



From Noyon to Geneva

W.A. Dreyer
Department of Church History
University of Pretoria
PRETORIA
E-mail: wim.dreyer@up.ac.za

Abstract

From Noyon to Geneva

This article contains a brief biography of John Calvin. It serves as an introduction to the publication of the Conventus Reformatus on the occasion of celebrating Calvin's birth 500 years ago. The article follows Calvin's life, from his birth in Noyon until his death in Geneva. The focus is on persons and events which had a substantial influence on Calvin. Calvin's theology is discussed in other contributions in this publication.

Opsomming

Van Noyon tot Genève

Hierdie artikel bevat 'n kort biografie van Johannes Calvyn. Dit dien as inleiding tot die gedenkuitgawe van die Konvent van Reformatoriese Kerke by geleentheid van die 500-jarige herdenking van Calvyn se geboorte. Die artikel volg Calvyn se lewensloop vanaf sy geboorte in Noyon tot sy dood in Genève. Daar word veral gefokus op die persone en gebeurtenisse wat Calvyn beïnvloed het. Die teologie van Calvyn word in ander artikels in hierdie nommer behandel.

1. Introduction

In many ways, any attempt to write a short biography of somebody like John Calvin is an injustice to the man and if truth be said, simply impossible. However, for the purpose of this publication which celebrates his 500th birthday, it must be done.

Even with many Calvin biographies in existence, it remains an incomplete portrait (Cottret, 2000:ix). This incomplete portrait has much to do with our lack of understanding and knowledge of late

medieval society. It also remains incomplete, because so many diverse opinions of Calvin keep circulating.

In his letter to Sadolet Calvin depicts himself as a man of “modesty, softness and mildness”. In the preface to his *Commentary on the Psalms*, he adds to the self-description the words “timid, soft and cowardly by nature” (quoted in Cottret, 2000:x-xi).

This rare self-portrait of Calvin does not reflect the view of many historians who depict him as a man with an iron will, who did not take kindly to any opposition and did not shy away from confrontation – using his sharp intellect and lucid language to demolish the enemies of the Lord.

Another reason for the diverse opinions is the fact that Calvin rarely made any facts known about himself. He made every effort to shroud himself in anonymity and not to be the focal point of the Reformation. God alone must be glorified, not man (Meeter, 1957: 10). In life, as in death, Calvin tried to glorify God: Calvin was able to have himself buried in such anonymity that no one has ever been able to discover the place of his grave (Febvre, 1968:267). As a result, the famous reformer never aroused the slightest personality cult among his followers. The whole idea of a charismatic and influential spiritual leader or prophet is completely strange to the Calvinist understanding of *solī Deo gloria* ... Even Theodor Beza, in his biography of Calvin, states that he does not want to make a man into an angel (quoted in Cottret, 2000:3-4).

In an attempt to understand the contribution of any historical figure, one must understand the historical context and setting of such a person. One of the basic mistakes non-historians make, is to impose modern issues and questions in an anachronistic manner upon somebody like Calvin. This also tends to confuse matters. The fact that the sixteenth century was an epoch of incredible socio-political and intellectual change does not make things easier.

Not only do we need to understand context, but also the intra-personal relations and interaction between people. One of the questions we should ask is who the people were with whom John Calvin associated, and how they influenced him. Very often it is the people around us, more than anything else, who influence our development and our place in history. We ought not underestimate the influence of a father, mother, friend, teacher, political or spiritual leader.

This contribution does not pretend to present startling new material on Calvin. Instead, it merely serves as a biographical orientation, following his footsteps as he travelled and stayed for shorter and longer periods in different locations, meeting the people which had some influence on him.

To remain within the limitations of an introduction, no primary sources were used. The secondary sources used are those who made extensively use of the primary sources with full documentary references.

2. Noyon (1509-1523)

Jean Cauvin (John Calvin) was born in Noyon, in the French province of Picardy and the parish of Sainte-Godeberte. The house where Calvin was born on 10 July 1509 was restored in the twentieth century and gives an impression of where Calvin grew up.

Calvin remained a loyal Picardien. In his letter to Blaurer (19 Nov. 1552), he laments the destruction of his hometown by the Spaniards. He reserved the Latin word *patria* (homeland) only for Noyon (Cottret, 2000:8).

Noyon was an important agricultural, commercial and ecclesiastical centre of the period. Noblemen and clerics gathered there, with which Calvin had regular contact (due to his father's position at court) since he was a boy. Accordingly, he had an education similar to the children of aristocrats (Dankbaar, 1957:2). This resulted in Calvin being very aristocratic in manner.

The Cauvin family were protected by Charles d'Hangest, bishop of Noyon. Calvin's father, Girard Cauvin, was employed by the bishop as secretary, prosecutor of the chapter as well as notary and procurator. Due to his position, he could ensure certain privileges for his son. In the spring of 1521, at the age of twelve, Calvin already received his first ecclesiastical benefice – part of the revenue from one of the altars in the cathedral.

Girard Cauvin had a decisive influence on his son's life (as we will see). The normal father-son relationship for that period existed in the Cauvin family. The father made important decisions on behalf of the son, as befitted a head of the family.

