

An aerial, black and white photograph of a city, likely Sydney, Australia, viewed from a high angle. The city is densely packed with buildings and greenery. In the foreground, a large, circular building with a distinctive roof is visible. The city extends to a waterfront with a harbor or bay. The sky is filled with heavy, dark clouds, but a bright light source from behind the clouds creates several prominent rays of light that illuminate the city below. The overall mood is dramatic and hopeful.

The PCEA—

**Australia's 21st Century
Reformational Geneva?**

the presbyterian
banner

The PCEA – Australia’s 21st Century Reformational Geneva?

An adaptation of the Moderator’s Address and Devotions—Sjirk Bajema

Part 1 – Reformational Geneva

It can seem that the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia (PCEA) is of little significance in this nation and in this world we find ourselves. We are a small denomination of some 15 congregations, with a worshipping community of around 700 each Lord’s Day. We don’t even live close together, being scattered right down the eastern seaboard of the Australian continent and the north-west coast of Tasmania. The statistics tell us that we are largely made up of an older age group proportionately than our community, and it is growing older. The great days of reformation and revival seem far behind us and our recent history finds us in a state of decline. There are local encouragements, true, but in terms of a wider impact and reforming influence, we have very little sway in the world we find ourselves.

In a time like this, we can easily be distracted by thinking of the things that we do not seem to have. And that is quite a lot when we go back to times such as some one hundred and fifty years ago, when the Reformed-Presbyterian world had far greater sway. They were the times of *The Disruption* of 1843 in Scotland, the *Afscheiding* and *Doleantie* of 1834 and 1886 in the Netherlands, together with the other revivals that came just before and after those occasions. Then Conservative Calvinist men were in positions of the highest secular authority. Then the Reformed Presbyterian church membership was a much higher proportion of society. And what are we now? Nothing more, really, than a poor shadow of what we once were. Increasingly, we are becoming marginalised to the periphery of our community.

But believing this would only make us both poor students of history and those lacking faith in a great and marvellous God. And it’s to history we now go, for we begin by looking back. This is where we may realise both the Lord’s encouragement for us and also very much His challenge for us. There are seven aspects I want to draw out from an earlier period in church history. By no means are they all the aspects we could draw out of that age that could apply to us in our day and age. And I won’t be drawing on those aspects which are universal for the Church of Christ in every day and age – those vital aspects of prayer and meditating upon God’s Word. The aspects I mention are ones that I see as particularly useful for us in this time.

Let’s go back then. We could go back to many a time in church history for this particular purpose. But I want to suggest we go back just a few hundred years, to a place you might be surprised I choose to take you to! Because the time we go back to is the 16th Century, and the place we go back to is none other than the city of Geneva in the country now called Switzerland.

Naturally, we look at this place and this time as those who would have very much liked to be there then. In fact, my mentioning this city and this time may well have you wondering if I have got my periods of church history mixed up. How could that period and place be relevant to our situation now? Well, that was a place where the Reformation under John Calvin really came alive. Who among us could ever forget what it was John Knox said about the Geneva of the 1550’s?

We hear those words again now. For he said, *I neither fear nor eschame to say, [it] is the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the apostles. In other places I confess Christ to be truly preached; but manners and religion so sincerely reformed, I have not yet seen in any other place.*

For the purpose of this article, however, we begin at a slightly earlier time in Geneva's history. That date is July 1536. It is the time when Calvin stayed a little longer in Geneva than the one night he had planned.

This was the era which Calvin described on his deathbed as the one where confusion then reigned, right in the midst of the Genevan Church. But it certainly was not that dire. There had been a reforming work going on for some years already. Various Protestant preachers had impacted upon that small Swiss city. Some with Lutheran influence who had passed through, and in the early 1530's had come those who were a little more different still than the Lutherans. One needs only mention the name Guillaume Farel. Ah, we know that name, don't we? He was a real firebrand of a Reformer! When Farel heard that Calvin was staying overnight in the city, only passing through, he immediately sought out this man whom he had never met, to implore him to stay in Geneva and help with the work. But Calvin was of no mind to do this. Calvin, as he tells us himself, was shy and retiring, yearning for a life of quiet and peaceful study in some sanctuary far from the rumble of the storms created by the Reformation. He steadfastly and strenuously resisted every overture of Farel until, in exasperation, Farel bellowed: *I declare, in the name of God, that if you do not assist us in this work of the Lord, the Lord will punish you for following your own interest rather than this call.*

1. *The Passion That Gets It Going*

We note, then, in the first place this aspect: *The Passion That Gets It Going.* It was Farel who best displayed this passion. But who was this man? Farel was also from France, born of a well-to-do family. He was a student of Lefevre, the reforming lecturer, and perhaps his most aggressive pupil. In 1523, he had already been forced to flee from France. Initially he went to Basel, where the influence of Erasmus caused his expulsion. It was Erasmus who said of Farel, *Never in my life have I seen so bold a man.* Obviously Farel was too bold for Erasmus to have him hanging around and influencing folk in that town!

Farel moved on to Bern, which was then embracing the Protestant reformation. Soon that city became Farel's sponsor and his base of operation. It was there that Farel wrote three small books – an exposition of the Lord's Prayer (1524), a liturgical handbook (1525), and a summary of the faith (1525). These booklets show him to be one of the pioneers in Reformed worship and doctrine.

Farel was at that stage a travelling evangelist staying short periods in different towns. For example, he was instrumental in bringing Neuchatel into the Reformed faith. Then when he was at Orbe he made a Protestant of the Paris-trained scholar, Pierre Viret. Viret was later the Reformer of Lausanne and a close associate of Farel and Calvin.

Farel lived a life not unlike that of the apostle Paul, as he was often attacked by angry mobs and suffered other persecutions. Once he was scratched so severely that a man from Bern who saw him reported that the missionary's face looked as if many fierce cats had dug their sharp claws into it. But Farel wasn't stopping. At 72 years old, still preaching, he was thrown into prison, rescued by friends, and, like Paul, saved in a basket let down from the walls.

