

## John Calvin and Dying to Self

**Q:** What comes to mind when you think of John Calvin?

*Today, we're going to get down to the real story of the great reformer, John Calvin.*

### Calvin's Story

#### I. Petit Jean (1509-36)<sup>1</sup>

##### A. Parents

1. John Calvin was born on July 10, 1509 to Gérard and Jeanne Calvin. They lived in Noyon, France where Gérard was the book keeper and notary for the local cathedral and Jeanne was a homemaker and mom to John and his two brothers.
2. Jeanne would die when Calvin was six. Gérard would later remarry and Calvin would have two half-sisters.
3. Gérard, through the cathedral and its local church government, secured Calvin scholarships to study at the university in Paris.<sup>2</sup> Gérard desired that his sons would be priests and sent them away to earn the necessary degrees to become theologians.

##### B. University of Paris (1523)

1. In Paris to study philosophy and theology with the aim of entering the priesthood.
2. Learned Latin—showed great academic ability.
3. Terrible Conditions.
  - a) Outlook: “Overall, **the College de Montaigu** was marked by a ‘narrow-minded and hair-splitting orthodoxy’ that resulted in violent opposition to and persecution of nascent French Protestantism.”
  - b) Conditions: Erasmus called the place: “Filthy, bleak, inhospitable, reeking with the foulest smells, [and] clotted with dirt... I carried nothing away from there except a body poisoned with infected humors.”<sup>3</sup>
4. Exceedingly strict.
5. Very Roman Catholic.
  - a) Calvin must have been aware of Evangelicals—those who proclaimed the theology of the Reformation—in France at this time. However, it seems that he was unmoved by the Reformed doctrine.
6. Here, Calvin earned his masters of arts degree in 1528.

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<sup>1</sup>Michael Haykin, ed. Derek Thomas and John Tweeddale, *John Calvin* (Afterword by R. C. Sproul), “The Young Calvin”, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019).

<sup>2</sup>Haykin: “Owing to his father’s connection with the church, Calvin was able to finance his studies from various church benefices he had been given in childhood and his early teens—one of the abuses of the medieval church.”

<sup>3</sup>Haykin.

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### C. Law School in Orléans (1528-29)

1. Moved to Orléans to study law.
2. Gérard Calvin thought that this would earn his son a larger income.
3. Gérard has also been excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church around this time. Gérard had been excommunicated for refusing to hand over the accounting books to the local bishop.
  - a) "It is not clear whether he was guilty of a misdemeanor or whether his pride was piqued at the questioning of his integrity."<sup>4</sup>
  - b) Regardless, he died in this state of excommunication.

### D. School in Bourges (1529)

1. Learned Greek. Followed his professor Melchior Wolmar—who was secretly committed to Lutheranism—from Orléans to Bourges.
  - a) Suspicion about studying the Greek New Testament: contemporaries regarded the study of Greek with deep misgivings. As one writer put it, "We must avoid [Greek] at all costs, for this language gives birth to heresies. Especially beware of the New Testament in Greek; it is a book full of thorns and prickles!"<sup>5</sup>
2. Published *Commentary on De Clementia* in 1529.
  - a) Scholar par excellence: This work demonstrated his academic *bona fides*. In it, we see that Calvin had thoroughly imbibed the humanism that was budding in his day—he was familiar with classic literature in both Latin and Greek. In his work he cited 155 Latin authors and 22 in Greek.
3. Conversion (1533?)
  - a) Calvin was a very private person. As a result, we are unsure about the precise date of his conversion—though it was assuredly while he was in Bourges.
  - b) "In his preface [to the psalms], after mentioning his father's desire that he become a lawyer, Calvin states, God, by the secret leading of his providence, turned my course another way [rather than the study of law]. First, when I was too firmly addicted to the superstitions of the Papacy to be drawn easily out of such a deep mire, by a sudden conversion God subdued and made teachable my mind, already more rigid than suited my age. **Having therefore received a taste and knowledge of true piety, I burned with such a desire to carry my study further,** that although I did not drop other subjects, I had no zeal for them. In less than a year, all who were looking for a purer doctrine began to come to learn from me, although I was a novice and a beginner."<sup>6</sup>
4. Licensed to litigate in 1532.

