

AN OUTLINE OF THE LIFE OF JOHN CALVIN

It is 500 years since God brought John Calvin into this world. During 2009, many Reformed churches and Christians in particular are remembering with gratitude this gift of Christ to his church. Publishing houses are producing books at a rapid pace of knots, articles, papers, conferences, and website and blog postings proliferate. But who was he? Perhaps for some who would or should know about this man of God, he is little more than a name on the pages of history: we are aware of him, but we do not know him. This brief biography is intended to provide an outline of his life sufficient to provide men and women of the Reformed and other traditions with some notion and understanding of the man we are remembering.

THE EARLY YEARS

John Calvin was born on 10 July 1509, in a place called Noyon (about sixty miles north-east of Paris) in the province of Picardy (the wide, flat region in which the First World War's Battle of the Somme would later be fought). His father – Gérard Cauvin – held legal office in the service of the bishops of Noyon, and wanted his son to enter the church, an environment that had seen its fair share of storms in past decades, and would soon grow far stormier still. Martin Luther was 26 years old in 1509, and already teaching at Wittenberg; Ulrich Zwingli was only two months younger than Luther. Philip Melancthon was twelve years older than Calvin. Henry VIII ascended to the English throne in the year of his birth. In 1517, when Calvin was only eight years old, Luther would post his Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the Castle Church.

Calvin's father used his influence to obtain for his son a chaplaincy at Noyon Cathedral when Calvin was 11 (a far from rare practice), and the income helped to fund his education. The brilliant young man was privately tutored, before being sent to Paris at the age of 14 to study theology at the University. He first attended the Collège de la Marche, then the Collège de Montaigu, where he received the equivalent of his Master of Arts in 1528 at the unusually young age of 17. In God's kindness, some of Calvin's fundamental instruction was given by the brilliant Latin scholar Mathurin Cordier, and he obtained a first-class education.

At about the same time as he received his M.A., Calvin's father changed his mind about his son's future, and directed him from theology to study law at the University of Orléans. It was here that Calvin learned Greek, and developed his powers of analysis and rhetoric – not unhelpful skills for a man whom God was making a minister of the gospel. Within a year, Calvin was sufficiently advanced to begin teaching incoming scholars.

He moved on to Bourges in about 1529, returning to Noyon for the burial of his father, who had died quite suddenly. Released from his father's seemingly quite heavy governance, Calvin spread his wings as a humanist, publishing his first and only humanist work at the age of 23, a commentary on the younger Seneca's *De Clementia (On Mercy)*. There is little evidence there of any Christian thought, but much of a brilliant mind and a firm grasp on a wide range of classical and historical source material. In the same year, 1532, he received his doctor of laws degree. Calvin's fierce dedication to study during these years was near-legendary, but almost certainly laid the foundation for his subsequent struggle with ill-health.

But this was a significant year for more reasons than these: Calvin had been exposed to some of Luther's teachings, which were by then widely circulated. His own cousin, Jean Pierre Olivétan, had been attracted to Lutheran teaching, and Calvin had studied alongside Olivétan for a period. But where and when, in the midst of all this, did God give Calvin a heart of flesh?

There is no reference to a human agent nor to a definite moment in the only plain record of this event known to come from Calvin's own pen, which I give in a translation furnished by Robert Reymond. It comes from Calvin's "Preface" to his *Commentary on the Psalms*:

I tried my best to work hard [in the study of law], yet God at last turned my course in another direction by the secret rein of his providence. What happened first, since I was too obstinately addicted to the superstitions of Popery to be easily extricated from so profound an abyss of mire, was that God by an unexpected [or 'sudden'] conversion [*subite conversione*] subdued and reduced my mind to a teachable frame. And so this taste of true godliness . . . set me on fire with such a desire to progress that I pursued the rest of my studies [in law] more coolly, although I did not give them up altogether.

