



Idelette: God's helpmate for John Calvin

In July of 1540 John Calvin made a marriage proposal to Idelette de Bure. She accepted. Three weeks later they were married on August 10, 1540. Many wedding couples have an interesting story of how God brought their lives together. The Calvin's marriage is no exception.

Obstacles to marriage

At least three years prior to the wedding date neither of them were suited for each other. That might sound surprising in light of the fact that both were opposed to the doctrinal and moral decay in the Roman Catholic Church; and both were very serious about their Christian faith. What, then, made them such a mismatch for marriage?

John Calvin had already begun to prove himself as an able preacher, a careful theologian and powerful Reformer. He fought the fight of faith on at least three main battle fronts. First, he defended the truth against false doctrine so prevalent in the Roman Catholic Church. Second, he waged spiritual war against the immoral and antireligious sentiments of the Libertines. They plotted wicked schemes against Calvin and threatened him with violence. Under their influence the city leaders of Geneva would eventually give Calvin this ultimatum: 'Leave Geneva within three days.'

The third flank of Calvin's opposition came from Dutch Reformers who were called the Anabaptists. In reaction to the Roman Catholic Church they 'threw out the baby with the (baptism) water.' According to their assessment all corruption in the Church could be traced back to two errors — infant baptism and the close connection between Church and State. They despised civil government — insisting that a faithful Christian could not serve in a governmental position. Anabaptists came to be labeled as 'Radicals' because of their fiery zeal and rigorous reaction to the Roman Catholic Church. They criticized Reformers like John Calvin for not having gone far enough with their reforms.

These three enemies: the Roman Catholics, the Libertines, and the Anabaptists, inflicted misery on the great Reformer. No halfhearted man would dare to wage war against any one of them. Yet, John Calvin proves his religious devotion by entering into the conflict with all three.

Idelette's life also reflects a seriousness about her Christian faith. She was born in the Netherlands and eventually came to live in Liege, Belgium. During the time of the Reformation, Liege was not a safe place for a Protestant, like Idelette, to live (*History*, 6:406).

We can safely assume that Idelette would have been among those willing to suffer persecution for the sake of the Gospel — at least as confessed by the Anabaptists. You see, Idelette was married to John Storder, one of the principal leaders of the Anabaptist movement in Liege.

To summarize, there were two obstacles that prevented John Calvin and Idelette de Bure from being suitable marriage partners. First, Idelette was already happily married to John Storder. Second, she and her husband identified themselves with the 'Radicals of the Reformation.' They were among those willing to be persecuted for their Anabaptistic beliefs — some of which John Calvin stringently objected.

Unsuspected providence

In the course of time, God's Providence began to rearrange the circumstances in the individual lives of John Calvin and Idelette Storder. On April 25, 1538 the city council in Geneva banished

John Calvin and his two colleagues from their Switzerland city. Calvin received urgent letters from Martin Bucer, one of the Reformation pastors in Strasborg, to join him in Germany. Within five months of leaving Geneva, Calvin settled in the city of Strasborg.

Two things should be remembered about Strasborg. First, it took a courageous stand in favor of the Protestant Reformation. The second factor is geographical. At that time in history Strasborg was situated less than 100 miles outside the border of a staunchly Roman Catholic France. These two factors combine to draw attention to God's providential protection for His Church. Strasborg welcomed those who fled the Roman Catholic persecutions in France.

Though Martin Bucer would continue to minister to the *citizens* of Strasborg, John Calvin would begin to minister God's Word to the French refugees. Calvin, a native of France, must have felt at home among the four to five hundred fugitives from his homeland.

One of the families that had fled to Strasborg for safety was the John Storder family which consisted of John, Idelette and their two children.

"Bucer, it appears, had introduced Calvin to the family, in the hope, doubtless, of enlightening Storder. Calvin had held private conversations with him, and the Belgian had been converted to the true Gospel by the ministry of the reformer. Idelette had probably also been converted at the same period."

(History, 6:406)

Already God was preparing John Calvin and Idelette Storder for each other even though neither of them had suspected God's marriage plan for them.

Sometime within the next two years an epidemic swept through Strasborg. John Storder contracted the deadly plague and in a short time Idelette became a widow. Both of the obstacles which had made John Calvin and Idelette de Bure unsuitable for marriage were now removed.

Three proposals and still a bachelor

While Idelette was grieving, John Calvin was making plans for marriage. In February of 1539 Calvin penned a letter to his friend and colleague, William Farel, inviting him to the wedding ceremony. According to the Providence of God however, the wedding did not take place.

Nearly one year later Calvin was still a bachelor. At this time international politics threatened to shake Geneva and her Reformers like an earthquake. Who would even think of pursuing a marriage under such circumstances.

