

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

How  
Christ  
restored  
the gospel  
to his  
church



### Mrs. Calvin... 1540-1549

John Calvin is often portrayed as a loveless man. He is often portrayed as someone without a heart or a soul. He is often portrayed as someone completely devoid of the milk of human kindness. He is accused of garnering the same kind of spirit H.L. Mencken accused the Puritan of having when he said, "The Puritans were people who lived in desperate fear that somebody somewhere might be having a good time."<sup>1</sup> Calvin is accused of just about every crime you can imagine. He is sometimes said to be personally responsible for dozens and dozens of people being burned at the stake in Geneva, which is interesting because I can't see that he was ever able to force the Council to do anything...he certainly wasn't able to force it to practice weekly communion. It is hard to imagine that he would have ever been able to convince it to have someone burned alive. He is often accused of having banished his daughter in law which seems to me would have been extremely difficult since he never actually had a daughter in law. He is sometimes called the Pope of Geneva, sometimes the Dictator of Geneva, sometimes the tyrant of Geneva, and sometimes he is even called...and this is my personal all time favorite...the Ayatollah of Geneva. And

yet, the man that followed him at Geneva, Theodore Beza, had no difficulty at all saying, "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 that it will be difficult to depreciate, and even more difficult to imitate."<sup>2</sup>

I think Calvin was a man of his times and I have to add times back then were hard, very hard indeed. Calvin's world was a time of great political and religious upheaval. Religious persecution was more than just a hypothetical reality. Calvin had a number of friends killed for holding Reformation views. One very close friend was burned at the stake in Paris.

But it wasn't just political and religious upheaval that made life hard. Life was hard physically. Infant mortality was common. Not many adults lived much longer than middle age. The reasons are, of course, manifold. There was no such as modern medicine. There were no hospitals. There was no such thing as anesthesia or antibiotics. And added to everything else the people of Calvin's day faced was the continual threat and reality of bubonic plague.

Life was hard...harder I think than most of us can imagine. That is why I always marvel when critics lampoon the Reformers for not being on touch with their feminine sides. They lampoon them as grim-faced tyrants. I don't really understand that. I mean think about it. John Knox was once sentenced to slave labor...slave labor rowing in a French galley. He later spoke of the "torment in the galleys, torments which brought forth sobs of my heart." During his nineteen months rowing the galleys, most men only lived five or six months, he

contracted a kidney infection and stomach ulcers, ailments that vexed him the rest of his life.<sup>3</sup> Now I don't know about you but I tend to think that may have been worthy of a prolonged pout. You see...and I hope I can convince you of this...the times called for men who were men.

The men of the Reformation were hard men because the times required hard men. They were hard men because the opposition to the gospel was hard. They were hard men because they faced death and heartache in quantity and proportion that would institutionalize most men in America today. They were not men apt to cry...they were not men apt to flinch. They were men who endured and were durable.

In my own life I have known a few people in my life like they were...people whose emotions were stretched so many times to the point of breaking over the course of their lives...that they just sort of calloused over. My own mother for one was just one such kind of person. Her mother died of typhoid fever when she was just a little girl, seven or eight. She sat and watched her convulse and die and no one there comforted her or took her aside. She grew up in household of men...her and her sisters serving as house slaves cooking meals and cleaning house and washing clothes...and any downtime they had was given over to hoeing or picking cotton. Meanwhile the boys in the family served as field slaves. Several of the kids died along the way and yet the ones that lived all finished high school...finished high school poor as church mice. They lost their possessions in the Great Depression but not their dignity. My mother married right after high school just in time to have her husband ship off to World War 2 leaving her to provide for their two little babies. After the war he abandoned her

for another woman. That was the mother knew and loved. And the thing I learned growing up around her is that toughness doesn't necessarily kill emotion but it does redefine it. Such women are not very quick to cry. That doesn't mean that they don't love or express their love as best they can. But it does mean that it tends to be a lot less sentimental or superficial.

