



John Calvin

1509 – 1564

The list of ailments from which Calvin suffered is enough to make a person wince: kidney stones, nephritis, hemorrhoids, migraine headaches, chronic pulmonary tuberculosis, intestinal parasites, spastic colon. Theodore Beza, his successor in Geneva, wrote of him, “A brave spirit was the master of a feeble body.” Nevertheless, Calvin persevered throughout his suffering, working even in the last, most difficult years, preaching until eight days before his death. Undeflectable in his vocation, he finally had to be carried into the pulpit in Geneva in a chair. A remark in the dedication to his *Commentary on II Thessalonians* says it all: “My ministry . . . is dearer to me than life.”

Jean Cauvin (his name was later Latinized to “Calvinus,” then abbreviated to “Calvin”) was born in the town of Noyon, France, fifty miles northeast of Paris. At age eleven he left home for the capital city, where he enrolled at the Collège de la Marche. Here he began his study of Latin (the language of every educated person in the sixteenth century), mastering the language by memorizing the rules in verse—a total of 2645 lines! Advancing to the Collège Montaigu, he was exposed to the gospel-oriented theology of the German Reformers. His father began to think better of training his son for the priesthood and sent him to the Faculty of Law at the University of Orléans. The university conferred its Doctor of Laws degree upon him at age twenty-three. Yet Calvin’s first love was not for the law but for the lan-

guages and literature of antiquity. He was becoming a classical humanist scholar. (All of the major Reformers were first trained as humanists, the sole exception being Martin Luther.) His first published work, *Commentary on Seneca*, was an exploration of political ethics.

Then in 1534 something happened to turn the humanist scholar into a theologian, preacher and pastor. Always disinclined to self-advertisement or exhibitionism, Calvin remained reticent about the details of his conversion. All we know is the little he tells us in the preface to his *Commentary on the Psalms*: "God subdued me and made me teachable."

From this point on Calvin openly associated with men whose theology was suspect. Suspicion quickly hardened into persecution. Two hundred were arrested in one month; in the next three months twenty were executed. The king promulgated a decree against "Lutheranism." Calvin fled to Basel, Switzerland.

Once in Basel Calvin began his major work, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The first edition appeared in 1536, and it was steadily expanded until the final edition of 1559. Designed as a primer for Reformed theology students, it became the most significant writing of the Reformation era. Its influence was incalculable. While that influence was perhaps most visible in Scotland and the Netherlands, the sway of the *Institutes* is evident in many different contexts and countries: the Anglican prayerbook, seventeenth-century Puritanism, New England Congregationalism, and the theology of the Eighteenth-Century Awakening. (John Wesley said there was "but a hair's breath" between him and Calvin.)

Calvin left Basel for Italy, only to be hounded back into Switzerland. In 1537 he was appointed pastor of one of Geneva's churches. Although he was the leading thinker of the Reformation and its most prolific writer, he was not a university recluse who was guaranteed solitude for the purpose of research and writing. Rather, he was a pastor who had to preach (every day!), visit the ill, bury the dead, adjudicate congregational disputes and counsel parishioners who had sinned notoriously.

A Frenchman living in Switzerland, Calvin was suspected of being a spy in the service of the French government. Genevan mobs demonstrated outside his house, firing guns and threatening to drown him in the river. City officials allowed him three days to leave. He

went to Strasbourg (at this time not part of France), the chief city of refuge for persecuted Protestants from France. Even though the city was largely German-speaking and his congregation small, Calvin was happy here, not least because it was in Strasbourg that he met and married his wife, Idelette de Bure.

Now devoid of the leadership of the man it had expelled, Geneva degenerated rapidly. The city council urged him to return. He declined, writing to a friend, "It would have been far preferable to perish once and for all than to be tormented in that place of torture." Yet return he did, and spent the rest of his life in the Swiss city.

Calvin's output was immense. In addition to the *Institutes* (1700 pages) he wrote commentaries on almost all the books of the Bible; many tracts and treatises discussing important theological controversies; hundreds of sermons (342 on Isaiah alone!); and numerous letters. Every Christian, Calvin insisted, must possess a measure of doctrinal sophistication or be at the mercy of every theological ill-wind. Pastors in particular must be provided with the tools needed for life-long study in service of the Word of God.

In the course of his vast writing he imparted that shape to the French language which it bears to this day, doing for the French language what Shakespeare did for English.

Calvin penned his last letter to his dearest friend, Guillaume Farel, only days before he died: "It is enough that I live and die for Christ, who is to all his followers a gain both in life and in death." His grave is unmarked. Yet his imprint—on such diverse subjects as art, economics and politics—is indelible. Still, it is as the theologian of the refugee that Calvin shines preeminently. And it is here that he will once again sustain so many people in present-day denominations who have learned what it feels like to be exiled.

