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## JOHN CALVIN—THE MAN.\*

One could scarcely have assigned to him a task more difficult than that of selecting, out of a crowded and influential life, the most salient acts and events for narrative; choosing, out of the congeries of traits which constitute the character of a great man, those of the first importance for portrayal; so combining them in presentation that those who hear will carry with them at least an impression of a great historical figure; and doing all this within the limits of a manuscript which will employ for its delivery not more than thirty minutes of terrestrial time. Yet this is the duty which those responsible for this celebration have devolved on their first speaker.

But who, if he were offered the opportunity, would not seize it with avidity, to do honor to the memory of one to whom our civilization, in all its highest interests of civil government, education, morality and religion, owes a debt so incalculable as it does to John Calvin? And it is therefore with great joy and with a lively sense of the honor that is mine in being permitted to speak of him, even under these difficult conditions, that I rise only to refresh your memory concerning his career and character and the elements of his greatness.

He was born at Noyon, in Picardy, in northeastern France, on July 10, 1509. His father was apostolic notary

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\* One of three brief addresses delivered at the Calvin Celebration, Princeton Theological Seminary, May 4, 1909.

and procurator fiscal in the city. He was a man of influence in the local ecclesiastical and political governments, and he entertained distinct social ambitions for his family. John was therefore educated from early youth with the sons of a noble family. To defray the cost he was granted the proceeds of a small benefice; and that he might enjoy these, he received the tonsure, and was devoted to the priesthood. Zealous in study, quick in acquisition and serious in character, he made rapid progress in acquiring and in comprehending knowledge. Abundant promise of great intellectual ability was given before he was twelve years old; and he was soon after sent to Paris to continue his studies. There, in two colleges—one after the other—he worked with strained attention every day until midnight; and when he awoke in the morning his mind recalled, reviewed and clarified the study of the preceding day. Ambition to know and loyalty to his ethical ideals, were his dominant traits at this period; so distinctly indeed, that his fellow students called him the Accusative; though there is no story that his scrupulosity dealt more severely with any other object than himself.

His father's offices touched the Church on the one hand and the civil law on the other; and his increasing ambition for his brilliant son seems to have vibrated between an ecclesiastical and a legal career for him. Just at this time, the law seemed to the prudent parent to offer the son the greater rewards; and so, at his father's instance, John went first to Orleans, where, under Stella, and afterwards to Bourges, where, under Alciati, both great civilians, he pursued the study of the civil law; and with such thoroughness and sureness of grasp, that in the absence of his professors, he from time to time became the lecturer; and this before he had reached his majority.

Up to this time the trait that dominated all his other traits and unified his life was the ambition to know. To this ambition he sacrificed his health, and sowed the seeds of that multiplicity of physical ailments which grew with his

years; and these, though they never mastered his will while living, cut him off before his time, and deprived the Church and State and us of the serene wisdom of a great man's old age.

But ambition for knowledge as his dominating trait was soon displaced by one infinitely higher. This was zeal for the revealed truth. It was not that his ambition for knowledge was ever destroyed or diminished. But knowledge thereafter was sought to confirm and illustrate the ultimate truth, which he now believed and never after doubted had been revealed to him. This vision of the ultimate truth came to him partly through conversations with his kinsman Olivetan, concerning the Reformation in religion in Germany, and especially through his study of classical Greek and, above all, the Greek New Testament under Melchior Wolmar, the humanist. I think this is the point of time to which we must assign what he afterwards speaks of as his *subita conversio*, though we cannot be sure of it. For from this time on, a new principle of action governed his life. The desire to know was subordinated and made instrumental to the truth already known, whose devoted bond-slave he continued until his death. John Calvin's later work, abundant and influential as it was, was not done under the dominion of that feverish search for unattainable truth the impulse to which Lessing esteems the greatest gift of God. Firm in the newly created conviction that the truth of God for man was revealed in Holy Scripture, his labors became far more abundant and far more fruitful than they ever would have been had mere ambition for knowledge continued the regnant motive of his life.

So we find him, under this new impulse, turning from the law and from the new letters to the Biblical and theological studies in which he became so great. He did, indeed, give to the world a single volume, an edition of Seneca's *De Clementia*, as the fruit of his humanism, and justified by its publication the high hopes and prophecies of those who had watched with eagerness the unfolding of his powers. But

this was all. Henceforth, he gave all he was and all he had of talent and attainment to divine things as the ultimate truth, and in particular to that Queen of the sciences—Theological science—which he believed to be what a little later Francis Bacon called it, “the Sabbath and Port of all men’s labors and perigrinations.”

