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# The Calvin Legend

BY BASIL HALL

IN April 1595 a fellow of Caius College, Cambridge, "preached *ad clericum* for his degree of B.D. in St. Maryes" wherein he attacked the teaching of Calvin, and was therefore summoned before the "consistory of Doctors" and "there enjoyed a recantation" in which he confessed he had done great injury to that "learned and right godly man". This passage from Fuller is quoted in a collection of "Opinions and Testimonies" respecting the writings of Calvin which was added to the English version of Calvin's *Commentary on Joshua* in the Calvin Translation Society series nearly a century ago. There are many other passages illustrating the admiration, or at least respect, with which so many distinguished divines, Catholic and Protestant, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries wrote of Calvin. In view of what follows below, it may be interesting to note that among these divines were Bishops Bilson and Andrewes, who were opposed to Puritanism in England, yet held Calvin in honour. Also it is curious to see Roman Catholic scholars like Bossuet and Simon giving at least qualified praise to Calvin, and to learn that John Donne, writing with approval of Calvin added: ". . . for whom I see the Jesuits themselves, though they dare not name him, have a high degree of reverence". Nevertheless, in part because of the strength and cohesion of his life's work, and the integrity, force, and competence of his theological writing, Calvin has never lacked detraction. One major difference between the older denigration of Calvin and that of our own time is that once those who sought to attack him first read widely in his writings. Now it would seem that the word "Calvinism" is a self-justifying pejorative to be used without regard to what, in the context, the word is supposed to mean.

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Calvin and his thought will always be subject to misunderstanding until it becomes sufficiently realized that what Calvin said and did are by no means to be regarded as identical with the work of Protestant successors who either claimed to follow the aims he proposed, or who were described by their adversaries, or later writers, as the spiritual heirs of Calvin. When Calvin died in 1564 the synthesis of biblical studies, humane learning, and the welfare of the small city state of Geneva, died with him. A change of emphasis came with Beza, his successor there, who altered the balance of Calvin's theology, saw, and in part approved, that successful repristination of Aristotle among Protestants which led to the Reformed scholasticism that distorted the Calvinist synthesis<sup>1</sup> and used his contacts with Protestant leaders elsewhere in Europe and in Britain for ends more politically sophisticated than Calvin would have conceived or desired. Further, for Englishmen, two aspects of their own later Protestantism come between them and this original synthesis of Calvin—Puritanism and the evangelicalism of the eighteenth century. There are several elements in common between Calvin's own teaching and that of Puritan and

evangelical writers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries both here and in North America. But much in the aims and methods of these writers, together with their self-imposition of certain limitations, separates their work from Calvin's balancing of the proportions in his work. In the reign of Elizabeth, when the Puritan effort failed to modify in a Genevan direction the provisions of the settlement of religion and its interpretation by the bishops, the next generation of Puritans turned to the more intense cultivation of personal piety. It is arguable, for example, that, when the Civil War came, the Puritan fervour—especially in its more sectarian forms—failed to relate adequately their passion for the sanctification of life to the limitations of politics, the nature of the constitution, and the economic and cultural factors in their environment. Here was the failure to do what Calvin had seen was imperative, that is, that one must come to terms with institutions, political and cultural, through a Church established, visible and centralized in authority, and functioning through an effective parochial as well as synodical discipline. This Puritan failure to face what Anglicanism, for good or for ill, had to face, has left its mark on our subsequent religious history. Evangelicalism was the successor to that intense concern for the sanctification of personal life which was at the heart of Puritanism. European pietism (which owed little to Calvinism) was a spur to, rather than a primary source of English evangelicalism. The evangelicals were the spiritual heirs of those seventeenth century Puritans who, while admirers of Calvin, had sought, by different emphases, a way of sanctification which Calvin would have approved in principle, but would have criticized for the failure to relate sufficiently this sanctification to the givenness of the Church and Sacraments, to Church order, and also to the political and economic environment.

