In the sixteenth century, Europe leaves the Middle Ages and experiences an unprecedented cultural effervescence called the Renaissance. This effervescence also reaches the religious ideas and the Church in the West which will undergo a profound change, the Reformation. Northern Europe and some countries in the East will adopt it. Geneva is situated at the southernmost point.
This change begins with **Martin Luther** in Germany and it is then promoted through a new medium, the printing press.
What is this all about? A return to Jewish and Christian roots (the rediscovery of the Bible) and the renewal of the concept of Church based on this roots.
Geneva is a very old, small, European republican democracy which opts for the Reformation in 1536. It breaks away from the house of Savoy and cuts ties with the Church of Rome and the Pope. Democracy was not invented by Calvin. It is thanks to the democratic decision of the people of Geneva that Calvin was able to come to Geneva.

Who is John Calvin? A young French man, intellectually extremely gifted, a lawyer who turned to theology. He is the author of a best-seller: *the Christian institution*, which sets out revolutionary ideas on theology and ecclesiastical organization.
He passes through Geneva by chance on his way to teach in Strasbourg. People recognize him and ask him to stay. He is convinced that he has been called by God himself. That is how he starts to work in Geneva.

First time in Geneva: Late 1536 - Easter 1538.
His priority is the implementation of the reform of the Church.
Calvin's Church is not a hierarchical pyramid with the Pope at the top. It is not intended as an intermediary between God and humanity. The priesthood, reserved only to a few, disappears. For Calvin, every believer is a priest and is responsible for his/her relationship to God. The believers are linked by a theological contract which is central to the Church: the confession of faith. The
Doctrine is therefore very important.
The ministers are not above believers, they are not priests - they are simply educated lay people.

The three fundamental theological principles are:
Sola fide (the center of the Christian life is faith);
Sola gratia (Only God saves, not the humans merits);
Sola scriptura (the Bible is the supreme authority).

Exile in Strasbourg.
Tensions around the Confession of faith that Calvin wants to make mandatory for all residents lead to his banishment in 1538. That is why he spent three years in Strasbourg. There, he teaches and looks after the community of French refugees. It is there too that he marries his wife, **Idelette Bure**. Together they have one child, who dies very young.

In the absence of Calvin, the Catholics – especially cardinal Sadolet - try to retake Geneva. Worried, the Council recalls Calvin in 1541. He resumes his classes from where he had left them in 1538.

Second time in Geneva: from September 1541 to 1564
Upon his return, Calvin asks the Geneva people to vote for the Ecclesiastical Ordinances. The aim is to give a Constitution to the Church of Geneva. The church is led by the **Consistory** and the **Company of Pastors** (ministers). The Church of Calvin is egalitarian and democratic leaders are elected by the people. It is separated from the State and autonomous in its decisions. The State has nevertheless the duty to assist and protect the Church.

Parallel to the reorganization of the Church, Calvin is an extremely important theologian and teacher. He writes works which are fundamental for theology: the *Christian institution,* for example, that he constantly modified, Commentaries (he commented on the Bible), various treaties (often controversial) and catechisms. Nearly a hundred books, plus thousands of sermons, thousands of hours of teaching and extensive correspondence. The *Geneva Bible* is regarded as an important step in the codification of modern French.

The printed book, which is a very recent invention, is taking off. In a few years, Geneva overtakes large commercial cities like Lyon, Venice or Frankfurt. Bibles and all sorts of books are produced in several languages and spread throughout Europe. Renowned printers such as **Guillaume Budé** or **Robert Estienne** come to Geneva.

The concept of study and intellectual work is very important. Calvin is a humanist. In Geneva, he creates public education for young people (for example the *college de Rive*) and later the academy, of which **Théodore de Bèze**, his trusty right arm, is the first rector. Geneva becomes a famous intellectual capital whose influence is not only limited to the training of ministers.

