

Calvin, the Church, and Displaced Persons

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The name John Calvin is so closely associated with the Swiss city, Geneva, and its international connections that it is often forgotten that he was, in fact, a resident alien in a small political entity without pretensions to university culture, precariously balanced between hungry larger states. Calvin came from France, an exile for his faith. He had not intended to settle in Geneva but was compelled by the conviction that God and the church were calling him through the mouth of William Farel. Geneva itself did not much want Calvin, this foreigner whom they accepted, exiled, and called back because they decided they needed him, this foreigner with whom they struggled as both pastor and city learned to live together for the sake of the faith they shared.

Calvin had only to speak and it was obvious to any Genevan citizen that he was not one of them. Furthermore, he attracted ever increasing numbers of other religious refugees from his native France and also significant numbers of exiles speaking Italian, English, and Spanish. The composition of their city was changing and their traditions were challenged. Calvin for his part tried to minister as faithfully as possible in Geneva – faithfulness including kinds of Christian formation (education and discipline) which Genevans did not necessarily appreciate – but his eyes and heart were always at least partly focused on France and the scattered worshiping congregations there and in exile.

So what might it look like to picture Calvin as the exiled pastor and theologian of displaced persons – refugees – in a Europe where religious reform and conflict shaped and reshaped the landscape of church and society? This essay seeks to identify: set up sign posts, not describe in detail, some of the factors which would need to be included in developing this somewhat untraditional picture of Calvin and his work.¹ The

1. The question of Calvin and the “reformation of the refugees” is a recently developed interest particularly brought to the fore by Heiko A. Oberman. Oberman was prevented by death from working out his full treatment of this, but his important essays on the subject have been gathered into a book, *John Cal-*

first set of topics clusters around Calvin and his engagement with religious refugees; the second group is focused on aspects of his theology; the third offers some excerpts from Calvin's international pastoral correspondence as a way to bring the larger issues to life in personal terms.

I

To be uprooted from home, relatives, language, all that is familiar, is wrenching in any age, but this is particularly true in a traditional society where generation after generation has lived in one place, attended one church, spoken with one local accent, shared a common political, economic, and cultural context. To leave that known world, or to be forced out, anticipating that it may be essentially forever, demands either desperation or some compelling reason. It also requires, or forges, a level of psychic and social adjustment which can call forth new strength and nurture new ideas and perceptions, as well as exert pressure on ties among family and citizens as religious convictions bring separations and conflicts.

John Calvin was a religious exile from his native France.² He chose this path when he became convinced that he could not continue to live and work for church reform in the existing structures; for him it had come to be a choice between his homeland and his faith. It is not always noted, but it is very important that Calvin was one of the few leading Protestant reformers who spent his entire working life as an exile. Martin Luther was a Saxon in Saxony, Philip Melancthon was a German in Germany, Ulrich Zwingli was a Swiss German in German Switzerland, Martin Bucer was an Alsatian in Alsace, Thomas Cranmer was an Englishman in England, John Knox was a Scot who spent a significant part of his life in Scotland, John a Lasco was a Pole who at least worked for his last years in Poland. Besides Calvin there were some Italian, French, and Spanish leaders: Peter Martyr Vermigli, Farel, Francisco de Enzinas,

vin and the Reformation of the Refugees, introduction by Peter A. Dykema (Geneva: Droz, 2009). The issue of large scale population movements related particularly to religious reasons has become a matter of more widespread interest, as witness a number of sessions on the subject at the Sixteenth Century Conference and Society in Montreal in October 2010, and the announcement of a major conference: "Early Modern Migrations: Exiles, Expulsion, & Religious Refugees 1400-1700: An International and Interdisciplinary Conference," Victoria College in the University of Toronto, 19-21 April 2012. The present essay makes no claims to be even an overview of all that can be said about Calvin; it is simply an essay pointing to some of the dimensions which deserve further treatment.

2. In this essay no attempt to document every detail of Calvin's story, since many aspects are well known. For a good recent biography see Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

Juan Diaz, who did most or all of their work outside their homelands. However, of the most outstanding Protestant theologians, Calvin was the only one whose entire ministry was carried out as a foreigner, a resident alien in Geneva (until he was given citizenship near the end of his life).

