



JOHN CALVIN

THE THEOLOGIAN OF THE REFORMATION

Christian Biographies
Richard D. Phillips
Second Presbyterian Church

CALVIN'S EARLY LIFE

- Born in Noyon, France, July 10, 1509
 - Son of a lawyer and an inn-keeper's daughter.
 - Second generation of the Reformation; was 8 years old when Luther nailed his *95 Theses*.
 - Lost both of his parents early: mother when age 6; father when 21.
- Studied law in Paris, an intellectual center of the Renaissance.
 - Earned his doctorate in 1533; published a study of Seneca's *De Clementia*.
 - Paris was a center of the new Humanism, but officially still loyally Roman Catholic
- Conversion and Flight, 1533
 - Few details known other than the influence of Nicolas Cop.
 - When Cop published a Lutheran critique of the church, followed by the *Affair of the Placards*, Cop and Calvin fled for safety (1534).
 - Calvin took refuge in Basel, writing his first version of *The Institutes*, seeking to persuade King Francis that the evangelicals were not heretics (1536).



CALVIN'S BEGINNING IN GENEVA

- **Providential Arrival (1536)**
 - Seeking a quiet place for study in northern Italy, Calvin traveled through Geneva.
 - Wm Farel recognized him as the author of the *Institutes*, demanded that Calvin stay.
- **Ministry at St. Peter's**
 - Starting as an unpaid lecturer, Calvin was elected as pastor (1537).
 - Began preaching morning & evening, plus every weekday.
 - Started writing instructional materials for church members
- **Civil Contest**
 - Geneva was ruled by a Council, which controlled both state and church.
 - Calvin's public persuasion started to become effective in winning approval for Reformation
 - Calvin's leadership brought resentment and political opposition.
 - Wrote *Articles on the Organization of the Church and Its Worship* (1537).
 - In a squabble over the proper administration of the Lord's Supper, Calvin & Farel were expelled from Geneva (1538).



“After hearing that I was determined to pursue my own private studies – when he realized that he would get nowhere by pleas – he came to the point of a curse: that it would please God to curse my leisure and the quiet for my studies that I was seeking, if in such a grave emergency I should withdraw and refuse to give aid and help. This word so overwhelmed me that I desisted from the journey I had undertaken.”

CALVIN IN STRASBOURG

- Strasbourg was another leading Reformation city, led by Martin Bucer.
 - A settled church-state city where Calvin could study and write in peace: “the happiest years of his life.”
- Valuing Calvin and worrying about his poor health, Bucer sought for him to marry.
 - Idelette de Bure, widow of a godly man in Calvin’s church, married him. Their one child, Jacques, died in infancy.
- Meanwhile, back in Geneva
 - Cardinal Sadoleto sought to restore the city to the Roman fold, enjoying some success among the people with his moderate ideas.
 - Sought to draft an answer, Calvin wrote *A Reply to Cardinal Sadoleto*, an acknowledged masterpiece of Reformation apology.
 - Asked to return, Calvin sought to decline: “I would rather die a thousand deaths on a cross...”

“If you admit it to be a fearful destruction to the soul, when, by false opinions, divine truth is turned into a lie, it now only remains for us to inquire which of the two parties retains that worship of God which is alone legitimate” *Reply to Sadoleto*.



“I am not of the wild race of lovers who, at the first sight of a fine figure, embrace all the faults of their beloved. This is the only beauty which allures me, if she is chaste, if not too nice or fastidious, if economical, if patient, if there is hope that she will be interested about my health.”

RETURN TO GENEVA / REFORMATION LEADERSHIP

- Return to Geneva (13 Sept. 1541)
 - Resumed preaching at St. Peter's
 - Submitted *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* to City Council (Presbyterian church government)
 - Gave the Consistory authority over church rule / spiritual matters of flock
 - Began publication of his *Commentaries*, starting with Romans.
 - Years of reform: 1541-1546
- Death of Idelette (1549)
 - "I have been bereaved of the best friend of my life, of one who, if it has been so ordained, would willingly have shared not only my poverty but also my death. During her life she was the faithful helper of my ministry. From her I never experienced the slightest hindrance."
- The Libertine Affair (1546-1553)
 - The "Libertines" claimed that having been saved by grace they were exempted from moral obligations. Contained many wealthy and politically powerful families.
 - Speeches were made in Geneva denouncing Calvin's doctrine. In 1547, a death threat was left on Calvin's pulpit. The Libertines soon took control of the City Council.
 - Assault on the Lord's Table. Calvin tenders resignation but is declined (1553).



THE SERVETUS AFFAIR

- Michael Servetus, a Spaniard, was a notorious heretic, particularly denying the Trinity, and espousing immorality.
- Was condemned throughout Europe: convicted in Lyon; burned in effigy.
- Against Calvin's counsel, Servetus arrived in Geneva in 1553 and was immediately arrested.
- Charged with heresy, Servetus was convicted and burned to death.
 - Calvin had no authority in the trial, not even having the right to vote in Geneva.
 - Calvin testified against his doctrine, agreed with the death penalty but argued against burning.
 - Event took place at a time when Calvin's influence with the Council was at its lowest; it is thought that the Council wanted to out-do Calvin in reforming zeal.
 - In a generation when thousands were put to death for heresy, scores by burning, Servetus was the only man executed for heresy during Calvin's years in Geneva.
- Servetus' death has been used as a principle smear against Calvin and his doctrine ever since.



