

CHAPTER XIII - An Account of the Life of John Calvin

This reformer was born at Noyon in Picardy, July 10, 1509. He was instructed in grammar, learning at Paris under Maturinus Corderius, and studied philosophy in the College of Montaign under a Spanish professor.

His father, who discovered many marks of his early piety, particularly in his reprehensions of the vices of his companions, designed him at first for the Church, and got him presented, May 21, 1521, to the chapel of Notre Dame de la Gesine, in the Church of Noyon. In 1527 he was presented to the rectory of Marseville, which he exchanged in 1529 for the rectory of Point l'Eveque, near Noyon. His father afterward changed his resolution, and would have him study law; to which Calvin, who, by reading the Scriptures, had conceived a dislike to the superstitions of popery, readily consented, and resigned the chapel of Gesine and the rectory of Pont l'Eveque, in 1534. He made a great progress in that science, and improved no less in the knowledge of divinity by his private studies. At Bourges he applied to the Greek tongue, under the direction of Professor Wolmar.

His father's death having called him back to Noyon, he stayed there a short time, and then went to Paris, where a speech of Nicholas Cop, rector of the University of Paris, of which Calvin furnished the materials, having greatly displeased the Sorbonne and the parliament, gave rise to a persecution against the Protestants, and Calvin, who narrowly escaped being taken in the College of Forteret, was forced to retire to Xaintonge, after having had the honor to be introduced to the queen of Navarre, who had raised this first storm against the Protestants.

Calvin returned to Paris in 1534. This year the reformed met with severe treatment, which determined him to leave France, after publishing a treatise against those who believed that departed souls are in a kind of sleep. He retired to Basel, where he studied Hebrew: at this time he published his Institutions of the Christian Religion; a work well adapted to spread his fame, though he himself was desirous of living in obscurity. It is dedicated to the French king, Francis I. Calvin next wrote an apology for the Protestants who were burnt for their religion in France. After the publication of this work, Calvin went to Italy to pay a visit to the duchess of Ferrara, a lady of eminent piety, by whom he was very kindly received.

From Italy he came back to France, and having settled his private affairs, he proposed to go to Strassburg or Basel, in company with his sole surviving brother, Antony Calvin; but as the roads were not safe on account of the war, except through the duke of Savoy's territories, he chose that road. "This was a particular direction of Providence," says Bayle; "it was his destiny that he should settle at Geneva, and when he was wholly intent upon going farther, he found himself detained by an order from heaven, if I may so speak."

At Geneva, Calvin therefore was obliged to comply with the choice which the consistory and magistrates made of him, with the consent of the people, to be one of their ministers, and professor of divinity. He wanted to undertake only this last office, and not the other; but in the end he was obliged to take both upon him, in August, 1536. The year following, he made all the people declare, upon oath, their assent to the confession of faith, which contained a renunciation of popery. He next intimated that he could not submit to a regulation which the canton of Berne had lately made. Whereupon the syndics of Geneva summoned an assembly of the people; and it was ordered that Calvin, Farel, and another minister should leave the town in a few days, for refusing to administer the Sacrament.

Calvin retired to Strassburg, and established a French church in that city, of which he was the first minister: he was also appointed to be professor of divinity there. Meanwhile the people of Geneva entreated him so earnestly to return to them that at last he consented, and arrived September 13, 1541, to the great satisfaction both of the people and the magistrates; and the first thing he did, after his arrival, was to establish a form of church discipline, and a consistorial jurisdiction, invested with power of inflicting censures and canonical punishments, as far as excommunication, inclusively.

It has long been the delight of both infidels and some professed Christians, when they wish to bring odium upon the opinions of Calvin, to refer to his agency in the death of Michael Servetus. This action is used on all occasions by those who have been unable to overthrow his opinions, as a conclusive argument against his whole system. "Calvin burnt Servetus!--Calvin burnt Servetus!" is a good proof with a certain class of reasoners, that the doctrine of the Trinity is not true--that divine sovereignty is Antiscriptural,--and Christianity a cheat.