This experience of displacement was not unique to Calvin, though very few religious exiles were as influential as he. Certainly, not all those who came to reject the church, as it was established around them, chose exile. For some, it was simply out of the question for economic or other reasons; for some, it was too high a price to pay and/or they found ways to accommodate themselves to their situations. (Calvin would call the latter “Nicodemites” for hiding their faith; it was especially reprehensible in his eyes if this concealment meant conforming to the Catholic Mass in order to escape notice.³) For a remarkable number, however, exile became either a choice or a necessity. Among those who were forced out of France by active persecution were the Protestants (Waldensians) of Provence, whom the officials of Francis I attacked with the sword in 1544-45, destroying villages, killing, raping, enslaving (in the galleys) the peasants who would not accept the Mass. Calvin engaged in a vigorous campaign to help these persecuted fellow believers, arranging with the Genevan government to accept the refugees and provide work for the able-bodied, and spending much time and energy to persuade Swiss Protestant territories to send a diplomatic mission to the French king to intercede for the poor villagers.⁴

Over time, Geneva became more and more a center for religious refugees, especially French-speaking ones. In the first generation of the reforms, Strasbourg had filled that role, but as Bucer’s influence waned and stricter Lutherans gained control of the church, only those who agreed with the 1530 Augsburg Confession were welcome in Strasbourg. Under Calvin’s leadership the city of Geneva, with its essentially homogeneous population, developed into a magnet for many Protestants from different lands. There were scattered individuals and groups from Italy; beginning in 1551 they established a congregation. Marian exiles from England came in the mid-1550s and found a church home. A Spanish-speaking congregation was formed in 1558.⁵ And there were the French:

3. See for example his writings beginning in 1537 with *Deux lettres contre les Nicodémistes*, including *Excuse à messieurs le Nicodémistes* (1544), republished a number of times.

4. See the four volumes of M. R. Gilchrist, trans., *Letters of John Calvin*, compiled by J. Bonnet (New York: Burt Franklin/ Lenox Hill, 1972 reprint of 1858); hereafter, *Letters of John Calvin*. For Calvin’s efforts, see volume 2, letters nos. 122, 131, 132, 137, 138, 139, 140.

5. See also G. Baum, E. Cunitz and E. Reuss, eds., *Ioannis Calvinii Opera*

an ever increasing number, who challenged and changed the composition of Genevan society. The French could fit in, though they did not blend very well. Many were people of wealth and high social status, and considerable education; some were poor, though they often brought important skills of various kinds. Because of their numbers, the economic and cultural contributions many French could offer, and especially because they could be assimilated into the Genevan church even if their accents always marked them as foreigners, these refugees became a significant factor in making the city state more cosmopolitan as well as expanding its economic base with new industries such as printing.

Besides his role in attracting and helping refugees in Geneva, Calvin continued to be closely engaged with other people displaced for religious reasons. One group of these was the French-speaking church he had served in Strasbourg, which had been forced to leave there at the Augsburg Interim and the city's turn toward strict Lutheranism. This congregation, along with German and Dutch Reformed, found a (temporary) home in England under Edward VI, thanks to an invitation from Thomas Cranmer. While they were in London Calvin sent one of his most talented colleagues, Nicolas Des Gallars, to serve the exiles. These "strangers churches" were uprooted again when Mary Tudor came to the throne, and they moved back to the continent. The French found a tentative welcome in Lutheran Frankfurt, and there Calvin continued to work with them, both interceding with their somewhat reluctant hosts and attempting to guide the church itself as it struggled over questions of ministerial leadership. However, it was not just French refugees who concerned Calvin. He also accepted a call to try to mediate in the English Marian exile church in Frankfurt when it was fractured by liturgical controversy, and when negotiations failed, he asked the Genevan government to provide a place for the group who had to leave Frankfurt.⁶ His explanation for this welcome is significant for his sense of the connection among believers of different languages and heritages.

May it please [the Council] to receive the English who had to come here because of the gospel and to allow them a church to administer the word

Quae Supersunt Omnia (Brunsvigae: C.A. Schwetsckhke, 1863-1900); hereafter, OC. Through Calvin and the Company of Pastors, the Italian community asks to be allowed to establish a church, OC 21: 493, 26 November 1551 (from Registers of the Council). For the English church, OC 21: 608, 10 June 1555 and OC 21: 617, 24 October 1555. For the Spanish, see OC 21:706, 10 October 1558.

