

History of the Reformation

The Life of John Calvin

Parts 1 & 2

"I am eager for people to know Calvin not because he was without flaws, or because he was the most influential theologian of the last 500 years (which he was), or because he shaped Western culture (which he did), but because he took the Bible so seriously, and because what he saw on every page was the majesty of God and the glory of Christ" . . . John Piper

- John Calvin – Giant of the Reformation
 - One of the most respected
 - Theologian of the Reformation
 - Mission minded
 - Bible Exegete
 - One of the most hated
 - Restriction of Religious Freedom
 - Doctrine of Predestination
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- Birth and Early Years
 - Born Jehan Cauvin July 10, 1509 in Noyon, Picardy
 - Cathedral city just a few miles North of Paris
 - Where Charlemagne 1st crowned co-king of France, 768 AD
 - His father, Gerard was a well-regarded, upright
 - Cathedral notary and registrar to the ecclesiastical court.
 - Advantage of the best education possible
 - From very young in the household of Lord of Montmor
 - Trained as “gentleman” with the children of nobility in Noyon.
 - His mother died when he was very young
 - Raised by a his stepmother
 - One brother and one of two half-sisters survived and lived with him in Geneva.
- Calvin, the Student
 - His father was very ambitious for his precocious son.
 - Gerard helped arrange for John to receive the chaplaincy at the local cathedral when John was only 12.
 - This chaplaincy along with other appointments to church offices provided John an income, which funded all of his future studies.
 - He showed rare abilities as a student.
 - He studied theology from 1523 to 1528 and received his doctorate at 19.
 - Became excellent in the study of Latin
 - His father withdrew him from Theology school
 - Enrolled him in University of Orleans to the study of law
 - Lawyers could earn more money
 - Trained under the best lawyer in France and advanced beyond any other student.
 - Very useful later in Geneva
 - It was said he “scarcely had his equal” but did not limit his studies to the law.
 - He studied every field of science including philosophy
 - Learned Koine Greek to study the NT



- Through studying law, found freedom not available in the school of Theology in Paris
 - Was said to be the most learned man in Europe by the time he was 22.
 - His powers of memory were described as “miraculous”.
 - He memorized each lecture and rose early and repeated each one verbatim the following morning.
 - He was fundamentally a man of letters.
 - He was shy. He never sought public notice or acclaim
 - He ate sparingly and slept no more than 3-4 hours each night.
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- Calvin, the Humanist
 - After the death of his father (1531), he knew what he wanted in life. . .
 - To be a great humanist scholar in the mold of the great Erasmus
 - Returns to Paris
 - 1532 – Received Licentiate in law
 - “permission to teach”
 - Published commentary on Seneca’s DeClementia (On Clemency) at his own expense
 - Demonstrates his desire to be a humanist. The beauty and clarity of his prose was extraordinary.
 - He set the standard that is credited with developing the entire French language.
- Calvin’s Conversion
 - 1533 – “God by a sudden conversion, subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame. . .
 - Commentary on the Book of Psalms
 - Nicholas Cop, a personal friend, becomes rector of the University of Paris.
 - His inaugural address was a powerful polemic against excesses in the church.
 - Cop criticized the church and teachers as sophists.
 - Strong reaction from the conservative senior faculty.
 - Calvin was suspected of writing the speech
 - If Calvin did write it, judging from the content of the speech, he is still a nominal Catholic humanist.
 - Both Cop and Calvin are immediate fugitives.
 - Cop to Basel and Calvin into hiding in Noyon and Orleans.
 - while in hiding Calvin went to Nerac in Southern France
 - Jacques LeFevre D’Etaples who had translated the Bible into French.
 - Former teacher at the Sorbonne in Paris
 - Sometime during this year he was delivered suddenly and miraculously from “popish superstitions”.



