

John Calvin—From Birth to Strassburg (1509—1541)

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Reformation Men and Theology, lesson 7 of 11

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Almost all scholars of Reformation history would agree that the greatest Reformer of all was John Calvin. He was a man unique among men. He was a scholar, a theologian, a teacher, a preacher, an evangelist, an administrator, and a leader of men. Few men have suffered like John Calvin from the attacks of unbelievers and believers alike. Many who attack John Calvin simply are ignorant of church history. It would be well for some of those who condemn him to spend some time studying his works. Without Calvin, the Reformation would not have succeeded as it did.

Probably no servant of Christ since the days of the apostles has been at the same time so loved and so hated, admired and abhorred, praised and blamed, blessed and cursed, as the faithful and fearless Calvin.

One of the ways to understand Calvin is to see what others have said about him. His most ardent enemy was Pope Pius IV who said,

“The strength of that heretic consisted in this, that money never had the slightest charm for him. If I had such servants, my kingdom would extend from sea to sea.”

Calvin’s dearest friend, Theodore Beza, said of him:

“The thing to be wondered at is that a single man, as if he had been a kind of Christian Hercules, should have been able to subdue so many monsters, and this by that mightiest of all clubs, the Word of God.”

- B. The first ten years of Calvin’s ministry were the last ten of Luther’s ministry, although the two never met personally. The Reformation in Germany and in Switzerland was bogged down, for in many places the reform was only political and moral, but not really spiritual in nature. The Reformation had fallen on hard times. The Reformers required a position more sharply defined

and a sterner leader, and that leader they found in John Calvin. For hard times, hard men are needed and intellects which can pierce to the roots where truth and error part company. In the opinion of many of his contemporaries, Calvin was the most learned man in Europe.

- C. Calvin was above everything else a theologian. He was able to systematize the Reformed faith so people could understand it. Luther was the obstetrician of the Reformation and Calvin was the pediatrician. God used Luther to ignite the Reformation, but he used Calvin to mold it into a mighty force for God. Even Melancthon, the theologian of the German movement, referred to Calvin as “the theologian.” Calvin was loved by men who were dedicated to Christ, and all of the great men of the Reformation loved and respected him. He aroused remarkable affection in men so different from himself as Luther, Melancthon, Bucer and John Knox, even when they disagreed violently with him. Even Hubmaier the Anabaptist and Calvin had a warm affection for one another, but they could not agree on church principles.
- D. As great as this man was, he was very humble. He was also a very spiritual man who practiced what he preached. He did not have glaring weaknesses in moral character as did Luther and Zwingli. Calvin could have had anything he wanted, but he lived and died a poor man. His house was scantily furnished, and he dressed plainly. He gave freely to those in need, but spent little upon himself. He declined all but his modest salary. When he died, he left a spiritual inheritance of inestimable value and a material estate of from \$1500 to \$2000. Calvin had given instruction that there was to be no pomp at his funeral and no erection of any monument over his grave. He wished to be buried, like Moses, out of reach of idolatry.

This is consistent with his theology which humbles man and exalts God. Even the spot of his grave in the cemetery at Geneva is unknown. There is a flat headstone that says “J.C.” on it but no one can be certain that this is Calvin’s grave.

- E. Calvin has been terrible maligned for his stern (but biblical) views of election and predestination. These views were held by most in the early church. Augustine espoused them. Most of the free church in Europe during the Middle Ages believed in election and predestination (Waldenses). Luther and Zwingli held these doctrines. Calvin, as a predestinarian, was very evangelistic and said:

“Let each one of us seek to make those whom we meet partners of our peace; yet our peace will only rest upon the children of peace. Let us speak to the heart of each one whom we meet, let us offer him the remedy of salvation, so that he and through him others may not perish. But it belongs to God to bless our words in those whom He has chosen.”

