

John Calvin

For a New Reformation

Edited by Derek W. H. Thomas
and John W. Tweeddale

Afterword by R. C. Sproul

John Calvin: For a New Reformation

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Preface

More than five hundred years after his birth, John Calvin (1509–1564) remains an important figure for understanding the modern world. A remarkable scholar, organizer, preacher, and churchman, Calvin emerged as a leading second-generation Reformer in the sixteenth century. While many outstanding theologians shaped the Protestant Reformation, Calvin’s labors in Geneva in particular set the stage for reformation around the world. Since his death, admirers and despisers alike have reflected on his legacy. His protégé, Theodore Beza, captured this dynamic in the conclusion of his biography on Calvin: “In [Calvin] all men may see a most beautiful example of the Christian character, an example which it is as easy to slander as it is difficult to imitate.”¹ To put the matter less starkly, whether as an object of criticism or as a model to follow, Calvin is a man worthy of consideration.

In this book, leading Reformed pastors and scholars reflect on the significance of the ministry and teaching of John Calvin for the church today. Part 1 focuses on “the life and work of John Calvin” and gives specific attention to his pastoral ministry. Chapters 1 and 2 sketch the contours of Calvin’s biography. Michael Haykin begins by surveying the formative years of Calvin’s life prior to his ministry in Geneva, concentrating on his education, conversion, and earliest publication and on the events that led to his joining the ranks of the Reformation. Steve Nichols then picks up the story with Calvin’s call to Geneva and shows how he and his colleagues struggled for the cause of orthodoxy in seeking to reform the church according to the teaching of Scripture.

1. Theodore Beza, “Life of John Calvin,” trans. Henry Beveridge, in *Tracts and Letters*, 1:c.

The next five chapters provide case studies from Calvin's life and ministry. In chapter 3, David Calhoun gives a portrait of Calvin as a pastor. Relying on an extensive cross section of sources, he shows that Calvin's primary calling in life was to serve as a "minister of the word of God in the Church of Geneva." Building on this theme, Doug Kelly makes the case in chapter 4 that Calvin viewed the Reformation primarily as a pastoral-care movement. Although we learn much from Calvin's writings, Kelly contends that we can never really know what kind of pastor he was until we study the "session minutes" of the Consistory in Geneva. Bob Godfrey reminds us in chapter 5 that the work of reforming and pastoring the church was not the work of one man or city. Godfrey demonstrates how friendship was an important way for Calvin to extend the reach of the Reformation. In chapter 6, Steve Lawson contends that Calvin was primarily a preacher. He surveys the expository method of Calvin's preaching by identifying the central theological principles that undergirded his preaching while also noting several distinctives of his pulpit ministry. Rounding out this section, Derek Thomas explains in chapter 7 why Calvin wrote the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He traces its development throughout Calvin's ministry, provides an overview of key themes, and gives suggestions for first-time readers of Calvin's classic work. Taken together, the chapters in part 1 provide a biographical mosaic of Calvin's life as a theologian and pastor, and chapter 7 serves as a bridge to the focus of part 2.

Part 2 considers "the teaching of John Calvin." Using the *Institutes* as a rough guide, this section incorporates analysis of Calvin's commentaries, sermons, and other writings to introduce readers to his views on theology and the Christian life.

Scott Oliphint begins this discussion by tackling the organizational rationale of Calvin's doctrine of Scripture, focusing especially on the role of the Holy Spirit. In doing so, he draws attention to the importance of Calvin's view of Scripture for the development of a Reformed apologetic. In chapter 9, John Fesko surveys the broad contours of Calvin's doctrine of creation and humanity and explores the relationship of this doctrine to related topics, such as government, natural law, science, art, and music. In particular, he explains how Calvin

viewed creation as the theater of God's glory. Related to this point, Burk Parsons summarizes Calvin's teaching on the providence of God in chapter 10 by examining its place in the *Institutes* and its relationship to the doctrines of predestination and creation. He reminds us that for Calvin, the doctrine of providence leads us to worship. The following chapter, by Guy Waters, takes up Calvin's teaching on the law in relation to creation, sin, and redemptive history. He notes how the Reformer's sensitivity to the unfolding of Scripture affected his understanding of biblical law and its application to the contemporary church.

Chapter 12 covers the person and work of Christ in Calvin's thought. Paul Wells highlights the theme of mediation to reflect on Calvin's development of related topics, such as reconciliation, union with Christ, and the promise of new creation. In chapter 13, Joel Beeke addresses the topic of the Holy Spirit in Calvin's theology. He summarizes Calvin's thinking on the Spirit in relation to the Scriptures, Christ, the order of salvation, the assurance and application of redemption, and spiritual gifts. Next, Ted Donnelly introduces readers to Calvin's well-known *Golden Booklet*. He shows that for Calvin, the Christian life entails cross bearing and self-denial. Then, in chapter 15, Derek Thomas takes us deeper into Calvin's understanding of Christian living by exploring his sermons on the book of Job. Thomas connects the incomprehensibility of God, a critical theme in Calvin's theology, with Christian endurance through adversity. In chapter 16, Paul Helm outlines Calvin's view of predestination. After considering how this doctrine intersects with themes such as providence and union with Christ, Helm demonstrates that Calvin never intended for his teaching on predestination to promote speculation but rather for it to encourage us to be sure of our relation to Christ, who is the mirror of election.

The next two chapters cover aspects of Calvin's ecclesiology. In chapter 17, John Tweeddale explains that Calvin describes the church as mother in order to refine arguments of church fathers on the role of the church, promote the Reformation doctrine of salvation, develop a theological framework for the ministry in Geneva, and urge fellow Christians not to forsake the means of grace in the visible church. Then Keith Mathison situates Calvin's views on the sacraments in their

historical context, probes possible influences on his doctrine, considers the relationship of the sacraments to union with Christ, and sketches the broad contours of his teaching on baptism and the Lord's Supper.

The last two chapters draw on Calvin's eschatology. In chapter 19, Robert Peterson explores the topic of God's preservation of his people in Calvin's writings. He considers how Calvin's view differed from Roman Catholic teaching, what biblical texts Calvin relied on to develop his thought, and how Calvin applied this doctrine. Finally, Cornelis Venema provides a comprehensive treatment of Calvin's eschatology. By examining topics such as the intermediate state, the signs of the times, the second advent of Christ, the Antichrist, the millennium, the resurrection, and the consummation of all things, Venema shows that Calvin's teaching on the last things pervades his writings. While Calvin's theology extends beyond what is covered in this book, the chapters in part 2 give readers an overview of the scope of his biblical and theological writing.

As can be seen in this overview, the goal of this book is to encourage you to read and study Calvin. Our aim is to provide an accessible one-volume introduction to his life and teaching. We hope that these chapters will serve both as a primer for those who have never read Calvin and as a resource for students of Reformed theology. While each chapter reflects exceptional scholarship, this book is not intended for the academy but for the church. We have in mind pastors, elders, Sunday school teachers, Bible college students, seminarians, and serious lay readers who are interested in learning about Calvin and his theology. For those wanting to know more about Calvin than what is covered in the pages of this volume, we have included a bibliographic essay in the hopes of helping readers navigate the world of Calvin and his many interpreters.

We would like to express our profound thanks to the contributors of this volume, and the editors and staff at Crossway, for their hard work and uncommon patience as we sought to bring this book to completion. "Thank you" does not begin to articulate how much we appreciate each person who supported this project.