Calvin's mother was a devout woman, the daughter of a wealthy inn-keeper. She died in 1515, when Calvin was only six years old (Cottret, 2000:10). Even so, the young Calvin was influenced by his

mother's medieval piety. In his *Traite des reliques* (1543) he refers to this early period in his life, when he still took part in the idolatrous veneration of all sorts of relics (cf. Cottret, 2000:25). Although Calvin later distanced himself from medieval piety, the fundamental faith and spirituality of his earlier years remained.

Calvin had three brothers and two sisters. The four boys were named Charles, Jean, Antoine and Francois. Francois died at a young age. One sister's name is unknown, and the other was called Marie (Dankbaar, 1957:2). Charles became chaplain in Noyon and later pastor in Roupy. He was charged with heresy and died (during 1537) in a state of excommunication. Antoine and Marie also turned to the Reformation and followed their brother to Strasbourg and Geneva. It seems that the Cauvin family gradually turned away from the Roman Catholic Church and became protestants.

Calvin received his first ecclesiastical benefice at the age of twelve (1521). Calvin officially renounced his church revenues in 1534 (Wendel, 1978:17). The income generated from these benefices made it possible for him to study in Paris, although there were some periods when he did not receive any money. He also had the benefit of aristocratic protection by the d'Hangest family. Against this background we can understand why Calvin dedicated his first publication, *De Clementia*, to Claude d'Hangest.

In his native town, Calvin studied Latin in the College of the Capettes until the age of fourteen. In 1523 Calvin's father sent him to Paris to further his studies.

3. Paris (1523-1528)

Calvin moved to Paris from Noyon with his friends, Joachim and Yves d'Hangest-Montmor and their nephew Claude d'Hangest-Genlis. He lived with his uncle, Richard, who had a blacksmith shop next to the St. Germain l'Auxerrois church (Dankbaar, 1957:3).

Paris had numerous colleges, some dating back to the thirteenth century. The University of Paris was founded in 1200. The University had four faculties, i.e. Law, Medicine, Theology and Arts (Cottret, 2000:349). All students started in the Arts faculty, learning grammar, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, philosophy and music. After completion, the student would choose one of the three "higher" faculties and specialise in Medicine, Law or Theology. That would be followed by the *licence* and *thèse*. Students would normally start their

studies at the age of thirteen, completing the Masters at the age of 21.

Calvin started his studies in the Collège de la Marche in August 1523. In the same month (in Paris) an Augustinian monk, Jean Valière, was burned at the stake, because he had contact with the heretic *Luthériennes* (Balke, 1977:15). Luther's works were by then well-known and his growing influence became a major problem for the king and authorities in Paris.

The susceptibility of the French to Luther's ideas was partly due to the preparatory work of Desiderius Erasmus and Lefèvre d'Étaples, who already in 1512 published a *Commentary on the Pauline epistles* in French in which the fundamental reformed principles (authority of Holy Scripture, justification through faith and abolishment of superstitious practices) were formulated. There were also other groups active with leaders such as Briçonnet (Bishop of Meaux), Roussel, Farel, Cop, and Mazurier. They were protected by Margareta, sister of King Francis I (Balke, 1977:16). These groups realised that the church had turned into a useless institution and that it needed fundamental reform. They were fostering knowledge of the Early Church and idealised the simplicity of the Early Church (Balke, 1977:17).

Did the political and religious turmoil make an impression on the young boy who had just arrived in the big city?

Calvin started his studies under the eminent Latinist, Maturin Cordier. Calvin completed his studies in grammar with Cordier before he commenced with Law. Cordier were attracted to the protestant Reformation. As a result, he had to move to Lausanne. He later established himself in Geneva and taught his last lessons at the Academy of Geneva, which Calvin had established. He died in Geneva at the age of 85, in the same city and the same year as his famous student, John Calvin.

Calvin had the highest respect for the teacher who taught him to read and write perfect and eloquent Latin. He dedicated his *Commentary on 1 Thessalonians* to Cordier. In the dedication Calvin lauds his teacher's conduct and skill, recognising the great influence he had on his own abilities (Cottret, 2000:17).

After completing grammar school, Calvin moved to lodgings at the Collège de Montaigu as a paying guest – which allowed him to dodge some of the rigorous discipline for which the institution was

famous. Calvin studied philosophy and dialectics at the Collège, probably under a well-known scholar from Spain, Antonio Coronel.

The famous Humanist Desiderius Erasmus who also studied there, tells us that the Collège was organised according to the principles of the Brothers of the Common Life which had great influence in Holland (quoted in Cottret, 2000:17). The Brothers were known for their criticism of medieval scholasticism, mysticism and evangelical zeal. It could be imagined that the young Calvin picked up some of these values at the Collège.

Calvin turned nineteen, and in this period he had contact with his cousin Pierre Robert d'Oliviet (Olivetanus), the man who produced the French translation of the Bible. It was Olivetanus who encouraged Calvin to do Bible study and reject the superstition of the church (Dankbaar, 1957:7). He also became friends with Budè and Cop and others who were reading and discussing the work of Luther and Zwingli.

Even at a young age Calvin had a fundamental understanding of theological issues. For instance, he distanced himself from Zwingli's symbolic understanding of the sacraments (cf. Dankbaar, 1957:7).