The assertions of the preceding paragraph would need the support of closer argument and supporting evidence before satisfying conclusively either myself or historians of the period. Nevertheless, I make them in order to persuade my readers—if to nothing else—to hesitate before assuming that Calvinism means William Perkins, the Westminster Catechisms, Whitefield, Toplady, and Edwards. If, however, this seems to some to be an elementary truth, then they should notice how remarkable it is that so few who write and speak of "Calvinism" are aware of the implications of this truth. Too often we look back to Calvin through the distorting lens of our own Protestant religious history, which, however admirable and original in its aims and achievement, is not Calvin's calvinism "englished". To understand Calvin's work we must come forward from the time and place into which he was born—the vigorous energies of change and renewal in the early sixteenth century—towards the completion of his work in Geneva in mid-century. Only by this approach can we learn to appreciate the whole Calvin and avoid imposing on his work a theological pattern from another age, or modifying his thought by making our own selection of what we approve in it outside of the context of the rest of his writing and life history. Too often, to-day, those who admire Calvin's theology, are guilty of this eclectic approach which may lead to serious misrepresentation of his work. Those who admire—and do

well to admire—the massive theological achievement of Karl Barth, do Calvin little service if they approach him through the method of Barth. For example, the ill-posed question whether there is ground for a natural theology in Calvin has obscured the pattern of Calvin's own emphases and distorted our contemporary understanding of him by overlooking the implications of the fact that he was never entirely free of sixteenth century biblical humanism\* in his theological method. The theologians of the Reformation did not affirm that the "theology of the Word" was entirely sufficient in itself. Not even Luther was content to say, "the Word alone," and leave it at that, for his doctrine of the Sacraments, for example, moderates what some have sought to regard as the mere biblicalism of Luther. Moreover, his sustained admiration for Melanchthon, the man who sought above all to relate the "theology of the Word" to his contemporary cultural and political situation, rejects the view of Luther's work which oversimplifies it as mere biblicalism. And Calvin had much in common with Melanchthon besides a cordial and lifelong friendship.

Calvin like Melanchthon saw that the theology of the Word must be realized in society, it must establish a pattern of cultural and political understanding as well as of churchmanship and sacramental life. It is no use anyone saying "Nein!" to that—as Barth did to Brunner's attempt, at the time of the Church struggle in Germany, to affirm a measure of natural theology in Calvin. One cannot shout history out of existence. The Reformers were concerned about institutions, about liturgy and Church order, about laws and political relations. It is bad history and inadequate theology to fail to recognize the effort of the Reformers in these matters.

Moreover, this assumption that the Reformers were wrong to be preoccupied with these things is being supported by the renewed and widespread interest in the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century—those men who accused the Reformers of failing to join them in their dissociation of the Word from the ways of contemporary society. Many of the proponents of Anabaptism to-day directly or indirectly attack the Reformers on the ground that they failed to separate the work of Christians from political and cultural affairs. Several examples might be given of this attempt to undercut the significance of the classical Reformation in favour of this theologically null and ecclesiastically incoherent group of men and women who withdrew from the effort of making the visible Church effective in society. Calvin is frequently subjected to attack based on these assumptions. It is distressing that those who claim to be his disciples should—either by ignoring certain elements in his work, or by introducing a defective method in studying him—also assist unintentionally in this misunderstanding of him.

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Let us turn from the misunderstanding of Calvin to look at the variety of misrepresentation of him made by his enemies. It is inevitable that Calvin in his own time and ever since should be attacked by members of the Church of Rome. It is a measure of Calvin's achievement that Rome should be so consistent and energetic in its

attack on Calvin. Daniel-Rops of the Académie Française, author of a widely read history of the Catholic Church, has written an introduction to some extracts from Calvin's writings chosen and translated by another Catholic historian, Fr. Cristiani.\* In this introduction Calvin is said to resemble Robespierre in his private character, "one of the terribly pure men who pitilessly enforce principles": in public life he is described as the theocratic dictator of Geneva, a Geneva where there were "too many policemen, too many pliable judges, too many prisons, and too many scaffolds".<sup>4</sup> (Yet how many hundreds fled from Catholic France to Geneva to enjoy this nightmare, and sought citizenship in what they believed to be a city of freedom as well as of refuge!) This method of attack is neither new nor unusual among Catholic writers, but it lacks the particular instances whereby Calvin was once libelled, since no writer of repute dare use material shown again and again to be mere invention, like the foolish story of Calvin being known to his schoolfellows as the "Accusative Case".

