

WHO WAS JOHN CALVIN?

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"John Calvin was by far the greatest of the Reformers with respect to the talents he possessed, the influence he exerted, and the services he rendered in the establishment and diffusion of important truth" (W Cunningham: *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, p 292).

John Calvin was born at Noyon, in Picardy, on July 27th 1509. His father, Gerard Calvin, being a person of no small judgment and prudence, was highly esteemed by most of the nobility of the district, and this was the reason why young Calvin was from a boy very liberally educated, though at his father's expense, in the family of the Mommors, one of the most distinguished in that quarter.

His father had at first intended him for the study of theology, to which he inferred he was naturally inclined; because, even at a youthful age, he was remarkably religious, and was also a strict censor of everything vicious in his companions. His father procured a benefice for him from the Bishop of Noyon, in what is called the cathedral church, and thereafter the care of a parish connected with a suburban village called Port-Eveque, the birthplace of his father. It is certain that Calvin, though not in priest's orders, preached several sermons in this place before he quitted France. The design of making him a priest was interrupted by a change in the views of father and son – in the former, because he saw that the Law was a surer road to wealth, and in the latter, because, having been made acquainted with the reformed faith by a relation named Peter Robert Olivetan (the person to whom the churches of France owe that translation of the Old Testament, from the Hebrew, which was printed at Neuchatel), he had begun to devote himself to the study of the Holy Scriptures, and, from an abhorrence of all kinds of superstition, to discontinue his attendance on the public services of the papal communion.

It cannot be doubted that at the time when the German Reformers agreed upon the Confession of Augsburg, in 1530,

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Calvin was not only studying the Scriptures for himself, but was observing the effects of the Scriptural doctrines upon individuals and societies in the great cities of France. Little could it have been suspected at that time, that, after the lapse of a few years, those who in France embraced these evangelical doctrines should come to be known, not as Lutherans, but as Calvinists.

His Conversion

With regard to Calvin's conversion to the Evangelical faith, and his adoption of the Reformation principles, it appears that several means were used by the God of grace to bring this remarkable character under the power of the Gospel.

Three several causes may be recognised: the study of the Scriptures; the influence of personal friends who were living in fellowship with Christ; and the spectacle of the piety, devotion, and steadfastness under persecution of many members of the Reformed community in Paris.

It was no easy step which Calvin took in going over to the ranks of the Reformers. He had long been a student and lover of Holy Writ, and he had recently seen clearly enough the many corruptions of Popery. Calvin in his youth had been warmly attached to the papal communion, and he was naturally and by education an upholder of authority, and indisposed to cast off accustomed restraints. But events convinced him that no reform of the papacy could come from within. At the same time, his mind, enlightened by the Word and the Spirit of God, was dissatisfied with a religion consisting largely of outward observance. He also found no real rest for his conscience in following the customary religious practices. He came to find this rest in the Gospel of Christ, especially as a revelation of Divine mercy to himself personally. His conversion was thorough; old things passed away, and all things became new.

In Geneva, William Farel, from Dauphiné, in company with efficient colleagues, had preached the Gospel, and disputed with and vanquished adversaries, and had secured the establishment of the Reformation there in 1535. To this Geneva Calvin came. His intention was to stop only a single night. But Farel, hearing of the arrival of Calvin, earnestly begged him to abide at Geneva. Calvin at first steadily declined his request. Farel, however, changing his tone from one of intreaty to command, bade him stay, denouncing him with God's displeasure, if he did not come "to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the

mighty" (Judges 5:23).

The reformation at Geneva had become firmly established, due to Farel's fearless work. Then the vigorous intellect of Calvin, his great knowledge of Divine truth, his amazing industry, and his great ability as a writer and as a preacher, were all admirably adapted to carry on what Farel had begun. Farel was a man of action, Calvin a man of thought; Farel was a preacher of fiery eloquence, Calvin a writer of deep, but calm Scriptural knowledge. Both were men of God, ardent lovers of truth, bosom friends and affectionate brethren for life.

When we consider Calvin's circumstances at this time, we can see there were solid reasons why he should be induced to pitch his tent at Geneva. Driven out of France by the papal persecution, he could not but be desirous to obtain a haven from the storms of violence.

Then, as most of God's servants have experienced, the leadings of His providence and the dealings of His grace, both combined to work out His eternal purposes, and to fix Calvin's abode in that city which has become lastingly identified with his memory and name.

His Controversies with Papal Rome

In the 16th century it was impossible to be neutral in the great struggle of which Europe was then the battlefield, between the Papacy and the Reformation. Calvin was a general in the ranks of the Reformers. Both as a theologian and organiser, he was supreme. Both in his *Institutes* and in his many commentaries upon Scripture, he took every opportunity of exposing the errors of Romanism, especially the doctrine of salvation by works and merit, as opposed to the Gospel doctrine of salvation by grace through faith.

