

## CALLING IN CONFLICT: JOHN CALVIN'S PASTORAL THEOLOGY DURING HIS STRASBOURG EXILE, 1538–1541

DAVID C. QUACKENBOS\*

**Abstract:** *John Calvin's letters in 1538–1541 display a pastor struggling with the reality of exile. Despite his situation, Calvin remained steadfast in his conviction that pastors are to be called by God, to be confirmed by the church, and to remain at their post. Yet during these years he often had trouble aligning these convictions with the reality he faced. This struggle was made worse by his adversaries, chiefly Cardinal Jacopo Sadoletto and Pierre Caroli. Tracing the trajectory of Calvin's exile reveals his convictions about pastoral ministry being tested and clarified. To determine how Calvin's understanding of pastoral calling developed, this essay examines his letters written during his three-year Strasbourg exile. It argues that Calvin's pastoral theology was shaped both by his friends (Guillaume Farel and Martin Bucer) and his enemies (Sadoletto and Caroli). Specific attention is given to his correspondence with Cardinal Sadoletto. Finally, the influence and importance of Calvin's community will be discussed.*

**Key words:** *John Calvin, pastoral ministry, Protestant Reformation, Geneva, Strasbourg*

When one looks back upon the life of John Calvin, it can be tempting to see the emergence of the Genevan church as inevitable. In 1538, however, this was not a foregone conclusion. Calvin was exiled from Geneva for his stance on church discipline and the examination of parishioners before the Lord's Supper.<sup>1</sup> Calvin, along with his co-minister Guillaume Farel, was given only a few days to leave the city. Calvin vowed that he would never again take up church ministry and sought a quiet life of solitude in Basel. However, he was convinced by Martin Bucer and Wolfgang Capito to come to Strasbourg and pastor a congregation of French refugees in that city. At the same time, Farel was called to pastor in nearby Neuchâtel.<sup>2</sup> Calvin consulted with his trusted friends and decided to go to Strasbourg.

Calvin's correspondence during his time in Strasbourg displays the theological struggles of a young pastor in exile. One of Calvin's chief theological struggles centered around the nature of pastoral ministry. Calvin taught, both prior to his exile

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\* David C. Quackenbos is a PhD candidate at McGill University, 845 Sherbrooke Street West, Montreal, Quebec, Canada H3A 0G4. He may be contacted at david.quackenbos@mail.mcgill.ca.

<sup>1</sup> Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 78–80. See also Michael W. Bruening, *Refusing to Kiss the Slipper: Opposition to Calvinism in the Francophone Reformation*, OSHI (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 58–61.

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, Letter 22 in *John Calvin: Tracts and Letters, Volume 4: Letters, Part 1*, ed. Jules Bonnet, trans. David Constable (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2008), 76 (*Letters* hereafter). The original Latin and French letters can be found in *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, vols. 10–11, ed. Guilielmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, and Eduardus Reuss (Brunsvigae: C. A. Schwetschke, 1872–1873) = *Corpus Reformatorum*, vols. 38–39. Calvin explains in Letter 22 that Bucer thought Calvin and Farel should not “colleague together,” as their dismissal had proved their poor influence on one another.

and after his exile, that pastors ought to have a calling from God. Yet if one is to be called lawfully to pastor a church, this calling from God must be confirmed externally by the leaders of the city and other pious pastors. A detailed analysis of Calvin's correspondence shows that his understanding of pastoral calling was thrown into sharp conflict by developments within Strasbourg and Geneva. These conflicts forced Calvin to re-evaluate his theological convictions in the face of both friends and enemies. In the end, his tested convictions brought major changes to the Genevan church documents upon Calvin's return in 1541.<sup>3</sup>

### I. CALVIN'S THEOLOGY OF CALLING

Calvin wrote few letters during his exile that did not include some mention of Geneva, whether displaying his disgust at the way he was treated there, his love for the people of the city, or his fear of the church falling away. In Calvin's first letters after his dismissal, he had little good to say about Geneva or his calling to that city. He expressed relief at being free from a difficult charge and anger at anyone (including Bucer) who might suggest that Calvin had sinned in Geneva.<sup>4</sup> However, shortly after arriving in Strasbourg, Calvin became more reflective about the events surrounding his dismissal. Toward the end of his exile, as he began to wrestle with the notion of returning to Geneva, Calvin spoke more openly about what it meant to be called by God to minister in a city.

On October 1, 1538, roughly six months into his exile, Calvin wrote to the church of Geneva. He explained that, instead of trying to bring himself back into their good graces, he was merely writing out his overflowing affection for them, which he called his "bounden duty."<sup>5</sup> He stated that those who dismissed him were responsible for the factions arising in the Genevan church and that he (and Farel) had acted innocently. He further explained that his conscience was clear before God, "that it has been by Him that we have been called to the fellowship of this ministry among you" and that "it cannot be in the power of men to break asunder such a tie."<sup>6</sup> Calvin spent most of this letter defending his ministry against his Genevan detractors.

Calvin uses this letter to discuss the matter of calling, arguing that his expulsion from Geneva by men does not negate God's calling on him to serve there. He still feels bound to serve the Genevan church and to display that his ministry was

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<sup>3</sup> The *Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances* (1541) are significantly longer and display a different argumentation than the *Articles concerning the Organization of the Church and of Worship at Geneva* (1537). The *Articles* mainly focus on the Eucharist, arguing that if the Eucharist is rightly practiced, other matters (church discipline, catechizing children, singing of psalms, etc.) will fall into place. However, the *Ordinances* are largely given to explaining the church structure (including a long section on the calling of pastors), seeming to argue that the new church structure, with its hefty requirements on pastors and elders, will lead to proper discipline, which will lead to the right practice of the Eucharist. Thus, the proper celebration of the sacrament is the *result* of a well-ordered church, not its cause. These documents are available in John Calvin, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans. J. K. S. Reid, LCC 22 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 48–72.

<sup>4</sup> Calvin, Letters 22–24, *Letters*, 73–82.