6. For a brief overview of this situation, see Gordon, *Calvin*, 240-243.

and sacraments... because formerly the said English received the other nations [refugees who came to them] and gave them a church.⁷

The English-speaking congregation in Geneva in fact was the beginning of a long and very fruitful connection between Calvin and his church, and Protestants in Britain. It is no accident that the largest number of translations of Calvin's writings in the sixteenth-century was English, and especially his sermons were more popular in Britain than anywhere else, except France.⁸

Calvin's home country was not only the source of the greatest number of religious refugees, but it was also the place to which the Genevan church sent the most "missionaries." Small French congregations had been developing for some decades before they could find trained pastors or be officially organized. It was to Calvin and Geneva that these congregations looked for educated ministers of word and sacraments, and beginning in the 1550s supplying men to lead these believers became one of the main tasks of the Genevan Company of Pastors. The need for theological education in the new Protestant style, which focused on careful exegesis of Biblical books in their entirety, was a constant concern for Calvin. From the time he arrived in Geneva, he had been lecturing on scripture, and over the years he wrote commentaries on most of the New Testament and produced expositions of many books of the Old. These started as lectures to educate anyone who wanted to attend; the only condition was to be able to understand Latin, the normal language of scholars. In 1559, Calvin was able to bring this less formal organization of theological study to the status of a humanist institution of advanced education by establishing the Genevan Academy (eventually university) with the purpose of providing leaders for the future of church and society. The Academy gave a focus for the work of the Genevan pastors, who were already attempting to supply trained men for the scattered Protestant churches in France – and elsewhere.

Alongside these lectures and publications for the training of ministers, Calvin also regularly preached in French through entire books of the Bible. The French refugees prized these sermons so much that they engaged one of their number, the stenographer Denis Raguenier, to record the reformer's preaching verbatim (something almost unique in that age). Against Calvin's own wishes, the refugees in Geneva wanted to publish (at least some of) these sermons, to serve as education and edification for the French church. One editor, Conrad Badius, explains the importance of this.

7. See OC 21: 617, 24 October 1555.

8. See Francis Higman, "Calvin's Works in Translation," in *Lire et découvrir* (Geneva: Droz, 1998), 550-562.

I beg you to consider the contribution to the progress of the Church of God which has resulted from the sermons of our good Master Jean Calvin which have been published to date. Although he did not have the leisure to revise these sermons and we were obliged to bring them to light just as they were taken down, nevertheless they have served as mute teachers to those who, deprived of the freedom to hear the living voice, have enjoyed reading these sermons, and have been brought to a knowledge of the truth by that means. And likewise [they have served as] a form for a number of those who in these times of visitation [trial] have been called to the ministry of the Gospel and who, being conformed to this manner of teaching: pure, simple, and far from all ostentation and affectation of human eloquence, today are fishing for souls in great heaps, to dedicate and consecrate them to their Lord and Shepherd.⁹

Calvin might be reluctant to allow his unpolished sermons to circulate in print, but he had to concede if these helped the scattered congregations of believers who had either no ministers or untrained ones.

Not all people who appeared to be religious refugees proved to be faithful to the new teaching of the gospel, however, and Calvin also had to do with a number of individuals whose behavior he considered a dishonor to the church. Among these were men who, after a time as Protestants, returned to the Roman church; these included several who became the sources of very negative stories about Calvin himself. The best known is Jerome Bolsec, a former monk who disputed the reformer's teaching on predestination and ended by writing a "biography" filled with hearsay and even outright fabrications about Calvin's (im)morality. Material derived from one of Calvin's former secretaries, Francois Bauduin, who also returned to Rome, contributed to the negative image of the reformer, particularly emphasizing his harshness. Other "displaced persons" might not present such lasting challenges but they were a concern. In 1556, Calvin warned Heinrich Bullinger about a Frenchman, a former "Mass priest," who had come to live in Zurich. This man had spent some time in Geneva with "his wife," who turned out to be the second woman he claimed, and yet he had married again in Zurich (becoming a "trigamist," in Calvin's words). Not all who left their homes for their faith remained convinced in that new teaching or honored its standards in their lives.¹⁰

9. *Bibliotheca Calviniana: Les oeuvres de Jean Calvin publiées au xvi siècle*, eds. R. Peter & J.-F. Gilmont (Geneva: Droz, 1994), 2: 957, preface to Gospel Harmony by Badius, 1562 (missing from OC).

10. For the most recent discussion of Bolsec's and Bauduin's responses to Calvin, see Irena Backus, *Life Writing in Reformation Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 153-162, 169-186. Letter to Bullinger, no. 440, *Letters of John Calvin*, 3: 288-289.

