

UNION SEMINARY REVIEW

Vol. XLVII.

OCTOBER, 1935.

No. 1.

JOHN CALVIN THE CITIZEN.*

BY THE REV. JAMES I. VANCE, D. D., LL.D.,
*Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church,
Nashville, Tennessee.*

John Calvin was a dominant citizen of world life in one of the most stirring and eventful periods of human history.

The period was the Renaissance. The sixteenth century was rising to its stately dimensions. Time was throbbing with a new passion. It was the age when Ulrich von Hutten set his lines afire with a kindling enthusiasm for his country and cried, "O century, when studies bloom and spirits awake; it is happiness to live in thee!"

It was the age of great souls; of Luther and Erasmus, of Raphael and Michelangelo, of Columbus and William of Orange, of Loyola and Rabelais, of Coligny and Zwingli and Melancthon, of Titian and Copernicus and John Knox and John Calvin; and of a host of others, artists and sculptors, architects and discoverers, soldiers and statesmen, thinkers and doers, a glorious company of immortals; among them all, none more brilliant in the light he trailed nor grander in the truths he stamped upon his age, nor more enduring in the torch he flung for men to follow, than Calvin.

Calvin's theology has, of course, made a profound impression on the thinking of Europe and also of America, but as

*Our General Assembly of 1935 adopted the report of its Committee on Reformation Sunday, Dr. Vance, Chairman, which recommended "John Calvin and His Institutes" as the theme for Reformation Sunday, October 27, 1935. Geneva will celebrate John Calvin and his work in royal fashion in May, 1936. The REVIEW, in consequence, is making this a Calvin year.—Editors.

Döllinger has well said: "History is no simple game of abstractions: men are more than doctrines," and Calvin was more than Calvinism.

The man himself, by his genius for government, the brilliance of his intellect, the scintillating luster of his logic; by his tireless industry, his unconquerable will and his discipline of self, his worship of the will of God, his peerless position in the Protestant world, his virile antagonism to Roman Catholicism and his unyielding hostility to Paganism, released energies which swept through Scotland, Holland, France, Switzerland, England, and broke in a tidal wave on America.

He did this, not because he was a theologian, but because he was John Calvin the man.

It is not strange, therefore, to find Pattison saying: "In the sixteenth century, Calvinism saved Europe," and John Morley saying: "To omit Calvin from the forces of Western evolution is to read history with one eye shut," and Bancroft saying: "He that will not honor the memory and respect the influence of Calvin knows little of the history of American liberty"; statements with which Green agrees in his larger *History of the English People* when he portrays Calvin the father of the American Republic.

It was not Calvin's views, it was his life, that ruled his age. His morals were sublime, his theology was based on the Word of God, but neither his morals nor the dogmas of his theology were academic. They were an incarnation.

His life emerged from the womb of his conversion. It was sudden, almost as breath-taking as that of Paul. He said, "God himself produced the change. He instantly subdued my heart to obedience." In speaking to a friend, he said, "The die was cast." The soul of his creed was, "If God be for us, who can be against us."

Then there was no hierarchy behind him, there was not even the Reformation, but there was a democracy; and God, by his sovereign grace, threw out upon the new age this mightiest builder, who was to give a troubled world the key to liberty by which it was to unlock the prison house of sin.

Two mighty forces confronted each other, two giant con-

ceptions of life; the old epitomized by a marble palace on the banks of the Tiber, the new epitomized in the Institutes of Calvin. The printed page proved mightier than the marble mausoleum and the brain of Calvin than the ritual of the Pope.

Against Calvin the statesman and preacher stood Rabelais the satirist and humorist. Voltaire has appraised the wit of Rabelais. He has pronounced it: "The most filthy ordure that a drunken monk could possibly vomit."

Against Calvin, who incarnated the fighting mood of the Reformation, also stood Loyola, who bred for Rome its most heroic band of defenders. The difference between these three men, Rabelais, Loyola and Calvin, contemporaries in Paris prior to 1535, has been aptly described thus: "Rabelais wasted individualism, Loyola crushed individualism, Calvin educated individualism."

It is interesting to compare how Loyola and Calvin sought to serve the cause of religion. Loyola died in 1556 and Calvin in 1564. Before they went they laid down the lines of strategy along which the battle was to be fought through the long impending future.

The strategy of Loyola was the Inquisition and the massacre of St. Bartholomew. The strategy of Calvin was the Institutes, the preaching of the living word, and a free church, which, to quote Stevenson, "As it ran through Holland, England, Scotland and America, widening as it went the thoroughfare in which free thought and free religion, democracy and constitutional government flowed, was to find its fullest, its most glorious and its most lasting illustrations."

Geneva was the last of the cities under the Alps to turn from Rome but became the impregnable center of papal opposition. There was nothing static about Geneva. It was described as "a cauldron always at the boiling point." It became a city in which moral reform walked hand in hand with political change.

Farel, the fiery preacher, who as he went through Switzerland "turned every stump into a pulpit" and who has been called "the Whitefield of his day in Switzerland," undertook to make the establishment of the Reformation a thing of law. The matter of regulating moral order was put to popular vote.

