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Sketches from Our History

Contending for the Faith Through the Ages

CHAPTER VIII

JOHN CALVIN, THE REFORMER OF GENEVA

1. Calvin's home and early life

John Calvin the Reformer was by birth a Frenchman. He was born at Noyon, in Picardy, in northern France, some 67 miles from Paris, on the tenth day of July 1509. At the time of Calvin's birth, Martin Luther was 26 years old, and Zwingli about 25. Protestantism had not yet appeared on the scene; several years would pass before Luther would nail his famous 95 Theses to the church door at Wittenberg. Europe was slumbering uneasily in the age-old priestly system of Romanism, namely, salvation by sacraments and human merit.

John Calvin was the second child in a large family; he had four brothers and two half-sisters. His father was a lawyer who held several legal or administrative offices in both church and state. His mother was known as a devout Christian. Calvin's father wished his son to enter the service of the church, and John's early education was directed toward that goal.

In 1521, at the age of 12 years, John Calvin was appointed a chaplain of the cathedral of Noyon, and received the income pertaining to this position, though the actual duties of the position would be carried out by an older man, an ordained priest, who would receive only a fraction of the salary. The fact that Calvin could be appointed to ecclesiastical office at the age of twelve, by a legal fiction, receiving most of the salary while another man performed the duties, gives an interesting sidelight on the corruptions of the church of that day. This arrangement was of course considered perfectly honest and respectable, and was, indeed, an example of a common practice. Yet this kind of corruption was one of the lesser evils of the church which called for reform. The doctrinal errors were far more serious.

Meantime, Calvin was getting his elementary education in the household of a local nobleman named Montmor, along with the sons of the family. Because of an outbreak of the plague at Noyon, they moved to Paris in 1523, and at the age of 14 Calvin first saw that great city. In Paris, Calvin continued his studies, taking up, among other things, logic and philosophy. His great ability as a scholar soon became evident to all. During this period Calvin also made many friends among well-known people

in Paris. The notion that he was an unsociable bookworm or recluse is entirely unfounded; Calvin had numerous friends and he knew how to be friendly himself.

The authorities of the cathedral at Noyon were quite pleased with Calvin's success as a student, and twice promoted him to "better" positions in the church. Calvin was not ordained as a priest, but he preached a number of sermons to the people. But Calvin was not to become a priest of the church. Calvin's father began to feel that the profession of law offered a more promising career than the service of the church. It seems, too, that about this time John took up the study of the Scriptures and began to be critical of some features of Roman Catholic worship. At all events, when his father suggested a change to the study of law, Calvin readily complied, going from Paris to Orleans in 1528 to study law under Pierre Taisan de l'Etoile, the outstanding jurist of the day. At Orleans Calvin made rapid progress in the study of law, and also took up classical studies. He worked so hard at his studies that he probably injured his health.

In 1529 Calvin moved from Orleans to Bourges, where he continued his study of law, this time under a famous Italian scholar. Here he learned Greek and began the study of the New Testament in its original language. It was now twelve years since Luther had nailed his 95 Theses to the Wittenberg church door. The doctrines of Protestantism were now being widely spread through France as well as other countries of Europe. But Calvin was not yet a Protestant, and we may add that he was probably not yet a Christian, for at this time he showed much more interest in classical studies than in the Christian religion.

In 1531 Calvin's father died, which made it necessary for him to leave Bourges and return to Paris. Here he continued his study of Greek and began with Hebrew—at that time a new and rare subject for anyone except Jews. The next year Calvin published his first book, a commentary in Latin on one of the writings of the Roman author Seneca. From this it will be noted that his chief interest was still in classical studies rather than in Christianity.

2. Calvin's Conversion

Although Calvin seemed to stand at the open door of a great career as a humanist or classical scholar, God had a different purpose for his life. Calvin was converted to Christ and became an earnest and faithful Christian. Later he wrote of his "sudden conversion," which he attributed directly and entirely to the special grace of God. His life was completely revolutionized; from this time on, Christianity was everything to him.

