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BRIEF BIOGRAPHIES No. 3

JOHN CALVIN

by
CECIL NORTHCOTT

A new series outlining the lives
and achievements of pioneers and
reformers from the sixteenth cen-
tury to the present day

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JOHN CALVIN

THE YOUNG HUMANIST

JEAN CAUVIN, to give him his proper French name, was twelve years old when Martin Luther appeared before the Diet of Worms in 1521. We have no evidence that the echoes of that great event penetrated to the quiet corner of Picardy in Northern France where Jean was born on July 10, 1509. But there can be no doubt about it. The attention of Catholic Europe was riveted on the German monk who was defying the Pope and Holy Church, and there must have been many discussions within the home circle of the Cauvins, an intelligent and cultured family.

But the home of the great Réformer was

strictly Roman Catholic. His father, Gerard Cauvin, was a respected lawyer in the town of Noyon, and conducted a great deal of confidential business for the nobility and higher clergy of the district. His mother, Jeanne La France, was a beautiful and devout woman, and one of the few stories of Calvin's boyhood we have is the one of him being taken by her to the Abbey of Ourscamp, near Noyon, where he kissed "part of the body of St. Anna, the mother of the Virgin Mary". Young Jean grew up with his three brothers and two sisters in the atmosphere of Catholic piety. Only occasionally would the family hear of the dreadful happenings in Germany, or shake their heads over a poor Picard who had been haled by the Inquisition as a follower of Wiclif and Hus. Towns, villages and families were wrapt undisturbed in the security of the medieval church.

When he was about fourteen, John went to live with the noble family of de Montmor to share the education of the nobleman's children. This early environment stamped Calvin right through his life. In the social training of the great house he became the cultured, polished French gentleman. The grace and precision of the aristocrat never left him. He was short in height, with a pallid face and large, brilliant eyes, and in his youth gave promise of great firmness of will, clear, logical thought, and capacity for work. He was a striking contrast to Martin Luther—the bluff, jovial Saxon peasant.

Calvin's father had early seen that his son was an apt and industrious student, and determined to give him the best education. He went with the young de Montmors to the College de la Marche, part of the University of Paris. To defray these extraordinary

expenses, M. Cauvin procured for his son one or two benefices. John was tonsured and became a clerk in holy orders, but curates were paid out of the livings to do the work, and the balances were bursaries for John's education.

For five years John Calvin lived in the critical and liberal atmosphere of the University of Paris. Students flocked to the great colleges from all parts of Europe, and the lively and acute mind of young Calvin was stirred and sharpened by sound teaching, debate and discussion. He began to study theology, and in his first college came under the influence of Mathurin Cordier, who was later converted and lived with his great pupil in Geneva. It was under him that Calvin was grounded thoroughly in the classics and laid the foundations of his clear, logical French style. But Cordier had great influence over the developing character of

the young student and did more than anyone to open up the depths of Calvin's mind, and prepare the way for his truly phenomenal learning. Too much of Cordier however was not thought to be good for the young student, who was removed to the College de Montaigu.

Here, again, he was fortunate in his teachers, and he began to excel in public disputations, and laid about him among his fellow undergraduates with mighty effect. He was nicknamed "The Accusative Case" for his censoriousness! But in spite of his reserve, remarkable ability and gifts which repelled many men, those who loved him in his student days stuck to him right through his life, and many settled with him later at Geneva.

Calvin's father now wished him to be a lawyer, as he was on bad terms with the church in Picardy, and John obediently went

to Orleans to study law. In the year he left the College de Montaigu, 1528, Ignatius Loyola entered it with the manuscript of the *Exercitia Spiritualia* in his pocket and some gold pieces in his purse. The Frenchman was nineteen, and the Spaniard thirty-six. Did the future champions of Geneva and Rome meet in the lecture-room, or pass in the street? What a disputation they might have had!

