

Church History (27): The Life and Ministry of John Calvin (1)

With regards to the life and ministry of John Calvin, I intend to consider his early years and conversion, ministry in Geneva, marriage, later years and death, and theological writings. We will consider the first four this week, leaving his theological writings for next week.

I. The Life and Ministry of John Calvin

1. *Early years and conversion.* "John Calvin was born July, 1509, at Noyon, in the northern province of Picardy. Noyon was approximately 67 miles northeast of Paris. The population at the time was about 6,000" (Vineyard).¹ His father was a lawyer and a person of considerable importance. His mother died when he was five or six. At fourteen, Calvin set out for Paris where he engaged in general and theological studies. "When I was as yet a very little boy, my father had destined me for the study of theology. But afterwards, when he considered that the legal profession commonly raised those who followed it to wealth, this prospect induced him suddenly to change his purpose" (Calvin).² As a result, in 1528 he moved from Paris to the famous law schools in Orleans and Bourges, where he completed a degree in law in 1532. Upon his father's death he returned to Paris to study the classics and Hebrew. Here he experienced what he called "a sudden conversion."

And first, since I was too obstinately devoted to the superstitions of Popery to be easily removed from so profound an abyss of mire, God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame, which was more hardened in such matters than might have been expected from one at my early period of life. Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with so intense a desire to make progress therein, that although I did not altogether leave off other studies, I yet pursued them with less vigor.³

Two important events happened during these early years at Paris. First, he witnessed the martyrdom of a friend. Calvin began to secretly gather with other believers, where he met a friend by the name of Pointent, who grew increasingly bold with his Protestant views. This resulted in his arrest and death at the stake. "Calvin stood there and watched as the executioner cut out his tongue and eyes. This was to keep him from blaspheming the institutions of the Roman Catholic Church and from giving his tormentors fierce looks" (Vineyard).⁴ Second, he wrote a sermon for the newly elected rector of the University of Paris (Nicolas Cop). This address said nothing about indulgences, good works, or the Church, but of Christ and forgiveness of sins in Him. "In Parliament where the Roman Catholics were entrenched, it was decided to burn Cop at the stake. However, students who were followers of his, heard the news and helped him disguise and escape to Basel (Switzerland). The Papists then went after the author of the speech. But Calvin also was warned and was let down out of window in bed sheets" (Vineyard).⁵ Calvin eventually found refuge in Basel. "When Calvin arrived in Basel in 1535, he was penniless. He lived in a humble house undisturbed by the outside world. It was here that the first edition of the *Institutes* was written" (Vineyard).⁶

2. *Ministry in Geneva.* Geneva is a French-speaking city in Switzerland (located where the French, Swiss, and German borders meet). Because of the previous labors of Zwingli (and others), Switzerland

¹ Jim Vineyard, *John Calvin: Preacher of Righteousness*, 3

² John Calvin, *Commentaries*, 4: xl

³ John Calvin, *Commentaries*, 4: xl-xli

⁴ Jim Vineyard, *John Calvin: Preacher of Righteousness*, 16

⁵ Jim Vineyard, *John Calvin: Preacher of Righteousness*, 18

⁶ Jim Vineyard, *John Calvin: Preacher of Righteousness*, 21-22

was far more sympathetic to the Reformation than France. We must remember, men such as Luther and Zwingli were first-generation Reformers, whereas Calvin was a second-generation Reformer, who had the benefit of building on their labors. "Calvin was 25 years younger than Luther and Zwingli and had the great advantage of building on their foundation. He was inferior to them as a man of action but superior as a thinker and organizer. They cut their stones in the quarries; he polished them in the workshop. They produced new ideas; he constructed the ideas into a system" (Vineyard).⁷ "Though Luther and Calvin never met, they greatly admired one another's works. Luther praised Calvin's early writings, stating, 'His books I have pursued with singular pleasure.' Calvin, in turn, addressed Luther, twenty-five years his elder, as his 'most respected father' and 'a remarkable apostle of Christ, through whose work and ministry, most of all, the purity of the gospel has been restored in our time'" (Lawson).⁸