- No one knows exactly when or by whom. It was either Dr. LeFevre or his brother Andrew who brought him to the reformed faith.
 - In May of the next year he traveled back to Noyon and resigned all his benefices from the Catholic Church
 - Worked tirelessly thereafter in the reformation.
 - Oct 1534 – Affair of the Placards
 - Jan 1535 – Calvin joins Cop in Basel
- Fugitive (1534-1536)
 - Basil – Sets himself now to learn Hebrew
 - March 1536 – Calvin publishes *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*
 - The first edition is published
 - Addressed to King Francis I of France, written on behalf of the French Protestants (*Huguenots*)
 - Contained six chapters at first containing the law, faith, prayer, the sacraments, false sacraments and Christian liberty
 - By 1559 it would contain 80 chapters. 74 new ones with some addition to the original but never one revision.
 - After a visit to France, Calvin sees an opportunity to accomplish his goal of peace and quiet by moving to Strasbourg
 - Because of regional warfare, he had to make a detour to the south, leading him to spend one night in Geneva



Life of John Calvin – part 2

- Geneva 1536 - 1538
 - Background information about Geneva
 - Rebellion against the house of Savoy
 - 1526 – Annexed to the city of Bern
 - St. Peters had been taken over by the German speaking reformers
 - At least four reformed preachers were in Geneva
 - Guillame (William) Farel and Pierre Viret – charged by Zwinglian Germans to bring Swiss French regions into the Reformation fold
 - A large libertine group and a large Catholic group present also.
 - **Libertine** : one devoid of any restraints; especially one who ignores or even spurns religious norms, accepted morals, and forms of behavior sanctioned by the larger society
 - Secular humanists in the 21st century understanding
 - So Geneva was very unstable and very immoral
- 1536 – Farel finds out that the “author of the Institutes” happens to be in town for a night
 - The fiery Farel convinces Calvin to give up his plans to pursue scholarship in Strasbourg and remain in Geneva as a preacher

- Farel – “you are simply following your own desires. . . God will curse the quiet life you want for your studies”
- Calvin - I felt as if God from heaven had laid His mighty hand upon me to stop me in my course, . . . and I was so stricken with terror that I did not continue my journey.”
- Calvin begins his ministry
 - First assignment was Exposition of scripture
 - He was soon preaching 4 times a week
 - Defender of the faith in debates with Catholics.
 - The confession of faith laid the foundation stone for the first theocratic state in 1536
 - His next work was a catechism
- Exile in 1538
 - Calvin and Farel demand that Geneva city council embrace their vision for the reformation
 - More radical than that which Bern (higher HQ) authorized
 - Calvin immaturely follows Farel and his zealotry
 - Farel and Calvin given 3 days to leave the city
 - Libertines and Catholics saw a chance to retake Geneva
- Invited by Bucer, separating him from Farel
 - To Strasbourg as preacher, teacher, academic and writer
 - New influenced to maturity by Martin Bucer (father figure)
 - Marriage to the widow Idelette de Bure in 1540
 - First husband was John Stordeur, an Anabaptist in Belgium
 - Calvin converted them to the Reformed Faith
 - A woman who was "chaste, obliging, not fastidious, economical, patient, and careful for (his) health“
 - Had several children, but none survived infancy
 - Beset by many illnesses, she died in April 1549
- Strassburg 1538 - 1541
 - Time of great maturing
 - He is now 32. Friends with Melancthon, Bucer and all the great academics. He is considered the greatest of them all.
 - Has continued his writings,
 - Major edits to the Institutes
 - Commentary on Romans (Calvin at his best)
 - Letters are long, thoughtful apostolic treatises.
 - Responsible for the French speaking church
 - There is trouble in Geneva
 - Weak preachers were retained
 - Cardinal Sadoletto (bishop at Duchy of Savoy) sees an opening and writes a very gentle, heartfelt letter inviting the Genevans back into the fold (26 Mar 1539)
 - Bullinger and Bucer push Calvin to the fore to answer
 - Calvin published his Letter to Sadoletto Sep 1539 (21 pp single spaced 10 font)
 - The Reason for the Reformation was the Doctrine of the Church
- Return to Geneva 1541
 - Calvin (in Strasbourg) has kept up correspondence with friends in Geneva so he knows about the letter
 - Writes a letter to the council warning of the danger
 - Geneva has no desire to go back under Catholicism



