JOHN CALVIN AND THE REFORMATION #3

GUILLAUME FAREL'S PREPARATORY WORK AND THE CALL OF CALVIN TO GENEVA

Prayer
Scripture: Jonah 1:1-3
Hymn: 349 "Before Jehovah's Awful Throne"

When John Calvin left France for the last time in the summer of 1536, at the age of twenty-seven, he planned to retire to Basel or Strassburg or to Germany to devote his life to scholarly work, away from the stormy battles of religion. In the quiet of the library and study he would search out answers to the troubling questions and prepare answers and arguments for others to use in the battles. But he found the road to Strassburg and Basel blocked by the armies of Charles V and Francis I who had just opened their third war. Calvin took the road to Geneva where he planned to spend only one night. But when his friend du Tillet learned that he was at an inn in the city he rushed to Farel to tell him that the author of The Institutes had stopped in the city for a night. Farel rushed to the inn to lay it on Calvin's conscience that God was calling him to join him in the Reformation of Geneva.

FAREL AND THE BEGINNINGS OF THE REFORMATION IN GENEVA:

Guillaume Farel was born in 1489 at Gap in Dauphine in France. He went to Paris as a student in 1509, the year Calvin was born—he was Calvin's senior by twenty years. He was a student and then a teacher in the college of Cardinal LeMoine for twelve years. During this time he became a member of the little group of humanists who gathered around Lefèvre d'Étaples in the abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. About 1521 he broke with Rome. Later in his True Face of the Cross he described his conversion: "I was so soiled with mire and papal filth and so deeply ruined in it that all that is in heaven and on earth could not have dragged me from it if this loving God and this kindly Saviour Jesus Christ, in His great grace, had not pulled me out by drawing me to his gospel." Farel declared that God the most kindly Father took pity on him in his error and made himself known to him through a pious brother (Lefèvre). God wiped away his sins through the blood of Jesus. He began to understand the Scriptures and the prophets and apostles became clear and comprehensible. Christ became his Shepherd and Guide.

Farel first tried to bring the Reformation to Meaux with Briconnet and then to his native Gap, but at both places he was driven out by the Romanists. In 1523 he fled from France to Basel where he was taken in by Oecolampadius, who advised him against fanaticism. Erasmus, whom Farel called "Balaam," used his influence to have him expelled from the city. He visited Strassburg and won the friendship of Bucer. Bern, though not fully committed to the Reformation became his base of operation. In 1524 he preached the Reformation gospel in Montbéliard where he published an exposition of the Lord's Prayer (1524), a liturgical handbook (1525), and a summary of the faith (1525), works that marked him as a pioneer in Protestant worship and doctrine. In 1526, at the suggestion of Berthold Haller, the Reformer of Bern, he went to the Pays de Vaud and settled in Aigle as a schoolteacher and evangelist. In 1528 Aigle, Oillon, and Bex adopted the Reformation, destroying images and ending the mass. He failed in an attempt to plant the Reformation in Lausanne. In November, 1529, he made a stormy attempt to take Neuchâtel; ultimately he secured victory there for the Reformation in 1531. In the meantime he won Morat for Reform in 1530. In Grandson and Orbe he secured toleration for Protestantism alongside Catholic worship—both were under the joint overlordship of
Protestant Bern and Catholic Freiburg. In Orbe he won for the Reformation the Paris trained scholar, Pierre Virlet (1511-1571) who would be the reformer of Lausanne. In September, 1532, he was invited to the Waldensian synod at Chanforan and won a large section of them for the Reformation. On October 4, 1532, Farel, accompanied by Olivetan and Antoine Saunière, entered Geneva. His preaching met with fierce opposition. He was interrogated by the civil authorities and cited before the bishop's vicar. The canons beat him, kicked him, struck him in the face and incited the people to throw him into the Rhone River. A blunderbuss shot aimed at him exploded instead of going off as intended. Farel and his friends escaped by boat on Lake Geneva to Lausanne and then went on to Orbe.

Farel was one of the greatest orators of his time—in fact one of the great preachers of church history. He had a freckled face with prominent cheek bones, flashing eyes, red hair and a long red beard—both unkept. He was always poorly clad. He had a thunderous voice easily heard by large crowds in the open. He was a fiery and uncompromising champion of Reform. Everywhere his life was in danger from angry mobs encouraged by the Roman clergy.

When Farel first arrived in Geneva it was already in the midst of a political and religious revolution. At the beginning of the 1520's Luther's writings were attracting the interest of some of the citizens. In 1522 Francois Lambert, a Franciscan converted to Lutheranism, preached Reformation doctrine. Farel reported to Zwingli on October 1, 1531, that Christ was being preached to Geneva. When Pope Clement VII authorized a sale of indulgences in Geneva on June 2, 1532, placards attacking the pope appeared throughout the city. The city officials denied any leanings toward Lutheranism, but this incident led Farel to believe that he would find some willing listeners even if he might be roughly treated.