Over a period of time Calvin studied most of Luther's work, but rarely mentioned or referred to him in his publications. In spite of this, Calvin called Luther "brother" and "father". In fact, it was Luther's theology, especially his two *Catechisms* as well as his treatises on *Freedom of the Christian* and *Babylonian captivity*, which inspired the first edition of Calvin's *Christianae religionis institutio* (Ganoczy, 2004:9-15).

4. Orleans and Bourges (1528-1531)

Because of Calvin's links to the Bishop of Noyon and the church benefices that he received, the original plan was that he would study Theology and become a priest. However, Calvin never took up formal studies in Theology and eventually renounced all positions in the church. In Paris he completed his initial studies in Arts and then decided to study Law.

This change happened before Calvin turned twenty. It was due to several factors. Firstly, his father, Girard Cauvin, came into conflict with the clergy in Noyon as well as with the chapter. This created tension within the Cauvin family. Secondly, Girard Cauvin was convinced that those who followed a career in Law, were financially

better off than most other people. Lastly, the Lutheran ideas had progressively more influence on Calvin (cf. Calvin in the preface of his *Commentary on the Psalms*, quoted in Cottret, 2000:21).

To further his studies in Law, Calvin moved to Orlèans and Bourges in 1528. In Orlèans he studied under Pierre de l'Estoile. Calvin had great respect for the integrity and intelligence of his professor, although he remained an ardent opponent of the protestants (Wendel, 1978:23). Calvin's understanding of the law always remained dependent upon the teaching of Pierre de l'Estoile.

At Orlèans Calvin also used the opportunity to study Greek under Melchior Wolmar, a German with Lutheran sentiments. It is unclear whether Wolmar had any influence on Calvin's final conversion to the Reformation. Calvin dedicated his commentary on 2 Corinthians to Wolmar, remembering Wolmar's love and affection for him as well as his lessons in Greek (quoted in Cottret, 2000:24).

During 1529 Calvin moved to Bourges. The University of Bourges was founded by Louis XI in 1463 (Wendel, 1978:24) with the specific goal to establish the rational grounds for the absolute monarchy or *ius majestatis*. Although Calvin studied there, he never accepted the principle of absolute monarchy. Instead, he maintained the position that the king should always remain subject to the law, specifically the law of God.

In Bourges Calvin studied under the famous Italian jurist, Andrea Alciati (1492-1550). Calvin, however, was not impressed with his pompous discourses, especially those aimed against l'Estoile and the French in general (Cottret, 2000:23). He even wrote the preface to Duchemin's *Antapologia*, defending l'Estoile against Alciati. This preface was Calvin's first published work. Even so, Calvin learned from Alciati the worth of a fluent and concise literary style and exquisite use of Latin.

Calvin remained a jurist until the end of his life. His thoughts remained permeated with the rigor and the geometry of the legal system. He remained fascinated by law and committed many laws to memory (Cottret, 2000:21). This had a fundamental influence on his theology.

In the spring of 1531, Calvin returned to Noyon when his father became gravely ill. Girard Cauvin died 26 May 1531, still in a state of excommunication, due to his conflict with the church (Cottret, 2000:24). The efforts Calvin had to make to get his father a decent burial

probably enhanced his negative feelings towards the Roman Catholic Church and the final break with it (Wendel, 1978:25).

5. Paris (1531-1534)

After the funeral of his father, Calvin returned to Bourges and Orléans for a very short period to arrange his affairs.

Although Calvin found studying Law stimulating and probably could have accepted an appointment as judge in Picardy (Cottret, 2000: 54), in his heart he was devoted to the *humaniores literae* (Cottret, 2000:28-29). He was the classical humanist, studying classical texts. For that purpose he decided to return to Paris.

In Paris, King Francis I established a new college where the teaching was entrusted to the Royal Readers. Erasmus was offered the position as head of the institution, but declined due to bad health (Wendel, 1978:26). The Collège de France was conceived in the purest spirit of Humanism and complete freedom in research and teaching.

Arriving in Paris, Calvin decided to pursue his Hellenic studies under the leadership of Pierre Danès, who was one of the most illustrious Royal Readers. Calvin also started mastering the rudiments of Hebrew.

During the winter of 1531-1532 Calvin completed his first book, a commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia* (Wendel, 1978:26-31). This publication established Calvin as an eminent humanist scholar, especially by the eloquent manner in which he applied the methods of Erasmus, Budè and Laurent Valla, using philological, grammatical, logical and historical arguments to explain the meaning of the text.

What makes this important is the fact that Calvin would later apply the same method in his exegesis of biblical texts. In so doing, he contributed to the founding of biblical exegesis as a science.

Wendel explains convincingly how important Seneca had been to the humanists – especially his stoic ethics, love for truth and scientific research. Even after Calvin's conversion, he retained the stoic ideas of natural law and applied it to the Christian society (Dankbaar, 1957:11). It is clear that Calvin never distanced himself from the fundamental methods and principles of Humanism. His exquisite use of Latin and French, his command of language and his clarity of style puts him in the same category as Pascal, Erasmus and other famous authors of classical Humanism.

This did not mean that Calvin accepted everything that Humanism had to offer, as became clear in his controversy with François Rabelais (cf. Dankbaar, 1957:13-14). For instance, in his defence against Pighius (1543), he rejected the absolute freedom of man because he was convinced that man is fundamentally a sinner. He also understood the limitations of human ability, knowledge and reason.