Scholarly debate continues from all sides of the historical and religious spectrum as to the occasion, speed, and possible catalysts of Calvin's conversion. It does seem to have happened rapidly, although there are some evidences of and possible references to a longer preparatory period. What we can say is that once it had occurred, there was no looking back. With his customary tenacity and vigour of mind and heart, Calvin embraced the new teachings that accorded with the Word of the living God, and his life was never again the same. So complete was the transformation that when his friend, Nicholas Cop, Rector of the University of Paris, delivered an address advocating reform of the church on All Saints' Day of 1533, many thought that Calvin might be the true author of the piece (and it is possible that this was the case). Not only did Cop have to flee, but Calvin himself was lowered by sheets from a window and escaped the city dressed as a manual labourer.

Calvin travelled on, finding rest where he could, and already being tracked down by friends (as well as hunted by foes) because of his gifts and understanding. He studied the Scriptures, and by May 1534 had resigned his holdings in the Roman Catholic church. By 1535 he was forced to leave France altogether, departing from the relative safety and scholarly enjoyments of a place called Angoulême, and heading to Basel in Switzerland. There he wrote the preface for the French translation of the Bible made by his cousin Olivétan. In France, some of Calvin's dear friends were already dying in martyr's fires at the hands of Francis I of France. By 1536 Calvin had completed and published the first edition of what has become known as Protestantism's *magnum opus*, his *Institutio Christianae Religionis*, or *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Repeatedly revised and expanded to its final form, this was originally a fairly brief outline of the true Christian faith designed to demonstrate to the persecuting French monarch the realities of the belief and lives of the Protestants of France (it was, in fact, dedicated to Francis I, opening with an extensive letter to the king). At the young age of 26, Calvin's grasp on the fullness of God's revelation, and his genius for precise statement and comprehensive organization and systematization of the truth, were becoming more publicly evident.

Later that year Calvin moved on again to Italy with a friend, du Tillet, whose home at Angoulême had provided a temporary French hiding place. A brief return to Paris followed, before Calvin headed to Strasbourg in July of 1536, determined to live a life with his head among his beloved books. Avoiding a raging war between Francis I and Charles V of Spain, he took a long detour south, arriving in Geneva for an overnight stay.

GENEVA AND FURTHER EXILE

In Geneva was a Christian man named Guillaume Farel (anglicised, William Farel). He heard of the brilliant young scholar's arrival in the city and sought him out. The fiery Farel was a powerful advocate for the gospel cause, and he set out to persuade Calvin to give his gifts and energies to that cause in Geneva. Calvin, by no means weak-willed himself, insisted that his heart was set on private study. Merle d'Aubigné, the great historian of the Reformation, records Calvin's view of the altercation:

Finding that he gained nothing by entreaties, he proceeded to utter an imprecation that God would curse my retirement, and the tranquility of the studies which I sought, if I should withdraw and refuse to give assistance, when the necessity was so urgent. By this imprecation I was so stricken with terror, that I desisted from the journey which I had undertaken.

The Elijah-like Farel had gained his end: Calvin felt that God himself had reached out and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck. By September 1536, all necessary business addressed, Calvin took up residence in Geneva as a “Reader in Holy Scripture.” He received no pay until the following February, and was generally referred to in official papers as *ille Gallus* – “that Frenchman.” It was not the most auspicious of beginnings.

Nevertheless, Calvin quickly rose to prominence. One delightful story that illustrates his ability relates to a famous disputation that occurred in Lausanne. A debate was convened between the champions of the Protestant and Roman causes to help the citizens determine in which direction the city would move. The debate focused on ten theses proposed by Peter Viret, a Protestant. For the first three days (they did nothing by halves!) Calvin said nothing, but sat in silence, much to Farel’s frustration. On the fourth day, a Roman Catholic priest gave a lengthy speech on the third thesis concerning the bodily presence of Christ at the Mass, in which he sought to array the Church Fathers against the Reformers. Calvin, unprepared and without notes, suddenly rose to his feet. He swept – from memory – through various of the Fathers’ writings, quoting and summarising in support of the Protestant position, and then – with this great weight of evidence built up – thrust a charge of gross audacity at the Roman Catholic delegates for daring to accuse the Protestants of contrariness to the ancient doctors of divinity. There was absolute silence. Then a Franciscan friar stood, and on the spot denounced his own errors, renounced his monastic vows, and pronounced himself determined to follow Christ and his pure doctrine. Lausanne voted for Protestantism, and even the priest who had made the initial speech to which Calvin responded soon turned – in company with many others – to Protestantism.

