

# Ian Hamilton Lessons from Calvin 20190213c

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, it's a pleasure to be here. I don't see Paul very often, but when I do, I can say this honestly, he is a breath of fresh air to me.

We're different generations, but he encourages me because I think, well, I'm not really that odd. What I mean by that is there are other people in this world who think like me or somewhat like me, and Paul is one of those.

He is an encouragement to me from a distance, so I want to say that at the outset. I was about, not quite 21, and I stumbled across a biography on John Calvin.

I wasn't raised in a Christian home. I had no Christian background. I wasn't long a Christian. And I was in my third year at university in Scotland, in Glasgow, in my junior honours year.

[ 1 : 10 ] And I can't remember the circumstances which led me to read Emmanuel Stickelberger's biography of John Calvin.

But when I read it, I was absolutely enraptured by it. It gripped me. It gripped me. It amazed me. I knew nothing of John Calvin.

So much so that the following year in my senior honours class, we were to choose a dissertation topic. Now, my subject was economic history, and the professor gathered the class, and one by one we were to announce what our dissertation topic for our final honours year exam would be.

And people were saying 18th century transatlantic trade, the development of banking in England in the 16th century, and so on and so on. And it came to me, and I announced John Calvin and the struggle for reformed orthodoxy in Geneva with special attention to the doctrines of the church and predestination.

And there was a gasp. The professor, who was a Roman Catholic fellow, I got on well with, and he knew that my heart was set on, after my first degree, going to Edinburgh University to study theology.

[ 2 : 33 ] And he just looked up and smiled, and he said, OK. I don't know who marked the dissertation, but I was able to do it because we'd been told we could cover any subject that had been lectured on in our junior and senior honours class.

And we had a visiting American who gave one lecture on Calvin's Geneva, the reason being that he saw it as the philosophical thought that gave birth ultimately to the Protestant work ethic that was developed by Max Weber at the end of the 19th century.

So I just seized on that, and I thought, I've got him. And since then, Calvin has been my Christian hero, a flawed hero, as every Christian man and Christian woman is.

At times, deeply flawed. He had a volcanic temper that humiliated him. Sometimes his closest friends were the brunt of his volcanic temper.

But he confronted me with a vision of God that was entrancing. Entrancing because I could see it was biblical.

[ 3 : 59 ] And so from then until now, John Calvin, for good and for ill, has been, under God, the man who has shaped my thinking as a Christian in terms of what a Christian is, what a Christian theology is.

And probably, and this would surprise many people, it's the Catholic spiritedness of Calvin and his theology that probably more than anything else has endeared me to him.

Which surprises people. Because for many people still, and even the Oxford Dictionary of Religious Thought, thankfully it's not the Cambridge Dictionary, but the Oxford Dictionary of Religious Thought, speaks of Calvin as a dictator in Geneva.

Actually, he wasn't even a citizen of Geneva until five years before he died. But we'll come to that. Now, I'm not going to assume that you know much about John Calvin.

So what I'd like to do is, for the first maybe 15 minutes, if I can contain it to that, just give you an overview of his life. And then look at eight or nine or so lessons for today for the church from the life of John Calvin.

[ 5 : 24 ] So, John Calvin was born in 1509 in a little village. Little, not so little village, I suppose, by today's standards. It was called Noyon, N-O-Y-O-N, about 60 miles north-north-east of Paris.

His father, Gerard, was a relatively well-to-do man who had sent his son to university in Paris. Calvin was about 15 or so when he went to Paris. And the aim was that he would become a priest. But Calvin's father fell out spectacularly with the local archbishop.

And so he changed his son's study from the direction of the priesthood to being a lawyer.

He went to Paris, studied in the same college as the famous French dramatist Rabelais. They both called it that lousy college, meaning it was covered with lice.

[ 6 : 35 ] From Paris, he went to Orléans and Bourges and then went back to Paris. Calvin almost never writes about his conversion.

Once in the preface to his commentary on the Psalms, published in 1547. And then a little bit in his famous letter to Iacomo Sgaletto, which I might touch on, 1539.

And in one other place. And that was very common. The reformers were not really interested over much in how people came to Christ.