Soon after the publication of the *De Clementia*, Calvin returned to Orlèans to receive his master's degree in Law.

By 1533, those interested in reforming the church were under the impression that the king of France would support them. D'Étaples and his friends received favours from the king and sermons with an evangelical nature were delivered at the Louvre.

Nicolas Cop (Rector of the University, son to the king's physician and close friend of Calvin) on 1 November 1533 delivered a public lecture on the Beatitudes, in which he discussed justification by faith alone as well as the relationship between law and gospel – fundamental to Luther's theology. Furthermore, Cop criticised the church for teaching that salvation could depend on the good works of the believer. This created a commotion. Suddenly, not only the traditional teaching of the church, but the church itself, was criticised. The authority of the church was at stake.

Cop's discourse has often been regarded as the work of Calvin (Wendel, 1978:40). In fact, it uses passages from Erasmus' *Paraclesis* which he added to his translation of the New Testament as well as entire passages from a sermon by Luther which Bucer had translated into Latin in 1525. However, without doubt Calvin knew what his friend was up to and supported it.

The reaction of the church was immediate and severe. Two Franciscan monks lodged an official complaint with Parliament. Cop was convinced that he could argue his case in Parliament, but one of the members warned him that his life was in real danger. On advice of the Parliament, the king gave written orders that the whole "Lutheran sect" must be eradicated from Paris (Dankbaar, 1957:19-20). More than 50 *Luthériennes* were arrested. Cop and Calvin had to flee.

Calvin moved around for a while. He went back to Noyon then moved to the province of Saintonge where he visited Louis du Tillet under the pseudonym of Charles d'Espeville. As canon of the cathedral of Angouleme, d'Espeville had a large library which Calvin

used. For some time Calvin had the rare luxury of studying and working in peace and quiet. At the age of 24 he started working on his magnum opus.

It must have been at the end of 1533 or beginning of 1534 that Calvin finally converted to the Reformation, probably during his stay in Angouleme working in Du Tillet's library (Dankbaar, 1957:25-28; Wendel, 1978:42).

To "become a protestant" or be "converted to the Reformation" means very little in terms of doctrine. At that time, there were no clearly formulated doctrines. It was more a matter of commitment than doctrine. Calvin preferred to adopt another formula. He regarded himself, after his conversion, as a lover of Jesus Christ. Calvin also used the term *Christian* to refer to himself and others who followed Jesus Christ. To be a Christian meant to stand fast in the faith that brings salvation and in service of the Lord (cf. Cottret, 2000:89-90).

For Calvin, being a Christian, meant being a disciple of Jesus Christ. Calvin's conversion to the Reformation was not just an intellectual process of accepting certain principles – it was a very personal commitment to Jesus Christ which required fidelity, love and service. Fundamental to such a conversion is a shift in focus – from the church to Christ.

From Angouleme Calvin moved to Nérac, the south-western part of France where the reformers stood under the protection of Margareta, the Queen of Navarre. From there he returned to Noyon (May 1534) to finally renounce all ecclesiastical benefices and positions. This renouncement of benefices is probably the best indication that Calvin finally converted to the reformed movement.

From Noyon Calvin returned to Paris, which had become a dangerous place for all those who were considered revolutionaries. In 1534, several reformers died at the stake. One of them was Calvin's friend, Etienne de la Forge. Calvin quickly left again for Orlèans, where he started working on his first theological publication, *De psychopannychia*. Due to several factors it was only published eight years later (cf. Tavard, 2000).

In this first excursion into theology we find Calvin's aversion to the radical Anabaptists that would stay with him all his life. On the positive side, the *Psychopannychia* reveals the young Calvin's understanding of immortality in a way that would later reflect in his *Insti-*

tutes. It also shows his essential Humanism, as immortality was one of the core issues for discussion in Humanism. It also highlights his departure from humanist methodology, in the sense that he grounded his arguments on Scripture as the primary source of revelation and authority.

By 1534 the split between the reformers and conservatives in France was a *faite accompli*. Placards were posted all over France (October 1534), attacking the heart of the Roman Catholic Church – the Mass. There was no turning back. The king retaliated by arrests and seizure of property of those suspected to be part of the Reformation. Many French protestants had to flee and would never return to France.

6. Basle (1535-1536)

Calvin's journeys had to continue. He changed his name again and travelled to Claix, Crotelles, Paris, Metz, Strasbourg and eventually found refuge in Basle (January 1535).

King Francis I intensified the persecution of the reformers in France. Many were burned at the stake. Calvin regarded them as "holy martyrs" (Cottret, 2000:110). It became clear to Calvin that he could not stay in France anymore and that he would have to find refuge in Switzerland. Calvin remained passionately devoted to the church in France and continued to play a major role in the French Reformation.

After his conversion, Calvin became preoccupied with theology (Wendel, 1978:46-47). He was studying the Scriptures as well as Luther, Melancthon, Bucer and the church fathers. He started his correspondence with reformed leaders like Bullinger, Viret, Capiton, and Bucer. Even in his early letters, the tone is frank and imperious. He had, after all, moved in aristocratic and royal circles.