Calvin’s theology must be tested by its fruits. Henry Martin, a Catholic, said:

“One might suppose that the doctrine of predestination would result in nothing other than carefree existence, or idle hopelessness, that it would destroy all determination to a devout life. But nothing of the sort with the disciples of Calvin. The compelling power of the growing Protestantism is so strong that men, conscious of their salvation, do their work as a natural fruitage of their faith, thereby justifying their doctrine. Even after the relapse from the first great enthusiasm one can see how a strong generation, strict with itself, and of unusual moral and physical vitality, continues to exist.

Jules Michelet, an unbeliever, said:

Geneva existed because of its moral strength. It had no territory, no army, nothing for space, time and matter. It was the city of the Spirit, built out of Stoicism upon the rock of election by grace. Against the monstrously dark dragnet in which Europe was caught through the laxity of France, this academy of heroes was needed. To each nation in danger, Sparta sent as an army a Spartan. Thus Geneva . . . let Loyola undermine the ground, let Spanish gold and the sword of the Guise blind and bribe! In this peaceful place, in this dusky garden of God bloomed blood-red roses under the hand of Calvin for the salvation and the freedom of the soul. If there be any need of martyrs in Europe, the need of a man to be burned or broken upon the wheel, this man is in Geneva, ready to go with the singing of psalms.

Those who really knew Calvin found him to be gentle with real love in his heart for people. He grieved with his people in their sorrows and rejoiced in their joys. He had a heart for people and would write beautiful notes of sympathy when tragedy would strike a home. When a wedding occurred or a baby came to grace a home, he took a warm personal interest in the event. It was not unusual for him to stop on the street in the midst of weighty matters to give a schoolboy a friendly pat and an encouraging word. His enemies

might call him pope or king or caliph; his friends thought of him only as their brother and beloved leader.

The negative, stern conceptions of the character of Calvin are based almost entirely upon the representation of the Catholic, Kampschulte, who neither understood nor loved Calvin. Men of real doctrinal conviction are often thought of as stern, cold and hard, but you must always get to know the heart of a man and see how his doctrine affects his life. The more one comes to know of Calvin's theology and his personal spiritual life, the more he loves and respects him.

- G. The Reformation, under Calvin's leadership, became truly international and spread to France, Scotland, Hungary, Holland, a great part of Germany itself, the English Puritans, America, and the British Dominions. Calvin and original Calvinism was evangelical. Calvin commenting on the Great Commission said, "Without God we cannot; without us, He will not!"
- H. Many historians have called Calvin "the father of America," for from Geneva, Switzerland, where Calvin labored for thirty years, came the spiritual and democratic principles that laid the basis for the United States of America.

II. CALVIN'S YOUTH

Calvin was born July 10, 1509, in Noyon, a little town in northern France near Paris. His father was a secretary to the bishop, and a man of some means. Because of the early death of his mother, Calvin was brought up in the household of a nobleman in the neighborhood of his own home, and absorbed there something of the refined manners of the aristocracy. He had good family connections and was educated among the nobility.

III. CALVIN'S COLLEGE DAYS

- A. He studied in the three leading universities in France — Orleans, Bourges and Paris — from 1528 to 1533. Having no real desire to study law, he left his legal studies and turned to study theology. There he found the sphere of labor for which he was particularly fitted by natural endowment and personal choice. Early on he showed himself capable of clear, convincing argument and logical analysis. He advanced so rapidly that he was considered by the other students as a doctor rather than an auditor.

- B. Calvin was at this time a devout Catholic of unblemished character. During this time, he defended the teachings of the Roman Church with fervor and opposed Lutheranism with a passion.

IV. CALVIN'S CONVERSION

- A. The Protestant movement in Paris was gaining a foothold, and Calvin took an interest in the movement because he had been influenced by men of Reformed thinking such as Cop, Womar, and Beza while in various colleges. His conversion dated sometime during 1532 or 1533. Calvin says his conversion was sudden, through private study, because he failed to find peace in absolutions, penances, and intercessions of the church. In his commentary on the Psalms, Calvin said concerning his conversion:

“By a sudden conversion, God subdued and reduced to docility my soul, which was more hardened against such things than one would expect of my youthful years.”

