

John Calvin – French Reformer

His Early Years:

- 1) John Calvin's birth name was Jean Cauvin and he was born on July 10, 1509 in Noyon, Picardie, France to Gerard Cauvin and Jeanne le Franc. John grew up in a staunchly Roman Catholic home and in addition to being a lawyer, his father was also employed by the local bishop as the business administrator of the Noyon Cathedral.
- 2) In 1523, at the age of 14, Gerard sent his son to study Latin and theology at the University of Paris. His desire was that John would enter the priesthood. As a student, Calvin was diligent and excelled in his studies, and was known by all who knew him as one who was "remarkably religious". Though religious, Calvin, like Luther, struggled in his own soul regarding the matter of how to be right with God. In a letter written to Cardinal Sadolet, Calvin wrote the following words: "When, however, I had performed all of these things (satisfaction for offences and fleeing to the saints), though I had some intervals of quiet, I was still far off from true peace of conscience; for, whenever I descended within myself, or raised my mind to thee, extreme terror seized me --- terror which no expiations nor satisfactions could cure."
- 3) John graduated with a Master of Arts degree in 1528.
- 4) Due to a quarrel that developed between Calvin's father and the Bishop of Noyon, Gerald Cauvin decided that he no longer wanted John to study for the priesthood and instructed him to leave off his theological studies and instead pursue law. Thus, in 1528 Calvin left Paris and began studying civil law at Orleans. In 1532 he graduated with a Doctor of Law degree.

His Conversion:

- 1) While in Orleans, Calvin came into contact with individuals who introduced him to the doctrines of the German reformers. The first of these contacts were both professors. The first was named Cordier, who later joined the protestant movement and the other, Wolmar, a Lutheran by profession. These men and the truths that they introduced him to made a strong impact upon Calvin's heart and conscience.
- 2) Unlike Luther, little is known about Calvin's conversion experience. However, in his Preface to the Commentary on Psalms, he briefly describes God's providential work in drawing him to himself. "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. Thus it came to pass, that I was withdrawn from the study of philosophy, and was put to the study of law. To this pursuit I endeavored faithfully to apply myself, in obedience to the will of my father; but God, by the secret guidance of his providence, at length gave a different direction to my course. And 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 to a teachable frame my mind, 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 piety, 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."
- 3) Immediately following his conversion, Calvin openly sided with the Protestants in Paris who endured much persecution. He visited them and sought to comfort them in their affliction to the best of his ability. In 1533, one of his Protestant friends named Nicholas Cop who was Rector of the University of Paris, gave an address attacking the Roman Catholic Church and advocated reform in the manner that Luther tried to advance. When news of this address reached the King, Francis 1, he demanded that the heretics be arrested. Cop, being forewarned of the order, fled from Paris and sought refuge in the German city of Basel. As it was believed that Calvin assisted Cop in the writing of the address, he too was implicated in what was said, and thus, a few days later, fled to Basel as well.

His Work in Basel:

- 1) While in Basel, Calvin devoted his time to two important works. First of all, he assisted a man by the name of Peter Robert who was working on translating the Scriptures into the French language. In addition to doing that, Calvin began writing a book which would afterwards be referred to in the English speaking world as Calvin's "Institutes of the Christian Religion" which is a comprehensive work on systematic theology. Its original purpose was to convince the king of France that the persecution of those in his country who were Protestants was wrong, foolish and unwarranted. Calvin wrote concerning his purpose in writing the Institutes, "While I lay hidden at Basel, and known only to a few people, many faithful and holy persons were burned alive in France; and the report of these burnings, having reached foreign nations, they excited the strongest disapprobation among a great part of the Germans, whose indignation was kindled against the authors of such tyranny...It appeared to me that unless I oppose them with the utmost of my ability, my silence could not be vindicated from the charge of cowardice or treachery. This was the consideration which induced me to publish my Institutes of the Christian Religion. My objects, were first, to prove that these reports were false and calumnious (that the Anabaptists were overthrowing religion and civil order), and thus to vindicate my brethren, whose death was precious in the sight of the Lord." The book was written and first published in Latin in the year 1536 and then later in his native French in 1541. Throughout the remainder of his life, Calvin would continue to add material to the "Institutes" until its final completion in 1559.
- 2) In 1536, Calvin briefly and secretly returned to France. When attempting to return to Basel, he was forced to make a long detour south due to war that had broken out between the French armies of Francis 1 and the Imperial armies of Charles V. In doing so, he passed through the city of Geneva on September 5, 1536, where news of his arrival reached another French reformer named William Farel. Farel met with Calvin that night and convinced him to remain and work with him in Geneva.