The Duke of Savoy claimed feudal right to control Geneva. The bishop of Geneva claimed control of the city in the name of the pope. Both Catholic Freiburg and Protestant Bern wanted to control the city. The citizens of Geneva were determined to gain independence. They rose against feudal and episcopal rule in 1519 but failed. They tried again in 1525. In 1526 they formed alliances with Freiburg and Bern. In 1528 Geneva expelled the vice-dominus who represented Savoy. The bishop, Pierre de la Baume (1522-1538), a man of very bad repute, fled in 1527. The bishop and Savoy united in an effort to crush the citizens in 1530 but failed.

Geneva was governed by a series of councils. Four syndics and a treasurer elected by the citizens administered the city for the councils. The Little Council of twenty-five handled routine matters. It was made up of the four syndics, their last four predecessors, the city treasurer, and sixteen elected by the Council of Two Hundred. In 1527 the Council of Sixty had been enlarged to form the Council of Two Hundred. The Council of Two Hundred annually elected the sixteen. The Little Council elected the members of the Council of Two Hundred. The General Council, made up of all citizens, was summoned for grave matters.

At Orbe Farel found a young believer, Antoine Froment, twenty-four years of age, and like Farel a native of Dauphiné, whom he persuaded to go to Geneva in the guise of a schoolmaster and teacher of French. Under the protection of this occupation he would propagate Evangelical doctrines. Froment opened a school and gained followers. On January 1, 1533, he ventured to preach in Molard Square, standing on a auctioneer's stone block in the fish market. A riot followed and the Council of Two Hundred forbade any preaching without permission from the syndics or the bishop's vicar. Froment had to hide in the home of friends and even had to leave the city for a time, but he soon returned. Though the city was mostly Catholic he had gathered a small Protestant
congregation. Both Freiburg and Bern sent delegates to Geneva to further their religious interests. One of those sent by Bern in March, 1533, was the pupil of Farel, Pierre Viret, a Swiss of Orbe, almost twenty-three, but already widely known for his skill as a preacher. On March 25, 1533 the councils received a letter from Bern urging recognition for the Protestants. Three days later a battle in the streets was narrowly averted by the syndics. The Council of Two Hundred arranged a truce. At Easter the Protestants observed the Lord’s Supper for the first time. In a riot on “Hay 4 Cannon Werly from Freiburg was killed. Freiburg urged Bishop Pierre de la Baume to return to restore order but he proved utterly incompetent and on July 14 fled from the city for the last time.

In the late autumn of 1533 a Paris Dominican preacher, Guy Furbity, came to Geneva to defend the Catholic cause. The Council appointed him Advent Preacher. He bitterly denounced “Germans” and “Lutherans.” The magistrates of Bern thought he was alluding to them. Froment challenged Furbity and offered to give his body to be burned if Furbity had not spoken falsehood and words of the Antichrist.

On December 20, 1533, Farel returned to Geneva. In less than two years thereafter Geneva had cast its lot with the Reformation. The bishop’s vicar had attempted to keep episcopal revenues flowing even if the magistrates were assuming authority in religion. In January, 1534, the vicar forbade the reading of Holy Scripture. Bern demanded that a disputation be held. A formal disputation was held in Geneva between January 27 and February 3, 1534. Furbity was worsted in the debate and was induced to confess that his argument was based on Aquinas and not on Scripture. When Furbity continued his attacks he was arrested and kept in prison for two years until he was exchanged for Antoine Saunier who had been arrested in France. Geneva renounced its treaty with Freiburg.

The Protestants had been meeting in the comodious house of Jean Beaudichon, but on March 1, 1534, Farel and his supporters seized a Franciscan chapel, the “Rive.” When the bishop’s forces attacked Geneva, Farel and Viret won the confidence of the people by the way they served on the ramparts defending the city. The people gave their message a highly favorable reception. On October 1, 1534, the Little Council declared the bishopric vacant, though Geneva was still far from being predominantly Protestant. Farel pressed for a second disputation which lasted almost four weeks in May and June, 1535, and greatly strengthened his cause. The debate was widely advertised in advance and many foreign theologians were invited to debate five propositions. The bishop forbade the clergy to attend. Only two friars came; Jean Chapuis, a Dominican, and Pierre Caroli, a doctor of the Sorbonne. They were very weak and ineffective. The populace tumultuously demonstrated on behalf of Farel and Viret.

Before the debate, on March 6, 1535, there had been an attempt to poison the ministers and Viret almost died. A woman was executed for the attempt, but the ministers believed she was acting on orders from the Roman clergy. The government, believing the ministers were in grave danger, took them under its protection and assigned them the monastery of Rive.