That's the kind of thing I think of when I think of Calvin. His mother died when he was only six years old. His father then shipped him off to live with another family to receive his elementary education presumably because it was the best thing he could do for him. By the time Calvin twelve or so he was off to college and he never returned to live at home for any extended period of time the rest of his life.

Instead, he lived the life of a grim-faced scholar...alone with his books...his chief solace and joy. And then at the very moment in history when he might have found success and fame and appreciation as a scholar he was hounded from his homeland because of his faith in Jesus Christ. He was forced to be pilgrim and stranger in a strange land. It is any wonder that he was a man prone to guard his heart? Was it any wonder that he was not much of a hugger? Is it any wonder that he was not quick to laugh? Is it any wonder he was a serious minded man?

And yet he was a man...a real man...with real blood not ice water flowing through his veins. He hurt when people were mean to him and he hurt when people he loved died. Now you won't get that impression from those that hate him and hate the gospel he lived and loved to proclaim. No, you will only get that impression by getting to know Calvin the man. And you won't get to know

Calvin the man by just reading the *Institutes* or his commentaries on the Bible. You see Calvin the man did not write himself into every sermon or Sunday school lesson the way I do and men of our age do. When Calvin preached or he taught he focused on the text and on finding the Lord Jesus Christ there. That's why you won't get to know the real Calvin in his theological writings or even his expositions of the Bible. To get to know Calvin you have to read his letters. When you read Calvin's letters you come away with a completely different impression of Calvin the man. You come away with an impression that Calvin hurt like other men, that Calvin suffered like other men, and yes that Calvin even loved like other men.

Now I have taken the time to lay all this groundwork this morning about Calvin and his feelings and the like because I want to talk to you this morning about his wife.

It is a topic that is often omitted in discussions of Calvin and yet Calvin was married for almost a fifth of his life.

John Calvin was thirty one years old when he got married. He was married for nine years until his wife died in Geneva in April 1549.

Now Calvin was unlike many of the other men of his time that got married to allay their lusts. That doesn't seem to have ever been a problem for Calvin. Calvin got married, among other reasons, because he was looking for someone to take care of him so that his health might not decline any further. That was important to Calvin because he had a number of medical issues.

Calvin's afflictions read like a medical journal. He suffered from painful stomach cramps, intestinal influenza, and recurring migraine headaches. He was subject to a persistent onslaught of fevers that would often lay him up for weeks at a time. He experienced problems with his trachea, in addition to pleurisy, gout, and colic. He suffered from hemorrhoids that were often aggravated by an internal abscess that would not heal. He had severe arthritis and acute pain in his knees, calves, and feet. Other maladies included nephritis (acute, chronic inflammation of the kidney caused by infection), gallstones, and kidney stones. He once passed a kidney stone so large that it tore the urinary canal and led to excessive bleeding.<sup>4</sup>

Calvin got married during the three years he was in Strasbourg. The story of his marriage is funny and sad and so often misunderstood and misrepresented that I just think you ought to know a little about it.

When Calvin first moved to Strasbourg he moved in with the Bucer's...Pastor Martin Bucer and his wife Elizabeth. Calvin had never seen such a happy marriage. Bucer loved his wife so much that he just couldn't understand why everyone wasn't married. Bucer was constantly telling Calvin he ought to get married. Melancthon did the same thing and yet Calvin resisted the idea of marriage not wanting to be accused as many of the Reformers were as being priests who left Catholicism only so they could give up celibacy.

There is one great story William Peterson relates in an article about Calvin's search for a wife that involves Melancthon the great German Reformer and protégé of Martin Luther. Once Calvin was at a conference with Melancthon and a number of other Reformers and they had been hammering out some theological dispute or negotiation for hours and Calvin was sitting alone at one end of the table uncharacteristically silent and absent minded when Melancthon

spoke up and said, "Well, well, it seems to me our theologian is thinking about a future spouse."<sup>5</sup> I love that...I love the idea of someone ragging Calvin about thinking about a wife.