<sup>5</sup> Calvin, Letter 25, *Letters*, 83.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, Letter 25, *Letters*, 83.

carried out properly. Although Calvin obeyed the governing authorities who sent him out, he still felt duty-bound to serve the Genevan church. Though physically absent from them, Calvin refused to lay aside his God-given calling to pastor the Genevans.<sup>7</sup>

In a letter dated October 20, 1538, Calvin gives further clarification to his understanding of pastoral calling. The letter was in response to Louis du Tillet, who had been Calvin's close friend, fleeing France with him and spending some time in Geneva. For unknown reasons, du Tillet left Geneva before Calvin was exiled and shortly thereafter returned to the Catholic church.<sup>8</sup> Du Tillet had written Calvin on September 7, questioning the legitimacy of Calvin's calling to Geneva. He said, "I doubt that you have had a true vocation from God, having been called there [to Geneva] by men only ... who have dismissed you as they had received you there by their sole authority."<sup>9</sup> Calvin responded with respect to his old friend, admitting that du Tillet's letter forced him to reflect on some of his own faults. However, Calvin quickly pivoted to a defense of his ministry, saying, "If there was any ground to dispute my call, I believe that you have got no such reasons to impugn my ministry, but the Lord has furnished me with more firm and stable ones for my confirmation."<sup>10</sup> Calvin went on to explain that he longed for a quiet life, away from ministry. He told du Tillet of his call to Strasbourg and how his friend Simon Grynaeus had threatened him with the example of Jonah if he were to run from such a charge. Calvin concludes that the only reasonable foundation for his ministry, whether in Geneva or Strasbourg, was the calling of God rather than the calling of man.<sup>11</sup>

The response to du Tillet is significant for two reasons. First, Calvin was forced to specifically defend his calling in the face of opposition. He explained that he had not wished to flee his post in Geneva, nor did he want to run from difficulty if God so willed it. In Calvin's view, God had called him to the city and thus, he was still bound to it, even if it looked to an outsider as if he had left the city in disgrace. Second, it is in this letter that Calvin begins to talk about his calling to pastor in Strasbourg with the same language used to discuss his call to Geneva. He tells du Tillet that the calling to Strasbourg "was pointed out to me by the servants of God."<sup>12</sup> He later refers to his calling to pastor in Strasbourg as "the will of God."<sup>13</sup> Thus, given that Calvin could not be present physically in Geneva, where he was called to pastor, he saw no issue being called to minister in another city.

In June of 1539, Calvin wrote another letter to the Genevan church. In this letter, Calvin told the Genevans that "although my former letters had not been very

<sup>7</sup> Calvin, Letter 25, *Letters*, 84–86.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon, *Calvin*, 92–93.

<sup>9</sup> "Je doute que vous y eussiez juste [vostre] vocation de Dieu, n'y aiant esté appelé que des hommes ... lesquelz vous en ont tout ainsi debouté comme ilz vous y avoient receu par leur seule autorité." Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, "Epistolae 139: Du Tillet à Calvin," 10:242, translation mine.

<sup>10</sup> Calvin, Letter 27, *Letters*, 95.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, Letter 27, *Letters*, 96–99.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin, Letter 27, *Letters*, 98.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, Letter 27, *Letters*, 98.

lovingly received by you, I was nevertheless unwilling to be wanting in my duty.”<sup>14</sup> It is again clear that Calvin believed it to be his duty to care for and instruct the Genevan church, even from a distance. Yet Calvin’s calling to that city did not stop him from exhorting the Genevans to obey the current pastors in the city. He said,

The calling of your ministers does not happen without the will of God. For although that change which took place upon our departure may have been brought to pass by the subtlety of the Devil, so that whatever followed on that change may justly be suspected by you; in it, nevertheless, the remarkable grace of the Lord is to be acknowledged by you, who has not allowed you to be left altogether destitute.<sup>15</sup>

Calvin went on to explain that godly leaders from surrounding cities “have themselves approved of the calling of those men [the Genevan clergy].”<sup>16</sup> Calvin reasoned that properly called ministers, those with a calling from God and external approval, were to be obeyed by the church of Geneva. This held true even for those ministers who had replaced Calvin.

Calvin’s theology of calling gains another wrinkle in this letter. In it, he emphasizes the importance of external validation to the “lawfulness” of a pastoral calling. Calvin had made passing reference to this in his letter to du Tillet, citing Grynaeus’s urging of him to Strasbourg. Now, however, it is a clear part of what legitimates a pastor. To be a legitimately called minister, one needed both a calling from God and the approval of recognized godly leaders. Therefore, even though the existing Genevan clergy had been installed in place of Calvin, they were to be obeyed because they had both a calling from God and the confirmation of other faithful ministers. Calvin closes the letter by warning that such an external “calling” is never to be used as an excuse for the dereliction of pastoral duty.<sup>17</sup>

This understanding is confirmed in Calvin’s own treatment of his original calling to Geneva. Writing later in life, he recounts that he had intended to pass

<sup>14</sup> Calvin, Letter 37, *Letters*, 144.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin, Letter 37, *Letters*, 145.

<sup>16</sup> Calvin, Letter 37, *Letters*, 146. See also Bruening, *Refusing to Kiss the Slipper*, 79–85. Bruening details the struggle between Calvin and the Genevan clergy who had replaced him, specifically regarding the Christmas Eucharist of 1538. Eventually a meeting of reconciliation took place at Morges in March of 1539. Although we do not know the attendees of the meeting, some of their decisions are extant. For the results of the meeting, see A.-L. Herminjard, *Correspondance des Réformateurs dans les pays de langue française*, vol. 5: 1538–1539 (Paris: Georg, 1878), no. 771, “Réconciliation des pasteurs de Genève avec Farel, Calvin, et leurs partisans (Morges, 12 mars 1539),” 243–46. Thus, in Calvin’s letters throughout 1539, he is less critical of the Genevan clergy than he had been immediately following his exile (or would later become again).

