CALVIN:

Revolutionary, Theologian, Pastor

Williston Walker

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Calvin's Spiritual Antecedents

Calvin belongs to the second generation of the reformers. His place chronologically, and, to a large extent, theologically, is among the heirs rather than with the initiators of the Reformation. At his birth Luther and Zwingli were already 25 years of age, Melanchthon was about to take up a student's career at the University of Heidelberg, and Henry VIII had just begun his eventful reign. None of these leaders had entered, indeed, upon his reformatory work; but the thorough development of the Reformation in Germany and in German-speaking Switzerland was achieved before Calvin reached the activities of manhood. Yet, in spite of his lateness in point of time, Calvin must be ranked among the most influential leaders in the gigantic struggle of the sixteenth century. He could not have done his work had not Luther and Zwingli gone before; but he was far more than a builder on other men's foundations. That work had its antecedents and was made possible by many predisposing influences. A brief glance, therefore, at the state of the land in which Calvin grew to manhood may be of service as exhibiting the soil and the atmosphere in which his early intellectual and religious life was nurtured.

The kingdom of France, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, had many claims to eminence among the states of Christendom. In consciousness of national unity, in efficiency of governmental organisation, and in consequent influence on the

politics of Europe, it could challenge favourable comparison with any of its contemporaries. Not so worldwide in the activities of its inhabitants as the newly significant kingdom of Spain, then feeling the fever stimulus of the great discoveries which marked the close of the fifteenth century, its growth was more natural, solid, and unforced than that of its portentous southern rival. Though the neighbouring kingdom of England could show the forms at least of more popular governmental institutions, the physical strength of England was reckoned far inferior to that of France. The great Holy Roman Empire, rich in commerce, cities, and soldiers, was much less able to use its strength than France by reason of its divisions and its lack of a national spirit. Though far from having attained the organic development of a modern state, France, in the early sixteenth century, was, with the possible exception of England, the most advanced of any European kingdom on the road toward modern national life.

The national tendencies characteristic of the French monarchy of that age had conspicuous embodiment in Francis I (1515-1547), contemporary with whom Calvin was to do the formative portion of his work. A ruler of unbounded military ambition, anxious to win for France the post of highest influence in Europe, his personal charm, ready wit, eloquence, tact, and appreciation of scholarly and artistic merit gave him deserved popularity. His social talents attracted a splendid court; but his easy morality and entire want of personal religion or of ethical seriousness unfitted him to appreciate the fundamental significance of the gigantic religious struggle which convulsed Europe during his reign. France, under him, had an aggressive, though largely unsuccessful, military policy, a brilliant court, and a high degree of national unity and internal prosperity.

The relations between the French Church and the monarchy had for centuries been close and cordial to a degree hardly equaled elsewhere in Europe. Church and King had aided each other against the nobility. While thoroughly orthodox, as the Middle Ages understood orthodoxy, and bitterly opposed to "heretics" at home like the Cathari and Waldenses, the French

Church felt a greater hostility toward extreme papal claims than was general in other branches of Western Christendom. It possessed a strong sense of corporate unity, and of national or "Gallican" rights, which even the papacy ought not to infringe. But the growing strength of the crown was leading to increasing control by the sovereigns over the Church, and this control was decidedly strengthened when, in 1516, Francis I and Leo X entered into the famous Concordat. The King was henceforth to nominate to the higher administrative and monastic posts in the realm. To the sovereign the Concordat brought a firmer grasp on the French Church; to the papacy it secured an increase in revenue. But though the rights of the Church were thus in a measure sacrificed, it was exempt from many papal interferences and exactions that bore heavily on other lands. There was not, therefore, in France that popular hatred of the Roman curia which was so widespread in Germany and there made possible the rapid growth of the Lutheran revolt.

It would be an error to suppose, however, that the spiritual state of the French Church was superior to that existing in lands where the crown enjoyed less influence. The same evils of externalism in the conception of religion, of emphasis on acts done, penances performed, pilgrimages accomplished, and the indulgences won, rather than on the inward state of the soul and on the ruling purpose of the life, existed in France that were to be found elsewhere in Latin Christendom; and whatever of criticism may justly be passed upon the Roman Church of this period as a whole attaches equally to that of France. The growth of the power of the monarchy brought far less aid to the spiritual interests of the French Church than did a similar increase of royal authority south of the Pyrenees to that of Spain, since no French sovereign of the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries manifested a religious zeal comparable with that of Isabella of Castile or even with that of the emperor, Charles V. The French kings enjoyed the control of the Church which their share in the appointment of its prominent officers afforded. They appreciated its possibilities as a source of revenue. They were ready enough to oppose changes which

would in any serious way alter a fabric so useful to them. But they gave to political considerations the chief weight in ecclesiastical appointments; and the great evils of the possession of office by the morally unfit and the heaping up of benefices in the hands of favourites,[1] who, however well-intentioned, could give them no adequate spiritual care, continued to flourish unrelieved by any counteracting influence from the throne. France, as a whole, seems to have been fairly well content with its religious situation at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and, as compared with Germany or Spain, its sense of the need of betterment was undeveloped.

