

The Strasbourg exile (1538–1541)

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

After his expulsion, Calvin went to Strasbourg at the invitation of the reformer Martin Bucer. There he became pastor of the church of the French refugees.¹ These three Strasbourg years were among the most fruitful of his life. They allowed him to gain pastoral experience, to observe the workings of a large Reformed city and to build relationships with the leading reformers of the day.

Strasbourg was then a free imperial city, prosperous, with an ecclesiastical organisation developed by Bucer, a renowned school system and Reformed institutions of public assistance. Calvin discovered there a model of collaboration between the Church and the magistrate, in which pastors, elders and the civil authorities shared the supervision of morals and the organisation of charity. He also observed the workings of the gymnasium founded by Jean Sturm, which would later inspire the organisation of the Collège and the Académie de Genève.²

On a personal level, Calvin married Idelette de Bure in 1540, the widow of an Anabaptist refugee whom he had brought back to the Reformed faith.³ On the intellectual level, he published in 1539 a second edition of the *Institution*, three times longer than the first and enriched with chapters inspired by Melanchthon's *Loci communes*.⁴ He also replied to the open letter of Cardinal Jacopo Sadoletto, who had invited the Genevans to return to the Roman Church. His reply, written at the request of the Bernese and Genevan authorities, enhanced his prestige in the city that had driven him out.⁵

Calvin also took part in several religious colloquies organised in the Empire in an attempt to reconcile Catholics and Protestants.⁶ There he met Melanchthon and other Lutheran theologians. This experience broadened his horizons and gave him a European stature. When he returned to Geneva, the young humanist of 1536 had become a recognised reformer with an international network.

The Strasbourg exile offers a lesson that goes beyond Calvin's biography. Refugees, far from their city or their country, often acquire skills, connections and a broader vision which they later bring back with them. Geneva would benefit from this phenomenon on a large scale with the arrival of French, Italian, English and Dutch refugees during the sixteenth century. The circulation of people, ideas and practices between the Reformed cities would become one of the sources of Genevan prosperity.

1 Notes

1. Article "John Calvin", Wikipedia (en), cited above. ↩
2. Wikipedia (en), "Johannes Sturm": "in 1538 he set up the Protestant gymnasium, the Schola Argenteratensis (now called Jean Sturm Gymnasium)"; a curriculum based on rhetoric and the classical authors, a model for secondary education in Germany, England and France. ↩
3. Article "John Calvin", Wikipedia (en), cited above, for the marriage in 1540. ↩
4. Article "John Calvin bibliography", Wikipedia (en) (accessed September 2026). ↩
5. Wikipedia (en), "Jacopo Sadoleto": "In 1539 Cardinal Sadoleto wrote to the people of Geneva, urging them to return to the Catholic faith"; the Genevans asked Calvin, then in Strasbourg, to reply, which he did; edition: *A Reformation Debate: Sadoleto's Letter to the Genevans and Calvin's Reply* (1966). ↩
6. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS) (Historical Dictionary of Switzerland), art. "Calvin, Jean": during his stay in Strasbourg, Calvin published his first biblical commentary (on the Epistle to the Romans, 1540) and took part in the "colloquies of Worms and Regensburg (1540–1541)"; recalled by the Genevan magistrates in 1540, he agreed to return in 1541; Wikipedia (en), art. "John Calvin" (Genevan delegation reaching Calvin during the colloquy of Worms). ↩

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