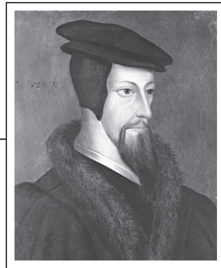
JOHN CALVIN

A PILGRIM'S LIFE



HERMAN J. SELDERHUIS

Translated by Albert Gootjes

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CONTENTS

Introduction 7

1 ORPHAN
1509-1533 9

2 PILGRIM
1533-1536 34

3 STRANGER
1536-1538 59

4 REFUGEE
1538-1541 85

5 PREACHER
1541-1546 110

6 VICTIM
1546-1549 145

7 WIDOWER
1549-1551 167

8 PATIENT
1551-1554 189

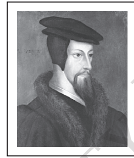
9 SAILOR
1555-1559 214

10 SOLDIER
1559-1564 236

Notes 260

Names Index 286

INTRODUCTION



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SAMPLE—DO NOT COPY

Life is a steeplechase: there are dangers everywhere, and God himself, who has put most of the obstacles in our way, watches to see whether we make it over them. Such is John Calvin's view of life—and of God. Calvin never spoke of life as something fun, and his own wasn't. Many of his followers concluded that there shouldn't be any fun in life, and here they misunderstand him.

Calvin runs the race of this life, falling all the while, picking himself up again and again, and looking forward to the finish, which he calls "the reflection of the life to come." The race wears him out, often seeming to pointlessly bring him back to the place he started, and yet there remains something to look forward to. Calvin stays on the course in faith that the God who makes the race so difficult also secures the runner's finish. At times, Calvin understands nothing of his God, but still hews closely to him and calls others to do the same. Without that God, life is nothing.

Calvin wanted things to be otherwise, but he had no choice. This is his greatest problem: there is so much he wants to do, but cannot. He wants to be free, but God always stands in the way. As so many others then and now have also seen, Calvin seems to be aware that even his own character is

often only another obstacle in his way. Calvin pleads for freedom, but prays for providence. Doesn't he see that these two just do not go together? Or is this precisely what gives life its edge—a battle between the human race that wants to run free, and the God who wants to keep a tight rein on things?

Does this make Calvin more exciting as a person than his dull appearance suggests?

In this book, Calvin is approached as neither friend nor enemy; I just do not categorize him in that sense. I feel nothing for Calvin either way, but I am fascinated by him as a person. Without intending to, he created a worldwide community of believers, arousing as much scorn as admiration and accomplishing so much in spite of his many limitations. I have tried to tell the story of his life to discover what he was like as a person. Since Calvin himself claimed that we learn most about people from their letters, the most important source for this book is his correspondence. Because I hope it will get us closer to Calvin himself, there are few references to secondary literature.

Much more can be said about Calvin than what is in this book, but I hope the story told here will reveal a very interesting person hidden behind perceptions of him as a somber academic. At first glance, he is no more than a bookish man with a long goatee who spent his entire life chopping away at dry doctrine with an occasional pause to burn some odd heretic in his spare time. In the coming of Jesus Christ, the Bible tells us, God clothes himself in the skin of another to transform each human being into another person. Maybe, just maybe, we will see another transformation if we ourselves crawl into Calvin.

It is well worth trying to get under his skin, and—if you get that far—I will let you out again at the end. I promise.

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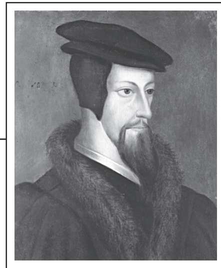
A PILGRIM'S LIFE



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1538-1541 85

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1541-1546 110

6 VICTIM
1546-1549 145

7 WIDOWER
1549-1551 167

8 PATIENT
1551-1554 189

9 SAILOR
1555-1559 214

10 SOLDIER
1559-1564 236

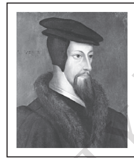
Notes 260

Names Index 286

1

ORPHAN

(1509-1533)



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Father

The family into which John Calvin—actually Jean Cauvin—was born on July 10, 1509, was a little different. They lived in Noyon, a small town in Picardy in northern France, where in 1551 the inhabitants held a big celebration when a rumor that Calvin had died reached their ears. The celebrations were a little premature, since a year later Calvin wrote that he had outlived Noyon after hearing that the town had been sacked by Habsburg troops, and that his parents' house was the only building still standing. Calvin—no wonder—saw this as a miracle!

Calvin's father and brother both came into conflict with the church—or rather, the cathedral—of Noyon, though both were also employed by it. His father, Gérard, had come from a family of dock workers and coopers in the fishing town of Ponte-l'Evêque, but left for Noyon, some three miles away, to start a new career. In this town with its beautiful cathedral, he became a successful lawyer and also looked after the financial affairs of the church. Some disgruntlement arose when the clergy accused him of underhanded dealings in connection with the estate of two priests, and as a result

Gérard was excommunicated on November 13, 1528. At the time, this was by far the worst thing that could ever happen to anyone, both temporally and eternally. Gérard died while still outside of the fellowship of the church on May 31, 1531, but his oldest son Charles managed to obtain absolution for him, so that he received a Christian funeral and was buried in consecrated ground. Charles was a priest, but in that capacity showed two character traits that, considering that his younger brother John showed them as well, must have run in the family: belligerence and stubbornness. Charles too was excommunicated, for first insulting one colleague from the Noyon cathedral and then hitting another—not exactly the kind of behavior one expects from a priest. On his deathbed in October 1537, he was offered absolution and last rites, but refused both and so was buried far away from his father, outside of the churchyard in unconsecrated ground under the gallows. Later, when John Calvin came into conflict with Rome and ended up outside of this church, he was, in a sense, simply continuing a family tradition. The one difference was that his theology did away with the distinction between consecrated and unconsecrated ground, and so it was no problem for him when he was buried neither in a churchyard nor under a gallows, but in an unmarked grave in a quiet cemetery in Geneva.