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<sup>4</sup>Haykin.

<sup>5</sup>Haykin.

<sup>6</sup>Haykin.

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5. Returned to be a professor in Paris.

### E. Professor at Collège Royal (October 1533)

1. Nicholas Cop's inaugural address

### F. Getting out of Dodge (October 1534)

1. Affair of the Placards
  - a) More than 200 people were arrested; 24 were burned at the stake; including Calvin's Parisian landlord. These were the circumstances that moved Calvin to leave France and find refuge in Switzerland.
2. Hiding out at Louis du Tillet's house, Noyon, and Orléans
  - a) Using his library; productive season of writing.

### G. *The Institutes* (1536)

1. Defense of the theology of the Reformers that had so many others ending up in hot water.
2. Earned him a reputation as an apologist for the new movement.
3. Briefly served as secretary to Princess Renée of France in Ferrara, Italy (March-April 1536-June)
4. Calvin returned to Paris in June of 1536 because the government had briefly decided to stop persecuting protestants (Edict of Coucy). This was revoked in 1540 and replaced by the Edict of Fontainebleau, which sought to punish protestants with extreme measures including death.
5. Calvin decided there was no future for him in France so he decided to set out on a journey to Strasbourg, a free city in the Holy Roman Empire.
  - a) Calvin had the desire to study, reading and writing books, so that he could serve the Reformation movement. He had no desire to be a pastor.

## II. Escape to Strasbourg (1536)

### A. A Night in Geneva

1. Due to the movements of French and German armies on the Northern border between France and Germany, Calvin elected to take a southern route through Switzerland that was less guarded.
2. He was traveling in a party of five—with his brother, his half-sisters, and a friend.
3. He passed the gates of Geneva, Switzerland to spend the night there on his way to Strasbourg.

### B. Farel's Request

1. Word gets out from his friend Louis du Tillet that Calvin, the popular writer of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, is in town.

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2. William Farel, a friend of Calvin's, found him at the inn and, drawing him aside, made a dramatic plea to him.
3. William Farel was in Geneva to help jump-start its process of Reformation. The city council of Geneva had voted earlier that year to throw off Roman Catholicism and become a protestant city. However, the movement started, it was soon in shambles. Farel recognized that he desperately needed help in guiding and reforming the city and looked to Calvin as a drawing sailor looks to a life preserver.
4. Galli and Olsen record the exchange well:

Farel was ecstatic. He was desperate for help as he strove to organize a newly formed Protestant church in town. He rushed to the inn and pleaded with Calvin, arguing it was God's will he remain in the city.

Calvin said he was staying only one night. Besides, he was a scholar not a pastor. Farel, baffled and frustrated, swore a great oath that God would curse all Calvin's studies unless he stayed in Geneva.

Calvin, a man of tender conscience, later reflected on this moment: "I felt as if God from heaven had laid his mighty hand upon me to stop me in my course—and I was so terror stricken that I did not continue my journey."<sup>7</sup>

### III. Teacher in Geneva (1536-38)

#### A. Beginning Difficulties.

1. The Genevan city council was not impressed with Calvin, in their official documents they refer to him simply as "that Frechman."<sup>8</sup>
2. They neglected to pay him for his first few months, he was almost constantly sick, and he was personally attacked with the outrageous claims that he was an Arian.<sup>9</sup>
  - a) Persistence: "These were the realities of the first few months of Calvin's pastorate: financial struggles, illnesses, and personal attacks. Calvin indeed was laboring under a cloud. But labor he did."<sup>10</sup>

#### B. Articles of Faith (January 1537)

1. "In January 1537, Farel and Calvin drafted their 'Articles concerning the Organization of the Church and of Worship at Geneva,' which they presented to the General Council of Geneva. Based on what would come to be called the 'regulative principle,' this text called for the radical

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<sup>7</sup>Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, "John Calvin" in *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 37–38.

<sup>8</sup>Stephen J. Nichols, ed. Derek Thomas and John Tweeddale, *John Calvin* (Afterword by R. C. Sproul), "The Young Calvin", (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019).

<sup>9</sup>Nichols.

<sup>10</sup>Nichols.

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transformation of the church service, of preaching, of the practice of the Eucharist, and of church discipline.”<sup>11</sup>

2. They sought to answer the question of “What is the church?” by looking to the Scripture and submitting themselves to its clear interpretation. That’s when the problems began.

