

The History of the Reformation...Part 2

How
Christ
restored
the gospel
to his
church



A Long Obedience...

July 1509

John Calvin was eight years old when Martin Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the door in Wittenburg.¹ It is important to keep that fact in mind. That is, it is important to remember that he was twenty-five years younger than Luther. It is important to remember that Calvin was a second generation reformer. That means that the initial groundwork for the Reformation was laid before Calvin came along. It means that men like Luther, Zwingli and Bucer hammered out the break with Rome and men like Melancthon, Calvin and Knox systematized, reinforced and consolidated their work. It means that men like Luther and Zwingli answered the great question, **"Should we stay in Catholicism or should we leave it?"** While men like Calvin and Melancthon answered the practical question, **"Now that we have left Catholicism what should our faith and practice look like?"**

I am making that point because I don't want you to think that just because Calvin was a second-generation reformer that he was in some way inferior to or less important than Luther and those that went before.

He was not.

Besides it is wrong, I think, to evaluate a man like Calvin on the basis of his contemporary impact alone. The standard by which such men ought to be judged has to take into account their faithfulness and not just the notoriety they obtained in their lifetime. The standard by which we judge such men ought to take into account their overall quantitative, historical impact as well as the impact they had while they lived.

And if you do that...if you evaluate Calvin on the basis of his overall impact...I think you might come to the conclusion that Calvin was perhaps even more important to the Reformation than Luther especially with regard to English speaking Christianity.²

You see Calvin influenced John Knox...who in turn influenced Scottish Presbyterianism...which in turn influenced the English Reformation...which in turn influenced the formation of the Westminster Confession...which in turn guided the theology of the Puritans...which in turn influenced colonial politics and theology in America...which in turn formed the representative republican form of government under which we used to live.

The line from American Protestantism back to Calvin is much straighter than the line back to Luther. Still, both men were titans. Both men were heroic. Both men were essential to the recovery and the advance of the gospel. The gains that had been made with Luther and the others had to be protected. The great doctrines of the Reformation had to be systematized and then entrusted to faithful men who

could on pass on what they had learned. Many points of theology and practice had yet to be debated or etched in stone. It took a man with skill as a thinker and organizer to bring the various threads of Reformation theology together in an intelligent manner and weave them into a recognizable tapestry. My point is that we ought not to think of Calvin as less important than Luther simply because he was a second generation reformer. His function and value to the Reformation was different than that of Luther but it was not less.

Not only were the secondary Reformers just as important as the primary ones. It is also important to remember that their times were not all that much safer. In fact, if anything the organized resistance to the Reformation set up by Ignatius Loyola and others really made the times even more dangerous than those of Luther and Zwingli. So we ought not to think that the times were any less dangerous for men like Calvin than they were for Luther. They were not. They too lived in privation and in constant danger most of their lives. Yet that second generation of reformers, and I am thinking principally of Calvin and of Knox here, possessed a stability, a constancy, a singleness of heart that is awe-inspiring to behold. They were for the most part unflappable and unmovable.

They saw the importance of the historic break by Luther and Zwingli and others and they wanted to hang on to what they had been given. They were determined to hang on to the truth of the gospel even if it meant making themselves hateful to all those that hated the gospel. They were determined to hang on to the gospel even though men like Sir Thomas More complained that they were men too frivolous, too giddy, too joyful in their salvation...that they were men drunk with the doctrine of justification.

It is true they were men joyful in their salvation...one might even be able to stretch that to the word "giddy". And they were men who drank long and hard at the fountain of justification...but they were never, ever frivolous. They were men of resolve and were possessed of iron wills.

So the question then becomes, "What was it that made a man like Calvin so resolute? What was it that enabled him to endure suffering, opposition and privation in such heroic measure?"

I think we can find the answer in Calvin's life in the same place we found it in Luther's life. I think we have to look for the answer in God's providential preparation of John Calvin. You see the Calvin was not born with an impervious hide or a fearless heart. He was not born with a will of granite or of adamant resolve. Those things were hammered out by God on the anvil of suffering in the forge of heartache and loneliness.

I like the way D'Aubigne puts it:

While men were thus putting to death the first confessors of Jesus Christ in France, God was preparing mightier ones to fill their places. Bede hurried to the stake an unassuming scholar, an humble hermit, and thought he was dragging almost the whole of the Reformation with him. But Providence has resources that are unknown to the world. The Gospel, like the fabulous phoenix, contains a principle of life within itself, which flames cannot consume, and it springs up again from its own ashes. It is often at the moment when the storm is at its height, when the thunderbolt seems to have struck down the truth, and when thick darkness hides it from our view, that a sudden glimmering appears, the forerunner of a great deliverance. At this time when all human powers in France were arming against the Gospel for the complete destruction of the Reformation,

God was preparing an instrument, weak to all appearance, one day to support His rights and to defend his cause with more than mortal intrepidity.³

Let me continue and explain what I mean.