Mother

Let us leave Calvin's death and burial for a later chapter and return to his family. From the information that has come down to us, it appears that Calvin's parents had seven children, two of whom were girls. Of these, one was called Marie. Two of the family's sons, Antoine and François, died at an early age. Very little is known of the family's children, however, aside from the facts that Charles was the oldest, John the second, and that another son also named Antoine would follow Calvin around for some twenty-eight years. Very little is also known of Calvin's mother, Jeanne Lefranc, but the little we do know of her allows us to understand much about him. She was apparently both beautiful and pious, and her deep religious devotion seems to contrast with what appears as mere outward appearance in her husband. Calvin thus grew up in an environment of piety, with a mother said to have

devoted herself to her children. He remembered her as a devout woman who took him on pilgrimages as a child. It was with her that a young Calvin once ended up in Ourscamp, close to Noyon, kissing a relic of Saint Anne. Neither the kiss itself, nor the fact that it was bestowed on a relic, fit with many of the current common images of Calvin, but closer to his own day it was to this same Anne that Martin Luther had promised to become a monk when he was caught in a terrible thunderstorm. So Calvin's first kiss was a corpse, at a time when he was unaware that such things and others would only get better.

Of greater significance, however, was Jeanne's death in 1515, which left Calvin motherless at the age of six. His father, who would die when Calvin was twenty-one, remarried and his new wife, herself a widow, bore Gérard two daughters. As a child, though, Calvin no longer had a mother. Instead, the church increasingly became his mother, informing Calvin's later affirmation of the traditional Christian dictum that no one can have God as Father who does not have the church as mother. Calvin's relationship to the church at that time was somewhat peculiar, since in spite of everything, Gérard had been able to arrange a position for his son as chaplain at La Gésine chapel in the cathedral of Lyon. In terms of ecclesiastical responsibilities, this was little more than a farce; at the time one could hold such a post and receive its income while paying another (at a lower wage, of course) to do the actual work. At the church of St. Martin de Marteville in 1527, Calvin took on an additional position in the same way, and in 1529 he took yet another as pastor of Pont-l'Évêque through the mediation of his friend Claude de Hangest. Mother church thus provided the means for young Calvin to devote himself to his studies and, ironically, so begin to distance himself from her.

Teachers

The scarce details we have strongly suggest that Calvin grew up in middle-class circumstances. His family could not have been poor at any rate, since his father had to pay school fees whereas many other children received a bursary. Whether the family's home would have provided visible evidence

of their affluence can no longer be known. In 1918, German forces struck Noyon (again!) and bombing destroyed Calvin's home. It was later replaced with a small Calvin museum. After a short time at Noyon's Collège de Capettes (named after the caps that were part of the school uniform), Calvin left his hometown for Paris in August 1523—the same month in which Jean Vallière was burned as the first Lutheran martyr in France. Calvin was accompanied by three sons of the house of de Montmorts, a branch of the de Hangest family, whom he had befriended through his father's professional network. The contact Calvin had with these nobles was already a sort of schooling in itself, one that would remain useful to Calvin. Throughout his entire life, he smoothly established and carefully maintained relationships with people of high standing. He remained aware of class differences, however, acknowledging his middle class background to Claude de Hangest in 1532. Calvin represented himself as an ordinary son of ordinary parents, and of average intelligence, someone who associated with people from the upper crust but did not belong there himself. As a fourteen-year-old boy he boarded with his uncle Richard, a locksmith, who lived close to the great gothic church of Saint-German L'Auxerrois, next to the Louvre, which in those days was still a palace. Here Calvin first studied under a tutor, whom he referred to as a "dumb man" *(homo stolidus).* Yet, within a month of his arrival, he matriculated at the university of Paris through his admission to the Collège de la Marche as *martinet* or oppidan. That Calvin was only fourteen years old at the time says nothing one way or the other about his intellectual abilities. It was not unusual to enter the university at fourteen, and Calvin, in fact, may even be said to have begun a little on the late side. He was by this time also old enough to latinize his name from Jean Cauvin to Ioannis Calvinus. That's how we ended up with "John Calvin."

De la Marche would be very significant for Calvin's ability in Latin. The renowned Latinist Mathurin Cordier, who must rank among the founders of modern pedagogy, worked there. He was greatly concerned for the spiritual well-being of children, and saw learning to read and write well as expedients for learning to live well. Calvin worked intensively with this man for three months, and as thanks for what this contributed to his knowledge of Latin,

his commentary on 1 Thessalonians was dedicated to Cordier in 1550. Since Cordier also instructed his students in the love of Christ, Calvin had great respect for his teacher as a Christian as well. In fact, the two became such close friends that they stayed in contact, and toward the end of his life Cordier rejoined Calvin in Geneva after previously working there with him from 1536 to 1538. Significantly, Calvin's relationship with his teacher also reveals a deep respect for those who were in authority above him. Cordier was not only his teacher but also a father figure, and as will become evident below, such people remained important to Calvin throughout his entire life.

Assault

Aside from Cordier, there was not much to recommend the Collège de la Marche, above all because its environment was too liberal for anyone desiring to become a priest. This was actually what Calvin's father intended for him, and within a few months he was transferred to the Collège de Montaigu in the Quartier Latin, where he became a boarding student. Intellectually, the move was certainly an improvement, but this institution was known for launching nothing less than an assault on the physical condition of its students. Hygiene at de Montaigu was so appalling that Erasmus, whose own stay at the college left him with bad health and an abundance of lice and fleas, wrote that he knew many others who had still not overcome the illnesses they had contracted there. Writing thirty years after his studies at the Collège de Montaigu, Erasmus recalled the hard beds, sleepless nights and spoiled food as if he had spent the previous night in his old school. We find no such complaints about the college from Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, whose four years there overlapped with one of Calvin's, but François Rabelais referred to it as the "college of lice" and likewise wrote that, if he were king of Paris, he would set fire to the entire building, including the teaching staff.

