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Part I

Calvin's Life and Context

1 Calvin's life

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Calvin was born on July 10, 1509, in Picardy in northern France, farm country marked by strong religious and ecclesiastical ties. His birthplace, Noyon, along with Amiens, Beauvais, Laon, and Senlis, belonged to the cathedral cities of this province, rich in tradition, which also possessed important abbeys such as Corbie and Péronne. The Picards made up one of the four recognized “nations” among the students of the University of Paris, and Calvin was proud throughout his life to belong to this elite. Even his character largely matched the “Picardian”: intelligent, logical, sensibly diligent, morally serious, and devoted to freedom and order – as well as overly sensitive, self-confident, and irritable. At the time of his birth, both a religiosity bordering on mysticism and a growing openness to humanist ideas were determining the spiritual climate of the land.

Calvin's father was a financial administrator of the cathedral chapter of Noyon. His mother, who died early, was a truly humble woman about whom little is known other than her zeal for pilgrimages. Calvin had four brothers and two sisters, most of whom are later found in the reform camp. Calvin admired his somewhat authoritarian father and profited from this aspiring man who tried to raise himself from a humble background to moving in educated circles, even that of the elegant family of de Hangest-Genlis. According to his father's wishes, John was intended to become a priest. His studies were financed by generous ecclesiastical benefices that soon made it possible for him to enjoy instruction in famous Parisian schools.

The spiritual atmosphere of the capital city was largely determined by the wavering political course of the king, Francis I. In 1515, Francis had attained from Pope Leo X the right of nominating all bishops. That brought, at least in principle, a close interaction between the ruler and the Catholic Church. On the other hand, this *roi très catholique* (“most Catholic King”) supported the Protestant forces in Germany in order to weaken the power of Emperor Charles V. At home, Francis vacillated between supporting conservative representatives of the church, such as the teachers of the Faculty of Theology, and humanists eager for reform, such as Erasmus, Lefèvre

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d'Étaples, the “circle of Meaux” around Bishop Briçonnet, his own sister Marguerite of Navarre, as well as the teachers of the *Collège Royal*. The *Collège*, which had been founded by Francis, represented a strong counterbalance to the inquisitorial authority of the Sorbonne and even showed an appreciation of Luther. Despite the subsequent condemnation in 1521 by the Faculty of Theology (or more precisely the Sorbonne) of 104 Lutheran teachings, the Catholic reform party for years did not retract in any way its sympathy for the German reformer.

In 1513, in accordance with his father's decision, the fourteen-year-old Calvin went to Paris: first, to the *Collège de la Marche* where he was educated under the direction of the great and deeply religious pedagogue Marthurin Cordier; then, after a few months, to the *Collège Montaigu* where he studied the liberal arts for four years in preparation for a priestly vocation. Cordier conveyed to Calvin a piety centered on the person of Christ in the spirit of the *devotio moderna* and on the foundation of a contemporary teaching method. In 1550 Calvin dedicated a biblical commentary to Cordier and in 1562 obtained a position at the Genevan Latin School for him. By contrast, Calvin had few good memories of the *Collège Montaigu*.

At Montaigu not only did an overly strict discipline hold sway under the direction of Noël Bédier and Pierre Tempête, but there was also a narrow-minded and hair-splitting orthodoxy. This was consistent with the attitude responsible for several death penalties against alleged or real supporters of Luther, for example, against the Augustinian monk Jean Vallière, who was burned alive in 1523, the year Calvin came to Paris. This inquisitorial activity originated in the theological faculty of the Sorbonne and exerted great influence on other anti-reformers besides Bédier. In 1525 even the Scottish philosopher and theologian John Major, who was formerly conciliatory about criticizing the pope, emerged as an opponent of Luther. At the same time, a heresy trial against Bishop Briçonnet of Meaux was initiated, and a biblical commentary by Lefèvre d'Étaples, who subsequently moved to Strasbourg, was banned. The year 1526 saw an intense battle unleashed between Erasmus and Bédier – and more funeral pyres flared up.

Under these circumstances, Calvin studied the liberal arts (but probably not scholastic theology) behind the protective walls of Montaigu. No document allows the historian to conjecture about any reactions from the fourteen- to eighteen-year-old to these events. We are much better informed about what happened after 1528, when Calvin moved to Orléans. He moved at the behest of his father who, after a falling out with the cathedral chapter of Noyon, decided John would pursue the career of a lawyer instead of a cleric. The son obeyed. He became a zealous student of the famous jurist Pierre de l'Estoile who was also the Vicar General of the diocese of Orléans.

