

THE LIFE OF JOHN CALVIN

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John Calvin's life and labours offer such a rich field for study that we might spend many hours exploring them. In the brief time that we have this morning, I want to sketch a simple outline of the main events in his life, and then focus briefly on some of the outstanding features of his personality.

I. A BRIEF SURVEY OF THE MAIN EVENTS IN CALVIN'S LIFE

His birth and early years

Calvin was born in Noyon, in the province of Picardy in France, on July 10th 1509. He sometimes spoke of himself as "merely a man from among the common people"¹. His grandfather was either a boatman or a cooper (barrel maker) who lived in the town of Pont-l'Eveque near Noyon. Gerard, his father, had been able to obtain a reasonable education and moved to the city of Noyon around the year 1480. There he rose to the position of notary of the Cathedral Chapter, and registrar of the ecclesiastical court.

John was the second of three (perhaps four) boys born to Gerard and Jeanne Calvin. From the earliest of ages it appears that he demonstrated a quick mind and a tenacious memory. Recognising the basic ingredients of a scholar, the ambitious Gerard managed to have his second son engrafted into the home of a leading family in the city of Noyon, the Montmors. Here he

"received a more thorough classical grounding, and acquired a polish of manners to which he must ever have remained a stranger had he grown up under his father's humble roof."²

Around the age of fourteen, the young Calvin left his home town to study in Paris. His departure was hastened by the arrival of the Black Death (the plague) in Noyon. His father, not wanting to see the talents of his brilliant son lost, managed to arrange for John to accompany the Montmor sons to the safer streets of Paris. Here he enrolled at the school or college of La Marche for preparatory studies, largely in Latin, which would fit him for attending university.

At university in Paris

At La Marche, Calvin established a deep and life-long friendship with one of his instructors, the brilliant Latin grammarian Mathurin Cordier. The historian Wylie writes,

"Cordier soon saw that he had a pupil of no ordinary genius before him, and after the first few days, the scholar of fourteen and the man of fifty became inseparable. At the hour of school dismissals, it was not the playground, but his loving, genial instructor, who grew young again in the society of his pupil, that Calvin sought."³

Some thirty years later, in dedicating a book to the aging Cordier, Calvin writes,

"I enjoyed your teaching only for a little space, since we were soon moved up by that stupid man who directed our studies according to his will, or rather, his whim. Yet, I was so helped by you, that whatever progress I have since made I gladly ascribe to you."⁴

Such was the great teacher whom God had provided for the greater scholar.

From La Marche, Calvin went in 1526 ? to the College of Montaigue, one of Paris' two universities or seminaries (the other was the famous Sorbonne). Here he applied himself with typical diligence to the study of logic and philosophy for BA and MA degrees. His tutors were men of iron discipline, and the hours of study were as long as the rations at meals were short. The day began at four o'clock in the morning, with the first lecture finishing at six in time for mass. Calvin thrived on this hard regimen. Often mealtimes passed without him eating. He was so intent on gaining knowledge that

"long after others were locked in sleep, he was still awake; he would be pouring over the pages of schoolman or Father until far into the morning."⁵

What is more, he was as punctual in his devotions as he was ardent in his studies. Born within the Roman church, he was one of her most faithful novices. At the age of twelve he had been appointed chaplain to a small church near his home town, and from those early times, he had embarked on his studies with a view to entering the priesthood. Quiet and serious of nature, rigorously consistent in life, he had been a constant needle in the flesh of his playfellows and contemporaries.

¹ Parker, *John Calvin*, p.ix

² Wylie, *The History of Protestantism Vol. II*, p.146

³ Ibid. p.148

⁴ Parker. p.7

⁵ Wylie. p.149

“Among them, he was the representative of conscience and duty”⁶
 writes d'Aubigne. Tradition has it that he came to be nicknamed “the accusative case”.⁷

A student of law

Calvin's preparation for the priesthood was interrupted suddenly at the completion of his MA by a directive from his father. Gerard Calvin, swayed by the lure of wealth in the legal profession, ordered his son to take up studies in civil law at the University of Orleans. Dutifully, although with some reluctance, Calvin obeyed and went to sit at the feet of one of France's most brilliant lawyers, Pierre de L'Estoile. Three years later, he transferred to the University of Bourges to learn from the famous Italian, Alciati. In both institutions he excelled, and academically at least, was fitted to soar to the highest honours the legal field offered.