I will not attempt to explain the complex political structures of Geneva during Calvin's time, except to say that there was the powerful Little Council of twenty five men, a larger Council of the Two Hundred, and between them a somewhat pointless group called the Council of the Sixty. It was the Little Council who essentially wielded the sword of government in Geneva. Calvin's relationship with these bodies was generally ambivalent, and often openly hostile.

Calvin and Farel sought to bring the whole city into conformity to Scripture; their commitment brought them into conflict with the civil authorities both politically and personally. Among other things, Calvin and his fellow-workers attempted to fence the Lord's table by withholding the elements from those living in open sin. This was not acceptable to the Councils, and in April 1538 – without a hearing – the Reformers were simply banished from the city at short notice.

Calvin made his way to Strasbourg, in Germany, where he found a friend and mentor in Martin Bucer. He spent three years in that city, preaching, pastoring, writing, teaching, and learning. He also found "a good thing" – in 1540, at the age of 31, he married Idelette de Bure, a widow in his congregation. Though their married life was in many respects a great joy, it was tempered with profound griefs: Idelette miscarried once, lost a daughter at birth, and delivered a son who died after only two weeks. Idelette herself died on 29 March, 1549, at the age of 40, and Calvin never remarried. Letters written to friends after her death give the lie to those who accuse Calvin of inhumanity. To Farel:

I am trying as much as possible not to be completely overwhelmed by grief. . . . Besides, my friends surround me and do not fail to bring some comfort to my soul's sadness. . . . I consume my grief in such a way that I have not interrupted my work. . . . May the Lord Jesus strengthen your spirit and mine in this great sadness, which would have broken me had he not extended his hand from on high; he whose service includes the relief of the broken, the strengthening of the weak, the renewal of those who are tired.

To Viret:

Though the death of my wife has been a very cruel thing for me, I try as much as possible to moderate my grief. And my friends fulfil their duty in a fine way. But I confess that for them and for me, the results are less than might be hoped for. However, the few results that I obtain help very little. Actually, you know the tenderness or rather the softness of my soul. . . . Of course, the reason for my sorrow is not an ordinary one. I am deprived of my excellent life companion, who, if misfortune had come, would have been my willing companion not only in exile and sorrow, but even in death.

As yet, in Strasbourg, many of these sorrows lay ahead. But he was not in Strasbourg for long. By 1540, the Genevan situation was awful: there seems to have been a widespread collapse of public morals and civil order. In desperation, the authorities turned to the man whom they had banished. Calvin faced the prospect of a return with great distress, writing to Farel that he would rather endure "a hundred deaths than that cross." Farel's response, it seems, was on a par with his first successful attempt to tie Calvin to Geneva, and the reluctant Reformer re-entered the city on 13 September, 1541, never again to relocate. When Calvin climbed back into the pulpit at the cathedral of St Pierre, he

resumed his ministry at the precise point at which he had paused three years before, taking up the next verse of his systematic exposition of Scripture.

THE MAN OF GENEVA

This second period in Geneva lasted until Calvin's death on 6 February 1564. Most biographers and historians view it in terms of years of struggle (1541-1555) and years of triumph (1555-1564). There is a Christlike and distinctly Christian pattern to his life in this respect. In his life there was never success without sorrow; for every child of God there is never glory without grief, never a crown without a cross.

In November 1541, Calvin's *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* – his constitution setting out proposed church order – were accepted with some emendations by the Genevan authorities. However, despite the political decree, there was no plain sailing. The party opposed to Calvin was known as the Libertines, and their leader on the Council was Ami Perrin. The opposition was private and public, political and personal: children referred to him as 'Cain' rather than 'Calvin'; a good number of Geneva's dogs answered to his name; he was publicly abused whenever he went out, and called the second-ranked devil in hell. The Libertines declared that the "communion of the saints" allowed them to pursue sexual immorality and practice adultery with one another's wives.