They were profoundly concerned that people came to Christ. But the mechanics of it were really of little moment. But Calvin does tell us.

And this probably gives us something of an insight into his life. He says, God subdued me. Deus subagent.

[ 7 : 45 ] I was sunk in potpourri. And God subdued me. That's almost all he says.

There's two or three other lines that embellish it somewhat. But that's the essence of it. He is a man subdued by God. He is not his own. We don't know when that was.

Probably it's around the year 1532. So he's born in 1509. Luther's 95th thesis are 1517. Calvin's 8. He's converted around the year 1532. So he's 23 or thereabouts. Soon afterwards he has to flee Paris.

Because one of his friends, Nicholas Kopp, who was the rector of the university, gave something of an incendiary address at the parliament in Paris.

[ 8 : 45 ] He had embraced the new Lutheran religion. And some have suggested that Calvin actually was the one responsible for writing Copse in rectorial address.

Calvin flees Paris. He goes to Basel in Switzerland. German speaking Switzerland. And he believes that God has called him to a life of scholarly reflection.

He's a brilliant young man. His first published work, 1532, was Reflections on Seneca. He was known for his academic brilliance.

And he believed that constitutionally, temperamentally, in terms of his psychology and giftedness, God had equipped him to be a scholar who would write in the defence of the faith.

He returns from Basel during a time of amnesty, early 1536 to France. Gathers up some of his family, his brother and sister.

[ 10 : 04 ] And he takes them with him. And he's heading for the reformed stronghold of Strasbourg. Where Martin Buser, or Buser, was the great Reformation leader.

Because of a war that was going on between the Emperor, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, and Francis II of France, to whom Calvin would dedicate the institutes of the Christian religion. We'll come to that. Calvin can't go directly to Strasbourg. And so he detours. And he ends up spending one night in Geneva.

It's remarkable how the Lord engineers armies to accomplish his sovereign purposes. William Farrell, who was called the Storm Trooper of the Evangelion, he hears that Calvin, who has just published the first edition of the Institutes, Institutio Christianissimi Religionis, the Institutes of the Christian Religion, is passing through Geneva.

Well, Farrell can't believe his luck. He knocks on the door, he goes into the inn. He tells Calvin, the cause of the Reformation needs him. Please stay.

[ 11 : 29 ] Calvin says to him, no. I am heading for a life of quiet, scholarly reflection. And in Calvin's own words, Farrell then terrified him.

He uttered an imprecation, a curse from God. He says, God, curse you if you do not stay here in Geneva. And Calvin says, I was so terrified by the imprecation, I agreed to stay.

1536 to 1538, he and Farrell seek to establish the work of Reformation in Geneva, which had been a reformed city for about five years, four to five years.

The Genevans want Reformation, but they don't want it that much. And over a number of issues, really to do with the relationship of church to state, is the church within its own domain sovereign? Or is the state able to intrude into the life of the church? The state decides, enough. And they send Calvin and Farrell packing.

[12:49] Calvin is delighted. He calls Geneva a hell hole. And he goes off to Strasbourg. You can almost imagine him singing all the way.

At last. He goes to Strasbourg. He's a Frenchman. And he immediately is asked to look after a congregation of 500 emigre, refugee French men and women.

And he does so. He becomes a preacher. And he loves being in Strasbourg. But the Reformation began to falter in Geneva.

And the Genevans begin to think, well, maybe Calvin's not that bad. Maybe we should ask him back. Because things are not going well.

The year earlier, 1539, the Pope's representative, Iacomo Sadoletto, he was an archbishop, cardinal later, He wrote this very well-crafted letter to Geneva, appealing to them to return to the Roman fold.

[14:04] If you ever read it, it's beautifully crafted. In places, it's theologically compelling. And the Genevans didn't know how to reply to it.

They write to Calvin in Strasbourg, will you please help us? And Calvin writes probably the most masterly Reformation response to Rome in a space of six days.

It's an outstanding letter. Go home and read it. It'll take you about 25 minutes. Fabulous. Geneva writes and says, please come back.

And one of Calvin's friends, Pierre Vire, wrote him a letter and said, Brother John, you really should go back to Geneva. The climate will be so good for you.

