

Reformation Church History
(Part 3: Calvin's Life and Work)

I. Introduction.

A. We've seen how the Lord brought things to this point.

1. There were glimpses of truth coming through the ages in Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas and many others.
2. And there were attempts at reform in the church before the Reformers in the Waldenses, Savonarola, John Wycliffe, John Hus and others.
3. But the Lord used His servant Martin Luther to begin making lasting changes.
 - a. Many things converged to make the Reformation possible in Luther's day.
 - b. The Lord fashioned Luther to be the man who would begin it, in his character, his upbringing and in his desire to enter the monastery.
 - c. God put in Luther a hunger and thirst for truth and to follow that truth no matter the cost.
 - d. We recognize that Luther didn't get everything right. But no one ever does. All men are sinners. But the Lord still uses men to advance His kingdom.

B. This morning, we're going to look at another of these men, John Calvin.

1. Calvin didn't have the impressive presence of a Luther.
2. But he had a keen and powerful theological mind that the Lord used to organize and cement the church in the truth.
3. He was the leading figure in what is called the second generation of Reformers.
4. What I would like us to do this morning is to look at the life of Calvin, his birth, upbringing, education, and his work as a Reformer.

II. The life and work of John Calvin.

A. His birth and early life.

1. Calvin was born July 10, 1509, in Noyon, France, near Paris.
 - a. His father was a secretary to the bishop of Noyon and a man of means.
 - b. Because of his father's influence, Calvin was appointed to a chaplaincy when he was 11.
 - c. This benefice (a church with an income) was exchanged for two better paying ones when they became available.
 - d. "It was a common custom to appoint a boy to a church office, collect the salary, and pay a portion to an adult priest who did the work" (Kuiper, 189).
 - e. There was an archbishop of Rheims who was only five when he received the office.
 - f. His mother died early, and Calvin was raised in the house of a local nobleman, where he learned "the refined manners of aristocracy" (189).

2. His early years in France.

- a. Calvin came to Paris in 1523.

- (i) In 1512, before Luther had become known, Professor Jacques Lefevre of the Sorbonne (the name of the theological college of the University of Paris) in Paris, published a Latin translation and commentary on the letters of Paul.
- (ii) In it he stated that it is God who saves “by grace alone.”
- (iii) William Farel, one of his students, saw what his professor was teaching him through the eyes of faith.
- (iv) Many others saw it as well. Churches were changed. “Margaret, the king’s sister, was converted. The new faith spread throughout the country” (189-190).
- (v) However, as in all lands, fierce opposition arose. Lefevre’s writings were condemned in 1525, as were Luther’s, and a little book by Margaret.
- (vi) This is the Paris Calvin came to.

b. Calvin studied diligently.

- (i) He strove to master all his subjects: classical languages, logic, the writings of the Church Fathers, and law.
- (ii) After 3 years in Paris, and 1 in Orleans, he went to Bourges to study under a famous law professor.
- (iii) In each city, he gained influential friends and knowledge: Nicolas Cop in Paris, Wolmar in Orleans, and Theodore Beza in Bourges.
- (iv) Calvin changed from the study of theology to law at his father’s request.
- (v) But when his father died, he decided “to practice neither, but to live the life of a scholar in Paris” (190).
- (vi) In 1533, Nicolas Cop, who was now rector of the University of Paris, made his annual All Saint’s Day address.
 - (a) His speech sounded like they contained the ideas of Erasmus and Luther.
 - (b) Rumor had it that Cop had written it with the help of Calvin.
 - (c) As a result, both had to flee for their lives. “John Calvin escaped through a back window while some friends talked to the bailiffs [the sheriff’s deputies] in the front” (190).

B. Calvin becomes a leader.

1. When was Calvin converted?

- a. He wrote in one of his books, “God by a sudden conversion subdued . . . my heart” (190).
- b. But he didn’t write down precisely when this happened.

2. After he was forced to leave Paris, he wandered for a year.

- a. He was hunted from city to city.
- b. He traveled under false names, such as Charles d’Esperville or Martianus Lucanius.
- c. Wherever he went, he taught small groups in secret places.
- d. It was becoming increasingly dangerous to be a Protestant.
 - (i) A new device had been invented to increase the torture of victims: it lifted them in and out of the fire, so that they were roasted slowly and not burned all at once.