This wrestling with wickedness among the Genevan leaders eventually resulted in an open confrontation. A prominent libertine called Philibert Berthelier, secretary to the Council of the Two Hundred, and known for his sexual promiscuity, was excommunicated by the consistory of the Church of Geneva in 1551, but absolved by the Little Council on 2 September 1553. The following day was Sunday, and communion was to be celebrated. These scenes are variously described, and it is difficult to know precisely what took place. In the most dramatic presentation – and bear in mind that this confrontation might have taken place more privately and before the Lord's day in the presence of the Council – Calvin preached and at the close of the sermon declared that he would rather die on the spot than allow those who had been excommunicated to profane God's ordinance. Some suggest that the Libertines were present, armed and with Berthelier and Ami Perrin among them. Calvin is said to have descended from the pulpit and stood before the table, and put his body between the people and the table: "These hands you may crush, these arms you may cut off, my life you may take, but you shall never force me to give holy things to the profane and dishonour the table of my God." There was a stunned silence. Perrin ordered Berthelier not to approach the table. The Libertines withdrew, and the Lord's table was celebrated in silence and with awe and reverence. Calvin stood for God before his and his Lord's despisers: whether this occurred more in public or in private, this man of God put his life on the line for the purity of God's worship. Expecting to be exiled once more for his resistance, Calvin preached that Sunday afternoon from Acts 20.31-32: "Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified." But God spared his servants, though further struggles and threats of violence followed for many months.

At the same time, one of the darkest acts of Calvin's Geneva was hovering over the Reformer. A brilliant Spaniard called Michael Servetus had long caused trouble to all religious authorities, being a constitutionally unconventional thinker and aggressive blasphemer and heretic. He denied the doctrine of the Trinity and the deity of Christ. Condemned to death elsewhere by the Roman Catholics, he made his way to Geneva – one wonders why – where he was recognised. In 1533 he had attempted to answer Calvin's *Institutes* with his own *Restitutes* (i.e. a restitution or restoration of Christianity), and he and Calvin had previously corresponded, and Calvin had given him some forthright warnings. Servetus was defended by the Libertines – they made him a champion of sorts against Calvin – and the heretic was himself appalled when the Little Council nevertheless confirmed a sentence of death by burning. This was not Calvin's decision, and he in fact protested the harshness of the sentence. He did not deny that Servetus should die – that was a common enough punishment for heretics in every country – but he did resist the notion of burning, suggesting a swifter and more merciful death. Servetus, having previously rejected offers to be exiled, and after a temporary plunge into despair, resisted with a highhanded arrogance all efforts to have him recant. Servetus was burned in October of 1553. Even while we abhor the errors of Servetus, we do not defend the response of Geneva. What we must do is accept Calvin's role as a man of his time (in which the sword of the magistrate and the sword of God's word were too often confused and interchanged), and yet defend his honour against those who make of this something that it was not, and gleefully read into the political acts of the civil authority the designs and desires of Calvin himself.

Slowly, day by grinding day, Calvin and his associates pressed for the application of God's word to the life of the church and to society at large. We cannot detail all the struggles, seen and unseen, known to men and known only to God, of these hard years. However, by 1555 the political opposition of the Libertines was essentially ended, and the consistory's right to excommunicate conceded. This was the beginning of Calvin's triumphant period, in which – it must be noted – he did not lord it as a despot in Geneva, but lived as simply, humbly, and diligently as before.

Here again, we are constrained as to how much detail can be provided, but there are several noteworthy spheres of labour which we must identify.

First of all, there is Calvin's preaching. Not only during the years of struggle but also in the time of more complete success, Calvin was essentially, even primarily, a preacher of God's word. On his return to Geneva from Strasbourg, he preached twice every Sunday, and then on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Later he preached only every second week (by which stage there were Tuesday and Thursday sermons also). The New Testament was his text on Sundays, the Old on weekdays, with the Psalms sometimes on a Sunday afternoon. This preaching effected a massive moral change in Geneva. We do not suggest that there was no mere social pressure, but the very nature of the change suggests that it was fundamentally a spiritual change as the church and then society found the Word of God brought to bear unflinchingly upon them. We have two thousand sermons still available, of perhaps more than four thousand preached.