<sup>17</sup> Calvin, Letter 37, *Letters*, 146–47. Calvin calls for “due inspection of their regular discharge of duty” and cautions against those who would “stand only on their calling.” In context, this reference to calling seems to refer to the ‘calling’ of the magistrates to a particular place. Calvin argues that some point to such a “calling” as evidence of their authority, rather than pointing to their faithfulness in preaching the gospel.

through the city, but Farel had cajoled him to stay and take up ministry there.<sup>18</sup> Yet Calvin repeatedly ascribes the impetus for his Genevan calling to God. To Calvin, therefore, his calling to Geneva followed the outlined pattern, with an internal calling from God that was externally confirmed by Farel.

## II. CALLING IN CONFLICT

At the end of 1540 and into 1541, the Genevan church began to make overtures to Calvin, seeking his return to the city. It was at this point that Calvin's convictions about pastoral calling came into conflict. First, Calvin repeatedly wrote to Farel in 1540 about his horror at the thought of returning to Geneva. He calls the city a "whirlpool of danger"<sup>19</sup> and says, "Rather would I submit to death a hundred times than to that cross [Geneva], on which one had to perish daily a thousand times."<sup>20</sup> These hardly sound like the words of a man resolved to follow God's will wherever it may lead. Second, Calvin viewed himself as lawfully called to pastor in Strasbourg. By his own logic, Calvin was now 'lawfully called' to be in two places at once.

Two letters to the Seignury of Geneva at the end of 1540 offer a glimpse into the turmoil surrounding Calvin at this time. Calvin began the first letter, dated October 23, 1540, by speaking of his desire to help the Genevan church in its time of need. At this point, they had asked him to return, yet he remained uncertain about how to respond. In the letter, Calvin was noticeably struggling with the reality that he had been called to serve the church in Strasbourg. He told the Genevans that he had "the desire to meet your wish"<sup>21</sup> (the opposite of what he was writing to Farel at the time), but that he could not desert the church of refugees in Strasbourg. He says,

I cannot slightly quit the charge or lay it down lightly, to which the Lord has called me, without being relieved of it by regular and lawful means; for so I have always believed and taught, and to the present moment cannot persuade myself to the contrary, that when our Lord appoints a man as pastor in a church to teach in his word, he ought to consider himself as engaged to take upon himself the government of it, so that he may not lightly withdraw from it without the settled assurance in his own heart, and the testimony of the faithful, that the Lord has discharged him.<sup>22</sup>

Both portions of Calvin's theology of calling are evident in this letter. One must have "settled assurance in his own heart," referring to a call from God, and "the testimony of the faithful," referring to external validation from faithful Christians.

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<sup>18</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms, Volume 1*, trans. James Anderson (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), xlii–xliii. A translation is also included in Elsie Anne McKee, ed., *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety*, CWS (New York: Paulist, 2001), 10.

<sup>19</sup> Calvin, Letter 46, *Letters*, 179.

<sup>20</sup> Calvin, Letter 45, *Letters*, 175.

<sup>21</sup> Calvin, Letter 53, *Letters*, 209.

<sup>22</sup> Calvin, Letter 53, *Letters*, 209.

Yet these put Calvin in a bind. He goes on in the letter to note that while attending an upcoming international diet, he would be sure to represent the interests of both Strasbourg and Geneva.<sup>23</sup> He ends the letter by promising the Genevans that he will do his best to help them in their time of need.<sup>24</sup>

In a letter written to Farel around the same time,<sup>25</sup> however, Calvin is significantly less eager to help the Genevans. After begging Farel to keep the contents of the letter private,<sup>26</sup> he says that he shudders at the prospect of returning to Geneva. He reminds Farel that they were “perpetually tossed up and down” and their “anxiety was continually boiling over.”<sup>27</sup> He then says that the only reason he did not leave Geneva earlier was “that I dared not to throw off the yoke of my calling, which I was well assured had been laid upon me by the Lord.”<sup>28</sup> Calvin went on to explain that his exile actually provided relief.

At this point in the letter, a shift in tone is noticeable. Instead of speaking about the need to follow God’s leading, Calvin begins to speak of the need to follow the advice of his friends and mentors. Calvin asks Farel to discuss his dilemma with other trusted leaders (presumably Bucer, Capito, and Viret) and for them to direct Calvin’s steps. Calvin presumes that the calling of God will be mediated through these men. He expresses to Farel his paralyzing fear at the thought of returning to Geneva, his firm belief that God had called him to pastor in Geneva, and the reality that he was lawfully called to pastor in Strasbourg. Unable to make a decision, he asked his friends to confirm his calling and work out the situation. He ends his letter by saying,

This is the sum of the whole: That I am not in this affair actuated by craft or cunning—the Lord is my witness; neither do I search about for loopholes whereby to make my escape. Certainly, indeed, it is my desire that the Church of Geneva may not be left destitute; therefore, I would rather venture my life a hundred times over than betray her by my desertion. But forasmuch as my mind

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<sup>23</sup> Calvin, Letter 53, *Letters*, 209.

<sup>24</sup> Calvin, Letter 53, *Letters*, 210. Calvin says, “I promise you that nothing shall be denied you on my part in all that is allowable, but that *I will do my utmost to serve you as far as God permits*, and those to whose counsels he has commanded me to hearken” (210, emphasis mine).

<sup>25</sup> The date of October 27 is given in the English translation of Calvin’s letters (Bonnet and Constable). However, in the *Corpus Reformatorum*, the date is listed as October 21. Either date puts this letter close to Calvin’s letter to Geneva on October 23. See Calvin, Letter 54, *Letters*, 210; Calvin, *Ioannis Calvinii Opera quae supersunt omnia*, “Epistolae 243: Calvinus Farello,” 11:93.

<sup>26</sup> Given early modern conventions surrounding letter writing, Calvin did not intend this letter to be private in our modern sense of the term. However, he clearly wished for Farel to keep it within a small, trusted circle. He says, “I made an attempt to write somewhat to them [the Genevans] in common; but when I took into account what usually happens with these general letters addressed in common, I changed my mind. For what is sent only to a select few, flickers about hither and thither incessantly from hand to hand, until at length it is thoroughly well published. This, therefore, was my reason why I wrote only to you: it was that you may not take into your confidence any other readers than those from whom you know that you need be under no apprehension of any danger. Why, therefore, I did not wish what I entrust to your confidence to be more widely spread, you will understand when you have read to the end of this letter.” Calvin, Letter 54, *Letters*, 211.