- (ii) It would later be used to torture the Huguenots.
 - (iii) A Protestant wasn't safe anywhere in France.
3. Calvin stopped wandering for a while and settled down in Basel, Switzerland, in 1535.
- a. Here, he developed and published his first edition of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* in the spring of 1536, at the age of 26.
 - (i) It was originally written as a catechism, laying down the fundamental teachings of the Protestant movement.
 - (ii) Calvin thought, however, that the book could be used to explain to the king of France, Francis I, that those being persecuted were not "radicals or revolutionaries, but firm believers in the Bible" (192). He offered the book as proof.
 - (iii) The whole book was written in classical Latin and was later translated into French.
 - (iv) At first, it was a slender volume of seven chapters (International, 177), but it was later enlarged and expanded into its current size.
 - (v) From its beginning, it quickly became the "leading statement of the evangelical faith, for it set forth in splendidly organized and logical form just what the teachings of the Protestant movement were" (192). Obviously, its influence continues today.
 - b. After a while, Calvin decided to go to Strassburg in southwestern Germany to pursue the quiet life of a scholar. But because of the danger of war, he chose a route that took him through Geneva.
 - c. "Little did he dream of the important task to which God was about to call him" (192).
4. Farel brings the Reformation to Geneva.
- a. Farel had first come to Geneva in October of 1532.
 - b. There he zealously promoted the Reformation.
 - c. "As a result of his visit to a synod of the Waldenses in one of the high valleys of the Alps, many of these people accepted the principles of the Reformation" (192).
 - d. Before that, he helped to promote the Reformation in Bern and Neuchatel, and in some smaller towns and surrounding districts.
 - e. On his first visit to Geneva, Farel failed to get the Reformation to catch on.
 - f. When he returned in December 1533, he was successful.
 - g. When he came, the Catholics were still the majority. But in a few months, his fiery preaching turned the tide.
 - h. In summer of 1535, he seized the Church of La Madeleine and the Cathedral of St. Peter. After this, an iconoclastic riot swept over the city, all the images were destroyed and the monks and nuns were driven out.
 - i. On May 21, 1536, the General Assembly of citizens voted to make Protestantism the official religion of Geneva.

5. Farel meets Calvin.
 - a. All during this time, Geneva was in revolt against its bishop and its lord, the Duke of Savoy.
 - b. Farel had a fiery temper and was a gifted and powerful preacher, but didn't feel equal to the task of bringing peace and order to the city.
 - c. Then he heard that Calvin had come to Geneva. He believed that Calvin, then 27, was just the man for this place. So he hurried to where Calvin was stopping for the night.
 - d. Calvin didn't think anyone in Geneva knew him. He was a stranger in that area and knew little or nothing of the situation there, so he was surprised when Farel came to see him.
 - e. But Farel knew of Calvin's *Institutes*. It was only a small book, but it made him known throughout all Europe.
 - f. Farel told him what his business was, but Calvin shook his head and was very uneasy.
 - g. He asked Farel to tell him the exact situation and what it was he wanted him to do.
 - h. The longer he listened, the less inclined he was to volunteer. He realized that to become involved would mean the greatest difficulties.
 - i. He shrank from the possibility of the fierce and prolonged struggles.
 - j. Instead, he decided he would go on from there to Strassburg, as he had originally planned. At least there he could devote himself to peaceful study and writing. He didn't need a job. His father had left him enough money to take care of his needs.
 - k. When he entered Geneva, he had no desire to stay. He just wanted to spend the night.
 - l. Farel insisted that he stay and help in the work of the Reformation in that city. But Calvin resisted.
 - m. At last Calvin gave the following reasons for not wanting to stay: his youth, his inexperience in practical affairs, that he was not suited for this work, and that he needed more study. He told Farel that this was his final word and the matter was closed.
 - n. "Then the old man rose from his chair, and, straightening himself out to his full height as his long beard swept his chest, he directed his piercing look at the young man before him and thundered: 'May God curse your studies if now in her time of need you refuse to lend your aid to His Church'" (193-94).
 - o. When Calvin heard this, he was terrified. He heard the voice of God in Farel's voice, and so he consented to stay in Geneva.
 - p. Farel was considered to be a man of ordinary abilities, and yet as Barnabas brought Paul, so Farel brought Calvin into the service of the Church.

6. Calvin's work in Geneva.
 - a. When he began, almost all the people of northern Europe were either Catholics or Lutherans.

- b. Nineteen years had now passed since the posting of the *Ninety-Five Theses*. Luther himself only had ten more years to live. The Reformation in Germany would not gain much more ground.
- c. After Zwingli died, many of his followers, especially in southern Germany, became Lutherans, and almost all of Norway, Sweden and Denmark embraced it.
- d. The only exceptions were those who had embraced the teachings of the Anabaptists.
- e. Calvin's life from the time he came to Geneva can be broken into three parts:
 - (i) His first stay from August, 1536, to April, 1538.
 - (ii) His stay in Strassburg from May, 1538, to September, 1541.
 - (iii) And his return to Geneva in September, 1541, until his death in May, 1564.