Although Calvin was himself only a novice as a Christian, his gift of leadership soon became evident, and he became a teacher and counselor of many. Very soon he became publicly prominent, and an attempt was made by the authorities to arrest him. Though he was able to escape, his room was raided and his books and papers taken. He went to Noyon, then later returned to Paris. Being now nearly 25 years of age, he would, except for his conversion, probably have been ordained to the priesthood. Facing the question of whether to try to reform the Church of Rome from within or to break wholly with it, he decided in favor of the latter course, and resigned his positions in the church.

About 1534 Calvin was at the city of Poitiers, where he was able to counsel and influence a number of men. It was near Poitiers that Calvin for the first time celebrated the Lord's Supper as a Protestant. This communion service was held in the security of a cave, with a slab of rock as the communion table.

3. Calvin's "Institutes of the Christian Religion"

The Protestant religion was spreading in France, and the king, Francis I, decided to take steps to check the new movement. John Calvin and his friend William Cop found it necessary to flee from their native country. Calvin found a refuge at Basel, Switzerland, where the Protestant faith was secure. On the journey to Basel Calvin was robbed, and it was only by borrowing the sum of ten crowns from his servant that he was able to reach Basel. The distinguished scholars and theologians who had gathered there gave Calvin a hearty welcome, and soon he was hard at work improving his knowledge of the Hebrew language.

King Francis tried to justify his persecution of the French Protestants on the ground that they were revolutionary fanatics of an extreme type. In February 1535 the king issued a pronouncement in which he made this charge against them. Realizing the terrible pressure on his fellow Protestants in France, Calvin decided to try to do something to help them. He therefore prepared a book stating their faith, which was published in March 1536 under the title of **Institutes of the Christian Religion**. As an introduction to the book, Calvin wrote a letter to King Francis. This introduction contains some 20 pages in the English translations, and it respectfully urges the king to

cast aside all prejudices and investigate for himself the faith of his Protestant subjects. We shall give here a few sentences of Calvin's plea to King Francis, as they appear in Beveridge's translation:

"Justice, then, most invincible Sovereign, entitles me to demand that you will undertake a thorough investigation of this cause, which has hitherto been tossed about in any kind of way, and handled in the most irregular manner, without any order of law, and with passionate heat rather than judicial gravity.

"Let it not be imagined that I am here framing my own private defence, with the view of obtaining a safe return to my native land. Though I cherish towards it the feelings which become me as a man, still, as matters now are I can be absent from it without regret. The cause which I plead is the common cause of all the godly, and therefore the very cause of Christ—a cause which, throughout your realm, now lies, as it were, in despair, torn and trampled upon in all kinds of ways, and that more through the tyranny of certain Pharisees than any sanction from yourself. But it matters not to inquire how the things is gone; the fact that it is done cannot be denied. For so far have the wicked prevailed, that the truth of Christ, if not utterly routed and dispersed, lurks as if it were ignobly buried; while the poor Church, either wasted by cruel slaughter or driven into exile, or intimidated and terror-struck, scarcely ventures to breathe. Still her enemies press on with their wonted rage and fury over the ruins which they have made, strenuously assaulting the wall, which is already giving way. Meanwhile, no man comes forth to offer his protection against such furies. Any who would be thought most favorable to the truth, merely talk of pardoning the error and imprudence of ignorant men. For so those modest personages speak; giving the name of error and imprudence to that which they know to be the infallible truth of God, and of ignorant men to those whose intellect they see that Christ has not despised, seeing he has deigned to entrust them with the mysteries of his heavenly wisdom. Thus all are ashamed of the Gospel.

"Your duty, most serene Prince, is, not to shut either your ears or mind against a cause involving such mighty interests as these: how the glory of God is to be maintained on the earth inviolate, how the truth of God is to preserve its dignity how the kingdom of Christ is to continue amongst us compact and secure. The cause is worthy of your ear, worthy of your investigation, worthy of your throne.