In this capacity de l'Estoile played a significant role in 1528 in the provincial synod of Sens, where measures were initiated in both internal church reform and in opposition to Luther.

How did Calvin react to the activities of de l'Estoile? Most likely he responded with great discernment. On one hand, the documents clearly point out Calvin's openness to the renewal movement in the church initiated by Luther and, in particular, by the humanists in France, where Calvin sided with his relative Pierre Robert Olivétan, with whom he had already made contact in Paris. We can surmise that both Calvin and Olivétan watched closely the reform represented by Erasmus and Lefèvre, and they were sympathetic to the basic intentions and even the individual theses of the German reformer. Olivétan pursued his biblical studies, we assume, even more intensely than his legal subjects with the result that he was able to produce his own independent translation of the Bible into French in 1535. Calvin wrote two forewords to this translation in which explicit anti-Roman emphases are readily found.

But in 1528, matters had not yet gone that far. Calvin was still searching and struggling to reconcile humanist reform with loyalty to his teachers who were very faithful to the church. In these circumstances, probably in the year 1529, Calvin wrote a foreword to the *Antapologia* that one of his friends, Nicolas Duchemin, was to publish in 1531 in defense of Pierre de l'Estoile against the attacks of the Italian professor of law, Andrea Alciati. In this writing of Calvin, one searches in vain for any polemical utterances against the Roman Church. Furthermore, Calvin maintained friendly relationships with men such as François Daniel and François de Connan, who would become no more Lutheran than Duchemin. Regarding the influence of Melchior Wolmar, the teacher of Greek in Wuertemberg who worked in Orléans and apparently was a supporter of Luther, he appears to be similar to Olivétan. Calvin exchanged ideas with him and enjoyed listening to him. But for years Calvin's statements divulge nothing about accepting their reform views as his own. It is not until his writings of 1535 that there is clear evidence of a turning-point.

In 1530, the Faculty of Theology began a general offensive against several suspected teachers of Lutheranism, such as the Hellenists Guillaume Budé and Pierre Danes, as well as the Hebraist François Vatable – all of them teachers at the *Collège Royal*. They were “guilty” of being convinced that a deeper scientific knowledge of the original biblical languages was essential for a correct interpretation of Scripture. The Vulgate, the Latin translation, was inadequate. Moreover, Bédier attacked “secret Lutherans” – he meant Erasmus among others. But a welcome counter-balance for the accused was the equally influential sister of the king, Marguerite of Navarre. Academic

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freedom at the University of Bourges, where Calvin moved in 1530, was due to her protection.

But Calvin did not remain in Bourges for long. In March 1531 he set out on a dangerous journey to Paris to take care of the printing of Duchemin's *Antapologia*. There he learned that his father was seriously ill. He went to Noyon as quickly as possible to be at his father's side during his last days. Gérard Calvin died in the state of excommunication imposed on him by the cathedral chapter two years earlier because of a questionable financial matter. The family was forced to carry out humiliating negotiations with the cathedral officials to make a church burial for the deceased possible. Once more Calvin experienced the inflexible conduct of clergy who were scarcely able to differentiate between worldly and spiritual power.

At that time Calvin himself defended the notions of freedom of conscience for the Christian and of tolerance as a special virtue of rulers. The first view is evident in his letter, dated June 23, 1531, to Daniel; the second in 1532, in his first published work, a commentary on Seneca's treatise *De Clementia* (*On Clemency*). In the letter just mentioned Calvin relates that he had visited Daniel's young sister in her convent shortly before she took her vows and respectfully admonished her that the fulfillment of her commitment was to be attained more by God's grace than by her own willpower. Inner freedom and joy are mentioned here, not a fundamental rejection of vows or life in a cloister. In the Seneca commentary, which Calvin dedicated to Claude de Hangest, abbot of St-Eloi in Noyon, the young jurist unfolded a theory of moderation and tolerance that every ruler – the Stoic as well as the Christian – should exercise in fulfilling his office. He is indeed the servant of the merciful God to assure order and general welfare in society. It is also interesting that there is no direct allusion in this writing to the persecution of the "Lutheran sects" which the French king permitted or even incited.