(1) His first stay in Geneva (1536-1538). Calvin left Paris in 1536 for Strasbourg (Germany), but because the road was barred by troops, he was forced to detour south, bringing him into Geneva. He planned to stay only one night. "He wanted to live quietly as a scholar. He was frail and tired and wanted some rest. God, however had other plans for Calvin. These plans were made clear when Calvin met William Farel in Geneva in 1536. Farel heard that Calvin was staying at an inn in Geneva while on his way to Strasbourg, so he visited him there" (Beeke).⁹ "With great eloquence Farel began to demonstrate to Calvin why he should stay in Geneva and not leave. He was 20 years older than Calvin, and he told about the miraculous way the city had been won for the Reformation. But Calvin said he wanted to learn and study, not teach and preach. With eyebrows lifted in a threatening way, and with his eyes hurling lightning, Farel said, 'You are concerned about your rest and your personal interest; therefore, I proclaim to you in the Name of the 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!'" (Vineyard).¹⁰

Wide-eyed, Calvin stared at the man which had thrown this horrible curse at him. His whole body trembled. A terrible clearness illuminated him. It was not the man who stood before him that spoke, but the Lord Himself through his mouth. He felt the presence of the Invisible and seemed to perceive the hand of God which, coming from heaven, descended upon his head, and rooted him irrevocably to the place that he had desired to leave. As if under searing fire, his defiance melted, and he offered his hand to the preacher, a tear rolling over his hollow cheek, he said, 'I obey God.'¹¹

"Calvin began his career as a reformer at Geneva with the status of Reader in Holy Scripture to the Church in Geneva. Before being a preacher, then, he was a professor. But he was very soon commissioned to preach sermons and to take part in the ecclesiastical organization. Thus, from the beginning, the four domains in which he was to do really original work—exegesis and dogmatics, preaching and the reconstitution of the Church—were open to his initiative" (Wendel).¹² The city of Geneva was governed by what was called a Council of Two Hundred. This group of men held full legislative and judicial authority over the city. "Executive functions were exercised by the Little Council which consisted of 25 members, 16 of whom were appointed by the Council of Two Hundred and the others elected annually by the General Council of the citizenry" (Lindberg).¹³ "The Council was asked by

⁷ Jim Vineyard, *John Calvin: Preacher of Righteousness*, 1

⁸ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 427

⁹ Joel Beeke, *Reformation Heroes*, 121

¹⁰ Jim Vineyard, *John Calvin: Preacher of Righteousness*, 34

¹¹ Jim Vineyard, *John Calvin: Preacher of Righteousness*, 34

¹² Francois Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, 50

¹³ Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 256

Farel to provide a suitable support for their new minister, but they were slow to do it, not dreaming that he would become the most distinguished citizen, and calling him simply 'that Frenchman'" (Schaff).¹⁴

The first thing Calvin did was write his *Articles Concerning the Organization of the Church and Worship*. "These were to serve as a foundation for the new ecclesiastical organization. And in this text, we already find some of the cardinal ideas which were to characterize the work of the Calvinists" (Wendel).¹⁵ "These *Articles* addressed the discipline of the Church, recommended frequent and solemn celebration of the Lord's Supper, singing of Psalms, regular instruction of the youth, abolition of the papal marriage laws, the maintenance of public order, and the exclusion of unworthy communicants" (Schaff).¹⁶ The *Articles* were followed by a *Confession of Faith* (1536/37) and *Catechism* (1537). "On July 29, 1537, the Council of the Two Hundred ordered all the citizens, male and female, to assent to the *Confession of Faith* in the Church of St. Peter. It was done by a large number. On Nov.12, the Council even passed a measure to banish all who would not take the oath. The *Confession* was thus to be made the law of Church and State" (Schaff).¹⁷ The *Confession* began with the following statement: "A Confession of Faith: Which all the Citizens and Inhabitants of Geneva and Subjects of the Country Are to Swear to Keep and Hold."¹⁸