Romanist attack on Calvin has long been supported by that of the humanists—if they may be so called—who from the time of Castello, and of Bayle, and thereafter have repudiated Calvin's aims. Not long ago at the time of the Nazi domination in Germany, Stefan Zweig in his book *The Right to Heresy*, drew a picture of Calvin's Geneva as a regime of dictatorial cruelty based on religious fanaticism. More recently Erich Fromm and Oscar Pfister, in *The Fear of Freedom and Christianity and Fear* respectively, show their desire to undermine current interest in the theological work of Luther and Calvin by accusing them, in effect, of concealed sadism, and of the cruelty born of fear. Fromm says of Luther and Calvin: "these two men personally belonged to the ranks of the greatest haters in history, certainly among religious leaders," and relates their doctrinal teaching to a basis of repressed hostility.<sup>5</sup> Pfister says: "It was the fact that Calvin's own character was compulsion-neurotic which transformed the God of Love as experienced and taught by Jesus into a compulsive character, a fanatic of fearful cruelty, bearing absolutely diabolical traits in his reprobatory practice."<sup>6</sup> He also speaks of Calvin's "diabolization of God".

Pfister, whose theological preoccupations are those of late nineteenth century liberalism, disapproves explicitly of the recent renewal of theological interest in Calvin. He followed up his attack in *Christianity and Fear*, 1944, with his *Calvins Eingreifen in die Hexer- und Hexenprozesse von Peney 1545* in 1947. Here, to prove his general attack in the former book, he concentrates on Calvin's part in the witch trials of 1545. Pfister wishes to show Calvin as cruel, without regard for human suffering, and without that compassion for human folly and sin which is fundamental to Christian faith and practice. He seeks to demonstrate that where the council of Geneva was reluctant to be too severe, through its officers, in inquiring into the extent of witchcraft (and plague-spreading) during the plague-terror of that year, Calvin directly interferred to increase the pressure of "inquisition", and thereby emphasized torture to procure evidence. Pfister also affirms that Calvin failed to distinguish between black and white magic, and wished to punish by burning those guilty of either practice.

The conclusion would thereafter be irrefutable : Calvin was a sadist. To write a book on what amounts to no more than a few sentences in a speech of Calvin to the Council, and in his commentary on Deuteronomy xviii, verses 10-15, is an achievement !—but of doubtful value when one looks more closely at the correct translation of what Calvin in fact said, and puts this into the proper context in the Council minute and the commentary concerned. First, Calvin, representing the *Venerable Company* of pastors of Geneva, spoke to the Council urging a “ légitime inquisition ” (i.e., a legitimate or properly conducted inquiry). Thereafter, the Council recommended the proper authority to proceed “ without fear ”. This Pfister turns into meaning that the judge appointed should act without fear of Calvin ! Neither the Council nor the judge were afraid of Calvin; he had no authority in the matter. The words “ without fear ” relate to the instruction to the judge that he should proceed without intimidation of the accused. Secondly, regarding Pfister’s attempt to show Calvin as desirous of punishing practitioners of both white and black magic with equal cruelty it appears that this turns upon Calvin’s comment on the passage in Deuteronomy mentioned above. Here Calvin, following his ordinary pastoral function of expounding the meaning of Scripture, explains, as the passage plainly states, that hearkening to wizards and witches is disobedience to God : since such practitioners of magic obviously deny God they should be punished, but the goal of Calvin lies in the comment on verse 15. Here he says that ministers should be hearkened to as the servants, the prophets, of God, and one must turn from all dealings with lying spirits which deny God. What Calvin is after is not the sadistic pursuit of witches but the pastoral concern to warn his hearers against lying unbelief.