The conviction that both state and church need a ruling authority deserving of respect is clearly discernible from time to time in all the ecclesiastical and political statements of Calvin's life. This also explains why Calvin detected very early in the so-called "free church" movement of the Anabaptists a deadly danger to the unity of the church and the authenticity of Christianity. A person who, like these "sectarians" or "fanatics" (as Luther called them), gives preference to individual spiritual experience or enlightenment over the church's interpretation of the Bible will also give free rein to arbitrary theologies. An example is the teaching of "soul sleep" after death instead of believing that the deceased are with Christ and that the faithful will rise again. In his work *Psychopannychia* (*On Soul Sleep*), written in 1534, Calvin argues against such a misunderstanding of the Christ-centeredness

of our religion and in favor of the traditional belief in the resurrection. Calvin offers not only extensive knowledge of the Old and New Testaments (277 quotes in a booklet of only fifty-one pages!), but also arguments from the great expositors of the Bible such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Augustine. The learned jurist shows himself to be a confident theologian and controversialist, which he had become not by attending schools of higher learning, but by private study and reading the sources.

In the meantime, the "Sorbonnists'" harsh war of attrition against the remaining fortresses of humanist reform continued, clearly with growing success. The reform party had seemed to gain the upper hand in 1533. Gérard Roussel was permitted to preach in the king's court. Bédier called Roussel's religious orthodoxy into doubt, but he had to leave at the behest of the bishop of Paris, Jean du Bellay. The new rector of the University, Nicholas Cop, successfully defended the Queen of Navarre when her booklet, *Miroir de l'âme pécheresse* (*Mirror of a Sinful Soul*), was censored by conservative theologians and her character ridiculed by rebellious students. The letters of Calvin stemming from this time show solidarity with Marguerite, Roussel, and Cop – and also with Guillaume Petit, bishop of Senlis, who likewise affirmed the religious orthodoxy of the queen's group of humanists.

A significant incident occurred after the events following a speech the rector, Cop, made on the Feast of All Saints in 1533 at the opening of the academic year. Cop was a physician; however, his speech had a spiritual and theological character. It contained Erasmian thoughts on a Christian philosophy of life, Luther's theme of law and gospel, and, finally, the teaching of the justification of the sinner "through faith without works of the law." The speech began with praise of Mary, the Mother of the Lord and the most perfect of all creatures. Then followed an explanation of the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount according to Matthew, with special emphasis on the lines: "Blessed are you when you are cursed and persecuted because of me . . ." Cop included an explicit rejection of the accusation that those fellow Christians who sincerely want to obey the gospel are heretics.

Who was behind this speech? Scholarly opinions differ. Some attribute to Calvin merely an advisory role; others think that Calvin wrote the speech himself; and others attribute to Cop, the Erasmian physician, a time of private study and a competence in theology similar to the young jurist. One thing is certain: Calvin felt solidarity with Cop and was able to affirm his statements. At any rate, the reaction of the opposition affected Calvin exactly as it did the university rector: both found themselves in that constantly shifting middle ground of loyalty to the church and a desire for reform. In the eyes of the Sorbonne occupying middle ground still meant schism and heresy. This radically conservative group was successful in regaining the

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confidence of the king by December, 1533. He ordered the extermination of the “damned Lutheran sects.”

Calvin found shelter with the well-to-do Louis du Tillet, canon of Angoulême and rector of Claix. Thanks to this friend’s hospitality and his extensive theological library, the future reformer enjoyed the leisure needed to continue his private studies for about five months. He read the church fathers along with the Bible. He gladly accepted material help from a churchman like du Tillet, while denouncing the income he had drawn since childhood for a completely fictitious Noyon pastorate. Presumably, Calvin saw in the canon of the Cathedral of Angoulême a kind of patron or benefactor for the studies that he carried out in the service of evangelical renewal.

Soon, however, Calvin left Claix – this “quiet nest” as he put it – and set out, according to his earliest biographers, for Paris and Orléans, apparently to become more familiar with the teachings of the Anabaptists. This allowed him to test the correctness of the faith of a young man – Calvin referred to him as “brother” – who was suspected of Anabaptism, and then to recommend him as an irreproachable Christian in a letter to Martin Bucer, the “bishop” of the already evangelical Strasbourg. This letter testifies not only that our self-taught theologian already considered himself capable of passing judgment on matters of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, but also that he harbored no sense of inferiority towards such a famous man as the reformer of Strasbourg.

