

**“Happy Birthday, John Calvin, Happy Birthday to You:  
On the Occasion of the 500th Birthday of John Calvin.”**

Text: “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed  
on him the name which is above every name, that at  
the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven  
and on earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus  
Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”  
Philippians 2: 9-11

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Last Friday, as you were busy with your end-of-the-week routines, I would guess that you did not pause in awe and admiration long enough to sing “Happy Birthday to John Calvin,” the founder of the Reformed and Presbyterian Church, who was born 500 years ago on July 10, 1509. Coincidentally that was the same year Michelangelo was painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome. While Calvin is associated with Geneva, Switzerland, especially at St. Peter’s Cathedral, he was actually not Swiss at all. He said he felt like an outsider the whole time he was there, like a died-in-the-wool Yankee living in North Carolina. Calvin was a Frenchman, born in the small town of Noyon, about 60 miles north of Paris, in the delightful Province of Picardy, like in “Roses of Picardy,” the famous little love song. Times were already changing by the time he came on the scene. The Renaissance and the movement to the modern world were well underway.

There was a comfortable home but his mother died when he was nine. Fathers ruled in those days and John was assigned to the study of theology when he was twelve. He received a scholarship at the Noyon Cathedral, which enabled him to study at the University of Paris, preparing to be a priest. Later, after his Father was excommunicated from the Catholic Church, over finances of all things, Gerard switched his son to the study of Law, which was fine with John, I guess. In the time and providence of God his precise training in the Law was useful throughout his life.

While still young, he was converted to the rising Protestant faith, in what he called a “sudden conversion.” Unfortunately we do not know much about it, as we do with Luther who described his sudden conversion in meticulous detail. I doubt that Calvin was bowled over in fear when a lightning bolt thundered into the ground beside him. I doubt also that he went forward at an emotional Billy Graham kind of rally. He was not the type, although he did admit that he was overly conscious of his sins before God. Calvin’s conversion was more likely an intellectual idea which suddenly took hold of him, directing him to rely on the authority of the Bible and not on the authority of the Church.

With other brash and spirited young men in France, and all over Europe for that matter, he protested in public for the new way. One day Calvin and his friends plastered placards all over the city, calling for ecclesiastical reform. They even pasted one on the wall outside the bedroom of King Francis I, who did not find it very funny. There were firm objections, and when the young men were facing arrest and a trial for heresy, Calvin understandably fled from Noyon in 1534.

In the next couple of decades, 1530s and 40s, he became the theologian of the Reformation. He was a second generation Reformer, the one who systematized the ideas and wrote them down. By the time Calvin arrived on the theological stage, Martin Luther had long since nailed his 95 Theses on the church door in Wittenberg in 1517. Henry VIII had already broken with Rome over his marital problems in the early 1530s when the Church of England was born. Ulrich Zwingli had established a Protestant Church up in Zurich in the 1520s. Erasmus, the Prince of the Humanists, while trying to remain loyal to the Roman Catholic Church, had been spreading radical ideas for decades. Luther’s friend and ally, Philipp Melancthon, was ten years Calvin’s senior.

The Reformed Protestant Church, which we know as Presbyterian, was founded by Calvin in Geneva. It spread into many parts of Europe (The Netherlands, Sweden, Transylvania, Poland, to non-Lutheran parts of Germany and even back into France with the Huguenot believers.) When John Knox was exiled to the continent, he studied with Calvin. When he returned to Scotland on May 2, 1559, he brought Calvinism with him, where it has flourished ever since as Presbyterianism. The Scots in turn brought their faith with them to North America and Canada in the 1800s. A select few settled in the Piedmont of North Carolina and Sharon Presbyterian Church was born in 1831 - a long and impressive journey from Calvin through John Knox and continuing through each of us

When Calvin fled from France, he stayed on the move for a couple of years. He spent some time in Italy. Then he went up to Basel (Basle), a delightful Swiss city on the Rhine near the border of France and

Germany. Erasmus lived there at the time. While in Basel Calvin completed the first edition of the famous **Institutes of the Christian Religion**, arguably the most important Christian theological book ever, unless you choose the Book of Romans. He revised and expanded it several times over so that in the end it was five times longer than the First Edition.