One of the funny things about Calvin's marriage is that a whole number of people felt a need to try to play matchmaker for him. Sometimes their intentions were exceedingly high minded...that is, they loved him and wanted to see him happy. In 1540, for example, he was introduced to a young woman of German nobility who was both beautiful and rich. Calvin writes, "I was presented with a girl of noble origins, and with a dowry that exceeds my station. But there were two things that kept me from a marriage with her: she did not speak our language, and I was afraid she would too often think back to her origins and upbringing."<sup>6</sup>

Now imagine that. He was dissuaded from marrying this poor girl because she was too rich and didn't speak French. He was worried about marrying her and having her fret over the loss of her quality and style of life. And he was a bit worried, I think, about himself and coming to have too many possessions and too much money as a minister of the gospel.<sup>7</sup> When the girl's brother pressed him to marry the girl...the man was huge fan of Calvin...Calvin became frantic. He finally agreed to marry the girl if she would learn French when she hesitated he slipped away.

Now I don't want you to think that Calvin didn't want to get married. Actually he did and he had given the matter a lot of thought. He wrote William Farel, "I am not of that insane class of lovers who, once captivated by beauty, kiss even its

faults. The only comeliness that attracts me is this:– that she be modest, complaisant, unostentatious, thrifty, patient, and likely to be careful of my health.”<sup>8</sup>

In fact, Calvin sent his brother Antoine, to ask in his behalf for the hand of another woman who was quite poor. He had heard such good things about her that he told Antoine, “if she answers to her reputation that would be dowry enough without any money.”<sup>9</sup> And at first the girl agreed and then Calvin always one to do his research found out she actually loved someone else and speedily released her from her vow.<sup>10</sup>

Calvin wanted to get married but he deeply concerned about not making a bad marriage...and by that he meant bad for the gospel. He was rescued in the end by his old friend Martin Bucer who recommended someone in Calvin’s own congregation. Her name was Idelette de Bure. She had been married to an Anabaptist named Jean Stordeur and had come to Strasbourg seeking refuge as a result from religious persecution in France. Calvin had apparently developed a relationship with Stordeur and over time had persuaded him to embrace the faith of the Reformed Church. He may have even visited in the Stordeur home. Either late in 1539 or early in 1540, Stordeur contracted the plague and died leaving his wife with two small children. It is almost certain that he performed the funeral for Stordeur.

Late in 1540, Idelette had moved outside of the city to her brother’s home and had taken her two small children. Bucer recommended her to Calvin on the basis of her character and godliness which Calvin already knew well enough and on

the basis of Christian compassion and mercy. Because she was both poor and godly she suited Calvin perfectly. According to William Farel, she was a good looking woman.<sup>11</sup> She was a couple of years older than Calvin but looked quite young.

Farel came up from Neuchâtel and performed the simple ceremony himself. She moved in with Calvin and his brother and his wife. She brought two children and a measure of experience to the marriage. Their honeymoon was short...only two weeks...and they both got sick. One writer puts it this way, "The Lord sent a providential illness to the couple so they would not sink into hedonism." When I first read that I thought it was a terribly sarcastic thing to say but is almost to a word what Calvin himself wrote to a friend, "In truth out of fear that our marriage would be too happy, the Lord from the beginning moderated out joy."<sup>12</sup>

But they were happy. They were happy with each other and they were happy with their lives.

In 1541, while Calvin was away representing the church at the Diet Hagenau (agano), plague killed one of the servants in his home. His brother Antione moved into a boarding house and Idelette took the kids and fled to the country house of her brother. Calvin hearing that plague had struck his home fretted to a friend, "My wife in my thoughts day and night..."

In 1542, after being married just two years Idelette and Calvin had a precious little baby boy...a baby boy named Jacques, the equivalent of James in English.

