

CALVIN'S EARLY YEARS (1509-1536)

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If I had to choose a historical figure apart from our Savior whose life and work radically changed my own destiny, John Calvin would without question be that man. Because of Calvin's scholarly and reasoned approach to theology, my Huguenot ancestors risked and later ran for their lives fleeing France to settle in the Netherlands where they could practice the Reformed faith. Hence, thanks to the blessed providence of our Savior, my name, my cultural heritage, and my theological perspective were impacted by the one whose 500th birthday falls in this year of our Lord, 2009.

Born "Jean Cauvin" in Noyon, France, on July 10, 1509, to Jeanne le Franc and Gerard Cauvin, this child prodigy changed his name when a young teenager in college to the Latin form *Ioannis Calvinus*, which in French then became Jean Calvin (hence the English "John Calvin"). Gerard, known for wisdom and prudence, had served in various ecclesiastical offices in Noyon, and wanted his son John to enter the priesthood. Paying for his son's education with the noble family of Hangest de Montmor, Gerard proudly witnessed young John displaying a genius in every subject attempted. At the age of twelve, the boy was awarded a chaplaincy at the cathedral in Noyon, but a plague in that city forced young Calvin and the other students at Hangest to seek refuge sixty miles southwest in Paris. Moving in with an uncle in the bustling capital of France, Calvin began his college studies in 1523 (at age fourteen) at the College de la Marche. Soon he transferred to a more ecclesiastical and prestigious school, the College de Montaigu, where his college expenses were paid by some local parishes. Calvin credited an instructor of Spanish heritage at this school for his sound foundation in dialectics and scholastic philosophy. Calvin's mental acumen brought him acclaim in philosophy and debate, and even produced several preaching opportunities for the teenaged genius.

Although the teachings of Luther and rising French reformers such as Jacques Lefevre d'Etaples spread like wildfire throughout Paris, Calvin was initially shielded from these new doctrines while at college. Friendships outside of the school in 1527 awakened young Calvin to the errors in the Roman Church, and Calvin started to change his mind about becoming a priest. His father, who had held numerous high positions in the church, had a falling out with the authorities in Noyon at this same time, and thus ordered his son to change his studies to law. Attending a famous law school in Orleans and then in Bourges, the now budding barrister came under the influence of Melchior Wolmer, a humanist favorable to the Reformation. His law studies, however, abruptly ended when Calvin's father died (May 26, 1531), and he returned to Paris to study Hebrew and the classics.

At age twenty-two Calvin published out of his own pocket his first book, a commentary on the text of Seneca's *De Clementia*. Increasing numbers of friendships with humanists and

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French Reformers caused him to seriously question the Church's authority, and to prompt his adoption of the Reformed view. The exact moment of conversion, long a subject of debate and mystery, occurred some time during 1533. Calvin speaks of this part of his life in his intensely personal introduction to his commentary on the Psalms. In the Psalms, Calvin identified personally with David's struggles in life, and thought it fitting to include his biography in the introduction. Although the language is archaic, let me quote the cogent section of this introduction dealing with his conversion:

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 of my early period of life.²

One credited with exercising influence on Calvin after his conversion was Nicolas Cop, who in November, 1533, began his tenure as the rector of the University of Paris. Cop's inaugural address, entitled "Christian Philosophy," emphasized the necessity of a certainty of salvation, a feature which would be essential to Calvin's new belief system. Calvin had a part in the writing of that address, which infuriated the Sorbonne theologians who were labeled in the speech as "sophists." With government officials notified, Cop and Calvin both saw the possibility of joining other reform minded souls in prison, and fled Paris. For the next three years, Calvin lived in various places inside and outside of France, often under assumed names. During part of this time, he studied in the excellent library of Louis du Tillet, and began writing *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

Decisive for Calvin was his move to Basel, where Calvin could see the Reformation in full swing, thanks to the work of John Oecolampadius, who had abolished the mass from worship, and participated in having a union between the civil and ecclesiastical governments. Oecolampadius had died prior to Calvin's arrival, but the other Reformers welcomed him, and it was there that he studied Hebrew. He continued to write *The Institutes*, which he published in March, 1536. Calvin, in his travels in Switzerland, briefly in France, and in the Holy Roman Empire, found that Protestants were falsely defamed everywhere and, most troubling, that persecution of Protestants in France was increasing under King Francis I. Calvin's humility and the purpose for writing are again to be found in his own words penned to the Introduction to the Psalms:

My objects were, first, to prove that these reports were false and calumnious, and thus to vindicate my brethren, whose death was precious in the sight of the Lord; and next, that as the same cruelties might very soon after be exercised against many unhappy individuals, foreign nations might be touched with at least some compassion towards them and solicitude about them. When it was then published, it was not that copious and labored work which it now is, but only a small treatise containing a summary of the principal truths of the Christian religion, and it was published with no other design than that men might know what was the faith held by those whom I saw basely and wickedly

² Rev. James Anderson's translation from the original Latin, which he published in 1849; quoted in *Parallel Classic Commentary on the Psalms* [AMG Publishers, 2005], p. x.

defamed by those flagitious and perfidious flatterers. That my object was not to acquire fame, appeared from this, that immediately after I left Basle, and particularly from the fact that nobody there knew that I was the author.³

Calvin was indeed the author, and *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which he addressed to King Francis I, became the most influential book of the Reformation period. His point in writing was to show that the Christianity that he set forth was the true historic faith, and that the changes had in actuality been presumptuously and erroneously made by the Roman Catholic Church. Codifying the essence of the Christian faith (improved through four editions that saw their final form in 1559), Calvin set forth the entire drama of creation, sin, and redemption as God drew them upon the canvas of Scripture. Stressed throughout *The Institutes* are the themes of God's sovereignty and the necessity of man's submission to God's will. In its final form, Calvin organized *The Institutes* according to the Apostles' Creed, and it is that edition that endures today as the crowning achievement of the great Reformer's life.

Leaving Basel, Calvin wanted to quietly pursue his studies in Strasbourg. However, the Lord's providence would change those plans. A war between the Holy Roman Empire and France had closed the most direct route to Strasbourg, and Calvin decided to spend one night in Geneva in July, 1536. Calvin himself described what happened "as if God had from heaven laid his mighty hand upon me to arrest me." The one who would strain every nerve to detain Calvin in Geneva was William Farel. In 1535 Farel had successfully suppressed the mass in Geneva, and had even expelled the monks and nuns out of the city. Farel was quite aware of his own shortcomings in theology and organization, and believed with all his heart that God's providence had bottled the solutions to all his problems in the brain of the reluctant young scholar whose reputation had literally preceded him. Ignoring Calvin's natural bashfulness and timidity, Farel threatened him that if he did not stay and lead the Reformation in Geneva, God would curse his time of study in Strasbourg. Calvin stayed, and the rest, as we might say, "is history."

³ Ibid.