
John Calvin and his Missionary Enterprise

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An Outline of Calvin's Life

John Calvin was born in 1509 in the town of Noyon in Picardy, north-west of Paris. He studied law and was so gifted that he was able to take the place of his lecturers when they were absent. In due course he earned his doctorate in law.

During the latter studies in about 1531 he was suddenly converted from Rome to Christ. He left Paris in 1533, being in danger because of his Christian faith. He lived in various places and began to devote his time to producing a systematic theology which was to become famous under the name *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He continued to work on and enlarge this work throughout his life. The first edition, published in 1536, was modest in size but over the years Calvin extended this work which soon became a classic and has continued as such ever since.¹

In 1536 Calvin travelled from Italy to Strasbourg. On the way he stopped at the city of Geneva where he intended to stay just one night. However there he met the fiery Reformer Farel.

At this point we need to look at the background as it will not only explain why Farel was so keen to engage Calvin's help but also show how these cities became Protestant. Geneva had seven regions (parishes) and about 300 priests and nuns. Farel had sought to reform the city but had been expelled. He then persuaded a friend by the name of Froment to begin teaching French in Geneva. This French language school attracted many prominent women students. Froment chose the New Testament as his text- book which was used by the Holy Spirit to convict the women who then influenced their husbands. In due course the evangelical party in the city increased in number. The way in which these cities were won was by challenging the Roman Catholic priests to a public debate which the city leaders were invited to attend. There were 200 City Council members in Geneva. The priests were mostly ignorant and unable to defend the Roman Catholic position. The Reformers would demonstrate the Roman Catholic teaching to be without biblical foundation and this convinced the City Council to reject Roman Catholic practice and control.

It was just when Farel was involved in this desperate struggle to persuade the leaders of Geneva to reject Romanism that Calvin arrived, then only 27 years old. Farel immediately saw in Calvin the teacher needed to consolidate the work. But Calvin had no desire to stay in Geneva. He was tired and longed for rest. 'May God curse your rest!!' shouted Farel. These words made Calvin tremble. Later he wrote in the introduction to his *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 'I was terrified by Farel's words and made conscious of being a coward.' So Calvin was persuaded to stay and he began to preach in Geneva. Not long after this the Roman Catholic priests of the nearby city of Lausanne were challenged to a public debate by the Reformers. Of 337 priests only 174 arrived and only 4 had any ability to defend their doctrine. Farel and Viret, a foremost Swiss Reformer of those times, were the spokesmen for the Bible. They took Calvin with them as an observer as he had no experience of these debates. The debate went on for several days. One priest in defence of transubstantiation started to quote from the Early Church Fathers. Farel and Viret were unable to handle this and looked to Calvin for help. Standing up, the latter proceeded to quote from memory passages from the Early Church Fathers, giving the exact source in each case. It was an amazing display of learning and had an electrifying effect on the assembly. The opposition was completely confounded. One priest was converted immediately. As a result of this astonishing performance not only did Lausanne turn Protestant but 200 priests renounced the Roman Catholic Church.

The work in Geneva however was not easy. Calvin wished to bring everything under the authority of Scripture. The City Council would not agree and this led to such a division that they expelled Calvin who then went to live in Strasbourg. There he was influenced by two outstanding Reformers, Bucer and Capito. They recognised Calvin's gifts and invited him to pastor a church with a congregation numbering 500 which he did from 1538 to 1541.

It was in 1541 that a Roman Catholic cardinal by the name of Sadoleto wrote to the Council of Geneva inviting them to return to the Roman Catholic Church. Sadoleto badly miscalculated because the people hated Romanism even though they had not agreed to all Calvin's reforms. They did not know how to reply to Sadoleto's letter. The humble course was followed which was to invite Calvin to return to Geneva. At first he refused but when he did return it was through a long and patient work that Geneva became the foremost centre for Protestantism, a city where many persecuted Christians from all over Europe were able to find refuge as well as a ministry that inspired them with missionary zeal.

Calvin's method was to expound the Scriptures systematically. He would preach almost every day in the morning and afternoon, expounding the Old Testament during the week and the New Testament on Sundays. He preached without notes directly from the Hebrew or the Greek. His expositions were written down by scribes. This is how his valuable commentaries came into being. He also kept up a huge correspondence. Up to 1553 much of his time was spent working at reformation in Geneva. Thereafter up until the time of his death in 1564 aged 54 he concentrated on the evangelisation of France.

