

## The History of the Reformation...Part 2

How  
Christ  
restored  
the gospel  
to his  
church



### A Temporary Inconvenience...

July 1536

He was twenty-seven years old<sup>1</sup>.

He was twenty-seven years old, an internationally acclaimed author with a runaway best seller on his hands, and he was on the run.

He was on the run because a lot of people wanted to kill him. The people that wanted to kill him wanted to kill him because of his book, his runaway best seller, and because of the impact it was having. And many of the people that wanted to kill him were powerful, extremely powerful, with enough money and resources and relentlessness to find him if he ever stopped moving. So he didn't stop. He kept on moving. He stayed on the run...a week or two here...a month there...sometimes only days or hours in one place.

He found himself constantly looking over his shoulder...constantly watching...constantly moving. As he moved about, he tried very hard to blend in

with the people around him. He tried his best to remain anonymous. He stuck mostly to the shadows.

He was grateful to God, of course, that his book had advanced the cause of the gospel. He was grateful that it had been well received and that it was selling well. But he was even more grateful that not many people knew what he looked like. He didn't mind so much having a famous name. But he was glad, especially glad, that his face was still unknown.

He wanted very much to keep it that way.

Because of the way things were, he used a pseudonym as he traveled...that is, he traveled under a fictitious name. Sometimes he used the name Martianus Lucianus which was a variation of the spelling of his real name.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes he used the name Charles d'Espeville<sup>3</sup>.

The desperate nature of his situation and the danger caused by his sudden fame had forced him to that. On the one hand, a huge number of people admired him and wanted to meet him; on the other hand, an even larger number of people wanted to see him dead.

And that was, as they say, the rub.

As he ran it was sometimes difficult to know with certainty to which group the people he met belonged. That is, it was hard to know whether those he met wanted to embrace him or kill him. So he kept his own counsel. He decided that

if he was going to err, he would err on the side of caution. His reasoning was simple enough. There were people all over Europe that longed to see him drawn and quartered or even worse...burned at the stake<sup>4</sup>. Nowhere was that more true than in his native country, France.

It was a fact he never allowed himself to forget.

He couldn't afford to forget. Just two months before his dear friend Etienne (ay-T\_YEN) de la Forge had been arrested, tortured and killed in Paris. He had suffered the heretic's fate. That is, he had been burned at the stake. The weight of the thought broke his heart for he had lived with de la Forge, just four or five years earlier, while writing his book...his first book, a secular work on Seneca.<sup>5</sup> It was while living with de la Forge that he had been first introduced to Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples (zhäk lufäv'ru dätäp'lu) and a number of other reform minded preachers whose hearts burned with the truth of the gospel. But those days seemed so long ago now. His friend de la Forge had been burned at the stake and d'Étaples was under scrutiny and he...he was on the run.

Originally, he had had to flee France, of course, because of his public identification with the Reformation and Nicolas Cop. Cop had been chosen rector at the University of Paris and as a result had been scheduled to give an inaugural address. The two men had worked on the address together and when Cop delivered the address, the Sorbonne and the Catholic theologians there exploded with rage. They accused them both of Lutheran sympathies. Cop had had to flee Paris and so had he. And his sudden, unplanned flight had forced

him to seek refuge pretty much wherever he could find it...a month here, a week there, sometimes only a day or two in a spot.

But where to run next...that was the question.

He was running out of places to stay and then he received an invitation to come to Italy of all places. The thought of hiding out in Italy made him smile...something he did not do very often. He was been invited there by a very famous French woman...a French woman everyone knew...a French woman who had herself only recently moved to northern Italy. But she had heard about his predicament and she had invited him to come and visit. She was no ordinary woman. Except for the historical misfortune of not having been born a man, she would have most likely been the King of France herself.

Her name was Renee de France<sup>6</sup>.

She was the younger sister of Louis XII, the previous King of France...the king who had died some twenty years earlier and had been replaced by Francis I.<sup>7</sup>

She was a noble woman...an intellectual...admired by Catholics and Protestants alike. She was known for her kindness, for her intellectual depth and for her spiritual sensitivity. And it was also widely known or at least it widely rumored that she too was pondering the truth of the Reformation and that she was willing to provide refuge for those who were being hunted. It was said that she longed for visitors who were theologically adept enough to help her clear up some of her lingering questions<sup>8</sup>. And she had invited him to visit. And the young writer,

the young writer with the runaway bestseller, the young writer on the run, was willing to do that...more than willing. And as things had worked out, there was suddenly no better time than the present.

