in this context. However,

Calvin does not stop here because he has in mind the person who takes the most comfortable way in life. The flesh is sluggish and thus needs exhortation (Rom. 7:25). The commands are therefore intended to exhort, or it would almost be better to say to encourage, people. The call to the tired man, "Wake up! God wants something from you." Theologically, that is the connection between justification and salvation. In justification, the human being is freed to understand and to follow the commandment of God.

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At the centre of Calvin's understanding of the sacraments stands the concept of promise. It is not the elements as such that bring salvation with them. Thus, for instance, the Word of promise is made known during the Lord's Supper with the elements. In this way, the celebration serves the growth of the certainty of faith and thereby the strengthening of the believers. In the celebration, the Holy Spirit, who "seals" the promises of God in the hearts of men, is promised. In the Geneva Catechism, which is constructed in the form of question and answer, Calvin formulates, "According to your conviction, then, the power and the effectiveness of the sacraments is not enclosed in an external element, but goes out entirely from the Holy Spirit? Certainly. God wants to reveal his power through his means of salvation, which he has determined for this purpose. He does this in such a way that he does not deprive his Spirit of any of its significance."

7. The Trial of Michael Servet

The dispute over Michael Servet is the most significant dispute of Calvin's in Geneva. Occasionally it is portrayed to the effect that Calvin got rid of an unpleasant enemy with the help of the council and that in this way his cruelty and severity became apparent. That is too simple, however. Therefore, the dispute will be represented here somewhat more fully.
Michael Servet was born in 1511 near Aragon and in 1531 got into a dispute in Strasbourg and Basel with the Reformers, over the question of whether the Word of God became completely human. There were also conflicts in respect of the persecution of heretics. At the same time, he published two papers against the traditional doctrine of the Trinity, in which he acknowledged ultimately only God the Creator as God, and the Son and Spirit only as divine modes of action, but not as God himself (Monarchianism). Both papers aroused opposition and the Strasbourg council forbade the sale of them. Then Servet went to Paris, studied medicine there and caught Calvin's attention. Then for a while he was a proof-reader in Lyon and in 1540 he was the doctor of the archbishop in Vienna in the Dauphine. Possibly, Servet also discovered the circulation of the blood, a discovery which in any case has made his name famous in medical history.
However, he also worked on theology and wrote a greater work in which he calls upon Christendom to return to its pure roots. The church fathers, the Roman church and even the Reformers have falsified the gospel. Creatures are outflow, emanations of the divine. There are sins first from the age of 20 and one can erase them by definite means (baptism, the Lord's supper, good works). Now no-one in Vienna wanted to print this work. So he turned to a Protestant printer in Lyon, who was willing to print it however, only after a report from Calvin. This was sought by Servet. Calvin refuted him and advised him to read certain passages from the Institutes. However, Servet did not want to be instructed. He replied to Calvin and sent him back a reviewed copy of Calvin's Institutes, with an offensive covering letter. Several years passed by. In 1553, Servet finally succeeded in having his book printed. It reached the hands of Calvin and a few of his friends, among them Guillaume de Trie. The latter had joined the Reformation, but a large number of his relatives, who lived in Lyon, bore a grudge against him on account of his conversion to the Reformation. Guillaume de Trie now wrote to his relatives to say that they had no right to accuse him of heresy when in their walls a heretic of the enormity of Servet was tolerated. It was then discovered that Servet was the doctor of the archbishop. He was reported, arrested and proceedings against him were started.