Foremost among the intellectual forces of France was still to be placed the University of Paris. That eminent seat of mediaeval learning, to which all other universities of northern Europe looked up as their archetype, had enjoyed high academic fame since the beginning of the thirteenth century. Within its walls Aquinas, Bonaventura, Duns Scotus, William of Occam, d'Ailli, and Gerson had taught. Its repute as a centre of theological instruction had, indeed, been considerably dimmed by the beginning of the sixteenth century, but was still great. It theological faculty, known popularly as the Sorbonne, from the large concentration of its instructors in the College founded in 1253 by Robert de Sorbon, regarded itself, and was widely reputed, of unimpeachable orthodoxy. Nor was it wanting in courage and independence. Its opposition to the Concordat, as recently as 1516, bore witness to

[1] Henry C. Lea, in *The Cambridge Modern History*, i. 659, gives a striking instance of pluralism contemporary with Calvin's life. Jean, son of Duke Rene II of Lorraine, was born in 1498. In 1508, he entered into possession of the revenues of the bishopric of Metz; 1517 saw him bishop of Toul; 1518 brought the addition of Terouanne; 1521 added Valence and Die; 1523, Verdun. In 1524, he became archbishop of Narbonne. The year 1533 added the archbishopric Reims and made him primate of France. In 1536 he became bishop of Alby, and the next year archbishop of Lyons. He then gained the bishoprics of Macon, Agen, and Nantes. Several of these posts he resigned to relatives; but many he continued to hold till his death in 1550. And, in addition, he was in possession of the "abbeys of Gorze, Fecamp, Cluny, Marmoutiers, St. Ouen, St. Jean de Laon, St. Germer, St. Medard of Soissons, and St. Mansuy of Toul."

the jealous concern of the University for the liberties of the French Church. But it was, nevertheless, on the whole a hindrance to progress. It stood strongly opposed to innovations in learning or in doctrine. Not that it wholly neglected the new learning that was crossing the Alps from Italy. Greek had been taught within its walls, though for a brief period, as early as 1458. In 1508, new interest in the Attic tongue had been awakened by the coming of Girolamo Aleandro, afterwards famous as an opponent of Luther at Worms. But, in spite of this measure of approval, the friends of classic studies felt that the University was hostile to them, that its dominant spirit was scholastic, and its methods antiquated. Its leaders looked upon Greek as the "language of heresies," and they condemned the teachings of Luther in terms of the utmost abhorrence.[2]

Yet, in the early years of the sixteenth century, the new learning was rapidly winning its way in France. In 1507, the printing of books in Greek was begun in Paris, and two years later the leader of native French Humanists, Jacques Le Fevre, already famed for his studies on Aristotle and in mathematics, published his exposition of the Psalms which Luther was to use in his early years of teaching at Wittenberg. Among many distinguished pupils of Le Fevre, none was more eminent for scholarship than Guillaume Bude, whose Commentary on the Greek Language, of 1529, gave him a European fame. To Bude's influence with Francis I was due the establishment, in 1530, of the Royal Lecturers (Lecteurs royaux), at Paris, to give instruction in Greek, Hebrew, and mathematics, wholly in the spirit of the Renaissance, and with a zeal for the new learning that roused the hostility of the Sorbonne. From this royal foundation the College de France was to grow. Indeed, under the reign of Francis I, the new learning had become distinctly fashionable. The King was conspicuously its supporter, and the roll of scholars, architects, and artists who found in him a patron

[2] See the letters of Henri Lorit and Valentin Tschudi in A. L. Herminjard, Correspondence des refromateurs dans les pays de langue francaise, i. 31, 38; Abel Lefranc, Histoire du College de France, pp. 60–63, 68.

is an ornament to his reign. Even more committed to the support of Renaissance men and methods was Francis's elder sister, Marguerite d'Angouleme, whose increasing liberalism was ultimate to carry her into real, though not publicly announced, sympathy with Protestantism.[3] In Marguerite, men of liberal ideas, generally, had a determined defender; and she afforded to many efficient protection, especially after her marriage, in 1527, to Henri d'Albret, King of Navarre, had put her at the head of a little court at Nerac. With Francis, however, support of the new learning was based on admiration for humanistic scholarship rather than on conviction, and it ceased whenever the new leaven threatened the constitution or the doctrine of an organisation so useful to the French monarchy from a political and financial point of view as the French Church.