<sup>27</sup> Calvin, Letter 54, *Letters*, 211.

<sup>28</sup> Calvin, Letter 54, *Letters*, 211.

does not induce me spontaneously to return, I am ready to follow those who, there is some good hope, will prove safe and trusty guides to me.<sup>29</sup>

These letters give a glimpse into the thoughts of Calvin as a human being, fraught with fear and uncertainty. Such a picture is rarely seen in his mature theological writings.

On November 24, 1540, Calvin again wrote to the Seignury of Geneva. His tone is like that of his letter of October 23. He tells them that God's calling on him to Geneva means that he is "forever obliged to seek her welfare and prosperity."<sup>30</sup> At the moment, however, he is lawfully called to minister in Strasbourg and is called away to an international diet. Thus, he says that as soon as opportunity arises, he will help the Genevan church. He believes his duty is "just the same as if I had already accepted the charge to which you have called me—exactly as though I was already in the midst of you doing the office of pastor."<sup>31</sup>

Calvin then clarifies his understanding of what he terms a "lawful" calling. First, he cannot leave Strasbourg without the consent of its leaders. In order that churches remain well-regulated, ministers cannot leave a church according to "mere fancy."<sup>32</sup> Pastors must stay where they have been called and work for the betterment of that church. Therefore, Geneva's pleas for his return do not negate the reality of his calling to Strasbourg. However, Calvin ends the letter by telling the Genevans that the leaders in Strasbourg recognize their need. Therefore, when an opportunity arises, they may be willing to send Calvin back.

What is especially significant about this second letter to the Seignury of Geneva is Calvin's insistence that personal preference has no bearing upon one's calling. Taken together with his previous letter to Geneva and the letter to Farel, Calvin's conflict comes clearly into view. His personal preference is to avoid Geneva and its hardships, yet he will ultimately do what God requires. Calvin is lawfully called both to Strasbourg and to Geneva, and if it were up to him, he would stay in Strasbourg. Yet he argues that it is not up to him; it is up to God, who will speak through the lawfully appointed channels of Bucer, Farel, Capito, and the leadership of the cities in question.

Calvin remains perplexed in a letter to Pierre Viret on March 1, 1541. Viret had recently come to Geneva at Calvin's recommendation. Calvin begins the letter by reiterating his position: that he is filled with dread at the prospect of returning to Geneva.<sup>33</sup> Yet even after recounting all of the potential difficulties, Calvin remains resolved to return, should it be required of him. In the letter, he reminds Viret that despite his complicated relationship with Geneva, he has never "shrunk back from that call."<sup>34</sup> Calvin then explained that he soon planned to sit down with Bucer and other trusted leaders to discuss his next steps. These deliberations would be "not as

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<sup>29</sup> Calvin, Letter 54, *Letters*, 213.

<sup>30</sup> Calvin, Letter 55, *Letters*, 215.

<sup>31</sup> Calvin, Letter 55, *Letters*, 216.

<sup>32</sup> Calvin, Letter 55, *Letters*, 216.

<sup>33</sup> Calvin, Letter 61, *Letters*, 230–31.

<sup>34</sup> Calvin, Letter 61, *Letters*, 231.

to the settlement of a pastor merely, but that we may take some thought about the complete restoration of the Church.”<sup>35</sup> This way, Calvin explained, the decision made will carry more weight and will not be based upon the whims of one man. This letter demonstrates Calvin’s continued insistence that, although he loathed the thought of returning to Geneva, he still felt called to pastor the church there. But he alone was not to determine whether he would return.<sup>36</sup>

On the same day that he wrote to Viret, Calvin wrote a letter to James Bernard, a minister in Geneva during Calvin’s exile who was calling for his return. The letter begins with a restatement of Calvin’s dilemma: He is called by God to both Geneva and Strasbourg.<sup>37</sup> Calvin stresses to Bernard that while his lawful calling to Geneva weighs heavily on him, his calling to Strasbourg “was a sacred and lawful call, as many godly persons can also testify to the world.”<sup>38</sup> Calvin then recounts the details of this call to Strasbourg, explaining that though he had determined not to take any pastoral post following his humiliation in Geneva, the leaders of Strasbourg had entreated him to minister in the French refugee church in the city, and Grynaeus had invoked Jonah, implying a curse upon Calvin if he were to run from the charge. Therefore, Calvin impressed upon Bernard the reality that it would be no small thing for him to leave Strasbourg. He concluded, “I will not stir a step ... except in the way of lawful procedure.”<sup>39</sup> Calvin concludes the letter by telling Bernard what he had already told others, that he would allow his “dear brethren and colleagues”<sup>40</sup> to consult about the matter and make the final decision. Once again, the reality that Calvin views himself as “lawfully called” to both Geneva and Strasbourg proves to be a source of conflict. While Calvin was sure that God had called him in both respects, that calling was confirmed and directed by trusted church leaders. Therefore, Calvin refused to decide without consulting the authorities around him.

### III. PUTTING CONVICTIONS TO THE TEST: THE RETURN OF CAROLI

In reading Calvin’s correspondence of 1540 and 1541, one would suspect that Calvin had the utmost confidence in these pastors and friends to make a wise decision. However, prior to his exile this conviction had not been put to the test. How would Calvin react if trusted church leaders made a decision that he considered wrong? Or worse yet, dangerous? The return of Pierre Caroli in 1539 provided just such an opportunity. While Calvin initially displayed frustration and disappointment in his friends, his trust that the will of God would work itself out through human mediators was eventually strengthened by this affair.

During Calvin’s early years of ministry, Pierre Caroli stands out as one of his chief enemies. Caroli was a doctor of theology at the University of Paris (the Sor-

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<sup>35</sup> Calvin, Letter 61, *Letters*, 233.

<sup>36</sup> Calvin, Letter 61, *Letters*, 233.

<sup>37</sup> Calvin, Letter 61, *Letters*, 234.