His literary labours were immense. Perhaps most prominent in terms of his own production was the final edition, in 1559, of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Continually revised since its

first appearance, the 1559 edition is Calvin's *magnum opus*, and ought to be read in its entirety by far more so-called Calvinists than it has been. Grounded in certain declarations of the Apostle's Creed, this magisterial treatment of the knowledge of God the Creator of heaven and earth; God the Redeemer, in Christ; the way in which we receive the grace of Christ; and, the external means or aids by which God invites us into the society of Christ, is a sweeping examination and systematisation of the Word of God. It is, fundamentally, an attempt to hear what the living God says to man, to see the revelation of God in Christ Jesus, to let God be God. At the same time, Calvin was writing commentaries on most of the books of the Bible, three catechisms, and theological treatises against all manner of errors and heresies. There are also 4271 letters (many of them lengthy) which have been collected. All this is in addition to the sermons, which a man called Denis Raguenier began taking down in his own private shorthand. This meticulously accurate scribe was soon employed to record and transcribe each one-hour, six-thousand-word sermon. Calvin, though, had no time to edit them. 1553 saw the publishing of the Geneva Bible, which became a blueprint for Protestant Europe – the English language editions with their explanatory notes were a founding text of the British reformation, and the seedbed of British Puritanism.

His international influence was vast, not only by means of correspondence, but also visitors. Exiles came from France, England and Scotland; refugees fled to Geneva from Germany and Italy – they came seeking both safety and instruction. Among them was John Knox, who declared the church which Calvin was reforming in Geneva as “the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the Apostles.”¹ In 1559 Calvin founded the Geneva Academy, the first Protestant ‘university’, if you like. Calvin was its professor of theology, and more than a thousand students from across Europe sat to hear him and Theodore Beza declare God’s truth. Again, we cannot list all the students who went on to give Calvin’s Biblicalism increasingly rich and effective form. These men were often nothing less than missionaries. Many returned to France and martyrdom. Many exiles came and went as Christ’s kingdom in their own nations made its often slow and painful progress. The Academy was known as “Calvin’s school of death” because so many of its alumni were put to death as a result of their witness for Christ.

Calvin called his own bodily condition “a constant death struggle”: from his early thirties he had begun to suffer physically, and bore numerous afflictions during this whole period. He had become a chronic sufferer from ague, catarrh (inflammation of the mucous membrane in the nose which caused his nose to run continually), asthma, indigestion, and migraine headaches which sometimes kept him awake all night. In 1558 he suffered at length from quartan fever (an intermittent malarial fever) from which he never fully recovered. He also suffered from close-to-crippling arthritis, gout, kidney stones, ulcerated haemorrhoids, gum disease, chronic indigestion, and pleurisy that finally led to malignant pulmonary tuberculosis. For years, so afflicted, Calvin had often coughed up blood on account of his public speaking.

¹ Quoted by Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendriksen, 1996), 8:518.

This constant pain – together with the fact that he was so often far beyond his more limited contemporaries, and the weight of work which he faced – was probably a source of much of the irritability of which he was sometimes accused. Beza writes:

His temperament was naturally choleric, and his active public life had tended greatly to increase this failing; but the Spirit of God had so taught him to moderate his anger, that no word ever escaped him unworthy of a righteous man. Still less did he ever commit aught unjust towards others. It was then only, indeed, when the question concerned religion, and when he had to contend against hardened sinners, that he allowed himself to be moved and excited beyond the bounds of moderation.

He was naturally timid, even fearful, which makes his courage all the more amazing. He was an affectionate and faithful friend, an intense man of deep feeling and penetrating thought. Worn out by his labours, Calvin preached his last sermon in Geneva on 6 February 1564. On Easter Sunday he went to church for the last time, singing with the rest of the congregation at the conclusion, “Lord, now let your servant depart in peace . . . for my eyes have seen your salvation.” On 25 April he dictated his last will and testimony, which included the following declarations:

