

## Note from the Playwright

I had many questions as I began the research that would shape the script for *Becoming Calvin*, but I felt liberated by biographers' statements that they did not know much about Calvin's formative years. The accounts of his life I read had very clear, albeit conflicting, hypotheses of Calvin's young adulthood, and so I synthesized their conjectures and created a "backstory" for young Jean Calvin in Noyon. I started my play with his student years at the Collège du Montaigu at the University of Paris, then journeyed with him to Orléans where he studied law.

The friends and family with whom I have populated my play are based on actual people. We know from his voluminous correspondence that Calvin really was a friend to or colleague of all the characters in my play, with two exceptions. These are the two women I created to fill unnamed roles of people who undoubtedly crossed paths with Calvin, Madame DuPont, the Bookseller and Adèle, Queen Marguerite's serving girl.

Working within the confines of historical fact, I tried to recreate for a modern audience a sense of the excitement, discovery and bewilderment felt by a brilliant young scholar on the cusp of the French Renaissance. It is challenging, I think, for a 21<sup>st</sup> century American audience to imagine a world where the king reigns supreme, the one true Catholic Church controls all education (as well as most of the *Parlement*), and the Bible is not accessible to anyone but priests and scholars. Transportation, limited to travel by horse (for the wealthy), boat (for those who can pay for passage), or foot, was spotty at best. Consequently, there was no reliable mail service. When I look at how difficult it can be to transmit even the simplest ideas today, I am amazed that the great minds who planted the seeds for Reformation during the Renaissance were able to connect so deeply with each other via letters, books, and treatises. They certainly did not have what we would call a "reliable network"!

The world my characters inhabit is one on the eve of great change. Calvin is instrumental in creating that change, but as is often the case with the visionaries among us, he is not aware of how pivotal he will eventually be. It is up to those around him who recognize his great talent to cajole, prod, even swear at him, in order to convince him of his vital part in the gigantic task of creating a New Church.

The biographers and historians I consulted gave conflicting accounts of events that shaped Calvin's theology and philosophy, but one huge fact was clear: Calvin did not act alone. He was no radical, springing out of a vacuum with wholly new ideas. He had support of members of the royal family, as well as other nobles, academics— even some Catholic leaders. He read and widely admired Luther, Zwingli and Bucer (who introduced him to his wife). The index of his correspondence reads like a virtual Who's Who of 16<sup>th</sup> Century European Intellectuals. And I could not let any account of my journey with Calvin fail to mention that the doctrine of predestination most often ascribed to Calvin is nothing new; it had been incorporated into the work of many earlier theologians on whose thought Calvin built, most notably Augustine of Hippo.

Through Calvin's published writings I met a gifted writer, with a keen mind and genius for logic, synthesis and analysis. His explanations of thorny theological issues strike me as clear, concise and surprisingly modern. In his private writings I found a man with an unexpectedly delicious sense of humor, who sometimes erupted in anger with a veritable torrent of words, aimed with stinging accuracy at the recipient. Some grudges he bore, some he did not. I kept looking for the "tyrant" who turned Geneva into a theocracy, but I found a beleaguered leader who tried to do the right thing, the only way he knew, to save an emergent middle class from worshiping at the altar of over-confidence and over-consumption.

And so I hope you will enjoy this play, my depiction of his formative years and the social, political, and religious forces that helped Jean Calvin become the great Protestant leader and pillar of the Reformation who effected greater change in the world than he ever could have imagined.

Ann Timmons