And now his life becomes so crowded that I cannot even mention all of its greater activities. The death of his father gave the loyal son liberty of action. He went to Paris. He threw himself heart and soul into the cause of theological and ecclesiastical reform. He held conferences; in which he preached sermons which always ended with the triumphant cry, “If God be for us, who can be against us”. He was enough of a man of the people to sympathize with the humble who had imbibed new hope from the watchwords of the Reformation, and his culture and social affinities made him at home with men of large learning and great affairs. He called himself “pusillanimous by nature,” but no other man who knew him ever suspected it. So now, he not only held conferences, but wrote for the rector of the Sorbonne an address on Justification by faith alone. Calvin was suspected as the author, and was obliged to fly from Paris. He was welcomed at the court of Margaret, the sister of the King, and was strengthened in soul by conferences with the aged Lefèvre. His deep interest in the already hounded and persecuted adherents of the Reform, led him back to Paris. But again he was obliged to leave it by stealth if he were to do anything more for the cause he held so dear. He fled, and, after painful adventures, reached the city of Strassburg—and soon afterwards Basel. Here he renewed his quiet studies in Greek and Hebrew, in the companionship of kindred spirits like Grynæus and Capito. He was received as a man of eminent learning, and his life only deepened the respect felt for his character and attainments, and extended his reputation and influence.

He was only twenty-six. But his faculties were already so disciplined and cultivated, and his judgment so mature, that

he was easily able to give to the world a work which at once lifted him into eminence throughout Europe; and which more than any other single work of his is the basis of his continuing influence and fame. A slander led to its composition and publication. The government of Francis I wanted an alliance with the Protestant Princes of Germany against his life-long rival, the Emperor Charles V. Of course, as Protestants, they wished to know why he was persecuting their Protestant brethren in his kingdom; and in substance, the reply of the representatives of the French King was that the Protestants of France were wild, anarchistic sectaries like the Anabaptists whom the Protestant Princes themselves were denouncing and punishing. This was the opportunity of Calvin. It appeared in his consciousness not however as opportunity but as the call to duty. "Silence", said he, "would now be treason." And he wrote "*The Institutes of the Christian Religion*", and that great Preface addressed to the King of France,—at once an appeal, a defence, and a challenge—which all, who read it in the light of the events which called it forth, agree has rarely been equalled and never excelled in its eloquence. Greater by far than the preface was the *Institutes* itself. For it organized into a unity, which all who then read it recognized as vital, the ideas of the Reformation, and gave to the movement an intellectual standing of which the Evangelical party at once became conscious, and which awakened the respect and increased the fears of the Roman theologians. It was not precisely the large treatise which we now know by the name of Calvin's *Institutes*. That is the edition of 1559. The edition of 1536 was by comparison a small book. But the conception of Christian doctrine and its organization are the same in both editions, as they are in all the seven published during his life.

The publication of this great work, and the vast increase of influence it brought him led him to believe that his career ought to be that of the scholar laboring in his study and with his pen. Of his great gifts as an ecclesiastic and states-

man he does not at this time appear to have been at all conscious. But he was soon to be introduced to work, that called into activity all the talents with which God had endowed him.

Journeying in 1536 to Strassburg from Ferrara, where he had been the guest of the Duchess Renée, daughter of Louis XII of France, he was compelled to pass through Geneva, where William Farel had organized the Reformed Church. Farel urged him to remain. Calvin, no doubt, longing for the quiet life of the scholar, was at first unwilling to do so. But his unwillingness was overcome, partly by the solemn appeal of Farel and partly by the urgent call of the people. He thus became one of the pastors of Geneva; and entered on that great and complex career during which he became the most influential Protestant in all Europe.

Geneva had lately won its independence from the Duke of Savoy, and had accepted the Reformation. But its social life had been disorganized by both the conflict and its victory, and its new won liberty was degenerating into what we have a right to call license. The party of moral order was in the minority. The Libertines were, if not in power, at least in the majority. If evangelical religion were not to be destroyed in the house of its friends, the Church and State of Geneva—for Church and State as in mediæval society were one—must organize a discipline which would secure the high individual and social life which the Reformation of religion implied. To this much needed work Calvin, with Farel and Viret as coadjutors, gave himself. It is the great work of the first stage of his Geneva life. It was not his only work by any means. His teaching, his preaching, his voluminous correspondence, and his controversies—with the Anabaptists on the nature of the Church, with theologians on the nature of the Real Presence, and with Caroli who accused him of Arianism—were themselves more than enough to engage all the powers of two or three men of ability. But, after all, it was, as I have said, the preservation of the Genevan State from renewed subjection to Savoy

and of the Genevan Church from disintegration that was at this time his greatest and most difficult work. To this period belong the Catechism, the Confession of Faith and the Articles of Discipline.