We have no wish to palliate any act of Calvin's which is manifestly wrong. All his proceedings, in relation to the unhappy affair of Servetus, we think, cannot be defended. Still it should be remembered that the true principles of religious toleration were very little understood in the time of Calvin. All the other reformers then living approved of Calvin's conduct. Even the gentle and amiable Melancthon expressed himself in relation to this affair, in the following manner. In a letter addressed to Bullinger, he says, "I have read your statement respecting the blasphemy of Servetus, and praise your piety and judgment; and am persuaded that the Council of Geneva has done right in putting to death this obstinate man, who would never have ceased his blasphemies. I am astonished that any one can be found to disapprove of this proceeding." Farel expressly says, that "Servetus deserved a capital punishment." Bucer did not hesitate to declare, that "Servetus deserved something worse than death."

The truth is, although Calvin had some hand in the arrest and imprisonment of Servetus, he was unwilling that he should be burnt at all. "I desire," says he, "that the severity of the punishment should be remitted." "We wndeavored to commute the kind of death, but in vain." "By wishing to mitigate the severity of the punishment," says Farel to Calvin, "you discharge the office of a friend towards your greatest enemy." "That Calvin was the instigator of the magistrates that Servetus might be burned," says Turritine, "historians neither anywhere affirm, nor does it appear from any considerations. Nay, it is certain, that he, with the college of pastors, dissuaded from that kind of punishment."

It has been often asserted, that Calvin possessed so much influence with the magistrates of Geneva that he might have obtained the release of Servetus, had he not been desirous of his destruction. This however, is not true. So far from it, that Calvin was himself once banished from Geneva, by these very magistrates, and often opposed their arbitrary measures in vain. So little desirous was Calvin of procuring the death of Servetus that he warned him of his danger, and suffered him to remain several weeks at Geneva, before he was arrested. But his language, which was then accounted blasphemous, was the cause of his imprisonment. When in prison, Calvin visited him, and used every argument to persuade him to retract his horrible blasphemies, without reference to his peculiar sentiments. This was the extent of Calvin's agency in this unhappy affair.

It cannot, however, be denied, that in this instance, Calvin acted contrary to the benignant spirit of the Gospel. It is better to drop a tear over the inconsistency of human nature, and to bewail those infirmities which cannot be justified. He declared he acted conscientiously, and publicly justified the act.

It was the opinion, that erroneous religious principles are punishable by the civil magistrate, that did the mischief, whether at Geneva, in Transylvania, or in Britain; and to this, rather than to Trinitarianism, or Unitarianism, it ought to be imputed.

After the death of Luther, Calvin exerted great sway over the men of that notable period. He was influential in France, Italy, Germany, Holland, England, and Scotland. Two thousand one hundred and fifty reformed congregations were organized, receiving from him their preachers.

Calvin, triumphant over all his enemies, felt his death drawing near. Yet he continued to exert himself in every way with youthful energy. When about to lie down in rest, he drew up his will, saying: "I do testify that I live and purpose to die in this faith which God has given me through His Gospel, and that I have no other dependence for salvation than the free choice which is made of me by Him. With my whole heart I embrace His mercy, through which all my sins are covered, for Christ's sake, and for the sake of His death and sufferings. According to the measure of grace granted unto me, I have taught this pure, simple Word, by

sermons, by deeds, and by expositions of this Scripture. In all my battles with the enemies of the truth I have not used sophistry, but have fought the good fight squarely and directly."

May 27, 1564, was the day of his release and blessed journey home. He was in his fifty-fifth year.

That a man who had acquired so great a reputation and such an authority, should have had but a salary of one hundred crowns, and refuse to accept more; and after living fifty-five years with the utmost frugality should leave but three hundred crowns to his heirs, including the value of his library, which sold very dear, is something so heroic, that one must have lost all feeling not to admire. When Calvin took his leave of Strassburg, to return to Geneva, they wanted to continue to him the privileges of a freeman of their town, and the revenues of a prebend, which had been assigned to him; the former he accepted, but absolutely refused the other. He carried one of the brothers with him to Geneva, but he never took any pains to get him preferred to an honorable post, as any other possessed of his credit would have done. He took care indeed of the honor of his brother's family, by getting him freed from an adulteress, and obtaining leave to him to marry again; but even his enemies relate that he made him learn the trade of a bookbinder, which he followed all his life after.

Calvin as a Friend of Civil Liberty

The Rev. Dr. Wisner, in his late discourse at Plymouth, on the anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims, made the following assertion: "Much as the name of Calvin has been scoffed at and loaded with reproach by many sons of freedom, there is not an historical proposition more susceptible of complete demonstration than this, that no man has lived to whom the world is under greater obligations for the freedom it now enjoys, than John Calvin."