

John Calvin

Background

- Born in Noyon France (60 miles north of Paris), July 10, 1509, while Luther was a professor at Wittenberg
- Calvin's father was middle class secretary to the bishop and procurator of the cathedral chapter
- His parents had 5 boys, his mother died when he was about 6, his father remarried and had more children
- John studied in Paris starting at age 12 at the College de la Marche
- He later studied at Montaigu at an institute dedicated to preparing young men for the priesthood
 - Food was scarce and very basic
 - Day began at 4:00 AM with prayers
 - Lectures at 6:00, followed by Mass
 - Classes, Bible reading
 - More classes in the afternoon, followed by Vespers
 - More school-work followed, with bed-time at 8:00
- Father had falling out with Bishop, and John goes on to study law rather than theology (some see a tie to his father in this)
- After studying law in Orleans, he received Master of Arts in 1528
- In 1530, he taught rhetoric at an Augustinian convent and preached at a local church – during this time he was still catholic
- After John's father died in 1531, he returned to Paris to finish his studies in theology

Calvin's Conversion and Exile

- In the Fall of 1553, Calvin converts
 - In 1557 – Calvin publishes his Psalms Commentary
 - Among his best works
 - Preface of work discusses conversion, describes his younger self as “too obstinately devoted to the superstitions of popery”, was slow or “subtle” to conversion, no “Luther in the Tower” conversion
 - Calvin's conversion occurred slowly but once made, there was no turning back
- In 1533 on All Saints Day, Calvin's friend Nicolas Cop, the Rector of the University of Paris called for Reforms based on Scripture
- Gives synopsis of Law/Gospel : Mathew 5:3 Blessed are the poor in spirit” Having nothing, attempting nothing is the basis of the gospel – was a pro-Lutheran message on Law and Grace
 - Some believe that Calvin wrote that sermon. A version of the message was found in his room in his own handwriting, he was a friend of the rector
 - The rector was not a theologian
- A warrant went out for the arrest of Cop, who flees to Basel
- Calvin was a relative unknown at the time, but fled, giving the implication that he was also implicated
- During this time, Calvin also escaped Paris, fleeing from a bedroom window by using bedsheets as a rope, and disguising himself as a vinedresser
- He spent the next couple years in the South of France under the name of Charles d'Espeville

- On October 17, Paris underwent the “affaire de placards, a time when French Protestants posted placards against the ritual of the Mass,
- Defied and condemned transubstantiation, and the belief of infused grace in the life of the believer
- Somebody snuck in a posted a placard directly to the King’s door, seen as an act of terrorism “we believe this, and we can get to you!”
- No more Mr. Nice Guy: October 1534, King Francis I changes his policy of tolerance toward protestants, arrests hundreds, executing some
- Gave 6 months for those leaning to Protestantism to conform
- Calvin resigns his benefices, flees to Du Tillet Library (a friend’s place)
- Served as a tutor to the children of the family, and plans for the future
- Calvin goes into exile to Basel, Switzerland (known for its tolerance), arriving in January 1535, where he took on a new name: Martianus Lucianus, and settled among other French exiles
- At this point, he identified with those who were working to reform the church
- Unlike the more bombastic Luther, Calvin was bookish, quiet, and preferred solitude to the limelight
- His goal was to settle into an area where he could live peacefully and provide theological guidance to the church through his writings, not to become a church leader