However, he was never to grace the law courts of France. In the latter months of his study of law, two events took place that were to once again change the direction of his life. The first of these was his conversion to the evangelical faith. While

“obstinately addicted to the superstitions of the papacy”, as he puts it, “by sudden conversion, [God] subdued and made teachable a heart which, for my age, was far too hardened in such matters. Having thus received some foretaste and knowledge of true piety, I was straightway inflamed by such great desire to profit by it, that although I did not attempt to give up other studies, I worked only slackly at then. And I was wonderstruck when, before the year was out, all those who had some desire for the true doctrine ranged themselves around me to learn, although I was hardly more than a beginner myself.”⁸

The second event of significance was the death of his father in 1529. This in effect set Calvin free to pursue the course of study of his choice, and led eventually to his return to Paris. Here, between 1529 and 1533, the study of Greek and Hebrew and theology occupied his mind. It was here too that his prowess as an evangelist and teacher of theology was first recognised. God-fearing, harassed Protestants in the city clamoured for his refreshing exposition of Scripture. Almost daily, men and women were “added to the church” as a result of the visits of Calvin to humble homes in the city. Before him stretched, he was convinced, a vast and profitable field for labour.

In and out of Paris

Calvin's stay in Paris was to be brief, however. On “All Saints Day”, November 1st, 1533, Nicolas Cop, the newly appointed Rector of the University of Sorbonne, delivered an address that created an uproar in the city. Entitled “Christian Philosophy”, it was in effect a very scholarly statement of the great doctrines of grace. The Roman Catholic hierarchy were incensed. Priests were heard to leave the great university hall muttering

“Grace, pardon of God, Holy Spirit; that's all this speech is filled with. Nothing about indulgences, good works- where will it lead to.”⁹

They immediately demanded Cop's arrest (which he only escaped through a last minute warning), and then set about looking for the man reputed to be the author of the address- John Calvin. Calvin was quietly studying in his lodgings when soldiers arrived with a warrant for his arrest. Only the faithful services of friends enabled him to escape. While some detained the soldiers at his door, others tied sheets together to make a rope for him to escape out a window. Free from the house, Calvin was forced to flee the city.

From Paris, Calvin made his way after several weeks of wandering to the home of a friend from university days, du Tillet, in Angouleme. Here, in tranquil and secure surroundings, Calvin made the best use possible of the 3~4,000 volume library at his disposal. It is almost certain that it was here that the outlines of the great composition destined to be called “The Institutes of the Christian Religion” first took their shape.

“Not that he wrote it here”, comments Wylie, “but in this library he collected the materials, arranged the plan, and perhaps penned some of the passages.”¹⁰

After six months at Angouleme, Calvin returned to Paris hopeful that he might once more be able to settle and take up the work he had begun in the city. However, his stay was short, and in 1535 he was forced once again into exile after more extremist members of the reform movement had plastered aggressive placards throughout the city. A fresh wave of anti-Protestant persecution followed, causing many, Calvin included, to scurry from the capital. From Paris he made his way via Strasburg to Basel in Switzerland, where, in the home of a Catherine Klein, he found the obscurity and quietness that he was coveting. Here he wrote the first of what were to be four editions of the “Institutes of the Christian Religion”.