In Orleans Calvin came more directly under humanist and Lutheran influences and began to read the Scriptures and to separate himself from the ceremonies of the church. On the death of his father, he returned to Paris and became friendly with the humanist professors at the College-Fortet, Buda and Cop. He joined the Protestant group in Paris and openly allied himself with the Reform party.

A REFORMER IN THE MAKING

It is difficult to say when his conversion took place. Calvin rarely unveiled his soul, but whether in Orleans or Paris, he perceived, "as if light had broken in upon me, in what a sty I had wallowed, and how much pollution I had contracted. . . . And now, O Lord, what remains to a wretch like me, but instead of defence, earnestly to supplicate Thee not to judge according to its deserts that fearful abandonment of Thy Word, from which in wonderful goodness Thou hast delivered me." He bitterly regretted his obstinate attachment to the "superstitions of the Papacy" of his youth and joined eagerly in the secret meetings of the Protestants in Paris, and whenever he spoke nearly always concluded with the words, "If God be for us, who can be against us?"

Never robust in health, Calvin during this period began to contract those distressing maladies—dyspepsia, fever, gout and headaches—which so wasted his later life. In 1532 he published his first book, a commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia*, in which he showed an amazing knowledge for a youth of twenty-three. He quotes from fifty-five separate Latin authors, from thirty-three works of Cicero, from all the works of Horace and Virgil, and from twenty-two separate Greek authors, and shows an intimate knowledge of the writings of the early Fathers. Suddenly, in the midst of his work, he had to fly from Paris.

His friend Nicholas Cop had been elected Rector of the University in 1533, and he asked Calvin to compose for him his Rectorial Address. Calvin wrote an eloquent defence of Evangelical truth, taking

for his motto, *Blessed are the poor in spirit*. There was an immense uproar, and the theologians of the Sorbonne instantly accused Cop of heresy. He and Calvin fled the city. Calvin settled in Basle, where he finished and published the first edition of his tremendous work, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. This book based on the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Sacraments set out to show that when tested by these standards "the Protestants were truer Catholics than the Romanists". It was written in Calvin's limpid, logical French style¹ in which "every art of adornment was sacrificed to clearness and simplicity".² Calvin provided the Reformed churches with the strongest weapon yet forged against the Papacy, whose power and influence spread quickly through all

¹ The first edition of 1534 was in Latin.

² R. N. C. Hunt, *Calvin*, p. 118.

the Reformed countries bringing encouragement and conviction to many harassed Protestant communities. The young man of twenty-six had stated in uncompromising fashion the Reformed faith in God the Father, His Son Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit, and in the Holy Catholic Church. He preached the high and stern doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of God and of the utter worthlessness of man, but he was not concerned only about personal salvation. Calvinism laboured to bring in the reign of God on earth; it was concerned about Christian society, God's requirements and man's duties. It practised discipline as well as preached piety, and if its methods, in Geneva especially, seem to us overwrought and censorious let us remember that it did boldly confront the problems facing a Christian society trying to live according to the law of God.

FIRST YEARS IN GENEVA

It was almost by accident that Calvin came to the city of Geneva where his real life's work was done. He set out on a short visit to Italy and was compelled to stay for a night in Geneva. William Farel, who carried the Protestant faith into this turbulent medieval city-state, was now, in 1536, its chief pastor. The Roman bishop had been expelled, but Farel was greatly worried about the right government of the city. There was no reformation of life. Licence, disorder, corruption and immorality went on unchecked. Farel heard that Calvin was in the city, and so bullied and threatened him that Calvin agreed to become professor of sacred learning to the church in Geneva. This quiet, reserved Frenchman did not greatly impress the leading citizens, but quickly he made his presence felt. He drew

up four articles for the right administration of the Lord's Supper and regulations for singing in public worship, the religious instruction of children, and marriage.