John Calvin was born on July 10, 1509 in northern France in a little town of about 7,000 called Noyon. It is about sixty miles north of Paris.⁴ By the time Calvin was born the town had acquired the residency of the bishop and had its own cathedral. That meant that the principle business of the town stop being agricultural and started being ecclesiastical. Calvin's father worked for the cathedral both as a lawyer and something of an accountant. That is, he managed the financial affairs of the cathedral.

Now, we don't know a great deal about Calvin's father other than the fact that he held a position in the cathedral at Noyon. Calvin himself wrote almost nothing about his own father or for that matter about the rest of his family or even himself. He was not given as we are today to autobiography. We do know that Calvin's father came from a family that had mostly been fishermen or barrel makers and that his position with the cathedral was the first in his family that involved a more refined clerical lifestyle. I think you could say that he held the first white collar job in his family.

Calvin's father was name was Gerard and his mother was named Jeanne Lefanc. We do know that Gerard was about fifty when Calvin was born. We also know that he made a comfortable, middle-class living and we know that because he was able to give his sons a decent education. In fact, he was able to obtain

benefices for his sons under which they received regular allowances paid by the church to further their educations. I'll talk more about that in a moment.⁵

When Calvin was nineteen or so, his father was accused of mishandling the estates of a couple of priests who had died and as a result was excommunicated by the church. The charges against him were never proved and they became a great source of bitterness for Calvin's father. We do know that when Calvin's father was excommunicated he ordered Calvin to stop studying for the ministry and to start studying law. It is easy enough to see, I think, how he reasoned. Calvin complied instantly to his father's wish. I think it another one of God's wonderful providences that that happened. For Calvin's exquisite expository skills would have never developed the way they did had he stayed with his theological studies. It was his study of law that made him such a capable expositor.

When Calvin's father died a year and a half after his excommunication, he was still outside the fellowship of the church and under the ban. But Calvin's older brother Charles, who was a Catholic priest himself, pled his case so well that he obtained absolution for his father after his death and was as a result able to give him a Christian funeral. Gerard Calvin wound buried in consecrated ground in the cathedral graveyard at Noyon, the same cathedral that had both sustained him and broken his heart.

John Calvin was the fourth son born to Gerard and Jeanne Calvin. He was the fourth son born to them but only the second to survive to manhood. He had two older brothers, Antoine and Francois, who died either as very young boys or

perhaps even as infants. In those days, infant mortality rates were very high. To have two out of five sons die in early childhood was the norm rather than the exception.

Calvin's older brother Charles was the first son to survive. John was next and after John there was a fifth brother also named Antoine...presumably in honor of the Antoine that had died as an infant.

Charles grew up and studied for the ministry himself. As I mentioned a moment ago, he later became a Catholic priest. But he ran too afoul of the cathedral "muckety-mucks" was eventually excommunicated first for insulting one colleague at the cathedral and then for striking another. All of the Calvins had trouble, it seems, with the Catholic Church. But his brother, unlike his father, was never reconciled with the church. On his deathbed in October 1537, he refused both absolution and last rites and was as a result was buried in unconsecrated ground under a gallows.⁶

Calvin's younger brother Antoine would later follow him to Geneva but he married a dreadful, adulterous woman there that caused both him and his brother John a great deal of heartbreak and shame.

Calvin's mother, Jeanne, was a beautiful and pious woman wholly given over to caring for and teaching her children. But she died in 1515 when Calvin was only six years old. Now I suspect that the impact of losing his mother at so young an age must have had an enormous impact on Calvin. But I must hasten to add that there is no way to know exactly what that impact was. Calvin remembered her as

a devout woman who took him on religious pilgrimages as a child.⁷ He remembered her taking him to visit a relic of Saint Anne, the mother of Mary but other than that he hardly ever talked about her, his father, or his family. What does seem clear is that the loss of his mother at such an early age caused him to seek comfort elsewhere. Most scholars think he found his comfort in his studies and there may be some truth to that but I like what Herman Selderhuis says when he says, “As a child, though, Calvin no longer had a mother. Instead, the church increasingly became his mother, informing Calvin’s later affirmation of the traditional Christian dictum that no one can have God as Father who does not have the church as mother...Mother church thus provided the means for young Calvin to devote himself to his studies and, ironically, so begin to distance himself from her.”⁸

His relationship with his father was always cordial. He seems to have had none of the bitterness other men sometimes experienced with their fathers. In fact, he always obeyed his father’s directives without hesitation.

