

## “JOHN CALVIN: HIS LIFE – Part 2”

In last week’s sermon I gave the highlights of John Calvin’s life up to the point when he was expelled from Geneva at the age of 29. Rather than giving a summary of the first sermon, here is Calvin’s account of his early years in the Introduction to Commentary on the Book of Psalms:

“...so God having taken me from my originally obscure and humble condition, has reckoned me worthy of being invested with the honorable office of a preacher and minister of the gospel. 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 Thus it came to pass, that I was withdrawn from the study of philosophy, and was put to the study of law.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 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. Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness 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.

I was quite surprised to find that before a year had elapsed, all who had any desire after purer doctrine were continually coming to me to learn, although I myself was as yet but a mere novice...I then began to seek some secluded corner where I might be withdrawn from the public view; but so far from being able to accomplish the object of my desire, all my retreats were like public schools. In short, whilst my one great object was to live in seclusion without being known, God...brought me forth to public notice. Leaving my native France, I in fact retired into Germany, expressly for the purpose of being able there to enjoy in some obscure corner the repose which I had always desired... But lo! whilst I lay hidden in Basle, and known only to a few people, many faithful and holy persons were burnt alive in France.”

From Basle Calvin went to Geneva and together with William Farel tried to establish a reformed church and state but they were expelled after two years and fled to Strasbourg. Farel went on to Neuchatel.

### 1. The Strasbourg Years (1538-1541)

Strasbourg is on the border of France and modern Germany. While Calvin was there it was an independent, German-speaking free city. Calvin referred to it as an "oasis." Many French Protestants had fled to Strasbourg where the reformer Martin Bucer had much influence. Calvin became pastor of a congregation of French-speaking refugees.

While there he revised the Institutes of the Christian Religion. The first edition had been in the form of a catechism. He dropped that format and made it a book. He also wrote a Commentary on Romans. He preached once a day and twice on Sundays. He often represented Strasbourg at meetings of Protestant leaders from all over Europe.

Calvin's friends urged him to marry and he was reluctant to do so. He wrote to a friend,

"I who have the air of being hostile to celibacy, I am still not married and do not know whether I will ever be. If I take a wife it will be because being better freed from numerous worries, I can devote myself to the Lord."

Several prospects were introduced to him including one young woman from a noble family. Reluctantly, Calvin agreed to marry her if she would learn French. A wedding date was set for March 1540, but Calvin remained reluctant and the wedding was cancelled. In August 1540 he married Idelette de Bure, a widow with two children. After they moved to Geneva, July 28, 1542, Idelette bore him a son. It was premature and soon died. She became ill in 1545, became bedridden, and died March 29, 1549. Calvin wrote about her:

“I have been bereaved of the best friend of my life, of one who, if it had been so ordained, would willingly have shared not only 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.”

## 2. Return to Geneva

After Calvin and Farel were driven from Geneva, the libertine party gained control of the council. The situation rapidly deteriorated. Church attendance sharply declined, immorality was rampant, lawlessness was everywhere. This became well known in other areas. In 1540 Cardinal Jacopo Sadoletto of Spain wrote a letter to the Geneva city council. Sadoletto was a Reformer but he believed in staying in the Roman Catholic Church and working for reform from within. He invited the Genevans to return to the Catholic faith.

The council, now controlled by Protestants, asked Calvin to draft a reply. His response to Sadoletto was courteous, but strongly defended Geneva's position on reforms. The council then sent an emissary to urge Calvin to return to Geneva. He began, “Rather would I submit to death a hundred times than to that cross on which I had to perish a thousand times over.” He ended by saying he was prepared to follow God's calling.

After negotiations lasting almost a year, Calvin returned to Geneva September 13, 1541. This time he had an official escort and a wagon for his family and belongings. The house Geneva furnished to him was large enough for his family and his brother Antoine Calvin's family.

## 3. Reforming Geneva

John Calvin began with church reform. A committee led by him drafted *Ordonnances ecclesiastiques* which were adopted by the council January 2, 1642. The ministry had four groups, pastors, teachers, lay

elders, and deacons. The pastors governed the church and trained students for the ministry. No one could preach in Geneva without permission of the pastors. Sacraments were Baptism and Communion.

A consistory of five pastors and twelve lay elders, elected by the city council oversaw the conduct of the citizens. The consistory had the right to visit every family annually and to search its home. It enforced attendance at weekly sermons, forbade gambling, drunkenness, dancing, profane songs, immodest dress, and all forms of theater. Punishment for these minor crimes was usually a fine, but if they were habitual the person could be banished from Geneva. Fornication resulted in exile. Adultery, blasphemy, and idolatry punished by death.

Calvin regarded education as inseparable from religion. Many new schools were started. All were under the authority of the Church.

Luther desired a return to primitive simplicity. Calvin accepted capitalism, encouraged trade and production, but opposed exploitation and indulgence. Calvin preached thrift, industry, sobriety, responsibility as necessary for the reign of God on earth. That encouraged industry.

Charity was the responsibility of the city government. Geneva received an influx of Protestant refugees fleeing persecution in France and England. The refugees eventually equaled the original population of Geneva. Food, clothing, housing, jobs were found for all of them.

During his twenty-three years in Geneva, John Calvin expanded his Institutes to 79 chapters. He wrote commentaries on nearly all the books of the Bible, and preached over two thousand sermons. He trained the leaders of Reformation in Scotland, Netherlands, France, and parts of Germany. He died on May 27, 1564 at the age of 55.

