

Who was John Calvin? 1: From France to Geneva.

Was there ever a saint more vilified and misrepresented than Calvin; yet was there ever a reformer that changed the world for the better as much as Calvin? As the Lord warned us, those who truly follow him will be persecuted by all, just as the Master was. What was John Calvin really like?

He was born in 1509 in Picardy, north of Paris, to Gerard Cauvin (Calvin is the Latinised form, an academic tradition then as it was the universal written language) who made John study law at Orleans. Calvin may have been converted when he returned to Paris, having been influenced by several Protestants, where he became a leader in the Reformation movement. Attracting violent opposition, he was forced to flee and travel through France and Switzerland; however, by 1534 he began to write tracts against errors. In 1536 his first, short version of the *Institutes* appeared to defend Reformed truth to King Francis 1, which became popular with many Protestants. He headed for Strasbourg where the Reformation was formally accepted but had to stay overnight in Geneva. There Guillaume (William) Farel, who had initiated many reforms in Geneva, forcefully persuaded an unwilling Calvin to stay. However, before long both were required by political enemies to leave, so Calvin went to work with Martin Bucer in Strasbourg.

Though very poor, Calvin had peace with Bucer and married Idelette de Bure, the widow of an Anabaptist, who bore a son that lived only a few days. Calvin became pastor of a French refugee church, which he organised on what he believed were Biblical lines as opposed to Roman liturgy, including preparing (with Clement Marot) a hymnbook of metrical Psalms. He also began a commentary on Romans and took part in formal discussions with Lutherans and Roman Catholics, whereupon his fame as a theologian spread.

Meanwhile the Genevan reform movement was falling apart without leadership and in 1539 could not reply to a letter from the humanist Cardinal Sadoletto demanding submission to the pope. Calvin was asked to reply for them, which he did successfully. In 1541 the Genevan city government changed and Calvin was asked to return to help the religious reform movement. Again pushed by Farel, Calvin unwillingly went back in 1541 to a city with an international reputation for immorality. This exposes the lies of those who state that Calvin engineered his way to gain absolute political power in Geneva; indeed Calvin never had any formal political power at all but simply sought to help reform the church. We will examine this next.

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