

JOHN CALVIN  
AND  
"THE INSTITUTES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION"

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The subject for this paper, which it seemed would be read during the calendar year of 1936, was suggested because of the fact that that year marked the four hundredth anniversary of the publication of the first edition of "The Institutes of the Christian Religion" by John Calvin, or, as he has been termed, "the appalling Calvin." This epoch-making treatise, written to instruct enquirers after truth in Protestant doctrine, was an intellectual *tour de force*, supplied a great need, and was received with an enthusiasm which was unparalleled. The publishers, endeavoring to describe the broad range of this systematic exposition of Christian doctrine, placed on the title page of the first edition the words—"containing well-nigh the whole sum of piety." Its success assured Calvin that the book was fulfilling its purpose, and thereupon he began a revision. The work went through a number of editions, being constantly revised and enlarged by the author, until what is accepted as its final, authoritative form was published Geneva in 1559, five years before the death of the French Reformer, who has been described as "the God-intoxicated man."

It was a critical time for Protestantism. The Bible had been put into the hands of the people, and it came to them like a new revelation. The shackles of ecclesiastically imposed doctrine had been completely

struck off, and emancipated minds found themselves without any definite rule of faith or systematic body of belief by which they could live. There are always some who delight in such absence of hedges, but absolute freedom of thought is a luxury which soon palls upon the man who realizes that he can of himself arrive at no certainty. Often, too, freethinking is the prelude to freelifing. There were all too evident signs of that tendency in Calvin's time. On the other hand, many serious, earnest souls, who had dared to break free from the old ecclesiastical tyranny felt the need of authoritative spiritual guidance. The mental habit of reliance upon the clergy is not easily gotten rid of. The situation clamored for a man who could provide that on which mind and heart could rest in quietness and confidence. John Calvin was the answer to this need. As Professor Lindsay says, "What the 'Christian Institutes' did for the sixteenth century was to make the unseen government and authority of God, to which all must bow, as visible to the intellectual eye of faith as the mechanism of the medieval Church had been to the eye of sense."

On the throne of France at this time was Francis I, whose handsome appearance, intelligence, and bravery made him the most chivalrous prince of his time. He was a lover of art, the promoter of learning and of literature, and the builder of the most exquisite gems of Renaissance architecture. He was no friend of the monks; their ignorance and coarseness repelled him. He would gladly have welcomed a reformation in the Church, had he not discerned in the Protestants an austerity which was a rebuke to his licentiousness, and

a love of freedom which would have been a check on his immoderate thirst for domination.

Formidable opposition soon broke out against the Protestants. Translations of the Bible were burned, and the reformers themselves were ruthlessly persecuted, many of them having been tortured, mutilated, and burned. In 1535, Francis I, who needed for his fight against the Emperor Charles the help of the German princes, mostly favorable to the Reformation, sedulously propagated the notion that the Protestants, whom he was at the time bitterly persecuting, were nothing, as he said, but "a pack of enthusiasts, enemies of public order, furious madmen, excited by the father of lies." Calvin was then in Basel, finishing the first edition of his "Institutes." He was incensed at this calumny of the cause and character of his fellow believers in France, concerning whose ardent faith, blameless conduct, and heroic deaths he had first-hand knowledge. It was this that called forth from him the famous Letter to Francis I, which appeared as a Preface to this first edition.

This is one of the noblest apologies for persecuted Christians, in style, substance, and spirit, ever penned. The editor of "The Harvard Classics," as Professor Donald Mackenzie notes, is justified in giving it a place of honor among the famous prefaces in world literature. It may not have had much influence on Francis I. He may never have read it. However, this preface was not written for the rhetorical triumph of an hour, but is a possession for all time, a possession which posterity should not willingly let die.

Courteously and respectfully, yet as one aware of

his legal rights as a subject, and conscious that his king has duties as a ruler which have not been fulfilled, Calvin, in this masterpiece of apologetic literature, argues the case for himself and his Protestant fellow-believers. It is no cringing seeker for toleration that here speaks, nor is it a fanatic uttering a tirade against persecutors. The voice is that of one convinced of the justice of his cause and skilled to reply to criticisms of it with carefully-trained and lawyer-like acuteness and cogency of statement. It is as convincing as it is brilliant. Calvin, in this Preface to his Institutes, had spoken the word which French Protestantism needed to have said in its defence. Henceforth no one could doubt his leadership in its cause.