By introducing a new generation of readers to the writings of John Calvin, we want to urge Christians to continue the work of

reformation today. One way we can help further the reformation is through theological education. Toward this end, all royalties from this book will be given to African Bible University in Uganda, led by Paul Chinchon as chancellor and, until recently, O. Palmer Robertson as vice chancellor, who retired in 2019 after serving in that role since 2004 but who has been teaching in Africa since 1992. Their vision for training African leaders through a biblically based education represents the kind of work that is needed to carry out reformation in our own day. For a new reformation, we need new reformers. This is why we are especially grateful to include in this volume an afterword by R. C. Sproul. It is a fitting tribute to his ministry to have one of his last published writings serve as the final word in a book on Calvin. Few have done more in the past fifty years to rekindle the light of Reformed theology than Dr. Sproul. His closing paragraph is not only a stirring conclusion to the volume but also a powerful reminder that we stand in need of a new reformation.

Derek W. H. Thomas and John W. Tweeddale

Abbreviations

| | |
|----------|--|
| ACPQ | <i>American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly</i> |
| AcTS | <i>Acta Theologica Supplementum</i> |
| ARG | <i>Archiv für Reformationgeschichte</i> |
| BLR | <i>Bibliothèque littéraire de la Renaissance</i> |
| BRT | <i>Baptist Review of Theology</i> |
| BTM | <i>Banner of Truth Magazine</i> |
| CH | <i>Church History</i> |
| ChrT | <i>Christianity Today</i> |
| CJJC | <i>Collection Jésus et Jésus-Christ</i> |
| CNTC | <i>Calvin's New Testament Commentaries. Edited by David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance. 12 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959–1972.</i> |
| CO | <i>Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia. Edited by Guilielmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, and Eduardus Reuss. 59 vols. Corpus Reformatorum 29–88. Brunswick and Berlin: Schwetschke, 1863–1900.</i> |
| Comm. | <i>Calvin's Commentaries. Edited by John King et al. Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844–1856.</i> |
| ConcJ | <i>Concordia Journal</i> |
| CourtSRT | <i>Courtenay Studies in Reformation Theology</i> |
| CR | <i>Corpus Reformatorum. Edited by C. G. Bretschneider and H. E. Bindseil. Halle and Brunswick: Schwetschke, 1834–1860.</i> |
| CSRT | <i>Columbia Series in Reformed Theology</i> |

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| CSSP | <i>Calvin Studies Society Papers</i> |
| CTJ | <i>Calvin Theological Journal</i> |
| CTQ | <i>Concordia Theological Quarterly</i> |
| CWS | <i>Classics of Western Spirituality</i> |
| EHP | <i>European History in Perspective</i> |
| ETR | <i>Etudes théologiques et religieuses</i> |
| EvQ | <i>Evangelical Quarterly</i> |
| FC | <i>Fathers of the Church</i> |
| FJ | <i>Founders Journal</i> |
| FKDG | <i>Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte</i> |
| HQ | <i>Hartford Quarterly</i> |
| IJST | <i>International Journal of Systematic Theology</i> |
| <i>Institutes</i> | <i>Calvin, John. Institutes of the Christian Religion (1559 ed.). Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. 2 vols. Library of Christian Classics 20–21. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960.</i> |
| <i>Institutes (1536)</i> | <i>Calvin, John. Institutes of the Christian Religion (1536 ed.). Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. H. H. Meeter Center for Calvin Studies. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975.</i> |
| JChSt | <i>Journal of Church and State</i> |
| JEH | <i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i> |
| JETS | <i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i> |
| JHI | <i>Journal of the History of Ideas</i> |
| LCC | <i>Library of Christian Classics</i> |
| LCL | <i>Loeb Classical Library</i> |
| LEH | <i>Library of Ecclesiastical History</i> |
| <i>Letters</i> | <i>Letters of John Calvin. Edited by Jules Bonnet. 4 vols. Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1858.</i> |
| LQ | <i>Lutheran Quarterly</i> |
| MQR | <i>Mennonite Quarterly Review</i> |
| OiC | <i>One in Christ</i> |

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| OER | <i>Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation. Edited by Hans. J. Hillerbrand. 4 vols. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.</i> |
| OSHT | <i>Oxford Studies in Historical Theology</i> |
| <i>Pneuma</i> | <i>Pneuma: Journal for the Society of Pentecostal Studies</i> |
| PRCPE | <i>Proceedings of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh</i> |
| <i>Presb</i> | <i>Presbyterion</i> |
| PRJ | <i>Puritan Reformed Journal</i> |
| PRR | <i>Presbyterian and Reformed Review</i> |
| PRRD | <i>Muller, Richard A. Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725. 4 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003.</i> |
| PrTMS | <i>Princeton Theological Monograph Series</i> |
| R&R | <i>Reformation and Revival</i> |
| RefR | <i>Reformed Review</i> |
| <i>Registres</i> | <i>Registres du Consistoire de Genève au temps de Calvin. Edited by Thomas Austin Lambert, Isabella M. Watt, Robert M. Kingdon, and Jeffrey R. Watt. Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2004.</i> |
| RHT | <i>Reformed Historical Theology</i> |
| RRR | <i>Reformation and Renaissance Review</i> |
| RSHT | <i>Rutherford Studies in Historical Theology</i> |
| RTJ | <i>Reformed Theological Journal</i> |
| RTS | <i>Renaissance Text Series</i> |
| SBET | <i>Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology</i> |
| SCES | <i>Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies</i> |
| SCJ | <i>Sixteenth Century Journal</i> |
| SDog | <i>Studies in Dogmatics</i> |
| SEMRR | <i>Studies in Early Modern Religious Reforms</i> |
| SHCT | <i>Studies in the History of Christian Thought</i> |
| SHT | <i>Studies in Historical Theology</i> |

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| SJT | <i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i> |
| SMRT | <i>Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought</i> |
| STJ | <i>Stulos Theological Journal</i> |
| TaiJT | <i>Taiwan Journal of Theology</i> |
| <i>Theological Treatises</i> | <i>Calvin, John. Calvin: Theological Treatises. Translated by J. K. S. Reid. Library of Christian Classics 22. London: SCM, 1954.</i> |
| ThH | <i>Theologie Historique</i> |
| THR | <i>Travaux d'humanisme et Renaissance</i> |
| ThTo | <i>Theology Today</i> |
| <i>Tracts and Letters</i> | <i>Calvin, John. Tracts and Letters. Edited by Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet. Translated by Henry Beveridge, Jules Bonnet, David Constable, and Marcus Robert Gilchrist. 7 vols. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2009.</i> |
| <i>Tracts and Treatises</i> | <i>Calvin, John. Tracts and Treatises. Translated by Henry Beveridge. Edited by Thomas F. Torrance. 3 vols. 1849. Reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1958.</i> |
| TSRPRT | <i>Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought</i> |
| UBCLR | <i>University of British Columbia Law Review</i> |
| WCF | <i>Westminster Confession of Faith. In Westminster Confession of Faith. Glasgow, Scotland: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1997.</i> |
| WLC | <i>Westminster Larger Catechism. In Westminster Confession of Faith. Glasgow, Scotland: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1997.</i> |
| WSC | <i>Westminster Shorter Catechism. In Westminster Confession of Faith. Glasgow, Scotland: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1997.</i> |
| WTJ | <i>Westminster Theological Journal</i> |
| ZKG | <i>Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte</i> |
| <i>Zwing</i> | <i>Zwingliana</i> |
| ZZ | <i>Zeugen und Zeugnisse</i> |

PART 1

The LIFE *and* WORK
of JOHN CALVIN

The Young Calvin

Michael A. G. Haykin

My ministry . . . ought to be dearer to me than my own life.
—John Calvin, preface to his *Commentary on 2 Thessalonians*¹

“I Am Not Eager to Speak about Myself”²

At one point in John Calvin’s earliest publication after his conversion, *Psychopannychia*, the 1534 treatise against the Anabaptist doctrine of soul sleep, the French theologian reflected on what life is like without a saving knowledge of the living God. While his comments are not autobiographical in form, they can, as Heiko Oberman has pointed out, be interpreted as a commentary on his own life prior to his conversion:

Do you want to know what the death of the soul is? It is to be without God, to be deserted by God, to be abandoned to yourself.