The accommodations were lacking, but the education was solid, ethically moral and theologically conservative. In this place for the training of future priests, Calvin received a good education in the subjects that belonged to the so-called faculty of arts. These were the preparatory sub-

jects required of all students before they made choices for further studies in theology, law or medicine. The focus was on rhetoric and logic, knowledge of culture, languages, and nature, and throughout it all the skill of engaging in learned disputation received considerable emphasis. In his extracurricular activities, Calvin secretly read the forbidden books of that time, which were considered provocative and even dangerous by some. To avoid any misunderstanding, it should be noted that these were the writings of Luther and Melancthon, with the latter's generally considered to be the more dangerous insofar as they were more persuasive and captivating than those of Luther.

Calvin lodged with the Nation de Picardy, as in that day students were grouped by country of origin. At the Collège de Montaigu, Calvin also acquired the nickname *accusativus*, which was not meant as a compliment. The name appears to have had nothing to do with grammar, but with a perception that Calvin felt a moral obligation to tell on others to the administration. This allegation was not completely just, and a look at the later Calvin will reveal that he—just like Erasmus and Ignatius—would receive more from the Collège de Montaigu than only a weakened constitution.

Fathers

In short, Calvin's intellectual life was progressing well, and he stood out for his diligence, intelligence and impressive memory. However, when he had almost finished with the preparatory curriculum of the general arts subjects so as to be able to devote himself entirely to theology, his father ordered him to drop his theological studies and begin an education in law. The reason for this was that by that time the elder Calvin (who, as related above, had been excommunicated for refusing to give an account of the proceedings for the testaments of two members of the clergy) had had enough of theology and anything ecclesiastical. John, always obedient, as he would continue to be throughout his life, did exactly as his father wished. In this Calvin displayed a trait that would show again very often in his relationships with others, and which explains much about the things he did or refused to do. Just as he wanted to do all that God asked of him, so also he wanted to be obedient to

all who, as he saw it, were appointed by God over him. Gérard's will was to be obeyed as law even though it had changed because he had come into conflict with the church. Additionally, though, Gérard's decision was also based on the realization that career opportunities and thus chances of financial success were much greater for Calvin in law than in theology. Many years later Calvin wrote that he obeyed his father as was naturally appropriate, but that in the end God in his providence turned the course of his life—and from his words it is more than clear that he was very happy with that turn. Even Calvin's father would have to cede to the law of the fatherly will of God. Or, as Calvin would put it—more than twenty years later!—in a letter to Melchior Wolmar: "my father sent me to study law, and the death of my father once again turned me aside from that road."

Student

During the time when Calvin still had to deal with his earthly father, toward the end of 1527 or the beginning of 1528 (the exact date cannot be determined), he went from Paris, where only ecclesiastical or canon law was studied, to the university of Orléans, a renowned center for legal studies where a program in civil law was also available. Calvin's father wanted his son to become a lawyer or judge but above all to stay out of ecclesiastical law. In Orléans Calvin received instruction from a man equally as renowned as the university: Pierre de l'Estoile. But after little more than a year—most likely in May 1529—he left for Bourges with his friends François Daniel and Nicolas du Chemin. Since 1517 Bourges had been under the protection of Marguerite d'Angoulême, sister of King Francis I of France, and had served as a sort of center for reform-minded critics. Here Calvin attended the lectures of Andrea Alciati, as renowned as de l'Estoile, who had arrived only a month earlier. Like many others who had taken leave of conservative Orléans, Calvin was attracted to Alciati's fresh, humanistic method of teaching Roman law from the Latin source texts. Calvin's earliest biographers report that he worked extremely hard, and that he was in the habit of skipping meals and working until midnight only to wake up early the next morning to go over the previous day's material once more before attacking

the new subject matter. Calvin's routine resulted in exceptional knowledge as well as exceedingly bad health—building on his experience in Paris on both counts. Soon Calvin was tired of Alciati's tendency—actually rather common among professors—to criticize his colleague de l'Estoile continually. Along with his fellow students, Calvin was also rather critical of Alciati's spoken Latin, as we see in his first extant publication, the preface to a work by his fellow student Nicolas du Chemin (*Antapologia*, 1531). According to Calvin, Alciati could write very beautiful Latin in his books, but he spoke it like a country bumpkin. Alciati had introduced him to the world of Italian humanism, but aside from this Calvin was very disappointed.

Ambition

In October 1530, Calvin returned to Orléans—on foot, as many people in his time did—and in February 1531 he obtained his bachelor's degree in law *(licentié ès loix).* From there he went to Paris with the specific goal of finding a printer for his first book, a commentary on *De clementia,* by the classical thinker Seneca, but he made a detour via Noyon in order to visit his father and make an appearance in the church to which he was, in fact, appointed as chaplain. During his stay, Calvin's father became so sick that his death was expected, and when it did indeed occur on May 26, 1531, Calvin was forced to stay in Noyon for sixteen days. What a remarkable scene that must have been—a chaplain in the place where he was not really the chaplain, a brother with the family to which he did not really belong, and a motherless son with his dying father to whom he was not really that close to begin with—for sixteen days, as a person who did not have the gift of patience! His father's death meant complete freedom to break off his studies in law, and so Calvin returned to Paris. He had, of course, been diligent in his legal studies as was expected of him, but his heart was set upon the arts, and at the Collège Royal he could study them to his heart's content. This institution had been formed by the initiative of King Francis I and remained under his protection. The king had appointed five humanist teachers who were in, but not of, the university. This was a clear royal signal to the reigning theological tendency at the university. The Collège—independent and aca-

demic—could guarantee the reforming trend, something made particularly evident in its focus on the three languages of humanist learning: Hebrew, Greek and Latin. Not that long ago (1523) at the Sorbonne it had been decided that all translations from Hebrew and Greek sources were of no value for the church and were in fact dangerous. Within France, a virtual crusade was launched against French translations and against works that supported such translations. The Collège was thus an interesting and cunningly progressive institution. Calvin was surrounded there by scholars who wanted to work, learn, and teach from original sources, including the Bible, which was exactly in line with his own interests. He received instruction in Hebrew, although it is not known from whom. Calvin had an interest in this language but would never become an expert in it, even if his knowledge did suffice to allow him to read from the Old Testament. In this he surpassed Erasmus, who did not know Hebrew and who was in fact afraid that learning the language could lead to a fall back into Judaism. Calvin, on the other hand, was convinced that one could learn from Judaism, and this conviction provided him a foundational and positive appreciation for the Old Testament.

