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Teaching Notes

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An Introduction to the Life and Thought of John Calvin



I. How God Shaped John Calvin

A. The Fledgling Reformation

1. Martin Luther was 25 years old when Calvin was born
2. Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the Wittenberg Castle door when Calvin was 8 years old
3. The fundamental principles of the Reformation: the “Five Solas”
 - a. Sola Scriptura: “based upon the Scripture alone”
 - b. Sola fide: “by faith alone”
 - c. Sola gratia:... “by grace alone”
 - d. Solus Christus: “in Christ alone”
 - e. Soli Deo Gloria: “to the glory of God alone”
4. Luther made his famous stand on the Word of God at the Diet of Worms in 1521, when Calvin was 12 years old
5. Luther’s towering example, courageous stands, and preaching/teaching/writing ministry forged a Reformation in Germany that stood as a beacon for other reformers

B. Calvin’s Birth and Education

1. Born on July 10, 1509, in Noyon, France (sixty miles northeast of Paris)
2. Parents: Gerard and Jeanne Cauvin
 - a. Father a financial administrator for the Catholic bishop of the Noyon diocese
 - b. Raised his son (John) to be a priest in the Roman Catholic church
 - c. When Calvin was 11, Gerard used his influence to get John a chaplaincy position at the Noyon Cathedral
3. At age 14, Calvin was sent to the University of Paris to study theology in formal preparation of being a priest
 - a. The University of Paris was at that time steeped in Medieval Catholic theology and untouched by the “Lutheran heresy”
 - b. Calvin would have learned little of Luther’s doctrines initially

4. When Calvin was 19, his father ran afoul of the Catholic authorities and commanded his son to stop studying theology and study law instead; which Calvin did for three years in Orleans and Bourges
5. During these years, Calvin mastered Greek and studied medieval philosophy through the works of Duns Scotus, William Occam, and Gabriel Biel
6. 1531: When he was 21, Calvin's father died and Calvin felt free to pursue his true love, the classics... Calvin was a true "humanist", loving the classical literature of the ancient world
7. 1532: Published his first book, a *Commentary on Seneca*

C. Calvin's Conversion

1. Calvin is a very private individual and says very little about himself in his sermons or writings... so we know very little about the details of his conversion
2. BUT by November of 1533, it is clear something dramatic had happened in his life
3. Luther's thoughts had by this time been widely disseminated and Calvin must have come in contact with Reformation ideals
4. In the winter of 1533, His friend, Nicholas Cop, preached a sermon at the opening of winter term at the University of Paris; the language of the sermon gives evidence that it is possible that Calvin may have helped write the message
5. The Parliament under King Francis I called Cop to account for his Lutheran-like doctrines; Cop fled the city, as did Calvin, as a general persecution broke out from King Francis against "that cursed sect of Lutherans"
6. So, by this time, it was clear that Calvin had crossed the line and become a Christian
7. How? This is the closest testimony we have:

Seven years later, he describes how he had been struggling to live out the Catholic faith with zeal:

. . .when, lo, a very different form of doctrine started up, not one which led us away from the Christian profession, but one which brought it back to its fountain . . . to its original purity. Offended by the novelty, I lent an unwilling ear, and at first, I confess, strenuously and passionately resisted . . . to confess that I had all my life long been in ignorance and error. . . .

I at length perceived, as if light had broken in upon me, [a very key phrase, in view of what we will see] in what a sty of error I had wallowed, and how much pollution and impurity I had thereby contracted. Being exceedingly alarmed at the misery into which I had fallen . . . as in duty bound, [I] made it my first business to betake myself to thy way [O God], condemning my past life, not without groans and tears.

God, by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame. . . . Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with [an] intense desire to make progress"

Piper on the Work of the Spirit in Calvin's Conversion and Doctrine:

How this happened is extremely important, and we need to see Calvin himself describe it in the *Institutes*, especially Book I, Chapters VII and VIII. Here he wrestles with how we can come to a saving knowledge of God through the Scriptures. His answer is the famous phrase, "the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit." For example, he says, "Scripture will ultimately suffice for a saving knowledge of God only when its certainty is founded upon the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit" (I, viii, 13). So two things came together for Calvin to give him a "saving knowledge of God" – Scripture and the "inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit." Neither alone suffices to save.