1. This chapter is adapted from Michael A. G. Haykin, “The Young Calvin: Preparation for a Life of Ministry,” in Joel R. Beeke, David W. Hall, and Michael A. G. Haykin, *Theology Made Practical: New Studies on John Calvin and His Legacy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), chap. 1. Used by permission of Reformation Heritage Books. For help with obtaining a couple of the sources used in the writing of this chapter, I am indebted to two dear friends, Dr. Monte Shanks and Dr. Ian Clary.

2. *De me non libenter loquor*. Calvin makes this remark in his *Reply to Sadoleto*, in *CO*, 5:389.

. . . Since there is no light outside of God who lights our darkness, when he withdraws his light then our soul is certainly blind and buried in darkness; our soul is mute because it cannot confess, and call out to embrace God. The soul is deaf because it cannot hear his voice. The soul is crippled since it does not have a hold on . . . God.³

It is not at all surprising that Calvin would have veiled his experience in this way, for of all the Reformers, he was the most reluctant to discuss details of his life in works destined for public consumption. As he told Cardinal Jacopo Sadoletto (1477–1547), “I am not eager to speak about myself.”⁴ He had, as Oberman aptly puts it, a “dislike of self-disclosure.”⁵ From his hand, there are really only two major sources for details about his life before his conversion, namely, sections from his *Reply to Sadoletto* (1539), which need to be used with caution since they are not explicitly autobiographical,⁶ and those from the preface to his *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (1557).⁷ Occasional remarks here and there in other passages in the works of Calvin, some of which are noted below, help fill in some of the gaps of his early life,

3. John Calvin, “Subita Conversio: The Conversion of John Calvin,” trans. Heiko A. Oberman, in *Reformiertes Erbe: Festschrift für Gottfried W. Locher zu seinem 80. Geburtstag*, ed. Heiko A. Oberman, Ernst Saxer, Alfred Schindler, and Heinzpeter Stucki, Zwingliana 19, no. 2 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1993), 2:295n4. For a translation of *Psychopannychia*, see *Tracts and Treatises*, 3:413–90. For Beveridge’s rendering of the passage that Oberman has translated, see *Tracts and Treatises*, 3:454–5. For the Latin behind this translation, see CO, 5:204–5. For a study of *Psychopannychia*, see George H. Tavard, *The Starting Point of Calvin’s Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000). Also see Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography*, trans. M. Wallace McDonald (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 77–82.

4. Calvin, *Reply to Sadoletto*, in CO, 5:389.

5. Heiko A. Oberman, *Initia Calvini: The Matrix of Calvin’s Reformation* (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, 1991), 7. This article can also be found in Wilhelm H. Neuser, ed., *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor: Calvin as Confessor of Holy Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 113–54. See also the comments by Bruce Gordon in his definitive biography, *Calvin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), viii–x, 1, 4.

6. Thus Richard Stauffer, “Les discours à la première personnes dans les sermons de Calvin,” in *Regards contemporains sur Jean Calvin: Actes du Colloque Calvin, Strasbourg 1964* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965), 206.

7. For the relevant portion of the *Reply to Sadoletto*, I have used the translation by J. K. S. Reid in Elsie Anne McKee, ed. and trans., *John Calvin: Writings of Pastoral Piety*, CWS (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2001), 41–9. Further references to the *Reply to Sadoletto* are cited as *Reply to Sadoletto* with the page number in McKee’s volume. For the Latin, see CO, 5:385–416. For more detail on this work, see John C. Olin, ed., *A Reformation Debate: John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoletto* (1966; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976).

For the preface to Calvin’s *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, I have used the translation of Joseph Haroutunian with Louise Pettibone Smith, *Calvin: Commentaries*, LCC 23 (Philadelphia: Westminster, n.d.), 51–57. For an older translation, see James Anderson’s translation in *Comm.*, 4:xxxv–xlix. My quotations from and references to Haroutunian and Smith’s translation are henceforth cited as “preface to *Commentary on the Psalms*” along with the relevant page number. For both the Latin and French versions of the preface, see CO, 31:13–36.

as does the biography of the French Reformer by his friend and ministerial colleague Theodore Beza (1519–1605). Beza wrote two lives of his friend and mentor. The first saw the light of day three months after Calvin's death in 1564.⁸ The following year, one of Beza's fellow pastors, Nicolas Colladon, published a considerably enlarged life of Calvin that built on the work of Beza but incorporated new material.⁹ Ten years later, after Colladon had left Geneva in 1571 for Lausanne, Beza issued a revision of his own biography but one that also made liberal use of the material in Colladon's work.¹⁰

“Intended . . . for Theology”

John Calvin¹¹ was born on July 10, 1509, in Noyon, Picardy, in north-eastern France, to Gérard Cauvin (d. 1531) and his first wife, Jeanne, née le Franc (d. 1515), both of whom Beza described as “widely respected and in comfortable circumstances.”¹² From a town clerk, Calvin's father had risen to occupy the position of a financial administrator in the cathedral of Noyon. A quarrel with the cathedral authorities, however, led to his excommunication, in which state he died in 1531. Calvin's mother, whom Calvin does not appear to have ever actually mentioned in print,¹³ died when John was a young boy of six. It may well be the case, as some historians have argued, that his mother was steeped in the medieval Roman Catholic devotion to relics, for in Calvin's biting treatise on relics, he recalls kissing a reputed fragment of the hand of Anna, the mother of Mary, at the Church of Ourscamp, not far from Noyon, where his mother may have taken him.¹⁴ John also had three brothers—an older brother,

8. CO, 21:21–50.

9. CO, 21:51–118.

10. CO, 21:119–72. It is this third edition of the life of Calvin that has been used in this chapter. For an accessible translation of this version, see Theodore Beza, *The Life of John Calvin*, trans. Henry Beveridge, in *BTM*, 227/228, August/September 1982, 1–68. This translation is essentially that of *Tracts and Treatises*, 1:xvii–c. Quotations are from the translation as found in *Banner of Truth Magazine* and are cited as Beza, *Life*, along with the page number.

11. The French form of Calvin's name was Jean Cauvin. It became Calvin via the Latinized form that Calvin used for his surname, Calvinus.