The baby was born prematurely and because of its weakened...lived only twenty two days. They were crushed.

It didn't help that one of the women in the church still objecting to Calvin's presence back in Geneva began to spread vicious slanders about Calvin's wife, Idelette. Because she had been married to an Anabaptist and because the Anabaptists in those days had a different view of marriage, the nature of the ceremony they took engaged in differed significantly from those in the Reformed Churches. Anyway, one woman claimed that Idelette was no better than a harlot.<sup>13</sup> She waited, of course, until the most hurtful time to spread her bile...she waited until the baptism of the baby and when the baby died she cried that it was a sign of God's judgment on Calvin.<sup>14</sup>

The Catholics of the time were always quick to argue as well that the death of the baby was a sign of God's wrath. In fact, they embellished the account saying that Calvin had three children that died in infancy. I suppose one child was not enough to make the point. But the Calvin's only had one child together.<sup>15</sup>

Years later Calvin recounted the incident with tears saying that God had only given him one son and had quickly taken him from him but that he took comfort knowing that God had given spiritual children all over the world. That was Calvin.

Idelette never fully recovered physically after the baby. She was quite ill almost continually from 1542 to 1545 with only occasional bouts of health. Once she left Geneva to go to neighboring city to tend to the wife of Peter Viret...a woman

with whom she had developed a sisterly friendship and exchanged letters constantly. But while she was there she became so ill that Viret wound up having to provide someone to take care of her. Calvin wrote Viret apologizing on her behalf.

It is truly a source of pain to me that my wife should have been so great a burden to you; for she could not have been of much service to your wife when confined, so far as I can divine, since she herself on account of the state of her health, stood in need of the assiduous attentions of others. It is matter of considerable comfort to me to be persuaded that you were able to bear it patiently.<sup>16</sup>

From 1545, Idelette's health began a low slow arduous slide.<sup>17</sup> She became a constant invalid. Calvin scholars are unsure as to exactly what was wrong her but most suspect that she had long the way contracted tuberculosis. More than once Calvin despaired for her life. He had married her in part to help take care of his health but for most of their marriage she required more care than she gave. Finally on March 29, 1549 she died. Let me let Calvin tell the story. The following is taken from letter written to his friend Peter Viret a week after her death.

Although the death of my wife has been exceedingly painful to me, yet I subdue my grief as well as I can. Friends, also, are earnest in their duty to me. It might be wished, indeed, that they could profit me and themselves more; yet one can scarcely say how much I am supported by their attentions. But you know well enough how tender, or rather soft, my mind is. Had not a powerful self-control, therefore, been vouchsafed to me, I could not have borne up so long. And truly mine is no common source of grief. I have been bereaved of the best companion of my life, of one who, had it been so ordered, would not only have been the willing sharer of my indigence, but even of my death. During her life she was the faithful helper of my ministry. From her I never experienced the slightest hindrance. (Some commentators hammer Calvin because of that line but remember that to Calvin nothing mattered in comparison to the advance of the gospel.) She was never troublesome to me throughout the entire course of her

illness; she was more anxious about her children than about herself. As I feared these private cares might annoy her to no purpose, I took occasion, on the third day before her death, to mention that I would not fail in discharging my duty to her children. Taking up the matter immediately, she said, "I have already committed them to God." When I said that that was not to prevent me from caring for them, she replied, "I know you will not neglect what you know has been committed to God." Lately, also, when a certain woman insisted that she should talk with me regarding these matters, I, for the first time, heard her give the following brief answer: "Assuredly the principal thing is that they live a pious and holy life. My husband is not to be urged to instruct them in religious knowledge and in the fear of God. If they be pious, I am sure he will gladly be a father to them; but if not, they do not deserve that I should ask for aught in their behalf." This nobleness of mind will weigh more with me than a hundred recommendations. Many thanks for your friendly consolation. Adieu, most excellent and honest brother. May the Lord Jesus watch over and direct yourself and your wife. Present my best wishes to her and to the brethren.<sup>18</sup>

Four days later he wrote this extraordinary account of his wife's death to his old friend William Farel.