But how does this actually work? What does the Spirit do? The answer is not that the Spirit gives us added revelation to what is in Scripture but that he awakens us, as from the dead, to see and taste the divine reality of God in Scripture, which authenticates it as God's own word. He says, " Our Heavenly Father, revealing his majesty [in Scripture], lifts reverence for Scripture beyond the realm of controversy" (I, viii, 13). There is the key for Calvin: the witness of God to Scripture is the immediate, unassailable, life-giving revelation to the mind of the majesty of God manifest in the Scriptures themselves.

Over and over again in his description of what happens in coming to faith you see his references to the majesty of God revealed in Scripture, and vindicating Scripture. So already in the dynamics of his conversion the central passion of his life is being ignited.

We are almost at the bottom of this experience now. If we go just a bit deeper we will see more clearly why this conversion resulted in such an "invincible constancy" in Calvin's lifelong allegiance to the majesty of God and the truth of God's Word. Here are the words that will take us deeper.

Therefore illumined by [the Spirit's] power, we believe neither by our own [note this!] nor by anyone else's judgment that Scripture is from God; but above human judgment we affirm with utter certainty (just as if we were gazing upon the majesty of God himself) that it has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men. (I, vii, 5)

“The internal witness of the Spirit in John Calvin is a work of enlightenment whereby, through the medium of verbal testimony, the blind eyes of the spirit are opened, and divine realities come to be recognized and embraced for what they are. This recognition Calvin says, is as immediate and unanalyzable as the perceiving of a color, or a taste, by physical sense – an event about which no more can be said than that when appropriate stimuli were present it happened, and when it happened we know it had happened” J.I. Packer

D. A Reformer in the Making

1. Calvin fled Paris in the middle of the night, lowering himself out of a window by means of sheets and escaping to safety in the guise of a vinedresser with a hoe on his shoulder
2. Calvin then suffered imprisonment for a short time, then fled to the estate of Louis du Tillet... a wealthy sympathizer of the Reformation cause
3. In this “quiet nest”, Calvin had the opportunity to spend five months in du Tillet’s extensive theological library
4. He pored over the Bible and the works of Augustine and other church fathers
5. God used Calvin’s astonishing genius, hard work, and this quiet retreat time to shape him into a theologian in a relatively short amount of time
6. Shortly thereafter, Calvin settled in Basel, Switzerland and began writing the great work of his life, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1534-1536); this work, in five ever-expanding editions, would become the defining masterpiece of Reformation systematic theology, a legacy for centuries to come; the work was dedicated to King Francis I to help explain the faith of the Protestants he was persecuting:

But lo! while I lay hidden at Basel, and known only to few people, many faithful and holy persons were burnt alive in France. . . . It appeared to me, that unless I opposed [the perpetrators] to the utmost of my ability, my silence could not be vindicated from the charge of cowardice and treachery. This was the consideration which induced me to publish my *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. . . . It was published with no other design than that men might know what was the faith held by those whom I saw basely and wickedly defamed.

7. Piper’s comment:

So when you hold the *Institutes* of John Calvin in your hand, remember that theology, for John Calvin, was forged in the furnace of burning flesh, and that Calvin could not sit idly by without some effort to vindicate the faithful and the God for whom they suffered. I think we would, perhaps, do our theology better today if more were at stake in what we said

E. Strange Providence Brings Him to Geneva

1. After a temporary amnesty was granted to French exiles, Calvin returned briefly to France where he collected his belongings and his brother Antoine and sister Marie; he then departed France for the rest of his life, intending to settle in the southern German city of Strasbourg
2. While en route to Strasbourg, Calvin was redirected because a war had broken out between Charles V (the Holy Roman Emperor) and Francis I of France resulting in troop movements that blocked the road to Strasbourg; Calvin was forced to detour through Geneva, Switzerland

John Piper: In retrospect one has to marvel at the providence of God that he should so arrange armies to position his pastors where he would!

