CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Christian History, October 1986

The Life and Times of John Calvin

As Shakespeare wrote, "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." John Calvin was certainly not born great.

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Calvin came from lowly stock. His paternal grandfather was a barrel-maker and boatman, his mother's father an innkeeper. His own father, Gerard, however, had improved his lot to become a successful lawyer, with a practice which brought him into the society of the local gentry and cathedral clergy. A side benefit from these connections fell to John, in that he was to be educated privately with the sons of the aristocratic De Montmors and was also to be given one or two chaplaincies in the cathedral, which serve as university grants.

Gerard planned a career in the church for his son. The path to this career lay through the University of Paris. There he would take the arts course and then go on to the nine years of study for the theological doctorate. After that, he would trust the De Montmors' patronage and his own talents to reach the higher levels of preferment.

The arts course was accomplished, or nearly so, by the mid-1520s. Calvin was now an excellent scholar, a good Latinist, proficient in the philosophy taught in those days, and qualified to take up the intensive study of theology.

A Change in Plans

But suddenly all the plans fell through. Gerard changed his mind and decided that John should achieve greatness in law and not in the church. John, dutiful son that he was, acquiesced, and the next five or six years saw him at the University of Orleans, attaining some distinction in a study for which he had no love. These were years which brought him into the ideals of the Renaissance and probably into the evangelical faith as well.

The effects of the new approach to the arts and scholarship were by this time apparent all over Europe. Greek was steadily making its way as a necessity and not a mere ornament in the scholar's equipment. Printing presses were supplying cheap editions of the Greek and Latin classics. There were already half-a-dozen editions of the Greek New Testament and as many of the Hebrew Old Testament. It was a revolution in thinking and taste, almost as great as that which has occurred in our own day, with "the divine art of printing," as Bullinger called it, corresponding to the computer and word processor.

Calvin, too, came under this influence. He learned Greek now and, a little later, Hebrew. He developed a taste for good writing, read widely in the classics, added Plato to the Aristotle he already knew, and made his close friends from like-minded young men. Moreover, he set to work, editing and commenting on a Latin treatise by Seneca. This first book was published in 1532, when he was 22 years old.

But, during the years of studying law, a more profound influence than that of the Renaissance had overtaken him. By the mid-1520s, the most momentous period in the history of the modern church, Luther's position was clear. In many countries Luther had a strong following and his friends were making use of the easy dissemination of ideas by printing to reach a wider audience. Most importantly for Calvin, there were also "Lutherans" in Paris and in Orleans.

Conversion

We do not know the time or the circumstances of Calvin's conversion to the evangelical faith. His own account in the preface to his commentary on the Psalms is reticent and vague. He writes:

> God drew me from obscure and lowly beginnings and conferred on me that most honorable office of herald and minister of the Gospel …What happened first was that by an unexpected conversion he tamed to teachableness a mind too stubborn for its years—for I was strongly devoted to the superstitions of the Papacy that nothing less could draw me from such depths of mire. And so this mere taste of true godliness that I received set me on fire with such a desire to progress that I pursued the rest of my studies more coolly, although I did not give them up altogether. Before a year had slipped by anybody who longed for a purer doctrine kept on coming to learn from me, still a beginner and a raw recruit.

Plainly, for Calvin himself, the important thing was not when it happened or how it happened, but the change itself and the results of the change.

He became marked out as a "Lutheran," and, when persecution arose in Paris where he had returned to teach in one of the colleges, he was forced into hiding now here, now there, in France. At last, he had to leave the country altogether. He sought refuge in Basel.

In that city, 450 years ago, he published the book with which his name was always to be associated—"Calvin's Institutes." The word "Institutes," however, does not convey much to us. It would be better to translate the title as "Principles of the Christian Faith" or "Instruction in the Christian Faith." The book was intended as an elementary manual for general readers who wanted to know something about the evangelical faith. The first part of the title expressed this aim: "The Principles of the Christian Faith, containing almost the whole sum of godliness and whatever it is necessary to know about saving doctrine." Calvin later wrote that, when he undertook the work, "all I had in mind was to hand on some elementary teaching by which anyone who had been touched by an interest in religion might be formed to true godliness. I labored at the task especially for

our own Frenchmen, for I saw that many were hungering and thirsting after Christ and yet that only a very few had any real knowledge of him."

The first three chapters take up 81 pages, in the edition of 1536. They form the heart of the book. But the situation in Western Christendom demanded that more should be said. Between the Roman Catholics and the Reformers, there were three major disagreements—on the Church, the Sacraments, and Justification. The last had already been fully explained, and the first was kept for the final chapter. Two chapters were given to discussion of the Sacraments of the Roman Church not recognized by the Reformers. These two chapters, with 106 pages, are longer because the subject was so important. In to the final chapter are packed three topics: Christian liberty, the authority of the Church, and political government.