You know, Strasbourg's okay, but the climate in Geneva. And Calvin replied and said, climate? I would rather die a thousand deaths than go back to that place.

[15:06] But he went back. Why did he go back? Because he was not his own. He was Deus subjugate.

Subdued by God. He recognized that that's where he was needed. So he returned. 1541. 1541. Late 1541. And from then until 1555, Calvin battled in Geneva.

Every council from 1541 to 1555 had an anti-Calvin majority. Every one of them. Dictator?

Calvin was lucky at times to escape with his life. People at times would gather 40 or 50 of them at night and shoot their guns outside his house to keep him awake.

Some would set their dogs on him in the street shouting, Ili galus! That Frenchman! Because French refugees were pouring in because of the persecution in France.

[16:09] It's not until 1555 that the council, the main council of 200 in Geneva, has a pro-Calvin majority. So from 1555 until he dies in 1564, there is what you might call relative tranquility for Calvin.

There's always battles with the council over, in particular, who has the right to excommunicate. It was very common for the state to insist that it had the final right of excommunication.

Now you need to understand the whole complex, complicated relationship of church and state in the 16th century to get your head around that. But Calvin was adamant. And you'll find good scholars who say, Calvin won the day.

Well, I don't think he did. I think he agreed to a fudge. There are times when you just have to agree, cross your fingers and hope it might go your way.

You think, is that very Christian? Well, maybe not, but that's just the way it is. He dies in 1564 in an unmarked grave.

[17:28] He didn't want anyone to be called a Calvinist. He wanted to die as an unknown.

And no one knows where Calvin was buried. Calvin would be appalled to think that there were people on the face of this earth who called themselves Calvinists.

So that was his life. What can we learn from the life of John Calvin? Let me quickly just mention a number of things. Number one, we see in John Calvin an unyielding faithfulness in the face of great hostility.

Calvin, by temperament, longed for quiet scholarly seclusion. But his calling was to stand for truth and righteousness in a day not only when it was being assailed from without, through Rome in particular, but even from within the reformed camp there were those who were willing to compromise for the sake of an easier life.

Calvin had a motto. My heart I give to you, O Lord, promptly and sincerely.

[ 19 : 13 ] Calvin understood he was not his own. He was to put truth before consequences. That's one of the things that first endeared me, reading that first biography of Calvin's.

Truth before consequences. Remember, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Not sure why they wouldn't call them the proper Hebrew names. Hananiah, Azariah, Mishael. Remember they were told, you know, if you don't bow down to the statue, it's the fiery furnace for you.

And they said, well, our God is able to deliver us. But even if he doesn't, we will not bow down. We need, in these days of confusion and chaos within evangelical Christianity, to adopt an unyielding faithfulness to the Lord and to his word.

Now, I'm going to qualify that in a few moments' time in measure. But keep that in mind. Cultivating an unyielding faithfulness.

No matter the hostility, no matter the pressure, no matter the consequences. Truth before consequences. That's the first lesson.

[ 20 : 37 ] Number two, we see in Calvin a commitment to the priority of preaching. Calvin preached or taught approximately eight times a week.

Now, he wrote commentaries on most books of the Bible. Not all. I've done one thing that Calvin never did. I've preached through Revelation. He never did that.

He wrote commentaries. He wrote theological pre-tisers. We have 4,000 extant letters of John Calvin's. Heinrich Bullinger. We've got 14,000 of Bullinger.

But 4,000 of Calvin's. Eight times a week. Now, why that? Now, some people say, well, he must have loved preaching.

That wasn't the reason. He believed that the people of God needed such a diet. To resist the world's diet of false illusions.

[ 21 : 40 ] People needed to be saturated with the word of God. With the truth of God. In order to armor their minds and hearts against the world's diet of false illusions.

And I think increasingly, we need to recover that commitment to the priority of the people of God sitting under the ministry of the word of God.

Two hours and a Sunday won't cut it. Will not equip us intellectually, far less spiritually and emotively, to stand for truth and righteousness in a decaying culture.

Two hours and a Sunday won't cut it. We need to seize every opportunity. Now, I'm not saying everybody in Geneva relish the prospect of listening to Calvin eight times a week.

But we need to, if we're going to, far less impact, but resist the world's false illusions.