### C. Unpopular measures.

1. In Geneva, as was commonplace for the time, there was **no separation between church and state**. As such, the city was seen as the church and the church was seen as the city. However, this understanding was pushed to its limit when Farel and Calvin began to require all citizens to both attend the meeting of the church and sign the Confession of Faith.<sup>12</sup>
2. Farel and Calvin believed that it was their right as pastors—according to the Scripture—to have **the power to excommunicate** unbelievers or members of the church who would not repent from their sin.
3. This has huge ramifications in the Lord’s supper. Farel and Calvin didn’t want to give the bread and the cup to anyone who was not a believer or one who was boldly living in sin.
4. However, **the City Council held the power of excommunication and would not give it to the pastors. As a result, Farel and Calvin were required to serve the bread and the cup in a way that deeply grieved their conscience.**
5. Therefore, “On Easter Sunday that year, Calvin and Farel both refused to serve Communion after their respective sermons. Thompson explains why, noting that without church discipline, there can be no Communion, adding, “The pastors had, in effect, excommunicated Geneva.” **The city, though, would have the last word. On April 23, 1538, both Calvin and Farel were dismissed from their duties and given three days to leave the city.**”<sup>13</sup>
  - a) Ultimately, Calvin was grieved by the lack of pastoral care that he and Farel were able to give to the saints in Geneva. **The city of Geneva desired preachers but not pastors.**<sup>14</sup> However, Calvin saw that this couldn’t be compatible with the biblical role of the elder/pastor/shepherd and so there was an impasse.

### D. Booted (April 23, 1538)

1. Finally in Strasbourg. After leaving Geneva, Calvin eventually made his way to Strasbourg where he had intended to go two years earlier. There, he came under the wing of Martin Bucer—a brilliant shepherd who had great concern for practical pastoral matters. Bucer asked Calvin to be the

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<sup>11</sup>Nichols.

<sup>12</sup>Nichols.

<sup>13</sup>Nichols.

<sup>14</sup>Nichols.

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pastor of the growing congregation of French refugees in Strasbourg, which Calvin did to great effect.

2. This was a blessed period of Calvin's life where he grew immensely.
3. Marriage and family. It was also while he was in Strasbourg that Calvin married a widow named Idelette de Bure. She was well suited for Calvin, her first husband having been a pastor himself. She was a perfect help-mate for Calvin's ministry. Though it could be said that Calvin focused more on his ministry to the church and significantly less on his ministry to his wife. That said, Idelette also seemed like the sort of person who desired more than anything else that her husband be a faithful minister of Christ, which he certainly was.

### IV. A Thousand Deaths (1541-64)

#### A. Cardinal Sadoleto

1. In 1540, Cardinal Sadoleto wrote a letter to the Genevan City Council trying to woo it back to Roman Catholicism. Although he was in exile, the City Council asked Calvin to write a response letter to Sadoleto. Calvin handily destroyed Sadoleto's arguments.
2. **“While defeated in his arguments, Sadoleto nevertheless continued to hassle Geneva, campaigning for its return to Rome. No one in Geneva was up to the task of refuting him. By September 1540, the city requested that Calvin return.** Thompson describes Calvin's response, ‘Calvin began hemming and hawing, offering again his standard list of excuses.’ Behind those excuses lies Calvin's true reason, which he himself best describes: ‘There is no place under heaven that I am more afraid of.’<sup>15</sup>
  - a) “When a call came for Calvin to return to Geneva, he was shocked and alarmed. **He wrote to Farel that he would rather “submit to death a hundred times than to that cross, on which one had to perish daily a thousand times over.’** Seventeen months later, he had determined what he should do. Left to himself, he would not return to Geneva, he wrote to Farel, yet he added, “But when I remember that I am not my own, I offer up my heart, presented as a sacrifice to the Lord,” thus putting into action the words quoted above that he had recently added to the Institutes. Urged on by fellow ministers, Calvin had become convinced that it was God's will for him to go back to Geneva, but ‘with what grief, tears, great anxiety and distress I did this, the Lord is my best witness,’<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Nichols.

<sup>16</sup>Calhoun.