Intelligence of my wife's death has perhaps reached you before now. I do what I can to keep myself from being overwhelmed with grief. My friends also leave nothing undone that may administer relief to my mental suffering. When your brother left, her life was all but despaired of. When the brethren were assembled on Tuesday, they thought it best that we should join together in prayer. This was done. When Abel, in the name of the rest, exhorted her to faith and patience, she briefly (for she was now greatly worn) stated her frame of mind. I afterwards added an exhortation, which seemed to me appropriate to the occasion. And then, as she had made no allusion to her children, I, fearing that, restrained by modesty, she might be feeling an anxiety concerning them, which would cause her greater suffering than the disease itself, declared in the presence of the brethren, that I should henceforth care for them as if they were my own. She replied, "I have already committed them to the Lord." When I replied, that that was not to hinder me from doing my duty, she immediately answered, "If the Lord shall care for them, I know they will be commended to you." Her magnanimity was so great, that she seemed to have already left the world. About the sixth hour of the day, on which she yielded up her soul to the Lord, our

brother Bourgouin addressed some pious words to her, and while he was doing so, she spoke aloud, so that all saw that her heart was raised far above the world. For these were her words: "O glorious resurrection! O God of Abraham, and of all our fathers, in thee have the faithful trusted during so many past ages, and none of them have trusted in vain. I also will hope." These short sentences were rather ejaculated than distinctly spoken. This did not come from the suggestion of others, but from her own reflections, so that she made it obvious in few words what were her own meditations. I had to go out at six o'clock. Having been removed to another apartment after seven, she immediately began to decline. When she felt her voice suddenly failing her, she said: "Let us pray: let us pray. All pray for me." I had now returned. She was unable to speak, and her mind seemed to be troubled. I, having spoken a few words about the love of Christ, the hope of eternal life, concerning our married life, and her departure, engaged in prayer. In full possession of her mind, she both heard the prayer, and attended to it. Before eight she expired, so calmly, that those present could scarcely distinguish between her life and her death. I at present control my sorrow so that my duties may not be interfered with. But in the mean while the Lord has sent other trials upon me. Adieu, brother, and very excellent friend. May the Lord Jesus strengthen you by his Spirit; and may he support me also under this heavy affliction, which would certainly have overcome me, had not he, who raises up the prostrate, strengthens the weak, and refreshes the weary, stretched forth his hand from heaven to me. Salute all the brethren and your whole family.<sup>19</sup>

Calvin threw himself back into his ministry and work. That was how he managed his grief. A full month later he wrote Henry Bullinger saying:

As time does not permit me to reply to your letter now, I am merely desirous of telling you that I have scarcely ever received anything more pleasant from you, as it served to alleviate a very trying domestic grief, which, occasioned by the death of my wife a little before, was causing me very much sorrow.<sup>20</sup>

Calvin outlived his wife some fifteen years. Others wanted him to remarry but he wouldn't have anything to do with that. He once wrote a friend, "I am no more than half a man, since God took my wife home to himself."<sup>21</sup> Seven years later he wrote one of his colleagues...a French pastor in Frankfurt who had himself lost his wife, "What a terrible injury, what a pain the death of your wife has caused

you, and I speak from my own experience. For even now I remember how difficult it was, seven years ago now, to deal with such grief.”<sup>22</sup>

But, of course, Calvin did deal with the grief. He dealt with grief and loss the best way he knew how...by throwing himself in the work of the ministry. Near the end of his life he interjected a brief personal note into one of his sermons on 1 Timothy explaining why he never remarried. This is what he said.