3. Calvin intended only to stay there one night...
4. His goal in life was to be a quiet scholar nestled in some secluded place writing theological works... God had other plans!!
5. William Farel, the fiery and zealous leader of the Reformation in Geneva, heard that Calvin was staying there for one night and went to deal with him quite boldly:

Farel, who burned with an extraordinary zeal to advance the gospel, immediately learned that my heart was set upon devoting myself to private studies, for which I wished to keep myself free from other pursuits, and finding that he gained nothing by entreaties, he proceeded to utter an imprecation that God would curse my retirement, and the tranquility of the studies which I sought, if I should withdraw and refuse to give assistance, when the necessity was so urgent. By this imprecation I was so stricken with terror, that I desisted from the journey which I had undertaken

6. Basically, Farel said, "May God curse your life of quiet study while we go in need of Reformation!"
7. Calvin settled in Geneva and began his pastoral ministry there

F. Banished to Strasbourg

1. Calvin and Farel began immediately working on improving church life in Geneva
2. Drew up a confession of faith and an oath for the 10,000 citizens of Geneva to bring about clear reform in the city
3. BUT they soon met strong opposition

4. Key issue: Calvin and Farel desired to keep the Lord's Table pure from open sinners by excommunication
5. This issue eventually led to their expulsion and legal banishment from the city in 1538

Piper: "Calvin breathed a sigh of relief and thought God was relieving him from the crush of pastoral duties so he could be about his studies. But when Martin Bucer found out about Calvin's availability, he did the same thing to get him to Strasbourg that Farel had done to get him to Geneva.

Calvin wrote, "that most excellent servant of Christ, Martin Bucer, employing a similar kind of remonstrance and protestation as that to which Farel had recourse, before, drew me back to a new station. Alarmed by the example of Jonah which he set before me, I still continued in the work of teaching."

6. They went to Strasbourg where for three years (1538-1541) Calvin pastored a Protestant congregation of approximately 500 French-speaking refugees
7. Calvin also taught in the local theological institute there, wrote his first commentary (Romans) and completed the second edition of his *Institutes*
8. He also met a widow named Idelette de Bure Stordeur, a member of his congregation; her former husband John Stordeur and she had been listed as Anabaptists and with him she'd had a son and a daughter; Calvin married her in 1540 when he was 31 years old
 - a. This marriage was no romantic match, but Calvin cherished her deeply
 - b. They suffered together a miscarriage, the loss of a daughter at birth, and the loss of a two-week old son

Of that loss, Calvin wrote: "The Lord has certainly inflicted a bitter wound in the death of our infant son. But He is Himself a Father and knows what is good for His children."

- c. Idelette died of tuberculosis in 1549 at the age of 40
- d. Calvin wrote to his friend Pierre Viret a few days after her death:

"I have been bereaved of the best companion of my life, of one who, had it been so ordered, would not only have been the willing sharer of my indigence, but even of my death. During her life she was the faithful helper of my ministry.

From her I never experienced the slightest hindrance. She was never troublesome to me throughout the entire course of her illness; she was more anxious about her children than about herself. As I feared these private cares might annoy her to no purpose, I took occasion, on the third day before her death to mention that I would not fail in discharging my duty to her children. Taking up the matter immediately, she said, 'I have already committed them to God.' When I said that

that was not to prevent me from caring for them, she replied, 'I know you will not neglect what you know has been committed to God.' Lately, also, when a certain woman insisted that she should talk with me regarding these matters, I, for the first time, heard her give the following brief answer: 'Assuredly the principal thing is that they live a pious and holy life. My husband is not to be urged to instruct them in religious knowledge and in the fear of God. If they be pious, I am sure he will gladly be a father to them; but if not, they do not deserve that I should ask for aught in their behalf.' This nobleness of mind will weigh more with me than a hundred recommendations.

e. Calvin never remarried

G. Returning to Geneva

1. Meanwhile... the City of Geneva was in an increasingly bitter struggle
2. Amazingly, they came to realize that Calvin had been right after all, and wanted him back as pastor
3. May 1, 1541, the City Council rescinded the ban on Calvin and even held him up as a man of God.
4. BUT Calvin didn't want to go back... would YOU?!!

Earlier in October he said to Farel that though he preferred not to go, "yet because I know that I am not my own master, I offer my heart as a true sacrifice to the Lord". This became Calvin's motto and the picture on his emblem included a hand holding out a heart to God with the inscription, *prompte et sincere* ("promptly and sincerely").