CALVIN'S MISSIONARY ZEAL

- Seeking to meet the widespread need for pastors, Calvin founded his Academy (1559).
 - Reform-minded students from across Europe came to study.
- The Genevan exiles from England, during Mary I's persecution, worshiped & studied under Calvin, taking his influence back home.
- Calvin's writings, and students, gave him an international influence like no other of his time.
- Scores of missionaries sent to France, committed to evangelism and church planting.
 - By 1562, there were 1785 consistories in France.
- So many of Calvin's students were martyred that the Academy was nicknamed "Calvin's School of Death."



"I beseech our good Lord that He would be pleased to make you feel in every way the worth of His protection of His own, to fill you with His Holy Spirit, who gives you prudence and virtue, and brings you peace, joy, and contentment; and may the name of our Lord Jesus be glorified by you to the edification of His Church" – conclusion of Calvin's letter to the Five Martyrs of Lyons, 1552.

CALVIN'S LATER YEARS

- The acknowledged leader of the Reformation's 2nd generation, Calvin sought unity with Lutherans to defend against the military threat of Emperor Charles V.
- Wrote thousands of letters and scores of valuable books.
 - His *Institutes* was put into final form in 1559. Commentaries on nearly the entire Bible.
- His authority in Geneva now uncontested, he further reformed the city, including its industries and social services.
- By 1560, Calvin was very ill. Died May 27, 1564
 - Per his instructions, buried in an unmarked grave

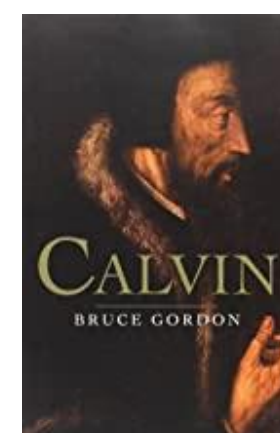
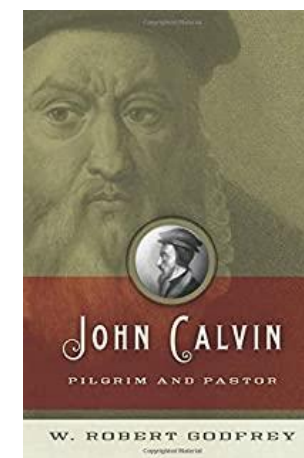
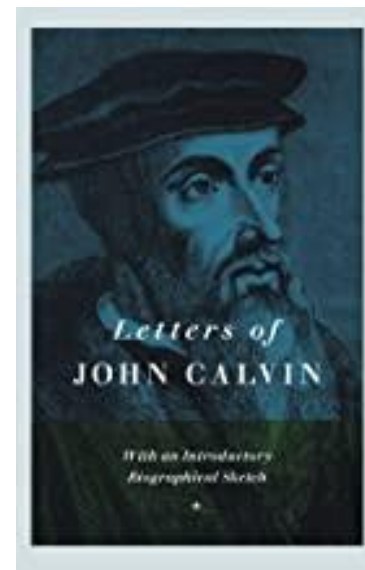
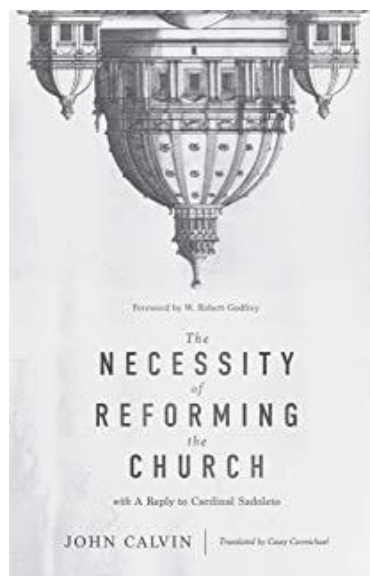
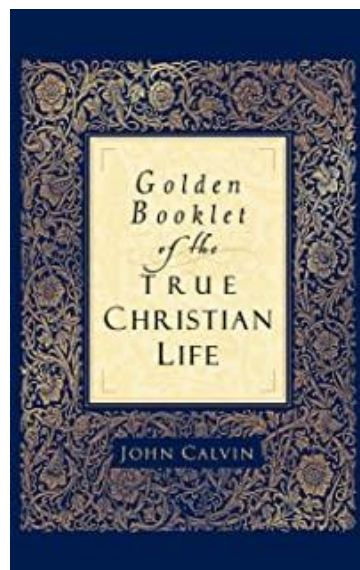
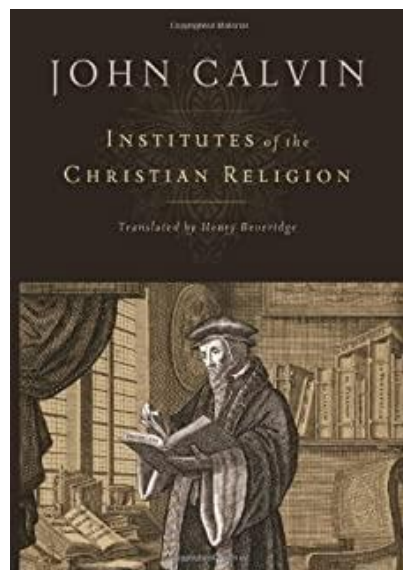


CALVIN'S LEGACY

- Passed on a detailed theology, centered on the knowledge of the sovereign God, the revelation of God through His Word, and union with Christ through faith.
 - Not an original thinker (none of his ideas were self-originated) but a brilliant systematizer.
- His writings and inspiration have had a titanic influence, far beyond his own lifetime, in every corner of the world.
 - Scottish Presbyterianism / English & American Puritanism / Dutch Reformed Churches / French Huguenots
- Based on his doctrine of vocation and the glory of God, the “Calvinist work ethic” is credited with fueling material prosperity throughout Protestantism.



FURTHER READING



NEXT WEEK...

John Paton:

Missionary to New Guinea