He left Basel to go to Strasburg and on the way he stopped for a brief visit in Geneva. There he met William Farel, a fiery red-headed Reformed-preacher who stands beside him now on the famed Reformation Monument in Geneva. Farel insisted that God wanted Calvin to stay in Geneva. He persisted enough that Calvin decided it was the Will of God. So he remained and became a pastor at the Church. Nothing is known of his ordination but he was ordained and began to preach and make regular pastoral visits.

It all lasted less than 2 years, however, when ever ready to defend ideas and doctrine, Calvin and Farel got into a dispute with the City Fathers over how communion should be served. It sounds inconsequential to us to argue about how the Sacrament should be distributed, but it was of primary importance to them. The Council declared that only unleavened bread could be used but they failed to consult the clergy. It became so contentious that he and Farel were banished from the city; in truth, they escaped with their lives. Calvin continued on to Strasburg where he had wanted to go anyway two years earlier when Farel detained him.

Strasburg at that time was a dynamic and cosmopolitan city. Martin Bucer, another Reformer, who had fled to Strasburg when he had been excommunicated by Rome earlier, had been there for some time. Bucer had great influence on Calvin as he also had with Luther. Calvin planned to return to his scholarly ways, and he did manage to publish his Commentary on the Book of Romans during his stay. But Bucer persuaded him not to retreat to the ivory tower of scholarship, but to enter the Parish ministry of the Church. Once more Calvin relented and agreed to serve in the French speaking congregation.

It was a good move. God works in mysterious ways. Among those who joined the congregation was a couple named Storer. They struck up a warm friendship, and he often visited in their home. When John Storer was struck down with the Plague, Calvin called on the family to minister to them. After Storer died, Calvin continued his ministry to the widow Idolette de Bure. Prior to that time, he had been pondering whether he should take a wife. He wrote to a friend that "The only beauty which can win my soul is a woman who is chaste, not fastidious, economical, patient, and who is likely to interest herself in my health." - not the most romantic of endowments to be sure. But she apparently fit the bill, for when the appropriate period of mourning had passed, Calvin proposed marriage.

In 1540 they became man and wife. Sadly Idolette (also spelled Idelette) had several unfortunate miscarriages. The only child who survived was a son who died a few days after he was born. Worse, Idolette herself died a few years later, which grieved Calvin to his heart. While it had not been the most vibrant of marriages - one of his heartless critics suggested that his wife had died of boredom (A comment to which many wives might quietly say "Amen.") As most widowers, he was stunned by how much he missed her and how helpless he was without her. And in addition, he became a single parent to her three children from her first marriage.

He wrote to his old friend Pierre Viret: "I have been bereaved of the best companion of my life....I try to subdue my grief as well as I can. She was the most faithful helper of my ministry. But God will somehow take care of me." (Selected Works of John Calvin, Vol. 5, p. 216, 1983.) Then he added, "I at present try to control my sorrow so that my duties may not be interfered with....May the Lord Jesus support me under this heavy affliction, which would certainly have overcome me had he not stretched his hand forth from heaven to help me." (p.47, Godfrey)

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During that time politics had shifted things again in Geneva and in 1540 Calvin was invited to come back to resume his pastorate there. His four worst critics were gone: one by execution, another by natural death, and the other two fled for parts unknown. He was so fond of Strasburg and he was also fearful that Geneva could change again, that he delayed it as long as he could. But feeling the Call of God, he acquiesced. He returned and remained there until his death on May 27, 1564, at the age of 54. But through it all the Reformed and Presbyterian faith was born.