We do know that after his mother died, his father remarried almost immediately. But we ought not to make too much of that. He married almost immediately because he was in his mid to late fifties when she died and he had a number of small children to raise and a job that consumed an enormous amount of time and energy. We don’t really even know what his second wife’s name was. But we do know that they had two daughters together...one of whom was named Marie. She later followed Calvin to Geneva with Antoine.

Other than that, almost nothing is known of Calvin’s early life. We do know that from the time he was seven or eight on he lived outside the Calvin home. At first,

he father sent him to live with the Montmors family where he received his elementary education.⁹ When he was only twelve or so his father sent him on to Paris with his friends the de Hangest family to continue his education but the details of what happened next are pretty vague.¹⁰ There is some controversy as to which college he actually attended.¹¹ Some say he attended de la Marche and others says de la Barbe. I am not so sure it really matters all that much. What does matter is that in that period he studied under one of the greatest teachers of his time Mathurin Cordier.¹² But even knowing that it is impossible to say for sure at which college Calvin attended because Cordier actually taught at both colleges.

One thing we know for certain is that Calvin had enormous respect and affection for Cordier both because of Cordier's skill at teaching and because Cordier attempted to instill a deep love for Christ in all of his students. Cordier seems to have become something of a father figure for Calvin. Prior to Calvin's entrance at the school, Cordier taught the first class in Latin...which was something like the senior class but he had become so discouraged with how little most of his students actually knew that he transferred down three years to the fourth class to make sure that incoming students were properly instructed. That move, an act of real condescension on Cordier's part, put Calvin under his tutelage.

Calvin never forget Cordier and many years later Cordier moved to Geneva to be with his younger friend. In fact, Calvin dedicated his commentary on First Thessalonians to Cordier.

It is befitting that you should come in for a share in my labors, inasmuch as, under your auspices, having entered on a course of study, I made proficiency at least so far as to be prepared to profit in some degree the Church of God. When

my father sent me, while yet a boy, to Paris, after I had simply tasted the first elements of the Latin tongue; Providence so ordered it that I had, for a short time, the privilege of having you as my instructor, that I might be taught by you the true method of learning, in such a way that I might be prepared afterwards to make somewhat better proficiency. For, after presiding over the first class with the highest renown, on observing that pupils who had been ambitiously trained up by the other masters, produced nothing but mere show, nothing of solidity, so that they required to be formed by you anew, tired of this annoyance, you that year descended to the fourth class. This, indeed, was what you had in view, but to me it was a singular kindness on the part of God that I happened to have an auspicious commencement of such a course of training.¹³

Calvin studied under Cordier for about year and a half but Cordier's influence lasted his whole life. After Cordier, Calvin transferred to and studied at a despicable place called the College de la Montaigu. Intellectually, the school was an improvement but physically it was quite a challenge. Now we don't know what we know about the College de la Montaigu from Calvin...he never really described his experiences there. What we know, we know from other students like Erasmus. Writing thirty years after his studies at the college, Erasmus recalled the hard beds, the spoiled food and the sleepless nights as if it had been the night before. Francois Rabelais referred to as a "college of lice" and likewise wrote that if he were king of Paris he would set fire to the entire building making sure that none of the teachers there escaped the flames.¹⁴

In one of later books, Erasmus recorded his impressions of the school as lice infested, with the constant smell of open latrines. He said the school was in disrepair and that thugs, who were both vicious and brutal, inhabited it. He discusses the school in a dialogue between two students.

FIRST: From what coop or cave did you come?

SECOND: From the College de Montaigu.

FIRST: Then I suppose you are full of learning?

SECOND: No, just lice.

The school was in one of the vilest parts of Paris. It was especially dangerous for the students because they were required to wear cassocks, so every criminal and pervert on the street knew immediately who the students were. They were easy prey. Eventually, the neighborhood turned so vile that the school undertook an enormous project for those times. The school which had buildings on both sides of the street decided that for the safety of the students crossing the street from one side to the other that they would build an elevated sky walk which crossed all the way across the street from one building to the next. It was a vicious place, filled with pedophiles and prostitutes. No one was allowed on the street at all after dark. It was called "Rue des Chiens" which means something like "Road of the Dogs" because of the deposits that the dogs made and because of the fact that the street was an open sewer.

While Calvin was at Montaigu, he was given the nickname the "accusative case." The accusative case is the grammatical case that contains direct objects but the pun was intended to hurt Calvin by accusing him of being a snitch. The point is that even before his conversion, Calvin had a real dislike for adulterous behavior and immorality.

