

# Countering Calvinism

## Bible Glossary, People & Places

### Geneva, Switzerland

#### Sermon Reference

The sermon is set in Geneva, Switzerland, particularly around St. Pierre's Cathedral, noted as the center of John Calvin's ministry about 500 years ago. Geneva is described as a city at a crossroads, pivotal in hosting the Reformation and later becoming a global city of influence housing institutions like the United Nations and the Red Cross.

#### Background Context

Geneva is a city in Switzerland, strategically located between major European capitals—Rome, Paris, and London—and historically served as a crossroads of European culture and politics. In the early 16th century, this positioning made it fertile ground for religious reformers during the Protestant Reformation, a movement that sought to challenge the prevailing doctrines and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. At the heart of this city stands St. Pierre's Cathedral, where John Calvin established his ministry, preaching approximately 2,000 sermons.

Before the Reformation took hold, Geneva was infamous for its moral decay, described in the sermon as having a high prevalence of brothels and night-life distractions, contributing to its notoriety as one of Europe's most 'stinky' cities. Within one generation, through profound religious reform spearheaded by Calvin and his followers, Geneva transformed into a beacon of Protestant Christianity, earning commendations such as John Knox's remark that Geneva was the 'closest place to heaven.' This transformation was not accidental but a deliberate attempt to establish a Christian social order influenced by Biblical teachings that extended beyond mere worship into education, justice, and communal governance.

The city's role extended beyond the Reformation period. By the 19th and 20th centuries, Geneva had become a centre of revival, mission, and global humanitarian efforts. The Revival of Geneva ignited by Bible study groups gave birth to figures such as Henry Dunant, founder of the Red Cross. His faith-informed advocacy led to international treaties governing warfare and prisoner treatment, underscoring Geneva's role in enshrining Biblical principles into global humanitarian law. Later development saw Geneva host foundational efforts toward ecumenical unity through the formation of the World Council of Churches.

Today, Geneva's importance continues through its hosting of major international organizations—United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the World Health Organization, and others—anchoring its legacy as a place where faith, diplomacy, and global governance intersect. This layered history denotes Geneva as both a historical and contemporary nexus of Christian influence, political thought, and social transformation, deeply rooted in the Reformation's theological and social upheavals.

## John Calvin

### Sermon Reference

John Calvin is the central historical figure discussed in the sermon, noted for his ministry in Geneva approximately 500 years ago. He preached extensively at St. Pierre's Cathedral and authored the Institutes of the Christian Religion, which laid the foundation for Calvinism and the Reformed churches worldwide.

### Background Context

John Calvin was born in 1509 in Noyon, France. His early life was marked by the death of his mother and a strong push by his father for Calvin to pursue advanced secular education, particularly in law, at the University of Paris. Alongside his legal training, Calvin mastered several languages, including Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, which positioned him to engage deeply with Scripture and theological study. This linguistic proficiency was a crucial tool in his later reform efforts, allowing him to write and preach with scholarly authority.

The 16th century was a tumultuous era for Christendom, financially and spiritually shaken by the corruption and excesses of the Roman Catholic Church. Calvin's personal religious awakening led him to participate in the growing Protestant Reformation. By 1537, Calvin began pastoring in Geneva, after Martin Luther had initiated the reform movement about two decades prior with his Ninety-Five Theses in 1517. Calvin sought not only spiritual reform but societal transformation, envisioning Geneva as a model Christian commonwealth governed by Scriptural principles.

His theological contributions culminated in his magnum opus, the 'Institutes of the Christian Religion,' which evolved through multiple editions to encompass 80 chapters outlining his doctrinal stances. Calvin's preaching in Geneva, estimated at around 2,000 sermons, served as a practical outworking of his theology, aimed at reforming not only beliefs but lifestyle, education, and civic order under God's sovereignty.

Calvin's development of what became known as Calvinism, summarized in the 'TULIP' acronym—Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints—has had a profound and lasting impact on Protestant theology globally. His teachings inform the doctrinal basis of Reformed churches and significantly influence Christian thought and practice, shaping debates about divine sovereignty, human will, salvation, and sanctification.

## John Knox

### Sermon Reference

John Knox is mentioned in the sermon as a significant figure who praised Geneva during the Reformation period, stating it was the 'closest place to heaven' after its transformation under Calvin's ministry.

### Background Context

John Knox was a Scottish clergyman and a leader of the Scottish Reformation in the 16th century. Born around 1514, Knox studied theology and became a passionate advocate for Protestantism. Influenced by John Calvin during his time in Geneva, Knox adopted Reformed theology and sought to establish a similar religious structure in Scotland. His experiences of exile and ministry in Geneva greatly shaped his theological ideas and ecclesiastical reforms.

Knox's most significant contribution was leading the Presbyterian movement in Scotland, which was rooted in Calvinist doctrines while emphasizing the governance of the church through elders (Presbyters). His preaching and reform efforts led to the establishment of the Church of Scotland, which rejected Roman Catholicism and embraced the principles of the Reformation with a strong emphasis on the authority of Scripture and the sovereignty of God in salvation.

Knox admired Geneva's transformation under Calvin, describing it as a model Christian city. This admiration was not merely rhetorical; Knox sought to export Geneva's Reformed ecclesiastical and social structures to Scotland. His influence extended beyond the church into political realms, advocating for the right and responsibility of rulers to uphold godliness and biblical law. His efforts were deeply rooted in biblical principles emphasizing God's sovereignty (Psalm 47), the authority of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16-17), and the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:9). Knox also played a role in encouraging moral reform and the establishment of schools, echoing Calvin's emphasis on education.

