

## A Dialogue between Martin Luther and John Calvin

*The following was originally presented at the John Knox Centre in Geneva, Switzerland, in 2009 as part of the celebrations of the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth.*

**Luther:** *Guten Abend! Guten Abend!* Yes, I am Martin Luther, the Reformer, and this is the first time that I set foot in this city of Geneva. I've come for the anniversary celebrations of my dear brother here, John Calvin.

**Calvin:** *Bonjour*, Luther. And "*bonjour*" to all of you who have gathered here this evening. I trust you recognize me from the Calvin portraits and statutes, most of them rather unflattering, I must say. My wife used to tell me I have such a nice smile but well! And indeed, I am the Reformer John Calvin, a Frenchman who ended up becoming a citizen of Geneva, and who made this city into a kind of protestant Rome. Some even call it the City of Calvin, although I do not like this kind of tribute paid to my person.

**Luther:** Well, that may have been the case in the past... but today? Remember the massive arrival of immigrants in the 19th century, mainly from Catholic cantons of the Confederation as well as from Southern Europe? Reformed people became a minority in their own stronghold! That's why the "Genevois" no longer call their city "the City of Calvin" but—unless they want to put some fault on your shoulders, my dear brother—they just call it the "city at the end of the lake."

**Calvin:** Sure, though I cannot resist reminding you that the Geneva coat of arms still bears our Reformed motto "*Post tenebras lux*"—"After the darkness, light." Even after the popular vote in 1907 to strictly separate Church and State, the citizens of Geneva decided to stick with this motto, something that gives me great pleasure, I must say.

**Luther:** Isn't it a pity, Calvin, that we never met in the 16th century? Don't you think that together we might have avoided the split between our two branches of Protestantism? Because in the final analysis, the fundamental affirmations of the Reformation are the same for you and for me, aren't they?

- Salvation by the grace of God in Christ alone, freely offered to humankind...
- the prominence of the Holy Scriptures as compared with the tradition of the Church...
- the centrality of the person of Christ as compared with all possible and imaginable saints...

**Calvin:** It is true that we could have reached agreement on most issues. Though my thoughts on predestination... well, you *have* been reluctant to acknowledge them...

**Luther:** And rightly so! Just as *you* have been reluctant to adopt my thoughts on the Eucharist...

**Calvin:** And rightly so! You'll remember that my priority then was to come to an agreement with Bullinger on this issue. I was desperately trying to avoid a split among the Reformation Churches in the Swiss Confederation. Because... without such an agreement, we would not have been able to resist the Counter-Reformation. In any case, my followers chose to call themselves "Reformed" or "Presbyterians" and not "Calvinists!!!" Whereas *yours*...!!

**Luther:** Calvin, in all fairness, I did insist that my name should not be turned into an adjective. But 50 years after my death people started calling themselves “Lutherans” ... what did you expect me to do about it at that point?

**Calvin** (smiles): OK, OK, you cannot be blamed for this. But now that we are on this topic, have I understood correctly that there are many Lutherans who do not speak German? That’s amazing.

**Luther:** Not at all. Our Churches worldwide are as diverse as those of your family, spread over all continents, speaking all languages and facing the same challenges. Only fundamentalists believe the contrary, like some Catholic fundamentalists who still believe that Jesus spoke Latin.

**Calvin:** And do Lutheran fundamentalists believe that Jesus spoke German?

**Luther:** Uh—how about Calvinist fundamentalists? Do they believe that Jesus spoke French?

**Calvin:** No, fundamentalists all speak English by now.

**Luther:** Well, in my lifetime, all serious theological work was done in Latin. And even the non-serious work: *In vino veritas!*

**Calvin:** *Post tenebras lux!* And that’s serious!

**Luther:** Do you remember, John ... at least, will you permit me to call you John? ... Do you remember that in the 16th century it was unthinkable that a Lutheran community would be allowed to settle in Reformed Geneva?

**Calvin:** Of course it was, my dear Martin, just like it was unthinkable for Reformed people to have their own church in areas where your disciples were predominant.

**Luther:** Let’s not stray from my point: it was only 300 years ago that Lutherans were finally permitted to erect their own Church building here, on the condition that it did not look like a church.

**Calvin:** I know, I know, that wasn’t very kind of the Reformed. Human sinfulness and all that. That’s why I’ve always insisted on the idea that “*ecclesia reformata sed semper reformanda*”—a Reformed church should always be a *reforming* church ... though I must admit that even this is often misunderstood and instead of “Reforming” the churches are dividing.

**Luther:** True, and while the Reformed family is a champion on that score, my followers, too, hold their own in this respect! But let's talk about more cheerful developments.

**Calvin:** What I’m extremely cheerful about is the way that Reformed principles have found their way all over the world. Look at all these people here, representing the global face of the Reformed tradition today.

**Luther:** True, you are really spread out, more than 800 national Reformed churches worldwide, isn’t it? And some 230 of these about to unite as the World Communion of Reformed Churches? And from what I hear, more and more of these also working together with my followers, for example through the Leuenberg Agreement, or in programmes of mission and justice...

**Calvin:** Indeed, but what pains me, Martin, is that some of them claim that we were NOT concerned about mission and justice. Here I was talking about knowledge of God that comes from obedience to God (if that isn't mission, what is?), and about the price of bread and interest rates in Geneva...

**Luther:** ...and I DID speak of justice in relation to justification! For whom do they take us? Did they ever live in our times, with its social evils and unfair practices? Huh, I wonder if they ever read André Bieler's book...?

**Calvin:** Or *Reformed World* for that matter? But misrepresentations aside, what really pleases me is that our disciples are slowly learning to work together at the grassroots. And—very important—that we all are learning to welcome the stranger in our midst. As you know, I was a refugee in Geneva myself, I know what it feels like to be uprooted and unwanted. And in this respect I really want to laud the late Lukas Vischer who started a movement called “Witnessing Together in Geneva” as a way to bridge the gap between long-term residents and immigrant communities.

**Luther:** Yes, we Lutherans too, miss Lukas very much, and not only for that. He was instrumental in the Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry study and, of course, in the birth of the Leuenberg Agreement. So, the split that we ourselves could not prevent is gradually being overcome. It's music to my ears.

**Calvin:** Talking of music, Martin, did you ever hear the melody I put to psalm 42? *(takes kazoo out of pocket and blows 2 lines of "Comme un cerf")*

**Luther:** John this is so inspiring! And what do you think of this my favourite: *(takes kazoo out of pocket and blows "A mighty fortress is our God")*

**Calvin:** You know, Martin, I'm so glad we finally met, and then here, at this centre named from my old student John Knox (a stubborn Scot he was, I tell you). And I repeat what I said about you in 1544, indeed you are a great man who “stands out for his extraordinary spiritual gifts; bold and unshakable, skilful and learned.”

**Luther:** Thank you John. As I said way back then to my contemporaries when I heard of you, “Truly this man's judgment is not bad. For my part, I at least accept what he says of me.”

**Calvin:** Amen!

*(The two Reformers embrace each other with a word of peace)*