Calvin had two goals in Paris, to study and to publish, but because he was so busy with the latter he did not attend many lectures. Nevertheless, while there he became so absorbed in the Bible that his biographer Colladon reports that he began to preach from it in the areas surrounding Orléans and Bourges during an extended stay there in 1532 and 1533. As an aside, we note that we have no idea whatsoever as to the reason for this stay. The period from May 1532 to October 1533 is in all events a bit of a mystery, but in the wall of the Augustinian monastery of Bourges there is a veranda that is referred to as "the chair of Calvin," and nearby in the Marché aux Poissons one can see a rock from which Calvin is said to have preached. As an official clergyman he had the right to preach, of course, but it is strange that this chaplain, who had never previously made much of his ecclesiastical work and instead had intended to become a jurist, had now become an evangelist. What had happened to Calvin? According to his own words, one Father had won the battle against the other. "Although I did everything to

do the will of my father, God in his providence yet made me turn to another way."

Conversion

Just as the death of Calvin's mother was directly related to his new bond to the church as mother, so the death of his father directly affected his bond to God as Father. On the basis of the evidence it is somewhat easier to trace Calvin's relationship to the church than his relationship to God, and so questions as to the moment at which and the path by which Calvin came to faith always come up. Though these questions have been of no concern to Calvin's biographers, many others have nevertheless attempted to settle them. Conversion, however, is a matter between God and a human being. As a result, biographers have found hardly any material, and certainly have not been able to give an exact date to anything. Despite all of this, however, Calvin's conversion has too often been modeled after those of Paul, Augustine and Luther, and an alternate category has been ignored. Calvin's conversion could very well have been like that of Timothy, who the Bible notes was already a believer as a child with his mother and grandmother. Calvin referred to his conversion as *subita*. If this word is translated as "suddenly," Calvin's conversion would indeed belong in the same category as Paul's. *Subita,* however, should actually be translated as "unexpected," indicating that Calvin had not expected to be converted. Even more significant is the fact that in speaking of his conversion he probably did not even mean a conversion from unbelief to belief, but rather a change in terms of church, by moving to a "purer doctrine" *(purior doctrina).* Calvin himself tells us that he held on stubbornly to papal superstitions and that he was too old to be pulled out of that swamp. (Writing at the age of forty-eight, and referring to the time when he was barely twenty, perhaps Calvin considered himself already old at that time.) Another of his arguments cuts even deeper, namely that out of obedience to the church *(ecclesiae reverentia)* he did not dare to make the step until he truly saw things differently. This raises the issue as to the time or moment at which Calvin no longer saw any good in the Catholic church and began

to consider the reform-minded side of the Christian religion. This question too is easier to ask than to answer. Much evidence suggests that Calvin's conversion began toward the end of his twenties, but even that was really nothing more than a beginning: Calvin himself writes that at first he had little appreciation for the Reformed teaching.

That Calvin was not quickly won over is evident from a conversation he had in Paris in June 1531 with the sister of his friend François Daniel. Daniel's sister had entered a convent and, to the chagrin of her brother, was on the point of making her vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Daniel thus sent Calvin and another friend, Nicholas Cop, to see her. Calvin wrote that he had made no attempt to dissuade Daniel's sister because that was not why he had made the visit. Instead, he had gone no further than to tell her that she should not do anything in her own power, and that she should also reflect carefully before doing anything. Evidently Calvin was not directly opposed to her decision and only wanted to tell her that she should make her vows relying on God's direction and power. Later, when Calvin gained an appreciation for the new doctrine, he expressed himself more radically on this subject, but he would continue to promote piety, chastity and obedience.

A Different God

It is perhaps better to leave the mystery of Calvin's conversion for what it is, and to draw a parallel between it and his view on the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. In both cases it is not about the *how* but rather about the *that,* and especially about the fruit of the *that.* More important than the preceding questions is the core of the issue, and for Calvin the core was that he was once again in a right relationship with God, which meant that God in his mercy had called him when he was lost *(quand il m'a appellé du temps que i'estoye perdu).* Calvin had already known God, but he had known him more as Judge than as Father because of the way the church had wrongly portrayed him. The unexpected transition to another theology also unexpectedly confronted him with a different God, the real God as Calvin now understood him.

> I was his archenemy, and in me there was not even a semblance of obedience toward him at all, but I was rather full of pride, full of maliciousness, arrogance and a diabolic obstinance to resist God and to plunge myself into eternal death. And this would indeed have happened, had not God in pity received me and unlocked for me the endless treasures of his mercy.

For Calvin this was the heart of the matter, as well as a matter of the heart. With this the questions as to the *when* and the *how* fall away, and furthermore, one understands why Calvin devoted himself so fiercely to God's cause: thankfulness for being saved from ruin.