The four articles were superseded in 1541 by the famous *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, which assumed their final form in 1561. These minute regulations for public and private life were quite in the spirit of the medieval civil legislation. Most medieval towns had their laws against extravagance in dress and against gluttony in eating and drinking. Cursing, swearing, gaming, dances and masquerades were all controlled by local laws. What was unique in Geneva was that under Calvin laws such as these were enforced by the church, and the centre piece of obedience in personal and community life was the Lord's Supper. The weekly communion, with all the regulations and discipline connected with it, was elevated

into the supreme position as an act of the church and the community. In the purity of that act and of its communicants Calvinism believed it had attained to the society of Christ on earth. The mistake it made was to use the secular arm to punish wrongdoers, and to persecute those who dared to challenge its authority.

Calvin drew up a Confession of Faith which all the population by solemn oath swore to maintain. There were still many Catholics in the city, and a party grew up, called the Libertines, fiercely antagonistic to Calvin and Farel. Matters came to a head over the introduction of certain ceremonies according to the usage of the church of Berne. Calvin and Farel hesitated and were forbidden by the General Council to preach. Next day they preached as usual, and the Council sentenced them to banishment for disobedience. Calvin was insulted

in the streets. Bullies threatened to throw him into the Rhone, and his house was surrounded by crowds singing obscene songs and firing shots. He fled from the city, hoping never to see it again.

For three years Calvin was absent. He and Farel stated their case to various church councils, and many representations were made on their behalf to the Council of Geneva. But the sentence of banishment was confirmed, and Calvin took up pastoral work in Strasbourg and prepared for a quiet life of study. But it was not to be.

The state of affairs in Geneva was growing worse. The life of the people was an open scandal, and there was neglect of the Lord's Supper. More moderate men succeeded to power, and the idea of asking Calvin to return began to be discussed. He refused to answer the first letters. They grew more impatient, and soon nearly all

the Swiss cities were adding their entreaties. Calvin remained unmoved, and confessed he shuddered at the idea of returning to the turbulent city. The city sent a messenger charged with securing the services of "Maystre Johan Calvinus". He followed Calvin across Europe to Worms. Calvin was distressed. Farel thundered at him, and the pastors of Zurich pointed out the strategic importance of Geneva and the great work he could do to "enlarge the ramparts of the Kingdom of Christ". Bullied, harassed and wasted with ill-health, Calvin gave way, and on September 13, 1541, he entered Geneva.

THE NEW DISCIPLINE

The city was by no means docile and manageable on the return of Calvin.

Within twenty days the church was given a constitution which developed into the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, and the discussions again aroused the old antagonisms. Calvin was a fearless fighter. One account describes the situation as follows: "The parties wearied of speaking cried, 'To arms'. The people heard the cry. Calvin arrived alone. He was received at the end of the hall with threats of death. He crossed his arms and gazed fixedly on the agitators. No one dares strike him. Then advancing into the midst with his breast bare he says, 'If you wish blood, strike here.' Not an arm moved. Calvin then slowly ascends the staircase. The hall was about to be filled with blood. Swords glittered, but at the sight of the Reformer the weapons were lowered, and some words sufficed to allay the excitement. . . . Calvin speaks with such force and emotion that the tears run down his

cheeks and the crowd retires in silence."

The ecclesiastical discipline of Geneva under Calvin was carried out through the Consistory, or session of Elders, presided over by one of the Syndics of the Council. It had no power of punishment, but only of warning and admonition. When punishment was necessary it had to be inflicted by the Council. In fact, the Consistory was a committee of the Council, and as Principal Lindsay remarks, "we ought to see in the disciplinary powers and punishments of the Consistory of Geneva, not an exhibition of the working of a Church organized on the principles of Calvin, but the ordinary procedure of the Town Council of a medieval city".

There is one blot on Calvin's record which will always be remembered against him. Servetus, a brilliant theological speculator, was arrested in France in 1553 for

heretical views about the person of Christ. He was condemned to death by a Catholic court, but escaped to Switzerland. He appeared in Geneva, and was arrested while listening to Calvin preaching, and was tried for heresy. Calvin undoubtedly secured his condemnation, but was not in favour of death by burning. This, however, was carried out. In his eagerness to condemn Servetus, Calvin was doing right according to the light of his age, but in later years admirers of the great Reformer have sorrowed much over the unfortunate episode. In 1901 the Calvinists of Geneva erected an expiatory monument to Servetus on which they inscribed these words, "The respectful and grateful sons of Calvin, our great Reformer, condemning an error which was that of his time, and firmly attaching themselves to liberty of conscience according to the true principles of the Re-

formation and the Gospel, have raised this expiatory monument."

