

Part 3: The Reformation Church (1500-1600)

Week 8: John Calvin (1509-1564)

Early Life

Born in Noyon, France.

Training – quotation from Calvin's "Preface" to his *Commentaries on the Psalms*

As we said earlier in our look at the Renaissance, this period in time in France was a time of intellectual revival. King Francis I was a great patron of arts and promoted Renaissance culture. Theologically Jacques Lefevre d'Étaples shared the concern of the Protestants that the Roman church was corrupt, although he never left the Roman church. In 1512 d'Étaples wrote a commentary on Romans which seems to teach justification by faith alone.

1532 - Calvin had some contact with this intellectual movement in his student days and published a commentary on the Roman moral philosopher Seneca's book "On Mercy." Calvin wanted to be an editor and commentator on Renaissance texts, like Erasmus. This work didn't make a huge impression on Europe, disappointing Calvin.

Conversion to Protestantism

**Quotation from his "Preface" to his *Commentaries on the Psalms*

We don't know exactly when Calvin identified with the Protestant movement. He admits that he was obstinately committed to the superstitions of the papacy until he was suddenly, or unexpectedly, converted. Probably similar to Luther's breakthrough. Probably 1533/1534. Increased problems with the authorities, so that he had to flee from France into Switzerland. Meanwhile he had been writing. Published *Institutes* first in 1535 at age 25. Final form about five times as long. Immediately recognized as remarkable presentation of Protestant view.

Calvin knew about Martin Bucer, the Reformer in Strasbourg and thought that would be a good environment to work in.

**Quotation from his "Preface" to his *Commentaries on the Psalms*

Ministry in Geneva

Because of military tensions between France and Germany, Calvin had to take a long way around to get to Strasbourg, through Geneva, in 1536.

**Quotation from his "Preface" to his *Commentaries on the Psalms*

1537 - Calvin and Farel suggested changes in church government to the city council and proposed several steps to ensure the success of the Reformation:

1. A confession of faith should be written, with all the residents of Geneva being familiar with it and believing it. Council agreed.
2. Church discipline was to be instituted. Anyone delinquent in doctrine or life would be admonished by the church; if they continued in their defiance they would eventually be excommunicated by the church. The city council wouldn't fully adopt this measure, as they wanted the council to control excommunication. Continuing point of conflict between Calvin/Farel and city government.

1538 - city government imposed new ceremonies and practices without consulting the ministers, refused to excommunicate some that Calvin and Farel thought should be; therefore Calvin and Farel refused to administer communion on Easter Sunday due to the lack of discipline. The city council then banished the two of them from the city (Calvin's first pastorate ended in utter disaster after less than 2 years - he was somewhat delighted; hadn't wanted to be there in the first place!)

Ministry in Strasbourg

1538-1541 - Calvin proceeded to Strasbourg as he originally desired. He was warmly welcomed by Bucer, who asked him to pastor a small French-speaking congregation of about 400 people and Calvin was happy to do that.

While in Strasbourg he wrote:

- Romans commentary
- Revised and lengthened his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*
- Wrote a reply to Cardinal Sadolet, former bishop of Geneva who wrote the Genevan city council urging them to return to Rome. Calvin answered him point by point making one of his most powerful defenses of the Reformation. Sadolet had launched a personal attack on the Reformers, saying they were only in it for the money and fame. Calvin responded to this in many ways, including the fact that they were reforming the church to provide assurance to terrified consciences.

In 1541 he married Idelette de Bure, the widow of an Anabaptist. They had only one child from the marriage, who did not survive. Idelette died in 1549.

**Calvin's letters to Peter Viret and William Farel on the death of Idelette

Return to Geneva

In September 1540 Calvin received an invitation to return to Geneva. Again, Farel had to persuade him. Calvin returned to Geneva in 1541. The issue of church discipline hadn't been resolved, but he agreed to an ambiguous statement that allowed the church to excommunicate.

Calvin's preaching alternated between preaching one week solely on Sunday morning and afternoon and the next week preaching Monday-Friday mornings and Sunday morning and afternoon. His practice was to preach from the New Testament on Sunday mornings and on the Psalms on Sunday afternoons. During the week he preached from the Old Testament.

1555 - Calvin's supporters permanently gained the upper hand in Geneva's city council

1564 - health deteriorated with headaches, stomach problems, kidney stones. He continued to dictate writings from his sickbed and preached until within a month or two of his death. Buried in unmarked grave to prevent pilgrimages.