He was willing to visit her, of course, because of the nobility of her character and because of her prominent position in French society. He understood intuitively the ramifications that such an important and public conversion might have on the Reformation movement in Europe. So he was willing to visit her...to disciple her if the opportunity presented itself. He was willing to do that both for her benefit and for the benefit that such a prestigious convert might provide the French Reformed community scattered across Europe. But he was also attracted by the lure of a temporary safe haven...a protected place where he might rest awhile, where he might collect his thoughts and simply lay low.

That is what he longed for...but that was not what he got.

In April of 1536, the young author and his best friend and traveling companion, Louis du Tillet arrived safely in the little town of Ferrara in northern Italy<sup>9</sup>. And Renee de France and her husband the Duke of Este were happy to put them up. They enjoyed her company and the privileges of her court and noble lifestyle. They had a number of talks and private interviews together and in those quiet hours they established a lifetime friendship. They enjoyed the protection of the Duchess and her love of the gospel for almost a month and a half. And then the Catholics in her court realized who he was. His private meetings with Renee de France, his theological sophistication, and his impeccable command of the French

language all conspired against him and eventually gave him away and he found himself running again...running for his life.

The details of his stay and escape from Italy are shrouded in mystery. His enemies spread lies that he was arrested and tortured and that he recanted his faith. Others said that he was nearly caught but escaped by the skin of his teeth. But the truth about his leaving Italy was a lot less glamorous. Some of the Catholics in Renee's court had notified authorities that he was there and they had come to arrest him but someone warned him the day before and he had escaped. The story is made all the more confusing by the fact that he never spoke or wrote about his trip to Italy very much. The most he ever had to say about it was that he had barely set foot in Italy when he had to leave it. Still, something dramatic had happened while he was in Italy...something had changed. He had learned something that he never seemed to forget.

He learned to know experientially, perhaps for the first time in his life, the enormity...the true enormity of God's providential care and kindness. As a result of what he learned there, he lived every day of the rest of his life afterward *coram deo*...before the face of God. That is, he lived every day with an acute awareness of God's kindness toward him. That was one of the reasons why the doctrine of God's sovereignty was emblazoned on his soul...was so much more than just an academic concept for him. God had saved his soul and God had preserved his life. It was one of the reasons why later he could seem so serene under great pressure and in the face of great opposition. The experience in Italy was not lost on him. It taught him to be careful but it also taught him to be fearless. From that day forward, he was a man prone neither to fear nor to carelessness.

That is why just two months later on a cool, summer night in July 1536, he was able to take their unplanned detour to the city of Geneva, Switzerland entirely in stride.

It wasn't where he had been headed...it certainly wasn't where he wanted to be. But it was a Protestant city. It was a city that only a few months before, during the time he had been in Italy, had turned out the Bishop and the Roman Mass and had embraced wholeheartedly the doctrines of the Reformation. It had done so under the fiery leadership and preaching of William Farel, a fellow-Frenchman. So the young writer took the unplanned detour there as a simple inconvenience...an unimportant hiccup along the way.

He didn't really want to be there. He hadn't wanted to go...he had intended to go instead to Strasbourg some one hundred and eighty miles to the north in that part of France that wraps around the northern portion of Switzerland. He had been headed there with his two traveling companions just a week or so after burying his older brother. He had hoped that he might find an opportunity there as a full-time scholar and part-time preacher under the direction of the pastor Martin Bucer. In fact, he relished the idea of simply being surrounded by books. But Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, and Francis I, the new King of France, had messed all of that up...had gotten in the way. They had marched out in battle array against each other and result was that the northern route to Strasbourg had been blocked by their armies<sup>10</sup>.

So the young writer turned to the south...turned south to Geneva...where he and his companions planned to traverse the Rhine Valley to the north and east of

Strasbourg and then head back west more or less making a big counterclockwise circle around the warring armies Charles V and Frederick I<sup>1</sup>.

That is what he intended but that is not how things turned out.

You see, the young writer was unaware of the greater, sovereign plan of the Lord Jesus, who had aligned kingdoms and armies in such a way as to place the young writer in exactly the right place at exactly the right time to accomplish exactly what He wished to have done.

At that particular moment, the young man had no way to know that. If he had, he would have laughed, as he not very apt to do, at his own extended efforts to remain anonymous. He thought of the little detour through Geneva as an inconvenience...nothing more than a temporary inconvenience. That is why when his closed carriage pulled into the city he was so quick to slide out of the coach....quick to try to locate someone who could speak French and direct him and his companions to the nearest hotel. He was trying, as quickly as he might, to get off the street and away from prying eyes.

Now it wasn't that there was anything about him to particularly attract one's eye.