Calvin was thus already a believer before he had a conversion in terms of church, and he wanted that belief to be characterized by what the Bible calls a life in the fear of the Lord. Such fear is to be understood as respect, akin to that which children have for their parents, and that Calvin had especially for his father. In Calvin, however, this fear also has an element of anxiety, though not in the neurotic sense described by twentieth-century psychologists and subsequently read back into figures like Luther and Calvin. Instead it is the anxiety of a person who is keenly aware of guilt before God. Calvin said he knew the feeling of the author of Psalm 130, who cried out to God from the depths of his guilt. One's conscience is tormented by an awareness of being a sinner and having to appear before a righteous and wrathful God, and one's conscience finds heavenly rest when it knows forgiveness and renewal. For Calvin the conscience is not a second God, but God himself speaking to human beings, and it is virtually impossible to count the number of times he writes about the conscience and its need to be at rest. Calvin's problem was that he had experienced Catholic preaching as a burden on the conscience without the comfort of forgiveness that is to follow. "There were always those torments of conscience which made you feel as if you were in hell. . . . I experienced it myself that way." Over against this strain on the conscience is the freedom of the Christian. This was why Calvin also had issues with the food- and fasting-prescriptions of Rome. God permits us to eat with a clear conscience all the things he has given us, and for that reason when Rome forbids certain kinds of meat on certain days,

our freedom is curtailed and we are caused to doubt with each and every bite. For Calvin, conversion meant freedom, a liberation from the torments of the conscience, from the feeling that whatever he did was sinful and wrong. Calvin experienced freedom from all of this and found peace in his conscience. According to him, “there is no greater good one can inherit on this earth.”

Calvin’s decision to end his legal studies had little to do with his conversion. He had had little use for this study to begin with, not only in terms of its content but also because at that time he was still rather shy—certainly no advantage for one who intends to become a lawyer. Moreover, Calvin wanted his choice to make it perfectly clear that he had no desire to follow in his father’s footsteps, especially in view of what he had made of his career in law.

Life

As a youth, Calvin experienced many things; nothing truly exceptional for young people of that time, but these experiences were rendered more acute through his conversion. Here we should think especially of his constant experience of being a stranger, of being on the road, of continually having to let go. Even if there is a sense that life here on earth is nothing more than a passage we run through in all haste, there is no contempt for this world. While on the road, we are to live as Christians, and Calvin’s description of that life is clear and concise. We are renewed by the Spirit of God, renewed to be children of God, and a sign of this is that our physical desires no longer master us, “but that the Spirit of God reigns in us, that we give evidence of our adoption, that we walk in the fear of God, holding to him as our Father and giving God the honor that is due him. That is the essence of what it means to be a Christian.” This is transparent and clear language, and it was appealing at a time when many craved religious clarity and simplicity. Calvin himself was among those who thirsted for such clarity, and once he came to know God, he also wanted to know everything about him. This fostered a frantic aversion to anything that even smelled faintly of idolatry, which he opined could be found aplenty in Rome.

Watchdog

With Calvin's conversion, the rest of his life can actually be summed up as well. Calvin had found God—he would probably say that God found him, but the result is the same: Calvin became God's advocate. He would devote every minute of the rest of his life to the defense of God and of his cause. Calvin's is the story of that one God and that one man. He wanted nothing more than to defend God against any attack that deprived him of his due, that made him appear small, or portrayed him as a tyrant or conversely as some kind of Santa Claus. The virtually impossible task he took upon himself was to keep God beyond humanity's reach, and yet at the same time make him the full concern of humanity. One could call Calvin a theological jurist or a juridical theologian, but he was in fact simply a shepherd's watchdog who wanted to protect the sheep, keep the flock with the shepherd and in so doing take the shepherd under his protection. Calvin made himself God's advocate.

Calvin did ask himself, however, who that God really was. Calvin warned against unrestrained theological speculation and wanted to keep closely to the Bible. God accommodates himself to us when he speaks, and babbles with us like a mother with her child. The Bible must be seen in that way as well. It is not a book in which all things are described in an exact, scientific way, but a book where an account of the facts—which are indeed facts and not merely stories or myths—is given such that both young and old can grasp them. It is in this way that God speaks about himself. For this same reason there is also an unknown and unknowable side to God. If God accommodates himself when he speaks, who is he really? Suspense is always present when Calvin talks about God, and at times he himself does not understand God at all. Throughout his entire life Calvin busied himself with the question of who God really is, continuing his search for the Father he had found.

Job Search

Those who have such high spiritual goals must also see to it that there is bread to eat. In Calvin's time, one applied for a post in the academic world by pre-

senting a substantial publication. Calvin did this in 1532 with the publication of his commentary on *De clementia*. As its title suggests, Calvin's work dealt with the harmonious life recommended by Stoicism, that ancient philosophy that longed for a state of being unaffected by emotions. As nice as this title may sound, Calvin's intent was not to surreptitiously reach the French king who mercilessly battled the Protestants under the guise of a philosopher beyond suspicion such as Seneca. The work cannot even be seen to relate closely to Calvin's faith. His commentary on *De clementia* says nothing of his religious convictions and was only intended to satisfy the common academic norms. As regards Stoicism and the apparent similarities between Stoic philosophy and Calvin's thought, one is still a long way from proving that the latter finds its roots in the former. Still, this suggestion is often made, and Calvin is said to have attempted to pass through all the circumstances of his life and of this world as emotionlessly as possible. This in turn is supposed to have been behind all those tough characters in the Reformed world who burn with fanaticism but stay ice-cold in the face of need, sickness and death. Calvin himself wrote that the Stoic ideal was in many ways similar to the virtuous Christian life, but added that the Stoic concern was a matter of one's own conscience, whereas Christianity was about service to God. In short the only message Calvin meant to communicate with his first book was that he wanted a place among the academic elite. An earlier edition of Seneca's *De clementia* had been published by Erasmus, who had suggested that subsequent improvements by another scholar would be good. Calvin's youthful overconfidence was such that he thought he was the one who could indeed do it better, and for that reason he did not hesitate to point out errors Erasmus had made here and there. In the preface Calvin wrote of himself—in conformity with the humanistic norm of modesty bordering on false piety—as such a simple young man that there was no reason to imagine that he would one day become well known. And yet Calvin is actually trying to gain a reputation for himself with this very book! This reveals another of Calvin's traits, and one could say that in this way he was like his *Institutes* which changed externally, but internally remained the same over the course of time. Calvin described himself as a shy person who was not at ease in company. That may well have

been the case, but once he had begun to write, all shyness fell away. It appears as if the brakes came off when he no longer saw people, but only pen and paper. His shyness was therefore only part-time, as is already apparent here at the beginning of his career.

