

CHAPTER 9

JOHN CALVIN: REFORMATION IN FRANCE AND SWITZERLAND

Life and Work of John Calvin (1509-1564)

A. Comparison of Calvin to Luther

1. Second generation reformer

26 years younger than Luther

2. Careful exegete and systematizer

Whereas Luther was issue oriented

3. Scholar by nature

Calvin a scholar forced by circumstances to become practical; Luther was driven to more scholarship by practical needs

4. Natural leader

This trait common to both men

Luther – more emotional and bombastic

Calvin – more logical, exegetical

Both – totally dedicated, inspirational to followers and disciples

5. Irenic

Luther responsible for Lutheran-Reformed division much more than Reformed people were

6. More doctrinally developed

- Basically the same except for communion
- Agree on general doctrines of Reformation
- Agree on sovereignty of God and predestination
- Lord's Supper—difference
- Common grace—Calvin developed more than Luther

B. Beginning of the Reformation in France

1. Jacques Lefèvre (1455-1536)

[Already discussed under Luther, M.7]; translated Bible from Vulgate into French; taught at university of Paris until 1525; when branded as a heretic in 1512, he said to his student Farel, "God will reform the church and you shall witness it."

1525, fled to Strasbourg and later to Navarre; he later regretted his flight from martyrdom:

"Thousands have suffered and died in defense of the doctrine in which I instructed them; and I, unfaithful shepherd that I am, after reaching so advanced an age, when I ought to love nothing less than life, or rather to desire death, have basely avoided the martyr's crown, and betrayed the cause of my God!"

2. William Farel (1489-1565)

Student in Paris under Lefèvre; by 1520, changed from strong Catholic to strong reformer; 1523, expelled from France

Traveling preacher and reformer, especially in French-speaking parts of Switzerland and in southwest Germany

3. Repression in France

At first Francis I protected reformers (his sister Margaret of Navarre a Protestant); gradually changed

1534, placards against mass appeared in Paris—one on door of Francis's bedchamber; changed his attitude

C. Beginning of the reformation in Geneva

1528, Farel's powerful preaching and disputations helped win city of Berne (in German section of Switzerland) over to Reformation

1532, Farel began evangelizing Geneva; Roman Catholic bishop there had been corrupt; uprising chased him out; Farel brought in to preach, caused a great stir (cf. Schaff, *HCC* 8:243-244)

Dukes of Savoy opposed reform in Geneva; Berne helped Geneva; 1535, city council voted Protestantism; monks and nuns left city; people largely indifferent

Organization of city: citizens meet once a year, elect 600 council members; 600 elect 200 leaders; 200 elect 4 syndics

1536, Farel read Calvin's *Institutes* (published 1536), liked them; Calvin on way to Strasbourg, stayed in Geneva overnight; Farel met Calvin, persuaded him to stay in Geneva

Council voted a small salary for "Farel and a young Frenchman"; Farel and Calvin participated in a debate in another city (Lausanne), defeated Catholic debaters, returned to Geneva; Calvin and Farel in Geneva two years (1536-1538)

Berne wanted Geneva to change its liturgy to resemble theirs; council voted to approve; Calvin opposed secular control of services and wanted to institute church-controlled discipline (Schaff, *HCC* 8:355); after Calvin refused to offer communion on Easter Sunday amidst lawless attacks on preachers, the city council gave Calvin and Farel four days, then 24 hours to change; they refused

1538, Calvin and Farel left Geneva; Calvin went to Strasbourg for two years; Geneva asked Calvin to return; finally returned, stayed there rest of his life

D. Early life of John Calvin

1. Parentage and youth

Grandfather a peasant (cf. Luther); father worked way out of poverty, was notary public, worked for bishop of Noyons

Calvin born July 10, 1509; second of five sons; good elementary education at Noyons, with noble's sons; father arranged for him to have two ecclesiastical benefices by age 18

2. Education

Father sent him to Paris to study for priesthood; initially he studied Latin, philosophy, and theology; father got in argument with bishop in Noyons, quit working for him; father ordered Calvin to change to study law—in Orleans (southern France)

Calvin received there a good education in law under two of the greatest jurists of the day; because of his gifts in law, Calvin received a full scholarship in completing his doctor of law, and also was consulted in the matter of King Henry VIII's divorce

1531, father died; Calvin returned to Paris, where he completed his course in the classics

3. Conversion (ca. 1532)

Not as many details as Luther's available; some references to it in Calvin's writings

At both Orleans and Paris he has contact with Protestant (or pro-Protestant humanistic) teachers; power of God changed him around, from his "obdurate attachment to papistical superstitions"

Calvin's only self-account of his conversion is in the "Preface" to his *Commentary on the Psalms*:

"At first, since I was too obstinately devoted to the superstitions of Popery to be easily extricated 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 ardor.