“I plead the cause of all the godly, and consequently of Christ himself, which, having been in these times persecuted and trampled on in all ways in your kingdom, now lies in a most deplorable state. . . . This is a cause worthy of your attention, worthy of your cognizance, worthy of your throne. This consideration constitutes true royalty, to acknowledge yourself in the government of your kingdom to be the minister of God. For where the glory of God is not made the end of the government, it is not a legitimate sovereignty, but a usurpation. And he is deceived who expects lasting prosperity in that kingdom which is not ruled by the sceptre of God, that is, his holy word.”

The “Institutes” themselves, to which this Letter to Francis I was prefixed, were, indeed, far from the perfection of logical treatment and inclusiveness of view which were to characterize the final form of this great work; but they were even now sufficiently significant. This first edition was not a large volume, num-

bering 519 small pages, only six by four inches, and it could be readily carried in a fair-sized pocket. The last edition was practically recast and rewritten, an undertaking which must have involved enormous labor. Calvin himself says in a letter of July 1, 1559, in which he announces its forthcoming publication, that it is "rewritten and so altered as to have almost the appearance of a new work." That he took such pains with it reveals his own sense of its importance, to which he gives expression in the same letter,—“it holds the principal and by far the most conspicuous place among all my lucubrations.” And that is a good deal to say for one who was indisputably the master-mind of his age in respect of the encyclopedic range of the subjects with which he could deal as an expert.

It is amazing that a young man of twenty-six should, as it were, constitute himself the authority on Protestant doctrine, and dogmatically set forth what was to be believed on many points regarding which there was much current uncertainty, confusion, and even fierce controversy. But Calvin's tone of assurance was just what was needed to solidify nebulous ideas and precipitate wavering opinions into definite convictions. Luther and others had done their work, and Calvin belongs to the second generation of the reformers. Luther and Calvin could not have changed places. When Calvin was born, Luther and Zwingli were already twenty-five years old, Melancthon was about to take up a student's career at the University of Heidelberg, and Henry VIII had just begun his eventful reign. With the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Reformation was practically an accomplished fact. Europe

was split into two irreconcilably hostile ecclesiastical camps. A Protestant Church was developing, vitalized by a new spirit, conscious of its mission, clear as to its principles. But it was more or less inchoate both as regards its organization and its doctrine. There was no coordination of parts, no accepted consensus of creed, no model of ecclesiastical structure.

If there was to be any firmly established Protestant Church, it must be founded not on a miscellaneous collection of ideas and views, but on a solid, symmetrical, sharply defined body of determinative doctrine. Luther had cleared the ground and provided the rough material. There was now needed a man, as Hunter has said, "of architectonic mind to shape and build that material into its proper place, and so fashion an organized Church, defined by its ordered system of belief." Calvin, the complement of Luther, was provided for that task. He was ideally fitted, both by nature and by education, for the work which remained to be done. Predominant in Calvin was the logical faculty, and haziness was as distasteful to him as confusion. Some one has remarked upon Calvin's "mental surefootedness and complacent intellectual self-righteousness." Certain it is that there are few instances on record of Calvin's owning himself to be in the wrong, and there are many instances of his exhibiting surprise that any one could differ from himself. Given a truth or principle as a premise, all inferences that seemed to follow logically must be true. Sentiment had no right of criticism. Calvin allowed little for the logic of the heart. Though the statement is exaggerated, there is some truth in Brunetiere's estimate:

“Just as he would have reasoned on the properties of a triangle or of a sphere, so Calvin reasons on the attributes of God. Everything that does not conform to the exigencies of his dialectic, he either contests or rejects. From an ‘affair of the heart’, if I may so put it, Calvin has transformed religion into an ‘affair of the intellect’.”

It is rather remarkable that not a voice took exception to this work or threw suspicion upon it because of the comparative youth of the author. Its timeliness, undeniable power, clearness, and grasp silenced all objections on that score. Recognized by the Protestant world to be the word that had been urgently needed, and that it was fitly spoken, it was received with such an enthusiastic welcome that Calvin in later years looked back with humble wonder and devout gratitude. Martin Bucer, Calvin’s friend in Strassburg, acclaimed it as a great gift of God to the age, extolling the work as paving the way to the unification of the Church and the reconciliation of contending views. “Would that we had many Calvins!” cried the learned Sainte-Merthe of Poitiers, as he laid the volume down. Nor was this a mere temporary success; admiration and appreciation grew as its fame spread. It steadily grew in the regard of the Reformed Church, and exerted an ever stronger influence upon the molding of its doctrine and organization.