There have been older attempts than these at discrediting Calvin, by trying to show that he was lacking in warm human lovingkindness ; but Pfister’s is the most recent, sharpest, and the most documented. Beside this attack and those of Zweig others seem to be too generalized and imprecise. To dwell on it further would be tiresome. Those who wish to read a patient and carefully documented rebuttal of Pfister’s attack should consult the effective short work by Ernst Pfisterer *Calvins Wirken in Genf*<sup>a</sup> where, among many other misrepresentations of Calvin, the witch trials at Peney are dealt with. (In fact, over thirty years ago E. Doumergue in his large-scale *Vie de Calvin* disposed of this and many other legends about Calvin.)

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There is, however, a serious charge against Calvin’s humanity, and this relates to his part in the trials at Vienne and Geneva of Michael Servetus. We would all agree that it should have been impossible in a Christian state for Servetus to have been burned alive for wrong belief. The Genevan Council should not have enforced the old Imperial and Catholic law against Servetus which required death by burning for those who denied the Incarnation of the Son of God or who denied infant baptism. That Calvin besought the Council to change the form of execution from burning to beheading may be of more interest than some would allow (had he not known close friends in Paris who had

been burned over a slow fire, a fact terrible to Calvin's sensitive memory?), but it does not excuse that death. "He was a terrible heretic: yes, but he was terribly executed." A fact universally agreed: but may there not be something hypocritical in the form of denunciation so many make on this episode? The Protestant heirs of Calvin have erected an expiatory monument at the place where Servetus was executed. It would be helpful if expiatory monuments were erected by Catholics in those many places where they executed heretics. It would also be of interest to see some expiatory recognition, by those Anglicans and others who cry out against Calvin's cruelty here, of the burning of two Englishmen by order of bishops King and Neile as late as 1612 at London and Lichfield for theological opinions which largely agreed with those of Servetus. The stirring up of these bitter memories benefits no one. But it is surely unjust to single out Calvin alone in that age for cruelty and doctrinaire intolerance.

The burning of Servetus was a terrible fact: but there are those who are not content with this as an example of Calvin's cruelty. Aldous Huxley could endorse an old and groundless legend thus: "Our fathers took the fifth commandment seriously—how seriously may be judged from the fact that during the great Calvin's theocratic rule of Geneva a child was publicly decapitated for having ventured to strike its parents"<sup>9</sup> Not only is there no evidence for this imagined incident from the Genevan records: but there was no legal ground for its being possible under the criminal code under which Geneva was governed. A popular poet of our time in a poem entitled "An Incident in the Life of Ebenezer Jones" presents a brutal school master who hurls down a stairway a mongrel dog before the horrified eyes of a pupil: Mr. Betjeman claims that this was done "by the 'minister of Calvin's God', who says, 'God damns a cur. I am, I am His word'."<sup>10</sup> Even if there were any basis for this incredible assertion in the source used, to perpetuate the theological absurdity in verse would seem a curious misuse of time and language if one did not recollect that for popular writers this kind of absurd inaccuracy in relation to Calvin and Calvinism is common form. It is a curious fact that if one were to collect references to "Calvin", "Calvinism," and "Calvinistic" in non-scholarly writing, the majority of instances would be pejorative in tone and in general bear very little relation to what is known to scholars of Calvin's writing, doctrine, and achievements.

Those who wish to focus denigration of Calvin and what he stood for, on his supposed cruelty and dictatorial powers fail to come to grips with two major facts. First, if Calvin was a cruel man how did he attract so many, so varied, and so warmly attached friends and associates who speak of his sensitiveness and his charm? The evidence is plain for all to read in the course of his vast correspondence. Secondly, if Calvin had dictatorial control over Geneva affairs, how is it that the records of Geneva show him plainly to have been the servant of its Council which on many occasions rejected out of hand Calvin's wishes for the religious life of Geneva, and was always master in Genevan affairs? A reading of Calvin's farewell speech to the ministers of Geneva made shortly before he died should resolve doubt upon this

point.<sup>11</sup> To call Calvin the "dictator of a theocracy" is, in view of the evidence, mere phrase-making prejudice. Calvin in Geneva had less power either in theory or in practice than had Archbishop Whitgift in England, and less again than had Archbishop Laud, for he had neither the authority of their office nor the consistent and powerful political support which they received.