One of the most controversial questions related to the significance of the ordinance of the Lord's Supper. Romanism had made what was called the sacrifice of the Mass, offered by the priesthood, the central part of worship, and around this perversion gathered most of the corrupt practices which disfigured that system.

His Work and Influence

"The great heresy, which might be said to have overspread the church for many centuries, was in substance this – that the salvation of sinful men, in so far as they might need salvation,

was to be ascribed, not to the one true God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, but to men themselves, and to what they could do, or to what could be done to them by their fellow-men and other creatures. This, more or less, developed as the great heresy which lay under the elaborate externalism of the mediaeval and Romish religion" (W Cunningham: *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, p 337).

Calvin saw that the only effectual way of dealing with this great perversion of the way of salvation, was to bring out fully and definitely the whole doctrine of Scripture concerning the place held in the salvation of sinners by the Father, by the Son, and by the Holy Ghost.

Accordingly, Calvinism is just a full exposition and development of the sum and substance of what is represented in Scripture as done for the salvation of sinners by the three persons of the Godhead. It represents the Father as arranging, choosing some to grace and glory, and sending His Son to seek and to save them. It represents the Son as assuming human nature, and suffering and dying as the Surety and Substitute of His chosen people, of those whom the Father had given Him in covenant. It represents the Holy Spirit as taking of the things of Christ and revealing them to men's souls, as taking His abode in all whom Christ redeemed with His precious blood, effectually and infallibly determining them to faith and holiness: and thus applying the blessings of redemption to all for whom Christ purchased them, and finally preparing them fully for the inheritance of the saints.

To quote from *Calvin's Calvinism*, by H Cole, Preface page x, (1856):

Calvinism is a designation, by which the doctrines of the sovereign grace of God have been distinguished for the last two centuries; but, more particularly and generally, for the last century. The term derives, of course, its descriptiveness, from the historical fact, that the eminent Swiss Reformer was the chosen servant of God, appointed by Him to proclaim and defend, more prominently than any contemporary or antecedent witness, the sublime doctrines in question. Not that these stupendous truths originated with Calvin, but with God Himself. They form an essential portion of the revelation of His Word. They are no more Calvinism, than Augustinism, or Lutherism, or Bucerism, or Cranmerism, or Latimerism: for they are Bibleism: and they are the *ism* of every saint, and true minister of Christ: they are the solidity and security of all true religion: they are the fast-hold of faith: they form a substantial ingredient in every true ministry of the Gospel: and they constitute an essential doctrine in the confession of every true Church of Christ.

Last Days

On the 11th May, 1564, having learned by letter that Farel, now in his eightieth year, had determined on making the journey to see him, Calvin wrote to Farel thus:

"Farewell, my best and most right-hearted brother: and since God is pleased that you should survive me in this world, live mindful of our friendship, of which, as it was useful to the Church of God, the fruit still awaits us in heaven. I would not have you fatigue yourself on my account. I draw my breath with difficulty, and am daily waiting till I altogether cease to breathe. It is enough to Christ I live and die; to his people He is gain in life and in death. Farewell again, not forgetting the brethren. At Geneva, 11th May, 1564."

The good old man, however, came to Geneva, and after seeing and conversing with him, returned next day to Neuchatel.

An extract from Calvin's will, dictated by himself, dated the 25th April, 1564, reads thus: "In the name of the Lord, Amen. I, John Calvin, minister of the Word of God in this church of Geneva, being afflicted and oppressed with various diseases, which easily induce me to believe that the Lord God has determined shortly to call me away out of this world, have resolved to make my testament, and commit my last will to writing in the manner following: First of all, I give thanks to God, that taking mercy on me, whom He had created and placed in this world, He not only delivered me out of the deep darkness of idolatry in which I was plunged, that He might bring me into the light of His Gospel, and make me a partaker in the doctrine of salvation, of which I was most unworthy... With my whole soul I embrace the mercy which He has exercised towards me through Jesus Christ, atoning my sins with the merits of His death and passion, that in this way He might satisfy for all my crimes and faults, and blot them from His remembrance. I testify also and declare, that I suppliantly beg of Him that He may be pleased so to wash and purify me in the blood which my sovereign Redeemer has shed for the sins of the human race, that under His shadow I may be able to stand at the judgement-seat..."

On the 27th May, 1564, Calvin was called away from the sphere of his earthly labours, and so departed one of the greatest luminaries it has pleased God to raise up amongst men.