**JOHN CALVIN**

**1509-1564**

Charles Haddon Spurgeon asserted, “John Calvin propounded truth more clearly than any other man who ever breathed. He knew more of Scripture, and explained it more clearly than any other man who has every believed.”

**CATHOLIC SON (1509-1523)** Raised to go into the priesthood.

**BRILLIANT STUDENT (1523-1533)** Studied at the University of Paris. At age of 17 – received his Master’s Art. Dad redirected from Catholic studies to the study of law. **1532 –** Earned his law degree.

**SUDDEN CONVERT (1533)** At age 24.We have Calvin’s testimony in his preface to his *Commentary on the Psalms* (1557): “Since I was too obstinately devoted to the superstitions of popery to be easily extricated from so profound an abyss of mire, God, by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame, which was more hardened in such matters than might have been expected from one at my early period of life. Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with so intense a desire to make progress therein, that although I did not altogether leave off other studies, I yet pursued them with less ardor.”

Five things should be noted about Calvin’s conversion: 1) Calvin had been immersed in the depths of Catholicism. 2) He was so sunken down into Catholicism that only God could have rescued him. He attributed his conversion to God alone. No human instrument is even mentioned. 3) His conversion brought an immediate and unexpected change in his life. 4) God overcame his resistance to the truth of the gospel. 5) He suddenly lost interest in the study of law and became absorbed with spiritual matters pertaining to God’s Word. His was a sudden, dramatic and thorough conversion.

He became marked man of Catholic Church soon after conversion. Had to escape in the middle of the night to avoid capture by Catholic officials. Spent a year wandering around France as an itinerant teacher, preacher, evangelist. Studied in a personal library of a friend whom he met. There, Calvin studied in solitude. He explained: “Being of a disposition somewhat unpolished and bashful, which led me always to love the shade and retirement, I then began to seek some secluded corner where I might be withdrawn from the public view.”

**BRILLIANT TEACHER (1533-1536)** At the astonishing young age, 25, only one year after his conversion, Calvin completed the first edition of his greatest work, *The Institutes of Christian Religion* in **1535**. It was published March 1536.The *Institutes* were hailed as the single most important book to be written during the Reformation. In *The Institutes*, Calvinaddressed the King of France giving a brilliant defense of Christianity in an effort to get King to stop the slaughter of the French Huguenots. Here Calvin argued that the teachings of the Reformation were tied to the Scriptures while Catholicism was the new religion.

**UNEXPECTED PASTOR (1536-1538)**  He traveled to Strasbourg, but was redirected by French soldiers to Geneva. There William Farrell who had introduced the Protestant movement in Geneva, boldly urged Calvin to stay and help the cause of the Reformation. Calvin was shaken and consented. He began to preach the Word of God and that one could not partake of Lord’s Supper if not repentant of sin. The established Geneva families persuaded the Fathers to have Calvin removed from the church in Geneva.

**STRASBOURG EXILE (1538-1541)** At the invitation of Martin Bucer, Calvin withdrew to Strasbourg. Calvin wanted to withdraw from the public eye. But Bucer pressured Calvin to stay in Strasbourg and minister. Once again, Calvin was thrust into the public arena in ministry. Back in Geneva, the Roman Catholic church pressures the reformed Church were Calvin had pastored to return to Catholicism. Calvin sends to this Church in Geneva a great written defense of Reformation re salvation through faith indicating that Catholic Church desecrates the glory of God with their corrupt gospel. Families in Church in Geneva plead with Calvin to return, and Bucer exhorts Calvin to do so though this thought was anathema to Calvin. His personal logo, heart in an open hand, a heart being offered up to God.

**REFORMING PASTOR (1541-1555)** Calvin reassumed his Genevan pulpit. When He entered his pulpit, he began his exposition at exactly the next verse from where he had stopped—3 1/2 years earlier. The statement it made was intentional. This church will be ruled by God’s Word. There Calvin remained the rest of his life.Upon his return, Calvin announced: “If you desire to have me for your pastor, correct the disorder of your lives. If you have with sincerity recalled me from my exile, banish the crimes and debaucheries which prevail among you…. I consider the principal enemies of the gospel to be, not the pontiff of Rome, nor heretics, nor seducers, nor tyrants but bad Christians.” Calvin established 3 marks for the Church 1) Preaching the Word. 2) The Ordinances of Baptism and the Lord’s table. 3) The discipline of Church members.