"Calvin endured much persecution in Geneva because he boldly preached the doctrines of grace. His home was often riddled with bullets. People named their dogs after him to ridicule him" (Beeke).¹⁹ His opposition came from various sources. Many within the Council felt threatened by Calvin, others retained Roman Catholic sympathies, and then others were merely ignorant. "The obligation imposed upon the Genevans to sign the *Confession* proved to be a mistake. By opposing the Catholic to the Reformed factions of the population, and thus rendering the existence of any middle party impossible, the leaders of the Church had hindered the progressive formation of a strong majority in favor of their plans" (Wendel).²⁰ "By February of 1538, the four new mayors of the city were definitely opposed to Farel and Calvin. As soon as the heads of this minority party became the rulers, they began to compromise. They continued to preach against the mockers, and finally against the council members themselves" (Vineyard).²¹ "They attacked the Council from the pulpit. Even Calvin went so far as to denounce it as the Devil's Council. Slanders were circulated against the preachers, and in the night, they were disturbed by violent knocks at the door of their dwellings" (Schaff).²²

(2) His exile in Strasbourg (1538-1541). In the beginning of 1538, after two years of being in Geneva, tension between Calvin and the Council came to head. The issue concerned who determined who should partake of the Supper. According to Calvin, this authority belonged to the church and not the Council. "Calvin's first attempts to reform Geneva not only failed but led to his expulsion from the city. It was obvious to him that church worship and discipline belonged in the hands of the leaders of the church, not the hands of the politicians" (Lindberg).²³ "The exercise of church discipline at the Communion table, did not sit well with prominent Geneva citizens, many of whom were living sinful lives. This crisis reached the boiling point on April 23, 1538, when Calvin refused to administer Communion to certain leading people who were living in open sin. The tensions grew so great that Calvin and Farel

¹⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8:349-350

¹⁵ Francois Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, 50-51

¹⁶ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8:355

¹⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8:356-357

¹⁸ *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*, 1:395

¹⁹ Joel Beeke, *Reformation Heroes*, 121

²⁰ Francois Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, 53

²¹ Jim Vineyard, *John Calvin: Preacher of Righteousness*, 41

²² Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8:360

²³ Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 257

were forced to leave Geneva" (Lawson).²⁴ "In April 1538 Calvin and Farel were expelled from the city. After another short stay in Basel, Calvin was persuaded to move to Strasbourg, where he had been headed before being waylaid, so to say, by the fiery Farel. Calvin spent three years in Strasbourg, and they were undoubtedly the happiest years of his life. They were also perhaps the most decisive years for his development as a reformer and a theologian" (George).²⁵ While in Strasbourg, Calvin became the pastor of nearly five hundred Protestant refugees from France. Calvin said: "Alarmed by the example of Jonah which he (Bucer) set before me, I still continued in the work of teaching. And although I always continued like myself, studiously avoiding celebrity; yet I was carried, I know not how, as it were by force to the Imperial assemblies, where, willing or unwilling, I was under the necessity of appearing before the eyes of many."²⁶ Here Calvin published his *Commentary on Romans* and enlarged his *Institutes*, translating it into French. He also wrote important smaller treatises: *The Form of Ecclesiastical Prayers and Hymns*, which would have a lasting effect on Reformed worship; *Little Treatise on the Holy Supper*, which was his first effort to state a median position between the Lutheran and Zwinglian views, and *A Reply to Cardinal Sadoleto*, who had written a letter to Geneva to exhort them (in Calvin's absence) to return to Rome.

In addition to these writings (and the fact that Calvin married in Strasbourg, something we will return to later), one of the most important things about these three years, was the influence of Martin Bucer. "Calvin was impressed by the church order that Bucer established in Strasbourg. Bucer promoted four offices: doctor/teacher, pastor, elder, and deacon. Calvin later implemented this structure in Geneva as the model he regarded as most biblical. Furthermore, Bucer's view of the Supper greatly influenced Calvin. Bucer felt that Luther went too far in stating that Christ was physically present in the Lord's Supper, and that Zwingli did not go far enough by treating the Supper only as a memorial. Like Calvin, he insisted that the Lord's Supper was a real means of grace (against Zwingli) and, at the same time, was essentially spiritual (against Luther)" (Beeke).²⁷ "Calvin's stay in Strasbourg was a fruitful episode in his life, and an education for more successful work in Geneva. His views were enlarged and deepened. He gained valuable experience" (Schaff).²⁸