<sup>38</sup> Calvin, Letter 61, *Letters*, 235.

<sup>39</sup> Calvin, Letter 62, *Letters*, 235.

<sup>40</sup> Calvin, Letter 62, *Letters*, 235.



bonne). When Caroli joined the reforming circle at Meaux in the early 1520s, under the influence of Marguerite de Navarre, Jacques Lefèvre D'Étaples, and Bishop Guillaume Briçonnet, he became an enemy to the conservative theologians within the Paris faculty.<sup>41</sup> It was in this early reforming circle that he became acquainted with Farel. Throughout the 1530s, Caroli frequently crossed paths with Farel, Viret, and Calvin.<sup>42</sup> Initially, he was an ally, arguing alongside Farel and Calvin at the 1536 Lausanne Disputation.<sup>43</sup> Yet shortly thereafter, Caroli's relationship with the French Protestants soured.

During their first stay in Geneva, Calvin and Farel had been plagued consistently by accusations of Arianism from Caroli. Calvin wrote to Caspar Megander in February of 1537 that Caroli was publicly endorsing the doctrine of prayers for the dead and accusing the Genevan pastors of Arianism.<sup>44</sup> Calvin claimed that he had explained their doctrine, offering up both the Genevan Catechism and an array of quotations from the early church fathers, but that these did not satisfy Caroli.<sup>45</sup> Only three months later, Calvin wrote to Simon Grynaeus calling Caroli Satan's "apt tool."<sup>46</sup> Yet in that same month, at another meeting in Lausanne, Caroli was condemned for his attacks, while Calvin and his colleagues were vindicated.<sup>47</sup> Despite this vindication, the doctrine and practices of the francophone clergy within the region were brought into some suspicion.<sup>48</sup> After his condemnation in 1537, Caroli returned to the Roman Catholic Church seeking an ecclesiastical appointment, only to be rebuffed.<sup>49</sup>

In late 1539, Caroli returned to Swiss lands seeking reconciliation with the Protestants.<sup>50</sup> Caroli had arrived in Neuchâtel and was planning to come to Strasbourg. In Neuchâtel, he was quickly reconciled to Farel. In September, upon hearing about their reconciliation, Calvin wrote to Farel. He was clearly frustrated by Farel's decision and said, "As soon as I rose from table, I went to Bucer, read over to him your letter, which made him very glad, especially because he could perceive from it your great leniency towards Caroli. He at once acknowledged that he could scarcely have felt himself able to treat that person with so much clemency."<sup>51</sup> Calvin found himself in unfamiliar territory: both Bucer, his mentor known for foster-

<sup>41</sup> Bruening, *Refusing to Kiss the Slipper*, 67–72. See also James K. Farge, *Orthodoxy and Reform in Early Reformation France: The Faculty of Theology of Paris, 1500–1543*, SMRT 32 (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 185–93. Farge offers an excellent treatment of the pursuit of supposed heretics (i.e., Lutherans) by the Paris Faculty of Theology throughout the 1520s. One of their chief targets was Caroli.

<sup>42</sup> Gordon, *Calvin*, 13–16, 72–77. See also, Bruening, *Refusing to Kiss the Slipper*, 72–74.

<sup>43</sup> Gordon, *Calvin*, 67, 72–77.

<sup>44</sup> Calvin, Letter 13, *Letters*, 47–50.

<sup>45</sup> Calvin, Letter 13, *Letters*, 49.

<sup>46</sup> Calvin, Letter 15, *Letters*, 54.

<sup>47</sup> Gordon, *Calvin*, 74.

<sup>48</sup> Gordon, *Calvin*, 72–77. Gordon helpfully lays out the Caroli affair of 1537 within the context of Bernese politics and the conflicts between German- and French-speaking Protestants.

<sup>49</sup> Calvin, Letter 60, *Letters*, 151n3.

<sup>50</sup> Gordon, *Calvin*, 90–91; Bruening, *Refusing the Kiss the Slipper*, 82–83.

<sup>51</sup> Calvin, Letter 39, *Letters*, 150.

ing peace,<sup>52</sup> and Farel, his mentor known for volatility and passion, seemed willing to reconcile with Caroli. Calvin was stunned.

The following month, Caroli arrived in Strasbourg, where the leadership of the Strasbourg church gave Caroli an audience to determine whether he ought to be reconciled. Bucer decided that Calvin should not be present at the proceedings, given Calvin's disgust for Caroli. Once Calvin reviewed the minutes from the proceedings, however, he was furious. He immediately arranged a meeting of the Strasbourg clergy at the home of Matthew Zell. Calvin told Farel that he "sinned grievously"<sup>53</sup> at this meeting and that there was "some cause for indignation, if moderation had only been observed in the expression of it."<sup>54</sup> Calvin complained that the Strasbourg leaders wanted him to sign on to their decision about Caroli while he was sidelined. He was even more frustrated that "they required me to subscribe, which if I should refuse, I must look henceforth upon them as adversaries."<sup>55</sup> In his frustration, Calvin left the room, only to be followed by Bucer who attempted to calm him down.<sup>56</sup> Calvin's letter then turns from narrating the meeting to excoriating Farel for the leniency that he had extended to Caroli. He expresses his frustration with his old friend, saying,

I was the more deeply afflicted because you had occasioned me those evils. Ever and anon they were twitting me with your lenity, who had mercifully embraced Caroli upon the spot; that I was too headstrong, who could not be moved one whit from that judgment which I had formed. Bucer, indeed, has tried every mode of representation, that he might soothe my mind upon the subject, but, in the meanwhile, sets up your example invidiously against me; nor, indeed, can you thus excuse yourself of inconsiderateness, or that you were too easily led away by him; and that I may freely speak my mind, that one might justly have expected from you more both of gravity and constancy and moderation.<sup>57</sup>

Calvin felt betrayed by Farel. In their years serving in Geneva, Caroli's attacks had been against Calvin, Farel, and Viret. While Calvin seemed resigned to Bucer's conciliatory attitude, he had no such patience with Farel. As the letter closed, Calvin systematically listed the ways in which Farel had handled the situation poorly.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> This is, of course, speaking generally. For an example of his willingness to pursue enemies, see Emmet R. McLaughlin, "The Politics of Dissent: Martin Bucer, Caspar Schwenckfeld, and the Schwenckfelders of Strasbourg," *MennQR* 68.1 (1994): 59–78. McLaughlin demonstrates Bucer's tenacious campaign against Schwenckfeld and his followers. However, Bucer's continuous work to foster unity among Protestants, even sometimes to the frustration of his colleagues, is well known.