- Bullinger and Bucer recommend the return of Calvin and the council passes a resolution to bring Calvin back.
 - He is offered a house, 500 Florin, 12 measures of wheat and 2 tubs of wine.
 - “The obligation and responsibility of my office determined me to restore myself to the flock from which I had been violently separated; and the best of Beings is my witness with what deep sorrow, abundance of tears, and extreme anxiety, I entered upon my office” . . . Calvin
- Farel again intervenes and again convinces Calvin to return to Geneva
 - where he is welcomed as a returning hero.
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- 14 years of struggle
 - Geneva broke
 - Calvin invited back by only a portion of the city council
 - Matured, separated from Farel, under Bucer’s influence
 - Armed escort from Geneva – Sep 1541 to accompany Calvin back
 - Tone of red carpet
 - Momentum, but no grandstanding
 - Calvin commenced preaching from the next text where he’d left off 3 years before
 - 1541 – 1546 – reform of the clergy
 - Uneducated
 - Catholic just going along
 - 1550 – the “titanic” is beginning to turn
 - From the pulpit, the greatest change can take place
 - Calvin – “*post tenebras lux*” from *Job 17:12*
 - Actually taken from Geneva’s invitation to return in 1541
 - New city charter
 - Religious education for children
 - Organization of church
 - Pastors/teachers, elders, deacons
 - Church discipline for immorality
 - City-wide enforcement of moral standards
 - The plague hit Geneva again
 - Calvin criticized for “not visiting the sick”
 - Reality – City council forbade Calvin to put himself at risk
 - Death of his wife - 1549
 - Sebastian Castellio
 - Rector of College – had to resign 1544
 - Desired to translate bible into French (Calvin already endorsed his cousin to do this)
 - Opposed Calvin by advocating religious tolerance
 - Opposed Servetus’s execution
 - Supported limited government
 - Writings influenced Roger Williams in America
 - Michael Servetus
 - Anti-Trinitarian Anabaptist who “stalked” Calvin for years
 - Executed for heresy – 1553
 - Beginning of change in Medieval Europe – humanists began pushing for an end of executions because of religious disagreements (heresy)
 - Calvin made to be the scapegoat of all the anger

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- Calvin's Final Years

- The final victory – May 1555
 - City elections voted Libertines out of power
 - Helped by the many French refugees getting citizenship in Geneva
 - After drunken protest, Libertines had to flee the city
- Controversies continue as Calvin gets drawn into Reformation issues
 - Lutheran conflict between Melanchthon and the “Gnesists”
 - Melanchthon was not Lutheran enough on the Eucharist – he agreed too much with the Swiss
 - Calvin and Bullinger had come to compromise agreement on the Lord’s Supper in 1549
- He was the head of the church in Geneva
- Geneva became a haven for persecuted Christians mainly from France.
 - Calvin preached to many preachers at a time most of them would return to France to preach.
- Started the first school to train preachers in 1559.
 - Theodore Beza was the 1st rector
- His influence was worldwide. Through letters to rulers and church leaders and constantly preaching he guided the spread of reformed churches into every nation.
 - Germany, Switzerland, Netherlands, England, France, Poland, Italy
 - Reached out to England but Elizabeth suspicious because of Knox
 - “They might not always like what he had to say, but they paid heed to his opinion.”



- Life Conclusion
 - Died Feb 6, 1564
 - Takes Genevan citizenship
 - Weakened by TB
 - Beza, “nothing seemed left but his spirit”
 - The city and friends from everywhere are in deep mourning
 - Dies and left orders to be buried in an unmarked grave
 - For fear that people would make him to be a saint
 - While not poor, lived and died very humbly



"...it is not very sound theology to confine a man's thoughts so much to himself, and not to set before him, as the prime motive of his existence, zeal to illustrate the glory of God. For we are born first of all for God, and not for ourselves. As all things flowed from him, and subsist in him, so, says Paul, (Romans 11:36,) they ought to be referred to him. I acknowledge, indeed, that the Lord, the better to recommend the glory of his name to men, has tempered zeal for the promotion and extension of it, by uniting it indissolubly with our salvation. But since he has taught that this zeal ought to exceed all thought and care for our own good and advantage, and since natural equity also teaches that God does not receive what is his own, unless he is preferred to all things, it certainly is the part of a Christian man to ascend higher than merely to seek and secure the salvation of his own soul. I am persuaded, therefore, that there is no man imbued with true piety, who will not consider as insipid that long and labored exhortation to zeal for heavenly life, a zeal which keeps a man entirely devoted to himself, and does not, even by one expression, arouse him to sanctify the name of God. But I readily agree with you that, after this sanctification, we ought not to propose to ourselves any other object in life than to hasten towards that high calling; for God has set it before us as the constant aim of all our thoughts, and words, and actions. And, indeed, there is nothing in which man excels the lower animals, unless it be his spiritual communion with God in the hope of a blessed eternity."

. . . Letter to Cardinal Sadolet (1539)