5. On September 13, 1541, Calvin returned and settled in Geneva and would never move again; the reformation of Geneva would now become the focus of the rest of his life
6. As we already noted, the day Calvin returned, he picked up right where he'd left off in sequential exposition of the word; expository preaching was to be the centerpiece of his program for Reformation... day after day, week after week, year after year
7. This ministry would make the lake city of Geneva the brightest light for the Gospel in all the world

H. A Growing Influence Throughout Europe

1. During this tumultuous time in Europe, there was religious refugees all over Europe; many ended up settling in Geneva
2. Two groups in particular were significant: French Protestants known as Huguenots; and "Marian Exiles"—English Protestants fleeing "Bloody Mary", the Roman Catholic daughter of King Henry VIII

3. There were also other refugees pouring into Geneva—from Germany and Italy in particular
4. In a short time, Geneva's population doubled to over 20,000
5. One of these exiles was John Knox, the future reformer of Scotland
6. He made a very famous statement about the City of Geneva years after Calvin had been working diligently in reform:

[John Knox, in a letter to a friend] Geneva is "the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the Apostles. In other places I confess Christ to be truly preached; but manners and religion to be so seriously reformed, I have not yet seen in any other place besides."

7. Calvin also carried on an amazing and profound correspondence (letters) with important figures—reformers, Kings/Queens, Dukes, etc. always seeking to advance the cause of Christ

I. Astonishing Perseverance Through Trials

1. Unremitting labor

Wolfgang Musculus called him, "a bow always strung."

Colladon says "he was for many years with a single meal a day and never [took] anything between two meals . . ." His reasons were that the weakness of his stomach and his migraines could only be controlled, he had found by experiment, by continual abstinence. But on the other hand, he was apparently careless of his health and worked night and day with scarcely a break. You can hear the drivenness in this letter to Falais in 1546: "Apart from the sermons and the lectures, there is a month gone by in which I have scarce done anything, in such wise I am almost ashamed to live thus useless". A mere 20 sermons and 12 lectures in that month!

2. Terrible sickness

To get a clearer picture of his iron constancy, add to this work schedule the "continuous ill health" he endured. He wrote to his physicians in 1564 when he was 53 years old, and described his colic and spitting of blood and ague and gout and the "excruciating sufferings" of his hemorrhoids. But worst of all seemed to be the kidney stones that had to pass unrelieved by any sedative.

3. Bitter persecution from enemies in Geneva... the Libertines

On top of all this pressure and physical suffering were the threats to his own life. "He was not unfamiliar with the sound of mobs outside his house [in Geneva] threatening to throw him in the river and firing their muskets". On his deathbed Calvin said to the pastors gathered, "I have lived here amid continual bickerings. I have been from derision saluted of an evening before my door with forty or fifty shots of an arquebus [a large gun]".

One of the most persistent thorns in Calvin's side were the Libertines in Geneva. But, here too, his perseverance was triumphant in a remarkable way. In every city in Europe men kept mistresses. When Calvin began his ministry in Geneva in 1536 at the age of 27, there was a law that said a man could keep only one mistress (see note 37). Even after Calvin had been preaching as pastor in St. Peter's church for over fifteen years, the immorality was a plague, even in the church. The Libertines boasted in their license. For them the "communion of saints" meant the common possession of goods, houses, *bodies and wives*. So they practiced adultery and indulged in sexual promiscuity in the name of Christian freedom. And at the same time they claimed the right to sit at the Lord's table (see note 38).

The crisis of the communion came to a head in 1553. A well-to-do Libertine named Berthelier was forbidden by the Consistory of the church to eat the Lord's Supper, but appealed the decision to the Council of the City, which overturned the ruling. This created a crisis for Calvin who would not think of yielding to the state the rights of excommunication, nor of admitting a Libertine to the Lord's table.

The issue, as always, was the glory of Christ. He wrote to Viret, "I . . . took an oath that I had resolved rather to meet death than profane so shamefully the Holy Supper of the Lord. . . . My ministry is abandoned if I suffer the authority of the Consistory to be trampled upon, and extend the Supper of Christ to open scoffers. . . . I should rather die a hundred times than subject Christ to such foul mockery" (see note 39).