After the debate, on July 23, 1535, Farel seized the Church of La Madeleine and preached in it. On July 30 the Little Council ordered the Protestants to limit preaching to the monastery of Rive and the Church of Saint-Germain. Farel declared that he must obey God rather than men, and proceeded to seize the Church of Saint-Cervais from the Dominicans. On August 8 he seized the Cathedral of Saint Peter (Saint-Pierre) and preached the first Protestant sermon in it. His followers removed the images. Following a fervent ovation after a fiery sermon, on August 10, Farel ordered the mass be suspended. Farel introduced the worship service he had prepared for Monthéliard. The Roman clergy,
the monks and the nuns who had not fled from the city were driven out.

On August 10, 1535, the Council of Two Hundred, by majority vote, ordered image-breaking to cease and the celebration of the mass to be suspended. It was about this time, August, 1535, that Calvin in his quiet retirement in Basel, was finishing the Letter to Francis I with which his Institutes was to be prefaced. A big factor in Farel's success was the scandalous reputation of the Roman clergy for immorality, along with their ignorance, inefficiency and neglect of duty. The Dominican monks had excused themselves from the debate on the ground that they had no learned man among them.

The bishop and the Duke of Savoy again raised troops to crush Geneva. They ravaged the surrounding country and isolated the city. Bern withheld help selfishly hoping Geneva would surrender to the control of Bern as the price of deliverance. When Neuchâtel sent aid in the autumn of 1535, Bernese agents persuaded them to return home. In December 1535, Francis I of France was about to attack Savoy for joining the Emperor Charles V. The French offered to protect Geneva promising near full local freedom. Bern fearing French control of Geneva, declared war on Savoy on January 16, 1536. After victory over Savoy, Bern, on February 5, 1536, demanded the rights over Geneva that had been exercised by the Duke of Savoy and the bishop. Geneva refused to surrender its independence, declaring it would never submit to any foreign control. On August 7, 1536, Bern finally in a treaty recognized the full independence of Geneva, though it still watched for opportunities to meddle in the affairs of Geneva.

In Geneva the city government assumed control of the moral and religious life of the city, stepping into the place of the bishop. In the fall of 1535 the Council of Two Hundred and the General Council used part of the ecclesiastical property to reform the hospitals and to establish a unified prison. The nunery of the Clarisses was turned into an asylum for beggars and the solicitation of alms by monks and nuns was forbidden. On Farel's insistence in April, 1536, preachers were sent to the outlying villages, masses were forbidden and the people were ordered to attend the newly established sermons. The Little Council declared the excommunicated absolved. The councils passed regulations controlling games, dances and singing. The Council of Two Hundred issued prohibitions against blasphemy, oaths, card playing, the sale of intoxicants and the reception of strangers into taverns. Urged by Farel, the Little Council and the Council of Two Hundred called by bell and trumpet a General Assembly on Sunday, May 21, 1536, and led by Claude Savoye, the first syndic, the citizens of Geneva voted without expressed dissent "to live in this holy evangelical law and Word of God, as it has been announced to us, desiring to abandon all masses, images, idols, and all that may pertain thereto." Under Farel's influence the councils established universal popular education at Geneva. The Two Hundred, on the advice of the Little Council, established the "great school" and chose Farel's friend, Antoine Saunier, to be its head, aided by two "bachelors." The General Assembly voted "that every one be bound to send his children to the school and have them learn." The children of the poor were to be taught gratis.

In June, 1536, a fine was levied for failing to attend the sermon. The recognition of any festival except Sunday was prohibited. Also in June a citizen was banished for having his child baptized by a priest. In July, Jean Balard, a former syndic, was summoned before the Council for refusing to listen to the new preaching and given the choice of attending or leaving the city.

In spite of all this Geneva was still far from being the fully reformed city that Farel wished. Much of the reform was politically motivated. With the removal of Roman authority some had fallen into
doubt and scepticism; some had turned to libertine immorality. There was growing discontent over the efforts to enforce discipline. Many of the citizens were shocked to learn that the change in religion demanded a change in life style. They were accustomed to regulations that were never enforced. Farel insisted that the Councils rigidly enforce all decrees. Farel expressed no discontent with the direction toward state control that his reform was taking. He well understood that his talents were better suited to starting the Reformation than to stabilizing, organizing and carrying it forward with a systematized body of doctrine and permanent institutions. He had eagerly read The Institutes and was highly pleased with them. When he learned that the author had stopped in Geneva for the night (August 1536) he rushed to the inn to demand that Calvin join him in his Reformation.

The meeting of Calvin and Farel was a stormy meeting. Calvin insisted he was not temperamentally suited for the work. His place was in the library in scholarly study. Farel thundered and pleaded for help. He threatened Calvin with the wrath of God and with curses on his quiet and study if he held back from the battle. Farel believed the coming of Calvin was the providence of God. He persuaded Calvin that God was calling him to the work.

Calvin went to Basel to move his meager possessions to Geneva. When he returned about the middle of August he was suffering from a severe cold. About September 1 he began the exposition of the Pauline epistles in the Church of St. Peter. He was content to begin in a very modest way, staying in the shadow of Farel, the recognized leader of Reform in Geneva.