7. Calvin's first stay in Geneva.

- a. He began as an assistant to Farel. The next year, he was appointed one of the preachers.
- b. Then Calvin and Farel made three proposals to the city council:
 - (i) "The Lord's Supper should be administered monthly, and every person not leading a good Christian life should be disciplined – if necessary, to the point of excommunication" (194).
 - (ii) "A Catechism which had been composed by Calvin should be adopted" (ibid.).
 - (iii) "And . . . every citizen should subscribe to a recommended creed, which had probably been drawn up by Farel" (ibid.).
 - (iv) The first proposal was Calvin's first attempt to make Geneva a model community, a city of God, and to free the church from the state's power.
- c. These proposals brought strong opposition, and when Calvin's opponents won the city election, things quickly came to a head.
 - (i) They insisted that Geneva adopt the form of worship that was practiced in Bern.
 - (ii) Calvin and Farel didn't believe the differences were very important, but they objected to its being imposed on the church by the civil government, without consulting the church officers.
 - (iii) When they wouldn't give in, they were banished from the city on April 23, 1538.

8. Calvin's three years of peace in Strassburg.

- a. Farel went to Neuchatel, where a few years earlier he had helped introduce the Reformation. He served the church in that city as pastor until his death.
- b. Martin Bucer, who had been won to the Reformation by Luther at the Leipzig Debate, invited Calvin to Strassburg. Calvin gladly accepted.
- c. After 18 months of turmoil in Geneva, Calvin enjoyed three years of peace.
- d. It was here he married Idelette de Bure, the widow of an Anabaptist pastor. She bore him one son who died a few days later. She herself died in 1549 (Carnes, 311).

- e. It was also here he became acquainted with the followers of both Zwingli and Luther.
 - f. He became the pastor of a church of French refugees, Lutherans who had escaped to Strassburg to avoid persecution.
 - g. For three years, he lectured in theology, finally enjoying the quiet life of a scholar. As a pastor, he also gained practical experience.
 - h. He had a good deal of time for studying and writing and his ideas developed.
 - i. He produced a greatly enlarged edition of his *Institutes*. He also wrote a *Commentary on Romans*, which immediately earned him a reputation of a first rate interpreter of Scripture.
 - j. It was at this time that Charles V in Germany was trying to unite the Protestants and Catholics.
 - k. A number of conferences were held, and Strassburg sent Calvin as one of its representatives.
 - l. The conferences failed to bring unity, but it did acquaint Calvin with many of the leaders of Lutheranism.
 - m. Calvin never met Luther, but he did meet Melancthon and they both became “warm friends” (196).
9. Calvin returns to Geneva.
- a. After Calvin left Geneva, there was confusion everywhere. There was no one in Geneva to give the necessary leadership to the church.
 - b. Cardinal Sadoletto thought this would be a good time to write a letter to Genevans to persuade them to return to the Catholic Church and to submit to the pope (*International*, 178).
 - c. Since no one there seemed to be able to answer the letter, they sent it to Calvin. Calvin setting aside his hard feelings towards the Genevans, wrote his famous *Reply to Sadoletto*, which kept Geneva cemented in the Reformation.
 - d. In 1539, the party that expelled Calvin made a treaty surrendering their independence to Bern. In the elections of the following year, that party was defeated, the men who negotiated the treaty condemned as traitors, and Calvin was asked to return.
 - e. Calvin didn’t want to leave the peace of Strassburg for the stormy waters of Geneva, but was again prevailed on by Farel (*International*, 178).
 - f. He entered the city a second time, September 13, 1541, “amid great rejoicing and an enthusiastic ovation” (Kuiper, 197).
 - g. The Lord had prepared Calvin for this very work he was now undertaking, which would eventually impact the world.
10. His great work in Geneva.
- a. He began by revising the city’s laws, drew up a form of government for the church, and revised his Strassburg liturgy and psalter.
 - b. Calvin gave the elders the right to discipline members of the church to the point of excommunication. If any further penalty was required, it was to be turned over to the civil magistrate.