"The characteristic of a true sovereign is, to acknowledge that, in the administration of his kingdom, he is a minister of God. He who does not make his reign subservient to the divine glory, acts the part not of a king, but a robber. He, moreover, deceives himself who anticipates long prosperity to any kingdom which is not ruled by the scepter of God, that is, by his divine word. For the

heavenly oracle is infallible which has declared, that ‘where there is no vision the people perish’ (Prov. 29:18)

“Let not a contemptuous idea of our insignificance dissuade you from the investigation of this cause. We, indeed, are perfectly conscious how poor and abject we are: in the presence of God we are miserable sinners, and in the sight of men most despised—we are (if you will) the mere dregs and off-scourings of the world, or worse, if worse can be named: so that before God there remains nothing of which we can glory save only his mercy, by which, without any merit of our own, we are admitted to the hope of eternal salvation: and before men not even this much remains, since we can glory in our infirmity, a thing which, is the estimation of men, it is the greatest ignominy even tacitly to confess. But our doctrine must stand sublime above all the glory of the world, and invincible by all its power, because it is not ours, but that of the living God and his Anointed, whom the Father has appointed King, that he may rule from sea to sea, and from the river even to the ends of the earth; and so rule as to smite the whole earth and its strength of iron and brass, its splendor of gold and silver, with the mere rod of his mouth, and break them in pieces like a potter’s vessel; according to the magnificent predictions of the prophets respecting his kingdom (Dan. 2:34; Isa. 11:4; Psalm 2:9).”

Calvin’s entire address to the French king was in harmony with the paragraphs quoted above. The reader will note the deep conviction, the intense earnestness, and the calm, meek courage of Calvin’s words. At this time Calvin was only twenty-six years of age, but he had, by the grace of God, struck a mighty blow for freedom for the Reformed religion in France, and indeed throughout Europe. The great value and importance of his **Institutes** was soon recognized, and Calvin became the recognized leader and voice of French Protestantism.

This book, which was first presented to the king of France in 1536 as a defence of the French Protestants, was destined to be one of the very greatest books of all Christian history. It became the principal theological textbook of a large part of Protestant Europe. Calvin revised and expanded it again and again for twenty-three years, until it reached its final form in 1559. The work was originally written in Latin, and later translated into French by Calvin himself for the benefit of his countrymen. It was soon translated into most of the languages of Europe, such as Italian (1557), Dutch (1560), English (1561), German (1572), Spanish (1597), Bohemian or Czech (translated about 1598, published 1617), Hungarian (1624), Polish (in part only; 1626). Six editions of the English version appeared between 1561 and 1600. This will give an idea of the tremendous demand for the book. At the present day it is still being printed, sold and read throughout a large part of the world. And it will remain a standard work on Christian theology to the end of time.

It was on Calvin’s **Institutes** that our Scottish Covenanter forefathers were nourished up in the words of sound

doctrine. From this book they gained a systematic knowledge of the truth of God’s Word, and from its cool courage and profound conviction they learned to stand their ground for Christ before kings and parliaments without cowardly fear and without retreat or compromise. In the deep providence of God, Calvin’s **Institutes** proved the key to a grasp of Scripture, and those who fed on the **Institutes** became, like Apollos of old, “mighty in the Scriptures.” For the very basis of the **Institutes** is the supreme and sole authority of Holy Scripture as the rule for faith and life.

It is a great pity that so many present-day Christians, and even ministers, have never read Calvin’s **Institutes**. Perhaps it is no wonder that the modern church is weak and ineffective, when so many of its members and even of its leaders prefer shallow “inspirational” literature to the solid writing of the Reformation. A return to the study of Calvin’s writings would put iron in our blood, and granite in our souls. These are no dry-as-dust volumes of musty, mouldy, out-dated theology. They are full of pulsing, vibrating life, produced from the anguish of Protestantism’s early struggles for its very life. If we want the church of the twentieth century to regain the life, vigor and conviction of the church of the Reformation period, we will have to consider whether it is getting the spiritual vitamins and minerals which the church of that day received. When the church gets over its rejection of doctrine as “too deep,” there will be a new zeal and eagerness to know the Truth of God, and a new power and conviction in confessing that truth before the world. God grant it may soon be so.