I remind you that you are a Calvinist - or you are supposed to be, if you are a member of the Presbyterian Church. I know that we do not seem to worry all that much about theology anymore. In our society, devoted soldiers of Christ change churches over petty grievances, not over disputes of doctrine. Mostly, I have found they leave because their feelings get hurt, or they don't feel important enough. One woman I knew quit our Congregation years ago because those who came to the church supper liked another woman's coleslaw better than hers. Back then what a person believed was of far greater importance than whether church members liked them or not. We toy trivially with such triumphant themes. As Belgian Count Maurice Maeterlinck once wrote: "The thoughts men's hearts once died for, we now breathe cheaply in the common air." We do.

Church Pastors and Elders used to stake their lives on theological issues. They fought to the death, figuratively and literally, to stand up for what they thought was right in the eyes of God. In our time meanwhile, our modern goal is to make our churches appealing to the public. Congregations struggle how they can entertain the flock with new and exciting Worship. In Calvin's time they honored pastoral care, Christian education, outreach to the poor and all the rest, but not as ends in themselves. Church programs arose out of a prior commitment to Jesus Christ and what he commands. They had a passion for what they believed. Robert Godfrey writes in his new book on Calvin: "Reformed Christianity was not a mild and innocuous religion. It was moving and powerful." One Spanish Catholic of the time added that "He would rather face a whole army, than come up against a single Calvinist who was convinced that he was doing the Will of God!" (John Calvin: Pilgrim and Pastor, 2009: p. 9.) As they say in Scotland: "A Presbyterian is one who will fight at the drop of a hat, and aye, he carries the hat for the dropping."

The life and ministry of John Calvin were characterized by hard work and spirited contention. He hardly had a peaceful day when he could rest his head at night. But then if you don't believe in anything enough to fight for it, sure you can forever live a quiet, happy, peaceful life. If you never stand up for anything, you can sit quietly down and enjoy your blessings all your days, with some time left over for golf and bridge. But, Martin Luther King, Jr. once cautioned that "If you have not found something you would die for, you are not fit to live!"

I often hear young ministers complain about how busy they are and how stressful it is to be a pastor. That's fine, I guess. I can attest to how demanding it can be at times. But I don't usually linger too long on that complaint. Of course, over-work and stress and discouragement are the common lot of many who are devoted to their vocations.

But, speaking of hard work: Calvin takes the prize. He preached 8 to 9 times a week, every week -- and no vacations at all. His sermons were well prepared and upwards of one hour long, just the sermon -- twice on Sunday and every week day morning. Thankfully a stenographer took many of them down and 1500 still survive. His sermons were serious, but they were lively, not dead tired and boring as you might guess. He wrote a complete Commentary on one book of the Bible almost every year. He developed an entirely new Catechism, 367 questions in all. That is a little boring. He prepared the impressive Genevan Psalter. He wrote voluminous volumes of theology. He lectured at the Academy weekly. And, praise the Lord, he saved time almost every day for Pastoral visitations.

Congregations can make it difficult on pastors. Like, the son of one of my ministerial friends entered the ministry a few years ago up in New York. He had been on the job just a few weeks when he called his

father one Sunday evening, and rambled on discouraged about what had happened in the previous week; then he added, “Dad, I thought Church people were supposed to be nice!” Sometimes they are, but sometimes they are not, like when they do not get their own way or feel slighted; and especially when they feel that someone is trying to change their time-honored way of doing things. When church people are mean they fight with the weapons of the world.

I am mostly immune at my age, but I advise you that your coming new minister might not be. You owe him or her your support and prayers and kindness and love. You need to learn how to listen and to open up to change. There is ample evidence that there is something wrong with the way Sharon has been doing things. I told our Church Session at its last meeting that “It is impossible to teach somebody to do something when they think they already know how to do it!” Like Billy Graham used to say it: “It is hard to make a Christian out of someone who thinks he already is!” It’s true everywhere, but it should not be true in the Church.

Calvin never attended a Dale Carnegie class and if there had been one, he would have flunked the course if he had. That was not his goal. He was not trying to get people to like him. He worried only over what God thought of him. His vision was fastened on what Christ wanted for his Church and its mission. He accomplished much in his abbreviated life.

