

Sunday, May 15, 2011—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—Lesson 33: The Life and Times of John Calvin

Calvin's Early Life

- John Calvin was born July 10, 1509 at Noyon in Picardy, about sixty miles north-east of Paris. His father was in comfortable circumstances and was raised in aristocratic society and had the manner of that class. (Latourette, 751)
- In boyhood he is rumored to have been deeply religious and critical of any laxity in morals. At the age of 14, Calvin attended the University of Paris. Coincidentally, Calvin matriculated through the University at same time as Francis Xavier and Ignatius Loyola, two of the men who would lead the Catholic Counter Reformation. (Latourette, 751-752)
- Influenced heavily by the Renaissance Humanism of the age, Calvin left Paris at the age of 19 to study law. Writing in elegant Latin and acquiring knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, he published his book at 23 a commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia*. (Latourette, 752)
- While the details of Calvin's conversion of fuzzy at best, it is clear that he had come under the influence of an earnestly Protestant group in Paris where he became acquainted with some of the writings of Erasmus and Luther. (Latourette, 752)
- Timothy Paul Jones, author of *Christian History Made Easy*, reports that in 1534 Calvin helped a friend write a speech that was peppered with quotes from Luther and Erasmus that angered the French government. Forced to flee, Calvin went back home to Noyon, France before moving on to Basel, Switzerland. It was during this time period Calvin became both a believer and a Protestant. (Jones, 110-111)
- While in Basel in 1536 Calvin published the first edition of his highly influential *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. "The work was the clearest, most logical, and most readable exposition of Protestant doctrine the Reformation age produced, and it gave its youthful author European fame overnight. Calvin labored on its elaboration nearly all his active life." (Shelley, 258-259)

Calvin's Institutes

- Latourette reports that Calvin's *Institutes* won their way not from originality of the ideas but because of their clarity, orderly arrangement, and comprehensiveness. "They were the most inclusive and systematic presentation of the Christian faith as held by the Protestants which had thus far appeared. They forth the entire cosmic drama of creation, sin, and redemption under the sovereign will of God as Calvin belied that it was taught in the Scriptures." (Latourette, 752)
- The initial work was a mere six chapters in length. For the next quarter of a century, Calvin worked away at this, adding extra chapters and rearranging the material. By the time of its final edition (1559), the work had eighty chapters, and was divided into four books. (McGrath, 69)

- “The first book deals with God the creator and God’s sovereignty over that creation. Book two concerns the human need for redemption, and the manner in which this redemption is achieved by Christ the mediator. The third book deals with the manner in which this redemption is appropriated by human beings, which the final book deals with the church and its relation to society.” (McGrath, 70)
- Calvin was more concerned with stating positively he believed to be true Biblical Christianity rather than refuting the errors of the Catholic Church. (Latourette, 753)
- “Even Roman Catholic historian , Kampschutle, commented, ‘Without doubt the most outstanding and the most influential production in the sphere of dogmatics which the Reformation literature of the sixteenth century presents.’ In spite of this glowing report, Calvin’s’ work was burned at Notre Dame in 1544.” (Vance, 33)
- Lawrence M. Vance, author of *The Other Side of Calvinism* offers the following assessment of Calvin’s *Institutes*, “If you want to read accurate information about the Trinity, and the Deity of Christ or find out what Reformed doctrine is—read it. If you want to ascertain the truth about baptism, the Church, dispensations, the Millennium, or the Second Coming of Christ: don’t hold your breath while you look for them. . .” (Vance, 33)