He was thin...extremely thin...almost skeletal. But that was not all that unusual for the time and was not something that would have drawn one's attention. His clothes were simple and dark. He was of medium height. He had a pale complexion, back hair and a black, trimmed beard. His face was sharp and pointed, and his eyes were piercing.

He was traveling with two companions, a man and a woman. They were clearly two brothers and a sister. They all looked like they had been cut from the same bolt of cloth. Still, you wouldn't have known that based on their conversation. They hardly spoke to one another...and when they did he did all of the talking.

But the moment he spoke, it was clear to everyone that heard him that he was different...that he was an educated man, for he spoke incredibly precise, incredibly elegant French. While a bystander might let him walk by without so much as a notice...the moment he spoke...even when he spoke in a whispered tone...people turned to see who he was.

It was a summer night, July 1536 in Geneva, Switzerland. Charles d'Espeville was twenty-seven years old and even though he thought he was simply going to spend one night at Geneva and be on his way...he had finally arrived at what was to be his home for the rest of his life<sup>12</sup>.

He didn't realize it but one of the French refugees that had seen him get out of the coach that night recognized him and realized immediately that the mysterious Frenchmen speaking in hushed tones had another name...a name he was born with...John Calvin.

That was how it happened...and the rest of the story is one of the grandest stories in all of recorded history. No one knows for sure who the person was that spotted Calvin and reported his presence to Farel. Most Calvin scholars think it was his old friend and traveling companion to Italy...du Tillet. Still what matters

is that William Farel came down and sought Calvin out and begged him to stay and help with the work in Geneva.

He begged Calvin to help and Calvin respectfully declined.

He pleaded with Calvin to stay and Calvin refused arguing that he was much too timid to be of much use. Calvin argued that he was really only fit to be a scholar and that while he was committed to the Reformation...his real value lay in his scholarly contribution. But arguing with Farel was like arguing with a brick wall. He simply would not take no for an answer.

Emanuel Stickelberger, one of Calvin's better biographers takes a bit of literary license and recreates the exchange between du Tillet and Farel like this.

"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?"

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 organizational footing. Farel himself was a fiery eloquent evangelist, able

to crush anyone in a battle of words. But when it came to setting the church in good order, he knew his bounds. The future of Geneva as a center 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?” 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.”

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 signaled his surrender.<sup>13</sup>

Calvin’s account of the meeting is a lot less dramatic. He doesn’t even say what Farel said to him.

That my object was not to acquire fame, appeared from this, that immediately after I left Basle, and particularly from the fact that nobody there knew that I was the author. Wherever else I have gone, I have taken care to conceal that I was the author of that performance; and I had resolved to continue in the same privacy and obscurity, until at length William Farel detained me at Geneva, not so much

by counsel and exhortation, as by a dreadful imprecation, which I felt to be as if God had from heaven laid his mighty hand upon me to arrest me. As the most direct road to Strasburg, to which I then intended to retire, was as shut up by the wars, I had resolved to pass quickly by Geneva, without staying longer than a single night in that city. A little before this, Popery had been driven from it by the exertions of the excellent person whom I have named, and Peter Viret; but matters were not yet brought to a settled state, and the city was divided into unholy and dangerous factions. Then an individual who now basely apostatized and returned to the Papists, discovered me and made me known to others. Upon this, Farel, who burned with an extraordinary zeal to advance the gospel, immediately strained every nerve to detain me. And after having learned that my heart was set upon devoting myself to private studies for which I wished to keep myself free from other pursuits, and finding that he gained nothing by entreaties, he proceeded to utter an imprecation that God would curse my retirement, and the tranquillity of the studies which I sought, if I should withdraw and refuse to give assistance, when the necessity was so urgent. By this imprecation I was so stricken with terror, that I desisted from the journey which I had undertaken; but sensible of my natural bashfulness and timidity, I would not bring myself under obligation to discharge any particular office.<sup>14</sup>

But I think Stickelberger gets pretty close to having it right because Theodore Beza, the man who succeeded Calvin at Geneva and who doubtless had many, many conversations with Calvin about his meeting with Farel in the course of their ministry together in Geneva wrote his earliest biography describes the meeting like this.