The “Institutes of the Christian Religion”

Two forces compelled Calvin to undertake the task of setting the body of Christian doctrine into the clear, systematic form of the “Institutes”. He had left behind in his native France hundreds- even thousands- of simple men and women

⁶ d'Aubigne, *History of the Reformation*, p.490

⁷ Ibid. p.490

⁸ Wendel, *Calvin*, p.37,38

⁹ Stickleberger, *Calvin*, p.21

¹⁰ Wylie, *Vol. II*, p.177

who were thirsting for instruction in Christian doctrine. Prevented from teaching them by word of mouth, Calvin determined to write a comprehensive summary of doctrine for their help. Then secondly, these same believers were continually tormented and persecuted for their beliefs and accused of heresy. Many sealed their faith in the hot fires of martyrdom. Calvin resolved that his "Institutes" should be an apology, or a defence on their behalf, vindicating their beliefs as truly apostolic.

The first edition of the "Institutes" was probably completed in August, 1535, but did not appear in print until March, 1536. It won instant acclaim. Leaders in the reform movement in France, Switzerland, and Germany all heralded the six-chapter work as a masterpiece. Calvin was suddenly propelled to fame. His haunt in Basel discovered, he soon shifted, first to Italy, and then back to France in search of obscurity.

France, however, could not offer Calvin either security or seclusion. A temporary (6 month) amnesty offering at the time for Protestants threatened to issue in a holocaust of persecution. For a third and final time he was forced to leave his homeland. Accompanied by his brother Antoine, and his stepsister Marie, he set out for Strasburg in Germany, a safe refuge for French Protestants.

Calvin in Geneva

En route to Strasburg, unexpected troop movements caused the small party to detour into Switzerland. Arriving at Geneva towards the end of August in 1536, they found lodgings, never suspecting that their one night stay in the city was to be the turning point not only in the life of John Calvin, but for the history of western Europe and much of the civilised world.

Events took place that night in this way. du Tillet, Calvin's friend from Angouleme, was in the Geneva at the time of Calvin's arrival. Recognising his friend, he hastened to tell the resident pastor, Guillaume Farel the good news.

"With startled but thankful surprise", writes Wylie, "Farel received the news that the author of the Christian Institutes was in the city. God, he thought, had sent at the most critical moment, the man of all others whom he most wished to associate with himself in reforming Geneva."¹¹

Emanuel Stickelberger recreates the interview between du Tillet and Farel graphically.

"Have you heard the latest news?" asked du Tillet. "My friend Calvin is here." The preacher almost lost his speech for joy, "Wha-what, John Calvin, the one who wrote the Institutes?" "He is leaving early tomorrow morning" came the answer, Farel's facial muscles became tense as he said, "He is not going to leave! Where is he lodging."¹²

And with that, Farel hastened to the historic interview. Without preliminaries, he put his case to the pale, thin young man twenty years his junior. He was desperately needed in Geneva. The city had, just months before, declared itself to be a Protestant republic. Its freedom loving citizens were rough and uncouth, however, and needed the superior mind of a man such as Calvin to bring some shape and culture to their habits. Above all, the church needed to be set on a firmer organisational footing. Farel himself was a fiery eloquent evangelist, "able to crush anyone in a battle of words".¹³ But when it came to setting the church in good order, he knew his bounds. The future of Geneva as a centre of reform, not only in Switzerland, but in Europe, hung precariously in the balances. He needed help. And Farel was sure that God had sent him his man.

How the battle of wills between the two men raged. Calvin was as determined in his chosen course as was Farel in his. He had no liking for the squabbles of pastoral life. He was looking for a secluded corner somewhere to confer with scholars, read, and write.

"I am timid, weak, and fainthearted by nature," he protested to Farel. "Do you really believe a Christian may give in to his timid heart so much that he can stay aloof from the battle for the kingdom of God?"¹⁴ came the fiery retort.

On and on the battle raged. At last, Farel, stretching himself erect, his eyes hurtling lightning, trumpeted

"You are concerned about your rest and your personal interests ... Therefore I proclaim to you in the name of Almighty God whose command you defy: Upon your work there shall rest no blessing ..." His facial expression tensed; by force he gripped the hesitant Calvin, his countenance so close that he could feel his streaming breath: "Therefore, let God damn your rest, let God damn your work"¹⁵

Calvin was finished. Burdened under the weight of a great, invisible hand, he melted.