[ 22 : 55 ] We need to seize every opportunity to sit under the ministry of the word of God. Thirdly, we see in John Calvin a passionate concern for the glory of Christ.

I mentioned Iacomo Sadaletto's letter in 1539 to the church in Geneva. Well, to the city-state of Geneva, appealing to it, come back to the Roman fold.

Come back to Mother Church. Calvin responded to Sadaletto. Listen to these words. You touch upon justification by faith.

The first and keenest controversy between us. Okay, you get that. Okay. Now listen to this.

Wherever the knowledge of it is taken away, the glory of Christ is extinguished.

So you say to John Calvin, what's so important about justification by grace alone, through faith alone, and Christ alone? Well, you might think the answer would be obvious.

[ 24 : 04 ] Well, without that, how are people to be saved? Calvin would look at you and say, what? The issue is not about your salvation.

The issue is primarily about the glory of Jesus Christ. The gospel of God is about God. It's first about him.

About the glory of his Son. We anthropologize the gospel. Now, of course, justification by faith alone is about being right with God.

Remember how Paul, in Galatians 1, if anyone preaches to you another gospel, and the gospel that we preached to you when we came, let him be anathema. Let him be accursed.

Now, what's Paul's concern? You say, well, it's pretty obvious, isn't it? If you don't get that right, how are people to be saved?

[ 25 : 05 ] No. That's secondary. That's proximate. The primary, ultimate reason is that when you deny justification by grace alone, through faith alone, and Christ alone, you extinguish the glory of Jesus Christ.

And that's one of the principal hallmarks in Calvin's writings. No matter where you look, what principally absorbs him is the glory of the God-man Jesus Christ.

Salvation is secondary, not primary. Number four, we learn from Calvin, heart, delight, and God. Calvin had a nickname at university. He was called the accusative case. Now, we're not quite sure whether that referred to his predisposition to grammar.

You know, the function of the accusative and grammar. Or whether it was he was somewhat prosecutorial in the way he went about advancing his convictions.

[ 26 : 26 ] He was a tightly wound Frenchman. He's not the typical example of someone with Gaelic flair and exuberance.

So when Calvin writes about something that vastly delighted him, you stop. You think, oh, what is this?

In book one of the Institutes, chapter 13, section 17, Calvin says, I read these words of Gregory, Gregory Nazianzen, late 4th century Greek church father, and they vastly delight me.

Now, when I first read these words, Calvin then proceeds to quote three or four lines from Gregory. He's actually quoting from Gregory's baptismal oration 40, section 41.

If you want a good read tonight, take you three or four minutes. Gregory Nazianzen, baptismal oration 40, section 41. He quotes these lines from Gregory.

[ 27 : 34 ] No sooner do I conceive of the one than I am illumined by the splendor of the three. No sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the one.

When I think of any one of the three, I think of him as the whole and my eyes are filled. And the greater part of what I am thinking escapes me.

I cannot grasp the greatness of that one so as to attribute a greater greatness to the rest. When I contemplate the three together, I see but one torch.

And cannot divide or measure out the undivided light. When was the last time you were overwhelmed thinking about the Holy Trinity?

When was the last time I was overwhelmed thinking about the Holy Trinity? Here is Gregory. He's teaching a candidate for baptism actually.

[ 28 : 41 ] A catechumen. And he says to him, you know, when I think of the Holy Trinity, I think of the three and I think of the one. But when I think of the one, I've got to think of the three.

And I'm overwhelmed and tears fill my eyes. And Calvin says, this vastly delights me. Delighting in God for who he is.

Delighting in God.

You know, the early church fathers got something spectacularly wrong. But my, did they get something spectacularly right.

Reading them. Reading their absorption in God. That's why I think, let's get off piste a little bit. One of the most significant moments in a service of worship is the call to worship.

[ 29 : 54 ] The opening praise. Which I think should be Trinitarian. And then the opening prayer of adoration. Glorifying in God. Forgetting about almost, almost forgetting about petitions.

And almost forgetting at times about thanksgivings. Glorifying in God for who he is. There were times as a young, young Christian, and Joan would know the same, sitting under a service led by William Still in Aberdeen.