Thus, Calvin had constant contact with exiled and displaced persons. As he was an exile himself, he welcomed, interceded, and educated them. He also wrote and preached for them, and acted to guide or correct as he felt was necessary. He worked very hard to enable scattered religious refugees to survive and grow as individuals and groups, and to counsel and educate ministers for people who might not be physically uprooted but had become “displaced” in their own society for the sake of their faith. The world of believers for Calvin was not a fixed one: Christians were in motion.

II

Calvin’s theology has been studied by many, and it is commonly recognized that his doctrine of the church is one of his most creative teachings. It is significant, therefore, to note that Calvin’s experience of exile and his constant interaction with displaced people are closely related to his understanding of the church. Without claiming a special influence of experience on teaching – although that argument can be made, it is too large a topic for this essay – it is worthwhile to sketch briefly some of the ways that Calvin’s teaching and his experience of the world of refugee Christians illuminate each other.

The Biblical foundation of the whole is Calvin’s conviction that the church is a pilgrim people on earth. Repeatedly, from his passionate engagement with the story of Abraham, through his emphasis on the suffering church, Calvin demonstrates that the life of the church visible on earth is characterized by being in but not of the world. Abraham stands as the model of the faithful who do not have a fixed home.

Look at Abraham, who had been tossed from side to side; he had changed places of residence, even being blown about like a piece of straw in the wind. In spite of all that, he knew that he must remain firm in God, and his faith was so well founded that nothing could shake it and he did not personally waver. See how Abraham always followed the path into which God led him; and so he worshiped the eternal God, the God of the ages, even though it appeared that God was playing with him as with a ball, chasing him here and there. Now it is said that [Abraham] lived in the country of the Philistines for a long time (Gn 21:34), but the word Moses uses means “to live as a stranger.”¹¹

11. Translation found in E.A. McKee, trans. and ed., *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety* (Mahweh: Paulist Press, 2001), 139-140. Hereafter, *Writings on Pastoral Piety*.

To be the pilgrim church it is not enough simply to be strangers; it is also necessary to continue to bear witness to faith under persecution.

Even those who cannot honor God for fear of their lives are not therefore excused, because the honor we owe Him is something too precious. We should not allege that [worshiping Him] is not permitted and we do not have the freedom to do it, for however that may be, what is told us here about Abraham must instruct us, because we know that he is the patron of all the faithful inasmuch as he is their father. Since it is so, even while we may be scattered among the enemies of God and of His truth, and persecution at hand, let us make confession of our faith, because we must always give precedence to the principal thing over the lesser ones.¹²

Abraham, the man God called into a life of wandering, was the father of the faithful. Calvin also describes the trials of the life of faith with a certain simple poignancy in a passage first published in 1539 (*Institutes* 3.8.1): “For all those whom the Lord has adopted and received in the company of His children ought to prepare themselves for a hard, laborious life, full of travail and countless kinds of evils.”¹³ The same sense of the struggle the church faces is heard frequently in Calvin’s sermons and prayers; the concluding prayer from one of his lectures on Zechariah (no. 161) is typical.

Grant, Almighty God, that as we are this day surrounded with enemies, and without any defence, so that our safety seems to be every moment in danger – O grant, that we may raise up our hearts to thee, and being satisfied with thy protection alone, may we despise whatever Satan and the whole world may threaten us with, and thus continue impregnable while carrying on our warfare, so that we may at length reach that happy rest, where we shall enjoy not only those good things which thou hast promised to us on earth, but also that glorious and triumphant victory which we shall partake of together with our head, even Christ Jesus, as he has overcome the world for us, in order that he might gather us to himself, and make us partakers of his victory and all his blessings. Amen.¹⁴

This larger theme of the persecuted pilgrim church deserves much greater development, but space prevents extended treatment.¹⁵

12. Translation by McKee, *Writings on Pastoral Piety*, 139.

13. E. A. McKee, trans. and ed., *John Calvin. Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1541 French Edition*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 694.

14. See the prayer on lecture 161, *Calvin’s Commentaries. The Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Associated Publishers), 983.

15. Dr. Bonnie Pattison presented a paper on this topic at the International Congress for Calvin Research in August 2010, and is working on a book on this subject.

