

14 John Calvin

John Calvin crept through the darkened streets of Paris hiding in the shadows of the buildings. What a day this All Saints' Day (November 1) of 1533 had been! First, there was the elaborate ceremony that was held in the cathedral. Then, his good friend Nicolaus Cop, rector of the University of Paris, had delivered a sermon to a shocked audience of Parisian clergymen.

When Cop detailed his beliefs that the Catholic church did indeed need to be reformed, an audible gasp had issued forth from the congregation. To make matters worse, Calvin had helped Cop write the sermon. It was not that Cop was calling for a complete break with the church as Martin Luther had done in Germany. Rather, he was just pointing out some areas that needed to be changed. But the conservative audience looked upon the remarks as heresy.

Fearing for his life, Cop had fled the city and sent a message to Calvin's rooms that he too should flee. The authorities in Paris seemed intent on stamping out any hints of Protestantism, and Calvin's association with Cop put him in open danger. It was neither the first, nor the last, time that Calvin would have to flee a city because of his religious beliefs.

The Young Calvin

Born in Noyon, France, on July 10, 1509, John Calvin became a member of the clergy in 1521. Since his church office required little of his time, he was able to move to Paris in 1523 to attend the university there as well as to escape an outbreak of the bubonic plague that was ravaging northern France. While studying at the university, Calvin remained a devout Catholic, usually attending mass every morning at 4:00 A.M. But the ideas that Martin Luther was spreading throughout Germany intrigued the young Calvin, and he would often stay up late into the night debating these ideas with his good friend Nicolaus Cop.

In 1528 Calvin's studies were interrupted when his father transferred him to the University of Orleans to study for a law degree. Disenchanted with the Catholic church, Calvin's father did not want his son to study theology in Paris. Although the young Calvin continued to be a model student and received his law degree, he never became a practicing attorney. Instead, after his father died in 1531, he returned to Paris to study theology and to

openly question the tenets of the Roman Catholic church.

Once in Paris, Calvin found a tolerant attitude toward reform. King Francis I's sister Marguerite of Angoulême had strong Protestant leanings and acted as a sort of protectress for the fledgling Protestant movement. Soon, however, the climate changed. Parisian authorities urged that Marguerite be condemned as a heretic and burned at the stake—as had so many other heretics throughout Europe. It was at this time that Nicolaus Cop gave his inflammatory sermon, and he and Calvin fled the city.

Breaking With the Church

In 1534 Calvin resigned his church post in Noyon. Fearing that the brash young man was a heretic, church authorities promptly imprisoned him. As he languished in a sordid prison, Calvin realized that only the will of God mattered. When he was released a few months later, he returned to Paris where he secretly preached his reformist beliefs for a few months before again fleeing the city.

As young Calvin journeyed south from Paris he began to believe that Protestants needed instruction in the basic beliefs of their faith. He decided to write a work entitled *Institutes of the Christian Religion* to provide such instruction and fled to the Protestant city of Basel, Switzerland, where he completed his influential work in 1536.

In the *Institutes* Calvin put forth the major beliefs of Protestantism. According to him, people are lost in sin, but God chooses those to be saved. Perhaps the five most important teachings that Calvin explained in his work were: (1) humans are depraved and unable to choose God; (2) God elects some people to be saved; (3) Jesus died for the salvation of this elect; (4) the Holy Spirit of God draws sinners to Jesus; (5) those chosen for salvation cannot lose their salvation.

Geneva

Late in 1536 Calvin began to put his religious beliefs into practice in Geneva, Switzerland, which had only recently become a Protestant city. The people had no real church organization in the city and were looking for religious leaders to establish a church there. Calvin, along with another Protestant, Guillaume Farel, began the process of establishing their church. But when the two clergymen

began to issue disciplinary regulations, many free-wheeling citizens objected. The city council then asked Farel and Calvin to leave.

In 1541, however, the city council begged Calvin to return. Social services, such as schools and help to the poor, were on the verge of collapse because there was no church organization to provide them. The city council vowed to give Calvin free rein to make the city function again. Calvin zealously attacked his task.

Calvinist Geneva

Calvin set up a rigid organization for the church in Geneva. Leading clergy met weekly in an assembly called the Assembly of Pastors. The Assembly assigned clergy to churches and established routines for services. A body called the Consistory acted much like a court and determined whether any citizens were guilty of immorality—including dancing and playing cards.

Although the tenets of Calvinist Geneva were strict, they succeeded. By the time John Calvin died on May 27, 1564, Calvinism had spread to Scotland and two-thirds of the Netherlands were Calvinist. Calvinism also had influenced the Anglican church in England as well as the ideas of the Puritans. Even today, Presbyterians throughout the world trace the origin of their denomination to John Calvin.

Reviewing Profiles

On a separate sheet of paper, write the answers to the questions below.

1. **Summarizing Ideas** Why did John Calvin flee Paris in 1533?
2. **Understanding Ideas** Why did Calvin first move to Paris?
3. **Classifying Ideas** What were the five major articles of faith as explained in the *Institutes*?
4. **Interpreting Ideas** Why do you think Calvinist ideas spread beyond Geneva?