4. Calvin’s Call to Serve God at Geneva

In 1536 Calvin made a brief visit to Italy, then returned to France, intending to settle his affairs there preparatory to leaving his native land more or less permanently. It was his purpose, at this time, to settle either at Strassburg or at Basel, and to spend his life as a scholar. As there was at the time a war going on between Francis I, king of France, and Charles V, emperor of the Holy Roman (German) Empire, it proved impossible for Calvin to reach Strassburg by the direct and ordinary route, so he traveled toward Basel, being accompanied at the same time by his brother Antoine and his half-sister Marie.

In the course of this journey, the party stopped at the Swiss city of Geneva. The intention was merely to stop here briefly and then continue to Basel. But God had purposed differently, and it turned out that Geneva was to be the place of Calvin’s activity for most of his life.

The war in which the Reformer Zwingli had lost his life turned out to the advantage of the Church of Rome, and left most of Switzerland in the hands of the Catholics. Three important cities—Zurich, Berne and Basel—however, remained true to the doctrines of the Reformation. To these three Protestant centers there was

now added a fourth, Geneva, through a combination of religious and political factors. We shall not enter into the rather complex history back of this revolution at Geneva further than to state that the city had been through a long and difficult struggle for the civil freedom from the Duchy of Savoy. In the year 1533 this struggle came to a successful conclusion and the civil and military power of Geneva was in the hands of the people of the city.

This struggle for civil freedom was followed by a religious revolution at Geneva. The Protestant influence came to bear on the city from Berne. The principal promoter of Protestantism at Geneva was William Farel. Like Calvin, Farel was a Frenchman who had been converted to Protestantism and had to leave France on account of persecution. He found a reception in Switzerland where he was able to preach to the French speaking part of the population in their own language. Farel was a bold and determined man, and he preached against the errors and abuses of Romanism wherever he went, in the most outspoken terms. In our day of lukewarm compromise and indifference to truth we should realize that the Protestant Reformation was not won by theological fence-straddlers, middle-of-the-roaders and doctrinal indifferentists. It was won by men whom God had raised up to lead His people—men who had a burning conviction and a consuming zeal for the truth, who fought hard and long and hewed to the line in their rejection of error. These men were not simply Supper was to be administered three times yearly.

But these reforms soon aroused opposition, and many of the more pleasure-loving of the people became restless and complained at the restraints on their liberty to do as they pleased. The evidence indicates that moral conditions were very low in Geneva at this time, and it seems that the Catholic priests and monks were notoriously evil in their manner of living. Prostitution, gambling and the drunkenness were common evils. Those who wanted to enjoy the pleasures of sin naturally resented the restraints placed upon them by the discipline of Protestant Christianity.

Such was the situation at Geneva when Calvin arrived there in 1536. Taking lodgings at an inn, his intention was to remain there only briefly, and then press on to his destination at Basel. But God's hand, through one of His servants, arrested him. The story of what happened is told by Calvin in the Preface to his Commentary on the Psalms.

A friend named Du tillet informed Farel that Calvin had arrived in the city. Farel at once called on Calvin and implored him to remain at Geneva and assist in the work of reformation there. Calvin, however, was most unwilling to comply. He declined the proposal, stating that he was unwilling to limit himself to any single locality, and that he desired to live a quiet life of devotion to scholarship. All of Farel's persuasions were without result.

Farel then told Calvin that his devotion to his studies was only an excuse, which God would not accept. He said that

“orthodox” or “sound”—they were filled with a consuming zeal for the truth. They could not tolerate what our Covenanter forefathers called “a detestable neutrality” in the cause of God and of truth.

Such a valiant-for-the-truth was William Farel. Born in 1489, he was Calvin's senior by twenty years. It is recorded that at one time he came upon a Roman Catholic procession bearing some “sacred” relics, and snatched these relics from the hands of the priest and threw them into a nearby river. On many occasions Farel suffered personal violence, and even his life was endangered. He called the compromising Erasmus a “Balaam,” to which Erasmus replied that Farel was “the most arrogant, abusive, and shameless man” he had ever met. Of course, to compromisers like Erasmus every clear-cut defender of the truth will seem “arrogant.” No doubt Elijah seemed arrogant to Ahab, and John the Baptist to Herod.