“Like a flash of light, I realized in what an abyss of errors, in what chaos I was.”

- B. Calvin broke with the Roman Church and was thrown in prison several times (for short stays) because of his evangelical activities. He became the head of the evangelical party in France less than a year after his conversion. Calvin could have lost his life when he saw a fellow evangelical's tongue cut out and the man burned at the stake. Calvin made a move towards the scaffold, but several other evangelicals dragged him away.
- C. Calvin was forced to leave Paris when Nicolas Cop, the rector of the University of Paris, gave the inaugural oration on All Saint's Day. This oration, at the request of the new rector, had been prepared by Calvin. It was a plea for reformation on the basis of the New Testament. The Sorbonne and Parliament regarded this academic oration as a manifesto of war upon the Catholic Church and condemned it to the flames. Cop fled to Basel. Calvin, the real author of the mischief, escaped from Paris, being let down from a room by means of sheets and escaping in the garb of a vine-dresser with a hoe upon his shoulder.

V. CALVIN'S WANDERINGS

- A. At least one year of wandering followed for Calvin. He was hunted from city to city, for no Protestant, especially Calvin, was safe in France. Calvin wandered as a fugitive evangelist under assumed names from place to place in southern France, Switzerland and Italy. His most common assumed name was Charles d'Espeville. Everywhere he went he taught small groups in secret places, even in caves.

Calvin was an evangelist. It is estimated that Calvin in his lifetime was responsible for starting as many as 250 local churches.

- B. During this period, he would confront Libertines, Freethinkers and Humanists who were also opposed to the Roman Church. He won many of these to Jesus Christ because of his great knowledge of the Bible, theology and the Church Fathers. However, there was one Libertine he could not convince: Michael Servetus. Servetus challenged Calvin to a debate, and Calvin accepted with great risk to his own life. Servetus never showed up. Twenty years later Servetus was burned as a heretic in Geneva.

VI. CALVIN'S REST AT BASEL

- A. The wanderings ceased for a time in 1535 when Calvin found rest in Basel, Switzerland. During this period, he came into contact with Martin Bucer, the Reformer of Strassburg, who was professor of theology at the university there.
- B. At Basel, he had time to spend formulating the truths of the Bible in an orderly way. In the spring of 1536, at the age of 26, he published his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. This work is the greatest exposition of evangelical truth produced by the Reformation. Calvin was the first man to give a systematic presentation of the evangelical, Reformed faith. This book threw fear and consternation into the Roman Church and was a powerful unifying force among Protestants.

Calvin revised the *Institutes* five times during his life in order to present a clearer meaning of the Christian faith, but never did he make any radical departure from any of the doctrines set forth in the first edition. The *Institutes* were written originally in French but were translated into most of the languages of western Europe. The *Institutes* became the common textbook in the schools of the Reformed churches, and furnished the material out of which their creeds were made.

VII. CALVIN'S FIRST ATTEMPT AT REFORM IN GENEVA

- A. Calvin made one last visit to France to take care of the family estate, and then decided he would spend the rest of his life as a scholar and writer in either Basel or Strassburg. The direct route to Strassburg was closed because Charles V and Frances I were at war, so Calvin was forced to go through Geneva, Switzerland. Calvin intended to stop only a night in Geneva, but Providence had decreed otherwise.
- B. Calvin's presence was made known to Farel, the Genevan Reformer, who instinctively felt that Calvin was the man to complete and save the Reformation in Geneva. Calvin was very reluctant to take the position and he pleaded he was too young, too inexperienced, he needed further study and his natural timidity and bashfulness made him unfit for public action. Farel threatened him with the curse of Almighty God if he preferred his studies to the work of the Lord, and his own interest to the cause of Christ. Farel said to Calvin:

“You are concerned about your rest and your personal interests. . . Therefore I proclaim to you in the name of Almighty God whose command you defy: Upon your work there shall rest no blessing . . . Therefore, let God damn your rest, let God damn your work!”