In Basle he found the time to work on the first edition of his *Christianae religionis institutio*, or in short, his *Institutes*. During March 1536 the first edition of the *Institutes* came off Thomas Platter's press. At this stage, Calvin was still influenced by Luther to the extent that Lang concludes that first edition of the *Institutes* could have been written by an *oberdeutscher Lutheraner* (Lang, 1913:106).

The *Institutes* was a response to the attacks made by Budè in his *Movement from Hellenism to Christianity* (Cottret, 2000:111). It was dedicated to the king. Calvin attempted to put the Reformation under

the protection of Francis I – which he probably knew personally due to his links with the French aristocracy and friendship with Cop. The introduction of the *Institutes* was a defence and legal plea where Calvin used all his legal knowledge and abilities to convince the king of the loyalty of the reformers.

Calvin used the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer and the Articles of Faith as basis for his *Institutes*. He also used material from Luther's small and large Catechisms. To this he added an exposition on the sacraments. Even though he used well-known material, Calvin presented a profoundly new theology, distinct from Luther's work.

Through the years Calvin expanded, restructured, reworked and reprinted the *Institutes*. It reflects Calvin's passion for clarity and structure. It gave direction to the reformed understanding of the gospel and the organisation of a reformed church. It had immediate importance for the church and it established Calvin as one of the foremost leaders of the Reformation.

The *Institutes* was never meant as a dogmatic treatise. His *subita conversio ad docelitam* made him an ardent student of the Holy Scriptures. Calvin was first and foremost an exegete of Scripture. The *Institutes* was meant to provide a broad framework for understanding the basic theological issues, in order that he could give all his attention to exegesis without continually having to revert to dogmatic discussions (Van 't Spijker, 1990b:143). As important as his *Institutes*, are his *Commentaries* to understand Calvin's theology.

After he finished the proof reading of the *Institutes*, he departed to Italy to visit Renée, Princess of France and daughter of Louis XII. She was married to the Duke of Ferrara. The purpose of his visit was to strengthen her in her faith and, in all probability, build up relations with the French royal family who were more positive towards the Reformation. The Duchess of Ferrara had several French refugees at her court, protecting them from persecution. After returning to Basle, Calvin continued his correspondence with her and became her spiritual director (Wendel, 1978:47).

7. Geneva (1536-1538)

Towards the middle of 1536, Calvin had to travel to France to finalise his father's estate. After making a quick visit to Paris, he departed for Strasbourg. Because of road blocks and danger to him

and his companions, Calvin made a detour and ended up in Geneva.

By the time Calvin arrived in Geneva (July 1536) the city had already secured its political independence from Savoy and embraced the Reformation (Innes, 1983:1). Fundamental social reform implemented in Geneva included new medical, educational, legal and political systems. Geneva was ready for ecclesiastical reformation. The person, who would eventually be responsible for restructuring the church in Geneva, was John Calvin.

When Calvin arrived, Geneva was an independent city state; a small republic with a population of about 12 000 people. Geneva's political, economical and religious importance would grow out of all proportion with its size, due to the work of Calvin.

Before the Reformation, the most important person in Geneva was the bishop (Innes, 1983:3). Over the centuries the bishops played a major role in the development of the city. When the Genevans opted for a more representative political system in the middle of the fifteenth century, the position of the bishop became gradually weaker. By the early sixteenth century the position of the Duke of Savoy also came under pressure, with the growing democratic sentiments. In 1526 rebellion broke out and had some success, with the assistance of Fribourg and Bern. In 1528 the representative of the Duke and in 1533 Bishop Pierre de la Baume was removed from the city (Dankbaar, 1957:42). When Calvin came to Geneva in 1536, the power of the House of Savoy and the Bishop was broken, but still threatening.

In Geneva, the struggle for political freedom and ecclesiastical reform went hand in hand. That would become a pattern in other countries like the Netherlands, as is clear in the documents of the *Grootte Vergadering* of 1651 by which a reformed state was proclaimed as well as in Scotland with the *Covenants* proclaimed by parliament (cf. Dreyer, 1995).

Since 1533, Guillaume Farel was preaching in different places in Geneva. He had been a student of Lefèvre. He was soon joined by his friends Pierre Viret and Antoine Froment. In 1534 Farel and Viret started disputes with the Roman priests who were still in the city. Their ideas gained approval from the Genevan citizenry and resulted in the storming of churches and destruction of some of the religious statues. On 8 August 1535 Farel preached the first evangelical sermon in the cathedral of Saint Pierre (Dankbaar, 1957:43).

When Farel heard that Calvin had arrived in Geneva, he immediately visited him and implored him to stay in Geneva and take the reformation of the church upon himself. Calvin resisted, explaining that he was an academic and student, not someone given to the practical side of things. He wanted to rest and study.

Farel, with his fiery personality, was consumed with anger. According to Calvin's report (in the Introduction of his *Commentary on the Psalms*) Farel grabbed Calvin by the shoulder and told him that God would curse him if he would only be interested in his own rest and his studies. Calvin shuddered with fear as if he had heard God's voice from heaven. As a result, he stayed in Geneva.

After a short visit to Basle to make some arrangements, Calvin returned to Geneva in August 1536 and immediately started lecturing on the Pauline epistles. He was still working under Farel and remained inconspicuous – to such an extent that the Council forgot to pay him his meagre salary.