It was with Bern's support that Farel came to evangelise Geneva in 1532. Again he met familiar opposition. At first it was the same old pattern – he was forced to leave in 1533 – but soon he was back with the official backing of the Bern council. And Bern was no city state to be tangled with lightly by the Genevans! They needed her as their ally, particularly against the Roman Catholic Duke of Savoy, who dominated the sur-

rounds of Geneva with his collection of castles. He had more than once invaded the city. So, the red-bearded bachelor missionary persevered. This endurance resulted in a final ratification being made in regards to the religion of the city by the General Council in the cathedral on Sunday May 21st 1536, consisting of what the three lower councils had already approved. The decision was that Geneva adopt the standard of living according to God's law and God's Word, and that she abandon idolatry. Geneva was becoming Protestant – and how different she now became! Already that February regulations had been adopted regarding dress, drink, games, and church attendance. From a reputation as a people given to pleasure, they could hardly have realised what they were in for now. But that Sunday in May 1536, the citizens pledged themselves to live by the Word of God and to abandon idolatry. They agreed to education for all children, including the poor, for whom it would be free. While there had been the same idea in Charlemagne, some seven hundred years before, it was only now that this was put into practice in any effective way.

Two months later, Calvin came into Geneva. It is not an exaggeration to say that Calvin's work would not have been possible without the intrepid labours of Farel, who hacked away at the undergrowth of Roman Catholic superstition and ploughed the soil of Switzerland so that the seeds of Calvin could be sown and bear their fruit.

Farel was one who, while bold, also recognised his own limitations in the ongoing reforming of Geneva. The Church Historian Philip Schaff writes of him: *Farel's work was destructive rather than constructive. He could pull down, but not build up. He was a conqueror, but not an organizer of his conquests; a man of action, not a man of letters; an intrepid preacher, not a theologian. He felt his defects, and handed his work over to the mighty genius of his young friend Calvin. In the spirit of genuine humility and self-denial, he was willing to decrease that Calvin might increase. This is the finest trait in his character.*

2. The Mentoring Which Keeps It Going

In this way we come to the second aspect of our subject: *The Mentoring Which Keeps It Going*. It was certainly divine providence that had brought these two Reformers together, which is what Farel wrote when Calvin was dying. And as any student of Calvin would know, it was a divine providence that came about through continued struggle. It was only two years later that Farel and Calvin were forced into exile from Geneva. But those first two years together saw a strong struggle to get a fully reformed worship and practice accepted by the authorities of Geneva. Given the city's past reputation, there was always going to be strong opposition against what the Reformers were proposing. In the meantime, however, the Reformers also worked on a system of instruction. To assist in this, Calvin in early 1537 published his *Instruction in Faith*, a very helpful summary of the main teachings of the *Institutes* for the common people. With this there was also a Confession of Faith laid before the magistrates in November 1536, and which was proposed to be solemnly pledged to by all the inhabitants of Geneva.

But the expulsion of these Reformers in 1538 seemed to be the end of any extensive reforming work being done in Geneva. Calvin, humbled by that experience, sought out an academic retreat in Basel. However there was yet another Reformer, Martin Bucer, in the same vein as Farel, who sought Calvin out to minister to the French-speaking congregation in Strasbourg. It was a richly blessed ministry. Both church and school had much to teach him, as John McNeill notes, and he was in a mood to learn. It was a time out that refreshed and renewed him. But God so ordained

it that John Calvin was invited back to continue in his work in Geneva in 1541. He was not keen to return to this maelstrom, and ignored the pleas for some months. Farel pleaded with him to come back once again. In one of his letters he roared vehemently, *Are you waiting for the stones to cry out? If you had been as slow to leave, when we were ordered out of the city, as you are slow to return despite all pleas, things would not have reached their present pass!*

It's no surprise that Farel also returned at that time, although only staying for a year this time. But we must also see under this aspect of *The Continuation of God's Passion in Those Following* how Calvin himself looked out for suitable men to take up roles of leadership within the Genevan church and elsewhere. One needs only think of Pierre Viret and Theodore Beza in this connection. And then there were the many others Calvin helped to mentor, amongst whom we know John Knox in particular.

3. *The Preaching Behind It All*

Here we come to the third aspect to our subject: *The Preaching Behind It All*. This is where we recognize the focus on solid biblical preaching and teaching. The reforming of the city went on now in earnest. The break in Strasbourg had refined Calvin and further focussed his vision. Of vital significance is the story of how he began his work again. While the people may have waited for him to speak from the new pulpit in St Peter's about the reasons for his exile and return, that was not to be. Here there was to be no great speech outlining his future insight. Here there was no recriminating voice. Instead, as it was his custom to preach through a book of the Bible, chapter by chapter, verse by verse, he began preaching at exactly the verse he had stopped at three years before.

Calvin's vision was the revelation of the Lord. This was clear in terms of the overall work in Geneva. He had a detailed report ready, known as *The Ecclesiastical Ordinances of the Church of Geneva*, that spoke specifically of modelling the church of Geneva according to the New Testament pattern. This meant a full program: from the worship services each Lord's Day at the churches, the catechism instruction for the young children, and the other sermons preached three times a week. It further laid out that baptism was to take place in the church, with the font near the pulpit, and that the Lord's Supper should also be conducted near the pulpit, with the people coming forward in groups to take their places at the tables. It detailed the family visitation the ministers and elders were to undertake, laid instructions that sick people had to inform their minister, prisoners were to be visited after dinner on Saturday, and gave instructions for a whole range of church discipline procedure. And yet, while it took only two months to have these Ordinances passed by the City Councils, it would take fourteen difficult years to put them into practice.

As we have noted, universal education for all children had been decreed in 1536. This continued to develop over the subsequent decades, so much so that in 1559 there came about the founding of a University in Geneva. This was known as the Academy and was a fully-orbed University, an institution that was the intellectual centre of Calvinism for many years to come. With Theodore Beza as the rector the curriculum combined classical studies, as conceived among the humanists, with Reformed theology. Naturally the heart of this University was the Seminary, from which trained men went out all over Europe and the United Kingdom. When Calvin died in 1564, this University had 1,200 on the roll. The University's curriculum demonstrated his belief that education could inculcate values and morality. His theory of teaching was quite progressive: teachers should not be authoritarian, but *should join [and] walk with [students]*

as companions. Calvin has been called *the father of popular education and the inventor of free schools*.

