



### **Prayer Before Studying Theology:**

O Lord, heavenly Father, in whom is the fullness of light and wisdom,  
enlighten our minds by your Holy Spirit,  
and give us grace to receive your Word with reverence and humility,  
without which no one can understand your truth. Amen  
--John Calvin

### **Week #8a: Life of John Calvin**

#### *I, Background and Education*

John Calvin was born in Noyon (c. 50 miles NE of Paris) on July 10, 1509, the second of four sons to Gérard Cauvin, who was a financial and legal assistant to the bishop and also did legal work for the local nobility. Thus, Calvin, though not a member of the nobility, was raised and went to school with children from prominent local families and received a good classical education.

This education was funded by various church revenues and at the age of twelve Calvin was tonsured and sent to Paris to study at the Collège de la Marche to improve his Latin. He then transferred to the Collège de Montaigu, where he pursued a bachelor's degree consisting of the traditional medieval curriculum—the trivium (grammar, logic and rhetoric) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy). He was a very diligent student and good at memory work. He would repeat everything new he had learned that day before he went to bed at night and, upon waking, would call to mind the previous day's lectures.

The college itself had been established by the Brethren of the Common Life and was strongly regimented and had a heavy devotional emphasis. Erasmus and Rabelais, influential figures who had also attended the school, ridiculed the school, claiming it served spoiled food and that students were regularly beaten and forced to sleep in filthy cubicles. Calvin studied scholastic philosophy under a well-known Gallicanist, the Scotsman John Major. (The Gallican movement originated in France and advocated that the Catholic church in each nation should have administrative independence from papal control.) Calvin completed his master's degree in philosophy in 1528 at the age of eighteen and it looked as though he would indeed have a promising future in the church.

Unfortunately, Calvin's father had a conflict with the cathedral officials at Noyon over an accusation of financial misconduct and was excommunicated, so Calvin left Paris to study law at the university at Orléans, then for two years at Bourges, where he was tutored in Greek by Melchior Wolmar, who was a Lutheran sympathizer. Calvin received his doctorate in civil law in 1532 at the age of 22 and published a commentary on Seneca's *De clementia* (which can be read as an appeal to the king for toleration of persons advocating ecclesiastical and social reforms).

## II. Calvin and the Movement for Reform

Calvin at this time seems to have been a sympathizer of the French reformist humanism that centered around Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples (a biblical scholar) and Bishop Briçonnet of Meaux and was supported by Marguërite, the eldest sister of King Francis I and future queen of Navarre and author of the Protestant-leaning devotional book, *The Mirror of a Sinful Soul*.

The tide soon turned against the reform-minded. One of Calvin's old friends from the Collège de Montaigu, Nicholas Cop, newly elected as rector of the University of Paris, gave an inaugural address that attacked the theologians of the Sorbonne, quoting Erasmus and even Luther. Cop was forced to flee Paris and blame for the address shifted to Calvin as a suspected coauthor and Protestant sympathizer. Calvin fled in disguise to Noyon and renounced the ecclesiastical benefices he had held there since the age of 12.

## III. Calvin and the Institutes

By the end of 1535, he had arrived in Basel and completed work on the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which

- was based on the Apostle's Creed,
- attempted to give the emerging doctrines of the Protestant Reformation a more systematic form and
- served as an apologetic for the French Protestant movement.

Subsequent editions included more in-depth discussions that drew upon

- Calvin's reading of the Church Fathers,
- the influence of other reformers (particularly Martin Bucer of Strasbourg) and
- Calvin's experience of pastoring a French refugee congregation in Strasbourg in 1538-1541.

The final edition of the *Institutes* appeared in 1559.

## IV. Calvin and Geneva

Calvin arrived into Geneva in 1536. The local nobility had succeeded in gaining increasing self-government in the late Middle Ages and this also made them sympathetic to the emerging Protestant resistance to traditional church authorities (see map in Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250-1550*, p. 373 for the geographical distribution of contemporary Protestantism).

Calvin was invited by Guillaume Farel to assist in implementing Protestant reform in Geneva but in 1537-1538,

- Calvin's plans to enhance the authority and disciplinary powers of the church's ministers was rejected and
- Calvin refused to endorse a return to certain traditional liturgical practices (use of unleavened bread for the Lord's Supper on Easter Sunday).

Calvin left Geneva and, in relative poverty and deteriorating, pastored a refugee congregation in Strasbourg, observing Martin Bucer's attempt to implement Protestant reform in that city and Johannes Sturm's reform of the educational system, both of which Calvin later drew upon when he returned to Geneva in 1541. (Calvin in 1540 married

Idelette de Bure, the widow of an Anabaptist that Calvin had persuaded to adopt the Reformed faith.)

Invited back to Geneva in 1541, he established a new church order, which

- respected the magistrate's authority in a way that his initiatives of 1537 had not, but
- still allowed the church a way to get the civil government's help in imposing discipline and punishing those who transgressed ecclesiastical law (violations of civil law being dealt with separately). (See q on Ozment, p. 366)
  - Michael Servetus—Spanish physician and anti-Trinitarian (executed 1553)
- After 1553 influx of refugees from France, England and Scotland and collapse of local opposition to Calvin meant that Calvin's reforms were largely unopposed.
- Founding of the Genevan Academy; rise of Theodore Beza (who would oversee the development of the Reformed tradition in Geneva).
- Calvin died in 1564.