Calvin, passing through Geneva, visited these good men as a matter of course, on which occasion Farel, with his usual heroic spirit, after urging him at some length to continue, and share their labors at Geneva without going farther, thus addressed Calvin, when he manifested no disposition to comply with the proposal: "I denounce unto you, in the name of Almighty God, that if, under the pretext of prosecuting your studies, you refuse to labor with us in this work of the Lord, the Lord will curse you, as seeking yourself rather than Christ." Calvin, terrified by this dreadful denunciation, surrendered himself to the disposal of the Presbytery and magistrates, by whose votes, and the consent of the people, he

was chosen not only preacher, which at first he had refused, but also appointed professor of divinity, which office he accepted in the month of August, 1536.<sup>15</sup>

Now for the next few months we are going to be looking at the life, ministry and theology of the incomparable John Calvin. We are going to do so not because we idolize him as the father of Presbyterianism but rather because we recognize him as one of God's great gifts to the church. We recognize the contribution and part he played in the restoration of the gospel. Calvin was human...no doubt about it.

But he was extraordinary.

That a man...any man could suffer the way he did and not break is worth investigating. That a man...any man could produce so much material to benefit the kingdom of God is worth looking into.

Now the one thing from history that is certain is that no one is ambivalent toward Calvin. They may love him or they may hate him but that are not neutral towards him at all. Listen to a few assessments of Calvin.

"The longer I live the clearer does it appear that John Calvin's system is the nearest to perfection."

— Charles Haddon Spurgeon

"Calvin's theological heritage has proved fertile perhaps to a greater extent than any other Protestant writer. Richard Baxter, Jonathan Edwards, and Karl Barth, in their very different ways, bear witness to the pivotal role that Calvin's ideas have played in shaping Protestant self-perceptions down the centuries...It is impossible to understand modern Protestantism without coming to terms with Calvin's legacy to the movement which he did so much to nourish and sustain."

— Alister E. McGrath

“It would hardly be too much to say that for the latter part of his lifetime and a century after his death John Calvin was the most influential man in the world, in the sense that his ideas were making more history than those of anyone else during that period. Calvin’s theology produced the Puritans in England, the Huguenots in France, the ‘Beggars’ in Holland, the Covenanters in Scotland, and the Pilgrim Fathers of New England, and was more or less directly responsible for the Scottish uprising, the revolt of the Netherlands, the French wars of religion, and the English Civil War. Also, it was Calvin’s doctrine of the state as a servant of God that established the ideal of constitutional representative government and led to the explicit acknowledgment of the rights and liberties of subjects...It is doubtful whether any other theologian has ever played so significant a part in world history.”

— J. I. Packer

“[Calvin] easily takes the lead among the systematic expounders of the Reformed system of Christian doctrine...Calvin’s theology is based upon a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He was the ablest exegete among the Reformers, and his commentaries rank among the very best of ancient and modern times. His theology, therefore, is biblical rather than scholastic, and has all the freshness of enthusiastic devotion to the truths of God’s Word. At the same time he was a consummate logician and dialectician. He had a rare power of clear, strong, convincing statement. He built up a body of doctrines which is called after him, and which obtained symbolical authority through some of the leading Reformed Confessions of Faith.”

“Taking into account all his failings, he [Calvin] must be reckoned as one of the greatest and best of men whom God raised up in the history of Christianity.”

— Philip Schaff

“What is it about Calvin that so inspires me? This: his disciplined style, his determination never to speculate, his utter submission to Bible words as God’s words, his submission to Christ’s Lordship, his sense of the holy, his concern to be as practical as possible; the fact that godly living was his aim and not theology for the sake of it. In a forest of theologians, Calvin stands like a Californian Redwood, towering over everyone else.”

— Derek Thomas

“Calvin is the man who, next to St. Paul, has done most good to mankind.”

— William Cunningham

“To omit Calvin from the forces of Western evolution is to read history with one eye shut.”

— Lord John Morley

“I have been a witness of him for sixteen years and I think that I am fully entitled to say that in this man there was exhibited to all an example of the life and death of the Christian, such as it will not be easy to depreciate, and it will be difficult to imitate.”

— Theodore Beza

“Calvin is a cataract, a primeval forest, a demonic power, something directly down from the Himalayas, absolutely Chinese, strange, mythological; I lack completely the means, the suction cups, even to assimilate this phenomenon, not to speak of presenting it adequately.... I could gladly and profitably set myself down and spend all the rest of my life just with Calvin.”<sup>16</sup>

— Karl Barth

Even Calvin’s enemies recognize his importance.

“The strength of that heretic [Calvin] consisted in this, that money never had the slightest charm for him. If I had such servants my dominion would extend from sea to sea.”

— Pope Pius IV

And listen finally to these words of Will Durant, no fan of Calvin.