The Lord's day of testing arrived. The Libertines were present to eat the Lord's supper. It was a critical moment for the Reformed faith in Geneva.

The sermon had been preached, the prayers had been offered, and Calvin descended from the pulpit to take his place beside the elements at the communion table. The bread and wine were duly consecrated by him, and he was now ready to distribute them to the communicants. Then on a sudden a rush was begun by the troublers in Israel in the direction of the communion table. . . . Calvin flung his arms around the sacramental vessels as if to protect them from sacrilege, while his voice rang through the building:

"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." "After this," says, Beza, Calvin's first biographer, "the sacred ordinance was celebrated with a profound silence, and under solemn awe in all present, as if the Deity Himself had been visible among them" (see note 40).

4. Threat of military conquest by Roman Catholic armies, resulting in his inevitable arrest, torture, and execution as a heretic

In a letter to Melancthon in 1558, he wrote that war was imminent in the region and that enemy troops could reach Geneva within half an hour. "Whence you may conclude," he said, "that we have not only exile to fear, but that all the most cruel varieties of death are impending over us, for in the cause of religion they will set no bounds to their barbarity"

J. Faithful to the End

1. John Calvin's Last Will and Testament: April 25, 1564

In the name of the Lord – Amen. I, John Calvin, minister of the word of God in the church of Geneva, finding myself so much oppressed and afflicted with various diseases, that I think the Lord God has determined speedily to remove me out of this world, have ordered to be made and written, my testament, and declaration of my last will, in form and manner following: First, I give thanks to God, that taking compassion on me whom he had created and placed in this world, he not only delivered me by his power out of the deep darkness of idolatry, into which I was plunged, that he might bring me into the light of his gospel, and make me a partaker of the doctrine of salvation, of which I was most unworthy; that with the same goodness and mercy he has graciously and kindly borne with my multiplied transgressions and sins, for which I deserved to be rejected and cut off by him; and has also exercised towards me such great compassion and clemency, that he has condescended to use my labor in preaching and publishing the truth of his gospel. **I also testify and declare, that it is my full intention to pass the remainder of my life in the same faith and religion, which he has delivered to me by his gospel; having no other defense or refuge of salvation than his gratuitous adoption, on which alone my safety depends. I also embrace with my whole heart the mercy which he exercises towards me for the sake of Jesus Christ, atoning for my crimes by the merits of his death and passion, that in this way satisfaction may be made for all my transgressions and offenses, and the remembrance of them blotted out.** I further testify and declare that, as a suppliant, I humbly implore of him to grant me to be so washed and purified by the blood of that sovereign Redeemer, sited for the sins of the human race, that I may be permitted to stand before his tribunal in the image of the Redeemer himself. I likewise declare, that according to the measure of grace and mercy which God has vouchsafed me, I have diligently made it my endeavor, both in my sermons, writings, and commentaries, purely and uncorruptly to preach his word, and faithfully to interpret his sacred Scriptures. I testify and declare that in all the controversies and disputes, which I have conducted with the enemies of the gospel, I have made use of no craftiness, nor corrupt and sophistical arts, but have been engaged in defending the truth with candor and sincerity.

But, alas! my study, and my zeal, if they deserve the name, have been so remiss and languid, that I confess innumerable things have been wanting in me to discharge the duties of my office in all excellent manner; and unless the infinite bounty of God had been present, all my study would have been vain and transient. **I also acknowledge that unless the same goodness had accompanied me, the endowments of mind bestowed upon me by God, must have made me more and more chargeable with guilt and inactivity before his tribunal. And on these grounds I witness and declare, that I hope for no other refuge of salvation than this alone – that since God is a Father of mercy, he will show himself a Father to me, who confess myself a miserable sinner. ...**

...

John Calvin.

2. Calvin died on May 27, 1564 in the arms of Theodore Beza, his successor

Beza's assessment of Calvin:

“Having been a spectator of his conduct for sixteen years, I have given a faithful account both of his life and of his death, and I can now declare, that in him all men may see a most beautiful example of Christian character, an example which it is as easy to slander as it is difficult to imitate.”

II. Personal Testimony: What John Calvin Has Meant to Me

- A. Five Points of Calvinism
- B. Forest and the Trees
- C. “Calvin is a cataract...”
- D. Radical God-Centeredness