At the heart of this teaching, there was the preaching Calvin was involved in almost every day. Beza estimates that Calvin averaged 286 sermons in French and 186 lectures in Latin every year. His wide ranging correspondence fills ten volumes of his collected works. He published commentaries on the Hebrew and Greek texts of nearly all the books of the bible. In doing so he combined techniques of literary, historical and textual analysis with tremendous learning and devastating insight. This was shown to great effect in one of the religious diets (ecclesiastical meetings) held while Calvin was in Strasbourg. It was there, when the Protestant causes seemed to be doing badly in the debate, that Calvin showed his far superior knowledge of the Church fathers to good effect during a sharp exchange with a noted Roman Catholic theologian.

John Calvin was based in Geneva from 1541 until his death in 1564. He became the spiritual leader of the city, a position created by the Grand Council as the city turned Protestant. Geneva became a centre of Protestant activity, producing works such as the *Genevan Psalter* and a whole range of other biblical publications. Calvin also supported the admission into Geneva of Protestant refugees, though that too was strongly opposed. You can see the degree of opposition by the fact that quite a number of these refugees took years before becoming Genevan citizens. While the city proper remained a Protestant stronghold in the subsequent centuries, a large part of the historic diocese returned to Catholicism in the early seventeenth century under St Francis de Sales. The legacy is unequivocal, however! Geneva has played a historical role in the worldwide spread of the Protestant revolution.

4. *The Caring For All*

In this way we come to the fourth part to this topic: *The Caring For All*. This is about how we see in Geneva the dignity of man in God's image. On the one hand, Calvin recognized social responsibility; on the other hand, he stressed individual responsibility to live a good, productive and moral life before God. Stressing the dignity of man, Calvin's social reforms included relief for the poor, construction of hospitals, schools (which were free), new prisons, consumer protection laws, provisions for refugees, and a sanitation system that made Geneva one of the cleanest and healthiest cities in Europe. Calvin was morally strict but humane, almost a humanist in his concern to reach the heart and not only the mind of men and women.

He made provision for 5,000 refugees between 1542 and 1560. Throughout his time in Geneva he preached, performed numerous marriages and baptisms, gave spiritual advice, and took part in controversy by correspondence with other reformers, as well as guiding the life of the city. He was a conscientious pastor who took the care of souls very seriously. Preaching was for him primarily a pastoral act. His main concerns were always a mixture of pastoral and theological. And so it was that, in addition to becoming a Protestant state, Geneva in the 16th Century also became a kind of welfare state.

John Calvin modelled this godliness in his own life. He lived frugally, refusing any extra favours and even returning or passing on to others monetary gifts he received.

There is a story told of a time when Cardinal Sadolet passed incognito through Geneva. He was the cardinal who had tried to entice Geneva back to Rome during the time Calvin had been exiled from the city. It is said that he wanted to have a look

at the famous Protestant who had written him such a brilliant reply. There he stood in front of the simple house in Canon Street. What a little place that was! Did the famous Calvin really live in this small residence? He knocked on the door. Calvin himself, in a plain black robe, answered the door. Sadolet was totally taken aback. Where were the servants? Even the bishops of Rome lived in mansions surrounded by wealth and servants. Archbishops and cardinals lived in palaces, like kings. But here was perhaps the most famous man in the whole Protestant church answering the door!

We see this aspect of *The Dignity of Man in God's Image* through what Calvinism subsequently produced in a number of northern European nations. Not only has Switzerland been economically blessed, but so too have the Netherlands, Scotland and Northern America. The influence Calvin had has been immense; and we realize how much when we look at what those very countries are missing at this time and place.

5. *The Welcoming Of Those Of Like Mind*

The immediate result of this reforming work is what we note in our fifth aspect: *The Welcoming Of Those Of Like Mind*. The Calvinist movement spread all over Europe, and Genevan society was in its forefront. In this Calvin was aided by the many who came to Geneva because of the reforming work going on there. In France, the conflict between French Protestants (called Huguenots) and Catholic churches led to armed wars (*The French Wars of Religion: 1562-1598*). The war ended when the King of France proclaimed the Edict of Nantes, which granted to Huguenots the freedom of worship. However, during the struggles, many Huguenots had left France fleeing religious persecution. Many of them took refuge in 'Calvin's Geneva'; and because of them Geneva, Holland and Britain gained greatly while France lost out very badly.

Added to this were the refugees from elsewhere in Europe and Great Britain. At various times the political situations drastically changed in those countries, so that reformed folk sometimes found it necessary to flee. You only need to think of the displacement of many in England, when the Roman Catholic Queen Mary (nicknamed Bloody Mary) assumed the throne after the death of Edward VI. And if they were fleeing, what better place could they go to?

This is where we naturally think of John Knox, but there were others also. His words again ring loudly in our ears! People were all richly blessed by being in this place of not only spiritual peace, but especially of biblical challenge. The refugees who flooded Geneva, at the rate of a thousand a year at one stage, found that Calvin was their best friend. He found homes for them. He persuaded the councils to set up a cloth-manufacturing business to give the refugees work. He established church services in different languages for different refugee groups – English, Italian, Spanish, and Flemish. He was never too busy or too sick to find someone a house, a wife, a servant, a job.

You can see why there was quite a degree of local resentment with the arrival of such a number of religious refugees. The normal population of the city was only some 15,000, so such a number of incoming refugees threatened to swamp any long-held local interests. It was no surprise that it was a struggle for those refugees to gain citizenship in Geneva – even Calvin did not become a citizen until he was on his death-bed!

But the change for the better spiritually could not eventually be held back,

even though there were strong forces opposing it. The same went for the economical change for the better.

Let me give one example of the result from this influx of refugees: Who has heard of a Swiss watch? Or should I say, who hasn't? Now, did you know this line of craftsmanship began in Geneva during the time of Calvin? Why are we not surprised by that, you say? Well, given the strong work ethic and skills of Calvinists it is only one of a number of such developments throughout the places where they settled. In this case, many French refugees were highly skilled craftsmen; and when you joined their skill with the jewellers already in Geneva and the tighter regulation regarding bodily adornment, you had the recipe for the development of clock and watch making that subsequently became world-famous. They were also involved in many other trades, including the production of cloth and velvet.