“After my heart had long been prepared for the most earnest self-examination, on a sudden the full knowledge of the truth, like a bright light, disclosed to me the abyss of errors in which I was weltering, the sin and shame with which I was defiled. A horror seized on my soul, when I became conscious of my wretchedness and of the more terrible misery that was before me. And what was left, O Lord, for me, miserable and abject, but, with tears and cries of supplication to abjure the old life which Thou condemned, and to flee into Thy path?”

4. First writing (1532)

Started it before his conversion; completed after converted; commentary on Seneca's *On Clemency* (Seneca had been Nero's tutor, brother of Gallio [Acts 18:12])

5. Departure from Paris (November, 1533)

Calvin 24 years old; becoming leader of Protestants at Paris; his friend Nicholas Cop elected rector of university of Paris; Calvin helped him prepare rectorial address—attacked church, approved Luther's reforms, including justification by faith; negative reaction; Cop and Calvin both had to leave Paris

Calvin spent next three years traveling in France, Switzerland, Italy; Calvin resigned his two Noyons ecclesiastical benefices

6. First published religious writing (1534)

Psychopannychia, against soul-sleep doctrine of Anabaptists; this was an apology to show that the Protestants were reasonable and not radical

psyche (soul) + *pan* (all) + *nux* (night)

7. Calvin's *Institutes* (March, 1536)

Calvin 26 years old; published first edition of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

Dedicated it to Francis I of France; he opposed persecution of Protestants in Germany by Charles V, yet he himself persecuted Protestants in France

Seven chapters, a short summary of the Christian faith; soon became popular textbook and apology for Protestants

Calvin wrote it in Basel (northwest Switzerland); wrote it in fine Latin, then in French (French style good too, influenced French language); many editions during his lifetime, until 79 chapters in 1559 (5th edition)

8. Trip to Italy and France

In Italy, stayed in home of a countess who sheltered Protestants; spoke publicly in French, disguised

Set out for Strasbourg (in Alsace, on French-German border, an imperial city, free and Protestant); went indirectly, through Geneva; stayed there for the night

9. Call to Geneva

Farel heard Calvin was in town; exhorted him strongly to remain in Geneva and lead the Reformation there; Calvin refused, wanted quiet life

Farel persisted, said that if Calvin refused the call of the church, the curse of God would be upon him: “You are only following your own wishes! If you do not help us in the work of the Lord, the Lord will punish you for seeking your own interest rather than His.” (Cf. Fisher, *History of the Reformation*, p. 211)

Calvin finally consented to stay and help in the church. He reflected years later: “Being by nature a bit anti-social and shy, I always loved retirement and peace.... but in spite of my natural inclination, He has thrust me into the limelight and made me ‘get into the game,’ as they say.” (Preface to Calvin’s *Commentary on the Psalms*)

E. Calvin’s first period in Geneva (July, 1536 – April, 1538)

Assistant to Farel (“young Frenchman”; cf. “Barnabas and Saul”)

Worked hard, so that Geneva became a thoroughly Christian city; made it a light for all Europe (even though many people there still worldly)

Planned sermons, catechism classes, etc.; assisted city council in civic issues (this caused him personal enemies)

In Lausanne, he and Farel defeated Catholics in debate; Farel also continued to help the church in Berne

Berne wanted unity of services; Farel and Calvin said government should not interfere; council forced them to leave Geneva

Calvin departed with the remark, "If I had served man, this would have been a poor reward, but I have served a greater Master Who never fails to perform what He promises."

Farel moved to Neuchatel, stayed there the rest of his life (27 years)

Calvin accepted the invitation of another reformer, Martin Bucer, to move at last to Strasbourg

F. Calvin at Strasbourg (1538-1541)

1. Call from Bucer

Bucer asked Calvin to take over the work in Strasbourg among French refugees there

Martin Bucer (1491-1551):

Scholar and Dominican monk; converted to Lutheranism (later became Reformed) when he saw Luther at the meeting in Heidelberg in 1518; left Roman Catholic church; soon married (1521)

Became leader of church in Strasbourg for twenty-five years (1523-1548); worked hard for Lutheran-Reformed unity; also present at Protestant-Catholic colloquies; worked out liturgy and church government for Reformed churches, impacting Calvin's thinking in this area

