

JOHN CALVIN.

THE EARLY YEARS:

Picardy is one of the northernmost provinces of France. An older generation of English people will remember it best for the memories it evokes of the First World War. The Western Front marched through Picardy and the remains of the grim lines of trenches where the young men of Britain and France faced those of Germany can still be traced across its undulating plains. It has another claim to fame however, for it also gave birth to the greatest theologian that Europe has ever produced. Noyon is a cathedral city, which in 1509 had a population of about 10,000 souls. In that year, a boy named Jean Cauvin was born, the fourth son of Gerard Cauvin, the local Procurator Fiscal. (Like many scholars of the period, he was to Latinise his surname. This had the effect of making it intelligible to other scholars who were not French. In the English speaking world, the resulting Calvinus has been shortened to Calvin.)

He was always a reticent and withdrawn person. Perhaps this can be traced, at least in part, to the fact that his mother died while he was still only three years of age. The young Calvin was destined for the priesthood. His father did most of his legal work for the cathedral chapter in Noyon and enjoyed the favour of the Bishop. He was thus able to secure two livings for the young John by the time he was twelve. (In cases like this, the work was done by curates who were paid a fraction of the revenues. The remainder of the income was used to fund the young Calvin's education). His university career began at Paris where he proved a natural student. After perfecting his Latin at the College de La Marche, he studied Theology at the College de Montaigu, which was noted for its rigorous academic standards and its bad food! The students at this college were encouraged to censor one another's conduct. There is a legend that Calvin took this duty so seriously that he was nicknamed the "accusative case". He did not want for motivation. In later life he attributed his poor digestion to a combination of the poor diet and the habit he soon developed of burning the midnight oil. For a time, there was a change of course. His father had quarrelled with the church authorities in Noyon and out of spite, instructed him to give up training for the priesthood and take up the law instead. With this in mind, he spent brief spells at the universities of Orleans and Bourges. It would seem that His relationship with his father was more dutiful than affectionate, for on his father's death in 1531 he returned to Paris.

His aim at this stage in life was to become a "Humanist". This word had a very different meaning among scholars in the 16th century to the one that it carries nowadays. Today it is used to describe someone who rejects conventional religious answers to the great questions in life and denies the supernatural. In Calvin's day, it had a much more restricted meaning. It referred to a scholar who specialised not in Divinity, but in the Humanities. At the time, this meant the study of the literature of ancient Greece and Rome, what we would call "the Classics". Calvin had thoughts of an academic career in this direction and in 1532 published a commentary on a work by the Roman philosopher Seneca called "On Clemency". It sold so badly that he had to defray some of the publishing costs himself. Protestant Christianity actually owes a great deal to the humanists of the early 16th century. They encouraged the highest academic standards and laid particular emphasis on the need to study the classics in

the original languages. This was to have the valuable side-effect of prompting Biblical scholars to look beyond the Latin translation of the Scriptures known as the Vulgate which had been in use throughout most of the Middle Ages and encouraging them to become proficient in Greek and Hebrew. In the sense that Calvin was to devote the bulk of his life to careful study of the Biblical text in the original tongues, he remained a humanist to the end of his days.

We know very little about Calvin's conversion. This is partly because he was reticent by nature, but allied to his retiring temperament he held a profound conviction that the servants of the Gospel have a duty to be self-effacing (See 2 Cor 4:5). His only reference to it was made in the preface to his "Commentary on the Psalms":

"God drew me from obscure and lowly beginnings and conferred on me that most honourable office of herald and minister of the gospel. My father had intended me for theology from my early childhood. But when he reflected that the career of the law proved everywhere very lucrative for its practitioners, the prospect suddenly made him change his mind. And so it happened that I was called away from the study of philosophy and set to learning law: although, out of obedience to my father's wishes, I tried my best to work hard, yet God at last turned my course in another direction by the secret rein of his providence. What happened first was that by an unexpected conversion he tamed to teachableness a mind too stubborn for its years - for I was so 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, a raw recruit."

The date of this conversion is uncertain, but it seems likely that a number of influences were at work, which led up to it. Soon after his arrival in Paris, he witnessed the burning of an Augustinian monk for the crime of Lutheranism. During his stay there he greatly appreciated the teaching Jacques Lefevre D'Etaples, a biblical humanist who was eventually expelled from the university. While at Orleans he was taught Greek by Melchior Wolmar, a German Lutheran. The conversion of his own cousin, Robert Olivetan, probably had a considerable effect on him while in a more negative sense, he was greatly offended by the unscrupulous behaviour of church officials at the time of his father's death. At any rate, by 1533 he was identified with the Protestant groups in Paris and had to flee for his life during an outburst of persecution. It arose because of a sermon preached by Nicholas Cop, a friend of Calvin and rector of the University. One of his duties was to preach on All Saints' Day. Partly at Calvin's instigation, he took the opportunity to deny that the intercession of the Saints had any value. One legend says that as the police knocked at the door of his home, Calvin escaped, let down by sheets from the window at the rear.