"Nevertheless," writes Calvin to William Farel: "in the midst of such commotions as these, I am so much at my ease, as to have the audacity to think, of taking a wife. A certain damsel of noble rank has been proposed to me, and with a fortune above my condition. Two considerations deterred me from that connection:

- *because she did not understand our language,*
- *and because I feared she might be too mindful of her family and education.*

I could not engage myself unless the maiden would undertake that she would apply her mind to the learning of our language, she requested time for deliberation. If it come to pass, as we may certainly hope will be the case, the marriage ceremony will not be delayed beyond the tenth of March."

March 10, 1540 came and went without any reply from his fiancé. By this time Calvin began to think that he would never get married. Soon Calvin would be turning 31 years old. Though Calvin and his friends longed for him to be married he seemed not to despair. Instead he used his age together with his single state to defend the Reformation movement.

Just when Calvin was about to give up on marriage the tide of God's providence turned in favor of Calvin's desire. Dr. Martin Bucer, the other pastor in Strasborg, suggested John Storder's widow to

his friend John Calvin. Bucer's promptings must have succeeded. In less than two months, on August 10, 1540, they tied the knot.

In sickness & in health

In less than six weeks after their wedding day both John and Idelette became extremely ill. This was just the first bout of sicknesses that would characterize their short nine years of marriage. His interpretation of this first wave of ill-health reveals Calvin's submission to God's Fatherly care. He humbly acknowledged God's providence in this way:

"...it seemed, indeed, as if it had been so ordered on purpose that our wedlock might not be over joyous, that we might not exceed all bounds, that the Lord thus thwarted our joy by moderating it."

(*Selected Works*, vol. 4, Letter October, 1540)

Early in 1542 (their second year of marriage) Idelette became pregnant with their first child. Then in July we read this sad correspondence from John Calvin to his friend and colleague, Peter Viret, who ministered in Lausanne, Switzerland.

"This brother ... will tell you in how great anxiety I am at present writing to you. My wife has been delivered prematurely, not without extreme danger; but may the Lord have a care over us."

(*Selected Works*, vol. 4, Letter [July] 1542)

One month later, the premature labor and early delivery of their first child took its toll on Idelette's health. *"She is unable to reply (to your letter),"* writes Calvin to Peter Viret, *"except by (a secretary), and it would be very difficult for her even to dictate a letter."* In all of this the great theologian humbly acknowledged the providence of God. *"The Lord has certainly inflicted a severe and bitter wound in the death of our infant son,"* he penned in his letter. As a pastor and husband we might assume that he consoled Idelette with the same sentiments which he expressed to the Viret family. *"But (God) is himself a Father, and knows best what is good for his children."* (*Selected Works*, vol. 4, Letter August 19, 1542).

In their fourth year of marriage John and Idelette experienced the birth and death of their second child. Writing to William Farel on May 30, 1544, John Calvin expressed his concern for his infant daughter. *"The pestilence (i.e. the plague) again alarms us, and seems to be on the increase. My little daughter labors under a continual fever."* (*Selected Works*, vol. 4, Letter May 30, 1544). Some time later Peter Viret and his wife received a letter from John Calvin expressing grief over the loss of their infant daughter.

1545 marked the death of yet a third child born to the Calvin's. On August 19, in the closing paragraph to their dear friends, the Viret's, John Calvin writes, *"The Lord has certainly inflicted a heavy and severe wound on us, by the death of our little son, but He is our Father, and knows what is expedient for his children."* (*Life of Calvin*, editor's footnote 10, p. 268).

After this third pregnancy in 1545 Idelette would never again be strong enough to bear children. Three years after they buried their third child John Calvin sent greetings to Farel on behalf of Idelette *"who (was) in bed from prolonged illness"* (*Selected Works*, vol. 5 Letter August 27, 1548).

John and Idelette Calvin had developed a close friendship with various leaders of the Protestant Reformation. Judging by the number of letters and their affectionate exchange we get the impression that among their closest friends were Peter Viret and his wife together with the bachelor, William Farel. That is probably why Calvin notified these two households first with this sober announcement: *"the death of my wife has been exceedingly painful to me..."* (*Selected Works*, vol. 5 Letters April 7 & 11, 1549). Idelette departed from this life on April 5, 1549.

Idelette's character

Most of what we know of Idelette and her character must be gleaned from the pen of her second husband, John Calvin. From his comments about her and from inferences made from their life's

circumstances I will attempt to categorize her life's testimony under the following texts from Scripture.

Proverbs 18:22 & 31:28-29

The first two passages both come from the book of Proverbs.

"He who finds a wife finds a good thing, And obtains favor from the LORD."

(Proverbs 18:22)

"Her children rise up and call her blessed; Her husband also, and he praises her: 'Many daughters have done well, But you excel them all.'"