"As he offered his hand to the preacher, a tear rolled over his caved in cheek, "I obey God!" were the words with which he signalled his surrender."¹⁶

¹¹ Ibid. Vol. II p.281

¹² Stickelberger. p.48,49

¹³ Ibid. p.45

¹⁴ Ibid. p.47

¹⁵ Ibid. p.48

¹⁶ Ibid. p.49

Immediately, he took up the work of assisting Farel. His status at first was that of “Reader in Holy Scripture to the Church in Geneva”.¹⁷ To Farel's frustration, his younger, more gifted colleague preferred the shadows of obscurity to the limelight. Calvin was content to deliver his lectures on Scripture day after day without personal recognition. However, the sheer excellence of his expositions soon had crowds flocking to his every appearance. It was only a matter of months before Calvin was appointed to the office of pastor, and entered, along with Farel and the other ministers, into the full duties of the pastoral ministry.

One of Calvin's first pastoral acts was to frame a confession of faith, and to draw up Articles by which the church at Geneva was to be governed. These, he considered, were essential to the establishment of the church and the consolidation of the reformation in the city. At first, the ruling councils in Geneva (to whom these documents had to be submitted) approved of these measures, and led in subscribing to the confession. However, in time, the demand contained in the Articles that the consistory (session) of the church have power to excommunicate, became a source of sore and bitter strife. The Council wanted that right for itself, and the power to determine other church affairs. Eventually, the conflict became such that Farel and Calvin and an aged, blind colleague Courault, were expelled from the city on April 25th, 1538.

An exile in Strasburg

The next three and one half years Calvin spent in Strasburg. Upon hearing of his expulsion from Geneva, Martin Bucer, the leading reformed pastor in Strasburg, had pleaded with him to come and assist him. Calvin had at first resisted, unwilling to thrust himself again into the fires of pastoral life. But Bucer, like Farel, prevailed. Calvin was installed as pastor of a congregation of French refugees in the city, and for the three years of his pastorate, enjoyed a harmonious and profitable relationship with his appreciative flock. Besides his pastoral work, he attended ecumenical councils, lectured in the university, revised and translated his "Institutes", and wrote the first of his commentaries (Romans).

Geneva did not prosper in his absence. The city quickly slumped back into a condition of riotous, unruly instability. Before long its leaders realised the mistake they had made in banishing Calvin and his faithful fellow-pastors. Humbled and penitent, they began what proved to be a long process of entreating Calvin to return to lead the church in their city. At first he refused- not out of spite, but out of a terrible sense of inadequacy for the task. He could not restrain a sense of horror as he thought of the dangers and indignities that Geneva promised to any faithful minister.

“Rather would I submit to death a hundred times,” he said, “rather than to that cross on which I had to perish a thousand times daily.”¹⁸

Once again, it was the prophet-like remonstrations of his colleagues that forced Calvin to relent. Unable to deny the voice of God in their challenges, he at last made his way back to the city that both loved and hated him. He arrived at Geneva's gates again on Tuesday, 13th September, 1541, the same slender, frail figure, but this time, at 32, riper, maturer in judgment, and more inflexibly committed than ever to his program for reform.

Opposition

As one of the conditions for his return to the city, Calvin had asked that a settled form of government for the church be agreed upon. From the day of his arrival he began to work on what were known as the “Ecclesiastical Ordinances” of the church at Geneva- a form of church government in other words. This dealt extensively with the different officers in the church, such things as the frequency of the Lord's Supper, the use of psalms in worship, and the right of the church to exercise discipline over its members.

Once again, it was this last article that was to cause untold pain for Calvin and dissension in the city over the years to come. Both the councils and the unruly, licentious element within the city, objected to the strict oversight of the moral life of people exercised by the consistory. In particular, they protested against the power it claimed to bar men and women from the Lord's Table. Ugly, dangerous scenes threatening the life of Calvin arose. He was daily mocked and cursed, and more than once confronted by weapon-brandishing “libertines” within his own church.