Now he was unusual. He was idiosyncratic to the nth degree. But there were times after the opening prayer I just wanted to go home. I just felt I was in the suburbs of heaven.

And Calvin does that. There was such a heart delight in God. There's nothing functional about the theology. Number five.

We can learn from Calvin the practice of ministerial humility. When a friend wrote to him and encouraged him to return to Geneva he said, I would rather die a hundred deaths on a cross than go back to that hell hole called Geneva.

[ 31 : 13 ] You know what he did when he went back? He stood up in church.

He made no reference to his expulsion two and a half years before. And he picked up his exposition at the next verse that he had finished two and a half years before.

He made no reference. He didn't say, I told you so. He just... Ministerial humility.

Pastors and elders together are called to model to the people of God a godly humility. And what has impressed me throughout the years in someone like Calvin with all his failures and his volcanic temper was this heart humility.

There's no desire to make a name for himself. There's no desire for one-upmanship. He's got no interest in being proven right. My heart is not my own.

[ 32 : 34 ] My heart I give to you, O Lord, promptly and sincerely. There are few things more that more commend a man's ministry and pastoral care than a manifest humility.

He's not into this for what he can get out of it. He's not in this to make a name for himself. Number six, there's a pursuit of Protestant Catholicity.

I said that Calvin put truth before consequences and he did. But, that needs to be qualified. Calvin was a Catholic Christian. He longed for Protestant unity.

He was willing to hold back some of his own cherished convictions, particularly in relation to the sacraments and predestination in order to encourage a wider Protestant unity.

He and Heinrich Bollinger in Zurich, they were friendly, they were very different, they were friendly, they corresponded. Bollinger thought Calvin went beyond Scripture in his teachings on predestination.

[ 33 : 50 ] I think probably he had a point. But they agreed not to make their differences public, but to keep them between themselves.

And when there was a possibility of a wider Protestant unity, reformed unity, Bollinger and Calvin conceived of what became known as the Consensus Tigrinus, an agreement between the churches in Zurich and Geneva and they hoped it would go out to Basel and Constance and other places.

And Calvin was willing to tone down, maybe that's not the right word, willing to lay aside his own particularly and I think particularly biblical and profound understanding of the Lord's Supper in particular because some of the other great Protestant centres thought Calvin was being a little too concessive actually to Luther.

He wrote a letter in 1553 to Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, a very famous letter, and he says to Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, Calvin wrote to everyone, he wrote to Archbishops, Emperors, Kings, Queens, Men on death row in prison, Widows of men martyred for their faith, Children, but he wrote to Archbishop Thomas Cranmer and he said this, I would willingly cross ten seas to help heal the bleeding body of Christ.

Now crossing ten seas in 1553 is a little different from crossing ten seas today. Calvin travelled extensively in pursuit of Protestant unity, he never achieved it, but it was a passion that he longed to see realised in the life of the wider church.

[ 35 : 59 ] He was a Catholic Christian. he quotes Augustine 403 times. I want to count it. He wants people to see that he belongs to the great historic orthodox creedal Catholic Church of Jesus Christ.

He's not a sectarian. Protestant Catholicity was precious to Calvin.

But that's easy to say. Our Lord Jesus Christ prayed that the church would be one that the world might see. It was to be a unity that was visible.

We say, well, you know, we're all one in Christ. Very true. There's one Lord, one faith, one baptism. Very true. Does the world see that?

what endeavours are we undertaking to show the world that we are one?

[ 37 : 04 ] that's easy to say. I've got no answer to that. You know, at times, just to get through a day trying to get your head around the little work that the Lord's entrusted to you is hard enough.

Never mind thinking beyond dealing. London, the United Kingdom. But is it not to despise the heart of the Saviour?

That we do not labour to show the world our unity in Christ? Number seven, just very briefly.

We learn from Calvin a commitment to consistent, meaningful, pastoral care. If you've got time, read Calvin on Acts 20, verse 20. Paul teaching publicly from house to house.

He said, those men who do not visit the flock of Christ are worse than bears. They ought to be removed from their ministerial pastoral office.

[ 38 : 19 ] Speaking of pastors and elders. And those people who do not welcome warmly their pastors into their homes are no less worse than bears.