The blue laws did not originate in New England nor hang over from old England. They were not invented by John Calvin. They came down from the Middle Ages and were the effort of a Protestant state to take over the supervision of personal conduct exercised by a Medieval state.

Before Calvin came to Geneva there was intolerance not only in Geneva but everywhere else in Europe. This was the situation. Before Calvin came, Geneva had not adopted democracy, nor freedom of conscience, nor liberty of worship, nor personal liberty. She had merely passed laws regulating amusements, commerce, the length of sermons, holidays and the style of hair-dressing. The city was ready for Calvin. Indeed the world was waiting for a master mind to free it from shackles and Calvin struck the blow that made men free. In doing so, he became the world's first citizen.

His preaching at times was stern. His theology at times was narrow; but he was tolerant too. In his catechism he said: "We should rather endeavor to secure a unity of doctrine and spirit among Christians than pettily insist on establishing certain ceremonies. Little will be said of forms on the Day of Judgment."

When he bore down too hard on them, the Council of Two Hundred met and forbade him "to mix in politics, but to preach the gospel as God has commanded," which sounds wonderfully modern.

Calvin left Geneva "having failed but undisgraced." Exiled, he reached Strassburg early in September, 1538, where the leaders of the church received him with open arms.

He was often in grave financial straits, so much so that at times "he had not a cent in his pocket." At Strassburg he received the title "theologian," and there he met Melanchthon in the intimacy of a friendship that was stronger than death. If one thinks of Calvin as cold by nature, let him read his love for Melanchthon. Melanchthon chided him for bearing down too hard on the side of Divine Sovereignty, but Calvin cried of Melanchthon, "Would God that I might die on thy breast!"

Calvin married late and had but one child, a son who died

in infancy, of whom he said: "God has given me a little son, and taken him away; but I have myriads of children in the whole Christian world."

In 1540 the citizens of Geneva recalled Calvin. During his absence the little republic had drifted to the edge of ruin. In restoring and rebuilding, there was much that an enlightened church to-day must condemn. But it must be blamed not so much on Calvin as on the age he sought to correct.

The one damning blot on his record was the burning of Servetus. While Calvin attempted to prevent the burning, he did consent to his death as a penalty for heresy. But that is the way the whole world felt then, whether Catholic or Protestant.

Fairbairn says: "Luther's aim was to teach a true soteriology, Calvin's to build a system and a state in the image of the truth of God." Zwingli was broader than both, for in his doctrine of election he would include all pious brethren in the invisible Church.

But when the pile is made complete, we find, as Stevenson says, that "the Reformation was due to a positive religious conviction. It began an era of popular enlightenment. It lifted up the laity; it awoke the national spirit in Europe. On the Rhine, it was Luther appealing to Germany to assert itself against the Pope on the Tiber. On the Thames it was Latimer and Ridley defying the threats and fagots of the fanatic queen inspired by the Italian cardinal; the Dutch around the Zuyder Zee shaking off the tyranny of the Spaniard; in France the exiled Huguenots becoming aliens to their native land rather than traitors to God."

Through all this, Calvin sought to lay the foundations of public life in religion.

The age is well summed up in the statement which says: "Catholicism was a religion of priests, Lutheranism of theologians and Calvinism of a believing congregation."

Calvin, who was both lawyer and preacher, was the man whose hand was at the helm. He taught that the soul of man has both rights and obligations and tried, in ways the present age condemns, not to regiment society but to stir men to free

obedience. In doing this he stayed the perilous movements that would split Protestantism into many sects. Because he was such a leader with a mind that was logic on fire and a will that tapped omnipotence, John Calvin still sways the world, and will so long as men think more of God than of his shrine and seek to worship him with the soul rather than with the imagination.

Calvin, born in 1509, died in 1564 and, in 1903, his disciples, without lowering his flag, unveiled in Geneva a monument to Servetus. Such was the magnetism of Calvin the citizen; such the tolerance of Calvinism.

CALVIN'S WORKS—RELIGIOUS LITERATURE WITH AN EDUCATIVE PURPOSE.*

BY THE REV. EDWARD H. PRUDEN, Ph. D., D. D.,
Professor in Shanghai University, Shanghai, China.

Calvin's writing fill many volumes. In fact, the products of his pen make an impressive showing amidst the religious literature of the ages. He began to write at an early age and continued tirelessly throughout his very eventful life. His works have broadened his influence tremendously and may be found in the libraries of religious people all over the world. Much of his work has been translated into English and other languages and it would be difficult to find a spot in Christendom upon which the impress of his teachings could not be discovered.

His writings took many forms. There are his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, his Commentaries on most of the

*First of a series of three articles, to appear in this and the next two numbers of the REVIEW, on the general theme, "John Calvin and Religious Education". Dr. Pruden majored for his Ph. D. in this subject in the University of Edinburgh, was pastor for a number of years of the First Baptist Church of Petersburg, Va., and is now teaching Philosophy and English in Shanghai University as a contract teacher for a year under the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.