One of the obvious ways that the experience of religious uprooting coheres with Calvin's understanding of the church is in the clarity with which the reformer marks out the distinct nature of the church. Or, to put it another way, Calvin clearly distinguishes between church and society, even when he does not want to separate them. There is a difference between being a Christian and being a citizen, even a citizen of a Christian state. If it becomes necessary, one must choose between faith and home, as Abraham did, and this must be done even when the cost is great. For Calvin, it is a betrayal of the faith to hide it under the cover of conformity to what is not the truth. Far more than Luther, Calvin insisted that those who profess the gospel could not attend Catholic worship outwardly and live their Protestant faith only inwardly; that is not just human weakness, it is sin. With this strong "anti-Nicodemite" stance, Calvin's doctrine of the church could make exile or death the only choices for a Christian who was being persecuted. While it may seem to modern eyes a harsh choice, the point of this teaching was that for Calvin not only must a believer's first loyalty be to God, but also open witness to that commitment is a necessary part of faithfulness.

Another aspect of Calvin's teaching on the church is the character of his "church constitution." For all Protestants, scripture is the sole authority for all that must be believed for salvation. However, for the Reformed tradition, scripture is also in second place the source of knowledge about the right ordering of the visible church. For Calvin, this means that the New Testament church is the model for the ideal organization of the church. There are two dimensions of this which are particularly important for a church of refugees. One is that the earthly church can exist quite well without civil support; i.e., it does not need to be established in order to carry out its full life. The second point is that the New Testament church, as Calvin understood it, had several distinctive ministries which are needed in every rightly ordered congregation. Typically he expresses this as a four-fold office theory. There are three kinds of presbyters: pastors, teachers, and elders, and there are deacons, of whom he identified two categories: those who handle finances and those who do the actual care for the poor. Combine these two aspects of Calvin's teaching and the effect is to define a full church constitution which is self-sufficient in any outward circumstances. So a group of Christians displaced from their homes, or "internally displaced" by forming a dissident group in a larger society of another faith, can organize and carry out the life of the church without dependence on the surroundings. Scattered congregations cannot properly live without connection with other congregations of the faithful, but geographic distance is not barrier to communion even if it limits communication.

This connectional system actually forms a third distinctive factor in Calvin's understanding of the church. The visible church is called into being by the proclamation of the gospel, in "the word purely preached and heard and the sacraments rightly administered" (*Institutes* 4.1.9). Calvin emphasizes that where these marks of the church are found, there the church is. Such marks are not tied to any place, yet they are temporal; so where these marks appear, Christians are gathered in the power of the Holy Spirit. This definition means that the church is not bound to any place and yet it concretely appears in various places. That being the case, all those who receive the gospel are the church, recognize each other by common profession of this basic "apostolic teaching" of the gospel. Being scattered or displaced is therefore not an impediment to identifying (with) other gatherings of the church. In fact, it is the obligation of Christians to recognize each other, the obligation of a church to acknowledge and seek ties with other churches who share the same gospel, even when they are geographically and culturally distant, speaking another language and using different forms. Mutual prayer and, when needed or possible, mutual aid, are implied in this recognition of relationship.¹⁶ Aid may take various forms; one kind of structural assistance is provided by sharing education of ministers and communicating among churches; one practical form of aid is welcome to refugees.

III

Over the years Calvin became a significant resource for "displaced persons" who needed counsel and assistance. Sometimes the relationship was temporary, sometimes it lasted for many years. Sometimes the counsel was encouragement or pastoral teaching, sometimes it might be correction or admonition. Examples of different kinds of contact can provide something of the "sound" of Calvin the exile speaking to other persons displaced for their faith.

The most dramatic situations were those in which believers were being persecuted. Often these contacts were relatively brief because the witness to the faith ended in martyrdom. There were both men and women who were "internally displaced" for their faith. In 1553, five young theological students returning to France to be pastors were burned at the stake. After efforts to free them had failed, Calvin continued to write to them to encourage them in the face of death.

16. A good example of this in Calvin's preaching is the sermon on Psalm 115 preached on a special day of prayer in November 1545, which gives particular attention to the Lutheran church in Germany; see McKee, *Writings on Pastoral Piety*, 161-172.

Since it pleases Him to employ you to the death in maintaining His quarrel, He will strengthen your hands in the fight, and will not suffer a single drop of your blood to be spent in vain. And though the fruit may not all at once appear, yet in time it shall spring up more abundantly than we can express...Put into practice then, my brethren, that precept of David's, that you have not forgotten the law of God (Ps 119:61), although your life may be in your hands to be parted with at any hour. And seeing that He employs your life in so worthy a cause as is the witness of the Gospel, doubt not that it must be precious to Him.¹⁷

In 1557, some women were arrested upon leaving a secret Protestant worship service in Paris, and imprisoned. Their leader, a young widow, would be burned at the stake. Women were considered weaker than men; thus, besides encouragement, Calvin's letter to these women expresses something of the outstanding character of their witness.