1548, many years after Calvin left, Bucer was forced by the Interim to flee Strasbourg; he moved to England, at invitation of Archbishop Cranmer, where he helped lead the Reformation as Professor of Divinity at Cambridge until his death three years later

2. The "Little Church"

400 French refugees, not so worldly, a good congregation; Calvin adapted a French order of service, wrote some hymns, worked on church government

2½ years there, the “happiest” of his life, despite his poverty

3. Calvin’s marriage

Many friends had suggestions, but no suitable wife found

1540, married a widow of an Anabaptist preacher turned Reformed, Idelette de Bure; two years later, had a son, but he lived only a few days

Married very happily for nine years, then she died; he looked after her children (Schaff, *HCC* 8:418-419); his private life more private and reserved than Luther’s

4. Meeting Melancthon

Met at three meetings, Roman Catholic and Lutheran conferences; friendship started [interesting article in 1977 *Westminster Theological Journal*]

5. Letter of Cardinal Sadolet and Calvin’s reply

Calvin could well have spent rest of his life in Strasbourg except for this event

Sadolet finest type of Catholic; had been secretary of Popes Leo X and Clement; good reputation; wrote open letter to people of Geneva inviting their return to the mother church; accused Protestant leaders of only wanting money (this hurt him); skillful letter

Geneva leaders did not know how to answer his arguments; they sent representatives and a copy to Calvin in Strasbourg

Calvin wrote a masterpiece in reply; answered religious arguments; defended Protestant leaders (compared Roman Catholic and Protestant salaries)

City council printed Sadolet’s and Calvin’s letters; Geneva saved for the Reformation

6. Geneva asks Calvin to return

City sent request to Calvin in Sept., 1540; Calvin reluctant, needed all sorts of assurances; Farel wrote him a letter; Geneva sent large delegation

Calvin finally (after a year) came back, September, 1541; preached on next verse after 2½ years' intermission

G. Reorganization of Geneva (1541-1547)

1. Summary of accomplishments

Great transformation of Geneva in twenty-five years; from “a European-wide reputation for immorality” (*NIDCC*, 178) to a truly Christian city

Preached on 9/10 of Bible, every day and twice on Sunday

Weekly meetings of preachers

Placed Geneva on strong economic base; introduced silk industry; doubled city's income

No vote for Frenchmen for ten years; this law eventually changed; Calvin not even a citizen of Geneva until 1559

Started college

On his desk when he died—plans for improving the guards on the city wall

2. New position

Return to Geneva as “chief pastor”; with “three assistants”

3. New ordinances of religion

a. The Venerable Company (early “classis”)

Minister from Geneva and other cities; met regularly; Calvin never presided, but influenced

b. The Consistory

Calvin had introduced it during his first stay in Geneva; Roman Catholics said the church consisted solely in clergy; Calvin wanted participation by laymen; consistory appointed by city council—visited families in areas; six districts

c. Relation to civil government

Calvin thought the government should keep order, protect the church; church should decide religious life within itself; power to excommunicate resides in church, government not to interfere

d. Oversight of individual conduct

Many detailed laws all through Europe at this time; irregularity of enforcement; Calvin exerted influence for “reasonable” laws, consistently enforced

Council thus enforced its laws more strictly; Calvin had no official capacity in the secular rule of the city (Schaff, *HCC* 8:491)

4. Re-codification of laws

Civil laws updated; negotiations with Berne brought good terms for Geneva; Calvin made some enemies in Berne

5. Psalter

Calvin translated many Psalms into French; so did French poet Clement Marot; Marot originally a Protestant, chased out of France after placard affair; later returned to Roman church, returned to France, and worked more on Psalter

Calvin’s and Marot’s and (later) Beza’s translations of the Psalms comprised the French Psalter; very popular in France, even with Catholics; went through 62 editions in only three years

6. Calvin’s commentaries

All recognize him as the greatest exegete of the Reformation (Schaff, *HCC* 8:280)

“Next to the study of the Scriptures which I earnestly inculcate, I exhort my pupils to peruse Calvin’s *Commentaries*, which extol in loftier terms than [contemporary Dutch divine]; for I affirm that he excels beyond comparison in the interpretation of Scripture, and that his commentaries ought to be more highly valued than all that is handed down to us by the library of the fathers; so that I acknowledge his to have possessed above most others, or rather above all other men, what may be called an eminent spirit of prophecy.

