

## 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of John Calvin's birth

John Calvin was born on July 10, 1509, the middle of 3 surviving sons of 5 in Noyon, in the northern French province of Picardy. His father was a highly esteemed notary, solicitor to the bishop, and administrator to the Noyon clergy. His mother was known for her religious piety, motherly affection, and beauty. She died when Calvin was still a little boy. In his early schooling, Calvin distinguished himself as having an extraordinary intellect and strength of character.

Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli were both about 25 years old when Calvin was born. Philip Melancton, Luther's systematizer, was 12 years older than Calvin. This made Calvin a second generation Reformer. Calvin was born the same year as King Henry the VIII of England. Calvin was 8 years old when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg Church, on October 31, 1517.

John Calvin's father decided that he should become a priest. This was arranged when he was 12 years old. To provide him with the best possible education, and to avoid the plague in their area, Calvin's father sent him with some other boys to Paris at the age of 12 to begin his studies at the University there, the most famous educational institution in Europe (1521). After one year of study there, Calvin's father transferred him to the lice-ridden College de Montaigu, another college in the University of Paris. (Calvin was followed here by Ignatius Loyola.) After 3 years, Calvin graduated with an M.A. degree at the age of 16. An exception was made for him, since most students had to be 21 years old to receive this degree.

Upon graduation, Calvin's father decided that the legal profession would be better for him, so he transferred to the University of Orleans to study civil law under the leading law professor in France. Within a year, he had so distinguished himself, that he began to teach classes himself. He left there at age 20 in 1529 or 1530 to study law at the University of Bourges. He returned home in 1530 to oversee the burial of his father who had died excommunicate, having fallen out of favor with the church over a business matter. He then returned to Paris for more studies, receiving a Doctorate in Law.

In 1532, Calvin experienced an unexpected conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism. He was a brilliant young scholar, with one of the most thoroughly trained legal minds of his time, taught by the best authorities in Europe, and someone whose presence was much sought after by all who knew him. Many people came to him to listen to his teaching. Because he had converted to Protestantism, he began to preach and teach Reformation teachings. At the age of 25, the normal age for ordination into the priesthood, Calvin resigned his church benefices on May 4, 1534, and thus closed all formal connections with the Catholic Church.

In 1534, a major persecution broke out in Paris against the Protestants. In 1535, Calvin moved to Basel to escape it. There, Calvin worked with others on a new translation of the Bible which became known as the Geneva Bible, which was the most popular translation in France for 200 years.

In 1536, at the age of 26, Calvin published the first edition of the Institutes. The first edition had 6 chapters and 520 pages dealing with The Law of God, Faith, Prayer, the Sacraments of Baptism and Communion, False Sacraments, and Christian Liberty, Ecclesiastical Power, and Civil Administration.

On August 5, 1536, Calvin stopped for a night stay in Geneva on his way to Strasbourg. This night became the defining moment of his life. When people discovered he was there for the night, they implored him to stay to be their teacher and pastor. Calvin initially protested, saying that he was a scholar not a pastor. But, Geneva Farel, 20 years older than Calvin, threatened him with the curse of Almighty God if he preferred the scholar's work to the cause of Christ in Geneva. Terrified by his words, Calvin wrote that "he felt as if God from on high had reached out his hand to arrest me." So, he agreed to stay. This became known as his "first Geneva period." He served there for 2 ½ years, and the first six months without pay.

Here, Calvin wrote a confession and a catechism. He was responsible for influencing the town of Lausanne to move from Catholicism to Protestantism. However, Calvin fell out of favor with the city leaders, because he refused to serve communion to everyone, believing that faith in Christ was necessary to receive the sacrament. The dispute became so difficult, that Calvin was asked to leave Geneva in 1538. So there was John Calvin, at the age of 29, a disappointed young Reformer, with no job, and no income.

Soon however, the Reformer Martin Bucer invited Calvin to come to Strasbourg, where he pastored a Protestant congregation of 400 – 600 French refugees until 1541. In 1539, the Catholic Cardinal Sadoletto appealed to Geneva to return to the Catholic faith. The city leaders, who had run Calvin out of town, now asked him to write the response. Calvin's "Reply to Cardinal Sadoletto" became regarded over time as one of the best defenses of the Protestant cause ever produced, for it expressed the thoughts and feelings of Protestants everywhere. It moved Calvin to the forefront of the Reformation movement, and earned him new respect and support in Geneva. In March of 1540, Calvin married Idelette de Bure, a widowed member of his Strasbourg congregation, and the mother of a boy and a girl.

In 1540, Calvin was invited by the authorities in Geneva to return to their city. Geneva was rampant with gambling, street brawls, drunkenness, adultery, public indecency, and anarchy. They viewed Calvin as the only man they knew who could save their city. In September of 1541, Calvin finally agreed to return to Geneva, older and wiser (at the age of 32). He still had a strong vision to make Geneva a Reformed city – regular preaching and catechism for children and adults, along with close regulation of businesses and the moral life of the community. Calvin's second Geneva period lasted from 1541 – 1564. The ministry was difficult for the first 14 years, but then much more successful for the last 9 years. Calvin republished his Institutes in 1543, 1550, and 1559, the final edition consisting of four books and 80 chapters. In 1559, Calvin wrote the French Confession of Faith.

Some people know John Calvin because of his opposition to the Michael Servetus, the arch-heretic of his day. Servetus denied the doctrine of the Trinity and the deity of Christ. Servetus had the kind of personality that did everything to provoke and nothing to conciliate. He had been convicted of heresy and blasphemy at a papal tribunal in Vienne, France. He had already been sentenced to burning at the stake when he escaped and showed up in Geneva. The authorities in Geneva were afraid of a backlash from the Catholic Church if they spared Servetus. Calvin used his influence to try to persuade people not to burn Servetus at the stake, believing that there were other means that would be more humane. Calvin did not win that argument. Calvin agreed that he should be put to death, but did not want to see it happen by being burned at the stake.

John Calvin's influence spread all over Europe because he started the Geneva Academy. People came from all over the continent to study under Calvin and Theodore Beza. Among his students were Guido de Bray, who wrote the Belgic Confession in 1561, Caspar Olevianus, who co-authored the Heidelberg Catechism in 1563, and John Knox, who brought the Reform movement to Scotland, becoming the founder of Scottish, English, and American Puritanism. At the time of the American Revolutionary War, 1/3 of the people living in the colonies were Scottish or Scotch-Irish. When you include the English, the Dutch, the German, and the French who had been influenced by Calvin's Reformed teachings, 2/3 of people in the colonies had been trained in his religious and political thought. More than 1/2 of the officers and soldiers in the American Revolutionary War army were Presbyterians.

As Calvin grew older, he began to suffer from asthma, indigestion, and migraine headaches. In 1558, he had a long bout with malarial fever that he never fully recovered from. He also suffered with arthritis, gum disease, and ulcerous hemorrhoids. In his later years, his body was constantly wracked with pain. John Calvin preached his final sermon on February 6, 1564. He attended church for the last time on April 20 (Easter Sunday). On April 25 he dictated his will, and on May 27, he died of pulmonary tuberculosis, five weeks shy of his 55<sup>th</sup> birthday. He was buried the next day. At Calvin's request, he was buried in an unmarked grave. Today, no one knows where he is buried. He was the author of 71 volumes of some of the greatest theological writings in existence.