6. *The Interaction With Others*

Now we come to the sixth part. Here we consider *The Interaction With Others*. This is where we turn to consider the refugees' interaction with others, including those of like mind. We have noted already Calvin's correspondence with his colleagues and also with those who had quite differing opinions. His reply to Cardinal Sadoletto is a brilliant response to a letter from that bishop to the Genevan rulers attempting to lever Roman Catholic influence there; with Calvin then in Strasborg and thus out of the Genevan picture, or so Sadoletto thought. But the city magistrates, in consultation with the ministers of Bern, invited Calvin to answer the cardinal's letter. Calvin's reply, written in six days, shows respect for Sadoletto's learning and standing, but with devastating eloquence dissolves his argument and throws his arguments back at him.

Letters to those of like mind include correspondence with Philip Melanchthon, whom he met at one of the Imperial Diets, which were theological forums to discuss the difference between Rome and the Protestants. His letters about those conferences give us valuable background into what happened at them. One author describes this aspect of his ministry this way: *Calvin was always writing letters. To his door galloped couriers from all over Europe, delivering letters and waiting to carry away their answers. Anyone in the city who wanted to send to receive a letter could arrange to do it on Canon Street. The Calvin house was Geneva's post office.*

Even though there was so much to take up his time simply with the struggle to reform Geneva, Calvin kept his eyes on the whole world. He saw his calling as one to also influence wherever he could for his Master. He worked constantly to bring peace and unity among the new Protestant churches. Calvin was a good friend. All his life he had close personal friends, some of whom were life-long, from his student days in Noyon. And certainly he and his household hosted many passing through. He demonstrated his congenial character through the long relationships he had with Farel and Viret. What completely different people they were! And yet Calvin could write in his dedication to the commentary on Titus, *I do not think that there has ever been, in ordinary life, a circle of friends so sincerely bound to each other as we have been in our ministry.* Other friends were Martin Bucer; Heinrich Bullinger, Zwingli's successor; Philip Melanchthon, Luther's successor; and Theodore Beza, his own successor. Then there were many others whom he never met, yet wrote extensively to. To say, as some have said, that he had no close friends but only acquaintances, is completely false.

7. *The Struggle Through It All*

This brings us now to the seventh aspect. This speaks to *The Struggle Through It All*. Here we turn to look at the struggles within and without. The last thing that Calvin had was a high self-esteem. Norman Vincent Peale and Robert H. Schuller have no reason to use him as a model for their positive thinking ideology. He was constantly full of doubts about his calling and often had to be encouraged by the likes of Farel and Viret. Added to that was the shocking state of Calvin's physical health. This was not helped by the very hard way in which he drove himself.

Right throughout his time in Geneva, Calvin had ill health. For example, he had asthma. This sometimes meant he had attacks of pleurisy, which in turn affected his speech. You can imagine how hard that was for a man who always had to speak! Added to this were his severe haemorrhoids, which meant he could not sit or move without pain. Then there were the sharp pains of kidney and gallstones. If his haemorrhoids were bearable, he would take to a horse and gallop as fast as he could, hoping to jolt loose the stones for which there was no surgery. In addition, he suffered constant headaches.

Then there were the struggles without. His enemies spread the rumour of his death many times. His home town of Noyon received that news at least ten times! Mind you, those who lived there at the time were only too keen to hear that news – on one occasion they even burnt down the house he grew up in.

We have already heard of the many years he struggled with those in Geneva who opposed the Reformation. Even from among those he himself taught and placed in key educational positions, he found he had enemies. One of these was a Sebastian Castiellio, whom Calvin had appointed rector of the high school. Upon applying to become one of Geneva's ministers, however, Castiello was declined because of objectionable views and doctrines. These differences involved such matters as disagreeing with the doctrine of election, and denying the Song of Solomon had a place as a genuine book in the Bible. Castiello moved on to Lausanne but, finding no teaching position there, he came back to Geneva. Upon his return, he promptly publicly insulted some sixty ministers and laymen of the Genevan church. Calvin too suffered the anguish of King David, as those who had once been so close to him turned on him.

Calvin suffered much particularly from the entrenched ruling classes. These so-called *libertines* opposed the biblical reforming of Geneva whenever possible. Even one of the messengers sent to Strasborg to bring Calvin back to Geneva became a thorn in his side. He was Ami Perrin, a councilman and captain general of the city militia. For example, in 1547 was the matter of the slashed breeches. For the annual parade and target-shooting festival Perrin wanted to have the militiamen decked out in short tight breeches, slashed on the side. He asked the Council of Two Hundred to make their decision on the breeches. That in itself was political, because he expected more support from them than from the Little Council. Calvin spoke at the meeting. He said that while he was not arguing about the slashed breeches, he was concerned about the influence such immodesty and luxury could lead to. The Council of Two Hundred decided against the slashed breeches. Well, that is something certainly different to the decisions being made by our civic representatives today! It gives us an insight into the work God was doing there, but also the continual opposition against such reforming. This city famous for its wickedness and vice threw up many other such challenges! In one of his letters to Viret, Calvin wrote that it was *like telling a story to the deaf*. *Their wickedness has reached such a pitch, that I despair of holding this church any longer. Believe me, I am undone and broken, unless God stretch forth his hand to me.*

In 1549 the opposition even grew to the point where children taunted him by taking letters from his name and calling him 'Cain.' People named their dogs after him. *Here, Calvin. Here, boy!* One day a rude group jostled him on the bridge that crossed the icy Rhone. Then there were the publications from Bolsec, and accusations from Trolliet.

It was only in 1555 that there was some resolution to this – the year when the majority of the opposing families left Geneva for good.

Thus we have seven key aspects which I believe we must note as of vital importance – whether in the Genevan Church in the 16th Century, or the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia in the 21st Century. It's these aspects in relevance to us today that I hope, Lord willing, to touch on over the next two morning devotional periods.

Again, let me state that there are other aspects that are part of a faithful biblical reformation. Yet to realise the passion, the mentoring, the preaching, the caring, the welcoming, the fellowship, and the contending for the faith, can be an encouragement to us today. Do we see these things happening in our congregations? How are they happening amongst us? Which ways can we further these qualities?

Part 2 – 21st Century Australia

We move on now to consider the seven aspects laid out in the Genevan situation of the 16th Century, in the light of where the Lord has placed us in our day and age. Let's see how the passion, the mentoring, the preaching, the caring, the welcoming, the fellowship, and the contending for the faith, might be seen in us today. How can the PCEA be Australia's 21st century Reformational Geneva?