12. Beza, *Life*, 11. For more details on the background of Calvin's family, see Cottret, *Calvin*, 8–12.

13. Allan Menzies, “The Career and Personality of Calvin,” in Menzies, *A Study of Calvin and Other Papers* (London: Macmillan, 1918), 129.

14. Cottret, *Calvin*, 10. Though cf. Menzies, “Career and Personality,” 129. For the recollection, see Calvin, *An Admonition, showing the Advantages which Christendom might derive from an Inventory of Relics*, in *Tracts and Treatises*, 1:329.

Charles (d. 1537), and two younger brothers, Antoine (d. 1573) and François, the latter dying as a child—and two half sisters, daughters of Gérard by his second wife.¹⁵

Given Gérard's close ties to the church, it is not surprising that he initially desired John to study for the priesthood. In fact, Gérard also directed John's older brother, Charles, into the priesthood, though the latter left it in 1536.¹⁶ "My father," Calvin recalled in the late 1550s, "intended me as a young boy for theology."¹⁷ So it was in 1523¹⁸ that young Calvin set off for Paris to study for a master of arts degree that would eventually lead to theological studies and the priesthood. Due to his father's connection with the church, Calvin was able to finance his studies from various church benefices he had been given in childhood and his early teens—one of the abuses of the medieval church. In Paris he initially studied for three months at the Collège de la Marche, where he improved his skill in Latin under the superb tutelage of Mathurin Cordier (1479–1564). Calvin later recognized his debt to Cordier when in 1550 he dedicated his *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians* to his old teacher:

It was under your guidance that I entered on a course of studies, and made progress at least to the extent of being some benefit to the Church of God. When my father sent me as a boy to Paris I had done only the rudiments of Latin. For a short time, however, you were an instructor sent to me by God to teach me the true method of learning, so that I might afterwards be a little more proficient. . . . It was my desire to testify to posterity that, if they derive any profit from my writings, they should know that to some extent you are responsible for them.¹⁹

After this brief time of what might be viewed as preparatory studies at the Collège de la Marche, Calvin went on to the formidable Collège

15. Richard Stauffer, "Calvin," in *International Calvinism, 1541–1715*, ed. Menna Prestwich (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 16; "Notice littéraire," in *CO*, 21:14; Gordon, *Calvin*, 4.

16. Cottret, *Calvin*, 11.

17. Calvin, preface to *Commentary on the Psalms*, 51.

18. For the date, see Ford Lewis Battles, "Calvin's Humanistic Education," in Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin*, ed. Robert Benedetto (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 48; Cottret, *Calvin*, 11.

19. *CNTC*, 8:331. On Cordier, see Battles, "Calvin's Humanistic Education," 52–53; Cottret, *Calvin*, 12–16; Gordon, *Calvin*, 5–6.

de Montaigu. This institution, founded in 1314 and revived in the late fifteenth century after a period of decline, was well known for both its theological conservatism and severe discipline. Overall, the Collège de Montaigu was marked by a “narrow-minded and hair-splitting orthodoxy” that resulted in violent opposition to and persecution of nascent French Protestantism.²⁰ The mode of life inculcated within the college walls then is well seen in a description of the college by the Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus (1466/1469–1536), who, reflecting on a stay at the college in 1495, recalled the place as “filthy, bleak, inhospitable, reeking with the foulest smells, [and] clotted with dirt.” As he went on, “I carried nothing away from there except a body poisoned with infected humors!”²¹ It is noteworthy that another key figure of this era, namely, the Counter-Reformation leader Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), as equally renowned as Calvin for his disciplined life, also studied at this college, though just after the Frenchman.²²

Much has been written about the philosophical and theological influences that shaped Calvin during his time at Montaigu,²³ but the truth of the matter is that there are no documents from Calvin during this period that can accurately pinpoint the exact nature of these influences. Was Stoicism one of them, as Alexandre Ganoczy has suggested?²⁴ Calvin’s first book *was* a commentary on a treatise by the Stoic philosopher Seneca (ca. 4 BC–AD 65), and in the sixteenth century, Seneca was viewed as a Stoic with a distinct sympathy for Christianity. Or was the Augustinian theology of Gregory of Rimini (ca. 1300–1358) a major influence, as Alister McGrath has posited?²⁵ To put things in perspective,

20. Alexandre Ganoczy, “Calvin’s Life,” trans. David L. Foxgrover and James Schmitt, in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 4.

21. Cited by Hans J. Hillerbrand, *The Division of Christendom: Christianity in the Sixteenth Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 296; Cottret, *Calvin*, 17. On the college, see also Battles, “Calvin’s Humanistic Education,” 48–49; Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 27–31; Cottret, *Calvin*, 16–20.

22. Battles, “Calvin’s Humanistic Education,” 49. Cf. the recent remark by Hillerbrand about Calvin: “His temperament seems to suggest kinship with none other than Ignatius of Loyola. The second generation of the Reformation called for men of this type, brilliant, determined, cool.” Hillerbrand, *Division of Christendom*, 314.

23. For an overview of these studies and a response to this method of inquiry, see Oberman, *Initia Calvini*, 10–19. See also Gordon, *Calvin*, 6–8.

24. Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, trans. David Foxgrover and Wade Provo (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), passim; T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 28. On Calvin’s Seneca commentary, see below. See also the response of Oberman, *Initia Calvini*, 13–14, to this suggestion of the influence of Stoicism over the young Calvin.

25. McGrath, *Life of John Calvin*, 37–47, passim.

Oberman has noted that Calvin never mentioned Gregory, and even McGrath concedes that in the end, “we do not know with any certainty precisely what Calvin studied while at Montaigu; we do not know under whom he studied (with the obvious exception of Cordier), or what lectures he attended; we do not even know what books he read.”²⁶ Such uncertainty about the ideas and books shaping Calvin during a formative period in his life does not mean Calvin is not indebted intellectually to elements of the medieval world, but it does mean that claims about such influences need to be made with great circumspection.²⁷

French historian Richard Stauffer has also noted that Calvin, during his time in Paris, must have been aware to some degree of the presence of evangelicals in France. Evangelicals were martyred in 1525—for instance, Jean Châtelain, an Augustinian monk, was burned in January at Metz, and a Franciscan who had embraced Lutheran ideas, very possibly one Pierre de Sébiville, suffered and died by burning at Grenoble. And evangelicals suffered martyrdom in 1526 as well—Jacques Pauvan was killed in Paris itself at the Place-de-Grève in August of that year.²⁸ And in 1524, the King of France’s sister, Marguerite d’Angoulême (1492–1549), the most powerful woman in France after the queen mother, published a book in which she took a decided stand for the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith alone.²⁹ But there is no evidence that at this point Calvin had even a modicum of interest in joining the cause of reform.

“Called Back . . . to Learn Law”

After obtaining his arts degree in 1528, Calvin was ready to begin his formal training in theology, but it was not to be. Although his father

26. McGrath, *Life of John Calvin*, 36.

27. For a succinct summary of the theologians of the Patristic and medieval era to whom the mature Calvin was indebted, see Stauffer, “Calvin,” 29. As Stauffer notes, “While Calvin was nurtured on the Bible, his reading of it was enriched by his astonishing knowledge of the great authors of the Christian tradition.” For more detail, see Ford Lewis Battles, “The Sources of Calvin’s Seneca Commentary,” in Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin*, 65–89; Anthony N. S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999); Jean-François Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book*, trans. Karin Maag, SCES 72 (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2005), 156–66.

28. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Lefèvre: Pioneer of Ecclesiastical Renewal in France* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 147–50.

29. Stauffer, “Calvin,” 16. Similarly, John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (1954; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 109. On Marguerite d’Angoulême, see George Saintsbury, “Marguerite de Valois,” *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed. (New York: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1910), 17:706.

had all along intended his son to become a priest like his older brother, suddenly he changed his mind and instructed John to go into law and move to Orléans to study at what was then the preeminent French university for legal studies. Calvin later described this sudden change in his life thus:

When he [i.e., Calvin's father] saw that the science of law made those who cultivate it wealthy, he was led to change his mind by the hope of material gain for me. So it happened that I was called back from the study of philosophy to learn law.³⁰

Calvin studied at Orléans from 1528 to 1529 and then transferred to Bourges for two more years of legal studies, from 1529 to 1531. The central reason for this move was the coming of the famous Italian jurist Andrea Alciati (1492–1550) to the town of Bourges.³¹ The legal knowledge obtained by this period of concentrated study gave Calvin an abiding interest in the nature of law and justice, the tools to create institutions in Geneva that would serve the advance of the gospel, and a mastery of how to read texts in light of their literary and linguistic contexts.³² What is also especially important about this shift into law was the fact that one of Calvin's tutors at both Orléans and Bourges was a German scholar by the name of Melchior Wolmar (1497–1560), who was committed to the evangelical perspective of Martin Luther (1483–1546).³³ It was at Bourges that Wolmar began teaching Greek to Calvin, which would open up for the future Reformer the riches of the New Testament.³⁴ It is noteworthy that a number of Calvin's contemporaries regarded the study of Greek with deep misgivings. As one writer put it, "We must avoid [Greek] at all costs, for this language gives birth to heresies. Especially beware of the New Testament in Greek; it is a book full of thorns

30. Calvin, preface to *Commentary on the Psalms*, 51–52. See also Beza, *Life*, 11.

31. For details about these two law schools and the teachers at them under whom Calvin studied, see Battles, "Calvin's Humanistic Education," 49–50, 55–58; Cottret, *Calvin*, 20–24.

32. G. R. Potter and Mark Greengrass, *John Calvin* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1983), 4; McGrath, *Life of John Calvin*, 59; Oberman, *Initia Calvini*, 38; Randall C. Zachman, *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian: The Shape of His Writings and Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 16–17; Gordon, *Calvin*, 18–22.

33. On Wolmar, see Battles, "Calvin's Humanistic Education," 57–58; Helmut Feld, "Volmar (Rufus), Melchior," *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon*, ed. Friedrich Wilhelm Bautz and Traugott Bautz (Herzberg: Verlag Traugott Bautz, 1997), 12:1588–91.

34. See also Menzies, "Career and Personality," 136–37.

and prickles!”³⁵ In 1530 the faculty of theology in Paris went as far as to condemn the idea that one cannot understand the Scriptures without a knowledge of the original languages in which they were given.³⁶ Calvin, on the other hand, would come to consider the study of Greek essential for anyone wishing to be a herald of the gospel.³⁷ Simon Grynaeus (1493–1541), the winsome professor of Greek at the University of Basel, would help him personally deepen his own grasp of Greek when Calvin resided in Basel from 1535 to 1536.³⁸

To what extent Wolmar may have shared his faith with Calvin is not known.³⁹ When Calvin noted his debt to Wolmar for the rudiments of Greek in the dedicatory preface of his *Commentary on 2 Corinthians*, he made no mention of theological matters.⁴⁰ In fact, there is clear evidence to show that at this time Calvin was still seriously committed to the Roman church.⁴¹ There was a deeply conservative streak in Calvin’s character. As he admitted in his reply to Sadoletto, “It was with the greatest difficulty I was induced to confess that I had all my life long been in ignorance and error.”⁴²

After his law studies, Calvin returned to Paris, where he learned that his father was seriously ill. He hurried to Noyon to be with him during his final days. His father had run afoul of Roman Catholic authorities two years earlier, in November 1528, when he refused to give the local bishop the accounting books for the cathedral. It is not clear whether he was guilty of a misdemeanor or whether his pride was piqued at the questioning of his integrity.⁴³ He was excommunicated and thus died

35. Cited by Parker, *John Calvin*, 21.

36. McGrath, *Life of John Calvin*, 62.

37. See John Currid, *Calvin and the Biblical Languages* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2006).

38. On Grynaeus, see Alexander Gordon, “Grynaeus, Simon,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed., 11:642. On Calvin’s relationship with him, see also Cornelis Augustijn, Christoph Burger, and Frans P. van Stam, “Calvin in the Light of the Early Letters,” in *Calvinus Praeceptor Ecclesiae: Papers of the International Congress on Calvin Research*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis, THR 388 (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2004), 145–47.

39. For a brief discussion of Wolmar’s possible influence on Calvin’s religious development, see Danièle Fischer, “Nouvelles réflexions sur la conversion de Calvin,” *ETR* 58 (1983): 216–17.

40. “The first time my father sent me to study civil law, it was at your instigation and under your tuition that I also took up the study of Greek, of which you were at that time a most distinguished teacher. . . . My indebtedness to you for this is still great for you gave me a good grounding in the rudiments of the language and that was of great help to me later on.” CNTC, 10:1.

41. Cottret, *Calvin*, 24; Ganoczy, “Calvin’s Life,” 5.

42. Calvin, *Reply to Sadoletto*, 48.

43. Hillerbrand, *Division of Christendom*, 296.

unreconciled to the Roman church.⁴⁴ Whether this had an effect on Calvin's thinking about the Roman church and its discipline is unknown.

The year following his father's death saw the appearance of Calvin's first publication, his *Commentary on Seneca's "De Clementia."*⁴⁵ This publication, funded out of his own pocket,⁴⁶ is a clear indication that Calvin's intellectual roots are to be found in Renaissance humanism, whose watchcry, in its desire to rejuvenate certain aspects of medieval civilization, was *ad fontes*, "back to the sources," particularly those of Western culture in the ancient Greco-Roman world.⁴⁷ Allan Menzies notes that Calvin's knowledge of the classics is abundantly evident in this first venture into the world of print culture: Calvin "shows himself acquainted with the whole of Greek and Latin classical literature, citing 155 Latin authors and 22 Greek, and citing them with understanding."⁴⁸ In the providence of God, this Renaissance passion for seeking wisdom from the past would provide invaluable direction to humanist scholars who, like Calvin, came to accept evangelical convictions: the source of church renewal could be found only at the fountainhead of the Christian faith, the Holy Scriptures. As Calvin later noted, the teaching of the Reformers went back to Christianity's "source and, as it were, clearing away the dregs, restored it to its original purity."⁴⁹

Calvin's footsteps between the publication of his humanist treatise in April 1532 and his moving back to Paris in the late autumn of 1533 are not easy to trace. He did go back to Orléans to receive his law degree. And at some point in 1533, the greatest of all changes took place in his life when, in his words, the "Lord shone upon [him] with the brightness of [his] Spirit,"⁵⁰ and he joined the ranks of the Reformers.

"A Taste and Knowledge of True Piety"

The date of Calvin's conversion is among the most disputed topics of Reformation scholarship. When did it take place? T. H. L. Parker has

44. Cottret, *Calvin*, 24.

45. *CO*, 5:1–162. For a discussion of this work, see Gordon, *Calvin*, 22–29.