In Strassburg:

- 1) As Geneva had been under the yoke of Roman Catholicism for many centuries, much work was required to bring the city out from under that yoke. Thus Farel and Calvin gave themselves to the teaching and preaching of the Word of God. As these two men were not interested in the people of Geneva being hearers of the Word only, their desire was that they be doers as well. To accomplish this, they drew up a confession of faith and rules of discipline which were initially approved by the Geneva city council. But soon opposition grew from those who resented these laws (called Libertines) and finally the Council of Geneva reversed their decision and as a result Farel and Calvin were banished from the city.
- 2) Calvin then went to Strassburg in southern Germany where the reformation had already taken hold. The three years that he spent in Strassburg were probably the most peaceful of his life. Much of his time was devoted to study and writing.
- 3) While there, he was appointed to the faculty of the city university. He became the pastor of a church made up of Protestant refugees from France. He met with other theologians where his own theological views were further sharpened. He corresponded with many leading figures on the continent of Europe. He continued his revisions of the Institutes.
- 4) In 1539 he married Idelette de Bure, the widow of a prominent Anabaptist whom Calvin was instrumental in leading to the Lord and later died during the plague. In addition to Idelette's son and daughter from her previous marriage, John and Idelette together had a son who lived only two weeks, a loss which Calvin bore the remainder of his life. In 1549 Idelette died. Calvin wrote concerning his wife, that she was a helper in his ministry, never stood in his way, never troubled him about her children and had a greatness of spirit. He never remarried.
- 5) The happy years that he had spent in Strassburg soon came to an end. The situation in Geneva since he left continually deteriorated. Three parties were vying for power and the city was heading toward anarchy. In 1541, Calvin was formally asked to return. Though he did not want to leave Strassburg, he felt that he needed to go out of necessity.

In Geneva:

- 1) Upon his return, Calvin struggled with the Council for many years. Many hated him, reviled him in the streets and threatened him and his family. Through it all, Calvin continued to preach, teach and write. At first, he preached twice on Sundays and three times during the rest of the week. But from 1549 and on he preached twice on Sunday, and every day on alternate weeks. Eventually his enemies left the city for other places and the civil and religious life of Geneva was brought under the discipline of the Word of God.
- 2) Calvin's greatest influence was exerted through his teaching. He established the Academy in Geneva which became the center of learning for students from all over Europe. Many came to hear him lecture, after which they returned to their homelands carrying in their minds and hearts the great truths of Scripture that Calvin had expounded to them, spreading the truth of the gospel everywhere. John Knox, the Scottish reformer, who studied in Geneva, commented that the most perfect school of Christ which could be found on earth since the apostles was the city of Geneva. Calvin taught the whole council of God. What Scripture taught, he believed and proclaimed it to all who would hear him. Calvin's commentaries were the results of the lectures that he gave to his students.
- 3) Monetary gain and pleasure meant nothing to Calvin. He repeatedly refused more money that was offered to him by the Council of Geneva. He lived simply and without luxury. Even the pope was so impressed with Calvin's lack of covetousness that he expressed his firm conviction that if he had a dozen men like Calvin, he could conquer the world.
- 4) Calvin struggled with many ailments during his final years but two or three years prior to his death, he was more sickly than usual. When advised by his friends to curtail his labors, his reply to them was, "Do you want the Lord to find me idle?" During this time Calvin had to be carried to the meetings that he wished to attend.
- 5) On May 19, 1564, Calvin summoned the pastors of Geneva to his bedside and bid farewell to them. He spent his last days in continual prayer, and saw all who wished to come to him, asking that they rather pray for him. On the evening of May 27, 1564, as the sun was setting, Calvin calmly fell asleep and woke again in glory.