The effects of its publication were both immediate and immeasurable. Written originally in <sup>Latin</sup> French and ~~Latin~~, it was soon translated into practically all European tongues, Italian, Spanish, German, Dutch, Hungarian, Greek and even into Arabic. Thomas

Norton, the translator of Plutarch, brought out an English edition. So large was the sale of the French edition, issued in 1559, that a number of presses working in different places could scarcely keep pace with the demand. A Hungarian scholar and poet celebrated it in verse, and dared to say that there had been no such work since the time of the apostles. The chorus of praise has never since ceased, and has been joined in by men of all theological complexions. The jurist Salmasius declared that he would rather have written that one book than all the mighty tomes of that great lawyer, Hugo Grotius. Dr. Müller, a professor of Göttingen, told his students that any one of them should sooner forget to eat his dinner than omit reading Calvin's Institutes. It was the foundation on which the young divines of those times built their theological education. Perhaps the strongest contemporary evidence of all to its recognized value is given in the prompt action of the Sorbonne, which caused it to be burned by the hangman, and prohibited its perusal or spread under the severest penalties. Martyrs were cross-examined as to whether they were infected with their errors by this poisonous book. By Roman Catholics it was styled the "Koran of the heretics," an evidence of its position of authority in the Protestant world. We can understand all this better if we concur with the judgment of Hume Brown, who says, in his life of John Knox, "Catholicism and Calvinism are the only two absolute types of Christianity."

Another very remarkable thing is the fact that, according to Beza, though the work was revised, enlarged, rewritten, and passed through many editions



during the course of some twenty-three years, the views expressed by Calvin in the first edition remained unchanged to the end. Unlike Augustine, who published a book of retractations, and Luther and Melancthon, who had well-marked earlier and later phases, Calvin never found reason to revise, much less repudiate, any of the doctrines for which he stood forward as champion and defender on his first entry into the theological arena. In the main this is true. The essential substance of his system remains unaltered through all the controversies, discussions, and experiences of more than two decades. The text of his confession of faith was definitely determined from the time of its adoption. The later editions of the Institutes are merely expansions of the first edition, certain doctrines receiving greater prominence and emphasis or more elaborate illustration and application. Never does Calvin act the critic of himself as Ruskin does in later editions of "Modern Painters," exposing fallacies, calling attention to mistaken views or false judgments. Calvin betters his work, but never corrects it. The doctrines which constitute the framework of his belief remain entirely unaffected.

Probably no man was more sure of himself and his views than Calvin. He could not conceive of himself as being wrong in his doctrine, and he could not understand how any intelligent and honest man did not see with his eyes. The disagreement of those he esteemed was a grief to him. He did not like to see his friend exposed to the danger incurred by embracing error. It should be remembered, however, that these doctrines were not to him matters of opinion, convictions reached

by the exercise of pure reason, but articles of faith, plainly and unmistakably taught in Holy Scripture. The Bible was to him the Word of God, the ultimate authority, the only infallible rule of faith and practice. More than that, he felt so strong a sense of divine mission as to place him among the race of prophets who identify themselves with God. He never doubted that God was his inspiring authority, and he, therefore, regarded his own interpretation of the Bible as the only true interpretation. He could not in loyalty to Scripture depart a hair-breadth from the truths which the Holy Spirit had shown him to be therein contained. He wondered that others could disagree with Scripture, when he was so absolutely certain that there had been revealed to him the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

It may not be amiss to refresh our minds on the life and character of this remarkable Frenchman, who has been referred to as "a man of great faults and great virtues," who was called by Voltaire "the Pope of the Protestants," though even Voltaire admits that he was thoroughly disinterested, and who was characterized by Renan as "the most Christian man of his generation." Many people, when they hear the name of Calvin, think at once of predestination or the burning of Servetus. This confusion is probably due to inadequate knowledge. For predestination was not at all a doctrine peculiar to Calvin. Luther and Zwingle were as strenuous upholders of this doctrine as Calvin, although in the latter's system it may occupy a more central place. And the spreading of heresy was in those days deemed worthy of death by practically

every one, including Servetus himself. Calvin found Geneva and Europe intolerant; he did not make them so. It may be remembered that the Roman Catholic Church had already condemned Servetus to death, and that he had escaped from them. It is also true that Calvin vainly tried to get the Council to mitigate the sentence of Servetus. Despite all this, however, we regret and condemn some incidents in which Calvin took part.

At Champel in 1903 there was unveiled the Expiatory Monument to Servetus. Doumergue, the biographer of Calvin, remarked on that occasion that it would be a great step in the furtherance of Christian progress and amity if other churches also with us repented of errors—if, for instance, the Roman Church were to raise expiatory monuments in Paris for the massacre of St. Bartholomew, or in Madrid for the horrors of the Inquisition. “No name in church history,” says Philip Schaff,—“not even Hildebrand’s, or Luther’s, or Loyola’s—has been so much loved and hated, admired and abhorred, praised and blamed, blessed and cursed, as that of John Calvin.” In another place Schaff says, “Calvin improves upon acquaintance.” We can fitly apply to Calvin the oft-quoted words of Schiller with reference to Wallenstein: “Distorted by the praise and hate of parties, the impress of his character floats in history.”