By way of introduction, we can see that Australia in 2012 is in a state of disarray. To say that there is a moral crisis is an understatement. We can no longer claim to have any semblance of inner or outer order in this nation. It is a condition which has also largely overtaken the Christian Church in Australia. In fact, many denominations can no longer be seriously regarded as Christian any more. I mean, how much of Christ Jesus is found in them? Oh, there's plenty of man that is openly and aggressively displayed, but very little of the Lord Himself. One only needs to see what some of the clergy have said in support of same sex marriage to realise this, and then to also note how many more of the clergy haven't said anything on this matter!

In a way, the situation here is not very different to that which Geneva found itself in during the early 1530's. And yet God's provision was at hand. Within two decades the tide had changed completely around – economically and morally. Much as many have disparaged Calvin over the years as a severe religious autocratic, determined to take all the joy out of life, he was universally mourned when he died in 1564. So great was the concern of the local folk to visit Calvin in his last days that the authorities had to carefully police his home!

How many of the leaders in today's Church will leave such a legacy – even on a small local level? But this is exactly the type of heritage we can be blessed with now. Let's heed the words of the apostle Paul to the Philippians. As he says there in verse 17 of chapter 3, 'Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.'

1. *The Passion That Gets It Going*

We considered here, in the first place, *The Passion That Gets It Going*. Looking back over our own history in Australia, we also see the importance of a pioneering minister with this motivation. We had pioneering men with vision. Melbourne itself has a number of educational institutions that were founded by such men as James Forbes. Sydney had its William McIntyre. And certainly in their times they were influential biblical voices within society.

Let's also note that our pioneering ministers, like Farel and the other reformers in Geneva and throughout Switzerland and Europe, were often from somewhere else. Farel and Calvin were French; and others were German, English or Scottish! They might have been in Geneva only for a few years or for most of their life, but, while they were there, there was no doubting their commitment and dedication.

There continues to be such a need in our day. Our ministers and elders must not be of the retiring kind, but wherever possible grasp the opportunity for growth and development. There need to be many Farels amongst us – men of passion who grasp possibilities. They may not necessarily be men known for the amount of books they have published, or for their interstate or international speaking engagements, but they are men who are zealous for the Lord right where they are. These are men whose glasses are half-full, not half-empty! As ministers, we should constantly be asked why we are so optimistic. And then we must reply, 'Well, what are we meant to be? Don't we have a great God who does wonderful acts? And isn't there the most wonderful future lying ahead of us?'

Just as Farel and those other pioneering reformers did, ours must be a voice in our community that is clearly distinctive. We must not hesitate to debate with those of other religious viewpoints – both within Christendom and outside of it. The example of the apostle Paul before the Athenian Aeropagus in Acts 17 encourages us here. And what a difference we would be in our communities then, rather than being like all those others who dare not say what they think for fear of the PC (Politically Correct) crowd!

I would even suggest that we could quite clearly advertise our essential difference from the rest of Christendom. One Reformed Presbyterian congregation published an advertisement that went like this:

Wonder what happened to preaching the gospel?
Sick of the same-sounding testimonies?
Tired of all the hype?
Do you miss church being church?

***Join us in worshipping the God who doesn't need us
and yet Who chose to love us...***

This is certainly one way to draw the distinction. But don't forget that the audience may not be so church savvy, either. Perhaps a leaflet like this might be better:

Church!
Why do I need it?

What do you think a church is for?
Weddings, christenings, funerals, to run charity centres,
a place for old and lonely and religious people to get together in on a Sunday...

BUT IN REALITY

The Church has the answers to the most important questions you will ever ask:

Who am I?

Why am I here?

Where am I going?

The Church has a mission
to bring you what is by far the best news you
could ever hope to hear – that God invites you
into a living relationship with Him through Jesus Christ,
so that you can live a life of real purpose,
and go to be with Him in Heaven when you die.
It's not only that you are invited to come to know God
through Jesus Christ – You MUST come to
know God through Jesus Christ, or die
without hope and perish eternally.

This is a matter of life or death!

We shall all stand before
the judgment seat of God.
Romans 14:10

The Church is
commissioned by God:
To worship God according to His Word,
To spread the good news that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners,
To warn unbelievers,
To build up believers in the faith, through the preaching and teaching of God's word,
To equip believers for service.

And so, we are here to share God's word
with you, and, by God's grace,
to serve you.

And then there is the level entry type of approach. This assumes there has been little interaction with the Church and Christianity – if any at all. A brochure published by the Knox congregation, entitled *The Quest for Happiness*, is pitched at this range.

This is a time and a place when we may well be harangued for the biblical faith that we profess and promote. It could even mean we risk the disapproval of the modern secular media. But that only joins us all the more with what many of the ministers of Christ's Church in the past have endured for the sake of the Gospel. In fact, most of the ages in church history have been times when faithful gospel ministry meant being persecuted. Why should we expect anything different?

2. *The Mentoring Which Keeps It Going*

Then there was, secondly, *The Mentoring Which Keeps It Going*. This is about the continuation of God's passion in those following. For like Farel, we must be those on the look-out for other gifted leaders in Christ's Church. The Ministry of the Word must once again be seen as the position of prime importance in our churches, and not second or third to various other professions or career options. The whole emphasis on materialism in our society, as shown in the stock market, has impacted on us in the Church also. To counter this influence, there is the desperate need to preach about the importance of ministry and personally challenge men to it.

This asks something of us who are already ministers and elders in the Church. Are you on the look out for suitably gifted young men? Does your congregation or presbytery have regular training days to build up and challenge our men in this? Is this a constant matter for congregational prayer?

This is a matter which can cause us some concern. It doesn't seem that there are sons of the next generation coming into leadership within our churches. So we tend to look too quickly at what we don't have rather than what we do have. I mean, what are all those other churches offering? They cover all the ministries, with everyone provided for under the one roof!

