

The Life of John Calvin – Part 1

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – An overview of the life of John Calvin and his effect upon the reformation church
2. aim – To cause us to understand the great reformer and how he affected the reformed church

b. outline

1. The Biography of Calvin
2. The Theology of Calvin
3. The Importance of Calvin

c. overview

1. the **state** of the Reformation
 - a. our timeframe is the first-half of the 16th C – the reformation is in *full swing* throughout Europe
 1. the W medieval church is deeply corrupt *ecclesiastically*, and deeply flawed *theologically*
 2. Luther has had his theological epiphany, and his ideas have spread throughout Europe
 3. simultaneously, Zwingli (in Zürich) has come to similar realizations regarding the faith
 4. arising, also, were the *radical reformers* – the Anabaptist movement
 - a. the belief amongst many that Luther and Zwingli had not taken the reformation *far enough*
 5. **IOW:** the first half of the 16th C. came to see an *explosion* of reformation throughout Germany and Switzerland that swept through all of Europe (including France)
 - b. it is into this timeframe that John Calvin is born, and he would be led by the Lord into becoming *the most significant theologian* of the era, and the one who would “tie together” the various Protestant doctrines into a cohesive whole
2. the **place** of John Calvin in the Reformation
 - a. although Calvin is often considered a “second generation” reformer (**i.e.** behind Luther and Zwingli), in reality, he was a *contemporary* of both men, although younger
 - b. this view of him is formed from his *broader works* expanding the theology of the Reformation *beyond* both Luther and Zwingli, thus *appearing* to be a “later” reformer

I. The Biography of Calvin

Content

a. his early life and career

1. John Calvin was born in Noyon, France, July 10, 1509
 - a. **i.e.** Luther was already 26 and lecturing in Wittenberg; Zwingli (being less than two months younger than Luther) had already achieved his MA degree and was serving as a priest in Glarus
 - b. **i.e.** Calvin was only eight when Luther tacked his 95 Theses to the chapel door (in 1517)
2. his father was a part of the rising middle class, and served as secretary to the local bishop
 - a. like Luther, Calvin benefited from a middle-class family life: his father (like Luther’s) used his business acumen and political connections to procure a good education for young John
3. Calvin studied first in Paris, where he was introduced to the thinking of *humanism* and to the conservative reaction against it
 - a. he was sent to study theology, *probably* with the intent that he would become a priest
 - b. the debates between the humanists and the conservatives introduced him to the teachings of Wycliffe, Huss, and (even) Luther, and in 1528 (at 19) he received a Master of Arts degree
 - c. but, Calvin was a *staunch Catholic* – he later wrote, “I was stubbornly tied to the superstitions of the papacy” – these early introductions to reformed thinking *probably* influenced the direction of his future, but (at this point) it does not appear that they *substantially* did
4. his father had a falling out with the bishop in Noyon, and he lost his influence in the city (and his financial support from the church)
 - a. so, John was instructed to abandon his study of theology and pursue a career in law (1527)
 - b. to that end, John studied in Orleans and Bourges (*boorga*), under two famous jurists of the time (**e.g.** like John Houseman’s character in *Paper Chase*)
 1. the first, Pierre de l’Estoile followed the *traditional* method for the study and interpretation of the law; the second, Andrea Alciati was a humanist with a reputation for being pompous

- a. **note:** since humanism is *primarily* concerned with “man” being the highest object of study, humanists often were arrogant in their approach (particularly by this time) and treated subjects such as law from the perspective of their “value” to humanity rather than to the actual nuts-and-bolts of the law and its actual application to everyday life
 - b. when a controversy broke out between the two men, Calvin took the side of the *traditionalist* (l’Estoile) – although deeply influenced by humanism, it appears that Calvin felt no loyalty for humanistic “elegance” of thought over rationality and intellect
2. this helps to explain why Calvin was such a *systematic thinker* when it came to theology ...
5. when Calvin’s father died (in 1531), he returned to Paris to resume his studies in theology
- a. he joined up with a group of humanist friends, some who were evangelical-minded (**i.e.** some who were familiar with the reformation teachings now spreading out from C Europe)
 - b. some time between August 1533 and May 1534, Calvin experienced an **evangelical conversion**
 - 1. biographers disagree on how this actually came about, for Calvin writes little about *himself*
 - 2. it appears that this occurred while he was studying law (in Paris), in obedience to his father, but that he discovered (somewhere) that God had a different plan for his life:

