

Andrew Cook:

And so we come to our series on the Reformation. Last time, here on *Serving Today*, we heard about Martin Luther, the man who started it all back in 1517.

We're now going to learn about another important reformer. We do that with the help this time of Derek French and Philip Grist.

Philip Grist:

No other theologian has influenced the Christian church worldwide more than John Calvin.

Derek French:

What do we know about his background?

Philip:

Well, he was born in the north east of France. He was the son of a church lawyer. His father intended him for the Roman Catholic priesthood and so from 1523 - 28 he studied in the university of Paris.

However, when his father quarrelled with some clergy, he decided that John should not become a priest. Calvin himself was a Christian humanist.

Derek:

Was he a true believer at that time?

Philip:

Well, some time in the 1530's Calvin, through the influence of two friends, embraced Protestantism. He speaks of "a sudden conversion. God subdued my heart to a teachable spirit. Thus, having gained a taste of true godliness, I burned with great zeal to make progress."

Trouble soon arose. He escaped into hiding, disguising himself as a gardener. Violent persecution broke out in Paris against Protestants and 24 were burned at the stake. In January 1535, Calvin fled to Bâle in Switzerland.

Derek:

And what did he do there?

Philip:

It was in 1536 that Calvin began writing 'Institutes of the Christian Religion'. It was then that the world began to regard this 26 year old as the foremost champion of French Protestantism. The book was an orderly summary of Christian doctrine and life.

When he completed it in 1539, it became the standard textbook for Reformed theology. However, over the years, Calvin added to it. The final edition in 1559 became four books. Reformed gospel teaching can be summed up as 'Salvation by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.'

No other book has so influenced evangelical thinking right down to the present day. 'The Institutes' is still available nearly five hundred years later.

Derek:

Philip, what do we know concerning his understanding of the Bible's teaching about the church?

Philip:

Well, Calvin held an exalted view of the Christian church, maintaining that there were four permanent offices in the local church: pastors, teachers, elders and deacons. This is still basically accepted today.

Calvin stayed in Bâle for over a year.

Derek:

Where did he go after that time?

Philip:

He then moved to Strasbourg where he hoped to settle and live a quiet life. However, a visit to Geneva changed all that!

Derek:

Why was that?

Philip:

Here he met William Farel, a man likened to a fiery Old Testament prophet. Farel wanted Calvin to stay. He made excuses that didn't impress Farel who was said to have called down the curse of God on Calvin's excuse to live a peaceful life amongst his books.

Through Farel's outburst, Calvin felt that God was calling him to stay so it was in Geneva that Calvin lived out almost all the rest of his life. He shared Farel's desire and vision to see Geneva becoming a model of Christian community.

Derek:

You said he lived out almost all the rest of his life in Geneva. That implies he didn't stay there all the time.

Philip:

That's right. In April 1538, both Calvin and Farel were banished from the city. Farel settled near Berne and Calvin went back to Strasbourg where in 1540 he married a French lady. They had one son who sadly died in infancy, and then in 1549 his wife died. Calvin spent three years in Strasbourg where he was greatly used of God in bringing churches together.

Whilst Calvin was naturally a gentle, quiet and rather shy person who detested controversy, in the service of Christ he was strong and powerful, utterly consecrated to the Saviour's will.

Derek:

Philip, you hinted earlier that Calvin faced opposition. Can you tell us more about that?

Philip:

Well a certain Roman Catholic cardinal was highly critical of Calvin and tried to win Geneva back to the Roman Catholic church, and so the citizens of Geneva pleaded with Calvin to return. Of Geneva Calvin said, "There is no place under heaven that I am more afraid of."

Eventually he yielded to the urgent appeal and went in fear and trembling, saying, "I offer my heart as slain victim in sacrifice to the Lord."

Even though so many of the citizens wanted him to go back, he didn't expect an easy pathway. Indeed the future years saw many struggles. For instance, he longed for the Lord's Supper to take place in churches every Sunday. But in those days he had to apply for permission from the city magistrates who would only license four times a year. Really, Calvin's vision continued for Geneva to be a Christian city.

There were, however, many political opponents and there was bitter conflict between Calvin's supporters and the opponents. Although Calvin was never politically involved in the council in Geneva, he did have tremendous influence.

Derek:

Is it possible for you to give us an example of that?

Philip:

Well, a Spanish radical named Servetus wrote against the errors of the Trinity. Calvin tried to reason with him but eventually gave up, referring to him as 'a desperately obstinate heretic.'

During his years in Geneva, Calvin wrote and published many important works, including his Genevan Catechism, and many of his commentaries plus a whole series of sermons. Indeed, the number of books he published is quite staggering, many of which are still available today.

Derek:

Yes, that is quite remarkable, isn't it. How would you assess his life?

Philip:

Summing up Calvin's achievements: often he is thought of as a great success story in the Reformation of the sixteenth century. First of all, Calvin not only wrote but encouraged the translation of the Psalms into

French, by one of the poets. These would be used in singing the praises of God. They were to be sung to simple but lively tunes, many based on popular melodies.

Then he provided Reformed churches with clear, solid theology. He also gave the churches a pattern of church governance, still used today.

He showed the world a city, Geneva, that actually lived out the faith.

Lastly, he made the Reformed faith the great missionary movement of his day.

Derek:

And how did his life end?

Philip:

Calvin was taken ill in autumn of 1558. He feared he might die before completing all his additions to 'The Institutes'. However, he did recover.

Later, he seriously strained his voice preaching and brought on a fit of violent coughing, bursting a blood vessel in his lungs. His health from then on steadily declined. His final sermon was preached in February 1564 and he passed into his eternal rest in May. His body was laid in an unmarked grave. So ended the life of one of the greatest theologians the world has ever known.

Andrew Cook:

Thanks to Philip Grist for bringing us that portrait of John Calvin in our series on the Reformation.

Well, that's the end of this edition of *Serving Today*. If there's anything you'd like to ask us about, we'd be delighted to hear from you. You'll hear details on how you can get in touch at the end of this programme.

So, until next time this is Andrew Cook saying goodbye. May God give us strength and help in the service of Christ.