Farel began his work of reformation at Geneva in 1532, but was soon driven from the city. In the providence of God his life was spared when a gun that was aimed at him burst asunder in the firing. Later Farel returned to Geneva and was more successful. Many of the people became Protestants. The assembly of citizens formally adopted the Protestant faith as the religion of the city. Romanism was officially rejected. All special festivals and days except the Lord's Day were abolished. The Lord's the curse of God would descend upon Calvin if he would not engage in the Lord's cause. Calvin in his writings often referred to this scene. He spoke of Farel's statement as a “formidable obstetation.” “He says that he was struck with terror, and felt as if the hand of the Almighty had been stretched out from heaven and laid upon him. He gave up his opposition.” Thus Calvin became the Reformer of Geneva. He hurried on to Basel, transacted some necessary business there, and returned to Geneva without delay.

At once Calvin began his work as a reformer at Geneva. He began preaching on the Epistles of Paul in the Church of St. Pierre. After about a year the magistrates, with the consent of the people, appointed him officially as preacher. At this time Calvin was twenty-eight years old. Except for a brief interval, he spent the rest of his life at Geneva.

5. Calvin Banished from Geneva

The young Calvin—he was about 27 years of age—was full of zeal and enthusiasm for the reformation of religion at Geneva according to the Word of God. With his colleague Farel he started work on the most urgent elements of reformation. But he was soon to learn what every faithful servant of God must learn—that the sacred cause to which he had dedicated his life was regarded with indifference by many professing Christians, and with downright opposition by others. No real work for God makes much progress without meeting opposition. The devil is quite willing to let dead “Christians” and churches

along, but when someone starts a really vital work for God, Satan will stir up opposition and trouble.

Geneva had renounced Roman Catholicism, but very little had been done in a positive way to set the religious life and the Church in order. Many religious and moral evils persisted, which would have to be faced and dealt with. Calvin and Farel were practical men and they did not try to do everything at once, but wisely proceeded step by step in the work of reformation. They took up the most urgent matters first. Approaching the city council of Geneva, they asked for the adoption of three proposals: (1) That the Lord's Supper be administered each month, and that ungodly person be excluded from partaking of the sacrament by the Scriptural church discipline, including, when all other measures failed, the sentence of excommunication; (2) that a creed or doctrinal statement of 21 articles be accepted and sworn to by the citizens of the city; (3) that a catechism for the instruction of children and youth, prepared by Calvin, be adopted.

These proposals were at first accepted, and began to be put in operation. But soon discontent and opposition began to arise. A party known as the Libertines became influential and bitterly opposed the work of reformation. The Libertines were supported by those citizens who wished to live as they pleased and who resented any interference with what they regarded as their personal liberty. This opposition was partly occasioned by the very strict moral regulations which had been put in force and which involved civil penalties. Dancing and card playing, for example, were punished by the magistrates. Calvin held that these types of recreation were not wrong in themselves, but he felt that they had been so abused that the only proper remedy was to prohibit them altogether.

There was also opposition to some features of the religious worship as reformed by Calvin and Farel. The festival days—Christmas, New Year's Day, Annunciation Day, Ascension Day—had been abolished as religious or holy days. The use of common bread in the Lord's Supper had been introduced, in place of the old practice of using unleavened bread—a practice which was retained in the Swiss city of Bern. Farel had introduced a very simple form of worship in Geneva. But there were those who wished to introduce the liturgy of Bern. Another matter was the use of baptismal fonts, which was retained at Bern but rejected at Geneva.

Some of these matters were clearly more important than others. Calvin was willing to yield on some of the points at issue. He later declared that he would be willing to allow the use of unleavened bread in the Lord's Supper, the use of baptismal fonts, and to have public worship on the "festival days" provided these days were not regarded as holy days—the people must be allowed to go about their ordinary business once the church services were dismissed. But Calvin was strongly opposed to the intervention and dictation of the civil authorities in these religious matters. He was jealous for the authority and jurisdiction of

Christ's Church. When it was attempted to impose the Bernese liturgy on Geneva by State power, Calvin absolutely refused to consent.