“There he goes, neighbour,” people would say. “I prefer to hear three dogs barking than to listen to him preach.”

“Did you know, hell has only two devils, and there goes one of them.” More than one dog answered to the name “Calvin”.¹⁹

At one point, he wrote to his friend Bullinger in Zurich,

“If I simply said that it was daytime at high noon, they would begin to doubt it.”²⁰

Often, during this time of opposition by “libertines”, Calvin expected exile or death. For some thirteen years after his return from Strasburg, he was in the fires of a raging battle. He wanted to see Geneva a godly society. An at times powerful liberal element did not. For most of the time, the ruling councils were dominated by antagonists who in effect

¹⁷ Wendel p.50

¹⁸ Parker. p.96

¹⁹ Stickleberger. p.107

²⁰ Wendel. p.93

held a sabre over his head. However, Calvin refused to be rattled. Unflinching in his commitment to principle, he defied their edicts when they were contrary to God's, and eventually won the battle. In 1555, his leading opponents, having so disgraced themselves by their immorality and intrigues, either fled the city or were executed as traitors.

Triumph

The last nine years of Calvin's life (1555-64) were years in which he saw the fruit of his agonising labours, prayers and tears. Geneva became a transformed city. Writing from Geneva to friends in his native Scotland in 1556, John Knox was able to say

“Here [in Geneva] exists the most perfect school of Christ which has been since the days of the apostles on earth. Christ is preached elsewhere too; yet nowhere did I find that morals and faith have been improved more sincerely than here.”²¹

Scholars and refugees from various parts of Europe flocked to the little Swiss city to avail themselves of the liberty and learning to be enjoyed in this great centre of Protestantism. Calvin himself was busier than ever teaching, preaching, writing, and building a college, all while suffering the discomfort of a host of physical ailments. He was at once the peerless preacher and exegete, the counsellor of kings- and nobles, and at the same time, the tender, affectionate comforter of martyrs and other humble Christian people. He was without question the great light of Protestantism, and the father of reformed churches as far abroad as England and Scotland. When he died on May 27th 1564, in the words of Beza his successor,

“the great light of the church of God was taken heavenward. It has pleased God,” he continued, “to show us in the life of a single man of our time how to live and how to die.”²²

With that, we turn to consider briefly some of the outstanding characteristics of Calvin's life.

II. OUTSTANDING PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS OF CALVIN

Timidity

Timidity and shyness were perhaps the outstanding personal characteristics of the great Genevan reformer. He hated public life and contention alike. Parker describes him as

“a lover of shaded paths and retired groves”.²³

“He was disinclined to any kind of public appearance,” adds Stickleberger; “a thousand times would he have preferred the scholar's study to the pulpit, a thousand times.”²⁴

We have already seen how Calvin's own awareness of this character trait made him loathe to take up pastoral duties. The raw strife of Geneva was a cross that nearly crushed him.

Courage

Yet, for all his personal sensitivity, Calvin was inflexible and courageous when the honour of God was at stake. He can be seen before the powerful Council of Twenty Five in Geneva, stoutly resisting their mandate that the Lord's Supper be served to those deemed by the Consistory to be unworthy and unfitted for the sacrament.

“I swear rather to die than to have the Lord's Supper defiled” he protests.”... I would rather be dead a hundred times than to commit such terrible mockery to Christ.”²⁵

“Indeed, in matters concerning faith, he became inexorable” writes Stickleberger. “His convictions grounded in Scripture were immovable, and he asserted them with the zeal of the Prophets of the Old Testament. Yet he retained his charming disposition, always ready to help, and lost nothing of his natural kindness of heart. People about him not only respected him, they loved him.”²⁶

Continual busyness

Unrelenting industry is a second outstanding feature of the reformer's life. He was always busy. His secretary of later years, Nicolas Colladan, writes concerning his master's ceaseless busyness,