The Institutes

- While in Basel, Calvin decided to write a summary of the Christian faith from a Protestant viewpoint
 - Issues written of by prior Protestant leaders dealt mostly with issues like Justification, to the exclusion of many other issues
- Calvin’s Institutes were to fill this gap
- The book was to serve as a theological reference guide, especially for those who were training for the ministry
- Biblical exegesis was the primary source for understanding our theology
- Works like the Institutes were an act of discipleship – we need to think through our theology, to ask questions, to lay out what passages of Scripture mean in relationship with other parts of the Bible as a reference source
- First edition appeared in Basel in 1536, and was 516 pages – had 6 chapters: Law, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer and the sacraments, Protestant position on false sacraments of Rome
- Structure was Lutheran, for whom Calvin had a lot of respect
- Preface made to King Francis I: We are not Anabaptists
- Frances was an opponent of Charles, who was against Lutheranism
- Protestantism was associated with Luther, outside of Luther were the extremists such as the Anabaptists
- Attempt by Francis to identify protestants in France as extremists or Anabaptists (who were associated with the peasants revolt and other uprisings with fanatical practices)
- Frenchmen fleeing to Switzerland were being associated by the state with Anabaptists
- 1536 Institutes were meant to make it clear to Francis I that they were not fanatics, but rather identified with mainstream Protestantism
- Book sold out in 9 months
- He continued to expand these throughout his life
- Later editions in Strasbourg (1539), Geneva (1541 – French addition), 1543, 1545, 1550, 1551, 1559, 1560
- Final version includes 4 books with 80 chapters:

- God and revelation creation, nature of human beings
- God as redeemer
- How we can share in the grace of Christ
- The church and sacraments
- Book shows deep knowledge of scripture, ancient Christian literature, and theological controversies of the time
- Widely regarded as the high point of Protestant systematic theology

Geneva via Strasbourg

- Intended to become a scholar, live quietly in Strasbourg, where the protestant cause was victorious, and where there were good opportunities for him
- Route was closed by military operations between Francis and Charles the 5th
- Direct path was blocked, so detoured through Geneva
- Geneva had been influenced by missionaries from Bern
- Mass had been abolished, but leadership was badly needed
- One of key missionaries from Bern, William Farel met with Calvin on his arrival
- Farel attempted to convince Calvin to stay in Geneva, ultimately threatening: “May God condemn your repose and the calm you seek for study, if before such a great need you withdraw, and refuse your succor and help”



- This finally convinced Calvin to remain

Calvin's work in Geneva

- Geneva was under the rule of the Duchy of Savoy
- Bishop there held sway
- Bern however was German speaking city that had converted to Zwinglian protestant views
- In 1536, Bern military annexed Geneva, actively supported French speaking missionaries to work in these French speaking cities, one of whom was Farel
- Farel was enlisting help of Calvin as a fellow French Reformation minded humanist to bring this newly annexed city under the sway of the Reformation
- The situation was very tense, the city had just been annexed by a powerful, German speaking region
- City was ruled by a council, which among other things hired and fired pastors and directs the church
- Calvin and Farel were unknown, Calvin was in his late 20's at this time
- Calvin and Farel worked together to achieve reform and institute discipline and conformity to Reformation ideals
- Introduced Confession of Faith, and Articles Concerning the Organization of the Church
- Daily meetings for Psalm singing and preaching were established
- Some, like John Knox, embraced these changes
- Others did not, and conflict ensued – Pierre Caroli, another reformed Frenchman sent by Bern.
- Caroli didn't get along well with Calvin, Farel were Arian (believed the Son was created by the Father)
- Calvin defended himself ably, but issue caused some to question him
- Calvin isolated himself from the assistance of Bucer
- Proposes ultimatum to the City council – people of the city take an oath to follow Confession of Faith, and Articles Concerning the Organization of the Church or face excommunication
- Bern had already handed over church Liturgy; Calvin and Farel insisted on following their own standards, attempting to assert their own authority: Excommunication was not part of their responsibility
- In 1538, Easter service, Calvin and Farel refused to use the liturgy legislated by the civil magistrates, and denied communion to some prominent Geneva citizens
- Calvin and Farel also block anyone else from preaching
- Calvin and Farel are also given 3 days to leave the city or be arrested
- After less than 2 years in Geneva, Calvin moved on to Strasbourg, where he had wished to go all along, Farel moved took on a pastorate in Neuchatel (where he remained the rest of his life)

Strasbourg (1538 to 1541)

- Unlike Geneva, Strasbourg was an independent city with a lot of freedom
- While Geneva had resisted influence of Calvin, Bucer was a dominant force in Strasbourg
- In Strasbourg, Calvin became a minister at the insistence of Martin Bucer, leader of the Reformation in Strasbourg
- Bucer became Calvin's mentor in Strasbourg, for some time Calvin lived in Bucer's home
- During this time, Calvin wrote a French liturgy, and translated many psalms and hymns into French for the French community in Strasbourg
- Publishes a new expanded edition of the Institutes
- Marries Idellette de Bure on August 6 1540, whose husband (who was a former Anabaptist) had died of the plague