Things would shortly change. In October Calvin travelled to Lausanne with his colleagues, to take part in a dispute with the Roman Catholic theologians of the city. Four days into the dispute, Calvin still did not say a single word and people started to express their doubts in his abilities. However, on the fifth day, he suddenly got up, started to quote verbatim passages from Chrysostom, Augustine and other church fathers off the top of his head. He spoke without notes on the Eucharist and other issues from Scripture. In amazement, several monks and priests stood up and declared that they were convinced by the clarity and erudition of his arguments and that they would lay down their monk's habits and become Christians (Dankbaar, 1957:47).

Calvin's name was now on everybody's lips. By the end of 1536, the Council appointed him as *Verbum Domini Minister*. No report exists of any ordination. His specific task was to formulate articles by which the church in Geneva could be organised. Typical of Calvin, the *Ordonnances ecclésiastique* was finished by December 1536 and on 16 January 1537 the Council adopted it as the basis of religious reform to be instituted in Geneva. For Calvin, it was important that the church in Geneva would not only adhere to the true preaching of the Word and ministering of sacraments, but would also be a living community under the Kingship of Jesus Christ (Wendel, 1978:51).

Shortly after that a summary of his *Institutes* appeared as a *Catechismus*. The third document that appeared within this short period

of time was a *Confessio de foy* to which all the citizens of Geneva would be bound. The Reformation in Geneva was founded on a church order, catechism and confession.

Although this was formally accepted by the Council, a lot of resistance emerged among the people. The resistance appeared when a copy of the *Confession* was distributed to all the households, with the implication that all the citizens of Geneva would have to make a personal commitment to the *Confession*. The idea of a public confession of faith was strange to the people. It became even more so, when Anabaptists appeared in the city and attacked the *Confession*.

Farel and Calvin implored the Council to implement the resolutions of the Council. On Sunday 29 July 1537, one year after Calvin arrived in Geneva, the secretary of the Council, Michel Roest, stood in the pulpit of the Saint Pierre and read the *Confession* as a legal document of the city. As an example to the citizens, the magistrates who were assembled in the church raised their hands as a sign of agreement. This was followed by the rest of the congregation in the church. This was an important moment for the Reformation in Geneva.

At the same time, it became more and more evident that many citizens of Geneva still maintained their Roman beliefs. Also, Farel had banished all festivals such as Christmas, New Year's Day, Ascension Day and others. Opponents of the Reformation used this to turn public opinion against them.

When the elections of February 1538 took place, Calvin and Farel had become unpopular. Their opponents won many seats in the Council as well as mayoral seats. By Easter 1538, the Council placed a prohibition on evangelical preaching, which Calvin and Farel ignored. Chaos resulted, with opponents brandishing swords and threatening to kill each other on the holy Sunday in church. The Council had an emergency meeting, and decided to ban Calvin and Farel. They had no choice but to accept this, and they left Geneva.

8. Strasbourg (1538-1541)

For almost five months, Calvin was moving around between the Swiss cities of Bern, Basle and Zürich. In September 1538, he received a call to Strasbourg, to minister the French refugees.

By 1538, Strasbourg had become one of the major centres of the protestant Reformation. Between the brilliant political leadership of

Jacques Sturm and original theological thinking of Capiton and Bucer, Strasbourg had become a major role-player and intellectual centre in Europe. Bucer was a brilliant organiser (Wendel, 1978:58), who had a great influence on Calvin.

According to his call, Calvin was responsible for the French refugees in Strasbourg. In September he started to preach in the church of St. Nicolas-des-Ondes. Calvin organised his parish according to the principles he thought appropriate and in line with the organisation of the Strasbourg churches (mainly the work of Bucer). This model of church organisation served as an example for the parishes established in France. Calvin started working on liturgies and formularies in French. This had a major influence on the liturgical ethos of reformed churches all over the world. He also included the singing of psalms in his liturgy. Many of the melodies were composed by the organist of Strasbourg, Matthias Greiter.

In his new parish, Calvin introduced principles of discipline (Plomp, 1969:157). It was easier to do in Strasbourg than in Geneva, because the small French congregation had much more freedom than the official, national Church of Strasbourg. From Calvin's letters to Farel it is clear that the application of discipline focused on Holy Communion. Members, who sinned publicly, were not allowed to take part in Communion. When the sinner repented, the censure would be lifted and no further action would be taken (Plomp, 1969:159).

Calvin took the matter of discipline a step further with the introduction of the *examen illud nostrum*, a process by which congregants had to be examined whether they are ready to take part in Holy Communion (cf. Plomp, 1969:160). Several of Calvin's friends were uneasy about this, but as he explained to Farel in a letter, it is impossible to abolish the Roman confession without replacing it with some sort of examination as to the faith of the individual.

In practice, before Holy Communion, elders had to examine those under their supervision and report any errant behaviour to the church Council. At the same time, the liturgy at Holy Communion required every believer to do "self-examination" in terms of their own faith and obedience to God. Children were not allowed to participate in the sacraments. Catechesis became compulsory and young people were only allowed to Holy Communion after an examination by the church council.

Calvin regarded the examination not only as a disciplinary measure, but also as pastoral guidance to the faithful, to assist them in maintaining their faith, obedience and service to God.