For the rest of his days, Calvin was a refugee. He spent two years moving from place to place. One product of this period of exile was the first edition of a book, which has been associated with him ever since, "The Institutes of the Christian Religion". Printed

in Basle in 1536, it contained just six chapters and was small enough to be easily concealed. Soon colporteurs were selling it throughout the whole continent of Europe. He hoped eventually to make his home in Strasbourg, which at that time was a German city, but near enough to France to be the home of a sizeable community of exiles. Military manoeuvres forced him to make a detour via Geneva, at that time an independent city near the borders of France, Savoy and the Swiss Confederation. He intended to stay only one night, but God had other plans for him. A fiery preacher named Guillaume Farel had persuaded the citizen assembly to embrace the Reformation and a declaration had been made severing all ties with the Papacy. Farel believed that the young Calvin, still only twenty-seven, was the ideal man to carry the work of reformation forward. Apparently he accosted him and told him forthrightly that the curse of God would fall upon him if he did not take up the burden of Reformation.

“Wherever else I had gone, I had taken care to conceal that I was the author (of the Institutes): and I had resolved to continue in the same privacy and obscurity, until at length Guillaume Farel detained me at Geneva, not so much by counsel and exhortation, as by a dreadful curse, which I felt to be as if God from heaven laid his mighty hand upon me to arrest me. As the most direct road to Strasbourg, to which I then intended to retire, was shut up by the wars, I had resolved to pass quickly by Geneva, without staying a single night in that city. A little before this, popery had been driven from it by the exertions of the excellent man whom I have named and Pierre Viret; but matters were not yet brought to a settled state, and the city was divided into ungodly and dangerous factions. Then a person, who has now basely apostatised and returned to the papists, discovered me and made me known to others. Upon this, Farel, who burned with an extraordinary zeal to advance the gospel, immediately strained every nerve to detain me. And after learning that my heart was set upon devoting myself to private studies, for which I wished to keep myself free from other pursuits, and finding that he gained nothing by entreaties, he proceeded to utter the imprecation that God would curse my retirement and the tranquillity of the studies which I sought, if I should withdraw and refuse to help, when the necessity was so urgent. By this imprecation I was so terror-struck, that I gave up the journey that I had undertaken; but sensible of my natural shyness and timidity, I would not tie myself to any particular office.”

GENEVA:

Calvin and the city of Geneva are inseparably linked. It is therefore important to bear in mind that it was years before he felt at home there. His heart was in France. He did not take out citizenship until 1559, only five years before he died. One wonders too, how long it took before he was accepted by the provincially minded Genevans. When he was first mentioned in the records of the City Council, he was simply called "Ille Gallus" (that Frenchman). In the event, his first stay there was brief. After two years he and Farel were expelled because of a dispute with the city authorities over his desire to introduce a consistent approach to church discipline.

The next three years were spent in Strasbourg, where he occupied himself preaching to the congregation of French exiles. The dominant influence in that city was Martin Bucer. He took a fatherly interest in Calvin and set himself the task of finding him a wife. One candidate proved unacceptable because she spoke no French while Calvin spoke no German. Calvin's requirements in a partner were hardly the stuff of romantic fiction:

"I am not of the wild race of lovers who, at the first sight of a fine figure, embrace all the faults of their beloved. This is the only beauty which allures me, if she is chaste, if not too nice or fastidious, if economical, if patient, if there is hope that she will be interested about my health."

In the end he married Idelette de Bure, the widow of an Anabaptist pastor and a member of his congregation. She bore him one child, a son who was born prematurely and died in infancy. She herself died in 1549. His grief was touching. He wrote to a friend:

"You know the tenderness or rather the softness of my soul The reason for my sorrow is not an ordinary one. I am deprived of my excellent life companion, who, if misfortune had come, would have been my willing companion not only in exile and sorrow, but even in death".

It is often supposed that Calvin was reserved to the point of being an emotional cripple, but that is hardly likely if he could evoke such devotion from a woman who knew him at the closest quarters.

He was recalled to Geneva in 1541. The situation had become very precarious and the Roman Catholic cardinal Sadoletto was making a determined effort to win the city back to the Roman fold. Calvin was reluctant to return. He had been happy in Strasbourg and had no desire to take up once more "that cross on which I had to perish daily a thousand times over". His friends persuaded him, however. Martin Bucer argued that he would be like Jonah refusing to go to Nineveh if he stayed where he was. On the first Sunday after his return, he entered the pulpit of St Peter's cathedral. The congregation probably half expected a triumphant paean of self-vindication. Instead he simply resumed his series of expositions at the very chapter and verse where he had stopped three years previously.