46. Calvin to Francis Daniel, May 23, 1532, in *Letters*, 1:31. See also Calvin to Francis Daniel, 1532, in *Letters*, 1:32.

47. See Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 125–30.

48. Menzies, "Career and Personality," 137.

49. Calvin, *Reply to Sadoletto*, 48.

50. Calvin, *Reply to Sadoletto*, 44.

argued for 1529–1530, a dating that a number of other scholars have followed, among them J. I. Packer.⁵¹ Traditionally, though, the date that has been given is 1533, a date that still rightly commands strong scholarly support.⁵² Although we do not possess irrefutable data to determine the time of Calvin’s conversion, Calvin himself discussed the nature of his conversion in two places—his *Reply to Sadoleto* and his 1557 preface to his *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*—and of these, the latter is more important.⁵³ In his preface, after mentioning his father’s desire that he become a lawyer, Calvin states,

God, by the secret leading of his providence, turned my course another way [rather than the study of law]. First, when I was too firmly addicted to the superstitions of the Papacy to be drawn easily out of such a deep mire, by a sudden conversion God subdued and made teachable [*domta et rangea à docilité*] my mind, already more rigid than suited my age. Having therefore received a taste and knowledge of true piety, I burned with such a desire to carry my study further, that although I did not drop other subjects, I had no zeal for them. In less than a year, all who were looking for a purer doctrine began to come to learn from me, although I was a novice and a beginner.⁵⁴

Six aspects of this concisely worded theological reflection on God’s saving work in Calvin’s life beg comment.

First, Calvin was indeed recounting the historical circumstances by which God brought him from a state of spiritual death to a living faith in God. Alexandre Ganoczy, though, has denied that this text should be primarily read as a historical narrative of Calvin’s conversion. Rather, it must be viewed as a theological reflection from the vantage point of Calvin’s mature theological thought. For example, Calvin’s assertion

51. Parker, *John Calvin*, 22, 162–65; J. I. Packer, “John Calvin and Reformed Europe,” in *Great Leaders of the Christian Church*, ed. John D. Woodbridge (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 206, 210.

52. Menzies, “Career and Personality,” 143; François Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (1963; repr., Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1987), 37–45; Stauffer, “Calvin,” 18; Oberman, trans., “Subita Conversio,” 283, 283n17; Gordon, *Calvin*, 33.

53. Parker, *John Calvin*, 162.

54. Calvin, preface to *Commentary on the Psalms*, 52, altered. For the original Latin and French, see CO, 31:21–22. This translation is from the French version primarily, though in what follows I have also referred to the Latin version.

that he underwent a “sudden conversion” is a statement made for theological reasons to emphasize conversion as a divine miracle. Ganoczy believes that the primary sources for Calvin’s life from the 1530s bear this out and reveal that Calvin’s movement away from the Roman church was that of “a gradual spiritual development.”⁵⁵ Undoubtedly, Calvin’s account of his conversion is not free from theological interpretation, and as Ganoczy has argued, Calvin here included details of his conversion to help explain his call to be a minister of the word in Geneva. But none of this lessens the historicity of his conversion account.⁵⁶ Moreover, it is telling that Calvin embedded the story of his conversion within a larger block of text that details historical events and recounts how it was that Calvin became involved in the Genevan Reformation.

Second, Calvin remembered that, prior to his conversion, he was “too firmly addicted to the superstitions of the Papacy to be drawn easily out of such a deep mire.” Calvin did not specify which superstitions he had in mind, but by comparing them to a bog, he was indicating that liberation from these distortions of Christian truth and “the matrix of late medieval religion” could have taken place only through an outside agency.⁵⁷ Calvin made no mention of the human instruments through whom he may have heard the gospel: possibly Wolmar; or his cousin Pierre Olivétan (1506–1538), who translated the New Testament into French and whom Beza wrongly saw as the key figure through whom Calvin became “acquainted with the reformed faith”;⁵⁸ or the early Protestant martyr Étienne de la Forge, with whom Calvin lodged while in Paris.⁵⁹ Nor did he make any mention of human writings that he must have read, works by Martin

55. Ganoczy, *Young Calvin*, 252–66; Ganoczy, “Calvin’s Life,” 9–10. Similarly, James A. de Jong, “‘An Anatomy of All Parts of the Soul’: Insights into Calvin’s Spirituality from His Psalms Commentary,” in Neuser, *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor*, 3–4n7; Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book*, 9–10; McGrath, *Intellectual Origins*, 55–56.

56. See Fischer, “Nouvelles réflexions,” 203–7; Cottret, *Calvin*, 68–70.

57. The quoted phrase is from McGrath, *Life of John Calvin*, 70. For a summary of what Reformed authors like Calvin considered to be distortions of Christianity, see Graeme Murdock, *Beyond Calvin: The Intellectual, Political and Cultural World of Europe’s Reformed Churches, c.1540–1620*, EHP (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 8–15.

58. Beza, *Life*, 11–12. On Beza’s error in this regard, see Menzies, “Career and Personality,” 140–41.

59. Étienne de la Forge was a Waldensian merchant from Piedmont. See McNeill, *History and Character of Calvinism*, 109; O. R. Johnston, “Calvin the Man,” in *Able Ministers of the New Testament: Papers Read at the Puritan and Reformed Studies Conference, December 1964* ([London]: Puritan and Reformed Studies Conference, 1964), 22; James Leo Garrett Jr., introduction to *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Garrett (Nashville: Broadman, 1980), 24.

Luther, for instance.⁶⁰ But this is typical of Calvin and the Reformed faith: an emphasis on the absolute sovereignty of God in salvation. Calvin could thus state in his treatise *The Eternal Election of God* (1562), “It is not within our power to convert ourselves from our evil life, unless God changes us and cleanses us by his Holy Spirit.”⁶¹ Or as he put it in his *Reply to Sadoleto*, referring to the way he came to realize that salvation was by grace alone, “You, O Lord, shone upon me with the brightness of Your Spirit.”⁶²

Third, the Latin behind the word “sudden,” in the phrase “sudden conversion,” is *subita*, which in Latin can mean “unexpected” or “unpremeditated,” and this is probably the better translation. In other words, Calvin’s conversion was not ultimately the result of any wish or intention of Calvin.⁶³ McGrath puts it well when he writes that this word “resonates with overtones of the unexpected, the unpredictable, the uncontrollable.”⁶⁴ One of Calvin’s natural characteristics was a resistance to change, as he indicated in this text. But God broke into his life and, as this passage intimates, brought to pass a completely unexpected upheaval that caused him to change his views of God and salvation and led him to embrace evangelical doctrine as the truth. What led him to hesitate and refuse to listen to evangelical authors, as he made clear in his *Reply to Sadoleto*, was “reverence for the church”:

But when once I opened my ears and allowed myself to be taught, I perceived that this fear of derogating from the majesty of the church was groundless. For they reminded me how great the difference is between schism from the church, and studying to correct the faults by which the church herself is contaminated. They spoke nobly of the church and showed the greatest desire to cultivate unity.⁶⁵

60. For Luther’s influence on Calvin, see McNeill, *History and Character of Calvinism*, 109–10; Ganoczy, *Young Calvin*, 137–45. Zachman believes that Calvin’s “sudden conversion to teachableness” was “most likely through the writings of Martin Luther.” *John Calvin as Teacher*, 17–19, quotations on 19.