Knox's legacy is foundational in Presbyterian theology and church polity, prominent among many Reformed churches worldwide today. His commitment to scripture-based reform and church governance challenges continues to influence Christian thought and practice, making him a cornerstone figure in the historical shaping of Protestantism.

## Henry Dunant

### Sermon Reference

Henry Dunant is cited as a direct fruit of the Revival in Geneva, initiated by reformed study of Scripture. He founded the Red Cross and championed biblical teachings about justice and humanitarian care, influencing global agreements like the Geneva Conventions.

## Background Context

Henry Dunant was born in 1828, more than two centuries after Calvin's ministry in Geneva. Dunant was a Swiss humanitarian, businessman, and social activist whose faith and reading of the Bible, particularly the book of Amos, inspired him to advocate for compassionate treatment of soldiers and prisoners during war. His efforts led to the establishment of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1863, and the Geneva Conventions, which set ground rules for humanitarian treatment during conflicts, are named after the city where they were negotiated.

Dunant's Christian commitment was not merely theoretical; it impelled practical engagement with global issues of war and peace. Drawing from biblical principles of justice and mercy, Dunant challenged nations to care for wounded soldiers regardless of their side in conflict. His work institutionalized Christian compassion into global law and humanitarian practice, advancing the cause of human dignity. Dunant was awarded the first Nobel Peace Prize in 1901, underscoring the impact of his faith-driven work.

The Geneva revival, sparked by a reemphasis on biblical study and the Christian faith within the city, provided the spiritual and cultural environment that nurtured Dunant's visionary leadership. The revival influenced not only ecclesiastical renewal but also societal transformation, showing the power of the gospel to impact all facets of life, including justice and international relations.

Henry Dunant's legacy exemplifies how faith leads to tangible, positive transformations in society. His life underscores the biblical mandate to care for the oppressed and pursue justice (Isaiah 1:17, Micah 6:8), modeling how the principles of Reformed Christianity can influence global humanitarian law and international cooperation.

## The Reformation

### Sermon Reference

The sermon often refers to the Protestant Reformation as the historical context for Calvin's ministry in Geneva and the theological movement of Calvinism that emerged about 20 years after Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses initiated the Reformation.

### Background Context

The Protestant Reformation was a major religious, political, and cultural upheaval that began in the early 16th century as a response to perceived theological errors and institutional corruption in the Roman Catholic Church. Traditionally marked by Martin Luther's 1517 posting of his Ninety-Five Theses on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, the Reformation ignited widespread debate about salvation, church authority, and scripture. It led to the formation of Protestant denominations, breaking from Catholicism and emphasizing direct access to the Bible and salvation through faith.

John Calvin emerged as one of the most influential reformers during this time, particularly shaping theology and practice through his work in Geneva. Unlike some reformers who

focused mainly on doctrinal disputes, Calvin's vision extended to social transformation through the establishment of a godly society patterned on biblical principles. The Reformation, therefore, was not only about individual salvation but about creating communities governed by the Word of God, which reflected a comprehensive understanding of faith applied to life, governance, and education.

This movement spread across Europe and eventually the world, dramatically altering Christianity's theological landscape and power structures. It challenged long-held institutions, created new forms of church governance, and emphasized doctrines such as sola scriptura (Scripture alone), sola fide (faith alone), and sola gratia (grace alone). The Reformation also set the stage for the Enlightenment and modern notions of individual conscience and religious freedom.

The ongoing legacy of the Reformation permeates Christian doctrine, worship, and practice across numerous denominations today, including Lutheran, Reformed, Presbyterian, and many evangelical churches. Its foundational principles continue to shape Christian understanding of God's sovereignty, human nature, grace, and the Christian's role in society and missions.

## St. Pierre's Cathedral

### Sermon Reference

St. Pierre's Cathedral in Geneva is the location where John Calvin preached approximately 2,000 sermons and where the Reformation in Geneva was strongly centered. It was also referred to as Calvin's cathedral and the site of the Teaching Chapel.

### Background Context

St. Pierre's Cathedral, originally a Catholic cathedral dating back to the 12th century, is situated in the heart of Geneva's Old City. It became a focal point of the Protestant Reformation as John Calvin took up his ministry there in the 16th century. Under Calvin, the cathedral transitioned from its Catholic past to become the pulpit for Reformed preaching and the site where new Protestant doctrine was taught and disseminated. Calvin delivered thousands of sermons there, shaping the spiritual life of Geneva and influencing Protestant theology widely.

The cathedral's transformation mirrors the religious shift of the city—from Catholicism to a center of Reformed Protestantism. This included not only alterations in worship practices but also significant changes to its physical architecture and symbolic meaning. Later modifications, such as the addition of Greek-style pillars in the 18th century during the Enlightenment, reflected ongoing cultural changes that moved away from medieval religious frameworks toward more classical ideals, highlighting Geneva's continuing evolution as a place of intellectual and spiritual ferment.

As the prime site for Calvin's ministry, St. Pierre's Cathedral was not just a place of worship but a hub for education, moral reform, and theological development. The adjacency of

the Teaching Chapel facilitated the spreading of Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion and his sermons, influencing clergy, laypeople, and visitors alike. The cathedral stood witness to the dramatic moral and civic transformation of Geneva from a city noted for its vices to a model of Protestant Christian community life. Today, St. Pierre's Cathedral remains a significant landmark, drawing visitors interested in the history of the Reformation. It symbolizes the profound impact Reformed theology had on Europe and beyond. The cathedral holds a place in the broader narrative of the Church's reform, serving as a testament to the enduring power of Scripture-based preaching and community transformation.

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