Matters came to a head early in 1538 when Calvin and his associates refused to administer the Lord's Supper in the Bernese form, and on Easter of that year refused to administer the sacrament at all, holding that the people were not in a fit state of mind to partake of the Lord's Supper. The civil authorities had prevented any adequate practice of church discipline, but they forbade Calvin and his fellow-pastors (Farel and Viret) to preach. The ministers ignored this ban and preached the Word of God, though refusing, as stated above, to administer the Lord's Supper.

This was a real crisis. The reformers were promptly banished from the city by action of the city council, which was confirmed the next day by a majority vote of the general assembly of the citizens of Geneva. So Calvin and Farel had to leave Geneva. They went first to Bern and later to Zurich where a synod of Swiss pastors was to meet. Calvin explained his position to this synod, stating that he was willing to make concessions on some matters, as explained above, but he positively would not yield on the matter of church discipline, which must be allowed, and which must be under the jurisdiction of lawful church officers, without interference by the State. Calvin also stated that he wished the Lord's Supper to be observed more frequently—at least monthly—and that congregational singing of the Psalms should be practiced in the churches. On this basis the Zurich synod attempted to mediate between the reformers and the people of Geneva, to persuade them to receive their pastors back. But through opposition of some of the leaders at Bern, this plan was frustrated, and the only outcome was a second decree of banishment issued by Geneva.

Calvin and Farel decided to separate, the former going to Strassburg and the latter to Neuchatel. Calvin remained at Strassburg from May, 1538, to September 1541. Though he was disappointed at the way things had turned out at Geneva, he welcomed the freedom from strife and the opportunity for study. But God's plans for reformation at Geneva involved better days in store for the city. Though the work of reformation there seemed to be all but wrecked, it would rise again, and God's true servants would be vindicated in His own time.

6. Calvin Recalled to Geneva

After their banishment from Geneva, Calvin and Farel separated the former going to Strassburg and the latter to Neuchatel. Calvin remained at Strassburg from May, 1538, to September, 1541. While there, he devoted himself partly to literary work, and partly to preaching and organizing the French church in that city, as well as lecturing on theology. Always a man of wide sympathies and many friends, he attended important religious

meetings and conferences in various cities of Germany. During this period, he became acquainted with the Lutheran leader Melancthon, and a firm friendship was formed which lasted throughout Calvin's life.

During this period, too, some of Calvin's most important writings were produced, including a revised and enlarged edition of his famous **Institutes of the Christian Religion**, his **Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans**, and his **Tract on the Lord's Supper**.

It was at Strassburg, too, that Calvin's marriage took place. In August, 1540, he married Idelette de Bure, the widow of a Belgian named Jean Stordeur, whom Calvin had converted from the Anabaptist heresy. Calvin later referred to his wife as "the excellent companion of my life" and said that she was a "precious help" to him in his labors and frequent troubles. Their happiness was brief, for Idelette died in 1549, to the great grief of Calvin, who never remarried. They had one child, Jacques, born in 1542 who lived only a few days.

Meantime things had been going from bad to worse in Geneva. Wickedness and irreligion flourished without interference. The Roman Catholic hierarchy tried to take advantage of the confusion at Geneva to win the city back to the fold of Rome. Cardinal Sadoleto, bishop of Carpentras in southern France, was the spearhead of this Catholic effort, which might have been successful, but for the fact that the authorities of the city of Bern became alarmed, and after consultation with the government of Geneva, called on Calvin to oppose the Catholic attempt. Cardinal Sadoleto had written a letter to the people of Geneva, to which Calvin now replied with a devastating answer, which completely frustrated the Catholic design. Sadoleto dropped the matter immediately and did not take it up again. Calvin's Letter to Sadoleto became one of the most famous documents of the Reformation. It has been described as the best defence of the Protestant position that has ever been written. Meantime Calvin was in correspondence with godly people in Geneva, encouraging and advising them. About this time there appeared at Geneva a revised translation of the Bible in French, on which the final revision and correction had been done by Calvin.