Calvin was terrified and shaken by these words of Farel and he accepted the call to the ministry as teacher and pastor of the evangelical church of Geneva. His reply to Farel was, “I obey God!”

- C. Geneva had officially become Protestant in 1535. This city was notorious for its wickedness; it was the cesspool of Switzerland. The city council had made laws against drunkenness, gambling, dancing and the like, but the laws had little effect upon the people. It was in 1536 that Calvin took over the responsibility of the Reformation in Switzerland, working at first as Farel's assistant.
- D. Calvin immediately prepared articles of faith for the church in Geneva, a form of church government, and a catechism for the children. Calvin insisted the church members should live in accordance with the demands of the New Testament. To secure this end, he asked that the church exercise its own discipline and bar from communion unworthy members. Calvin attempted to set up a theocratic state, and came very close at times to doing so. Stickelberger observes correctly:

“Admittedly, to the age of the Reformation the word ‘tolerance’ was unknown. Who does not keep this in mind lacks understanding of the history of this epoch, be he historian or even biographer of Calvin. He who sees the events of the past through the spectacles of his own age and views them in its ‘knowledge’ sees them distorted. Calvin was a child of his century. If he wanted to build up what was torn down, he could not have proceeded any differently. Faith was to him the highest wisdom, it was the content of life. He did not go halfway, but drew all consequences from this assumption, for the Church and for the state, as well as for every citizen. And his theocratic state, even though one may be critical or hostile towards it, was something magnificent, impressive and moving” (Emanuel Stickelberger, *Calvin*).

- E. Farel and Calvin exercised a great authority in Geneva from 1536 to 1538. But the population was not ready for the rigid discipline. Although he asked only for this small measure of spiritual independence, and the right to excommunicate flagrant and unrepentant sinners, the government of Geneva (supposed to be Protestant) rose in arms and expelled both Calvin and Farel.

The year preceding Calvin’s expulsion was misery for him because of the opposition he received. Calvin comments:

“Were I to tell you only the littlest things of the misfortune — what am I saying? — of the adversity which virtually crushed us during the course of one year, you would hardly believe me. I am convinced that not a day passed in which I did not long for death ten times.”

This was a very discouraging movement for Calvin, but this rejection was also in the providence of God.

VIII. CALVIN’S MINISTRY IN STRASSBURG

- A. After being expelled from Geneva, Calvin went to Strassburg, Germany. This was directed of the Lord, for he had to do much thinking. He realized how easy it was to tear down the Roman Church, but how difficult it was to replace it with something positive. He gave much thought to church organization and instruction of the people. *He realized that it was quite easy to bring the truth of God’s Word to the people, but much more difficult to bring the people to the truth of God’s Word.*

- B. It was during this time at Strassburg that Calvin came into contact with the German Reformation, especially with Martin Bucer. He had a great appreciation for the Lutheran leaders, and felt closely allied to the Lutheran Church, although he was unfavorably impressed with the lack of discipline and with the dependence of the clergy upon the secular rulers. Calvin followed the German Reformation all the days of his life with interest, and kept up a steady correspondence with Melanchthon.
- C. During this time in Strassburg, Calvin had a tremendous ministry with French Protestant refugees, who fled to Strassburg for protection. From these Bible classes came many of the leaders of the French Reformation.

At this point of history Calvin probably felt that his lifetime ministry would not be too effective. But God was simply preparing him for bigger things. Calvin would lead the Reformation on to its greatest heights.

- D. It was during this time that Calvin married Idelette de Buren, the widow of Jean Stordeur, the Belgian. When the Stordeurs came to Strassburg, they were Anabaptists and opposed the Reformed view with a passion. It was through Calvin's exposition of the Scriptures that they were converted to Reformed thinking. When Jean Stordeur died Calvin preached his funeral. In 1540, Calvin married Idelette de Buren, who had two children by her former husband. They had nine years of happy marriage, but she was quite sickly and died. She was weak in body but strong in faith, and on her deathbed exclaimed, "O glorious resurrection! God of Abraham and all patriarchs . . . I trust!"