(3) His second stay in Geneva (1541-1564). "After Calvin had spent three happy years in Strasbourg, the city fathers of Geneva wrote to ask him to return as their pastor. In his absence, the religious and political situation had deteriorated. But Calvin had no intention of returning. In a letter to Farel on March 29, 1540, he said, 'There is no place under heaven that I am more afraid of. Rather would I submit to death a hundred times than to that cross, on which one had to perish daily a thousand times over'" (Lawson).²⁹ "When Calvin returned to Geneva, it was to be for 23 years of uninterrupted work until his death on May 27, 1564. The first years were full of the cares and trials he had anticipated. His duties then were more numerous than his first stay. He had to reorganize the church, to introduce a constitution and an order of worship, to preach, to teach, to settle controversies, and to provide for the instruction of youth. Although it is no wonder that he often felt discouraged and exhausted, a divine trust in God and a sense of duty kept him at the task" (Vineyard).³⁰ "Calvin combined the offices of theological professor, preacher, pastor, church-ruler, superintendent of schools, with the extra labors

²⁴ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 433

²⁵ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 188

²⁶ John Calvin, *Commentaries*, 4: xlii-xliii

²⁷ Joel Beeke, *Reformation Heroes*, 53

²⁸ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8:366

²⁹ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 434

³⁰ Jim Vineyard, *John Calvin: Preacher of Righteousness*, 53-54

of equal, yea, greater importance, as author, correspondent, and leader of the expanding movement of the Reformation in Western Europe" (Schaff).³¹

(a) Calvin as teacher. "As time went on, and more and more Protestants heard about Calvin's efforts in this city, they fled to Geneva from their persecutors in other countries. Soon there were more Protestants than Roman Catholics in Geneva. Calvin established schools for young children as well as a Protestant university called the Geneva Academy. The Academy was set up by Calvin especially to train young men to become pastors. Many of these pastors returned to France to spread the gospel there" (Beeke).³²

(b) Calvin as preacher. "When Calvin returned to Geneva in 1541, in his first sermon, he resumed his exposition of Scripture at the next verse after the last one he had covered before being exiled. This continuation was intended as a hold statement that verse-by-verse preaching of the Word would hold the primary place in his ministry" (Lawson).³³ "We may remember Calvin for other things, but as he grew and matured, 'minister of the Word and sacrament' became the core of his identity" (Horton).³⁴ James Montgomery Boice said, "Calvin was pre-eminently a preacher" and Steven Lawson said, "Calvin preached some four thousand expository sermons during his years in Geneva." "Calvin preached from the NT on Sunday mornings, from the NT or the Psalms on Sunday afternoons, and from the OT every morning of the week, every other week. In this consecutive fashion, Calvin preached through most of the books of the Scriptures" (Lawson).³⁵

(c) Calvin as writer. Calvin wrote hundreds of theological treatises, commentaries on almost every book of the Bible, and thousands of personal letters. "Calvin was the great letter-writer of the Reformation Age. About 4,000 of his letters have come down to us, some of them almost of the size of treatises, many of them practically theological tracts, but many of them also of the most intimate character in which he pours out his heart" (Warfield).³⁶

(d) Calvin as organizer. "When Calvin returned to Geneva, he declared, in the first place, that he could not properly fulfil his ministry, unless, along with Christian doctrine, a regular presbytery with full ecclesiastical authority were established" (Beza).³⁷ He summarized what would become known as Presbyterianism in his *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*. "While Presbyterianism found classical expression in the Westminster Standards, it's firmly rooted in the Calvinistic churches of Europe, particularly the church in Geneva that was led by the Reformer John Calvin" (Thomas).³⁸ Of the three churches in Geneva, each sent a pastor and one elder, to form a presbytery. This presbytery formed a ruling body that gave direction and instruction to the local Churches.