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Let me take some remaining moments to share some thoughts about what Calvin believed and taught and what it means to us, five hundred years later:

I. The first point concerns his emphasis on the Sovereignty of God, a phrase for which he is widely known even though it does not appear in the Institutes. I will oversimplify it for emphasis: Calvin said “It is not about you or me! It’s all about God!” This is our Father’s world. He made it and owns it and he made us too. We focus on what we want to do. We keep reminding ourselves that God so loved us that he saved us from our sins. He did. We strut around as if we owned it all and that we deserve a good and happy, long, and lovely life. But in the famous Reply to Sadoleto, Calvin noted the problem: “...rather than focus on your own salvation, you should first focus on the Majesty of God and all of his Glory. We are created first of all for God, and not for ourselves.” (p. 16, Godfrey.) We assume that the Gospel is intended to bring us pleasure and safety, even so high a prize as our personal salvation. Calvin said that is not the way to view it, even though we know that our salvation is secure in Christ. The Bible does say that we should work out our own salvation, but it has already been worked out for us by God. The Creator God makes that decision.

The Doctrine of Predestination, for which Calvin is noted, had long been understood as the idea that some people are chosen for salvation and some are not. That would be unfair, if that is all and everything Calvin meant. Frankly I reject that narrow interpretation, as our denomination did decades ago. But I understand how and why he came to teach it. As he was explaining the meaning of Romans 8 and other Bible verses, but also from Augustine and Aquinas, even Martin Luther, predestination primarily meant to Calvin that there is nothing we can do to earn our salvation. God pre-determines that. You and I are not intelligent enough, or good enough or astute enough to surrender our lives to Christ. We seek Jesus Christ as a response: because God first sought us. Don’t miss that. (Are you listening?)

In my mind, and I might slip over the line here and suggest that if Calvin were here on his birthday, he would be shocked to discover that some have interpreted his reflections on the Sovereignty of God to mean that some of God’s children are not welcome at the Table of the Lord, or do not have the wisdom to accept the invitation. It is more that you and I, the elect, must remain forever humble in the sight of God. I am aware, of course, that the interpretation of what predestination means has been discussed for centuries, and honest Christian students can disagree. Some have worked through the same verses and

concluded that God chooses to grant his salvation to all in Christ. It is mainly that you and I, the elect, must remain forever humble in the presence of God. But, that does not concern me. I am not responsible for what anyone thinks except me, myself and I.

Our hearts were “strangely warmed,” to borrow a phrase from Wesley, by a passion which originated with God in heaven and then it is planted inside the heart and soul of his people here on earth. We are justified - put right with God; and sanctified - made holy, by the grace of God alone. To be part of the elect means that God laid hold on us. We do not discover God; we become aware that he is searching for us. And, if in his loving-kindness he decides to grant us eternal salvation, that is an ultimate bonus, but it is not ours to claim. The elect know they are in God’s hands, but they are humbled by the knowledge. We are saved by grace alone.

II. The second emphasis of Calvin which I want to mention is that Jesus Christ is Lord of all Creation. He is supreme and King; he is not our palsy walsy buddy, who stands around waiting to see what we want next. He is not our spiritual valet. Christ condescends to be with us but he still remains beyond us and above us. Christ paid the price for our sin, but it is up to him to determine what happens next. God has given the Son the keys to the Kingdom and he can use them however he chooses. He can unlock the heavenly gates for anyone he selects. Christ is the author of our salvation, not us!

Frederick Whitfield wrote an old hymn. You used to sing it here at Sharon I am sure, called “Oh, how I love Jesus.” For most of his life Whitfield was content to brag on how much he loved Jesus. But as he grew older, he changed the emphasis of the hymn and of his life. His song became not how much he loved Jesus, but on how much Jesus loved him.