In the commentary on *De clementia*, Calvin wished to display the extent of his knowledge and cited no less than sixty Latin and twenty Greek classics, including several church fathers. Clearly, he had a sharp mind. He knew by heart the classics such as Cicero, Virgil and Tacitus, and was very familiar with the corpora of Plato and Seneca. For these reasons, Calvin also had high expectations for his book. "The dice have been cast," he wrote to his friend François Daniel. An expression from the world of gambling in Calvin?! He had gambled that he would make it but should have known that gambling brings no luck. The book was a flop—all the more pitiful since he had paid for the cost of printing himself, as well as for the purchase and delivery of one hundred copies to be distributed for free in Orléans. He also attempted to persuade the professors in Paris to adopt his book to be used as course material, but this brought him nothing but debt and frustration. The whole affair leaves us with a rather heartbreaking image of a young man who tried so hard to belong, to climb higher, to make the jump from one social class to another, and in the process ended up between the two. On the other hand, if a twenty-one-year-old makes his own rather bold claims to competency, then gives further evidence of immodesty by criticizing other senior scholars in suggesting it is high time for a good commentary on Seneca's *De clementia* to finally appear, he should not be surprised if those same scholars look down on and ignore him. The results, at any rate, were a failed job search, a book that flopped and a lonely junior scholar with few prospects.

A Choice

Another unstable factor in Calvin's life was the situation in France. King Francis I had some leanings toward reform, even if only to irritate his two rivals, the emperor Charles V and the pope. In that European struggle between the French kingdom, the German empire and the Roman Church, Luther was used by each of these powers to strengthen their own position.

Within France, there was considerable receptivity to Luther's message, though there was no direct connection to Luther. He was, after all, just a German. The reform movement in France was called *évangélisme*, and in most cases had more to do with inner convictions than with outward choices. Calvin himself did not separate quickly from Rome, even after he had already been of evangelical conviction for several years. What helped was the fact that he associated with the "wrong" people: his cousin Robert d'Olivetan, with whom Calvin was very close, belonged to the confirmed Lutherans, as did his beloved teacher Melchior Wolmar. People are variously influenced by those around them. Thus we see that while Calvin was in Noyon in August of 1533 to fulfill some aspect of his chaplaincy he joined in a prayer gathering against the plague with his colleagues in the chapter of the Catholic cathedral.

On the other hand, however, his reforming side is also clearly visible when at the end of October of that year he reported negatively about a play in which students criticized the reforming principles of Marguerite d'Angoulême, the sister of King Francis I. On the basis of this, Nicolas Cop, Calvin's friend and the new rector of the Parisian university, delivered a rectoral speech inspired largely by Calvin on November 1 (All Saints' Day), which brought him into conflict with the theologians of the Sorbonne. Calvin said that these events motivated him to speak out precisely because Marguerite was a believer who was devoted to true teaching. Marguerite was a very interesting woman for many reasons, certainly in terms of Calvin's ideals and norms: she could read Hebrew, Greek and Latin, and speak Italian, Spanish, English and German. She had gathered around her a circle composed of culturally sophisticated and church reform-minded progressives. This circle was led by Guillaume Briconnet who, as bishop of Meaux, attempted to realize the ideal of Faber Stapulensis, the real leader of the French reform movement: to make the Bible accessible to all the people so that Christ could work salvation in their hearts by his Word. Calvin was also a participant in this little circle, but once again his problem was that he did not easily fit the profile of either of the circle's two main constituencies. He did not really belong wholly either to the openly reformed party or to the

reform-minded elite, and yet there were ways in which he actually belonged to both. Here is a tension that can be seen in all of Calvin's life and thought: the tension within himself as an educated elitist who actually wants to serve the common people; the tension between a scholarly humanist and a popular reformer. Calvin himself is the man in whom Erasmus and Luther must come together: in terms of style he wants to stay with Erasmus; in terms of content he must opt for Luther. As a result, Calvin wrestled his whole life long with the question of the proper relationship between culture and religion. Beyond this, little is known about this period in Paris other than that he lectured on Seneca and that a surviving report from one hearer tells that the audience was greatly impressed by the learning of "this Calvin."

Escalation

Late in 1533, Calvin had the opportunity to become an ecclesiastical jurist near Orléans, but the prospect held little interest for him. Was he to occupy himself with useless things? This question speaks volumes since Calvin needed money, had in his mind already dismissed the church, and wanted to become an academic but found that there must be more useful things for him to do even if he did not know what these were.