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### B. Return to Geneva (September 13, 1541)

1. Arriving in Geneva he declared himself as servant of the city, having resigned himself to the will of God and his call of his life.

### C. Growing influence

1. **“Again, he gave himself unstintingly to lead the church in Geneva toward a renewed faith and strengthened devotion to God—in catechisms and theological writings, sermons, biblical commentaries, liturgies, psalms and prayers, pastoral instructions, and letters of counsel and consolation. McKee writes, ‘Work was constant: preaching and teaching, weddings and baptisms, meetings of the Consistory or consultations with the city council, visits to the sick and endless correspondence, and more preaching, visits, letters.’”**<sup>17</sup>
2. In the midst of all this busyness, Idelette suffered two miscarriages and remained sickly for prolonged seasons. In 1549, after an especially grievous period of sickness, she died.
  - a) Writing to Farel, Calvin said,  
...intelligence of my wife’s death has perhaps reached you before now. **I do what I can to keep myself from being overwhelmed with grief.** My friends also leave nothing undone that may administer relief to my mental suffering... Her magnanimity was so great, that she seemed to have already left the world... She was unable to speak, and her mind seemed to be troubled. I, having spoken a few words about the love of Christ, the hope of eternal life, concerning our married life, and her departure, engaged in prayer. In full possession of her mind, she both heard the prayer, and attended to it. Before eight she expired, so calmly, that those present could scarcely distinguish between her life and her death. **I at present control my sorrow so that my duties may not be interfered with...**<sup>18</sup>

### D. Productivity

1. Calvin wrote heaps of commentaries—on nearly every book of the Bible. And also expanded his *Institutes* from six chapters to eighty in its final edition.
2. “Calvin ‘found Protestantism a mob, and transformed it into an army,’ wrote B. B. Warfield.”<sup>19</sup>
3. “As Herman Selderhuis explains, ‘Calvin and Geneva made for an odd couple; they didn’t seem able to live with or without one another. Calvin thought God would not allow him to leave Geneva, and the people of Geneva knew they could not afford to lose Calvin.’”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Calhoun.

<sup>18</sup>Michael A. G. Haykin and Victoria J. Haykin, *The Christian Lover: The Sweetness of Love and Marriage in the Letters of Believers* (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2009), 10–12.

<sup>19</sup>Calhoun.

<sup>20</sup>Nichols.

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4. The Goal: “Calvin’s wish for the church in Geneva could be summed up in this: that it would be a true church as prescribed in the Bible. This was, after all, the heart of the Reformation.”<sup>21</sup>
5. Success from the eyes of John Knox: “Calvin welcomed and assisted refugees from many lands and encouraged them to establish congregations in Geneva for services in their own languages: Italian, Spanish, and English. He urged the Genevan authorities to offer employment and other help to refugees. Geneva became for some, as it was for John Knox, ‘the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the Apostles.’”<sup>22</sup>

### E. Influence and pastoral ministry

1. Missions and evangelism. A school was established in Geneva for the training of pastors and missionaries. Hundreds of missionaries were sent to France alone to preach Christ and plant Protestant churches at the risk of their lives. In fact, many died. Two missionaries were even sent from Geneva to Brazil where they proclaimed Christ—though without any conversions—to the natives there.
2. He showed great hospitality.
  - a) **“Countless friends and strangers made his house their hostel,’ comments McNeill. ‘One of these wrote him afterwards: ‘Your hospitality in the name of Christ is not unknown to anybody in Europe.’”** On one occasion, the city council voted to give Calvin **a larger wine allowance** than provided for his fellow pastors, presumably because of the great amount of entertaining that he did.”<sup>23</sup>
3. He was gentle and warm in fulfilling his pastoral duties. Often attending the sick and dying with great compassion.

## V. Michael Servetus (1553)

- A. Servetus and Calvin exchanged letters.
- B. Returned to Paris to meet with him at great risk to himself (early 1530s).
- C. Wanted to argue with Calvin about the Trinity.
- D. Calvin wanted to pull him back into orthodoxy.
- E. Calvin eventually gave Servetus’s letters to the Roman Authorities.
- F. Servetus was proclaimed a heretic by the church and arrested.
- G. Servetus escaped and chose to sneak into Geneva to hear Calvin preached but he was recognized.
- H. Servetus was promptly arrested by the authorities in Geneva.