I chose as our text for today the familiar words of Philippians 2 where Paul tells us why Jesus came to earth. He was with the Father in the Eternal Glory before the foundation of the earth. And he gave it all up to come to earth. In John 10 they asked him why: “Why did you come, dear Lord Jesus?” He answered “I came that they may have life and have it more abundantly.” Though he was equal with God, Paul wrote, he did not count it as a thing to be grasped. He did not revel in it or take advantage. He took the ultimate risk and emptied himself to be with us: God with us is what Emmanuel means. He became obedient, even unto death on the Cross, so that we could have life and life eternal.

How it all happened is a mystery. Calvin reminds us that here again we need to be humble in the presence of God. We do not know as much as we pretend we do. We live by faith and not by sight, on the evidence of things unseen. St. Paul says in I Corinthians that we see in a mirror darkly now, i.e. we have an incomplete and diminished image of what and who Christ is. Someday, in God’s time, not our own, we will see in full and know, as God knows us now. Meanwhile, we must remain open to further insight and knowledge.

III. The third point Calvin taught is that the Word of God comes from the words of the Bible, not the Church, not the creeds, nor out of the minds of men and women. Back in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century it was imperative that he make that clear; the Church and its leaders had seized the authority for themselves. Returning to the Bible was the primary call of the Reformation. God can and does speak directly to us in the words of his Word. When Calvin dictated his Last Will and Testament shortly before his death, “He described himself as a servant of the word of God.” (Wulfert de Greef, quoted on page 67 in Martin Hirzel’s book on the Impact of Calvin, 2009). He said he strove to proclaim God’s word “in its pure form and to interpret scripture accurately.” He once said that he worked on every single verse of the Bible as if his whole life depended upon getting the right meaning. Unfortunately Calvin never wrote a systematic book on Scripture. The Institutes has a chapter on the Old and New Testaments, but it is primarily concerned with how the Old Testament predicts the coming the Messiah, and how both are the word of God.

He believed that God speaks to each generation in and through the Bible. The Church must be ever reforming. All our human minds can give us is a vague idea of the Eternal. We have to be humble before the Word of God. St. Paul wrote that the Word is foolishness to the world, but it is wise in the eyes of God. He was not, as you might assume, a believer in the inerrancy of the Scriptures. That is an argument which arose as a response to the higher criticism challenges just more than one century ago. The Bible is not a museum of Holy Books to revere and venerate. It is the living Word of God. Calvin was always aware that there are differences from one book to another, even apparent contradictions. Luther went so far to say that some of the 66 books should not be in the Bible. Calvin never went that far, but he frequently pointed out different conclusions to the same verse or Bible story and let the reader decide. The Bible is forever being re-studied.

From its original meaning, Calvin tried to discover what The Bible meant to his generation. He would say that our task is to discover what it means in ours. And they need not, and probably will not, draw the same conclusions. To understand and apply the Word properly, each new generation must examine and update, in order to keep the Word of God vibrant and alive. It should never be yesterday's news.

IV. The fourth item I will mention briefly is Calvin's teaching on The Church and Worship. He taught that Worship is an end in itself, not a means. Its purpose is the adoration of Almighty God. We do not come to church so that we can fellowship with each other, although it is nice to have friends in the Congregation: loneliness is a perennial problem in our time. The purpose of Worship is not to entertain us or to make us feel good about ourselves. We are not called upon to relax; we are called upon to repent and to turn again to God. We do not come to Church because we like the preacher or the Sanctuary or the banners or the music: we come to listen for the word God has for each of us. Like Isaiah, our purpose should be to praise God and be lifted up and consecrated anew each Sunday. A worship service should make a difference in your life. It should draw us up into heavenly communion with Christ.

Calvin believed that music belonged in worship. He worked hard to supervise the new Genevan Psalter. He did remove some high and elaborate liturgical music in praise of simplicity. But music always was an important part, mainly in singing Psalms of praise from the Bible. He encouraged young poets to write hymns and paraphrases from the Psalms and composers to compose tunes for the Psalms. The purpose of Church music to Calvin was to praise God. Its purpose is not to be pretty and nice, however agreeable it sounds. It was not to entertain but to lead the people on to another experience with God's Word. I might add that I think our music here at Sharon Church fits the bill, with maybe with a little bit of Wesley thrown in, perhaps a little of the Baptist too, mainly a little of Sandy and David too; but I think old John would approve.