<sup>53</sup> Calvin, Letter 40, *Letters*, 154.

<sup>54</sup> Calvin, Letter 40, *Letters*, 154.

<sup>55</sup> Calvin, Letter 40, *Letters*, 154.

<sup>56</sup> Calvin, Letter 40, *Letters*, 154.

<sup>57</sup> Calvin, Letter 40, *Letters*, 155.

<sup>58</sup> Calvin, Letter 40, *Letters*, 155–57. He closes the letter by saying, "Because I am aware that you are quite accustomed to my rudeness, I will make no excuse for treating you so uncivilly." He begins the next letter, written about three weeks later, by apologizing for his "ill-humor" and saying, "I do not quite remember what I may have written. I am aware, however, that I had not sufficiently softened the expressions, because this single solace of my grief remained."

Calvin sent Farel another letter three weeks later. In this and subsequent letters, Calvin had to wrestle with the reality of his own theology. While his opinion of Caroli remained unchanged, pastors whom he respected had granted Caroli forgiveness and reconciliation. Calvin's frustration was increased because he believed that Farel's decision in favor of leniency had influenced the other leaders. Thus, Calvin accuses Farel of setting himself over and above other leaders. Calvin says,

You deny that you are the Church. But who can suppose otherwise than that you have recommended [Caroli] on the certificate of the Church? Deny it if you can, that you attested his reconciliation by your letter. Moreover, what you wrote as applicable to you, was understood as referring to the whole Church, from whose authority all were of opinion that you had not departed. In this way, I have been left alone in my opposition. That, also, deprived me of authority.<sup>59</sup>

In subsequent letters to Farel, Calvin continued to express his disdain for Caroli. However, in time, his tone did change. Since Caroli had been cleared by Farel, Bucer, and others, Calvin determined to treat Caroli well. In November of 1539, Calvin wrote openly about his duty to be kind to Caroli despite harboring personal resentment against him.<sup>60</sup> A month later Calvin wrote, "Although I entertain no hopeful expectation concerning that individual, nevertheless I am prevented, by the consent of the Church, from despairing of him altogether."<sup>61</sup>

The return of Caroli forced Calvin to reckon with his own theology. He believed himself to be right. He was confident that Caroli was fueled by ambition and dangerous to the church. However, he was bound by the decision of those he trusted. He was forced to come to terms with the reality that God's work through human mediators did not always ensure an outcome with which he was comfortable. While Calvin likely would have stopped short of claiming infallibility for the deliberations of his friends, the sting of watching trusted leaders and mentors embrace Caroli put his convictions to the test.

In August of 1540, Calvin wrote a letter to Caroli. From context,<sup>62</sup> it can be gleaned that Caroli had written to Calvin and Farel in anger, complaining that he had not received a pastoral position among the Protestant churches and blaming Calvin for his woes.<sup>63</sup> However, Calvin told Caroli that he had not sought revenge and instead was trying to treat Caroli as a brother. Calvin reminded Caroli that Farel once "wrote, requesting that no one might be admitted to the office and work of the ministry who had deserted the churches committed to his superintendence. Ought he not to have done so?"<sup>64</sup> Calvin reasoned that Caroli had a history of abandoning Protestant churches and thus he ought not to be surprised if, despite an official reconciliation, he was not immediately given a new post. Calvin ex-

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<sup>59</sup> Calvin, Letter 41, *Letters*, 158.

<sup>60</sup> Calvin, Letter 42, *Letters*, 163.

<sup>61</sup> Calvin, Letter 43, *Letters*, 169.

<sup>62</sup> See Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, "Epistolae 233: Calvinus Carolo," 11:72–73. Footnote 1 helpfully illustrates the context of this letter.

<sup>63</sup> Calvin, Letter 50 *Letters*, 198–201.

<sup>64</sup> Calvin, Letter 50, *Letters*, 199.

plained that while he wished to treat Caroli as a brother, he was not required to recommend Caroli for ministry positions. On this account, Calvin had the “sure and faithful testimony of conscience” and the backing of “truly pious and learned men.”<sup>65</sup>

The final portion of this letter is especially helpful in understanding Calvin’s view of “lawful” calling. Caroli was evidently frustrated that he had been unable to become the pastor of a particular church and city,<sup>66</sup> believing that Calvin and Farel had the ability to place him in such an office but were keeping it from him. In response, Calvin rebuked Caroli, reminding him that the giving of preaching and teaching posts was not up to one man. Calvin summed up the issue, saying,

But with reference to that paction or agreement which you require of us, how is it possible for us to assent to it? That we may promise to settle you in a particular church,— how can we do so? In the first place, the churches are not at our disposal, as you are well aware; then, with what conscience could we promise that to you, before we are distinctly agreed upon the head of doctrine? You do not conceal that you still dissent from us; and yet you wish that a particular locality should be set apart for you to teach in.<sup>67</sup>

Calvin told Caroli that the power to place ministers within a particular city rested with the larger “Church” (in this context, referring to Farel, Bucer, etc.), within which Calvin was just one voice. Even so, why would Calvin recommend someone to such an office with whom he had vast disagreements? As Calvin saw the situation, the same man who came running back into the Protestant camp when he had not been given an ecclesiastical appointment by the Catholics had now flown into a rage over the same perceived slight among the Protestants.

To Calvin, this episode served to stiffen his resolve and strengthen his convictions. Since 1537, Calvin had viewed Caroli as a sworn enemy. His initial anger at the Protestant reconciliation with Caroli had been dampened by the fact that Caroli had been denied the post of his choosing. While the “Church” may have reconciled with Caroli, they had not simply given in to his desires. Therefore, though Calvin’s deference to such leaders was put to the test in 1539, his trust was strengthened by knowing that Caroli would not receive a ministry post until he showed deeper signs of humility.