“His *Institutes* ought to be studied after the [Heidelberg] Catechism, as containing a fuller explanation, but with discrimination, like the writings of all men.” (Jacob Arminius)

Commentaries vary in quality

Some well revised (Synoptic Gospels, Romans, major prophets); others were sermons taken down

Covers 23 books of OT, including the Pentateuch and all the prophets; includes all the NT except Revelation

7. Calvin’s correspondence

Thousands of letters, many to prospects, many with problems

8. The academy

Great school; center for Reformation throughout Europe

9. Refugees

Calvin used influence to open city’s doors to refugees; many came, from France, the Netherlands, England, Scotland, Germany, Italy, Spain, Hungary, Poland

Many older residents resentful; eventually Calvin got citizenship for them

One famous refugee—Bernardino Ochino: Italian, vicar-general of Capuchin order; converted to Protestantism; great preacher to Italians

Many refugees from England and Scotland; cf. John Knox in 1550s

10. Civic help

Silk industry doubled income of city

H. Eight years of difficulty (1547-1555)

1. Sources of attacks on Calvin

- Patriots (ancestral families opposed refugees)
- Libertines (many executed or driven out)
- Personal health (kidney stones during sermons)
- Public harassment

2. Servetus affair

Miguel Servetus (1511-1553); brilliant Spaniard; discovered blood circulation; anti-Trinitarian, opposed Catholics and Protestants; tried to debate Calvin in Paris; wrote *Restitution of Christianity* as an answer to Calvin's *Institutes*; correspondence with Calvin—often showed animosity

Lived in Vienna, arrested there by Catholic Inquisition, condemned to be burned; escaped to northern Italy; Calvin told him to stay away from Geneva, came anyway, disguised several weeks

Discovered when he called for the banishment of Calvin, arrested, tried before city council; Calvin the prosecutor; said he denied Christianity, not just Protestantism

25-vote majority on council usually against Calvin, gave Servetus false security; Servetus said Calvin should be arrested; people found out; council sent transcript to four cities, all said death (“end activity”); Calvin said behead, council said burn; Calvin opposed burning, to no avail; Servetus burned at stake

Council stank with people; opposition to Calvin faded, new election produced council 100% for Calvin; ten years of harmony followed

I. Calvin's last years (1555-1564)

1. Complete defeat of opponents

2. Acceptance of refugees as citizens

Calvin himself a citizen in 1559

3. Academy enlarged

Enlarged in 1559; great influence; replaced Wittenberg as center of Reformation; when Calvin died, taken over by Theodore Beza for forty years

4. World-wide influence

Letters to people everywhere; during reign of Mary Tudor in England (Bloody Mary, 1553-1558), many English refugees came to Geneva; John Knox came from England, returned to Scotland, led reformation there

5. Calvin's death (May 27, 1564)

Fifty-five years old; worn out, but still very active; day before death, council visited and reassured him; Theodore Beza confirmed as successor to various offices

Calvin had two men promise to bury him secretly in unmarked grave; possible point now has memorial (stone with J.C.)

Survey of Calvin's Work

Accomplishments

Refined biblical church government

Republicanism: constitutional/representative

Rule by lay elders

Graded courts of fellowship and appeal

Divorced from state control (at least initial steps)

“Men who were accustomed to rule themselves in the Church, would claim the same privilege in the commonwealth” (Fisher)

“The sense of the exaltation of the Almighty Ruler, and of his intimate connection with the minutest incidents and obligations of human life, which is fostered by [Calvin’s] theology, dwarfs all earthly potentates.” (Fisher)

Set biblical exegesis on an even keel

Use of original languages and textual criticism

Analogy of Faith vs. deduced doctrines of scholasticism

Original theology; biblical doctrines developed from Protestant viewpoint

Geneva claimed for Reformation center

Leaders trained for other lands!

Criticisms of Calvin

“Calvin was a cold, logical thinker”

Logical, but note the application of his Logo

“Calvin had a harsh, fatalistic theology”

Note balanced emphasis on whole counsel of God; doctrines of Grace

Theological systems are to be judged by Scripture, not by human presuppositions colored by a modern perspective of egalitarianism. An eternal hell, also, is a difficult doctrine.

Whoever attacked Luther’s parallel doctrine of predestination?

Note the historical results of Calvinism; anything but fatalism.

“Calvin meddled in private lives”

Calvin was not the ruler or legislator of Geneva, but rather the city representatives elected by the people

Every city had laws of personal conduct; Calvin helped simplify and get enforcement of these

Generally, only overt and flagrant rebellion was punished

Note: It may be granted that Calvin’s amillennial eschatology colored his understanding of theonomy/realized theocracy, thus allowing the civil authority the power of coercion in areas today considered to be realms of civil and religious liberty.

d. Servetus Affair (see discussion above)