(Proverbs 31:28-29)

Calvin enjoyed many close and warm friendships. None brought greater joy to his life than Idelette. He had expressed those very sentiments to William Farel just two days after her death. *"And truly mine is no common source of grief. I have been bereaved of the best companion of my life."* Her ambitions in life so harmonized with those of her husband that John Calvin went on to write, *"...had it been so ordered, (Idelette) would not only have been the willing sharer of my (poverty), but even of my death."* As far as a helpmate goes John Calvin testified that *"During her life she was the faithful helper of my ministry. From her I never experienced the slightest hindrance."*

As providence would have it Idelette suffered many illnesses in their short nine years of marriage. Yet, Calvin never seemed to be frustrated by any of them. With his own pen he writes, *"She was never troublesome to me throughout the entire course of her illness."* What especially struck Calvin about her life was that *"she was more anxious about her children than about herself"* (*Selected Works*, vol. 5 Letter April 7, 1549).

Many of Calvin's letter closings give further evidence that she was a faithful help-mate for the great Reformer. For example, in one of his letters to Peter and Elizabeth Viret, Calvin writes, *"The Lord preserve you all. My wife dutifully salutes you and your family. Yours, John Calvin"* (*Selected Works*, vol. 5 Letter March, 1544).

She likely assisted his ministry in other ways as well. In one letter, for instance, he reports that Idelette comforted a dying man. While Calvin attended many of his other pressing duties on that particular day Idelette faithfully stayed at the bedside of Amy Porral – the borgomaster of Geneva. (*Selected Works*, vol. 4 Letter June 16, 1542).

1Peter 3:3-4

The second passage comes from 1Peter 3:3-4,

"Do not let your adornment be merely outward – arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel – rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God."

What Calvin most highly prized in Idelette was *'the hidden man of the heart, the incorruptibility of a meek and quiet spirit,'* her modesty.

'Nothing is more becoming to women than a meek and peaceful spirit,' he said; *'we know what kind of creature a bold and obstinate woman is, who, from pride, vanity, and wantonness, is fond of showing herself off. Happy is the woman whose style of dress is modest, who does not go gadding about the streets, but keeps the house because of her love to her husband and her children.'*

(*History*, 6:407-408)

1Peter 4:9-10

The third passage comes from 1Peter 4:9-10.

"Be hospitable to one another without grumbling. As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God."

When John Calvin and Idelette returned from their honeymoon — if they had one — they entered a full house. Their house was more like a boarding school than a home. At least two of Calvin's siblings lived with them for a while — his brother Antoine and his stepsister Marie. Claude Defray, who had become a good friend of John Calvin, rented one of their rooms. Claude was a school teacher who also had two students renting rooms in John's house.

There were others who also enjoyed Christian hospitality at the Calvin home. In 1548, for example, Monsieur and Madame de Falais were living with the Calvin's on 11 Canon Street in Geneva for an unknown period of time.

Hebrews 12:1-2

The final passage comes from Hebrews 12.

"Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

(Hebrews 12:1-2)

Idelette demonstrated a deep trust in God's Fatherly care for her children. Calvin told this touching story regarding the closing days of her life.

"As I feared these private cares might annoy her to no purpose, I took occasion, on the third day before her death, to mention that I would not fail in discharging my duty to her children. Taking up the matter immediately, she said, 'I have already committed them to God.' When I said that that was not to prevent me from caring for them, she replied, 'I know you will not neglect what you know has been committed to God.'"

(Selected Works, vol. 5 Letter April 7, 1549)

Idelette also demonstrated a deep trust in God regarding her own salvation. Again, John Calvin recorded her own testimony which she spoke from her death bed.

"About the sixth hour of the day, on which she yielded up her soul to the Lord, our brother Bourgouin addressed some pious words to her, and while he was doing so, she spoke aloud, so that all saw that her heart was raised far above the world. For these were her words: 'O glorious resurrection! O God of Abraham, and of all our fathers, in thee have the faithful trusted during so many past ages, and none of them have trusted in vain. I also will hope.' These short sentences were rather ejaculated than distinctly spoken. This did not come from the suggestion of others, but from her own reflections, so that she made it obvious in few words what were her own meditations. I had to go out at six o'clock. Having been removed to another apartment after seven, she immediately began to decline. When she felt her voice suddenly failing her, she said: let us pray: let us pray. All pray for me.' I had now returned. She was unable to speak, and her mind seemed to be troubled. I, having spoken a few words about the love of Christ, the hope of eternal life, concerning our married life, and her departure, engaged in prayer. In full possession of her mind, she both heard the prayer, and attended to it. Before eight she expired, so calmly, that those present could scarcely distinguish between her life and her death."

(Selected Works, vol. 5 Letter April 11, 1549)

Based on Calvin's testimony we get the strong impression that she lived by the same convictions of faith with which she died. Such oneness in Jesus Christ would have harmonized their marriage and would have made Idelette a most suitable helpmate for the great Reformer — John Calvin.

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