- c. Luther had allowed the German princes a good deal of authority in the affairs of the church. Calvin, on the other hand, believed that the church should be free from the power of the state (Kuiper, 198).
- d. Calvin wanted to transform Geneva into a holy city that would be conformed to the will of God. This meant a very strict discipline (*International*, 178). The penalties resulted in 58 people being executed and 76 exiled by 1546 (Carnes, 311). Though some today question whether this was too severe, it did have the result of changing the character of Geneva and made her a power in the sixteenth century world (*International*, 178).
- e. Obviously, not everyone in Geneva agreed with Calvin's ideas. As a result, there were riots aimed at removing him from the city (*International*, 178).
- f. On one occasion, certain Genevans who had been excommunicated by the consistory came armed into the church while the Lord's Supper was being observed.
 - (i) Their goal was to threaten Calvin's life if he refused to administer the sacrament to them.
 - (ii) "Calvin stretched out his hands over the bread and wine, and declared that they would be able to take of it only over his dead body. By sheer moral courage and strength he made them desist from their attempt to gain admittance by force to the communion table" (Kuiper, 198).
- g. More than once bitter opposition arose against Calvin because of the strict discipline of the church over the moral lives of its members. More than once it looked as if Calvin would be expelled again from Geneva.
- h. In the end, it was the influx of refugees from other countries into Geneva and the case of Michael Servetus that saved him.
 - (i) Servetus was a Spanish physician who had published a book attacking the doctrine of the Trinity.
 - (ii) He was already under the sentence of death by the Inquisition (an ecclesiastical tribunal set up to investigate and check the spread of heresy) for his denial of the Trinity, but had escaped.
 - (iii) He had come to Geneva, apparently to make trouble.
 - (iv) "He was recognized, denounced by Calvin, and with the approval of the other Swiss Protestant cities, as well as the Roman Catholic authorities, burned at the stake" (*International*, 178) on October 27, 1553.
 - (v) Calvin's help had been enlisted by the state to prosecute the case, which he did effectively.
 - (vi) When the sentence was handed down, Calvin tried to have the penalty lessened to beheading, but the magistrate wouldn't agree.
 - (vii) "All the leading Protestant theologians, even the mild and softhearted Melancthon, fell in with the common practice of the Roman Catholic Church of that time, and approved of his death. Calvin's opponents had done all they could to hinder the trial of Servetus. Because they had tried to protect a man whom everybody condemned as a great heretic, they were now thoroughly discredited. Their power of opposition was broken" (Kuiper, 198).

- i. Many who were suffering from persecution because of their Protestant beliefs came to Geneva. They all supported Calvin. Even the government heartily supported him. “From 1555 on Calvin was master of Geneva” (Kuiper, 198).
- j. “Under his leadership the consistory of the church in Geneva passed rules and laws designed to control completely the lives of the citizens of Geneva, and to make of that city a Christian city, a ‘city of God.’ The civil government of Geneva could be relied on to put into effect the rules made by the consistory” (ibid., 198-99).
- k. Calvin’s greatest achievement was the establishing of the Geneva Academy, the first Protestant university anywhere.
 - (i) Calvin believed in an educated ministry.
 - (ii) He realized God’s glory meant more than the saving of souls.
 - (iii) The world belongs to God. The way men treat each other is important to God. “Therefore, government workers, doctors, lawyers, and all others needed a training that recognized and honored God” (Kuiper, 199).
 - (iv) The university was built by donations given by the common people of Geneva.
 - (v) Calvin selected his faculty with care, and from the beginning in 1559, it enjoyed the highest reputation.
 - (vi) Soon 900 boys were enrolled, coming from all over Europe.
 - (vii) In a short time, the king of France sent an official warning to Geneva complaining of all the Protestant preachers coming from there.
 - (viii) Theodore Beza, whom Calvin had met when Beza was twelve, became the first rector. He was Calvin’s right-hand man, and he became pastor of the Geneva Reformed Church for forty years after Calvin died.
- l. In 1559, Calvin published the third and final edition of the *Institutes*. It was now five times as large as his first edition of 1536.
- m. Because of the men trained at his university, his pattern of church government, his writings, primarily his *Institutes* and commentaries, and his correspondence with leading men in all Europe, Calvin gained followers everywhere, though he was simply a minister and theologian.
- n. This was especially amazing in light of his many ailments. Calvin was said to be a museum of diseases and suffered most of the time because of them.
- o. But God working with him, he was able to overcome these obstacles and do what the Lord had called him to.
- p. On May 27, 1564, when he was not quite 55 years old, worn out with his difficult and extensive labors, Calvin died.
- q. His coat of arms shows a hand holding a heart with the motto inscribed, “My heart I offer to You, Lord, promptly and sincerely.” This was the kind of life he lived.