Calvin Rules Geneva

- In 1536, on the heels of publishing his *Institutes*, Calvin decided to settle down to a life of private study in the city of Strasbourg. After embarking on his journey to Strasbourg, Calvin found the main road impassible due to the outbreak of war between Francis I or France and Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. As a result, Calvin was forced to make an extended detour which brought him through newly independent city of Geneva. (McGrath, 70)
- Having recently gained independence from the neighboring territory of Savoy, Geneva was in a state of confusion. Under the leadership of Guillaume Farel and Pierre Viret, the local bishop had been evicted and fledgling reform movement was in its infancy. (McGrath, 70)
- Calvin intended on staying in Geneva for one night. However, upon learning of Calvin’s presence in the city, Farel a follower of Zwingli, begged Calvin to stay and help organize the reform movement in Geneva. (Hill, 264)
- Inclined to continue on his way to Strasbourg, Calvin initially declined Farel’s promptings. A reply to which Farel is said, “You are only following your own wishes! If you do not help us in this work of the Lord, the Lord will punish you for seeking your own interest rather than His.” (Shelley, 256)
- “Calvin was terror-stricken. The last thing he wanted was to offend Almighty God! So he consented to stay and immediately took up the reforming cause in Geneva.” (Shelley, 256)
- Apart from a three year period in which he was temporarily expelled, Calvin stayed in Geneva for the duration of his life. (Hill, 264) “Two years later, after a series of religious

and political quarrels, the Geneva city council forced Calvin to leave the city. Calvin found refuge in Strasbourg, his original destination. There Calvin, cared for French Protestant (Huguenots) who, like Calvin had fled because of persecution. Finally, he found the life of study that he always wanted. In 1539 Geneva needed someone to debate a Roman Catholic thinker. The city council swallowed its pride and asked Calvin to return.” (Jones, 109)

- Calvin and Farel were banished from Geneva in April 1538 for refusing compliance with what they regarded as improper interference of the civil authorities in the Church’s sphere. The two men had labored to make Geneva a model Protestant community organized in such a fashion that the church and state worked together in harmony. (Latourette, 757)
- While in exile in Strasbourg, Calvin continued to enlarge and revise his *Institutes*. Moreover, it was during this time that Calvin married, worked on his skills as a preacher, and attended various conferences with other reformers where he met and befriended Melancthon, Luther’s right hand man. (Latourette, 757)
- “Meanwhile, a shift in the political situation in Geneva brought into power the partly friendly to Calvin. Its leaders besought him to return. Pressed by Farel and from a deep sense of duty he reluctantly complied. From his arrival in September, 1541, until his death nearly a quarter of a century later, May 27, 1564, he was the dominant figure in the city.” (Latourette, 758)
- In 1559, Calvin opened a new Academy—despite being so lacking in funds that he was forced to go from house to house in person to raise the money. The Academy taught Protestant theology as well as providing a rigorous training in science and humanism—making it a Protestant answer to the schools of the Jesuits that were popping up across Europe. (Hill, 264)
- “The Academy was enormously popular, accepting 900 students in its opening year and increasing class sizes in subsequent uptakes. . . Calvin recognized that this was an excellent way of spreading Protestant ideals. And spread they did, as alumni from the Academy returned home and preached what they had learned there.” (Hill, 264)
- “Calvin—as well as Luther and Zwingli—never escaped the idea that the church and government ought to be linked with one another.” (Jones, 112) Under Calvin’s direction, the government of Geneva was transformed into something like a Protestant theocracy. It became known as the Protestant Rome. (Hill, 264) The French philosopher Voltaire went so far as to call Calvin the Protestant Pope. (Vance, 30)
- Under Calvin’s leadership a close cooperation between church and state was carried through. A form of church organization was set up through the *Ordonnances*, a catechism was prepared, and a liturgy was introduced based on that which he had developed at Strasbourg. He had the discipline of community morals and the sumptuary legislation enforced which in theory had long been advocated by the Roman Catholic Church. (Latourette, 758)
- “Although persecuted by Catholics himself, Calvin did not hesitate to set up a church-state at Geneva, like his predecessor Zwingli did at Zurich. . . Calvin was a firm believer

in a united Church and State. From 1541 to 1546, fifty-eight people were executed and seventy-six were exiled from Geneva. Calvin was consulted in all important affairs of the State, and his advice was usually followed. Press censorship continued in Geneva until the eighteenth century. Attendance at public worship was commanded and watchmen were directed to see that people went to church. Three men who laughed during a sermon were imprisoned for three days. Death sentences were routinely imposed: a girl was beheaded for striking her parents and some were burned for witchcraft.” (Vance, 37)