Calvin was born July 10, 1509, in Noyon, a cathedral town in Picardy, France, about sixty miles north-east of Paris. His father, a man of judgment and ability, held, among other offices, that of attorney of the cathedral chapter. He was ambitious for his sons

and determined that they should have the best educational advantages. He secured for John, when he was eleven years old, an appointment to the chaplaincy in the Cathedral of Noyon, at which time he received the tonsure. This shaving of the crown of his head in his boyhood days is the only sign of membership in a clerical order which Calvin ever attained in the Roman Catholic Church, and he was never ordained either as a Catholic or a Protestant. It was customary to appoint boys to these offices in the Church. An older official performed the duties for less than the stipend, and the remaining income thus provided was used for the boy's education. This system was then regarded in much the same way that a scholarship is today. Pope Leo X, Luther's antagonist, had been made Archbishop of Aix at five years of age. Calvin held these preferments for some thirteen years, voluntarily surrendering them shortly after his conversion to Protestantism.

At the age of fourteen he continued his studies at the University of Paris, where he made wonderful progress during his four years' stay. An earnest, religious, and scholarly youth of high ideals, he had no sympathy with the cruder excesses of the many lawless and vicious students around him. He had been destined for the church, but now, having completed his undergraduate course, his father changed his plan for the young man. He decided that the church did not pay enough, that the law was a more lucrative profession, and sent him to the University of Orleans, where he took on in addition the study of Greek under the famous Wolmar. At the age of twenty he went to the Univer-

sity of Bourges, and graduated in 1531 at the age of twenty-two. In April, 1532, when he was not quite twenty three, he published his first book, "Commentary on Seneca's Treatise on Clemency," a remarkable book for one so young. In it he refers to fifty-six Latin and twenty-two Greek classical writers, besides seven of the church fathers. He spent another year at the University of Orleans, studying law for his doctor's degree, and in August, 1533, he is back in Paris.

About this time he had come definitely to the religious convictions associated with Protestantism. He speaks of his conversion as "sudden," and he regarded it as the direct work of the Holy Spirit. He had studied the Bible in the original languages, and was convinced that the Scriptures were the very voice of God. He had at first no thought of separating from the Roman Catholic Church. It was his hope that "the Church might be reformed from within by purer preaching and truer doctrine, without breach of its historic continuity." But constantly the Bible became to him more and more, and the authority of the Church less and less. Since there was no such movement among the papal hierarchs and priests, his severance from them was inevitable. In January, 1534, he went to Angouleme, where he began work on his famous "Institutes." He resigned his benefices, taught, traveled, suffered persecution, and early in 1535 he went to Basel, a Protestant haven, where he could study unmolested. Here he published the first edition of the "Institutes," which put him forthwith at the head of all the thinkers of his time, and brought him recognition as the "ablest interpreter of Christian doctrine that

the Reformation age had produced." There were six chapters in the original edition of the "Institutes" as follows:

1. The Law, as set forth in the Ten Commandments.
2. Faith, as embodied in the Apostles' Creed.
3. Prayer, as illustrated in that of our Lord.
4. The Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.
5. False Sacraments, attacking Confirmation, Penance, Extreme Unction, Orders, and Marriage, which Roman teaching had added to the primal two.
6. Christian Liberty, Ecclesiastical Power, and Civil Administration.

Later in the same year, 1536, he went to Geneva, a little republic of some 13,000 permanent residents in French-speaking Switzerland, where the Protestant message had already been introduced by the fiery Wm. Farel. His intention was to remain only one night, but Farel pleaded most eloquently for him to remain there to help him in the work in that city, finally adjuring him in these words: "You are following only your own wishes, and I declare, in the name of God Almighty, that if you do not assist us in this work of the Lord, the Lord will punish you for seeking your own interest rather than His." Deeply moved, Calvin determined to remain and unite with Farel in his Geneva work. Thus dramatically, out of a sheer sense of duty, did Calvin enter upon his great work of making Geneva into a "City of God," an incessant warfare which, though interrupted by three years of exile, spent at Strassburg in preaching and teaching, was to continue day and night,

in spite of his frail body and ill health, until May 27, 1564, when, at the age of fifty-five, with mind and soul still alert, his body had run its course. In accordance with his own wish, he was buried the next day like any humble citizen, in a plain wooden coffin and without pomp or ceremony. It was his wish that no stone should mark his resting place. Somewhere in the cemetery of Plain-palais he was buried. Here the visitor is shown a plain stone slab bearing the initials J. C., but "no man knoweth his sepulchre until this day."