Calvin never regarded discipline as essential to the being (or *esse*) of the church, but essential to the well-being (or *bene-esse*) of the church (Plomp, 1969:124-126). For Calvin, the *notae ecclesiae* were to be found in the pure preaching of the Word and the ministering of the sacraments according to Christ's institution. With all the attention Calvin gave to discipline, it is remarkable that there is no evidence that anybody was ever excommunicated (Wendel, 1978:61).

Although Calvin never regarded the discipline as one of the *notae ecclesiae*, in his own lifetime some of his famous pupils and followers did: John Knox (1560 in the *Confessio Scotia*), Guido de Brès (1561 in the *Confessio Belgica*) as well as the *Confessio christianae fidei* of Theodor Beza, as edited by the Hungarian Reformed Church in 1562, includes discipline as the third mark of the true church (Plomp, 1969:126).

Certainly, the importance Calvin attributed to the discipline and the fact that he regarded the *preaching* of the Word and the *obedience* to the Word as inseparable, leads us to the conclusion that discipline as a third mark was an obvious development in later Calvinism.

The question is why Calvin developed his understanding of ecclesiastical discipline in Strasbourg. The obvious reason is the influence of Bucer. Bucer was a theologian of the church, who started his theology with a commentary on Ephesians and continually reflected on the church (Van 't Spijker, 1990a:128-130). Both Calvin and Bucer taught at the Gymnasium, and they had regular contact (Van 't Spijker, 1990b:151). In Bucer's understanding of the church, discipline and ecclesiastical offices were extremely important. For this reason, the second edition of the *Institutes* reflects some influence of Bucer and his understanding of discipline.

Bucer's interest in the discipline becomes clear in the specific attention he gave to the office of the elder in the government of the church as well as in exercising discipline. In comparison, he gave very little attention to the deacon's place in the congregation (Van 't Spijker, 1990a:134-135).

When Calvin was appointed lecturer in the Strasbourg Gymnasium, he started teaching biblical exegesis (Wendel, 1978:61). He first expounded the Gospel of John and then followed with the Pauline

epistles. These lectures formed the basis of his commentaries. At the same time he found time to completely revise the *Institutes* and have the second edition published. The Strasbourg edition appeared in August 1539. It no longer gave the feeling of a catechism, but of a manual on dogmatic theology.

In general, the Strasbourg period seems to have been highly beneficial to Calvin. It would be the best three years of his life (Cottret, 2000:134). Not only did he develop as pastor, preacher, author of note and lecturer, but he also made acquaintance with important leaders of the Reformation like Melanchthon, with whom he would remain friends until his death. He also took part in important disputes. He even received official citizenship from Strasbourg. He made many friends, with many people visiting him at his home. Many of them went from there to the mission field, inspired by Calvin.

Calvin started earning a steady income and at the age of 31, he got married. Farel made the journey to Strasbourg to bless the marriage between John Calvin and the widow Idelette de Bure, probably in August of 1540. They were married for nine years before she passed away.

Calvin expected to stay in Strasbourg for the rest of his life. He was quite content. That dream abruptly ended when he was recalled to Geneva.

9. Geneva (1541-1564)

After severe political turmoil and war, a peace agreement between Bern and Geneva was signed on 1 February 1540. New syndics were elected on the next day. By October, the return of Calvin was called for, to continue with the Reformation of Geneva. By January 1541, the secretary of the Council (Roset) was sent to Calvin to formally invite him to return to Geneva.

Why were the Genevans anxious to get Calvin back? Their pastors (Morand and Marcourt) had left Geneva, and they needed someone to take responsibility for ecclesiastical affairs (Cottret, 2000:151).

The other reason why Geneva wanted Calvin back, was Calvin's response to Jacopo Sadoleto (1477-1547, Renaissance Humanist and Cardinal in the Roman Catholic Church). Nothing better demonstrates the interest Calvin continued to take in the Genevan affairs (Cottret, 2000:152). Sadoleto wrote a letter to the Small Council in

Geneva in March 1539, urging them to return to their mother, the church. Calvin responded with his magnificent *Letter to Sadoleto* on 5 September 1539. With Calvin's response, the Genevans found somebody who would champion their city.

Calvin addressed Sadoleto with the utmost respect, as "one learned man to another" (quoted in Cottret, 2000:154). In his letter he explains to Sadoleto his understanding of his calling as pastor, the true understanding of Scripture and the marks of the true church – i.e. the pure preaching of the Word. He also refutes the fear Sadoleto created with his reference to eternal life and the doctrine *extra ecclesiam nulla salus est*. It is not the church which ensures eternal life, but Jesus Christ through the grace of God. The theological quality of Calvin's response, convinced the leadership in Geneva to recall Calvin.

Calvin could not leave Strasbourg immediately and only returned to Geneva on 13 September 1541. He left Strasbourg with regret, where the people accepted him and even made him a citizen.