It was true in France, as elsewhere in Europe, that the new learning was leading to criticism of the existing state of the Church. From its standpoint the Sorbonne was amply justified in its opposition. The spirit of the Renaissance was that of a return from the scholarship of the later mediaeval period to the sources. Begun with a revived interest of the writers of classical antiquity, it soon led men to investigate anew the sources of religious truth, and to go back of d'Aili, Occam, Scotus, and Aquinas, to Augustine, and, even further, to the New Testament. The attempted return did not usually involve any hostile intention toward the established Church. Men like Erasmus, Ximenes, or Reuchlin believed that sound learning, the study of the Scriptures and of the Fathers, and earnest opposition to the superstition, ignorance, and maladministration rampant in the Church would effect all that was necessary for its betterment. They had no wish for revolution. In France this humanistic spirit of reform had its conspicuous embodiment in Le Fevre, who, both by reason of his own services to the cause of the religious awakening and the disciples whom he aroused to similar or even greater zeal, deserved the first place among the religious leaders of his native

[3] Abel Lefranc, Les idees religieuses de Marguerite de Navarre, Paris, 1898, p. 123.

country in the generation that preceded Calvin, and prepared the way for Calvin's more positive work.

Born at Etaples in Picardy about the middle of the fifteenth century,[4] Jacques Le Fevre was early attracted to Paris, where he learned Greek of a fugitive from Sparta, George Hermonymus. A journey to Italy, in 1488–1489, quickened his humanistic zeal, and his religious spirit was no less manifest in a sympathy with the mystical type of piety. A little man, modest, kindly, gentle, of a life that did honour to his priestly vows, he won friendship by his personal qualities as he attracted admiration by his zeal for scholarship. His disciples were destined to the most various parts in the Reformation struggle; but they seem to have held him in singular affection. Among those who honoured him as their teacher were: Guillaume Briconnet, sprung from one of the eminent noble houses of France, and to be bishop of Meaux; Guillaume Bude, instrumental, as has been seen, in the establishment of the Royal Lecturers; Francois Vatable, one of the first teachers of Hebrew on that foundation and to be Calvin's instructor; Gerard Roussel, the later confessor of Marguerite d'Angouleme, and bishop of Oloron, for a time Calvin's friend; Louis de Berquin, destined to die at the stake for his Protestant faith; and Guillaume Farel, to be the fiery preacher of evangelical doctrines in French Switzerland, and Calvin's intimate associate.

It was by reason of Briconnet's appointment as abbot of the great Parisian monastery of St Germain-des-Pres, in 1507, that Le Fevre came to make that religious foundation his home for the next thirteen years. There, aided by its noble library, he turned to the study of the Bible in a singularly fresh spirit. In 1512, he published a Latin translation of and commentary upon Paul's Epistles which shows clearly the development of his thought.

[4] The usual and more probable date is "about 1455," e.g. G. Bonet-Maury in Hauck's Realencyklopadie fur protestantische Theolgie, v. 174; but Professor E. Doumergue, Jean Calvin, les hommes et les choses de son temps, Lausanne, 1899, seq., i. 539–541, has an interesting argument favouring the conclusion that at his death, in 1536, he was 100 years old.

Le Fevre did not break with the Roman Church as an organisation–that he never did. He still held to many of its characteristic doctrines. Yet, five years before Luther's theses, he had come to deny the justifying merit of good works, to hold salvation to be a free gift from God, to doubt the doctrine of transubstantiation, and to imply a belief in the sole authority of the Scriptures.[5] But these assertions, though clear, were the utterances of a quiet, scholarly mystic, who saw no incongruity between his views and a cordial support of the Church as it then existed; and it is no wonder that few perceived what he failed to see. His book made no sensation; and he continued his peaceful career, holding with ever-increasing firmness the affection of his friends and pupils, and gaining, through the good offices of Briconnet, the regard of Francis I and of Marguerite.