Missionaries sent into France

It is widely believed that the Reformers of the sixteenth century were not involved in missionary activity. That is simply not the case.² John Calvin was involved in the work of sending missionaries to Brazil. Doors into Brazil did not open at that time and those involved in the attempt lost their lives. However the mission field is not only lands far off. Indeed France constituted a mission field.³

Unlike present day France, which is almost entirely secular in outlook, the France of the 16th century was religious but dominated by the priesthood of the Roman Catholic Church. Persecution by the priests against evangelicals was fierce. It could cost your life to actively propagate the evangelical faith. However within the Roman Church a very considerable Bible movement had taken place through the secret reading of books by Luther as well as through the teaching of a well-known Catholic, Levevre d'Étaples. A great spiritual harvest was there to be reaped.

From 1555 to 1562 we know for sure that 88 preachers were sent from Geneva into France. Of these nine laid down their lives as martyrs. There may have been more than 88. Historical research is hampered by the fact that everything in that period was done in a secretive way for security reasons. Also we must account for many short term missions into France. Those who were ordained and sent out as church planters were exceptionally gifted men. Some of them were from aristocratic families and most were from well-educated upper middle class background in France. Very few were from artisan origin and none from a peasant background. With the exception of Pierre Viret who was Swiss, (he became the pastor of the largest church of 8,000 communicants at Nîmes), these church planting missionaries originated from almost every province of France. This fact helps explain how it was that almost all regions of France were permeated with the gospel..

Of these missionaries those who were not already accredited pastors were obliged to conform to rigorous standards set up by Calvin. The moral life of the candidate, his theological integrity and his preaching ability were subject to careful examination. With regard to moral discipline a system was established by which the pastors were responsible to each other. There was an exacting code listing offences that were not to be tolerated in a minister. Offences in money, dishonesty or sexual misconduct meant instant dismissal.

All Calvin's students had to be fully proficient in Latin, Hebrew and Greek, in order to be thoroughly proficient in line by line exegesis of the Scriptures. They were required to be trained in Church History and Systematic Theology. Character training was paramount. These pastors had to face the reality of martyrdom. Only when Calvin judged a man to possess the necessary fibre and stamina would he be sent into France to preach and plant churches. Each church began by a group gathering in a home, and then out of that a fully disciplined church would be constituted. Such was termed 'a dressed church'.

In 1555 there was only one 'dressed church'. Seven years later, in 1562, there were 2150 such churches! This represents growth of extraordinary proportions. Eventually there were over two million Protestant church members out of a French population of twenty million. This multiplication came in spite of fierce persecution. For instance in 1572, 70,000 Protestants lost their lives. The church order used was Presbyterian. There were 29 national synods from about 1562 to 1685 when persecution forced most of the believers to leave France.

The real character of John Calvin is revealed in his letter writing which was very extensive and pastoral in character. Besides personal letters he also wrote to the French churches as whole. For instance in November 1559 he wrote: 'Persecutions are the real battles of Christians, to test the constancy and firmness of their faith; hold in high esteem the blood of the martyrs shed for a testimony to the truth.'

Conclusion

From the example provided above we need above all to recapture the biblical idea that a missionary is a male preacher/pastor who engages in church planting. There are many ancillary services and many ancillary agencies but without the application in practice of preaching and pastoring in the work of church planting the prospect of Christianity in any unevangelised land will be bleak.

References

1. *Calvin's Institutes*. The two volumes, edited by John T McNeil and translated by Ford Lewis Battles, form part of the *Library of Christian Classics*. 1,500 pages, Westminster Press, USA.
2. For a detailed description of the Brazilian saga see *The Heritage of John Calvin* edited by John Bratt, pages 40-73, Eerdmans, 1973.
3. John Calvin's enterprise in the evangelisation of France is described by Jean-Marc Berthoud in a carefully researched treatise of 53 pages, *Westminster Conference Papers for 1992* obtainable from John Harris, 8 Back Knowl Road, Mirfield, WF14 9SA, UK £4.00 including postage. It is from this treatise that I have extracted the material about France.