**OPPOSED PASTOR (1541-1555)** He experienced extreme, fierce opposition in the Church for the next 14 years during which time Calvin was steadfast and courageous. Followed by 9 years of support. [Illustration of conflict with the Libertines who sought to magnify the grace of God by sinning all the more. When they entered the worship service with drawn swords, Calvin literally stands up to their swords, saying, “These hands you may crush, these arms you may lop off, my life you may take, my blood is yours, you may shed it; but you shall never force me to give holy things to the profaned and dishonor the table of my God.”

**PREEMINENT EXPOSITOR:** A great and amazingly hard-working preacher. He preached 10 sermons every other week despite his own temperament which pulled him toward personal study. He preached to a packed house even though the weekday AM service started as early as 6AM and during the winter at 7 AM. Calvin understood the powerful influence of preaching the Scriptures. James Boice wrote concerning John Calvin: “Calvin had no weapon but the Bible. From the very first, his emphasis had been on Bible teaching. Calvin preached from the Bible every day, and under the power of that preaching the city began to be transformed.” Here preached from original texts and translated “on the fly” from both Hebrew in OT and from Greek in NT into Latin and French.

**A SUCCESSFFUL LEADER:** Many students who entered Calvin’s school escaped persecution and thus knew that his influence would likely lead to their own death. A great number of churches throughout France and other portions of Europe were planted through his ministry. As of **1562** there were 1785 elders and deacons in churches within France due to his church planting. More than a million French men and women were converted to Christ through his ministry and its influence.

Joel Beake writes, “Those who think that a Calvinist is not evangelistic has never studied the life of John Calvin, and remains in the ignorance of what they do not know.” By **1562** more than 2000 churches were being planted in France with 3 million members. Churches were planted in Italy, Hungry, Poland, Germany, the Netherlands, England, Scotland, and as far as Brazil. Dr. Benjamin Warfield wrote, “Here we have the secret of Calvin’s greatness and the source of his strength unveiled to us, no one ever had a profounder sense of God than he.”

**VISIONARY EDUCATOR (1559)** He established the Geneva Academy to train young ministers. It would eventually become the University of Geneva. At the time of Calvin’s death, there were 1200 students at the 1st level and 300 students at the higher level. He trained the next generation of not only preachers but lawyers, and doctors, and those who would serve in Western Civilization. Became a prolific Bible Commentator. His commentaries covered 3/4s of the entire Bible. Dr. John Murray writes, “Calvin was the exegete of the Reformation, and on the 1st rank of Biblical exegetes of all time. Dr. Broadus, “Calvin gave the ablest, clearest, exposition of Scripture that we have seen for 1000 years.”

He was an indomitable worker to the end, and a driven man who could not be hindered from working at extraordinary pace. The Geneva Bible was made per his leadership. This was a translation of entire Bible using Tyndale’s works and his study notes in the margins. Calvin was maintained a tremendous literary correspondence ministry to people throughout Europe.

His physical condition deteriorated; yet continued to work diligently. Toward the end of his life, he was carried by chair from his bed to the pulpit. He died at the age of 55, **1564**. Calvin influenced the Pilgrims who arrived here in the U.S. with the Geneva Bible and Calvin’s notes. Calvin’s influence shaped principles of democracy and free capitalism within our Country. His influence became pivotal in the Great Awakening. His influence is worldwide.

**Discussion Questions**

1. How did John Calvin’s life impact you and why?
2. What encouraged you about Calvin’s salvation experience?
3. Why did Calvin believe the gospel of the Catholic church desecrates the glory of God? What is the Biblical basis for such a conclusion?
4. Who poses the greatest evil to the gospel according to Calvin?
5. What is a “Libertine"? Where does Scripture warn us about the error of such teaching?
6. What does Calvin’s life and ministry teach us about the importance of preaching the Word?
7. What do you think about Calvin’s “marks of the ministry” for the church in Geneva?
8. How does Calvin’s life demonstrate God’s grace perfected through personal weakness?
9. What does Calvin teach us about the priority of church discipline?
10. What does Calvin’s conversion teach us about sovereign grace?
11. How is Calvin an encouraging example of perseverance despite difficulties and opposition from the powers of darkness?
12. What does Calvin teach us about the Christian commitment to serve the Lord w/a whole heart?
13. How is Calvin a good example of serving the Lord despite physical hardship?