He was to face a number of obstacles to his programme of ecclesiastical reform. The first was undoubtedly his temperament. Essentially a shy and rather nervous man, he found himself called upon to fill a role that would have taxed a natural extrovert. His health was also very fragile. He was plagued by attacks of pleurisy and his last years were dogged by tuberculosis. Gallstones, kidney stones, haemorrhoids and arthritis all troubled him at various times. These things may account, at least in part, for his rather tetchy manner when under pressure. His work was also accomplished against the backdrop of a busy domestic establishment. Idelette left behind two children from her first marriage and Calvin shared his home with his brother Antoine who had eight children. The "Institutes", the famous Commentaries and his sermons were prepared

in a house full of the distractions that children bring. In addition to all that, he had the round of pastoral work that goes with being a minister: weddings, funerals, sick visitation and so on. (He had to be physically restrained from going to visit the plague hospital).

He also faced determined opposition from a faction on the city councils (Geneva was governed by two bodies, the "twenty-five" and the "two hundred") who called themselves the "Libertines". It was easy for such opponents to represent themselves as patriotic Genevans trying to stave off the interference of French outsiders. Perhaps the lowest point in his stay there was the incident concerning Michael Servetus. This man, a Spaniard, was a mercurial character who dabbled in science. (He may have been the first man to discover the circulation of the blood). He was undoubtedly a heretic. Having convinced himself that the doctrine of the Trinity was the greatest obstacle to the evangelism of Jews and Muslims, he propounded an early form of Unitarianism. When he came to Geneva, he was tried for heresy and burned at the stake. This was not Calvin's doing. Although his personal influence was considerable, he held no rank other than minister of the gospel. The city authorities condemned the unfortunate man under a law that went back to its Catholic past. Calvin actually tried to have the sentence of burning commuted. Even so, the principles of religious toleration, which are rightly prized nowadays, were not held by any of the mainstream reformers. They are the fruit of Baptist and Congregational thinkers a century later.

CALVIN'S ACHIEVEMENT:

First and foremost Calvin would have wanted to have been judged by posterity as a preacher. John Knox referred to Geneva in his day as "the most perfect school of Christ since the times of the Apostles". While this is no doubt an exaggeration, Calvin's achievement was still considerable. He followed Zwingli's pattern of verse by verse exposition through whole books of Scripture and in doing so, largely set the tone for Reformed preaching ever since. The calls on his time were so great that he did not use notes. He prepared by meditating thoroughly on the passage in question. He would then go straight from his study to the pulpit and preach in colloquial Genevan French direct from the Hebrew or Greek text. His pulpit activity was phenomenal. At first he preached twice on Sundays and once on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. From 1549 he only preached once on Sundays but had begun preaching every day of alternate weeks. The "Compagnie des Pauvres Etrangers", a society of French exiles, employed a man named Denis Raguenier to transcribe all of Calvin's sermons so that hundreds of them are still available.

“And so we can trace him preaching on Sundays with one hundred and eighty-nine sermons on the Acts between 1549 and 1554, a shorter series on some of the Pauline letters between 1554 and 1558, and the sixty-five on the harmony of the gospels between 1559 and 1564. During this time the weekdays saw series on Jeremiah and Lamentations (up to 1550), on the minor prophets and Daniel (1550-52), the one hundred and seventy-four on Ezekiel (1552-54), the one hundred and fifty-nine of Job (1554-55), the two hundred of Deuteronomy (1555-56), the three hundred and forty-two on Isaiah

(1556-59), one hundred and twenty-three on Genesis (1559-61), a short set on Judges (1561), one hundred and seven on 1 Samuel and eighty seven on 2 Samuel (1661-63) and a set on 1 Kings (1563-64).

Before he smiles at such unusual activity of the pulpit, the reader would do well to ask himself whether he would prefer to listen to the second-hand views on a religion of social ethics, or the ill-digested piety, delivered in slipshod English, that he will hear in most churches, of whatever denomination he may enter, or the three hundred and forty-two sermons on the Book of the prophet Isaiah, sermons born of an infinite passion of faith and a burning sincerity, sermons luminous with theological sense, lively with wit and imagery, showing depths of compassion and the unquenchable joyousness of hope. Those in Geneva who listened Sunday after Sunday, and did not shut their ears, but were "instructed, admonished, exhorted and censured", received a training in Christianity such as had been given to few congregations in Europe since the days of the fathers." ("John Calvin", T. H. L. Parker, pp. 109-110).