For Calvin, this Reform should not be limited to the spiritual field. It aspires to be at the same time a social, moral and political reform.
The social reform leads to the development of solidarity with the poor. Whilst in Western Europe during the Middle Ages poverty is valued because it is considered as bringing you closer to God (St. Francis of Assisi!), Calvin considers poverty to be evil. Poverty must be fought. This is how the "hospice", which preceded the current social institutions, was born.
The same thing happens with health. Calvin extends the *Plainpalais Hospital* and promotes medical research.

From a moral point of view, the Calvinist reform is like a conservative revolution which requires Christians to be "perfect". The Consistory is a police of good moral conduct which closely monitors the population. Wrongdoing is punished severely - adultery (when it can be proven) or prostitution can lead to death.
However, the equality of men and women is declared in Geneva and in some cases, divorce is even allowed. Calvin even tries – but unsuccessfully - to pass a law punishing violence against women.

From an economical point of view, there has been a lot of talking about Calvin and capitalism. It is true that the Reform encouraged the banks by authorizing loans with interest. But it is not Calvin who invented this system. It was already practiced by Venetian or Lombard bankers. Its originality is to justify the loan with interest with theological arguments taken directly from the Talmud, and this was something entirely new for Christians!
Broadly speaking, Calvin is a citizen in favour of economic prosperity. For him a man's vocation is not to waste his time but to make the most of it for the good of all.

His political reform is more complex. Calvin comes from France, he is not from Geneva. He only becomes "Genevois" 4 years before his death.
He is not eligible and he will never be a member of the Government of the city, which is divided between the **Great** and the **Small Council**. He doesn't have the means to impose a new Constitution in Geneva. However, as a lawyer, he is asked to create new laws for the city, civil and political Edicts. We can say that he made his mark on the laws of Geneva in an indirect way. On the one hand, Calvin must obtain the support of the State to carry out reforms. On the other hand, there is constant friction with the people of Geneva. It is not accepted that a foreigner - a French man – tries to rule everything in Geneva. An anti-Calvinist party called the "Libertins" (the

friends of freedom) is very quickly established. Calvin and his allies (mainly French refugees) are the target of strong xenophobia. He is very close to losing the elections. Internal struggles are common.

At the international level, you only have to read the diplomatic correspondence of the day to understand the geopolitical importance assumed by the small Protestant republic in the eyes of Europe. And even beyond, since Calvin greatly admired the Ottoman Empire and even considered building alliances with it. Geneva becomes a religious symbol worldwide.

But Calvin does not only leave good memories in Geneva. The Reformation is a particularly austere period, one of intolerance. The Consistory not only monitors the morality of the population. The Consistory also monitors the fair doctrine. It also polices people, telling them how to think.
In Geneva, it is obligatory to be a Calvinist; people who think otherwise are either exiled or executed.

Woe to him who denies infant baptism, predestination, or the Holy trinity! In matters of theological doctrine, Calvin is as implacable as the Catholic Inquisition. He does not tolerate contradiction. Under his rule, several trials for heresy remain famous:
the trial of **Jérôme Bolsec** (who challenged predestination), that of **Jacques Gruet** (an atheist), of **Michel Servet** (against the Trinity), **Valentin Gentilis**. They all end being banished from Geneva or being burnt at the stake. The witch hunts are also frightening.

It is fair to say that intolerance is not exceptional at the time, although it is sad that Calvin is not able to find a way to fight this intolerance. Because of this failure, the great humanist **Sebastian Castellion** voluntarily leaves Geneva and Calvin.

Calvin dies on 27 May 1564. For us he is not a saint - in our view, only God knows who is holy and who is not. But he is the initiator of a movement of powerful civilization that marks the advent of the modern world. Protestantism begins with him, but is not limited to him. It is the job of each new generation to further develop and enrich it.
Being a Calvinist today is not to repeat what Calvin has said or written, but to show some creativity and innovation for solving current problems.

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