In October, 1534, a crisis affecting church and state erupted. When Antoine Marcourt, a preacher from Neuchâtel who sympathized with Luther, initiated blatant attacks against the sacrifice of the Mass and publicized them in the form of placards, the men of the Sorbonne and Parliament urged the king to take up the harshest measures of punishment. Even such an upright reformer as Guillaume Budé decidedly rejected Marcourt’s dogmatic aggression. Thus there came a new wave of persecution, with imprisonments and executions. Calvin found himself forced to leave France. In January, 1535, he met with du Tillet and Cop in evangelical Basle.

There existed in Basle at that time a healthy pluralism in matters of faith regarding reform. Erasmus lived there in seclusion. Oswald Myconius, a former colleague of Zwingli, led the community that between 1523 and 1531 received a well-structured and balanced reform of its church order under the direction of the monk Johannes Oeclampadius, who had become a Lutheran. Myconius wrote a corresponding profession of faith in 1534, but sought to gain its acceptance in an ecumenical spirit. He intended to mediate between the positions of Lutherans and Zwinglians – and Erasmians, too. Calvin preferred the theology of Luther during his stay in Basle. It was Luther’s

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theology, more than all other sources (Melancthon, Zwingli, Bucer) that inspired the first edition of his *Christianae Religionis Institutio* (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*), which came off the press in Basle in 1536.

One can only marvel at how quickly this theological compendium – a kind of expanded catechism for educated adults – was written. Even more admirable is the biblical, patristic, and reformed theological documentation, as well as the treatment of sources chosen according to a specific viewpoint. Among these sources are, above all, both of Luther's catechisms and his treatises on *The Freedom of the Christian* and *The Babylonian Captivity*. The *Institutes* was immediately a bestseller. It went through numerous, expanded editions in Latin (1539, 1543, 1550, 1553, 1559) and French (1541, 1545, 1551, 1560). The final Latin edition was five times larger than the first.

For the Foreword to the 1536 *Institutes*, Calvin wrote an open letter to the French king, which was a definite testimony to his reform faith and likewise a defense of the "party of the gospel" against the accusations of being Anabaptist, heretical, schismatic, and politically rebellious. Thus the entire work had a clearly anti-Roman emphasis and contained pronouncements critical of the papacy. Along with Calvin's contemporaneous Forewords to Olivétan's translation of the Bible and his own commentary on the letter to the Romans, this open letter may be considered the first indisputable proof of Calvin's complete turn to reform.

People everywhere like to label this turn a "conversion," mostly in the modern, confessional, sense of the word. Nevertheless, as the documents of the time clearly show, Calvin himself did not understand "conversion" in this modern sense, but rather in the biblical sense of "repentance," i.e., the fundamental penitential act of the believer. In the texts mentioned above, everything indicates that the young Calvin by no means intended to join a new church community opposed to the Catholic Church, but rather to "re-form" the one church of Christ in the spirit of the gospel. Inasmuch as the truth of the gospel had been "de-formed" – distorted – under the very exacting rule of the papacy, the entire demoralized church community should be "converted" itself, repent, and, in the footsteps of the church of the first five centuries, return to the God of Jesus Christ. That is quite different than an individual going from one "denomination" to another.

It is true that in 1557 the mature Calvin designated his turn to reform as a *subita conversio*, a "sudden conversion." However, the wider context of this statement shows that Calvin understood his life story as analogous to that of the Apostle Paul, who on his way to Damascus suddenly turned from the sin of opposing Christ to unconditionally serving Christ. In reality, a comparable turn for Calvin took place gradually over several years. However, this view is not incompatible with Calvin's statement of 1557, which, because of its

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literary context, is much more theological and confessional in meaning than autobiographical.

Furthermore, nothing in Calvin's writings allows us to recognize the concern for dating one's personal "conversion" that was so characteristic of later Pietists. Clearly, the young Calvin was more concerned about his gradually discovered "calling" (*vocatio*) to reform the church than about a confessional change in the individual in the modern sense of the concept.