Alongside all this went his written work. He is most famous for the "Institutes of the Christian Religion", which reached its final form after a number of revisions in 1559. It has become a sort of prototype of the systematic theologies in use today, but for those who feel daunted by the prospect of reading it, it ought to be noted that it was intended to be a comprehensive but intelligible handbook of basic Christian doctrine. In passing, the Institutes do refer to the doctrine of predestination, but during his own lifetime, Calvin's views on this were not regarded as particularly controversial. Luther's "Bondage of the Will" is arguably a more pungent and forthright statement of the doctrine than anything Calvin ever wrote. He also produced Commentaries on all the NT books except 2 and 3 John and Revelation, and a sizeable portion of the OT. It could be argued with some justice that he is the father of the modern Commentary. Certainly his own are still read with profit in many parts of the world. His method was a marked departure from the medieval. The tendency in the Middle Ages had been to look for several levels of allegorical meaning behind the plain statements of the Biblical text. Calvin's approach was to favour a straightforward reading whenever that seemed the natural way to proceed. As in his sermons, he interpreted difficult passages by examining them in the light of other passages, which were more clear. This approach may seem obvious to us today, but it is only so because we inherit the legacy of John Calvin who questioned the centuries old assumption of medieval commentators that the Holy Spirit must invariably have meant something much more esoteric than he actually said. In addition to all this, Calvin was an indefatigable correspondent who wrote vast quantities of letters to heads of state, other leaders of the Reformation, and persecuted believers in France.

This brings us to something that is hard to quantify. He was an acknowledged leader of the Reformation throughout Europe. At various times Geneva was home to communities of exiles who had escaped persecution in their own countries and who were to go back fired by the vision of what they had seen. The founding fathers of English Puritanism, including William Whittingham, compiler of the Geneva Bible, were a case in point. Reformers and persecuted saints across a whole continent sought

his wisdom. Like the Apostle Paul, he was in a real sense burdened by "the care of all the churches". To Calvin, Reformation was far more than just the recovery of the doctrines of salvation after years of Roman error. There was, for instance, a Reformed approach to worship, which involved congregational singing. Calvin transposed many Psalms into verse so that they could be sung. (The often ridiculed "Hymn-Prayer Sandwich" is not some oddity thrown up by Nonconformist churches but one development of the Genevan "Regulative Principle" which has as its starting point the idea that God is only to be worshipped in ways that he himself has commanded). In the same way, Calvin tried hard to persuade the authorities in Geneva to adopt a Reformed pattern of church government, which was in fact an early variety of what is now called Presbyterianism. He was also a sponsor of education, holding that all areas of study, including the natural sciences are godly enterprises for in seeking to understand the universe that God created we only think his thoughts after him.

THE END:

Calvin's last years were a tenacious but losing battle against steadily declining health. In February 1564 he wrote as follows to the physicians of Montpellier, who had asked if they could do anything to help:

"I have no way of showing my gratitude other than recommending you to draw from my writings what may afford you spiritual medicine. Twenty years ago I experienced the same courteous services from the distinguished physicians of Paris, Acatius, Tagant and Gallois. But at that time, I was not attacked by gout, knew nothing of the stone or the gravel, was not tormented with the gripping of colic nor afflicted with piles nor threatened with haemorrhages. At present these enemies charge me like troops. As soon as I recovered from a quartan fever, I was taken with sever and acute pains in my calves, which, after being partly relieved, returned a second and then a third time. At last they turned into a disease of the joints, which spread from my feet to y knees. An ulcer in the haemorrhoid vein long tortured me. Last summer, I had an attack of nephritis. As I could not endure the jolting of horseback, I was carried into the country in a litter. Coming home, I wanted to walk some of the way. I had hardly gone a mile when I was forced to stop, because of a feeling of lassitude in the loins, for I wanted to make water. And then, to my surprise, blood flowed instead of urine. As soon as I got home I went to bed. The nephritis was very painful and remedies only gave me a partial relief. At last, with the most painful strainings, I ejected a stone, and this lessened the evil. But it was so big that it tore the urinary canal and the flow of blood could only be lessened by an injection of woman's milk through a syringe. Since then, I have ejected several others and the heaviness of my loins is sufficient symptom that there is still some stone there. It is a good thing however, that minute or at least moderately small particles continue to be ejected. The sedentary way of life to which I am condemned by the gout in my feet prevents all hope of a cure. I am also prevented from taking exercise by the trouble in my seat. For although no ulcer appears, yet the veins are very swollen. But I am

thoughtlessly taxing your patience, giving you double labour as the reward for your kindness, not indeed in consulting you but in giving you the trouble of reading over my trifles."

That same month, he preached his last sermon in St Peter's and after a protracted and painful illness, died on the 27th May of that year, his mental faculties alert to the end. He was buried without a headstone in the common cemetery. His successor, Theodore Beza, said, "*It has pleased God to show us in the life of a single man of our time how to live and how to die*".