Calvin found the Church in Geneva in disarray. He found the work which had to be done overpowering. From his correspondence it becomes clear that he had very little time to spend on personal matters (Dankbaar, 1957:83). Calvin had to focus his attention on several areas (for a complete chronological list of publications and most important events, see Dankbaar, 1957:215-217):

- He had pastoral responsibilities towards the Church in Geneva. He preached hundreds of sermons, many of which were printed (cf. Cottret, 2000:354-356). He also did pastoral visitations and trained the pastors of Geneva for their work. He reworked different formularies for use in the liturgy.
- He remained involved in reforming the institutions of the city. He served as advisor to the Council and on different occasions had to address himself to the Council.
- Calvin established an academy in Geneva on the model he found in Strasbourg. He lectured in the Academy and many future leaders of the reformed churches received their training in Geneva.
- Calvin reworked his *Institutes* and published his *Commentaries* on the books of the Bible. He also published treatises on many important theological issues such as the sacraments, liturgy, free will, the Council of Trent, election, et cetera.

- Calvin took great effort to maintain international ecumenical relations. He maintained discussions with the Melanchthon and the Lutherans. He wrote thousands of letters which were sent all over Europe. He diligently took part in the disputations. He continually assisted the French Church in its development, for instance by writing the concept of the French Confession which would later form the basis of the Belgic Confession.
- He had to attend to difficult and traumatic cases. The most important of these were against Ameaux (1546), Gruet (1547), Bolsec (1551), Servet (1553) and Berthelier (1553). The most harrowing of these turned out to be the case against Servet, who died at the stake convicted of heresy.

In 1542 Calvin and his wife lost a son at child birth. Idelette died in 1549. Even with his personal trauma, the political turmoil in the city which every now and again erupted and the excruciating legal processes against different people, Calvin continued working. He published an enormous body of theological works which contributed to stabilising and directing the Reformation.

10. Conclusion

Descriptions of contemporaries leave us with the impression that Calvin was a man of moral and intellectual strength, a dreamer and at the same time a man of decisive action. He had a will of iron and maintained rigorous working hours.

He was a writer, a craftsman in language (Cottret, 2000:xi), immersed in the process of reforming church, theology and society. It consumed his thoughts and his life.

Calvin lived an ascetic life. He avoided both splendour and poverty, and maintained a lifestyle of *mediocritas*. The clothes he wore were simple. He ate very little, because food often made him ill. Calvin suffered of severe migraine and nervousness. He continually suffered from illness which left his body weak.

On 6 February 1564, Calvin preached for the last time. In March, the Council announced public prayers for him – something that had never been done before (Wendel, 1978:106). On 27 April various processions of people visited him to receive his farewells. The next day he met with the pastors of Geneva and the following day with his old friend, Farel. On 27 May 1564 Calvin died. He was buried, according to his orders, in an anonymous grave with no ceremonies

and no prayers said by the pastors. In death, as in life, he wanted to give all the glory to God.

What Calvin left behind in Geneva seems modest: a church, a school and a town which were formed and governed according to biblical principles. In reality his work, but more importantly his ideals and understanding of Scripture, within a few years had spread to countries like England, Scotland, the Netherlands, Hungary, France, Germany and Switzerland. All over Europe churches and societies appeared, building on the foundations Calvin had laid.

Few people can claim that they changed the course of history. Calvin's life and work had a major influence on modern society and the church as we know it.

List of references

- BALKE, W. 1977. *Calvijn en de doperse radicalen*. Amsterdam: Ton Bolland.
- COTTRET, B. 2000. *Calvin: a biography*. Trans. by M.W. McDonald. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- DANKBAAR, W.F. 1957. *Calvijn – zijn weg en werk*. Nijkerk: Callenbach.
- DREYER, W.A. 1995. *Kerk, volk en owerheid – 'n Hervormde perspektief*. Pretoria: Universiteit van Pretoria. (Ongepubliseerde D.D.-proefskrif.)
- FEBVRE, L. 1968. *Crayon de Jean Calvin: au cœur religieux du xvi siècle*. Paris: SEVPEN.
- GANOCZY, A. 2004. *Calvin's life*. Ed. by D. McKim. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin, 3-24.)
- INNES, W.C. 1983. *Social concern in Calvin's Geneva*. Allison Park: Pickwick.
- LANG, A. 1913. *Zwingli und Calvin*. Leipzig: Bielefeld.
- MEETER, H.H. 1957. *Het Calvinisme: zijn theologische en staatkundige grondgedachten*. Vert. door P. Prins. Kampen: Kok.
- PLOMP, J. 1969. *De kerklijke tucht bij Calvijn*. Kampen: Kok.
- TAVARD, G.H. 2000. *The starting point of Calvin's theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- VAN 'T SPIJKER, W. 1990a. *De kerk bij Bucer: het rijk van Christus*. (*In Van 't Spijker, W. De kerk: wezen, weg en werk van de kerk naar reformatorische opvatting*. Kampen: De Groot Goudriaan. p. 126-142.)
- VAN 'T SPIJKER, W. 1990b. *De kerk bij Calvijn: theocratie*. (*In Van 't Spijker, W. De kerk. wezen, weg en werk van de kerk naar reformatorische opvatting*. Kampen: De Groot Goudriaan. p. 143-162.)
- WENDEL, F. 1978. *Calvin – the origins and development of his religious thought*. Trans. by P. Mairet. London: Collins.

Key concepts:

Calvin, biography
Calvin, cities where studied and worked
Calvin, people who influenced

Kernbegrippe:

Calvyn, biografie

Calvyn, mense wat beïnvloed het

Calvyn, stede waar gestudeer en gewerk het