

Noyon, Paris, Orléans, Bourges: a humanist and legal education

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Jehan Calvin was born on 10 July 1509 in Noyon, in Picardy.¹ His father, Gérard Calvin, held a prominent position in the town: apostolic secretary to the Bishop of Noyon, procurator of the chapter of the diocese and fiscal procurator of the county.² His mother, Jeanne Lefranc, was the daughter of an innkeeper from Cambrai.³ The young Calvin thus grew up in a milieu in which ecclesiastical administration, the management of property and the practice of law were intertwined. His father maintained close relations with the leading families of the region, and it was thanks to the protection of one of them, the Montmors, that Calvin was able to continue his studies in Paris, at the Collège de la Marche.⁴

In Paris, Calvin received a solid grounding in Latin and the humanities. He is said to have attended the classes of the pedagogue Mathurin Cordier, whom he would later meet again in Geneva, and then to have studied at the Collège de Montaigu, renowned for its severe discipline.⁵ Initially destined for an ecclesiastical career, he received the tonsure and enjoyed the income attached to benefices.⁶ His father, having come into conflict with the chapter of Noyon, then steered him towards the law, which was considered more lucrative and more secure.⁷

Calvin studied law at Orléans and then at Bourges, two universities that ranked among the centres of French legal scholarship.⁸ At Orléans the teaching was then in the hands of Pierre de l'Estoile, a jurist renowned for his rigour, while Bourges hosted the Italian Andrea Alciato, one of the leading figures of legal humanism.⁹ At Bourges, Calvin also learned Greek from the German humanist Melchior Wolmar, who is said to have introduced him to Reformed ideas as well.¹⁰

The death of his father on 26 May 1531 released Calvin from the obligation to pursue a legal career.¹¹ He turned to classical letters and in 1532 published a commentary on Seneca's treatise *De Clementia* (On Clemency), the work

of an ambitious humanist seeking to make a name for himself in the republic of letters.¹² This first work already reveals several features of his method: a thorough knowledge of the ancient sources, attention to context, a concern for clarity and a marked interest in questions of government.

Calvin's legal training deserves emphasis, because it distinguishes him from many other reformers, who came from scholastic theology or from the clergy. Calvin had learned to read normative texts, to identify their purpose, to reconcile apparently contradictory provisions and to draft clear rules. These skills would reappear in his theological work, in his activity as an organiser and in his way of approaching economic questions.

Key points. Calvin was a lawyer by training. The son of an ecclesiastical administrator and fiscal procurator, educated at Orléans and Bourges in the milieu of legal humanism, he applied to theology and to the organisation of the city the methods of interpretation and drafting learned in the law faculties.

1 Notes

1. Article "John Calvin", Wikipedia (en) (accessed September 2026). ↩
2. Article "Gérard Cauvin", Wikipedia (en) (accessed September 2026).
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3. Article "Gérard Cauvin", Wikipedia (en), cited above. ↩
4. Article "John Calvin", Wikipedia (en), cited above. ↩
5. Wikipedia (en), "Mathurin Cordier": Cordier (1479/1480–1564), holder of the chair of rhetoric at the Collège de la Marche in 1523, taught Calvin there; took refuge in Geneva in 1536 or 1537, director of the schools of Neuchâtel and then of Lausanne (1545–1547), back in Geneva in 1559, died on 8 September 1564; Wikipedia (en), "John Calvin": Calvin withdrawn from the Collège de Montaigu by his father (1525–1526) to study law at Orléans. ↩
6. Article "John Calvin", Wikipedia (en), cited above, which mentions the tonsure. ↩
7. Wikipedia (en), "John Calvin": his father, Gérard, withdrew Calvin from the Collège de Montaigu (1525–1526) to have him study law at the University of Orléans. ↩
8. Article "John Calvin", Wikipedia (en), cited above; La Revue réformée, no. 266, "La légitimité du prêt à intérêt chez Jean Calvin", which states that he completed his law studies at Orléans. ↩

9. Wikipedia (en), “John Calvin”: law studies at Orléans, then at Bourges (1529) under Andrea Alciato, who inspired his humanist approach to law; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS) (Historical Dictionary of Switzerland), art. “Calvin, Jean”: law at Orléans and Bourges, licence in 1531. ↩
10. Wikipedia (en), “John Calvin”: learned Greek (Koine) during the eighteen months spent at Bourges. ↩
11. Article “Gérard Cauvin”, Wikipedia (en), cited above, for the date of death. ↩
12. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Calvin, Jean”: “commentary on Seneca’s De Clementia, 1532”. ↩

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