Meanwhile Luther was beginning his reformatory work in Germany, and, by 1519, that land was filled with the noise of the battle. His books soon reached France. The Sorbonne, under the lead of its syndic, Noel Beda, condemned his views in April, 1521. Criticisms of the Church which had passed well-nigh unnoticed now appeared dangerously "Lutheran." Le Fevre himself came under suspicion. In 1517 and 1518, he had put forth a scholarly study denying the identity of Mary Magdalene with Mary, the sister of Lazarus and the Mary who anointed the Saviour's feet. In itself, this might seem an academic question; but it denied the current teachings of the Church, it practically denied the current teachings of the Church, it practically asserted the right of private biblical interpretation, and it was an invasion by one who was only a master of arts of a field of thought to be fittingly open only to a doctor of theology. Under the suspicion which the rise of Luther had instilled, Le Fevre was now attacked by Beda, and his opinion on the problem of the Marys was condemned by the Sorbonne about seven months after it had denounced the Saxon reformer.

[5] For discussions, from somewhat divergent points of view, of the extent of Le Fevre's Protestantism, see Herminjard, Correspondance, i. 239; and Doumergue, Jean Calvin, i. 81–86, 542–551.

About a year before the condemnation of his book, however, Le Fevre had left Paris for the friendly home of Briconnet, who, since 1516, had been bishop of Meaux. The bishop was a worthy disciple of Le Fevre in purpose. He saw the need of reform, and held the humanistic belief that a return to the sources – the study of the Bible and the preaching of biblical truth – would right the evils of the Church. He perceived no need of revolution, nor did he, any more than Le Fevre, grasp the seriousness of the situation. But he was willing to do much more than most humanists to use the remedies in which he believed; and in his reformatory convictions and his efforts alike, he had the powerful sympathy of Marguerite. He now began the work in earnest. Under his encouragement and that of Marguerite, Le Fevre published, in 1523, a translation of the New Testament which grew by 1530 to a version of the whole Bible. This was, indeed, far from being the first translation of the Scriptures to be made or printed in France; but those that had gone before had been marked by the abbreviations and modifications popular in the Middle Ages. Le Fevre now gave a careful version of the Vulgate, enriched here and there by comparison with the Greek.[6] Though in no sense a great translation, Le Fevre's work undoubtedly furthered extensive reading of the Scriptures in France.

Briconnet was inaugurating, meanwhile, an active campaign of preaching in his diocese, aided by Roussel, Vatable, Farel, and Michel d'Arande, all of whom had caught their inspiration from Le Fevre; but he soon found himself in great difficulties. By the champions of the existing order he was looked upon as little better than a Lutheran. On the other hand, the new preaching could not be confined to simple expositions of the Scriptures. The humanistic reformatory course was one almost impossible to hold in practice, save as an individual attitude. Farel inveighed against the papacy, and was probably dismissed

[6] Reuss and Berger in Hauck, Realencyklopadie, iii. 126–131; Doumergue, i. 98; *The Cambridge Modern History*, ii. 283. The New Testament had been printed in French at Lyons about 1477; and the whole Bible, modified as above mentioned, at Paris about ten years later.

by Briconnet in 1523. But iconoclastic acts, wholly distasteful to Briconnet, Roussel, and most of his friends, soon occurred. In December, 1524, Jean Le Clerc, a wool-carder of Meaux, tore a copy of a papal bull from the cathedral door and affixed instead a declaration that the Pope was Antichrist.[7] Bricconet denounced the acts of Le Clerc and his possible associates in January, 1525;[8] but the political situation soon made his position impossible. The great defeat of the French at Pavia, in February, was followed by the captivity of the King in Spain, whither Marguerite went to join him in August. The Parlement of Paris was now able to oppose Briconnet unhindered. His preachers were forbidden and Le Fevre's translations ordered burned.

Briconnet felt that the situation was beyond his solution. He was not a man of the highest courage; but had he been more daring than he was he might well have thought that his mild reformatory efforts had resulted in attempts more revolutionary than he anticipated or relished. He now issued, on October 15, 1525, two synodical decrees[9] condemning Luther's doctrines and books and deploring the "abuses of the Gospel" by those who denied purgatory and rejected prayers to the saints. His reformatory work at Meaux was over. The same month Le Fevre and Roussel were compelled to fly for safety to Strassburg; but Briconnet himself continued in possession of his office till his death in 1534. Fortunately the royal favour followed the fugitives. On his return from Madrid, in 1526, Francis recalled them. To Le Fevre he gave the post of teacher to his children and librarian of the Chateau of Blois. Here the aged scholar laboured on his translation of the Bible; but the growing tension of the ecclesiastical situation led the ever-kindly Marguerite to effect his transfer to the safety of her court at Nerac in 1530, and there Le Fevre died six years later. Roussel did further work as a reformatory preacher in

[7] He was whipped and branded at Paris. On July 22, 1525, he was burned at Metz for the destruction of a shrine.