In the courts and in the theological faculty, however, people began to take sides, spurred on by Cop's speech, who, as noted before, chose All Saints' Day (November 1) to propagate as rector the ideas of Erasmus and Luther, adding an appeal to use not swords, but words, to fight for the truth. The Parisian theologians warned the king against these Lutherans, and he responded with a series of arrests that began within the month. The king, however, did not want to act too directly against the reformers since he needed the help of the German Protestant princes in face of the threat posed to France by the emperor and the pope. Just when the situation appeared to settle down somewhat, things got out of hand with the *affaire des placards*. Cop had urged a war of words, and on the night of October 17, 1534, pamphlets promptly appeared which described the Mass as an intolerable abuse. They were not just posted here and there, however. One pamphlet made its way to the door of the king's own bedroom in his castle at

d'Aboise. As one would expect, he had quite a shock the next morning when he realized that someone had been able to get within a few meters of him without being noticed. Weren't these people linked to the fanatics in Münster who only a short time ago had intended to bring about a new heaven on earth and had instead caused all hell to break loose? The king immediately saw these things as a spiritual battle, and on the next day organized a procession and public prayers that God might bring these shameful people to repentance. Apparently unconvinced, however, that prayer and processions alone would solve the problem, he followed up with persecution and bloodshed. Even with the support of the German princes hanging in the balance, the king claimed he was left with no choice. This was no longer an exclusively theological matter; it had become political, just as had happened in the battle against the Anabaptists, whose radicalism and rejection of infant baptism had turned society upside down. The attack on the Mass as an institutional means of grace was seen in the French context as an attack on the king himself. Church and monarchy were so closely related that any who raised their hands against the church raised them against the king himself, and in so doing brought all of France into danger.

The situation escalated to the point that Cop fled to Basel. Since it was known that Calvin had contributed significantly to Cop's speech, Calvin considered it wise that he should leave as well and thus arrived in Angoulême in March 1534. It appears that the preceding events were the proverbial last straw for Calvin, and on May 4 he renounced the income from his chaplaincy. This step was further necessitated by the requirements of canon law, according to which he would have to decide at age twenty-five whether he wanted to continue in the church and be ordained as a priest, or to give up his ecclesiastical career altogether. Calvin chose to end his ministerial service—and yet he did not: the chaplain did not become a priest but he did become a pastor.

Image

Before moving on to the next stage in Calvin's life, we need to consider how Calvin was viewed by others and how he viewed himself. Exactly

what he looked like at that time is not known, but surviving portraits leave the impression that in those days Calvin still looked young and fresh—not quite so pale and skinny as he appears in later pictures. The prevailing image of Calvin rests on those later pictures, however, and it must be noted that such representations of his physiognomy certainly have been of little advantage to him. The image is of a rather unsociable person who can barely find anything to enjoy in life. It is the image, as suggested in a well-known survey work, of one who seemed to have taught the law rigorously with little respect for the gospel revealed in Christ. This is the dominant image of Calvin. It may remain to be seen whether this image represents Calvin as he really was later in life, but we can already see that it does not match up with Calvin in his early years. Instead, as we have seen in this chapter, he was a person who was forced to be independent early on, who followed his father's way and yet sought his own while doing so. He was one of those students and young academics open to new ideas, new challenges, new forms of church and scholarship. He brought a fresh approach, he was progressive, interested in renewal and driven by the new experience of life promoted by the renaissance and humanism. This is the image of Calvin as he was in those early years, and as he would in fact remain. Needless to say, this is quite different from the typical image of Calvin portrayed as a boring churchman with a pointed beard who gazes darkly out into the world.

Calvin wanted to be free and independent, ideals that can also be seen in his view of the church. His 1532 letter to du Chemin in which he asked for a little bit of money since he was broke provides a typical example of this desire. The note ends with the promise that du Chemin will receive his money back within a few days and be able to cross Calvin's name off his list of debtors. Calvin wanted to be indebted to no one—he wanted to be free and independent—and he wanted the same for others with respect to himself. We see this in the announcement of the publication of his Seneca commentary to François Daniel, in which Calvin suggested that it would be great if Daniel were to buy a hundred copies, but added that his friend was not to feel obligated in any way by the complimentary copy he included.

Calvin did not want to dictate to Daniel but rather wanted to allow him to make a completely independent decision.

Seal

Calvin designed his own seal, and simply in so doing betrayed a certain kind of self-consciousness. More revealing than the production of the seal, however, were its images and words, which said so much about his drive. The seal depicted a hand, and within that hand a heart. Everything was summed up in this. Calvin wanted to give his whole heart to God *prompte et sincere*—"willingly and honestly"—as was written around the image. These two characteristics were in clear evidence throughout Calvin's life: the *prompte* in his incessant, persistent and sometimes apparently thoughtless diligence, and the *sincere* likewise. Many things could be said about Calvin, but he was at any rate open and honest; others always knew what they were up against in him. Yet the seal also said more, since the hand with the heart was bookended by the letters *I* and *C,* which could stand for *Ioannes Calvinus* but also for *Iesus Christus*. This may seem confusing, but actually made things crystal clear: it was Calvin's desire that all that concerned him and all that concerned Christ should be perfectly aligned but should also actually come together as one. He was neither the first person with such a vision, nor the last, and he was certainly not the only one. But in Calvin the importance of this vision certainly stands out. Identifying one's own cause with that of God, one can accomplish a great many things, but one can also become vulnerable and potentially incapable of distinguishing between work and home any longer.

Calvin did not like to talk about himself—at least that is what he said. His commentaries and sermons, however, reveal quite a lot about him just as the novels, plays and poetry of other authors do of their authors. He can be found, if only one looks for him in his work, and this will indeed be done in what follows. Calvin spoke more directly about himself in his correspondence, and from this emerges the image of a person who is confident (and assertive) in his call to be a prophet, but also a person who is much less confident in himself.

Self-Image

"Who I am, you know, or at any rate you ought to know. I am a man for whom the righteousness of our heavenly Father is so important, that I allow no one to move me from a most strict devotion to this righteousness." With these words to Ami Perrin, Calvin declares himself and describes his manner of life from the time of his conversion to his death.

His claim in a letter to Sadoleto that he did not like to speak about himself *(De me non libenter loquor)* has been interpreted widely as evidence that Calvin would not talk about himself at all. A careful reading of his letters and commentaries proves this false, however, and reveals much about Calvin as a person. The fact that in his writings and sermons he often uses "we" when he means "I" provides an additional key to a better understanding of Calvin.