Evidence was lacking, however. Consequently, Guillaume de Trie sent several documents to his relations, amongst which were several letters from the correspondence between Servet and Calvin, which the latter had handed over. He thereby indirectly supported the trial. Servet fled however, and so was destroyed in his absence, as it were – that is, his books were burnt. Servet intended to set up business in Naples. Foolishly he travelled there through Geneva. Scarcely had he arrived when he was arrested at the request of Calvin on 13th August 1555. The magistrate immediately took sides against Servet, which Calvin had not at all expected. And still more, the town council adopted the prosecution themselves. Consequently, the opinion of the other cantons was sought. However, before they arrived, the town council put together its own accusation. In Vienna it was demanded that Servet should be handed over. However, the Geneva judges were of the opinion that they themselves should judge Servet and not hand him over.
Servet was not aware of the seriousness of his situation. He hoped for the intervention of the political dissidents. Calvin, on the other hand, insisted on the death of Servet. He was, however, against his being burnt at the stake, the death penalty for heretics, having preference for something less spectacular and painful. Incidentally, the interrogations show that Servet quite provoked the hatred of his opponents. He accused Calvin of patent heresy and asked for all that belonged to Calvin to be handed over to him as compensation for his suffering.
The reports from Basel, Bern, Schaffhausen and Zurich arrived and expressed unanimously that Servet should be disposed with. And this then happened. On 26th October 1555, he was sentenced to death by burning and this was carried out on the following day, although Calvin and the other pastors had requested a less cruel kind of execution.

Calvin indirectly collaborated in Servet's death. Hence to exonerate him from guilt would be to condone something unjust. Calvin had desired the death of Servet. He had also collaborated in the trial by passing on the letters. He did not attempt to stop the council, although this was something he in any case scarcely could have done. He has a clear share in the guilt of Servet's death, not more.
One cannot say, however, that it was simply a matter of *Calvin's* proceedings against Servet. No other town would have acted otherwise. Before and after Servet, hundreds of heretics were executed, at the hands of both Protestant and Catholic powers. Melanchthon, incidentally, congratulated Calvin for his actions. "Calvin was convinced, as all other Reformers, that it is the obligation of the Christian authorities, to punish with death blasphemers of God, who murder the soul, in the same way as murderers, who kill the body."
One can condemn Calvin today – that is easy. But one cannot simply apply our current modern standards to Calvin's behaviour. For it reflects, to some extent, the spirit of the 16th Century.

8. Calvin's final years

In the year 1549, Calvin's wife died. The marriage also resulted in a son, who died however shortly after birth.

In the year 1559, Calvin founded the Academy in Geneva, with three chairs: Greek, Hebrew and Philosophy. The Academy was the place of education for many theologians, who had joined the Reformation and then became Reformers of their countries. The effect can in no way be overestimated. John Knox from Scotland, for example, studied in Geneva along with many others from a wide range of countries. The Academy could be regarded as the culmination of Calvin's work. It was here that interpretation of Scripture, as the central interest of Calvin, began to be carried out in a structured way.

In the same year, the last revision of the Institutes appeared. It is now a thick textbook in four books and 24 chapters and is among the greatest dogmatic works of Protestant theology.

Probably as a result of excessive diligence in his life, Calvin, who had lived through an abundance of illnesses, grew weaker and weaker. On 2nd February 1564, he held his last lecture in the Academy and on the 6th February his last sermon. On 27th May 1564, Calvin died in Geneva. He was buried on 28th May without pomp, and at his wish his grave received no gravestone. So no-one knows anymore exactly where Calvin is buried. In his farewell speech of 28th February 1564, Calvin says in retrospect:

> *"I have had many weaknesses, which you had to bear, and all that I have done is itself at base worth nothing. Wicked men will no doubt exploit this statement. Thus I repeat once more that all my activity is worth nothing and that I am a wretched creature. I can, to be sure, say of myself that I have intended good, that my mistakes have always displeased me and the fear of God has taken root in my heart. You can confirm that my efforts have been good. Therefore I ask you to forgive me my wickedness. However, if there has been anything good, keep to it and follow it!"*

Calvin was originally from France and his whole life was oriented towards France. He wanted to strengthen the communities in France which were suffering under persecution. To serve them was his great life's goal. He succeeded in uniting the Reformed churches through a common doctrine and through *The Church Constitution*. He died too early, however, to assist the French communities in the later religious wars.
His correspondence with the whole of Europe is impressive – roughly 2000 letters have been preserved. These include letters on political leading personalities just as much as on other Reformers inside and outside the Swiss Confederation. Many letters deal with the situation of the Protestants in France, but go also beyond that. Besides this, however, there are also a whole lot of letters which portray Calvin as a pastoral carer, who is able to give simple community members helpful and beneficial advice in their questions regarding faith and life.