All this was too much for the pleasure-loving Genevans. Two years after Calvin had been called with enthusiasm, he became the most unpopular man in the little republic. The Libertine party won in the elections of 1538; and the grave and earnest pastors protested against their measures. It was hardly necessary to banish them; for Farel and Calvin must have felt that, in the state of Genevan opinion then existing, they had no function to fulfil. But they were banished; and Calvin went to Strassburg, where he was welcomed by Bucer, and where he became the pastor of the church of the French Refugees, lectured on theology and published his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. The churches of Strassburg and its people rejoiced in his presence in the city. They made him a citizen. His own sympathies with other Protestants than the Reformed were deepened. He became, as he was well qualified to become, a mediator between the Protestant parties. He also became at this time the intimate friend and correspondent of Melancthon; and he represented the Protestants in the Conferences of Bonn and Frankfort and Ratisbon. The exile to Strassburg both broadened Calvin himself and widened his influence.

Meanwhile the Genevans were repenting. The absence of Calvin, and the high value placed on him by others taught them the greatness of the gift they had spurned. The disorders in their city increased. As the only remedy, Cardinal Sadolet in a letter of great skill and beauty invited their return to the bosom of the Catholic Church. To this letter Calvin from Strassburg replied in a paper which in literary form and in the noble and gentle spirit which pervaded it is surpassed by nothing he has written. The Genevans begged his return against Strassburg's affectionate protests; and Calvin was divided. Inclination would have held him

where he was. But duty, he believed, called him back to the turbulent and endangered city on Lake Lemman. He went back on his own terms, with more freedom than ever before, to exert an influence far more commanding in Church and State. Thus, from 1541 to his death in 1564, Geneva continued his home, in a high and peculiar sense his own city, though it was only a few years before his death that he became a citizen.

It would require not a few moments but a course of lectures to describe the abundant and various labors of this, the most fruitful period of his life, and to show their importance. I will only say, that in the most of them he was breaking paths for us to walk in. He organized anew the visible Church for us to find a home in. He founded the College which became the inspiration and the model of the Protestant colleges of a new continent. He opened anew the Scriptures, and became, as Farrar has said, the father of modern Exegesis. He unfolded the great principles which underlie and support government by the people, and guarantee their civil freedom. Above all, he re-discovered, expounded and organized into a great self-consistent system the truths of revelation for the Reformed Church of God.

All this he embodied in literary products the most various; each consummate in its form, and in its matter so important, and in its spirit so vital, as to be living and influential today. Academic lectures, elaborate treatises, commentaries on all the books of the New Testament, except the Apocalypse, and on many of the Old Testament, correspondence with ministers of the Churches and great ministers of state, and brilliant polemic discussions; these, with his earlier writings, make a collection, in the English edition of his works, of more than fifty octavo volumes. It is not too much to say, that no contemporary of his had a circle of readers so wide; and that none had readers so eager, whether they were allies or disciples or opponents.

In these writings he has discussed almost every great subject touching the Church's doctrine, discipline or cultus;

the Christian rule of faith; the Christian life of worship and of duty; practical ethics; and the moral and religious relations of civil government and human society. To the discussion of every one of these subjects, he brought large learning, a critical judgment which seldom failed to separate the essential from the merely circumstantial, a breadth of intellectual sympathy which always secured for it fairness and largeness of treatment, and, above all, a single-eyed and passionate devotion to the great vision of the truth of God by which in his earlier life he had been converted and transformed.

So large and so varied is this literary product—varied, I mean, both in form and in matter—that it would not have been strange if in some of it he had fallen below himself; if some discussion, some letter, some sermon indicated that when he wrote it the forces of his mind were wearied or distracted. But if there is such a document, I have never heard of it. All of his powers and attainments seem always to have been at his disposal for the purpose immediately in hand. It can be truthfully said of him, that the whole of the man is in every one of his literary products. This is a wonderful statement to make; but it becomes more wonderful, when I add to it, that his was not only the frailest of bodies, but a body unusually sensitive to pain, and most often in a state of acute suffering. We read without surprise that he did not live to reach the age of fifty-five. We only wonder how he could have lived so long. He is the illustration by eminence of Pascal's thinking reed.