As noted previously, Calvin did not have a great self-image. In his letters he frequently mentioned a number of his own negative characteristics of which he was conscious but which he also found difficult to hide. He admitted that it was difficult for him to maintain peace with moderation and tolerance, although he did his best "against his nature." He said that in writing he often became more fiery than he actually intended, even though "it is not my nature to fight it out with such coarse rudeness." This character trait also amazed the Catholic theologian Bartholomeus Camerarius, who had several discussions with Calvin in Geneva about the freedom of the will. Camerarius did not understand how Calvin could be so sharp in his writings and so easygoing and friendly face-to-face.

Calvin's vehemence also explains why he could defend Luther when the latter had once again lashed out harshly. When Calvin wrote to Farel that he preferred to live in isolation, part of the reason for this was his realization that his presence could work people up. He wrote the same to Melanchthon. It would be better for himself as well as for others if he withdrew a little, but God continually put him back on stage. God had given him his role in the play *(theatrum)* that is this world. He wanted to do something about this shortcoming, writing to Heinrich Bullinger that he tried to write in such a way that others would not become angry. Along the same lines, a

colleague from Basel, Simon Grynaeus, admonished Calvin for being too sharp in his reaction to Peter Kuntz, a preacher at Bern, reminding him that Kuntz came from a family of simple farmers, whereas Calvin had a more educated and cultured background.

In the course of his dispute with the fanatical Lutheran theologian Joachim Westphal, Calvin noted in his second response that he had perhaps been too harsh. He had been shocked by his own violence, and wrote to Bullinger: "I see that I was more heavy-handed that I had intended to be." He wrote that he did not understand very well how this could have escaped him in his dictation, and later admitted that he had had difficulty restraining himself when responding to Westphal.

In contrast to all of this, Calvin wrote in the preface to his commentary on the Psalms: "I have to admit that by nature I am timid, soft and of little courage," referring to his *pusillanimitas* or smallness of heart *(Ainsi, combien que ie me recognoy estre timide, mol et pusillanime de ma nature).* Elsewhere he openly wrote: "timid as I am and have always been, as I confess" *(timide comme ie suis, et comme ie l'ay tousiours esté, ie le confesse).*

Honest Kid

Though aware of his own faults, Calvin did think he lived as he had taught others to live, a claim the truth of which is more and more corroborated by research. The criticism of his lifestyle and the various accusations of immorality that were already in circulation during his lifetime appear to have been unfounded. It was impossible for him not to speak the truth and in fact would have gone against his very nature. He loved being straightforward and open, but in that openness he often went too far. As a young theologian, he criticized the experienced Reformer Martin Bucer, claiming that he could act no differently: "I prefer to make my complaint against you openly rather than to suppress my annoyance and so cause it to grow." He found it more honest "to give offense in my boorish simplicity than in hypocrisy to praise someone." Anyone who thought Calvin was a sycophantic slimeball knew nothing of him at all, and he considered nothing better than that others should speak as openly with him as he did with them.

When Bullinger let it be known that he had problems with Calvin's criticism of his book on the Lord's Supper, Calvin gave an elaborate defense of the way he had written: "I have always loved simplicity, and never cared much for cleverness." Even opponents praised him for his clarity, and Calvin wanted at all costs to avoid the impression that he was cleverly hiding things. "My way of teaching is too simple to be considered suspect, and at the same time too detailed for it to be called unclear." Thus he said nothing different in Zürich than in Geneva. He claimed that it was his principle to be frank and consequent in speech and that in his experience this had been the way in which even the strictest hardliners could be brought around to moderation. He wanted to avoid long-windedness, which he claimed to see in Augustine among others. He also admitted, however, that his terseness could cause offense. He just was not sure, and claimed that it was a result of his lack of self-confidence: "I have so little self-confidence that I prefer to follow my own nature than to admonish others." Shame is another feeling Calvin often felt. He asserted that he took no pleasure in exposing the evil of Rome, but rather was ashamed by it. When ill, he was ashamed of being able to do so little. Calvin was transparent, open and straightforward, and this made him both vulnerable and sensitive to criticism.

He did indeed see himself as God's watchdog: "A dog barks when it sees that its master is being attacked. I would be a real coward if I saw God's truth being attacked and remained quiet without making a sound."

In a letter to Bucer, Calvin anticipated what Bucer might say about him: "You will probably say that I have a habit of hurling lightning bolts in letters, and being mild in personal contact." Calvin thought differently about this: "I like to be clear, and whether in a letter or face to face, I cannot restrain myself when I want to express my meaning clearly in words. Openness is of more use than craftiness, and so I prefer simply to say what I mean."

Writing in 1538, Calvin claimed that his openness was a strategy intended to separate the person from the issue, and he was proud to have achieved this. He debated Albert Pighius, a Catholic theologian from Kampen, only when the latter was alive and only on the basis of his doctrine. He reacted vehemently against Sadoleto because he felt attacked not in his person but in

his office. Calvin claimed that the fierce treatment he received from Michael Servetus—whose life, as will be seen further on, was brought to an end at the stake in Geneva with Calvin's help—never bothered him. Servetus' defamations of Calvin were like "the barking of a dog at a pile of manure," and just two hours before Servetus was burned, Calvin maintained he had not battled him for personal reasons. "I do not hate you, I do not despise you and I did not want to be hard in pursuit of you."

Human Being

Nevertheless, Calvin's entire life and work clearly show that he was not an emotionless stone. A glimpse of this is caught in his reaction to the news that Luther had been content with Calvin's work. "If we are not appeased by such moderation, we must be completely of stone. I am really appeased. I wrote something that satisfied him." Neither was fear foreign to him. As late as 1562 Calvin could speak of his fears under persecution thirty years earlier. In a sermon on 2 Samuel, he looked back on his time before his flight from France and related that he had been scared to death: "I was so afraid that I wanted to die to be rid of those fears."

Calvin was simply a human being, and we will follow him on his remarkable journey.