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There is besides this misrepresentation of Calvin found in Catholic, and what may be called humanist, writers, a tradition of misrepresentation of Calvin which derives from a few English Church historians who have a common line of descent. In the posthumous publication—by former pupils, among whom were Leighton Pullan and B. J. Kidd—of A. L. Moore's *Lectures on the Reformation* there is a paper entitled "The influence of Calvinism on modern unbelief". Here are to be found the strange notions that "Servetus started from orthodox Calvinism"<sup>12</sup>; that Calvinism encourages the transition from Christianity to Arianism and Socinianism or Unitarianism; and the bizarre sentence: "the most profoundly immoral and revolting tenets of Calvinism are to be found in the *Institutes*".<sup>13</sup> B. J. Kidd was too careful a scholar to commit himself to Moore's manner and assertions about Calvin; nevertheless his selections from Calvin's work in his *Documents of the Continental Reformation* are certainly not chosen with the intention of showing Calvin in a favourable light. But Leighton Pullan in his Bampton Lectures for 1922 could write: "The modern capitalist is usually a child of the Ghetto or a grandchild of Geneva".<sup>14</sup> This romantic illusion that Calvinism and capitalism, or big business, are complementary has no relation to the facts of economic history and is now much less heard of than it was many years ago. Following Moore, Pullan also argued that "Calvinism is haunted by the spectre of Socinianism", although he makes the (very necessary) qualification that you cannot accuse Calvin of unorthodoxy on the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. In view of the qualification it is difficult to know what Pullan meant.

Recently *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* in the article on Calvin renews the old Catholic libels that Calvin was cruel, and an "unopposed dictator" who prohibited all amusement. Presumably the editors have not examined the evidence in the records, or even secondary sources which have used these, for no notice is taken of the fact that the Council of Geneva in Calvin's time introduced little in legislation that was new on the suppression of gambling, blasphemy, drunkenness, licentious dancing, luxury in dress, playing of games during the hours of public worship, and so on, for all this had been provided during the episcopal government of Geneva before the Reformation. The Council merely sought with some additions to make what had been a dead letter a living practice.

Further, to assume that Geneva was a city in which "puritanical" morality became grimly successful is to be much more optimistic than either Calvin or the Genevan Council ever were about the success of their aims for the moral life of the city. In view of this attitude it is not surprising that the article on Calvin says nothing of the facts that



Calvin was a biblical humanist (the significance of this is too little realized in general), that his doctrinal system (and the word "system" ought not to be stressed) was essentially Christological, that Calvin was deeply read in patristic and scholastic learning, for example, in the debt of his ecclesiology to the work of Cyprian and of St. Thomas. Calvin's ecclesiology is briefly dismissed with the erroneous statement that he subjected the state to the Church. It would be a curious exercise to discover what passages in Calvin's writings could be adduced to validate this assertion, or what reference to the historical evidence concerning the relation of Church and State at Geneva could support it.

Of all the leaders of Protestantism Calvin seems to have received a greater weight of denigration and misrepresentation than the rest, for much of the attack on Luther is more absurd than serious, and is thereby self-defeating. To go further with the listing and exemplification of misrepresentations of Calvin's life and work would be possible for there is a great mass of it, but it would be tedious to continue. Too little space has been given here to the positive contribution of Calvin; this fortunately will be made plain elsewhere in this journal. I should like to conclude, however, by affirming—although I am a Presbyterian!—that Calvin was no doctrinaire Presbyterian; that attitude developed later, after his death, with his successor Beza. Calvin sought passionately, as did his friend Melancthon, for the restoration of the Catholic Church of the Apostles and the Fathers, and he sought to realize this in the unity of the Churches of Europe, other than that one which held allegiance to Rome. Long ago Hooker in the preface to his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* showed the historical necessity which prevented Calvin from maintaining episcopacy at Geneva, and in our time at least two well-documented monographs have been written abroad to show that Calvin was willing to accept episcopal government of the Church. To ask what side Calvin would have chosen in the English or Scottish Church conflicts of the seventeenth century is to ask the wrong question in the wrong way. Rather, it would be more helpful in our contemporary situation to ask what help we may gain, from the study of the life and work of Calvin, for the union of the Churches on terms which recognize the objective givenness of the Word and the Sacraments, Liturgy and Order, and the Church's duty in the moral well-being of society. There is much that can be learned from Calvin to this end when he is able to stand clear of the weight of misrepresentation and denigration under which so many would wish to obscure him.