[8] Letter to the clergy of Meaux, Herminjard, i. 320.

[9] Herminjard, i. 153, where they are dated 1523, though with hesitation. On the true date see Doumergue, i. 110.

France, and, as will be seen, influenced Calvin at a crisis in that reformer's history; but he was even more of a mystic quietist than Le Fevre. Like Le Fevre and Briconnet, he saw the need of reform, without desiring or appriciating the necessity of revolution, or being willing to pay the cost.[10] Aided by Marguerite, he accepted the bishopric of Oloron, and died about 1552, in good repute for fidelity in the spiritual administration of his diocese.

Yet if Le Fevre, Briconnet, and Roussel were thus disposed only to a humanistic type of reform that did not break with Rome, and proved inadequate to the struggle, there were those who entered into the spirit of the German revolt and wished to effect a similar revolution in France. Most of these radical reformers were from the mercantile and wage-earning classes; but a few men of learning and rank were to be found among them. Of Le Fevre's stormy pupil, Guillaume Farel, something has already been said, and there will be abundant occasion to speak further of him in this narrative. The most eminent in station among the early uncompromising reformers of France was Louis de Berquin, a noble of Artois, and, like Farel, a disciple of Le Fevre. A man of dignified bearing, scholarly attainments, and high character, Berquin won the friendship of Marguerite and Francis I, and became a member of the royal council. A little later he gained the rather timid regard of Erasmus.[11] A translator of Erasmus and Luther, and himself a writer in favour of reform, he was an object of attack from 1523 onward, but was at first saved by the friendship of Marguerite and of her royal brother. That favour Francis I failed to extend to Berquin at last, probably because he became convinced that Berquin's attack on so useful an institution as the crown found the French Church to be was too serious; but his end came in death by fire on April 16, 1529, on condemnation by the Parlement of Paris – sentence hastily passed and executed to prevent possible interference by the King. When a nobleman of such connections and influence was thus made to suffer, it

[10] Letter to Farel, August 24, 1524, Herminjard, i. 271.

[11] His story is well told by H. M. Baird, History of the Rise of the Huguenots, i. chap. iv. For Erasmus's estimate, see Herminjard, ii. 188.

was evident that scant mercy could be expected from the French courts by heretics of lower social rank. In the death of Berquin French Protestantism of the thorough-going type lost its most conspicuous representative. Yet he cannot be called a leader. He was no organiser. He seems to have had little missionary force. He fought largely alone; and he left the reform movement little stronger save for the courage of his example.

The vast majority of the radical reformers of France were, however, from the humbler walks of life, and their conduct in many instances was such as to exasperate rather than attract. Iconoclastic excesses, such as had been exhibited at Meaux, were repeated in many places, notably at Paris in 1528. The Gallic spirit is more impulsive than the German, and though iconoclasm was common enough in many lands during the Reformation age, it showed its injudicious, aggravating face nowhere more plainly than in France, where the image-breakers, instead of representing, as in some lands, a popular revolution, were but a handful as yet among a hostile and angered population.

By 1530, the French Reform movement, in both its types, was slowly and somewhat irregularly growing. Its humanistic form appealed to men of culture. Where the new learning had penetrated, in the court and among student circles, there was not a little sympathy with such efforts as Le Fevre had led. A critical attitude toward mediaeval doctrines and practices, that yet did not break with Rome, was extensive, especially among the younger race of scholars. The radicals found little sympathy among the humanistic reformers. If the latter were inadequate to their task, the former were as yet incapable of widely commending their cause. The great lack of the French reformatory movement was a leader whose controlling mind could knit its scattered and divergent forces. Such a leader must appeal to the world of scholarship, and yet go further in opposition to Rome than the humanists had done. He must be as firm as the radicals in hostility to the papacy, and yet be able to show that iconoclastic excesses were incidental, not characteristic. He must present a type of theology congenial to non-German religious thought.

Such a leader it was to find for the first time in Calvin. That the intellectually and politically divided forces opposed to Rome, or to Roman abuses, not merely in France, but ultimately in Switzerland, the Netherlands, Scotland, and to a large degree in England, also, were knit into spiritual unity; that the theology of the Reformation was given an interpretation congenial to the non-German mind; and that a great type of ecclesiastical independence characteristic of Romanism, but forfeited by most of the reformers, was preserved, and combined with a lay participation in church government unknown to the Latin Church, were to be the results of his work.