In either 1527 or 1528 AD, Calvin's father made Calvin leave Paris and his study of theology to move to Orleans and begin a study of law. Calvin followed his father's instructions dutifully. When his father directed him to change his course of studies from religion to law he complied immediately without complaint.

Calvin seems to imply that his father's decision was financial. Listen to what he says in his introduction to his commentary on the Psalms.

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.¹⁵

Most historians on the other hand argue that the change stemmed from his father's excommunication from the church. They argue that Calvin's father burned in anger toward the church and demanded that his son leave the study of theology for something less political. Regardless of which view is correct Calvin would have been 19 years old to the time of the change.

From the period of 1528 to 1532 AD, Calvin studied law. He studied Latin, Greek and Hebrew. It was a basic part of the humanist education in those days. At the same time, Henry VIII was divorcing his wife for his new love Anne Boleyn and Luther's doctrine was invading France. The church was outraged at the progress Lutheranism was making in France. At some point before 1533 AD, Calvin was converted. Now I have to tell you Calvin doesn't make a very big deal about his conversion. He writes about it only briefly and when he does he doesn't have all that much to say. Listen to this short section for his commentary on the Psalms.

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.

Eventually, one of Calvin's friends from Paris, a man named Nicholas Cop, was elected as the rector at the University of Paris. At the start of the New Year, Cop delivered a sermon in which he called for reform of some of the church's more startling abuses. The church in France had absolutely no intention of allowing what happened in Germany under Luther to happen in France. They ordered Cop to be arrested. They also ordered Calvin to be arrested. For the next year Calvin laid low. He stayed with friends first here and then there. Calvin hardly recounts any specific details of his life during that time except that one person he stayed with had a library with over 2000 volumes in it. But that was Calvin.

In October of 1534 AD, Calvin decided that it was no longer safe to stay in France and left for Basle in Switzerland. In Basle, he was able to keep up with the events of the Reformation. One reformer was poisoned in Geneva. One of his friends was burned at the stake in Paris. Everywhere the Reformation was being related to the radical anarchy of the Peasant's War in Germany and to the Anabaptists. Calvin was furious at the charge. So he decided to write a short theological work to explain to the king of France what the Reformation stood for. It was a little book...only six chapters long. Listen to part of his introduction.

To his most Christian Majesty, the most mighty and illustrious Monarch, Francis,
King of the French, his Sovereign;

John Calvin prays Peace and Salvation in Christ.

Sire, When I first engaged in this work, nothing was farther from my thoughts
than to write what should afterwards be presented to your Majesty.

But when I perceived that the fury of certain bad men had risen to such a height
in your realm, that there was no place in it for sound doctrine, I thought it might
be of service if I were in the same work both to give instruction to my
countrymen, and also lay before your Majesty a Confession, from which you may
learn what the doctrine is that so inflames the rage of those madmen who are this
day, with fire and sword, troubling your kingdom.

Let not a contemptuous idea of our insignificance dissuade you from the
investigation of this cause. We, indeed, are perfectly conscious how poor and
abject we are: in the presence of God we are miserable sinners, and in the sight of
men most despised - we are (if you will) the mere dregs and offscourings of the
world, or worse, if worse can be named: so that before God there remains
nothing of which we can glory save only his mercy, by which, without any merit
of our own, we are admitted to the hope of eternal salvation.

That little book was entitled the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and it became,
of course, an overnight runaway bestseller.

Let's pray.

¹ The famous event with Luther took place October 31, 1517. Calvin was born July 10, 1509.

² It is interesting to note that both Look Magazine and Time Magazine gave Luther the number
three spot on the 100 Most Influential people of the Last 1,000 years behind Edison and
Guttenberg. Look included Calvin at number 40. Time didn't include Calvin at all but did include
Elvis.

³ J.H. Merle D'Aubigne, *The History of the Reformation in the Sixteenth Century Book 3*, (New York:
American Tract Society, 1847), 473-4.

⁴ Derek W. H. Thomas, "Who was John Calvin?" in *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine & Doxology* ed. By Burk Parsons (Lake Mary, Florida: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2008), 19.

⁵ Emanuel Stickelberger, *Calvin: A Life* translated by David George Gelzer (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1954), 15.

⁶ Herman J. Selderhuis, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 10.

⁷ Selderhuis, 11.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 9.

¹⁰ W. Robert Godfrey, *John Calvin: Pilgrim and Pastor* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2000), 25.

¹¹ Alister McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 21ff. McGrath has a lengthy discussion on the subject.

¹² Selderhuis, 12.

¹³ John Calvin, *Preface to his Commentary on First Thessalonians*.

¹⁴ Selderhuis, 13.

¹⁵ John Calvin, *Preface to his Commentary on the Psalms*.