But this is a mentality which in 16th Century Geneva would have had the Reformers closing up shop before they began. I mean, who were they really, anyway? How could they presume to have any impact in a town so full of immorality? Then there were those powerful secular ruling families there! And what were their few over against the powerful Church of Rome? But always the Reformers looked to the Lord. They were very much full of passion for His Kingdom. So much so that they focused extensively, in their time and place, upon setting up a society based upon God's Word. This not only means that our ministries are those through which God calls others into ministry – our ministries must also be those that claim, in the words of Abraham Kuyper, 'every square inch of this world for Christ.' There's no part of this planet which doesn't belong to the Lord. So let's be those who challenge God's people to go out and show in all the spheres of society the One Who they should be bowing before!

In this way, we can raise up not only a generation of faithful preachers but also faithful politicians, faithful lawyers, faithful scientists, faithful teachers, faithful tradesmen and faithful labourers. Abraham Kuyper was largely converted through God's witness in a country parish. His own laundry lady argued with him about the inerrancy of God's Word at a time when he held a low view of that Word. He came to realise, as the apostle Paul declares in 1st Corinthians 1, that true wisdom isn't found in the scholars of this age but in declaring

Christ crucified. And it was Abraham Kuyper and those of like mind that the Lord used to bring about revival in the Church in the Netherlands. It was a revival which helped return many back to a simple and spiritual worship of God. A revival which in turn continued God's passion in those following.

3. *The Preaching Behind It All*

With the third aspect, we noted *The Preaching Behind It All*. This is about the focus on solid biblical preaching and teaching. In this regard, Geneva under Calvin certainly stood out. We have heard about the many times he preached and taught during the week and on Sundays. Because of the people's poor biblical background, he also insisted on the Bible being read sequentially in the worship services on Sundays. In this way, all the people got to hear the whole Word of God.

This was simply following what is obvious in God's Word. We read of such an exhortation to solid biblical preaching and teaching in our opening reading – 2nd Timothy 4:2. The clear charge the Lord gives Timothy through Paul is this: *Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction*. This is one area where we should be standing out from the vast majority of so-called Christian churches today. Because you can go to many Baptist, Church of Christ, Brethren, Anglican and Pentecostal churches, and Reformed and Presbyterian churches, and you will not find any consistently faithful biblical teaching there. Fifty years ago, even forty years ago, many of those churches opened God's Word and exegetically taught from it. But now it is almost all topical preaching – and topical on a very narrow range of subjects.

Let me give an example here: I have a particular interest in what other churches are doing in terms of their preaching and teaching. As part of this interest I recently attended a Preaching Conference where a number of leading Pentecostal speakers spoke. As one who did his BD thesis on Pentecostal theology and so was familiar with their view on preaching some thirty years ago, it was interesting to note the changes in this area. So how do you think they have changed in this? Which perspective is the dominant one that you hear from the Pentecostal platforms each week?

Ah, I gave it away there, didn't I? They don't have pulpits any more! In fact, their major philosophy is found in secular motivational management principles and techniques. While Whitefield, Wesley and Howell Harris received acknowledgement at the conference, it wasn't connected with biblical doctrine but distorted to push a particular contemporary style. The one who was gushed over by so many there was nothing but a stand-up comedian. You really have to wonder how he can be declaring God's truth when his talk is peppered throughout with one-liners obviously taken from a completely different source than the family or congregation he claimed to have it from. Two of the speakers there could have been brothers of Tony Robbins! Indeed, the film clips before each session were from the TED (Technology, Entertainment & Design) motivational conferences. This is a strongly secular positive thinking stimulus.

The next day, I led both the worship services in our Narre Warren congregation. I can tell you that my preaching that day was quite different to what

had been taught to me the day before. In complete contrast to the sensation-ally topical style, it was a distinctly exegetical exposition. Mind you, I pray that I did present it in a clear and understandable way for young and old. We should not be simplistic, but we must be simple.

If nothing else, brethren, our churches must be those that are known to preach the gospel with passion and power. There must be nothing like those motivational messages that always talk about what you have within yourself to break free and become famously wealthy. Rather, we must be put in our true place in God's sight and so through repentance be open to God's leading in biblical revival. This came home to me when I was in conversation with a Christian visiting the church I was a guest preacher at. While he was quite definitely Arminian in his theology, he was most thankful that in a conservative Reformed Presbyterian church you could always be sure that God is exalted up high and man is humbled through being clear about his sinfulness! He acknowledged that there were no more Arminian churches in his locality declaring that any more.

What a good test that is for us. Would any one visiting with us possibly not hear of Christ crucified, risen and coming again? If someone is looking for a biblical church, would he find it in all of our churches? I think here of what those Gentiles asked of Philip the disciple in John 12:21: 'Sir, we would like to see Jesus.' Well, they did. But do those in our pews meet Him on His Day? And, obversely, would someone visiting with us be disturbed deep within because God's Word struck them then and there? These are good questions to ask of ourselves in the preparation for the preaching of God's Word.

In connection with this, it is helpful to remember that Old Testament prophets spoke largely not of what would happen in the future but of what was happening right then, because the law was not being obeyed. Aren't we to be such a presence nowadays? Are the Severtus' being clearly condemned within our walls? And I don't mean that we are for the death penalty upon such blatant heretics – Geneva only did what was going to inevitably happen elsewhere – but we must clearly speak out God's Word on that which very much offends society's present PC sensitivities!

And now allow me another example: This concerns what one of our folk said to me some months ago. She was speaking of how she found her involvement with our worship services after she had previously worshipped for many years in a variety of different denominations. She said to me, 'You know, Sjirk, the Word of God comes alive for me here. Before, I had only ever gone once to church on Sundays – if that. Now I have to come twice. And I have to go to the Bible Study too. The Bible has come to mean so much to me now. It really is God speaking to me.'

Drawing back to what we gleaned from God's work in Geneva, it does no harm to have a working model outlined for your church. Soon after Calvin arrived back from Strasbourg, he had *The Ecclesiastical Ordinances of the Church of Geneva* laid before the different city councils. This was the full program for the church, covering everything from worship services, the catechism instruction of the young, the place of the sacraments, family visitation, care for the sick and imprisoned, and the whole range of church discipline. You may

well say we have these outlined in our Church Standards. But where are they found in your local congregation? While the word 'strategy' may seem a little secular to us, it is exactly what was happening in Geneva.

And let's hope that such a program won't take fourteen difficult years to implement!