“Since I was too obstinately devoted to the superstitions of popery to be easily extricated from so profound an abyss of mire, God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame, which was more hardened in such matters than might have been expected from one at my early period of life. Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with so intense a desire to make progress therein, that although I did not altogether leave off other studies, I yet pursued them with less ardor” (*Preface to the Commentary on Psalms*, 59)
 - 3. **LOW:** Calvin’s conversion was *clearly* not of the same kind as Luther (**i.e.** deep spiritual and emotional struggle with sin) – while he did recognize that some men often experience “fearful tortures of conscience” (as Luther had), there is no indication that *he* did
 - 4. **LOW:** Calvin’s conversion was born out of a deep *intellectual* understanding of the realities of the gospel over against the corruptions of Rome, but it was not (overly) *emotional* in its track
 - a. which (also) helps to explain why Calvin was such a *great thinker* in regards to theology ...
6. in 1534, Calvin returned to Noyon and gave up the ecclesiastical posts his father had secured for him, even though they were his main source of funds
- a. it is unknown if he had been converted by this time (and leaving those posts represented his first break with the Catholic Church)
 - b. in October of 1534, Francis I changed his policy of tolerance towards Protestants to a policy of persecution of them (**note:** 17 years after the *95 Theses*)
 - c. so, in January of 1535, Calvin left France and went into exile in Protestant Basel, in Switzerland
 - 1. he intended to live out the rest of his life studying literature, to settle in a calm environment where he could study Scripture and write about the faith

“Being of a disposition somewhat unpolished and bashful, which led me always to love the shade and retirement, I then began to seek some secluded corner where I might be withdrawn from the public view ... In short, while my one great object was to live in seclusion without being known, God led me about through different turnings and changes, that He never permitted me to rest in any place, until, in spite of my natural disposition, He brought me forth to public notice.” (*Preface to the Commentary on Psalms*, 57)
 - 2. his main project was to write a short summary of the Christian faith *from a Protestant perspective* – this was over against the *main* discussions of Protestant literature of the time
 - a. **i.e.** Protestant thinking was concerned *primarily* (at this time) with **polemics**: those issues that were *specifically* held to be wrong within Catholic thinking, and how Protestants understood them in light of a new view of justification by faith (**e.g.** sacramentalism (communion), clericalism (celibacy), etc.)
 - b. Calvin desired to pen a treatise on a *robust* view of theology *flowing out of the ramifications of justification by faith*: the Trinity, the incarnation, creeds, Christian freedom, etc.
 - c. so ... Calvin began his *magnus opus*: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*
 - 1. the first version was published in 1536, as a short and small book
 - 2. he continued to revise it for the rest of his life, publishing new versions in 1539, 1543, 1550, and 1559; one in Latin, and another shortly after in French
 - 3. more details on the *Institutes* will be our discussion in the **next lesson**
- b. his pastorate in Geneva**
- 1. (**as above**) Calvin had no intention of becoming a leader in the Reformation
 - a. difficulties in Basel forced him to consider a new location, so after short visit to Ferrara and back to France, he decided to settle in Strasbourg (where Protestantism was victorious and the environment was ripe for his theological and literary studies)
 - b. but ... the route to Strasbourg was closed by military operations, and Calvin had to make a detour through Geneva (**the providence of God, perhaps?**)
 - 1. a few months before his arrival, the city had been “turned” to Protestantism under the leadership of a missionary from Bern named **William Farel**