“We shall always find it hard to love the man, John Calvin who darkened the human soul with the most absurd and blasphemous conception of God in all the long and honored history of nonsense.”<sup>17</sup>

— Will Durant

My prayer is that God himself will guide our study and that we will come away after studying Calvin not simply with a greater appreciation of Calvin, although I think that will happen, but with a greater appreciation and certitude that our God is God and that He rules and reigns in the hearts and affairs of men and that He can still use us with all our failures and foibles to advance the kingdom of the Son that He loves.

Let's pray.

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin was born July 10, 1509 in Noyon France. The incident described in the narrative above took place in mid to late July in 1536, which means Calvin would have just turned 27 years old.

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, "Letter 12 to Francis Daniel" from *The Selected Works of John Calvin: Tract & Letters Volume 4: 1528-1545* edited by Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 46.

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, "Letter 17 to Louis Du Tillet" from *The Selected Works of John Calvin: Tract & Letters Volume 4: 1528-1545* edited by Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 65.

<sup>4</sup> See "Hanging, drawing, and quartering" at Wikipedia.com. It says, "Until 1870, the full punishment for the crime was to be "hanged, drawn, and quartered" in that the convict would be (1) dragged on a hurdle (a wooden frame) to the place of execution. (This is one possible meaning of *drawn*.) (2) hanged by the neck for a short time or until almost dead. (*hanged*). (3) disembowelled, and the genitalia and entrails burned before the victim's eyes (This is another meaning of *drawn*. It is often used in cookbooks to denote the disembowelment of chicken or rabbit carcasses before cooking). (4) beheaded and the body divided into four parts (*quartered*). Typically, the resulting five parts (i.e. the four quarters of the body and the head) were gibbeted (put on public display) in different parts of the city, town, or, in famous cases, country, to deter would-be traitors. Gibbeting was abolished in England in 1843."

<sup>5</sup> Francis Nigel Lee, "My Heart I Offer To You, O Lord -- Promptly And Sincerely!" an address given at a 16<sup>th</sup> Century Reformation Rally (Brisbane, Australia: Annerley Presbyterian Church, 1985). Lee writes, "Renewing his old friendship with Nicholas Cop, Calvin lodged with an enthusiastic Protestant, Etienne de la Forge. There, he met De la Forge's preacher Rev. Gerard Roussel; as well as the great Bible scholar Lefevre d'Etaples."

<sup>6</sup> F. Whitfield Barton, *Calvin and the Duchess* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 11-17.

<sup>7</sup> Calvin had two important women of France come to his aid. The first was the Queen of Navarre who was the sister of the King, Francis I. The other was Renee De France the sister of Louis XII the king just prior to Francis. Cf. Theodore Beza, *The Life of John Calvin*, 7. The Queen of Navarre was the first. Beza records the fact that she protected Calvin immediately after the famous incident with Nicholas Cop. He writes, "The queen of Navarre, only sister of Francis 1st, a princess of extraordinary talents, afforded the reformer, on this occasion, marked protection, and the Lord dispelled the storm by her intercession. She invited Calvin to her court, received him with great honor, and gave him an audience."

<sup>8</sup> Emanuel Stickelberger, *Calvin: A Life* translated by David George Gelzer (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1954), 38. Stickelberger says Calvin was invited to visit by Renee of Ferrara. Other historians think he went at the suggestion of Margaret of Navarre. Regardless of why he went, he was received with open arms.

<sup>9</sup> Theodore Beza, *The Life of Calvin*, 9. "After completing his Institutes, and faithfully performing the duties he owed his native country, he felt a desire to pay, as if at a distance, his respects to Italy, and to visit Renee, the Duchess of Ferrara, and daughter of Louis 12th king of France, whose piety was at that time very much praised. He therefore, waited upon her, and at the same time so confirmed her in a sincere zeal for religion, to the utmost of his abilities according to the existing state of affairs, that she continued ever after to entertain a sincere affection for him during his life; and now also, as his survivor, exhibits striking marks of her gratitude after his death."

<sup>10</sup> Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin: Geneva and the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 14.

<sup>11</sup> Alister McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 78.

<sup>12</sup> T.H.L Parker, *Calvin: An Introduction to His Thought* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), 1. That is, of course, except for the two year stint in Strasbourg from 1538-1541.

<sup>13</sup> Stickelberger, 46-48.

<sup>14</sup> John Calvin, Preface to his Commentary on the Psalms.

<sup>15</sup> Beza, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Eduard Thurneysen, "Letter from Karl Barth to Eduard Thurneysen, 8 June 1922;" in *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth-Thurneysen Correspondence, 1914-1925* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1964), 101.

<sup>17</sup> Will Durant, *The Reformation...* Vol. 6 of 'The Story of Civilization. (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1957), 490.