<sup>1</sup> This also occurred in Lutheranism when Flacius Illyricus and his aristotelianizing successors distorted the original insights and emphases of Luther.

<sup>2</sup> As did the other Reformers, Calvin owed a great deal to that renewal of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin studies in the early sixteenth century which made a remarkable contribution to the transformation of biblical learning. Calvin himself studied under the "Lecteurs Royaux" (later the "Collège de France") who represented at Paris the "Trilingual Studies" of Christian humanism which so greatly stimulated scriptural learning and assisted in the rejection of the scholastic methods of, for example, the Sorbonne.

<sup>3</sup> *Calvin tel qu'il fut*, 1955 (Introduction by Daniel-Rops : texts selected and translated by Chanoine L. Cristiani).

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, Introduction, pp. 7 and 8.

<sup>5</sup> *The Fear of Freedom*, pp. 80 and 81.

<sup>6</sup> *Christianity and Fear* (in German 1944) ; English Translation 1948, p. 401 and p. 399.

<sup>7</sup> *Calvins Eingreifen . . .*, p. 33 and p. 44.

<sup>8</sup> 2nd edition, 1957.

<sup>9</sup> *Proper Studies*, p. 287.

<sup>10</sup> *Old Lights for new Chancels*, John Betjeman, p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> *Lettres de Jean Calvin*, ed. Jules Bonnet, Tome second, p. 561.

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 502.

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 506.

<sup>14</sup> *Religion since the Reformation*, p. 83 and p. 80.

## Calvin the Theologian

BY JAMES I. PACKER

**J**OHAN CALVIN'S theology arrests attention at the outset on two accounts : it has been extraordinarily influential, and it has been extraordinarily maligned.

For the first : it would hardly be too much to say that for the latter part of his lifetime and a century after his death John Calvin was the most influential man in the world, in the sense that his ideas were making more history than those of anyone else during that period. Calvin's theology produced the Puritans in England, the Huguenots in France, the " Beggars " in Holland, the Covenanters in Scotland, and the Pilgrim Fathers of New England, and was more or less directly responsible for the Scottish uprising, the revolt of the Netherlands, the French wars of religion, and the English Civil War. Also, it was Calvin's doctrine of the state as a servant of God that established the ideal of constitutional representative government and led to the explicit acknowledgment of the rights and liberties of subjects, and in due course to toleration—though, admittedly, Calvin and his first followers failed to see that toleration was logically demanded by their principles.<sup>1</sup> These facts reveal Calvin as in effect the producer, not merely of Protestantism in its most virile and thoroughgoing form, but of some of the most fundamental ingredients in post-Renaissance Western civilization. It is doubtful whether any other theologian has ever played so significant a part in world history.

As for the second : it is really staggering to observe how persistently, from his day to ours, Calvin and his teaching have been misrepresented and traduced. The common idea of Calvin is still of an irritable misanthrope who projected his dislike of the human race into a malevolent theology of which the main point was that most men are irremediably damned. It is still widely fancied that the main feature of his thought was predestinarian speculation—as if his theology was ever other than aggressively biblical, or as if he ever asserted anything about predestination for which he did not offer proof from Scripture and precedents from Augustine ! His doctrine of sin (later called " total depravity ") is still often taken to mean that every man is now