- Befriended leading reformers including Bucer, Melanchthon and Zwingli
- Completes the 1540 Romans commentary
- Expands the Institutes
- Translates the writings of Chrysostom into French (was a knower and lover of the Patristic age)
- Spends 3 happy, peaceful years, is mentored, married and matured

Geneva in Turmoil

- Cardinal Sadoletto – wanted to bring protestants back into the church: tried to persuade Genevans back to Rome
- Genevans didn't know how to respond, forwarded letter to Bern for advice
- 1539, Calvin writes response to Sadoletto – it was a masterpiece based on the root cause of the Reformation: lays out what the church is and the basis for moving over to the reformation
- The response, which defended the city and the reformation also convinces many that Calvin is not a troublemaker or fanatic
- Calvin's friends in Bern pushed for Calvin's reinstatement to Geneva
- Calvin is invited back by those who wanted reform, and favored the alliance with Bern
- Geneva sent an armed entourage to lead Calvin back in September 1541
- Calvin returns a changed man, and was not enthusiastic about the return
- Gave him a large home, a good income, and attempt to make him the "Luther of the city", encouraged him to become the leader
- Calvin sets a modest tone, humbled by his experiences and vindicated by this return
- Focus is as pastor, and furthering the pastoral care of the City to be led by Pastors who were better educated, Biblical men to help reform the city
- Calvin preached twice on Sunday, as well as Monday, Wednesday and Friday
- He later changed his schedule to preach every day of alternate weeks as well as twice on Sunday, averaging around 250 1 hour sermons per year
- Weekdays, he went through the Old Testament, Sundays, the New
- At one point, the church hired a stenographer to take down his sermons
- Over the next twelve years, 2,043 sermons were recorded and printed. These remain with us today
- The church again exercised Christian discipline with a rigor not previously known, again causing some controversy

The trial of Servetus

- Not all embraced the reforms Calvin brought, or the discipline
- One example was that of Michael Servetus
- Servetus was a well-known Spanish physician at the forefront of his community
- Held a number of heretical treatises, arguing against the trinity,
- Had been on trial by the catholic Inquisition in France before escaping to Switzerland
- Was charged with 38 offences
- Advice was sought from other Swiss Cantons, ultimately was decided to condemn the man
- Servetus was finally burned to death (Calvin had argued for beheading)
- Beginning in 1555, Calvin focused on the establishment of a school to train young men for ministry and missionary work
- The result was the Academy of Geneva, which was inaugurated on June 5, 1559

Calvin's leadership in Geneva

- Upon Calvin's return, Geneva was half reformed
- City was run by the magistrates
- Creates a series of Ecclesiastical Ordinances, which being signed into law by the government, placed the governing of the church of Geneva into the hands of the Consistory, including pastors and elders
- Designates Company of pastors and consistory
 - Company of pastors who met every Friday morning for worship and meetings
 - Congregation – 1 pastor elected to deliver a sermon – Sermon + discussion, feedback from other pastors
- Consistory: City court (a political body) for Christian life, would exercise discipline
 - Chide people for poor attendance
 - Encourage people for recommit to biblical pattern of life
 - Child abuse, drunkenness
- Pastors, Deacons, Elders, Doctors

A day in the week in Geneva:

- Sunday and Wednesday: church service
- Other days optional, but sermons were preached daily
- Men and women sat separately – women and children in front (best seats in the house) and men behind (take the worst seats)
- Psalm singing: (model from Bucer) – wanted word of God in their minds
 - These people had spent their lives listening, not singing, idea was to change this
- Communion 4 times per year (he wanted monthly communion)