The successful formulation of reform theology soon led to a corresponding praxis. Guillaume Farel, who had led the reform in Geneva with the help of the city council and in part through the use of force as well, felt overwhelmed by the emerging chaos. He pleaded with the now famous Calvin to stand at his side in the difficult work of leading the community. Farel pressured him with really overwhelming arguments: if Calvin did not accept Farel's summons, he would be cursed by God. After some hesitation, Calvin agreed and took the office in Geneva of "reader" (*lector*) of Holy Scripture. Calvin began his activity with lectures on the letters of Paul. He also participated in the Lausanne Disputation in October, 1536, between reform theologians and those faithful to Rome. The latter must have felt defeated when Calvin, quoting patristic texts from memory, refuted the allegation that the "evangelicals" disregarded the teaching of the church fathers about the Last Supper.

The reputation of the young man from Noyon, whose theological and legal knowledge – as well as his gift for controversy – had proven highly useful to the reform camp, continued to grow. Bucer wrote in a friendly way that he wanted to meet him and would leave it to him to choose the proper place. Calvin did not react with false modesty, even less with the subservience that many laymen tended to show priests and bishops even after they turned to the "gospel." To be sure, the author of the *Institutes* esteemed the episcopacy as an important ministry for leading the church. This is the sense in which he addressed Bucer himself as "Bishop of Strasbourg" and congratulated Gerard Roussel for his ordination as bishop of Oléron, even though his old friend remained in the Roman camp.

On the other hand, Calvin was able to see that the sacrament of ordination – especially as it was connected at the time one-sidedly to the priestly function of sacrifice – was not an indispensable requirement for serving God's Word and leading the community. Calvin himself never wanted to be an ordained pastor, even though he knew he was called to the pastoral office through the Word and sacrament as the content of his reform activities. This interpretation is also consistent with the theological viewpoint that distinguishes all the writings of Calvin: the exact determination of the ontological status of a person or a thing is not crucial, but rather its function

under the working of God's Spirit is key. The reformer's position regarding priestly ordination as well as "transubstantiation" in the Eucharist can be cited as an example of this viewpoint.

To "function" and act according to God's will a church community needs a clear confession of faith and a church order to rule everyday life. Therefore, in 1536 Calvin composed a "confession of faith" (*confessio fidei*) and a series of "articles" (*articuli*). The articles provided for the community the frequent – at least monthly – celebration of the Lord's Supper, which should be an occasion of preaching, professing (the creed), and praising God. This requirement met with resistance from the city council, especially regarding the frequency of the Lord's Supper, as well as the public and obligatory character of a personal profession of faith. This resistance prepared the way for the crisis in Geneva in 1538 that would lead to an open break between the council and Calvin.

However, before this break occurred, a dogmatic dispute with Pierre Caroli, a former co-worker of Bishop Briçonnet in Meaux, caused our theologian considerable worry. Caroli had become a pastor in Lausanne without agreeing with his reform colleagues on all questions of religious faith and practice. Caroli allowed prayer for the deceased and criticized the doctrine of the Trinity advocated by Viret, the reformer of Lausanne, as well as by Farel and Calvin. Caroli considered their doctrine of the Trinity to be inconsistent with the Athanasian Creed (the *Quicumque* Symbol), and in reality to be Arian. Calvin suggested a synod be called, a response that fit the tenet he advocated his entire life that dogmatic disputes be decided by gatherings of pastors. The religious colloquies held in 1537 in Berne should be seen in this connection as successfully leading to the unification of the Swiss and Alsace Reformed churches concerning the Lord's Supper and the Trinity. Thus, Calvin's "Confession of Faith" was affirmed.

Other events caused Calvin pain. His good friend and patron, Louis du Tillet, left him because it was impossible for him to approve the manner in which Calvin took on priestly and even episcopal duties. Calvin, however, saw the reason for the separation, which was very painful for him, to be due more to his being outspoken and impolite to du Tillet. The correspondence in this matter shows how capable Calvin was of self-criticism.

Calvin also displayed inflexibility toward the Genevan council when it meddled in church affairs and wanted to give preference to the ritual for church services imported from Berne rather than that prepared by the Genevan pastors. Since Calvin and Farel did not give in, a public conflict resulted and both church leaders were expelled from the city. They left for Basle in the spring of 1538. During these events Calvin showed a mixture of guilt and confidence which was characteristic of him at that