For He who marshals us to battle, arms and shields us at the same time with the necessary weapons and gives us dexterity in wielding them. Our sole task then is to accept them and allow ourselves to be governed by Him. He has promised to give us a mouth and wisdom which our enemies will not be able to gainsay. He has promised to give firmness and constancy to those who put their trust in Him. He has shed His Spirit on all flesh, and caused to prophesy sons and daughters, as He had foretold by His prophet Joel; which is evidently a sign that He communicates in like manner His other necessary graces, and leaves neither sons nor daughters, men nor women, destitute of the gifts proper for maintaining His glory. . . .

Consider what was the courage and constancy of women at the death of our Lord Jesus Christ: when the apostles had forsaken him, how they continued by Him with marvelous constancy and how a woman was the messenger to announce to the apostles His resurrection, which the latter could neither believe nor comprehend. If He then so honored women and endowed them with so much courage, do you think He has less power now or that His purposes are changed? How many thousands of women have there been who have spared neither their blood nor their lives to maintain the name of Jesus Christ and announce His reign! Has not God caused their martyrdom to fructify? Has their faith not obtained the victory over the world as well as that of martyrs? And without going further, have we not still before our eyes examples of how God works daily by their testimony, and confounds His enemies in such a manner that there is no preaching of such efficacy as the fortitude and perseverance which they possess in confessing the name of Christ?¹⁸

17. Letter no. 318, *Letters of John Calvin*, 2: 406.

18. Letter no. 476, *Letters of John Calvin*, 3: 365-366.

In the ringing affirmation of the God's call to the women and the wonderful value of their witness, Calvin's words show his strong conviction that the choice for faith, even at the cost of life, is a brilliant sign of the church: a visible choice between safety and a faithful witness to the end, a choice available to women as well as men, young and old, people of every rank and class.

Actual exile might be both, more or less, of a trial than martyrdom. The French-speaking congregation which first gathered in German-speaking Strasbourg with Calvin as its pastor was made up of people who had already left their homelands for their faith. Then they had to move to England and/or face repression from fellow Protestants, and after a few years in London they had to move again. Back on the continent, in Frankfurt, they again started in a new place, this one somewhat less congenial than England. It is not too surprising that the death of a minister and internal disagreements about the process by which his colleague had been chosen should disturb the harmony of the group. They sustained a unified communal life while moving from place to place, never living in one's own native language or culture, rearing children in a foreign world where they would inevitably lose the identities which shaped their parents. They lived in a world in which one lives on the sufferance of hosts and cannot hope for advancement, where the temptation is for each to cling to what he or she has without regard for the common good. Yes, they did all this for faith. Calvin's letters to members of the congregation and to their Frankfurt hosts give a good picture of the tensions and struggles which, while natural in human life, could be exacerbated by a situation which enforced mutual dependence among those existing as an enclave of strangers in a foreign land.¹⁹

What about the case of an important individual, a royal or aristocratic tool in the political alliances of the day, someone "displaced" by family dictates? This was especially difficult for a woman, like the Princess Renée of France married to the very Catholic Duke of Ferrara, who repeatedly punished her for her Protestant "heresy." For many years Calvin corresponded with this Frenchwoman as she struggled to maintain her faith in an Italian court where she could not escape her husband's rule. At times she weakened in her resistance, and Calvin's words both recognized this and encouraged her to continue.

Certes, I am convinced that the same attacks which caused you to backslide will be again ere long renewed, but I pray you to think of how much you owe to Him, who has ransomed you at such cost, and daily invites

19. See the cluster of letters in 1556 to the French Church, its elders and deacons, the Lutheran host church, John Clauburger, nos. 424, 428, 429, 430, 436, 437, 438, in *Letters of John Calvin*, vol. 3.

you to his heavenly inheritance. ...Call upon him, trusting that he is sufficient to help our infirmities, and meditate on those noble promises which are to exalt us by the hope of glory in the heavens. For the foretaste alone should make us forget the world, and trample it under our feet. And to prove that the desire of glorifying God is increased in you, or at least is in no wise deadened, bethink yourself, Madam, in God's name, not only how to bear testimony to him in your person, but also so to order your household, that the mouths of evil speakers be closed.²⁰

Calvin's next letter indicates that he has word of the Duchess' renewed suffering from her husband, and he offers sympathy and praise.