61. CO, 8:113. See also the similar statements in Calvin’s *Commentary on Jeremiah*. CO, 38:466, 671; cf. Ganoczy, *Young Calvin*, 251.

62. Calvin, *Reply to Sadoleto*, 44. See McNeill, *History and Character of Calvinism*, 118.

63. Parker, *John Calvin*, 163–64.

64. McGrath, *Life of John Calvin*, 72. The fact that McGrath favors Ganoczy’s nonhistorical interpretation of this passage in the preface to Calvin’s *Commentary on the Psalms* does not affect the point he is making about this term.

65. Calvin, preface to *Commentary on the Psalms*, 48.

Fourth, conversion for Calvin meant the formation of a teachable heart. As he asserted, “God subdued and made teachable [*domta et rangea à docilité*] my mind, already more rigid than suited my age.” The verb “subdued” was associated with the taming of wild animals, specifically horses that needed bridle and bit to be ridden and directed.⁶⁶ It is a frequent metaphor in Calvin’s writings, an indication of the importance Calvin placed on teachableness and submissiveness to the will of God as being central to the nature of biblical Christianity, especially among those who aspire to be ministers of the word. In Calvin’s words, taken from his comments on 1 Corinthians 14:31, “No one will ever be a good teacher, if he does not show that he himself is teachable, and always ready to learn.”⁶⁷

Fifth, as François Wendel has noted, conversion meant for Calvin “a total change of orientation” in his studies. Having had “a taste and knowledge of true piety,” Calvin says, “I burned with such a desire to carry my study further, that although I did not drop other subjects, I had no zeal for them.” He had lost his passion for the sort of studies that had culminated in his *Commentary on Seneca’s “De Clementia.”* Rather, it was the study of Scripture and evangelical theology that henceforth gripped his heart.⁶⁸ Allan Menzies captures the depth of the change when he states that Calvin now “no longer writes as a Humanist, but as one who is guided by the Word, and who feels the cry newly arising from the blood of the martyrs being spilt around him.”⁶⁹

Finally, the language that Calvin used here to describe the affective impact of his conversion is noteworthy. There is a strong tradition of thought about Calvin that depicts him as cold and unemotional. But this account of his conversion—especially his statement about burning with desire (*enflammé*) to grow in his knowledge of God—indicates

66. J. I. Packer, “Calvin: A Servant of the Word,” in *Able Ministers of the New Testament*, 42; Parker, *John Calvin*, 163; Oberman, *Initia Calvini*, 7–8n3; Oberman, trans., “Subita Conversio,” 290.

67. Cited by Randall C. Zachman, “The Conciliating Theology of John Calvin: Dialogue among Friends,” in *Conciliation and Confession: The Struggle for Unity in the Age of Reform, 1415–1648*, ed. Howard P. Louthan and Randall C. Zachman (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 94–95.

68. Wendel, *Calvin*, 44–45. See also Harro Höpfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 19. And among the books he definitely read were some by Luther: see Calvin’s *Second Defence of the Pious and Orthodox Faith concerning the Sacraments, in answer to The Calumnies of Joachim Westphal*, in *Tracts and Treatises*, 2:253.

69. Menzies, “Career and Personality,” 145.

the exact opposite and that he had an unusually ardent nature. In fact, as James A. de Jong has noted in a study of Calvin's piety as found in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, Calvin's comments on this portion of Holy Scripture help dispel "the stubborn perception of Calvin as cold, rationalistic, vindictive, and aloof." Instead, one finds "an experiential believer of considerable depth and warmth."⁷⁰ Calvin's conversion consisted not in mere enlightenment; it entailed nothing less than an "unreserved, wholehearted commitment to the living God."⁷¹ This ardent commitment finds pictorial expression in Calvin's crest or seal, which pictures a heart on an open, outstretched hand, with a motto underneath that reads *Cor meum tibi offero Domine prompte et sincere* ("My heart I give you, Lord, eagerly and earnestly").⁷²

"All Who Were Looking for a Purer Doctrine"

Calvin's giftedness as a teacher was soon being recognized. In fact, according to Calvin's own words, within a year of his conversion, those who were seeking "a purer doctrine" than that of Rome were seeking him out.⁷³ Calvin was not a complete novice to teaching. For instance, he had already been involved in giving a series of lectures on Seneca in the late summer or early fall of 1533.⁷⁴ He now found himself part of a movement in France that had been seeking reform within Roman Catholicism since the early 1520s. At the heart of this reform movement was the biblical scholar Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples (ca. 1455–1536).⁷⁵

By the 1520s, Lefèvre was famous throughout Western Europe for the depth of his learning—for many he was equal to none other than

70. De Jong, "Insights into Calvin's Spirituality," 4. I owe this reference to J. Nigel Westhead, "Calvin and Experimental Knowledge of God," in *Adorning the Doctrine: Papers Read at the 1995 Westminster Conference* ([London]: Westminster Conference, 1995), 16.

71. McNeill, *History and Character of Calvinism*, 116.

72. On this crest, see Herman J. Selderhuis, "Calvin as an Asylum Seeker," in *Calvin's Books: Festschrift Dedicated to Peter De Klerk on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser, Herman J. Selderhuis, and Willem van't Spijker (Heerenveen: J. J. Groen, 1997), 286.

73. Augustijn, Burger, and Stam, "Early Letters," 144.

74. For an eyewitness report of these lectures, see Oberman, *Initia Calvini*, 36n119. See also Augustijn, Burger, and Stam, "Early Letters," 141.

75. For an excellent study of Lefèvre, see Hughes, *Lefèvre*. For an overview of his career, see also Eugene F. Rice Jr., introduction to *The Prefatory Epistles of Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples and Related Texts*, ed. Eugene F. Rice Jr. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), xi–xxv. For Calvin's relationship to Lefèvre, see Hermann Dörries, "Calvin und Lefèvre," *ZKG* 44 (1925): 544–81. On the early French evangelicals, see also Gordon, *Calvin*, 11–17.

that paragon of humanist scholarship Erasmus. He had spent his early career immersed in Aristotelianism and medieval mysticism, but after the appearance of his commentary on the Pauline correspondence in 1512, he was increasingly known as a theologian, even though he had never had any formal theological education.⁷⁶ Scholars are divided over whether Lefèvre anticipated the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith alone—Philip Edgcumbe Hughes says yes; Richard Stauffer and others say no⁷⁷—but what is clear is that Lefèvre deeply appreciated Luther’s early writings. And in Lefèvre’s later works, especially those after 1518, the French scholar completely rejected the cult of the saints and other aspects of what he regarded as corrupt worship present in medieval Catholicism.⁷⁸ In Beza’s words, Lefèvre began “the revival of pure religion.”⁷⁹ And yet, though some of Lefèvre’s disciples, such as Calvin’s close friend Guillaume Farel (1489–1565), would so embrace Lefèvre’s critique of medieval piety as to break with Rome, others, following Lefèvre himself, did not see this issue as a just cause for separation. Nonetheless, Calvin’s doctrinal convictions concerning true worship—one of the central issues of the Reformation—are definitely rooted in Lefèvre’s radical critique of late medieval piety.⁸⁰

The 1520s had seen episodes of persecution of this reform movement, some of it extremely violent—witness the martyrdom of Jacques Pauvan, one of Lefèvre’s disciples, noted above. Another period of persecution occurred in late 1533, following an address by the rector of the University of Paris, Nicolas Cop, one of Calvin’s friends, on November 1.⁸¹ The address, by no means radical by later Protestant

76. Rice, introduction to *Prefatory Epistles*, xiv. For a discussion of the theological themes in Lefèvre’s commentary on Paul’s letters, see Hughes, *Lefèvre*, 69–99, *passim*.