Control, + pathways for spiritual growth

Calvin's last years

- Calvin was sick for much of his life
- Involved in many controversies, including fallout from Servetus
- Addressing split in Lutheranism – Philipists, Gensio-Lutherans
 - Joachim Westphal – antagonist to Melanchthon
 - Regarded Reformed camp as Sacramentarians along with Melanchthon, who befriended many Reformed
 - Calvin steps in in 1555, writes in defense of Reformed position on the sacrament

Overview of Various Views of the Sacrament:

Presence of Christ in communion

Luther's view

- Bread is still bread, wine is still wine, but Christ's body and blood are "in, under, around and behind the bread and wine"
- The elements don't become the body and blood of Christ, but rather the body and blood of Christ are supernaturally added to the elements (real presence)
- Discussions concerning the presence of Christ obscure the main significance associated with the sacrament: "These words, "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins", show us that the sacrament forgiveness of sins, life and salvation are given us through these words. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation...Whosoever believes in these words has exactly what they say: "forgiveness of sins." – Source: Luther's Catechism, The Sacrament of Holy Communion"
- The forgiveness obtained here through the sacrament is therefore one obtained through faith in Christ

Zwingli's View:

- "This is my body" should be read, "This signifies my body." He claimed that the Lord's Supper is a symbolic memorial, an initiatory ceremony in which the believer pledges that he is a Christian and proclaims that he has been reconciled to God through Christ's shed blood.
- The only mode of presence proper to the human body of Christ was "local presence." Therefore, according to Zwingli, Christ's body is locally present in heaven and nowhere else until the Second Advent.

Calvin's View

- To summarize: our souls are fed by the flesh and blood of Christ in the same way that bread and wine keep and sustain physical life. For the analogy of the sign applies only if souls find their nourishment in Christ—which cannot happen unless Christ truly grows into one with us, and refreshes us by the eating of His flesh and the drinking of His blood.
- Even though it seems unbelievable that Christ's flesh, separated from us by such great distance, penetrates to us, so that it becomes our food, let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above all our senses, and how foolish it is to wish to measure His immeasurableness by our measure. What, then our mind does not comprehend, let faith conceive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated in space.
- Now, that sacred partaking of His flesh and blood, by which Christ pours His life into us, as if it penetrated into our bones and marrow, He also testifies and seals in the Supper—not by presenting a vain and empty sign, but by manifesting there the effectiveness of His Spirit to fulfil what He promises. And truly He offers and shows the reality there signified

to all who sit at that spiritual banquet, although it is received with benefit by believers alone, who accept such great generosity with true faith and gratefulness of heart.

Source: [THEOLOGY OF THE LORD'S SUPPER Excerpted from John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 4.17.1–5, 7–11 \(trans. John McNeill\) - Pilgrim Covenant - Reformed Church in Singapore \(pilgrim-covenant.com\)](#)

[Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper by Keith Mathison \(ligonier.org\)](#)

Calvin's last years continued:

- 1558 Farel marries at 59 years old
 - Calvin is upset, says this will hurt the protestant cause
 - Issue causes scandal, Calvin breaks off relationship
- Toward the end of his life, Calvin worked on expanding his Institutes publishing the last edition in 1559, which was 4 times the size of the first
- Becomes one of most successful, most published tract on theology in English language
- At this time his health deteriorated
- On Feb 26, 1564 he gave his last lecture on Ezekiel 20.
- He died on May 27th at age 55 in the arms of Theodore Beza
- His last words were "How Long oh Lord?" (Psalm 79:5)
- He was buried the following day, wrapped in a plain shroud and placed in a plain wooden casket with no pomp and laid to rest in an unmarked grave

Calvin's Legacy

- Melancthon revered him as the most able interpreter of Scripture in the church, and called him "The Theologian"
- Spurgeon said Calvin "propounded truth more clearly than any other man that ever breathed, knew more of Scripture and explained it more clearly"
- Among those who have been born of women, there has not risen a greater than John Calvin. No age before him as ever produced his equal, and no age afterwards has ever produced his rival
- A Theological Standard – Luther introduced ideas; Calvin systematized them
- His influence spread throughout the world, promoting the establishment of Reformed, Presbyterian and Congregational churches, and influenced the teaching of Baptist churches