"Prove themselves Christians by holiness of life," says Mr. R. H. Tawney, "might be taken as the motto of the Swiss reformers. It was in that spirit that Calvin 'drafted the heads of a comprehensive scheme of municipal government, covering the whole range of civic administration, from the regulations to be made for markets, crafts, buildings and fairs to the control of prices, interests and rents. It was in that spirit that he made Geneva a city of glass, in which every household lived its life under the supervision of a spiritual police, and that for a generation Consistory and Council worked hand in hand, the former excommunicating drunkards, dancers and contemnors of religion, the latter punishing the dissolute with fines and imprisonment'."¹

¹ Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, p. 117.

John Knox came to Geneva and declared it to be "the most perfect school of Christ that ever was on earth since the days of the Apostles". "In other places I confess Christ to be truly preached, but manners and religion so sincerely reformed I have not yet seen in any place besides." The once turbulent city became orderly and dignified. From St. Peter's Cathedral there went out day after day the courageous messages of the Reformed faith to harassed communities throughout Europe. The pallid, disease-wracked, unwearied Calvin quarried and fashioned the new faith strong enough to resist the strength of the counter-Reformation and Inquisition, and bold enough to challenge the new secular monarchies of Europe.

THE PROTESTANT CITADEL

At home he did three things for Geneva,

"he gave its church a trained and tested ministry, its homes an educated people who could give a reason for their faith, and to the whole city an heroic soul which enabled the little town to stand forth as the Citadel and City of Refuge for the oppressed Protestants of Europe."¹ Calvin cared immensely for education, and founded the University of Geneva, which soon attracted students from all parts of Western Europe. They lived in spartan conditions and under severe discipline, but many carried back to Scotland and England an admiration of the hardy life and sound learning of Calvin's University. In this way the spirit and traditions of Calvinism began to spread through the universities of Europe and of Britain and, after 1620, when the Pilgrim Fathers crossed the Atlantic Calvin's high regard for scholarship and sound learning

¹ Lindsay, *History of the Reformation*, II, p. 131.

was planted on the American continent, and led to the establishment of America's most celebrated universities.

For the Reformed religion in Europe Calvin kept up a steady supply of trained and disciplined ministers. Genevan pastors were to be found wherever danger and persecution were greatest. Calvin laboured enormously for the persecuted church in his beloved France, and was ever ready to welcome refugees to his city. At one time there were six thousand refugees in Geneva, while the normal population was only thirteen thousand. The city "became the citadel of the Reformation, defying the threats of Romanist France and Savoy and opening its gates to the persecuted of all lands". All over Reformed Europe men looked to Calvin and Geneva for guidance and comfort. His ministers, taught by the most distinguished scholars of the day in

Geneva, went to England, Scotland, the Netherlands, the Rhine Provinces and, above all, France, exhorting, training and encouraging the Protestant communities. How well they did their work was seen in the war years from 1940 onwards when against the new Nazi paganism the Reformed Churches of North-western Europe stood firm. In Holland, France, Norway, Denmark and Germany itself the churches in the Calvin tradition were a bulwark of opposition, and many of their pastors and people faced persecution and death rather than surrender to false doctrine. Never did John Calvin's children display the supremacy of the church and its beliefs more gallantly than in the years when Hitler challenged the very foundations of the Christian religion.