The fact that the length of the last three chapters is double that of the first three indicates a second purpose of the book. This was to make clear to non-evangelicals, whether strong Roman Catholics or Renaissance "humanists," where the Reformation stood doctrinally. Ridiculous ideas were current, identifying the Reformers with various ancient heresies, with extreme and anarchistic Anabaptists, and with moral permissiveness. Calvin, therefore, wrote the *Institutio* as a confession of the faith of evangelicals, showing their orthodoxy to the great creeds, their loyalty to established political order, and their acceptance of the moral demands of God's law. There should have been no need after this for anyone who could understand Latin to plead ignorance of the Reformation faith.

What If?

History is full of "ifs." If there had not been troop movements and skirmishes blocking the route to Strasbourg, if they had reached Strasbourg in a day or two, and if Calvin had settled there for life, the history of Europe, England, and America would have been vastly different.

With his brother and sister and one or two friends, he directed his steps toward the free city of Strasbourg. As it was, the little company had to go round two sides of a triangle, into what we now call Switzerland, and then approach Strasbourg from the south. They got to Geneva, a safe town for them, since it had declared for the Reformation a month or two earlier. Here they put up at an inn for the night, intending to resume their journey in the morning.

Before the evening was out, it had come to the ears of the church leader, William Farel, that the author of the *Institutio* was in the city. Farel, poor man, was beside himself with work and worry, as he strove to organize and establish a newly formed church. Organizing was not his strong point, and he had few helpers. Now there had been given him a man who would prove an ideal assistant. Straight to the inn went Farel, not dreaming that his offer would be welcomed. Calvin, however, was obdurate. He was a scholar, a writer, not a pastor or administrator. Farel would have to find someone else. Calvin was headed for Strasbourg in the morning.

Terror-Stricken to Stay

At last Farel, baffled and frustrated, swore a great oath that God would curse all Calvin's studies unless he stayed in Geneva. Calvin had always had a tender conscience, and now, "I felt as if God from heaven had laid his mighty hand upon me to stop me in my course... and I was so terror stricken that I did not continue my journey."

Through all that followed, this belief that God had called him to work here, and not somewhere else, never wavered. This belief was challenged only once, when he and Farel were banished from Geneva eighteen months later. He thought that God had mercifully released him. But, after three years of freedom, he submitted to renewed imprecations from Farel and returned to Geneva. In the long struggles which followed, his human desires were for freedom; but he was a soldier placed in a field of battle by his Captain. In that battle he must stay, until his Captain ordered otherwise. New orders finally arrived in May, 1564, with his death.

His return to Geneva from Strasbourg in 1541 was a different matter from his first entering the city. Then he had been a mere passer-by. Now he was an important and influential personage, close friend of leading Reformers like Martin Bucer and Philip Melanchthon, and the author of three more books.

The *Institutio* was rewritten. Since 1536, Calvin had been doing some hard reading, especially in the Church fathers. He had also been doing some hard theological thinking and had the benefit of stimulating discussions with other theologians. He realized the *Institutio* needed more breadth.

He now put it out with the unashamed claim of presenting a comprehensive statement of "well-nigh the whole sum of our wisdom, worth calling true and solid wisdom." This was not so much a revision as a rewriting, though with much of the earlier material incorporated into it. The six chapters swelled to seventeen. The catechism form was abandoned, in favor of a broader treatment centering loosely round the concept of wisdom, with its two parts, the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves.

It was, then, this established theologian who was invited back to Geneva. He could make his own terms and was obviously in a position of great moral advantage. It is to his credit that he strove to curb his temper and his self-will (both too evident in his first period in Geneva) and to be patient with opposition.

Reorganizing the Church

His commission was to reorganize the Church in Geneva. For him, the Church in any place must faithfully mirror the principles laid down in the Holy Scripture. In the New Testament, he found four permanent orders of ministry, and around these he constructed his organization. He prepared a draft document, "Ecclesiastical Ordinances," which was discussed in committee, somewhat modified, and passed for approval by the City Councils.

In this fourfold ministry, the whole life of the Church was covered, its worship, education, soundness and purity, and its works of love and mercy.

To the pastors was committed the ministry of the Word and Sacraments. They conducted the services, preached, administered the Sacraments, and generally cared for the spiritual welfare of the parishioners. In each of the three parish churches, two services were held on Sundays and the catechism class for children. During the week a service was held every other day—later on, every day. The Lord's Supper was to be celebrated quarterly, not once a week as Calvin wished.

The doctors, or teachers, had the responsibility for education, both for adults and for children. Lectures on the Old and New Testaments were usually held on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. These were more academic than the sermons and were conducted in Latin. The audience consisted of the older schoolboys, ministers, and anyone else who wished to attend. The education of children was also to be provided; but here great difficulties were encountered, owing to scarcity of suitable teachers and lack of money. The problem was gradually overcome, and the establishment of the Academy, in 1559, placed education in Geneva on a stable footing.