Though I could have wished to have better news of you, to wit, that with tranquility of mind you were serving God in peace, nevertheless I rejoice to learn, that you are not weary of groaning and being in pain, in order to seek for the means of fulfilling your duty. Thus it becomes us to do battle, to follow the Son of God.²¹

While Duchess Renée's "exile" was not chosen for religious reasons, her experience of isolation as a believer could qualify her as a religiously displaced person.

Another experience of religious exile was the trial of families separated by faith and/or geography. Sometimes, when there was no way to find a place where a couple divided by religious confession might live together, a divorce was the only solution. This was the case with the Marquis de Vico, an Italian nobleman who moved to Geneva and, because his Catholic wife would not agree to move from Italy to a place where he could also practice his faith, successfully sued for a divorce.²² At other times, the story might be news of the loss of a beloved family member in a distant land, as with the aristocratic French lady Mme de Normandie. She was already ill when she and her husband came to Geneva in exile, to be able to live according to their new understanding of the faith. When she died, Calvin wrote to Mme de Cany, another French woman (like Duchess Renée, persecuted by her husband for her Protestant faith). He describes Mme de Normandie's death with the intent that Mme de Cany might pass this testimony on to Mme de Normandie's father, himself newly drawn to this gospel which had led to his separation from his daughter.

20. Letter no. 384, February 1555; *Letters of John Calvin*, 3: 130.

21. Letter no. 403, June 1555; *Letters of John Calvin*, 3: 187-188.

22. See the full story in chapter six entitled, "The Galeazzo Caracciolo Case: Divorce for Religious Reasons," in Robert M. Kingdon, *Adultery and Divorce in Calvin's Geneva* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 143-165.

[Mme de Normandie] said: "The hour draws near, I must needs depart from the world; this flesh asks only to go away into corruption; but I feel certain that my God is withdrawing my soul into His kingdom. I know what a poor sinful woman I am, but my confidence is in His goodness and in the death and passion of His Son. Therefore I do not doubt of my salvation, since He has assured me of it. I go to Him as to my Father." ... After once more declaring the sense she had of her sins, to ask the pardon of them from God, and the certainty which she entertained of her salvation, putting her sole confidence in Jesus and having her whole trust in Him, without being invited by anyone to do so she began to pronounce the *Miserere* as we sing it in Church, and continued with a loud and strong voice, not without great difficulty, but she entreated that we would allow her to continue.

[S]he said to me, "How happy I am, and how I am beholden to God, for having brought me here to die. Had I been in that wretched prison [Catholic France], I could not have ventured to open my mouth to make confession of my Christianity. Here I have not only liberty to glorify God, but I have so many sound arguments to confirm me in my salvation."²³

Dying far from home was not easy, but for those who had abandoned their earthly places to go where they could openly worship God as they believed God wills: that could be a "good death." Calvin, who had just recently lost his own wife, also describes how the grieving husband nevertheless encouraged his dying wife.

For while possessed with such grief as I know it to have been, and weighed down by extremity of sorrow, [M. de Normandie] had so far gained the mastery over self as to exhort his better part as freely as if they were going to make a most joyful journey together.²⁴

Left alone in a foreign land, the widower could still express his faith. Calvin understood: both he and his wife Idelette de Bure had been exiles for their religious convictions. Shortly after her death, he spoke of being "bereaved of the best companion of my life, of one who, if anything more difficult had befallen me, would not only have been the willing sharer of my exile and indigence, but even of my death."²⁵ One hears not just a husband speaking of his beloved wife, but the testimony of one person who had chosen exile for his faith, about another who had made that same commitment.

23. Letter no. 240, *Letters of John Calvin*, 2: 221-222.

24. Letter no. 240, *Letters of John Calvin*, 2: 222.

25. Letter no. 238, *Letters of John Calvin*, 2: 216.

IV

For Calvin, the church on earth is a pilgrim people, and the life of being an exile, a displaced person, is a visible manifestation of that. Sometimes it is possible to live in a familiar place as a faithful Christian, but often faithfulness can entail displacement, exile. For Calvin, that is the reality of the church, reflecting Biblical teaching and the experience of many people.