CALVIN'S CONTRIBUTION

Calvin's supreme contribution to religion

is an ecclesiastical one. Luther's emphasis was on personal religious experience. John Calvin was concerned about the "company of the saved"—the body and bride of Christ, her "privileges and ornaments". In John Calvin Protestantism produced its supreme ecclesiastical statesman. He saw that unless there was a vigorous and positive statement of what the new Reformed churchmanship was, men would drift back to the Church of Rome—still splendid and attractive—and the Protestant churches would become the tools of secular princes, as the Lutheran churches later did in Germany. As Mr. B. L. Manning writes, "Only a church with a claim and sphere as wide, an authority as august, a foundation as venerable and secure, a machinery as efficient, a policy as subtle, a temper as high, a mission as complete, could replace the corrupted Church of Rome and hold its own against the

secular state rising everywhere on the ruins of medieval religion."¹ There was a parallel throughout between Geneva and Rome. "It was necessary to face the world not with a truncated church, but with a church capable of supplying every need that the old church supplied . . . the authority of the church is in the whole company, the assembly of the faithful elect . . . this authority no earthly prince or magistrate must claim or curtail."²

For Calvinism, where the Word was faithfully preached and the Sacraments rightly administered, there could be no doubt the Church of Christ had existence. It was this clear-cut conception of the church—her rights and her duties—which inspired the Puritan movement in England, and

¹ Manning, *The Making of Modern English Religion*, p. 95.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 97, 98.

compelled many to seek religious liberty untrammelled by the State.

It was this "high churchmanship", convinced of its divine authority and confessing only the name of the Lord Jesus which defied states and princes both on the Continent and in Britain. It asserted the freedom as well as the majesty of the Church, and in Britain provided the stern, unflinching faith which won religious liberty and so proved a bulwark in our political and democratic life.

Worn out by his phenomenal toil, Calvin died in 1564 at the age of fifty-five. We know singularly little about him as a man. His friendships in Geneva with Farel, Melancthon and Viret were dear and lasting. They respected, admired, revered and loved him, but give us few intimate details about him. To the last he was courtly, urbane and polished and reserved. Calvin

was eminently a man caught up in a great work, giving himself to it unflinchingly.

The spirit and strain of the religion he inspired "exalted its votaries", says Lord Morley, "to a pitch of heroic moral energy that has never been surpassed. They have exhibited an active courage, a cheerful self-restraint, an exalting self-sacrifice that men count among the highest glories of the human conscience."

The essential spirit of Calvinism was an awareness of the Majesty and Sovereignty of God and of the unworthiness of man to approach Him. The Calvinist was a worm and a miserable sinner because he was aware of the Holiness of his God. That conviction was the premise of his worship, his doctrine, his theology and his life. His worship was plain, simple and dignified because he knew, to quote Mr. B. L. Manning, that "to call on the Name of God,

to claim the presence of the Son of God, if men truly know and mean what they are doing, is in itself an act so tremendous and so full of comfort that any sensuous or artistic heightening of the effort is not so much a painting of the lily as a varnishing of sunlight. . . . Calvinistic rites are simple because the grace of which they are the means is so irresistible that in their simplest form they are completely and eternally adequate."¹ In doctrine and in theology Calvinism emphasized the stern Majesty and awful Holiness of God, and Calvin and his ministers preached in the spirit of "Old Testament prophets to an Israel not wholly weaned from the Fleshpots of Egypt".² In life the spirit of Calvinism was other worldly in the sense that the

¹ Ibid., pp. 101, 102.

² Tawney, *Religion and Rise of Capitalism*, p. 119.

body of the faithful were citizens of heaven and but sojourners on earth. But while here, it mattered supremely how they lived, and proved "themselves Christians by holiness of life". It seemed to be well within the power of the heroic, unconquerable spirit of Calvinism to bring in the Kingdom of God.

John Calvin's children cover the earth to-day. In the English speaking world in particular their conquests have reached out to all the great Dominions and most noticeably to the American continent where in the United States and Canada churches inspired by his teaching number their adherents by the million. When that fact is coupled with the peerless witness of the Calvinist churches against modern paganism in Europe we know that we salute the name of one who stands—after four hundred years—amongst the great fashioners of the Church in the modern world.

Brief Biographies

1. THOMAS CRANMER by R. G. Martin
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