4. *The Caring For All*

We come now to the fourth aspect in regards to our subject: *The PCEA – Australia's 21st Century Reformational Geneva?* This fourth aspect to this is *The Caring For All*. Here, there was brought out the dignity of man in God's image. Let me begin this by acknowledging we are an aging denomination. Comparing us with the general population, we have an older age range of members and adherents. This is something that has been noted negatively. There is concern that the number of younger families is diminishing overall. What growth there is amongst some of our congregations is usually because of older people coming to us. But if it is an older age group that God gives us to minister to, then let us do that and do it faithfully, utilising all the gifts he has given us to do that with. Calvin had to deal with many in church because they had to be in church, and not for any love for the Word. We generally have amongst our folk a great love for the Word, so let us go on from there. Here we may bring out a little more of what Galatians 3:28 says. There the apostle declares, 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' To this we can add also, 'neither young nor old', for how many churches nowadays don't downgrade the elderly! And how many times haven't we heard of families leaving because there is no so-called effective children's ministry there! Well, let's tell them there is the most effective children's ministry of all as God's people worship all together on the Lord's Day! Whether old or young, or in-between, we must treat every age group seriously.

This is also why we need to encourage those with young families to be involved in faithful Christian Schooling or Christian Home Schooling. This is also something for our older folk to think about as well. We must not only think of our own children, but of others in our congregation and in our community. Having served as a Christian School Chairman for a small primary school in one of the poorest areas of New Zealand, I know we can give great help to the community in this way. Mind you, with so much government bureaucracy these days, that is not as easy as it once was.

Yet there is one area where we can make an impact educationally. Here, I am thinking specifically of the teaching to be done in our churches – catechising of our children and others – through the use of the Catechism in worship services for our reminding, our children's instruction, and our visitors' edification. B.B. Warfield once commented that one of the strengths of the Christian Reformed Churches of North America in the late 19th Century was their tradition of preaching through the Heidelberg Catechism during the Sunday pm worship service. In the same way, the love of the Shorter Catechism has been a tremendous Free Church strength. It is no surprise, either, to see how this was implemented in 16th Century Geneva, for the ministers and elders would visit throughout the populace to make sure that fathers were teaching their children about the Bible and its doctrines. It was very much seen as a parental duty to bring children up in the ways of the Lord. And so, in the end, if parents today cannot find faithful Christian schools to bring up their

children, they should not hesitate to try and home school them.

The way to properly respect the dignity of man is to tell them about God, and what they should be in His sight. That puts us in the tight place! This is what Paul was stressing with the Galatians. There is nothing in us which gains the credit with God – only what He has done in Jesus Christ. That is what must be taught. That's the gospel! It is what truly frees us – even if physically speaking we still remain slaves!

It's when the true gospel is not preached that man is enslaved, whether that be through liberalism or arminianism. Because those false gospels place the emphasis on what you have to do and not on what God has done in Jesus Christ. How Paul rails against them in his letter to the Galatians! In the first verse of chapter 5 he says, 'It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and don't let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.'

5. The Welcoming Of Those Of Like Mind

We come now to the fifth aspect: *The Welcoming Of Those Of Like Mind*. This concerns our dealing with spiritual refugees. A number of our churches have had folk visit them from other churches because of the liberalism and deceit they have witnessed. And then, there are some churches amongst us which have people constantly coming and going. As one of our ministers said to me once, 'Well, they come...and they go.' What should be our response to them and what can we do to help more of them?

In 16th Century Geneva, John Calvin helped out personally in arranging accommodation, employment and other matters. Many of those who sought refuge there immediately looked up his help. As someone who wasn't the best judge of character, this sometimes backfired on him. But he was definitely doing what he could to help those seeking to be faithful. So how are we known by what we doing in this? I don't mean getting on the social welfare bandwagon, as so many churches are doing nowadays. This is not first of all about soup kitchens and free lunches to the 'working poor.' Galatians 6:10 is clear that our first priority is to those who belong to the household of believers.

I believe this means that while we must relate empathetically and so get next to them in their need, we must also simply explain why we do what we do. Let's have the Regulative Principle readily available in a brochure that is easy to understand. Let's use a Bible Version and Psalm book in good clear English. Remember, they come with baggage. There are particular aspects in their doctrine and practice which may differ from ours. And it can differ quite radically! In the joy of seeing others worshipping with us we can forget to watch ourselves, as Paul warns us in Galatians 6 verse 1. This is especially so if they seem to be as conservative as we are.

I will never forget meeting a strongly conservative gentleman when we were in Western Australia. It was in an Op Shop of all places! But the way he spoke of the concerns within his denomination and the struggles he was having really gelled with me. I was quite struck by the similarity between his experiences and my own. But very soon, I was confronted with a reality check. While we may have had things in common regarding the difficulty in holding fast to the faith, it turned out there was all the difference in the world between us theologically. For his faith was a strong adherence to traditional Roman Catholic theology. And the Tridentine Latin Mass is definitely a different faith than the Confessionally Reformed position!

It is good advice to not quickly put any new folk in positions of leadership and even serving within the congregation. Let them prove themselves by their commitment to the means of grace over time. One elder's advice to me was not to put any one in office until they had been at least with your congregation for two years, and that only after a thorough check of their previous church life. One Presbyterian church in Western Australia got badly caught out when a group who came in and bolstered up the size of their congregation by nearly double turned out to be terribly divisive. And the key figure in this group was a man who had a track record of the same behaviour in previous congregations!

I'm sure you can tell me similar accounts. The words of the apostle in 1st Timothy 5:22 regarding not being hasty to lay hands upon any man are just as important today – no matter how positively they present themselves at our church worship services, or elsewhere!

6. *The Interaction With Others*

We move on now to consider, in the sixth place, *The Interaction With Others*. Men went out from Geneva all over Europe declaring the glorious doctrines of grace. John Knox was one who greatly benefited from his stay in that Swiss canton. Geneva was clearly seen as a vital connecting cog within the Calvinist world. But could we in the PCEA also be such a place? While we are not found in the one physical town, couldn't each of our congregations be such a spiritual location? Imagine that. Because of the preaching and teaching we've already spoken of, and the mentoring we've seen to be so essential, we become a springboard not only into Christendom but also the whole world. I was encouraged with what Trevor Leggott has told us of the more recent additions to the A.I.M. team throughout Australia, because there is a distinctly growing Reformed-Presbyterian influence happening there. And long may it continue. But may part of that also be through us! And through us, may it help other like-minded missions and denominations in other countries too!