(e) Calvin as missionary. "Calvin dispatched French-speaking pastors, whom he had trained for the gospel ministry, from Geneva to other French-speaking provinces in Europe. Most went to France, where the Reformed movement grew to encompass about one-tenth of the population. Eventually, thirteen hundred Geneva-trained missionaries went to France. By 1560, more than hundred underground churches had been planted in France by men sent out from Geneva. Further, Geneva-trained

³¹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8:443-444

³² Joel Beeke, *Reformation Heroes*, 126

³³ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 436

³⁴ Michael Horton, *Calvin on the Christian Life*, 21

³⁵ Steven Lawson, *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion Doctrine and Doxology*, 73

³⁶ B.B. Warfield, *Works*, 5:7

³⁷ John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, 1: xxxviii

³⁸ Derek Thomas, *Living for God's Glory: An Introduction to Calvinism*, 223

missionaries planted churches in Italy, Hungary, Poland, Germany, the Netherlands, England, Scotland, and even Brazil" (Lawson).³⁹

3. *Marriage*. "Calvin married in August, 1540 while exiled in Strasbourg. He himself was in no hurry to get married, and put it off till he was over thirty. What led him first to think of it, was the sense of loneliness and the need of proper care, that he might be able the better to serve the Church" (Schaff).⁴⁰ Calvin first mentioned the subject of marriage in a letter to Farel, from Strasbourg, May 19, 1539, in which he says: "I am none of those insane lovers who, when once smitten with the fine figure of a woman, embrace also her faults. This only is the beauty which allures me, if she be chaste, obliging, not fastidious, economical, patient, and careful for my health."⁴¹ Calvin married Idelette De Buren (a widowed Anabaptist) and member of his church. Her former husband died of the plague in the spring of 1540. She brought to the marriage two children and bore him three children (all of which died at birth or soon after). Sickness marked the early months of his marriage. He wrote to Farel about his sickness a month after his wedding: "It seemed indeed, as if it has been so ordered on purpose that our wedlock might not be over joyous, that we might not exceed all bounds, that the Lord thus thwarted our joy by moderating it."⁴² This sickness was not limited to Calvin. In the same letter to Farel he said of his new wife: "While I was still suffering under the weakness of which I have spoken, my wife took a fever, from which she is now beginning to get well, and that with a different kind of complaint; for since the last eight days she has been so exhausted by frequent vomiting and otherwise, that she can with difficulty sit in bed."⁴³ After nine years of marriage life and prolonged sickness, Idelette died. A week later Calvin wrote to a friend: "I have been bereaved of the best companion of my life, of one who, had it been so ordered, would not only have been the willing sharer of my exile and sorrow, but even of my death. During her life she was the faithful helper of my ministry. She was never troublesome to me throughout the entire course of her illness; she was more anxious about her children than about herself."⁴⁴ Four days later, Calvin wrote to Farel. "About the sixth hour of the day, on which she yielded up her soul to the Lord, a brother addressed some pious words to her, and while he was doing so, she spoke aloud, so that all saw that her heart was raised far above the world. For these were her words: 'O glorious resurrection! O God of Abraham, and of all our fathers, in Thee have the faithful trusted during so many past ages, and none of them have trusted in vain. I also will have hope.'⁴⁵ Calvin ended the letter by saying: "I at present control my sorrow so that my duties may not be interfered with. But in the mean while the Lord has sent other trials upon me."⁴⁶

4. *Later years and death*. Calvin grew very sick in the spring of 1564. He died May 27, 1564. Afterwards, friends found that he gave orders to be buried without a marker. "Four days after his death, the Geneva Register simply wrote: Calvin went to God May 27 of the present year" (Beeke).⁴⁷ Beza (Calvin's colleague and successor), ended his account of Calvin's life: "Having been a spectator of his conduct for sixteen years, I have given a faithful account both of his life and of his death, and I can now declare, that in him all men may see a most beautiful example of the Christian character, an example which it is as easy to slander as it is difficult to imitate."⁴⁸

³⁹ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 436

⁴⁰ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8:413-414

⁴¹ John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, 4:141

⁴² John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, 4:204

⁴³ John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, 4:205

⁴⁴ John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, 5:216

⁴⁵ John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, 5:217-218

⁴⁶ John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, 5:219

⁴⁷ Joel Beeke, *Reformation Heroes*, 126

⁴⁸ John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, 1: c