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<sup>21</sup>Nichols.

<sup>22</sup>Calhoun.

<sup>23</sup>Calhoun.

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- I. After conferring with the other reformed cities in Switzerland and Germany and receiving a unanimous decision, Servetus was condemned by the City Council to be burned at the stake.
- J. Calvin agreed with this ruling but tried to persuade Servetus to repent of his sinful positions and escape death. However, Servetus wouldn't budge.
- K. Calvin petitioned the council to have Servetus be given a more humane execution, but he was refused.
- L. Calvin is often blamed for the death of Servetus but that simply isn't the case. It is harsh but this was the standard legal proceedings of the day.
- M. Servetus had the unique distinction of being the only heretic condemned by Roman Catholic and protestant authorities.

### VI. A Waning Life, a Waxing Movement (May 27, 1564)

- A. Calvin on his deathbed: (April 28, 1564) "Calvin summoned the ministers of Geneva to his home for a farewell message on April 28, 1564. Calvin told them, "I have had many infirmities which you have been obliged to bear with." "My vices have always displeased me," he added, asking them to forgive the "evil" that he had done, "and if there was any good," to profit by it."<sup>24</sup>

- B. "'It Is Enough That I Live and Die for Christ, Who Is to All His Followers a Gain Both in Life and Death.'

The above words Calvin wrote to his friend Guillaume Farel several weeks before Calvin himself died on May 2, 1564. In the minutes of the Consistory of Geneva, there is a simple cross beside his name and the words: 'Gone to God, May 27th of the present year, between 8 and 9 o'clock, p.m.' A few days later, Farel wrote a friend,

Oh why was I not taken away in his stead, and he preserved to the church which he has so well served, and in combats harder than death? He has done more and with greater promptitude than any one, surpassing not only the others but himself. **Oh, how happily he has run a noble race! May the Lord grant that we run like him, and according to the measure of grace that has been dealt out to us.**"<sup>25</sup>

- C. Calvin was one of the most influential systematizers, articulators, and organizers of the Reformed movement. His impact has been vast and his works are still frequently cited today. The Reformed churches in Switzerland, the Netherlands, England, Scotland, and part of Germany owe much to his mighty labors.

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<sup>24</sup>Calhoun.

<sup>25</sup>Calhoun.

### Theological Theme of Calvin's Life:

- **Dying to Self—Luke 9:23-26**
  - Every conversion has a price.
  - Calvin's conversion consisted not in mere enlightenment; it entailed nothing less than an "unreserved, wholehearted commitment to the living God." This ardent commitment finds pictorial expression in Calvin's crest or seal, which pictures a heart on an open, outstretched hand, with a motto underneath that reads *Cor meum tibi offero Domine prompte et sincere* ("My heart I give you, Lord, eagerly and earnestly").<sup>26</sup>
  - "When Christ calls a man, he bid him come and die."<sup>27</sup>
  
- **What does dying to self look like?**
  - Submitting yourself to God—1 Peter 5:6-7
  - Submission to God's Word—with all of your life, this is true worship.
  - Submission to God's means of personal transformation: by God's grace through the ministry of the Holy Spirit according to the Holy Scripture.
  - Submission to God entails hardship.
    - Calvin's comments on Matthew 18:19—the hardships of following Christ: "We realize that he was a scribe, a man accustomed to a quiet and easy existence, treated with respect, who would be no match for hard words or hard times, for persecution, or the cross. He wishes to follow Christ, but he imagines to himself a soft and pleasant path, lodging with all good things provided—while Christ's road is a thorny one for his disciples; it leads through endless pains to a cross. . . . **So we should learn that, in his person, we are all being told not to make wild and irresponsible claims to be Christ's disciples, without taking any thought for the cross and the hardships. . . . This is the basic training which admits us to his school, denying ourselves and lifting up our cross.**"<sup>28</sup>
  - Submission to God others.
    - We are called to love God and our neighbor.
  - Submission to God entails serious joy.
  
- **Where do you need to die to yourself and submit to God?**
- **Where do you need to love God and your neighbor instead of yourself?**

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<sup>26</sup>Haykin.

<sup>27</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

<sup>28</sup>CNTC, 1:254.