As for me, I do not want anyone to think me very virtuous because I am not married, It would rather be a fault in me if I could serve God better in marriage than remaining as I am...But I know my infirmity, that perhaps a woman might not be happy with me. However that may be, I abstain from marriage in order that I may be more free to serve God. But that is not because I think I am more virtuous than my brethren. Fie on me if I had that false opinion.<sup>23</sup>

There is perhaps one other reason he never remarried...but I won't state it out loud lest someone somewhere think Calvin, the unfeeling monster that he was...the man with ice water in his veins...the Ayatollah of Geneva...somehow in the closing years of his life grew feelings and demonstrated an affection for someone that he loved. Fie on me if I should promote such a false opinion.

Let's pray.

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<sup>1</sup> H L Mencken, *A Book of Burlesques*, "Sententiæ" (1920), quoted from *The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations*. The actual quote goes, "Puritanism: The haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy" but I have messed with out of disrespect.

<sup>2</sup> Theodore Beza, "Adored...Abhorred" in *Christian History Magazine* Volume 12. October 1, 1986.

<sup>3</sup> Kevin Dale Miller, "John Knox: Did You Know" in *Christian History Magazine* Volume 46. 1995.

<sup>4</sup> I got this quote from my good friend Jack Smith, Assistant Minister at Redeemer Presbyterian in Austin. I am not sure exactly where he got it. The heading reads his ministry and maladies which it certainly describes.

<sup>5</sup> William J. Peterson, "Idelette: John Calvin's Search for the Right Wife" in *Christian History Magazine* Volume 12. October 1, 1986.

<sup>6</sup> Herman J. Selderhuis, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 168.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 141.

<sup>8</sup> Williston Walker, *John Calvin: the Organizer of Reformed Protestantism* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1906), 234. See also John Piper, "The Precious Weight of the Glory of God" a lecture on the life of Calvin. Piper writes, "Calvin had told his friend and matchmaker William Farel what he wanted in a wife: "The only beauty which allures me is this - that she be chaste, not too nice or fastidious, economical, patient, likely to take care of my health" (see note 23). Parker comments, "Romantic love...seems to have had no place in his character. Yet prosaic wooing led to a happy marriage" (see note 24). I think Parker was wrong about romantic love (see below on Idelette's death). But the prosaic wooing he referred to was toward an Anabaptist widow named Idelette Stordeur who had joined Calvin's congregation with her husband Jean. In the spring of 1540, Jean died of plague and that August 6, 1540, Calvin and Idelette were married. She brought a son and daughter with her into Calvin's home."

<sup>9</sup> Walker, 235.

<sup>10</sup> Herman J. Selderhuis, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 168.

<sup>11</sup> Selderhuis, 169.

<sup>12</sup> Cottret, 143.

<sup>13</sup> T.H.L Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 129.

<sup>14</sup> Letter 204 to Farel Geneva, 21st august 1547. He writes, "As the day of the [Lord's] Supper draws near, I may meet with Penthesilaea. Froment lately made a movement about a reconciliation, but he wished the matter to be settled according to his own arbitration. I replied that our church was not so destitute but that there were brethren competent to undertake that duty. We shall make every effort. And yet she has cruelly wounded me. For when at the baptism of our child James, I had admitted the truth about the fault of my wife and her former husband, she calumniously asserted among her own friends, that my wife was therefore a harlot; such is

her bold impudence. I shall treat her not according to what she deserves, but according to what my office demands.”

<sup>15</sup> Selderhuis, 169.

<sup>16</sup> Letter 223 to Viret Geneva, *15th June 1548*.

<sup>17</sup> Selderhuis, 170.

<sup>18</sup> Letter 238 To Viret *April 7, 1549*.

<sup>19</sup> Letter 239 To Farel Geneva, *11th April 1549*.

<sup>20</sup> Letter 242 To Henry Bullinger *7th May 1549*.

<sup>21</sup> Selderhuis, 172.

<sup>22</sup> Selderhuis, 172.

<sup>23</sup> Parker, 130.