The story of Calvin's work in Geneva is a thrilling one, but the limits of patience forbid its telling here. However, Geneva was never to Calvin an end, but always a means. It would be interesting to view Calvin from many angles, as statesman, as commentator, as ecclesiastical organizer, as educator, as the reconciler of churches—and all these he was. But in every relationship he put God first. The basal thought with him was, "In the beginning God." The God that Calvin worshipped was a great, a majestic God, one who is sovereign, and personal, and holy. He believed that only God rules, that He holds no broken sceptre, wears no mutilated crown, and knows no restricted rule. He believed that the Bible is the Word of God, that it is the sole authority in matters of faith and conduct. He taught this more consistently than any other Reformation leader. He drew upon the Bible for his system of doctrine and system of morals. He strove for the moralization of all life by religion. He was persuaded that the whole of a man's life is to be lived as in the divine presence. No other justification was needed

for his moral mandates than the command of God as found in the Scriptures.

Religion was to him the very breath of life. His piety was profound and constant. He was consecrated, for his heart was wholly given to God. His seal symbolized the man and mirrored his life,—a hand stretched out as to One invisible, offering a bleeding heart, with the motto, "I give Thee all; I keep nothing back for myself." He never doubted that God was his hearty ally in all his activities. In Geneva he sought to establish a "Bibliocracy," to make the Word of God effective in ecclesiastical, political, and personal life. He was not trying to make himself the personal dictator of the city, nor was he trying to unite Church and State in an ecclesiastical absolutism. He was trying to make Geneva a city in which the Word of God should be the ultimate authority in matters of belief and morals. If this meant rigid discipline and unpopularity, he did not shrink from it. He was quite willing to be God's prosecuting attorney in the celestial battle against unrighteousness. He was a theologian and a jurist, and seldom did he have a shadow of a doubt as to what was right and what was wrong. Never did he waver in his conviction that it was his duty to impose these moral convictions upon himself and upon everybody within reach of his tongue or pen. Though it be at the cost of sweat and anguish, and even blood, God's righteousness must be upheld.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism was formulated a century after Calvin's day, but its first two



questions so reflect the spirit of Calvin that he might well have written the very words.

Q. 1. *What is the chief end of man?*

A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.

Q. 2. *What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him?*

A. The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him.

It must be remembered that Calvin and the Calvinists believed in a great God—a God so far transcending human creatures that man could best find his own joy and glory in exalting Him. When one believes with his whole heart that it is the chief end of man to glorify God, that the Scriptures contain the only rule for the right performance of this chief duty, and that *his own interpretation* of the Scriptures is the only true interpretation, then that person is not apt to be very tolerant. He will view heresy as poison, and the heretic as a snake in the grass. He will punish blasphemy as a direct affront to the Most High, and he will look with suspicion on any form of worship that appears to contradict the express divine command, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me; thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image." This is what happened in Calvinism. The three cardinal offenses against God, the Calvinists thought, are *idolatry*, *blasphemy*, and *heresy*.

Before Calvin's death, the Genevan state was firmly established on the principles of the Word of God, as he saw it. Moral infractions there still were, but the drunkard, the harlot, the blasphemer, and the idler had been driven under cover so effectively that John Knox called Geneva "the most perfect school of Christ that ever was on earth since the days of the apostles." His influence extended far and wide. He unified and gave creed, discipline, and organization to the Reformation movements of France, of the Netherlands, of Scotland, of Hungary, of Poland, and of Bohemia. England was profoundly influenced by Calvinistic thought, and Bancroft says, "He who does not honor the memory of Calvin betrays his ignorance of American liberty."

Whatever friend or foe might say of Calvin, none failed to recognize his transcendent ability, and none doubted his devotion to his cause. He believed that intelligence, and not ignorance, is the mother of piety. With all his frequent arrogance towards men, Calvin's spirit was humble towards God. No duty was too irksome, no sacrifice too great to make for that great and holy God who had redeemed him, who had chosen him for his specific task, and who was his constant Guide and Helper and Friend. None ever deserved more the reverential tribute posthumously paid him by the Council of Geneva, when it declared that "God had impressed upon him a singularly majestic character." Impartial judgment, in virtue of his character and achievement, must declare that Calvin takes rank with Augustine and Aquinas as among the noblest and the greatest of the sons of men.