9. Theodor Beza – Successor of Calvin

After the death of Calvin, Theodor Beza chose to be Calvin's successor as head of the Geneva pastors. Beza was born in 1519 in Burgund and turned to the Protestant faith at an early age, even if at first somewhat half-heartedly. Only after a major illness did he turn completely to the Reformation and from a house of lawyers became a professor of Greek at the Academy of Lausanne, remaining in this post for ten years. In 1558, Beza came to Geneva and became the principal of the Academy there. Already in the first few years of his time in Geneva, Beza worked as a theological adviser of the French church and as dialogue-partner of the political leaders of the Huguenots in connection with the religious wars. After 1564, Beza had further close contact with the French churches, once being chosen by La Rochelle to be chairman of the Synod. And finally, he had to see many people being driven out of France.

Again and again Beza was viewed above all as a pupil of Calvin's. That is correct but does not exhaust his achievement. In contrast to Calvin, he was thoroughly acquainted with Aristotelian philosophy, and therefore attempted to systematise several doctrines with this (in particular the doctrine of predestination and of the Lord's Supper). In this he is amongst those who prepared the way for later orthodoxy.
Another characteristic feature is his work on the New Testament and in biblical studies. His edition of the New Testament, for which he discovered and utilised numerous manuscripts, had been reprinted more than one hundred and fifty times by 1965. At the age of 86, on 13th October 1605, Theodor Beza died.

10. The Development of the Reformed Church in France up to 1598.

In 1598, Heinrich IV of France pronounced the edict of Nantes, which granted the Reformed Christians in France equal rights and permitted services to be held in most places. Eight religious wars since 1562 had preceded this edict. From about the year 1535, the Reformed doctrine spread in France. Parishes arose, drawing believers to them. The presence of the Geneva Reformed Church under the leadership of the French Calvin led to a state of affairs in which the French Protestants were more and more orientated towards Geneva. In 1559, the National Synod assembled in Paris and adopted a confession of faith (Confession de Foy) and a church constitution (Discipline ecclesiastiques), and thereby gave a structure to the church. By 1562 about a third of the French population was Protestant.
However, the Protestant communities lived from the beginning under difficult conditions, becoming entangled in political disputes. And thus the rivalry between the (Catholic) dukes de Guise and the (Protestant) princes de Conde dominated the course of events for about half a century. In the armed conflicts between the Catholics and Huguenots, as the French Protestants were named (the origins of the name are uncertain), it was therefore not just a matter of religion. The kings were mostly on the stronger side in this conflict. And until 1585 this was for the most part the Catholics, the tides turning a little after this. Besides small attempts to allow both faith-persuasions to exist next to one another, there were atrocities and numerous massacres, among which the Night of Bartholomew of 1572 stands out, in which a large number of the Protestant nobility were murdered. All in all, there was a greater amount of injustice in the conflicts and wars of the Catholic majority, although one must also add that the defenders did not often recoil from violence.
In 1589, Heinrich of Navarra became the new King Heinrich IV. He was originally from Huguenot circles, but in 1593 converted to Catholicism on political grounds. Through military and diplomatic skill, he saw through with the fighting parties and thereby brought the religious wars to an end. On 13th April 1598, he pronounced the edict of Nantes, which formed the legal basis for the existence of the Reformed Church in France. Only 87 years later was it superseded in the edict of Fontainebleau under Ludwig XIV (more on this in lesson 5 of the basis course).