77. Hughes, *Lefèvre*, 74–78; Richard Stauffer, “Lefèvre d’Etaples: artisan ou spectateur de la Réforme,” *Bulletin de la Société de l’Histoire du Protestantisme Français* 113 (1967): 405–23.

78. See Carlos M. N. Eire, *War against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 168–94.

79. Cited by Eire, *War against the Idols*, 193.

80. Eire, *War against the Idols*, 186.

81. For this address, see *Institutes* (1536), 364–72. According to Beza, Calvin wrote the address for Cop. *Life*, 13. This seems unlikely. See the discussion of the address and the question of Calvin’s role in the writing of it in McGrath, *Life of John Calvin*, 64–66; Cottret, *Calvin*, 73–76. For a recent defense of Calvin as the author, see Joseph N. Tylenda, “Calvin’s First Reformed Sermon? Nicholas Cop’s Discourse—1 November 1533,” in *Calvin’s Early Writings and Ministry*, ed. Richard C. Gamble, *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism 2* (New York: Garland, 1992), 120–38; this article first appeared in *WTJ* 38 (1976): 300–318. Augustijn, Burger, and Stam also support the case for Calvin’s authorship. “Early Letters,” 143.

standards—while it did contain mild overtones of Lutheranism, it also made an invocation to the Virgin Mary—rattled enough of the faculty of theology in Paris for them to issue a condemnation of it and Cop. The latter quickly left Paris for Basel, and because the authorities began to arrest those sympathetic to Lutheran ideas in the wake of Cop’s address, Calvin, known to be a friend of Cop, also fled. Beza noted that Calvin’s rooms were searched at the time and various papers seized, an indication that he was indeed in danger of arrest.⁸² Reflecting on this time of persecution nearly thirty years later in a sermon on 2 Samuel (1562), Calvin admitted that he was terrified and in such distress that he nearly wished himself dead to escape the agony of the time.⁸³

He found safety in Angoulême with a friend, Louis du Tillet, who possessed a fabulous library of several thousand volumes. Calvin probably used these works in the spring of 1534 to do some of the research that culminated in his *Psychopannychia*, which he either wrote or finished in Orléans later in the year, though publication of this work was delayed until 1542.⁸⁴ Beza noted that Calvin also found time to visit Lefèvre d’Etaples during this period. According to Beza, Lefèvre “was delighted with young Calvin, and predicted that he would prove a distinguished instrument in restoring the kingdom of heaven in France.”⁸⁵ For another trip in this year of traveling, Calvin visited Noyon, his birthplace. The cathedral records there indicate that on May 4, 1534, Calvin personally resigned one of his benefices. Presumably, he gave up the others at the same time. Curiously, Beza makes no mention of this event, but it probably signaled Calvin’s final break with Rome and his full-blooded commitment to the Reformation.⁸⁶ Calvin spent the months immediately following this May journey in transit: he journeyed to Nérac, where Marguerite d’Angoulême, the king’s sister, held court and was ever favorable to

82. Beza, *Life*, 13.

83. Cited by Oberman, *Initia Calvini*, 27–28n84.

84. McGrath, *Life of John Calvin*, 72. Du Tillet acted as Calvin’s patron to 1537. His subsequent return to the Roman Catholic Church severed the bond between him and Calvin. See Tavard, *Starting Point*, 140–41; Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book*, 20.

85. Beza, *Life*, 14.

86. Johnston, “Calvin the Man,” 23; Stauffer, “Calvin,” 18; McGrath, *Life of John Calvin*, 73–74.

evangelical views; he went back to Paris at great risk to meet Michael Servetus (1509/1511–1553), who failed to keep the appointment; and he spent some time in Orléans.

“Christ’s Road Is a Thorny One”

That fall, as he was working on the finishing touches of *Psychopannychia*, an event took place that would push Calvin’s wanderings beyond the realm of France. During the late evening of October 17, 1534, and the wee hours of the morning of October 18, posters (*placards*) were set up in various prominent places in Paris, Rouen, Orléans, and other French towns, denouncing the Mass as an abomination before God. Driving the theological perspective of the man behind the posters, Antoine Marcourt, a pastor in Neuchâtel, was the soteriology of the book of Hebrews: what need is there for the priestly mediation of the Mass when Christ offered himself up on the cross to the Father “once for all” (Heb. 7:27)? A poster was even placed on the door of King Francis I’s bedchamber!⁸⁷ Francis was furious. Evangelical theology was now seen as a positive danger to the state.⁸⁸ Less than four weeks later, more than two hundred had been arrested, twenty-four of whom would be burned as heretics. Among the latter was Calvin’s Parisian landlord, Étienne de la Forge.

So it was that Calvin made the decision to leave France. He found refuge, like Cop had done, in the Swiss town of Basel, where he arrived in January 1535. Other French evangelicals were there, including Guillaume Farel and Pierre Viret (1511–1571), who, Swiss-born like Farel, would, along with Farel, later be numbered among Calvin’s closest friends and colleagues. Powerful testimony to what Calvin called “the holy bond of friendship” between these three men, a friendship begun during this time in Basel, can be found in Calvin’s dedication to them of his *Commentary on the Epistle to Titus*:

I think there has never been in ordinary life a circle of friends so heartily bound to each other as we have been in our ministry. With both of you I discharged here [i.e., in Geneva] the office of pastor,

87. Cottret, *Calvin*, 82–88; Tavard, *Starting Point*, 13–17.

88. McGrath, *Life of John Calvin*, 74.

and so far from there being any appearance of rivalry, I always seemed to be of one mind with you.⁸⁹

While in Basel, Calvin also would have had time to reflect on what had taken place in France and its implications for Christian discipleship. Years later he was able to look back and see what God was doing in his life during this time. Some words from his exposition of Matthew 8:19 (“And a scribe came up and said to him, ‘Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go’”) in his *Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* well express those later thoughts about God’s work in his life in the days following his conversion:

We realize that he was a scribe, a man accustomed to a quiet and easy existence, treated with respect, who would be no match for hard words or hard times, for persecution, or the cross. He wishes to follow Christ, but he imagines to himself a soft and pleasant path, lodging with all good things provided—while Christ’s road is a thorny one for his disciples; it leads through endless pains to a cross. . . . So we should learn that, in his person, we are all being told not to make wild and irresponsible claims to be Christ’s disciples, without taking any thought for the cross and the hardships. . . . This is the basic training which admits us to his school, denying ourselves and lifting up our cross.⁹⁰

Calvin was learning in the school of Christ that if he would serve the Master of the school wholeheartedly, he must walk a “thorny” road. In modern parlance, the French scholar (scribe?) was being taught the cost of discipleship and thus being prepared for his life’s work in Geneva.

89. *CNTC*, 10:347.

90. *CNTC*, 1:254.