Such signs, in Calvin’s view, would never come. On July 25, 1541, Calvin wrote to Viret and Farel about several issues regarding his impending return to Geneva. Among them was a note about Caroli, his final note on the matter during his exile. Calvin said, “The danger which we formerly feared on account of Caroli will now be at an end; for he has broken his promise in such a way, that he can never be received by us, and already, as I hear, is treating about a reconciliation

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<sup>65</sup> Calvin, Letter 50, *Letters*, 200.

<sup>66</sup> Likely the church at Metz is in view, but it is difficult to determine based upon the evidence. See Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, “Epistolae 233: Calvinus Carolo,” 11:72–73n1.

<sup>67</sup> Calvin, Letter 50, *Letters*, 201.

with his Sorbonne friends.”<sup>68</sup> Caroli returns to Calvin’s correspondence only two years later, once again seeking to stir up sentiment against Calvin at Metz. While Calvin’s frustration with Caroli had to do with more than the nature of pastoral ministry and calling, this affair challenged and then clarified Calvin’s convictions regarding the authority of faithful pastors in mediating the will and calling of God.

#### IV. REPLY TO SADOLETO: BOUND TO GENEVA FOREVER

While not usually considered under the heading of Calvin’s “Letters,” his *Reply to Sadoleto* was one of Calvin’s most important writings during the exile period. The *Reply* is typically grouped among Calvin’s theological treatises, and its content betrays its theological and polemic nature. However, a study of Calvin’s pastoral theology between the years 1538–1541 would be remiss to omit an analysis of his *Reply*.

The context of Calvin’s *Reply* is crucial to understanding his life and state of mind while in exile. Cardinal Jacopo Sadoleto was trained as a humanist and had served as a papal secretary.<sup>69</sup> By 1539 he was the Cardinal of Carpentras, a city near Geneva. Upon hearing about the expulsion of Calvin and Farel from Geneva, he was tasked with writing an open letter to the city, imploring the Genevans to return to the Catholic fold. Sadoleto expressed sympathy to the Genevans, who were the victims of “certain crafty men, enemies of Christian unity and peace” who had sown “the wicked seeds of discord [and] had turned the faithful people of Christ aside.”<sup>70</sup> He implored the Genevans to return to the Catholic church, closing his letter with a hypothetical scene from the Day of Judgment, which in Sadoleto’s estimation would result in Protestants being cast out by God as schismatics, while Roman Catholics would be accepted.

While the letter was addressed to the Senate and the people of Geneva, Calvin was the one tasked to respond.<sup>71</sup> Calvin’s response deals with a plethora of issues, including the Eucharist, the charge of schism, and iconoclasm. However, this brief analysis of the letter will demonstrate that Calvin’s burgeoning understanding of pastoral calling found a prominent place in his *Reply to Sadoleto*.

First, Calvin’s *Reply* reinforced his understanding that his calling by God to pastor the church in Geneva remained in effect. Calvin opened the letter by saying that he would have been happy to overlook a personal attack, “but when I see that my ministry, which I feel assured is supported and sanctioned by a call from God,

<sup>68</sup> Calvin, Letter 71, *Letters*, 276.

<sup>69</sup> Richard M. Douglas, *Jacopo Sadoleto, 1477–1547: Humanist and Reformer* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959). Chapter 1 traces his humanistic training through Rome, and chapters 2–3 focus on his service to Pope Leo X and Pope Clement VII.

<sup>70</sup> Jacopo Sadoleto, *Letter to the Senate and People of Geneva*, in John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises*, 3 vols., trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 1:4–5.

<sup>71</sup> Bruening notes that the Genevan magistrates asked Jean Morand to draft a reply to Sadoleto, while asking the Genevan printers not to publish Calvin’s response. When Morand did not write a response, Calvin’s *Reply* was published in the city. See Bruening, *Refusing to Kiss the Slipper*, 83–84. See also Theodore Beza, *Life of Calvin*, in Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises*, 1:lxixiii.

is taken and wounded in the flank, it would be perfidy, not patience, were I here to be silent and disregard what you say.”<sup>72</sup> Calvin explained that he was lawfully called to Geneva, and although he is “for the present relieved of the charge ... this circumstance ought not to prevent me from embracing it with paternal affection; for God, when he charged me with it, bound me to be faithful to it forever.”<sup>73</sup> Throughout the *Reply*, Calvin claimed that he was not writing to defend his own reputation or skills, but instead, defending the calling of God. It did not matter that no one from Geneva had responded, because Calvin’s duty was equal to that of the pastors currently in the city.<sup>74</sup>

Calvin then contrasts the way in which pastors and priests traditionally had been installed in their positions, arguing that the contemporary Roman Catholic process was found wanting. While Calvin respects the way in which the ancient church had elected its leaders, he sees in the contemporary Roman Catholic Church neither a biblical pattern nor fidelity to the patristic pattern. He says,

But how on your part is discipline either observed or desired? Where are those ancient canons with which, like a bridle, bishops and presbyters were kept to their duty? How are your bishops elected? After what test? What examination? What care? What precaution? How are they inducted to their office? With what order? What solemnity? They merely take an official oath that they will perform the pastoral office, and this apparently for no other end than that they may add perjury to their other crimes.<sup>75</sup>

In this, we see Calvin’s defense of his theology of calling in the face of Roman Catholic attack. The implication of the rhetorical questions quoted above is that Calvin is serious about pastors being “kept to their duty” and “examined.” Calvin takes seriously that there be “precaution” against unbridled ambition. In the end, then, pastors with a true calling will take on their position with “solemnity” and they will both observe and desire proper discipline.

The *Reply to Sadoletto* was written approximately halfway into Calvin’s exile. It was after this response that the Genevans began to request his return. Despite being in Strasbourg, Calvin maintained his responsibility to pastor the church in Geneva. His understanding of calling forced him to demonstrate his care on behalf of the Genevans, even while absent. In the *Reply*, Calvin clearly articulated the convictions with which he would wrestle in the coming years as a return to Geneva became a reality.