2. the city government had simply “abolished” the Catholic mass under the direction of a nucleus of educated laity who desired a break with Rome, along with many of the bourgeoisie
3. Calvin only intended to stay in the city for a day, before continuing his journey to Strasbourg
 - a. Farel was informed that the author of the *Institutes* was in town, and arranged an interview
 - b. Farel tried to convince Calvin that he was desperately needed in the city, and Calvin recognized Farel’s missionary zeal for the true gospel
 - c. but, Calvin refused to listen to his appeals; he didn’t want to get involved in the confused situation in the city ... so, Farel appealed to Calvin with a threat:

“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.”
 - d. Calvin wrote later: “these words shocked and broke me, and I desisted from the journey ...”
 - e. thus began his career as the **Reformer of Geneva (in 1536)** ...
2. Calvin soon became the central figure in the religious life of the city
 - a. even though he *originally* intended to simply aid Farel in *his* leadership
 - b. the two pastors began to teach that reformation principles needed to be taken seriously
 1. specifically, Calvin insisted that the principles of reformation demanded that an unrepentant sinner needed to be excommunicated from the church – if a man was truly justified *by faith*, but his life did not reflect that faith in *continuing sin*, then it stood as reasonable that such a man should not be considered a part of the church
 - a. IOW: he presented an ecclesiastical ordinance that would subject the citizens of the city to a degree of moral control – being a Christian demanded teaching and conformity to it
 2. however, the influential middle class men of the city (who had originally supported a break with Rome), considered this “going too far” – the local government was controlled by these men, and they refused to allow it – they claimed it was an unwarranted “rigorism” and a usurpation of government authority
 - c. so, Calvin was *banned* from the city in April, 1538 – William Farel left *voluntarily* with him
 1. Calvin returned to Strasbourg – but, he wondered if he had missed God’s call
 - a. **Martin Bucer**, the leader of the reformation of Strasbourg, insisted that Calvin become pastor of the city – Bucer became Calvin’s mentor, and strongly influenced his theology
 - b. the time in Strasbourg was peaceful and productive, but he longed to return to Geneva
 - c. he became a citizen of the city in August 1540, and married Idelette de Bure, the widow of an Anabaptist (after a typical *Calvinistic* search for a bride!)
 1. little is known of their relationship (for Calvin rarely wrote of her), except that he called her “the faithful helper of my ministry” and “the best companion of my life”
 2. she bore him three children, all who died shortly after birth – she died after nine years
 - d. but ... when the government in Geneva changed, he was invited to return, in 1541
 1. in fact, Calvin was welcomed back in grand style
 2. **rumor**: it is said that Calvin returned to his pulpit and simply picked up where he left off
 3. Calvin (with the cooperation of the government) reorganized the church into a set of *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* = 5 pastors, 12 lay elders, and a set of deacons (a **Consistory**)
 - a. pastors (doctors): education of the entire community; elders: supervise the religious life of their neighborhoods; deacons: social services
 4. for 12 years, the *Consistory* and the government of the city clashed repeatedly
 - a. by 1553, the opposition had risen to power, and Calvin’s political position was precarious
 - b. which led to the incident with **Michael Servetus (see next lesson)**
 - e. in 1559, Calvin opened the *Genevan Academy*, under the direction of Theodore Beza
 1. Beza would (eventually) succeed him as the theological leader of the city (and would write his first biography) – Beza’s background was very similar to Calvin’s (in fact, much of what eventually became known as “Calvinism” actually stems from his teachings and writings)
 2. the school educated the Genevan youth according to Calvinistic principles, but also many others, who took those ideas with them throughout Europe
 - f. Calvin died on May 27, 1564, at the age of 54
 1. on his deathbed, he called all of the ministers of the city together and urged them to peace
 2. and, his old friend, William Farel, paid him a last visit from the nearby city of Neuchatel
 3. he was buried, *per his request*, in an unmarked grave in the city