INTRODUCTION: John Calvin was the leader of the Reformed branch of the Reformation. He belonged to the second generation of the Reformation. When he was born Luther and Zwingli were already twenty-five years of age. Melanchthon was about to begin his career as a student at the University of Heidelberg. Henry VIII had just begun his reign. None of these had entered their reformatory work, but by the time Calvin broke with Catholicism and joined the Reformation, Zwingli was already dead, and the Reformation in Germany was well established. Shortly after his break with the Catholic Church Calvin was driven out of France. Geneva in the French speaking part of Switzerland became the center of his reform, which would absorb what was left of the reform of Zwingli and grow into the international branch of the Reformation, known as "The Reformed Churches." Calvin distinguished himself as the systematic theologian of the Reformation and also as exegete and preacher.

THE BACKGROUND: The France of Calvin's time was one of the most advanced of the European kingdoms. Francis I (1515-1547) was a popular ruler and his court one of the most splendid of the day. He was a ruler of great military ambition, proud of the artistic and scholarly achievements of his realm, but he lacked the personal religion and ethical seriousness to understand the significance of the religious struggle that would convulse France and all Europe.

The French church and monarchy enjoyed a closeness that enabled the French to limit papal infringements. The Concordat between Pope Leo X and Francis I in 1516 increased the king's control over his church, recognizing his right to nominate the candidates for high church offices and exempting the French from many papal exactions and interferences, while increasing the pope's revenues.

The French church suffered from the evils of the day. The emphasis was on such externals as penances, pilgrimages, and indulgences, to the neglect of inward spiritual wholeness. Political considerations largely ruled ecclesiastical appointments and offices were filled with the morally unfit and benefices were heaped on favorites.

The University of Paris enjoyed great prestige as the center of medieval conservatism, orthodoxy, and opposition to all innovations. The new learning of the Renaissance had been stoutly opposed by Scholasticism but was beginning to make headway. The leaders of the French Humanism were Jacques Le Fèvre and the king's sister, Marguerite d'Angoulême. They gathered around them a circle that eagerly pursued the new learning, read the latest books, and even showed some sympathy with Protestantism. Even Luther was read. In 1530 the king established the Royal Lecturers to give instruction in Greek, Hebrew and Mathematics in the spirit of the Renaissance. This royal foundation would grow into the Collège de France. This circle of Humanists included Guillaume Budé, one of the king's chief advisers; also his physician, Guillaume Cop. François Vatable was the Hebrew professor; Gerard Roussel was the confessior of Marguerite and would become bishop of Orlor; Lewis de Berquin would burn at the stake as a Protestant. Guillaume Farel would become a fiery preacher of reform. Guillaume Briçonnet would become bishop of Maux, noted for opening his bishopric to new learning and its teachers. The arch foe of all the new learning was Noël Beda who headed the theological faculty of the University of Paris, known as the Sorbonne. Any criticism of the church was suspected of being "Lutheran."
BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD OF CALVIN: John Calvin was born at Noyon, about fifty-eight miles northeast of Paris, on July 10, 1509, the son of Gerard Cauvin. The name was latinized into Calvinius and then changed to Calvin. Calvin’s ancestors had been boatmen on the river Oise. Gerard had moved from the family home at Pont l’Eveque to Noyon because of the opportunities for advancement in the cathedral town. He married Jeanne Lefranco, daughter of a successful innkeeper of Cambrai who had retired and settled in Noyon. Gerard held a number of offices under Charles de Hangest, bishop of Noyon (1501-1525). He was attorney for the cathedral, its business manager, secretary to the bishop, and notary for the clergy and magistrates. The de Hangest family had held the episcopal office for generations; the bishop’s brothers were leading citizens. Gerard’s position enabled his family to associate with the aristocracy of the city.

Calvin’s mother was noted for her beauty and piety. She died when John was about three, but she had already carried him to the shrines of the neighborhood and he had been allowed to kiss a fragment of the head of St. Ann. John was the fourth of five sons. He looked up to Charles, his older brother. The next two sons died early. The fifth, Antoine, spent his life in John’s shadow, following him to Geneva. Gerard married a widow after losing his first wife. The second wife bore him two daughters. One married and lived in Noyon. The other, Marie, followed John to Geneva where she married Charles Costan.