## V. CONCLUSION: CALVIN IN COMMUNITY

Throughout Calvin’s exile correspondence, one is struck by the immense influence of Farel, Bucer, and Capito, along with Calvin’s burgeoning friendships with Heinrich Bullinger and Philipp Melancthon. Far from spending his exile

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<sup>72</sup> John Calvin, *Reply to Sadoletto*, in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 222.

<sup>73</sup> Calvin, *Reply to Sadoletto*, 222.

<sup>74</sup> Calvin, *Reply to Sadoletto*, 219–23.

<sup>75</sup> Calvin, *Reply to Sadoletto*, 245.

years in loneliness, Calvin was welcomed into the community of pastors in Strasbourg and into the international community of Protestant leaders. He spent those years pastoring French refugees and attending international diets (Worms and Ratissbon). Within his letters, however, Calvin consistently depends on his friends.

Bucer and Farel stand out, not only as Calvin's close friends during this time, but also as models. To Calvin, the ideal pastor will have the passion and zeal of Farel, along with a compassionate desire for peace found in Bucer. Calvin highly esteemed both men and often labored with them in common cause. Yet he also had telling moments of disagreement with each. The Strasbourg years thus emerge as a time of Calvin developing his own voice. He moved beyond being the sidekick of the hot-headed Farel, but he never acquired the ecumenicism of Bucer. Calvin would forge his own path.

Throughout his correspondence, the influence of Calvin's enemies is equally illuminating. Sadoletto and Caroli provided Calvin with opportunities to put his convictions to the test. When Sadoletto, a wolf in Calvin's eyes, wrote to the sheep over whom God had placed Calvin, defense of the flock was required. Even if Calvin privately harbored relief at his expulsion from Geneva, he defended the church because he had received an irrevocable call from God to be its pastor. His duty to Geneva went beyond geographical proximity.

Likewise, if Calvin believed that the calling of God is mediated through the deliberation of pious leaders, then he was bound by their decisions, even when those decisions were uncomfortable. The return of Caroli in 1539 backed Calvin into a corner. In both 1536 and 1537, Calvin had been vindicated in Lausanne, with his 1537 vindication involving his opposition to Caroli. Thus, in 1539, not only did those in authority rule against his position, but the chief decision makers were Farel and Bucer. Calvin was forced to abide by their decision and treat Caroli as a brother.

In the end, however, Calvin's confrontations with Sadoletto and Caroli served to strengthen his convictions. Against Sadoletto, the Genevan church did not return to the Catholic fold, instead asking for Calvin to return. Despite reconciliation with Caroli, the Protestant pastors did not give him a particular locality. When Caroli eventually left the Protestants again, Calvin felt vindicated. While Caroli's return in 1539 frustrated Calvin, by 1541 he could confidently trust the same human mediators to decide his case.

Upon his return to Geneva in 1541, Calvin's horizons had expanded. The young man who had repeatedly sought out a quiet life of scholarship was back in Geneva, pastoring a church with which he had a checkered past. Calvin had developed friendships with the likes of Bucer, Capito, Melancthon, and Bullinger; he had taken part in European colloquies; and he had numerous high-profile writings to his name.<sup>76</sup> He was a different man from the one who had arrived in Geneva in 1536.

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<sup>76</sup> By this time, Calvin had published two editions of the *Institutes*. His third edition, the first French version, would be printed by the end of the year. Calvin had written a commentary on the book of

The work of a minister can be unusually isolating. Recent surveys demonstrate that many pastors are considering leaving the ministry.<sup>77</sup> In the current cultural moment, many ministers are feeling the residual effects of COVID-19 regulations and an increasingly disconnected, divided society. Thus, a study of Calvin's exile period can serve uniquely as an encouragement to the lonely and isolated. The experiences of Calvin demonstrate the wisdom in seeking out, developing, and investing in close pastoral friendships. When faced with an isolating situation, Calvin had mentors and friends on whom to rely. In later years, as Calvin gained further prominence and his list of enemies grew, those scorned by Calvin would find their own encouragement in working together.<sup>78</sup> Their friendships, which grew out of opposition to Calvin, often fostered unity and support.

When Calvin was dismissed from Geneva in 1538, he was not left alone. Nor, when he was recalled to Geneva, did he face that decision alone. When relationships within his community were strained, Calvin reacted in vitriolic anger, but he was eventually willing to heed the advice of his mentors. While Calvin may have a reputation as being assured of his purpose, especially in his theological writings, one can see that in many of the day-to-day events of pastoral life he struggled with the same uncertainties faced by modern-day pastors and theologians.<sup>79</sup> His varied responses to such circumstances can serve as both models and warnings. In seeing both the good and the bad from his exile period, one can glean the importance of community in fostering unity, accountability, and encouragement.

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Romans in 1539. Finally, his *Reply to Sadoletto* had given him a reputation among the German-speaking Protestants. Calvin explains to Farel in November of 1539 that he has received the following reports from Wittenberg (via Bucer and Melancthon): Luther reportedly said, "Salute for me reverently Sturm and Calvin, whose books [alluding to the *Reply to Sadoletto*] I have read with special delight." Melancthon said, "Luther and Pomeranus have desired Calvin to be greeted; Calvin has acquired great favor in their eyes." Calvin, Letter 42, *Letters*, 167.

<sup>77</sup> As a recent example, see "Pastors Share Top Reasons They've Considered Quitting Ministry in the Past Year," *Barna*, 27 April 2022, <https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-quitting-ministry/>.

<sup>78</sup> Bruening demonstrates that anti-Calvinist Protestants created their own networks, which they used for their own encouragement and support. His study "treats Calvin's evangelical opponents together, not as a collection of distinct voices but as networks of opposition to Calvin, Beza, the Genevan Reformation, and the French Reformed churches." Bruening, *Refusing to Kiss the Slipper*, 4.

<sup>79</sup> See Scott M. Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609*, OSHT (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). This study helpfully demonstrates that Calvin and his colleagues were often busy with day-to-day pastoral concerns.