How do we do that? In personal terms, a love for the doctrines of grace and an overwhelming sense of God's sovereignty soon attracts those with the same faith and those who desire the biblical faith. Congregationally, Reformation Day rallies are one way to begin this. On or about October 31st may be a good time to publicly raise the profile of biblical Christianity. Have a clear and informative address about a particular period in biblical revival or a key reforming figure. This can be an encouraging time of joining together with fellow Calvinists from different denominations. But especially, it is a valuable way of being built up in the essential scriptural doctrines.

Other ways of getting this Word out there is through sharing copies of *The Presbyterian Banner* by hard copy, or by the file attached to an email, or otherwise. There are also many other suitable magazines, brochures, and booklets to pass on.

Some Calvinist ministers use the attending of a local minister's fraternal as an opportunity to bring this Word. They believe that by being a different voice within such gatherings they can point those other ministers back to the Word. The difficulty with being too involved with such a group is that activities and events can be promoted by them which are totally foreign with our doctrinal standards. One minister found that out when objecting to the constant promotion of strongly Pentecostal meetings via the minister's fraternal email list. Rather than answering his

concerns, he was cut off the list!

So, unless we can retain our loyalty to confessional Calvinism, we should not compromise. God has not worked biblical revival in the past through His servants being mealy-mouthed. In fact this expression, 'mealy-mouthed', apparently comes from a German expression found in the writings of Martin Luther, where he condemned those not willing to state the facts or their opinion directly. Doesn't that tie in well with what we ought to be doing? Will we lose people because we are speaking the truth in love? No doubt, but we will increasingly become known as one of the few who do declare God's Word and that will find those sincerely seeking the truth joining with us!

As Christians, we know that we should be doing that regardless anyway. But those especially who are leaders in the Church of Christ ought to be standing out for the truth. This might mean writing letters to the local paper, being involved in public debates, and other opportunities for bringing out the gospel. We need to be wise, though, that we neither make ourselves out to be fools when the secular media tricks us, or get to thinking we are more important than we actually are. One example of secular trickery is when there is a request for a TV interview. As one person involved in giving interviews for the media for a secular agency warned me once, 'Never give the TV station an opportunity to change or edit an interview with you.' That is why he always insists on going on TV live, so that there is no opportunity for distortion or misrepresentation. We do well to heed his advice and avoid altogether any pre-taped situation.

Mind you, if a local paper gives space for local ministers to write a devotional piece, and that without editing, it can be a valuable way of outreach into the community.

Throughout all this, however, we must give heed to the flock of which we are the Lord's under-shepherds. That is the first and most important port-of-call when it comes to interaction with those of like-mind.

And then, let's heed Calvin's words here: wherever you have the Word of God faithfully preached, there you have the Church of Christ. We have to be careful not to get to thinking that we are all on our own here. The despair of Elijah, when he was all alone in his struggle against the pagan king and his kingdom, can sometimes affect us too. And what was it the Lord replied to him? In 1st King chapter 19 verse 18, He said these words to His prophet: 'Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel – all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him.'

7. The Struggle Through It All

And now we come to our seventh aspect, *The Struggle Through It All*. Here we touched upon the very real battle we face in faithfully following the Lord. Geneva did not continue on in this role of being a leading light within the Calvinist world. She fell away from the true biblical faith. There was a time of revival in the 19th Century under Cesar Malan and Jean-Henri Merle d'Aubigné, amongst others, a movement known as *Le Reveil*, but this more strongly emphasised personal conversion.

So Geneva did not return to the forefront in Calvinist theology and practice. But God in His providence raised up other leaders and other centres. There have been times of biblical revival in Scotland, the wider United Kingdom, North America, the Netherlands, and elsewhere.

And who can say how things will go in the future for the PCEA? We have seen many in the Free Church tradition fall away. We look at what is happening in Scotland and we are deeply disappointed by the pragmatic spirit amongst our brethren there. But we have what we have right here and now. The Confessional basis is strong and vibrant amongst us – or there is no reason for it not to be! Is this hope for Australia possibly to be found in the PCEA? Living in a nation where the Christian church has in the vast majority reduced God down to an impotent and irrelevant God, or a God who gives them experiences completely unrelated to this world, we must be those who proclaim the sovereign God who is ruling right now over this world. We must declare that all of life must be to the glory of God. And we must do that in every sphere of life – not just church or home, but in education, business, sport, and wherever we are found!

This will mean that as we are faithful to God's Word, we will be particularly attacked by the devil. As we know from Scripture, he is busy at work against those who are the Lord's, because those are the people through whom Christ Jesus is fulfilling His Great Commission. You only need to consider the last chapter of Ephesians to realise the strength and intensity of this warfare. There we read in verse 12 of chapter 6 that 'our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.'

Many of us will be able to relate the nature of some of these attacks. There is that often used degradation of conservative Calvinism through association with extreme sectarian groups. We may be called fundamentalist, narrow-minded, and exclusive brethren.

As this article acknowledged at its beginning, humanly speaking as a denomination we are not much. But divinely speaking, there is nothing whatsoever that we lack as we look to the Lord according to His word. Dedicating our all to Him never left any of His children short of what they needed when they needed it. To continue on from the previously quoted passage in Ephesians 6: verse 13 says, 'Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.' This is the armour that consists of wearing the belt of truth that buckles everything together, the breastplate of righteousness that protects your heart, the feet fitted so they're always ready for battle, the shield of faith which defends against those nasty attacking arrows, the helmet of salvation which means you take on Christ's saving work, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. This sword is what reveals its cutting power when God's Word is proclaimed. Then it strikes to man's innermost place, as Hebrews 4:12 describes. It's this preaching which must be at the heart of what we as faithful churches of Jesus Christ do. This is the passion which must mark us above all else. To adapt the words of Richard Baxter, we must preach as if we would never be preaching again, and we must preach as though we were dying men speaking to dying men!

I pray that these seven aspects have been an encouragement and a challenge for you. May drawing out the lessons of the passion, the mentoring, the preaching, the caring, the welcoming, the fellowship, and the contending for the faith, be as thought provoking for you as they have been for me in preparing these notes. And may they stir us on to work out these things in us and toward those we serve and have interaction with.