The third order was that of elders. In every district of the city, there were one or two elders who would keep an eye on spiritual affairs. If they saw, for example, that so-and-so was frequently the worse for drink, or that Mr. X beat up his wife, or that Mr. Y and Mrs. Z were seeing rather a lot of each other, they were to admonish them in a brotherly manner. If the response was unsatisfactory, they were to report the matter to the Consistory, who would summon the offender, remonstrate with him or her. If this failed, they would, as a last resort, pronounce excommunication, which would remain in force until he repented.

Finally, the social welfare work was the charge of the deacons. They were the hospital management board, the social security executives, and the alms-house supervisors. It was a proud boast that there were no beggars in Geneva.

A Heavy Work Load

Calvin not only organized the form of the church, he also played his full part in the day-to-day work. He preached twice every Sunday and every day of alternate weeks. In the weeks when he was not preaching, he lectured three times (he was the Old Testament professor). He took his place regularly on the Consistory, which met every Thursday. And he was either on committees or incessantly being asked for advice about matters relating to the deacons.

It should not be thought that he was in any way the ruler or dictator of Geneva. He was appointed by the City Council and paid by them. He could at any time have been dismissed by them (as he had been in 1538). He was a foreigner in Geneva, not even a naturalized citizen, until near the end of his life. His great authority was a moral authority, stemming from his belief that, because he proclaimed the message of the Bible, he was God's ambassador, with the divine authority and power behind him. That he was involved in so much that went on in Geneva, from the City constitution down to drains and heating appliances, was simply due to his outstanding abilities and sense of duty. He made good his offer of himself in 1541 as "the servant of Geneva."

Poor Health

The burden of work and responsibilities was turned into crushing labor by his continual poor health. Overwork in his law-student days had impaired his digestion. This in turn, increased by his excitable and nervous disposition, brought on migraines. Later his lungs became affected, perhaps through too much preaching and talking, and he was incapacitated by lung hemorrhages. As if all this were not enough, he was tortured by bladder stones and the gout.

And yet he drove his body beyond its limits. When he could not walk the couple of hundred yards to church, he was carried in a chair to preach. When the doctor forbade him to go out in the winter air to the lecture room, he crowded the audience into his bedroom and gave the remaining lectures on Malachi there. To those who would urge him to rest, he had the wondering question, “What! Would you have the Lord find me idle when he comes?”

The afflictions and pressures he endured were intensified by the opposition he faced. It was not reasoned opposition raised in the course of debate. This opposition took the form of actual physical intimidation, of men setting their dogs on him, of the firing of guns outside the church during the service, of people trying to drown his voice or put him off by loud coughing while he preached, even of anonymous threats against his life.

Disaffection grew. Calvin, for his part, stuck to his guns admirably. At first he was patient, but gradually his patience was worn away. Even in his patience, he was too unsympathetic. He may have remained always morally superior to his opponents, but he showed little understanding, little kindness, and certainly little sense of humor. On the other hand, we have to ask ourselves how much Calvin would have achieved in Geneva and in the world, if he had been an amenable sort of man. His sympathy was for the needs of the Gospel; his kindness was for the Kingdom of God; in the situation he saw no comedy, only tragedy.

We must remember that during all this turmoil, Calvin had not relinquished his many other responsibilities. He continued preaching and lecturing, commentaries and other books were written, many hundreds of letters were dispatched to every part of the civilized world, and he had worked away at the *Institutio*

Never satisfied, Calvin made his greatest and final revision in the winter of 1558, when severe illness gave him leisure from ordinary tasks. The work was greatly increased in bulk, the 21 chapters of 1550 now became 80. These 80 were completely recast into four “books,” corresponding to the four parts of the Apostles’ Creed on God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, and the Church.

What happened to the *Institutio* in its course from the six chapters based on the catechism to the four books on the creed? Did it lose its contact with those who are “hungering and thirsting for Christ”? Did it cease to be evangelistic and become purely theoretical theology? Above all, did it drift away from the teaching of Holy Scripture? Not at all.

The 1559 edition begins with the same sentence as it did in 1539, which was nearly the same as in 1536: “Our true and genuine wisdom can be summed up as the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves.” By “God,” Calvin means the God who has revealed himself through Holy Scripture, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. By “the knowledge of God,” Calvin means the relationship of child and Father created by the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. The *Institutio* remains what it always was, an evangelistic and pastoral work, a continual exposition of Holy Scripture.

Only five years remained to him after 1559. They were years of increasing sickness and weakness—years, nevertheless, of unremitting toil. He again translated the *Institutio* into French. He wrote the large commentary on the Pentateuch and translated that also. He continued to preach, lecture, and perform his ordinary duties until February of 1564. After this he quickly declined and died three months later.

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