V. The fifth and last point which concerns us here is with Calvin we are chosen and redeemed not so much that we can get into heaven when we die, but that we can spend our lives in service to Almighty God while we are here on earth. Our lives are not our own. Calvin's views on politics and economics were transformational. He sought to bring the whole of human behavior under the Lordship of Christ. He freed the individual from the tyranny of those who denied their right to soar. Our goal is to do all that we can to see that "Justice rolls down like the waters and Righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." He was a great believer in missions. His congregations cared for the poor and needy. He cared for the troubled and dying of the parish. He believed in Missions: he dispatched a purely spiritually minded mission team off the Brazil in the day when European powers were sending missionaries off to enhance the interests of their own nations and religions.

Calvin called on the citizens of Geneva to lead Godly lives and to honor Jesus Christ. He tried to reform the City into a city of God. Under his guidance, the City Consistory, made up of half clergy and half laity, guided and guarded the morals and activities of the citizens. The elders frequently called church members to the public dock and excoriated them over major and minor infractions of the rules, which

needless to say caused exceptional embarrassment to those who had been caught in their various acts of evil. Now there's a thought which might help in our time.

He did not always live up to the best that he taught. I guess no one does, really. Just look around you at the record of so many leaders today. Unfortunately there are some ineradicable blunders and blotches on Calvin's record; most especially that he prosecuted the case against Michael Servetus when Servetus was on trial for denying the Trinity and Infant Baptism. The court issued a decree of execution by fire, unless he repented. And while Calvin was said to have tried to get him to repent, he stood idly by while the accused was condemned and burned at the stake outside Geneva.

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Well, it is time for us to go, past time – some of you are thinking. And it is time to say a final Happy Birthday to Calvin, too. Thanks for sharing this time with me; I hope you have been listening. He was a remarkable man, to whom all of us are indebted. Old Benjamin Warfield noted that “What Plato is among philosophers, and what The Iliad is among epics, and what Shakespeare is among dramatists, such is Calvin among theologians.” (p. 37, Calvin and Calvinism.) A bit parochial perhaps, but not all that far from the truth.

In many ways his life was not a happy one. He seldom had good health. He was troubled by migraines, asthma, chronic indigestion, kidney stones, back trouble, fatigue and anxieties. Some no doubt came from weaknesses in his native constitution, some from neglect, but they surely came in part from the stress and overwork in his ministry. He was said to have been irritable and impatient - no wonder, pain can do that to you. The arthritis in his knees and hips was so bad that by mid 1563 he could hardly walk and had to take to his bed more days than not.

He preached his last sermons and lectures in early February of 1564. He prayed constantly that he would not lose the powers of his mind, for he had so much more to do. That prayer was answered. Until a few days before his death he dictated sermons and lectures, including his last Commentary of the Book of Joshua.

All his life his friends urged him to ease up. To which he responded, “What? Would you have the Lord come and find me idle?” (p. 195 Godfrey.) In April 1564, he dictated his Last Will and Testament. Then he died on Saturday, May 27<sup>th</sup>, at the age of 54, in the same year that William Shakespeare was born. He was buried on the next day, Sunday.

By his own direction his body was interred secretly in an unmarked grave somewhere in Geneva we guess, following what the Scripture says happened when Moses died: “He was buried on the top of Mt. Nebo, but no one knows where even to this day.” Calvin did not want his followers to glorify him. To God be the Glory. Not to follow John Calvin, but to follow Jesus Christ. No one knows to this day where Calvin is buried either.

His was not an easy life. But, as he wrote in the Institutes (II,15,4:) “We may patiently pass our days in afflictions, hunger, contempt and other disagreeable circumstances, but we are always contented with the assurance that our Christ our King will never desert us. He will give us everything we need, until having finished our warfare, we shall be called to triumph and live with him forever.” What more could we want? For now or forever more, Amen.