

## **Becoming Calvin:**

### **The Background**

The man we know as John Calvin was born in Noyon in the north of France in 1509. He fled that country in his mid-20's and spent most of his adult life as an exile in the Swiss canton of Geneva.

As a student -- first in Paris and then later in Orleans and Bourges -- Calvin was exposed to the reform impulses introduced into French society by Renaissance humanists and devotees of the views of Martin Luther. Calvin found himself attracted to both currents of thought and identified with both at different stages in the course of his development.

The main target of the advocates of reform was the church. They all started out thinking they could—and should—stay in the church. But the changes they had in mind varied widely, and those who believed that big changes were necessary soon discovered (as Luther had) that they were not welcome in the church. Indeed, they found they would be persecuted if they actively expressed their convictions in public.

The struggle among the advocates and opponents of reform in France was intense. A major reason was that the king, Francis I, was under great pressure from the Pope to rid France of the “Lutheran heresy.” At the same time, in pursuing his geopolitical agenda, Francis wanted the support of Protestant princes in other countries. In addition, he respected the views of his older sister, Marguerite of Navarre, who herself was an advocate of reform. For a while, Francis vacillated, but when in 1534 some of the more radical elements among the advocates of reform openly attacked the mass as a form of idolatry, he cracked down brutally,

Calvin was implicated in the events that led Francis to act, and that prompted his abrupt departure. He was a marked man, and from that point on, he conducted himself as such. He openly rejected the authority of the Roman church. Soon he was playing a prominent role in the reconstitution of the church and broke with many of his former friends and allies who could not bring themselves to take such radical steps.

How did this happen? What was it that turned the young law student who wanted to “live in seclusion without being known” into an outspoken defender of the ‘reformed’ cause? What made him turn in that direction when so many others did not? Looking back, Calvin himself always maintained that it was the hand of God that led him down the path he took. To historians the matter has always been a mystery.

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