

“JOHN CALVIN: HIS LIFE – Part 1”

Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct. (Hebrews 13:7 NKJV)

Much attention has been paid to the fact that this is the bicentennial year of the birth of Charles Darwin, the English naturalist who set forth the evolutionary hypothesis. That has had a profound influence on many branches of science. This year is the five hundredth anniversary of the birth of John Calvin. Churches in the Presbyterian and Reformed family of Protestantism look to John Calvin as the father of their faith. His influence has been immense in all Protestantism, but also in such areas as government, social welfare, the relationship of the individual to the State, the role of the State in maintaining morality, the relationship of employee and employer, the acquiring and the right use of wealth. He has been called the father of capitalism and the author of the Protestant work ethic.

This will be the first of a series of sermons on John Calvin. I hope you will gain an appreciation and understanding of him and that you will be proud of the fact that as Presbyterians you are carrying on his teachings about church government, Biblical doctrine, and the sacraments.

1. The Early Years

John Calvin was born July 10, 1509 at Noyon, in the Province of Picardy in France. He was the second of three sons who lived. The bishop was also the prince of Noyon. John Calvin's father, Gerard Cauvin was cathedral notary, registrar of the ecclesiastical court, and also fiscal procurator for the province. His mother, Jeanne le Franc was

the daughter of an innkeeper in Cambrai. She died a couple years after Calvin's birth. Gerard intended that all three of his sons, Charles, Jean, and Antoine should be priests.

John Calvin preferred "Calvin" to "Cauvin" and used that as his name even as a youth. He was very intelligent and at the age of twelve his hair was cut in a tonsure symbolizing his dedication to the Church. At that time he was appointed a chaplain of the Cathedral. This meant that he received a regular stipend from the Cathedral treasury. He continued to receive that stipend for the next thirteen years.

At the age of fourteen Calvin went to Paris in the company of the Hangest family, who were nobility. For the first year he entered the College Marche of the University of Paris. There he soon became highly skilled in Latin. He then attended College de Montaigu where Erasmus had studied and where Ignatius Loyola would study. This was a distinctly church-centered environment. He continued his studies there until he was nineteen. Then his father ordered him to stop studying for the priesthood and pursue a degree in law.

Calvin left Paris and studied law in Orleans and Bourges. In Bourges he learned Greek, a necessity for studying the New Testament. There he was exposed to humanism. He received his licentiate in law. When his father died in 1531, Calvin returned to Paris to study the classics and Hebrew. The publication of a French translation of the Bible had contributed to the interest among the students in the ideas of Martin Luther and in Church reform. They drew Calvin into their conversations and activities. In 1532 he received his degree in law and published his first book, a commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia*.

2. His Conversion

During this period Calvin experienced a sudden conversion. In the preface to his *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* he wrote:

“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.”

After his conversion Calvin turned his attention to the cause of Reformation. Calvin was close friends of Nicholas Cop. Cop was appointed rector of the University of Paris. In his inaugural address he pointed out the need for reform and renewal in the Catholic Church. The address was similar to opinions of Erasmus and Luther. He was denounced as a heretic and fled to Basel, Switzerland to avoid arrest.

Calvin's friendship with Cop marked him as a target for arrest. He began a period of fleeing from one place in France to the other. During this time he was writing the first version of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He revised it a number of times throughout his life. The first version had six chapters, the last one had eighty chapters.

In October 1534 there was the “Affair of the Placards.” All over France unknown persons posted placards in a number of cities attacking the Catholic Mass. This provoked such an outcry against Protestants that Calvin was forced to leave France. He went to Basel in January 1535 where he joined up with Nicholas Cop again. In March 1536 he published the first edition of the *Institutes*. For several months he was in Italy serving as the secretary of Princess Renee of France. In June he returned to Paris to help his brother Antoine settle their father's estate. At this time there was published the Edict of Coucy which gave heretics six months to reconcile with the Catholic Church. Calvin saw

that there was no future for him in France. In August 1536 he set out for the free Imperial city of Strasbourg.

However, because of military maneuvers he was forced to detour to the south and go through Geneva. In 1530 Geneva allied itself with Bern and Friborg and became independent. During that time the bishop had been the virtual prince of the city. William Farel had been preaching and advocating church reform. In 1533 the city expelled the bishop and accepted the Reformation. However, the emphasis was on freedom from the Catholic Church's hierarchy. When John Calvin appeared in Geneva, intending only to stay overnight, Farel convinced him to stay in Geneva and help him reform the Church in that city.

Throughout the fall of 1536 Calvin and Farel worked together drafting a Confession of Faith, making changes to worship which included congregational singing, the manner and frequency of Holy Communion, a revision of the marriage laws, the necessity of subscribing to the Confession of Faith by members, and the reasons for and method of excommunication. On January 16, 1637 Calvin and Farel presented their *Articles on the Organization of the Church and its Worship in Geneva* to the city council which accepted it that same day.

The council was not as willing to enforce the *Articles*. Calvin and Farel became increasingly unpopular. Bern, Geneva's ally in the Reformation proposed unity in the churches' ceremonies. One proposal was the use of unleavened bread in communion. The council ordered Farel and Calvin to use unleavened bread in the forthcoming Easter Communion. The two did not serve Communion in the Easter service. The next day they both were expelled from Geneva.