In the name of God, I, John Calvin, servant of the Word of God in the Church of Geneva, weakened by many illnesses . . . thank God that he has shown not only mercy toward me, his poor creature, and . . . has suffered me in all sins and weaknesses, but what is much more, that he has made me a partaker of his grace to serve him through my work . . . I confess to live and die in this faith which he has given me, inasmuch as I have no other hope or refuge than his predestination upon which my entire salvation is grounded. I embrace the grace which he has offered me in our Lord Jesus Christ and accept the merits of his suffering and dying, that through them all my sins are buried; and I humbly beg him to wash me and cleanse me with the blood of our great Redeemer, as it was shed for all poor sinners so that I, when I shall appear before his face, may bear his likeness. Moreover, I declare that I endeavoured to teach his Word undefiled and to expound Holy Scripture faithfully according to the measure of grace which he has given me. In all the disputation which I led against the enemies of the truth, I employed no cunning or any sophistry, but have fought his cause honestly. But, oh, my will, my zeal were so cold and sluggish that I know myself guilty in every respect; without his infinite goodness, all my passionate striving would only be smoke, indeed the grace itself which he gave me would make me even more guilty; thus my only confidence is that he is the Father of mercy who as such desires to reveal himself to such a miserable sinner.

On 28 April, he summoned the ministers of Geneva for a farewell address which well captures both the pungency of his personality and the tenor of his life:

When I first came to this church, I found almost nothing in it. There was preaching and that was all. They would look out for idols it is true, and they burned them. But there was no reformation. Everything was in disorder . . . I have lived here amid continual bickering. I have been from derision saluted of an evening before my door with forty or fifty shots of an arquebuse [musket]. . . . They set the dogs at my heels, crying, Here! here! and these snapped at my gown

and legs. . . . though I am nothing, yet know I well that I have prevented three thousand tumults that would have broken out in Geneva. But take courage and fortify yourselves, for God will make use of this church and will maintain it, and assures you that he will protect it.²

But he also said:

I have had many faults that you have had to tolerate, and all that I accomplished was of little significance. The evil-minded will take advantage of this confession, but I repeat that all that I have done is of little significance, and I am a poor creature. My faults have always displeased me and the root of the fear of the Lord has always been in my heart. As for my doctrine, I have taught faithfully, and God has given me grace to write, which I have done faithfully as I could; and I have not corrupted [mutilated] one single passage of Scripture nor twisted it as far as I know; and when in a position to arrive at an artificial meaning through subtlety, I have put all that under my feet, and have always aimed at being simple. I have written nothing out of hatred against anyone, but have always set before me what I thought was for the glory of God.³

He entered his rest and reward on 27 May, being 54 years old. It is suggested that his last discernible words were, “How long, O Lord?” His body was buried with the normal ceremony of the church in a simple coffin at the common cemetery on Sunday 28 May, in accordance with his wishes. His grave was unmarked, and remains unknown. Thus the life and thus the death of John Calvin of Geneva.

We have no space for an extended evaluation of the man, except to warn against the very abuses that Calvin sought to avoid in his own dying days. There are those today who would venerate him, affording him the same sort of demi-divine status as can be seen in the Roman communion for the church fathers, putting his words on a par with Scripture. I say this not to denigrate Calvin but to defend him. No-one was more conscious of his imperfections and shortcomings than he was himself. We marvel at his life as a man of God, but he would have us marvel at the one who made him a man of God. We tend to point at him, but we should look and see him pointing away from himself to Jesus Christ. We bend our ears and minds to listen to him; we should hear him shout, “Listen to God!” John Calvin would not have had recommended that you unthinkingly and uncritically follow a mere man: it would have been repugnant to this eminently gifted and godly saint, utterly persuaded that he was what he was by the grace of God. He would call you to a noble-minded embrace of God’s truth and its rule of faith and life. If you would honour Calvin, honour his God and Saviour. If you would esteem Calvin, esteem Christ and his Word. His legacy is of a man subject to God in all his majesty, and constrained to live and die for his glory. His life and work reveal a man kneeling before God, subject to his Word, determined to know and to do his will, whatever the cost. The best response to Calvin, the greatest tribute you can pay the man, is to cultivate the same disposition and attitude to his God and ours. He was a Christlike man, and he would have had you see Jesus: imitate him, then, but only and just as he imitated Christ.

² Quoted by David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (Oxford: OUP, 1995), 20.

³ Quoted by Robert Reymond, *John Calvin: His Life and Influence* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2004), 129.

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