The de Hangest houses became a kind of second home for John. The tutors of the de Hangest boys were also his tutors until the boys were enrolled in the Collège des Capettes, a boys’ school in Noyon.

From the first John showed great brilliance and promise as a student and the father began planning for university education. Before John was twelve years old his father had secured for him an excellent benefice from the church that would provide funds for his education. Later two more benefices were added.

JOHN CALVIN AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PARIS: In August, 1523, at the age of fourteen, John Calvin, accompanied by three of the de Hangest boys and their tutor, left home to enroll in the University of Paris. Plague had broken out in Noyon.

In Paris John Calvin enrolled in the Collège de la Marche and lived in the home of an uncle who was a smith. This probably guarded him from many of the vices of Paris students. John’s favorite teacher was Mathurin Cordier, a man of forty-four, who had been a priest of Rouen before he became the Latin professor in the college ten years earlier. Cordier was reputed to be one of the finest Latin teachers of his day. The brilliant mind of John Calvin quickly attracted the teacher who gave him special attention. They became life-long friends. Cordier would later give himself to Calvin’s reform and move to Geneva where he died at the age of eighty-five, an ardent admirer of Calvin. Calvin credited Cordier with teaching him the most efficient methods of study. He fired him with the delights of good learning and imparted to him the spirit of Humanism at its best. He left a lasting impression on Calvin’s Latin style. He gave him an unfailing sense of style and diction and removed offensive barbarisms.

Calvin’s tutor soon transferred him to the more prestigious College de Montaigu, noted as a training place for priests. The college had been founded in 1388 by Gilles Aisselin, archbishop of Rouen. A succession of strong leaders had given it a reputation for being one of the most rigorous colleges in the university. Jean Standonck, a member of the Brethren of the Common Life, built its reputation for gravity and asceticism. Noël Beda made it the fortress of orthodoxy and resistance to innovations. Pierre Tempete was known for stern discipline. Erasmus and Rabelais, who had been students in the college, hated it and satirized Tempete as the "Terrible Tempest." Erasmus
complained of its stale eggs and stale theology. Calvin found the college a real challenge. He ate little, slept little, and devoured books. He continued to improve his Latin under a Spanish professor, probably Antonio Coronel. Calvin distinguished himself in philosophy and dialectics. He probably studied philosophy under the learned Scottish Ockhamist, John Major, who not only guided him in Scholastic philosophy, but also probably introduced him to the church fathers, including Wyclif, Huss, and even Luther—Major treated these in his writings. Under Noël Beda Calvin developed into an able debater. By the time he was eighteen and a half he had completed the course for the master of arts degree. He had continued his close friendship with the de Rangest brothers. He was a frequent and welcomed guest in the home of Guillaume Cop, physician to the king, and friend of Erasmus and Reuchlin. Cop had four sons. Nicholas Cop and Calvin were closely associated in their scholarly careers. A younger son, Michel Cop, followed Calvin to Geneva and became a Reformed pastor. Calvin also formed a close friendship with Pierre Robert, better known as Olivétan, who became a noted translator of Scripture.

Calvin's patrons at the cathedral of Noyon were so proud of his record that he was given an additional benefice, the curacy of Saint-Martin de Martheville, which considerably added to his income.

CALVIN IN LAW SCHOOL: In 1528 Calvin's father suddenly insisted that he transfer from theology to law. Calvin obediently moved to Orléans where at nineteen he began the study of law. His father had become involved in a quarrel with the canons of the cathedral over cathedral business. The canons insisted on inspecting the books and Gerard Calvin refused to let them inspect the books. The bishop also was involved in a controversy with his canons who disapproved of the bishop growing a beard. The bishop did not protect Gerard and the quarrel finally resulted in his being excommunicated.

At Orléans Calvin studied under Pierre de l'Etoile, the foremost teacher of jurisprudence in all France, noted especially for legal scholarship and logic. Calvin lived with a young lawyer and ardent disciple of Etoile, Nicholas Duchemin. He formed close friendships with two other law students, François Daniel and François Coman. He found time to study Greek under Melchior Wolmar, a German Humanist who had fallen under Luther's influence, and who had opened a boys' boarding house and was teaching Greek. Theodore Beza, a lad of nine, was also studying Greek under Wolmar at this time.