- “The City Council had absolute power in matters religious as well as civil, and it became the instrument of Calvin’s will. The citizens were required to sign a confession of faith or to leave the city. Strict rules were enforced regulating the morals and habits of the people. The churches that had begun to grow up in obedience to New Testament teaching almost disappeared in the general organization, for papal rule was replaced by that of the Reformer and liberty of conscience was still withheld.” (Braodbent, 236)
- The clearest example of the power of Calvin’s Geneva can be seen in the execution of Michael Servetus. Servetus was a highly educated doctor of medicine who spoke six languages. He forced to live undercover on account of his heretical doctrinal views:
 - Premillennial
 - Rejected Calvin’s Doctrine of Predestination
 - Anti-Catholic (pope was the Dragon of Revelation)
 - Mass was Satanic
- All the Reformers essentially agreed on these points. So what got Servetus in trouble with the authorities in Geneva? First, he rejected infant baptism as a demonic invention of the Papacy and was not shy to inform Calvin of his views in to letters addressed to him. Second, he unfortunately was not orthodox in his views on the trinity. (Vance, 37-39)
- In 1553, at Vienne, Servetus was imprisoned by the Catholics. Faking a trip to the outhouse, Servetus escaped and foolishly fled to Geneva. Theodor Beza, Calvin’s protégé reports the Calvin himself reported Servetus’s presence to the local magistrate who arrested him. (Vance, 40)
- In a trial lasting more the two months Calvin himself drew up a document of thirty-nine accusations against Servetus. Five days into the trial Calvin wrote to Farel, “I hope the sentence of death will at last me passed upon him.” Despite Reformed claims to the contrary Calvin played a role in the matter throughout, the arrest, trial, and execution of Servetus. (Vance, 40-41)
- On October 27, 1553, Servetus was burned at the stake in Geneva. “Calvin was not alone in his views of killing heretics. Bullinger and Melanchthon approved of the execution. Melachthon wrote Calvin, “The Church owes and always will owe a debt of gratitude to you for having put the heretic to death.” (Vance, 42)

Influence of Geneva

- “Under Calvin Geneva became a haven for oppressed Protestants from many lands. In it men were trained who went back to the native countries to further the Reformation. While they did not always slavishly reproduce what they had seen there, through them and his writings Calvin became the most powerful single factor in shaping the distinctive feature of the Reformed Churches.” (Latourette, 758)
- From Geneva Reformed Church movements took hold in Scotland, Germany, Netherlands, and France with the activities of the Huguenots.
- John Knox was perhaps the most prominent of the religious exiles to take refuge in Geneva. Knox was a restless activist who had tried earlier to point England in the direction of Calvinism. Like many others, however he was forced to flee England overnight when, in 1553, the country returned to the Catholic faith under Henry VIII’s daughter Mary I. The queen’s persecution of Protestant leaders earned her the title “Bloody Mary.” (Shelley, 262)
- “Knox escaped to the Continent, where he developed the theory that Protestants had the right to resist, by force if necessary, any Roman Catholic ruler who tried to prevent their worship and mission. That was farther than Calvin was willing to go, but many of the nobles in Scotland found the idea attractive.” (Shelley, 262)
- “When civil war broke out in Scotland in 1559, Knox rushed home. By the summer of 1560 the Calvinists were in control of Edinburgh.” (Shelley, 263)
- Under John Knox, the Scots became Calvinists. In 1560 their parliament officially disestablished the Roman Church and ratified a confession of faith prepared by Knox. Here the Reformed Church did away with bishops, holding this form of church government to be unscriptural; a system of elders (or presbyters) was instituted as more in keeping with the New Testament. Scottish Calvinism is thus sometimes known as ‘Presbyterianism.’ (Hill, 268)
- Vance reports that Presbyterianism became the state church of England due to the influence of John Knox who studied under Calvin. (37)
- When Calvin died in 1564, he left more than a reformed Geneva. All over Europe and soon in distant America, his followers would spread his teachings all over the world.

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