Calvin is absolutely committed, not just to preaching the word, but to visiting the people of God to seek out the fruit of that word in their lives.

He's got a wonderful passage, church. Oh dear, where is it? I think somewhere in the 119th Psalm. Let me go back a sentence.

In the early 17th century, there was a very famous little book called the Art of Prophesying. And in that little book, it was said there are seven types of hearers in every congregation.

Seven types of hearers. Well, somewhere in the 119th Psalm, Calvin says, not engaging with that of course, he says, there are as many types of hearers as there are people.

[ 39 : 32 ] Everyone's unique. And you need to get alongside them to understand them. You need to know how they tick in order to minister the word of God effectively.

And they need access into your life. Now, some ministers and elders are just stupid. They're far too open. You need to be guardedly open. But when people have access into your life, they hear you differently.

They hear you through a different psychological grid, I think. I think it's nothing less than tragic and appalling.

I don't know how it's done here, so I might be saying something that's very offensive. I don't mean it to be. I haven't a clue what Paul does or what any elder does, so I can say it in good conscience.

I think it's a dereliction if we do not visit the people of God. How we do it, different ways of doing it, get alongside them.

[ 40 : 38 ] Jesus said, I know my sheep and we need as much as we are able to to echo the saviour and say, I know my sheep, maybe not as well as I should, but I know my sheep and as they have some access into our lives, they hear and receive our pastoral care differently.

Number eight, we see in Calvin a commitment to church purity. the whole issue of excommunication, don't have time to go into it. There's the case of Michael Servetus, you might want to ask me about that, happy to speak about Servetus, Jerome Bolsek.

Calvin strove throughout the whole length of his ministry in Geneva, from 1536 to 1564, excluding the two and a half years he was kicked out.

he labored that the church should have the right to exercise the ultimate sanction of excommunication.

He believed that the purity of the church mattered to God, and that the witness of the church in the world would be given a luster other.

[ 42 : 00 ] When gospel discipline was applied wisely, gently, big thing for Calvin, gently, but firmly.

And the last thing I want to say, I could expand on all of those, but the last thing is that in Calvin we are confronted with the absolute necessity and priority of scripture shaped worship.

In that letter to Sadaletto in 1539, Calvin wrote, there is nothing more perilous to our salvation than a preposterous and perverse worship of God.

If someone had asked you before you came tonight, what was the reformation all about? I would guess, maybe I'm wrong, but I would guess most would say, well, it was about recovering for the church and the world the absolutely pivotal truth that God justifies the ungodly through faith alone in his son, Jesus Christ.

And not one reformer would have given that answer, not one. They would have looked to God.

[ 43 : 48 ] He said it was for two reasons. Number one, to recover the true worship of God. And number two, to restore to the church and world the true doctrine of salvation.

But look what he puts as his priority, to recover the true worship of God. God was not being worshipped according to his word. God. And that was what gave birth actually to the reformation.

In that same letter to Sadaletto, Calvin, if I remember rightly, says, it is remarkable to me how difficult it is to persuade people that God is only to be worshipped according to his word.

I think probably today that may well be the great issue in the church. Is God to be worshipped according to the culture in which we live?

The culture dictates and determines how we think? Or is God to be worshipped according to his word?

[ 45 : 08 ] You know Leviticus 10, Nadab and Abihu are consumed because they offer strange fire, that is unauthorised fire.

You might say, well that was the old covenant. Have you ever thought about 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul says, you know the reason why some of you are sick and some of you have died? It's because you're treating the Lord's supper with disdain. And he's speaking not about unbelievers being there, but about Christians, professing Christians behaving proudly, arrogantly, disdainfully. He's saying that's the reason why some of you are sick and some of you have died. That's pretty scary, isn't it? When you come to the Lord's supper? When's the Lord's supper next? When is that? Sunday morning.

Well, there you go. That's the new covenant. God takes his worship seriously. We call it the regulative principle.

[ 46 : 07 ] Calvin never called it that. arose by any other name. So those are some of the lessons that at least I hope I'm trying to learn from John Calvin.

And he would simply say, you're not really learning it from me. I'm simply trying to reflect in what I'm doing, what God in his word is saying. So, thank you.

Thank you.