When Marguerite d'Angoulême opened a new law school at Bourges she invited a noted Italian, Andrea Alciati, to occupy the chair of Roman Law and invited Wolmar to join the faculty as professor of Greek. In 1529 Calvin and his friends followed Wolmar to Bourges. Alciati was noted for his persuasive courtroom manner and his power as an orator. He was also famous for his humanistic legal reforms.

When Alciati attacked Etoile in print, Calvin and his friends sided with Etoile. Calvin's first published writing was the preface to a defense of Etoile written by Duchemin.

THE DEATH OF CALVIN'S FATHER: John Calvin was called back to Noyon in the spring of 1531 because of the illness of his father. When the father died in May, 1531, it took skillful negotiations on the part of John and his older brother, Charles, to arrange for their father to be buried with the faithful rather than with the damned.

Charles continued the quarrel with the canons of the cathedral and was excommunicated in May, 1534. He died in October, 1537, still in revolt against the church. He refused the sacraments.

CALVIN AS A HUMANIST SCHOLAR IN PARIS: The death of his father freed John Calvin from the obligation to be a lawyer. He returned to Paris to take up study in the Collège de France. He studied Greek under Pierre Danes and Hebrew with François Vatable. He again moved in the humanist circle of the Cops. In April, 1532, he published his first
scholarly work, Commentary on Lucius Anneas Seneca's Two Books on Clemency. He dedicated the work to his friend, Nicholas Cop. It was a humanist work of great erudition but gave no hint of his future in religion. Calvin was terribly disappointed that the book was almost completely ignored by the scholarly world. He had to pay the expenses of the printing.

BACK TO ORLEANS AND THE LAW: Calvin returned to Orleans to complete his doctorate in law. He served for a short time as proctor for the "nation" of students from Picardy. He wrote his first religious work, Psychopannychia, against the Anabaptists and the idea that the soul sleeps between death and the resurrection.

CALVIN'S FLIGHT FROM PARIS: In August of 1533 Calvin attended a meeting of the clergy in Noyon where he was still in good standing. He still enjoyed the income from his benefices.

By October, 1533, he was back in Paris, where the Humanists were again in favor. Marguerite d'Angoulême had published her Mirror of a Sinful Soul. The Sorbonne condemned her book as heretical. Cop aroused the university in her defense. The king forbade any criticism of her book.

Nicholas Cop was appointed rector of the university. On November 1, 1533, he delivered his inaugural address. The Sorbonne declared the address was filled with Lutheran heresy and instituted heresy proceedings against both Cop and Calvin. Rumors had spread that Calvin had had a part in the preparation of the address. Cop fled to Basel. Calvin's friends warned him that the police were on their way to arrest him. As the police knocked at his door he escaped by a window, climbing down on a rope of twisted bed sheets and curtains. Dressed as a peasant vineyard worker, with a hoe over his shoulder, he escaped from the city.

Calvin found refuge with Louis du Tillet in Saintonge. He spent the early part of 1534 studying in du Tillet's excellent library. In April, 1534, he visited the aged Lefèvre at Nerac.

CALVIN RESIGNED HIS BENEFICES: On May 4, 1534, Calvin returned to Noyon to resign his benefices. He was approaching twenty-five, the time for his ordination. He later wrote of a sudden conversion that made it impossible for him to continue in the Roman Church. He gave no date nor details. It has remained a mystery.

He paid short visits to Paris, Orléans and Poitiers, but everywhere friends warned him he was in great danger. He returned to Angoulême where du Tillet urged that they must flee. They fled to Strassbourg with horses, some money, and two servants. After a brief visit with Bucer they set out for Basel. One of the servants stole all the money and the horses. On foot they finally arrived in Basel where Calvin assumed the name of Martianus Lucanius. They were welcomed by Myconius and Bullinger. Calvin studied Hebrew with Sebastian Münster and eagerly awaited news from France concerning the fierce persecution of French evangelicals by Francis I.

Calvin's future seemed completely uncertain.