“I do not believe there can be found his like. For who could recount his ordinary and extraordinary labours? I doubt if any man in our time has had more to listen to, to reply to, to write, or things of greater importance. The multitude and quality alone of his writings is enough to astonish everyone who looks at them, and even more

²¹ Stickleberger. p.120

²² Ibid. p.150

²³ Parker. p.ix

²⁴ Stickleberger. p.18

²⁵ Ibid. p.122

²⁶ Ibid. p.17

those who read them... He never ceased working, day or night, in the service of the Lord, and heard most unwillingly the prayers and exhortations that his friends addressed to him every day to give himself some rest.²⁷ Another contemporary described him as “a bow always strung.”²⁸

A simple lifestyle

A great simplicity and moderateness marked every aspect of his domestic affairs. Throughout life, he remained almost penniless. He steadfastly refused any monetary preferments, and gave liberally from his meagre stocks to those in need. His house and furniture in Geneva belonged to the council, and his personal effects were so scanty that it was no major task to dispose of them in his will. Colladan writes

“As to his ordinary life, everyone will bear witness that he was very abstemious, without any excess or meanness, but a praiseworthy moderation... One fault that he had was that in his abstinence he took little regard to his health, mostly being content for many years with a single meal a day and never taking anything between two meals.”²⁹

This great simplicity was evidently willingly shared by his wife. In 1540, Calvin married the widow, Idelette de Bure.

“The grace which might capture me for a woman”, he had written earlier, “is discipline, gentleness, modesty, good house-keeping, patience...”³⁰

Although little is said of Idelette, she clearly fulfilled these requirements happily. Her death just nine years later was a great grief to Calvin. In a letter (apparently to Bullinger) shortly after her death, he writes

“Truly mine is no common grief. I have been bereaved of the best friend of my life, of one who, if it had been so ordained, would not only willingly have shared my poverty, but also my death. During her life she was the faithful helper of my ministry. From her I never experienced the slightest hindrance.”³¹

Subject to the Word

No study of Calvin would be complete without mention of his great reverence for, and exhaustive knowledge of the Word of God. He bowed in utter submission beneath it. To him, it was not only the Word of life, but also the sceptre by which Christ ruled in the Church. His most strenuous labours were devoted to understanding and explaining that Word in expositions matchless in their depth and clearness.

“I have not falsified a single passage of the Scriptures, nor given it a wrong interpretation to the best of my knowledge,” he could write as he lay dying; “and though I might have introduced subtle senses had I studied subtlety, I cast that temptation under my feet and always aimed at simplicity.”³²

Some have described Calvin's teaching as "Old Testament -like". However, as Stickleberger says, this charge

“is not tenable. Calvin sees the will of God to which one has to submit, in all of Scripture. He knows, only one Holy Spirit, not one for each Testament... Calvin takes the whole Bible absolutely seriously: this the secret of his being reveals.”³³

We have come to the end of our study. By any standards, the man we have been considering was remarkable. Even his stoutest opponents down through the centuries have been bound to admit his tremendous and lasting influence. But what can we learn today? Let me close by merely listing two lessons that I will take from the study of his life.

1. God selects and prepares His instruments well. Calvin's intellectual abilities, his training, and even his temperament, were all perfectly adjusted to fulfil the work entrusted to him with great skill, and yet with total dependence upon the grace of God.
2. Both teaching and discipline are necessary to make the home, the church, the society a “perfect school of Christ.” Teaching is of first importance. But teaching, without the reinforcement of firm and loving discipline, is likely to effect only a change of opinion without a corresponding transformation of life. This principle lay behind Calvin's insistence on church discipline in Geneva. Its abandonment accounts for much of the wreckage that we see both in the church and society of our day.

²⁷ Parker. p.122-123

²⁸ Ibid, p.123

²⁹ Ibid p.123

³⁰ Stickleberger. p.71

³¹ Parker. p.121

³² Ibid. p.183

³³ Stickleberger. p.30