Calvin's intellectual endowment was as imperial in quality, strength and variety of talent as that of any man of the great age in which he lived. It has been said that Luther had genius and Calvin talents. But what this means I do not know. Every great man has distinctive traits of intellect and temperament; and these give character to his outlook on life, to the work of life he chooses as his mission, and to its changes in detail as these are determined by the crises which confront him. Certainly, we have the right to

say that no man in his century did larger work than he did, or did what he did with more ability, or was more nearly equal to every exigency, or was called suddenly to meet exigencies more critical. The mind of no contemporary moved more easily over a wide area of knowledge and thought, or seized with surer eye the great subjects it embraced.

It is hard, without seeming exaggeration, to speak of his special gifts of intellect: his quick perception of truth, his great power of acquisition, his capacious memory which held and retained large stores of knowledge, his ease of recollection which called out what was needed for immediate use, his faculty of large discourse, that is to say, the faculty of marshalling the elements of his knowledge in due order, relating them to principle and combining them in a system—the great gift in virtue of which he is the greatest of modern theologians—and his sympathetic insight into other minds and his power of interpreting them, in virtue of which he is the founder of modern Biblical Exegesis.

The literary critics seem to agree with each other in the opinion that the surest and most characteristic mark of a writer's genius is that made by it on his literary expression. And there is, no doubt, profound truth in the dictum, that the man is in his style or that "the style is the man." But whose gifts of expression in that age surpassed—I had almost asked equalled—those of Calvin? I am repeating the judgments of those competent to speak when I say, that it was not Erasmus, the man of letters, or Melancthon, the preceptor of Germany, but John Calvin who came nearest to reviving in his own writings the Latin of the Augustan age; and that, when he wrote in the French of his own day, he newly and permanently and notably endowed the language with traits of nobility and precision. And then—to speak of his style in the more special meaning of that term—one has to admit that, though the reappearance of a writer's personality in his style is easily recognized, style is really indescribable in words. This is especially true of a style

which appears in such a variety of prose forms, and is so flexible to every use as the style of Calvin. One can only name its outstanding features. One can say of him as Matthew Arnold said of John Milton the poet, that he writes in "the great style," that his style is deeply serious, and is weighty with matter. The phrase which seems to me best to describe the style of Calvin is that employed by Mr. Gladstone to describe the style of Lord Macaulay. "It is paramount", says Mr. Gladstone, "in the union of ease of movement with perspicuity of matter, and of both with real splendour, and of all with immense rapidity and striking force." In employing this felicitous phrase to describe the style of Calvin, one should change the word splendor into the word grandeur; not only because of the difference between the underlying subjects which engaged Calvin's and Macaulay's minds, but also because Macaulay's splendor at times is flaunting, and this real grandeur can never be. And one should add the caution that while the suspicion is excited that Macaulay's splendor is sometimes forced or artificial, and his lustre, as has been said, is "metallic", Calvin's grandeur of style is organic; it is his sincere expression; the form and action, the force and glow and warmth which reveal and certify the living author.

Of his active, practical genius, which embodied itself in great institutions, like the Reformed Church and the Reformed Republic and the New Academy of Geneva, I can only stop to say that it sometimes appears even greater than the genius reflected in his writings. Nor may I speak of those more personal qualities, like fidelity, and constancy and self-forgetfulness in friendship, and affectionate devotion as brother, husband and father, except to say that if, as Mr. Royce tells us, loyalty is the best word to express the highest and most inclusive social and moral virtue, there never lived a soul more loyal than John Calvin.

And now to close. There is a phrase which both explains and sums up John Calvin the man. The phrase is not mine. It is the phrase of a great man of letters, a great linguist,

a great historical scholar, a student of the Apostolic documents and of the persons of the Apostles. These, because he had given up his Christianity, he studied from the outside. From the outside also he studied Calvin. In a true sense, therefore, he formed his estimate of Calvin in a judicial temper. This man is Ernest Renan. The words of Renan shall be the concluding words of this inadequate paper. "Calvin succeeded more than all, in an age and country which called for a reaction toward Christianity, simply because Calvin was the most Christian man of his age."

*Princeton.*

JOHN DEWITT.