Gradually God in His providence was opening up the way for Calvin to return to Geneva. The Libertine party, who had opposed him and secured his banishment, more and more lost power and its members were largely out of office. Calvin's colleague Farel tried to bring about Calvin's recall to Geneva. When the opportunity finally came to return, Calvin was torn between the claims of Strassburg and Geneva, but after considerable hesitation he decided that God wished him to work at Geneva. He arrived there on September 13, 1541, and the people of the city received him with enthusiasm and joy. Farel himself decided to remain at Neuchatel, and Calvin's other colleague, Viret, went to Lausanne. Calvin was now the unquestioned leader of the church in Geneva.

He found the responsibilities of his position extremely heavy. Every other week he preached daily through the entire week. Three days of each week he taught theology. Once each week he attended the meeting of the consistory, or governing body of the church. Besides all these official duties, he carried on a voluminous correspondence with friends and inquirers all over Europe, and was frequently engaged in time-consuming controversy in the cause of the truth. In a letter to a personal friend he wrote: "I have not time to look out of my house at the blessed sun, and if things continue thus I shall forget what sort of appearance it has. When I have settled my usual business I have so many letters to write, so many questions to answer, that many a night is spent without any offering of sleep being brought to nature." God's work is done by busy people, and Calvin was one of the busiest of God's servants.

7. Calvin and Servetus

On no matter connected with the Protestant Reformation, perhaps, has more misinformation gained currency than concerning the relation of Calvin to the trial and execution of Michael Servetus. The ghost of this sad and unfortunate affair is continually reappearing, and is used by many who have no love for the Reformed Faith as if the mere mention of the name of Servetus were sufficient to discredit completely and forever, not only Calvin as a servant of Christ, but Calvinism as Biblical Christianity.

Let it be clearly understood at the outset that we do not justify the execution of Servetus. It cannot be justified on the basis of the principles which Calvinists—and Christians generally—of the present day recognize as Biblical. Looking back on the affair after four hundred years have passed, we can only say that the execution of Servetus for blasphemy—of which he was certainly guilty—was unwarranted and wrong. But having said this, we must also say that grievous wrong has been done to the memory of John Calvin, and to the cause of Calvinism, by the careless, inaccurate and even downright false statements which have been circulated concerning his connection with this sad affair. That the execution of Servetus was wrong does not imply that opponents of Calvinism are free to circulate historically false accounts of the matter. Animus against Calvinism does not exempt people from the duty of obeying the commandment, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor."

No doubt many who have dragged up the ghost of Servetus as an argument against Calvinism have repeated these incorrect accounts of the matter without realizing that they were dealing in falsehood. While this may lessen their responsibility it does not eliminate it. The true facts are easily accessible and can be ascertained by anyone who wants to know them, merely by consulting such a standard reference work as the **Encyclopaedia Britannica**. A Lutheran writer on church history says that the execution

of Servetus “is a sad, ineffaceable blot on the character of Calvin” (**Sketches from the History of the Church**, by G. E. Hageman, p. 162). A recent Baptist writer, who certainly should know better, says that “John Calvin’s Consistory, a bold-faced inquisition in Vienna condemned Michael Servetus as a heretic to be burned at the stake June 17, 1553; Servetus fled, was apprehended in Geneva, and was burned at the stake October 27, 1553” (Dr. R. V. Clearwaters, in Introduction to **The Doctrine of the Church in These Times**, by Chester E. Tulga, page 8). The statement just quoted is a bundle of historical errors. The true facts are: on June 17, 1553, Servetus was condemned to death, not by “John Calvin’s Consistory,” but by a French civil court; and this was done, not at “Vienna,” but at Vienne, a city in France. On October 26 of the same year Servetus was again sentenced to death, and executed the next day, not by “John Calvin’s Consistory,” but by the Senate of Geneva, a civil tribunal of which Calvin was not a member.

Michael Servetus, of French and Spanish descent, was born in 1511. His father sent him to study jurisprudence in the city of Toulouse, where in 1528 he first became acquainted with the Bible. His first published writing was entitled **De Trinitatis Erroribus** (“Concerning the Errors of the Trinity”), issued in 1531. Later he studied medicine at Paris, where he first met Calvin in 1536. There is some question as to whether he actually received his degree in medicine; he claimed to have, but the record of his graduation is missing in the university archives at Paris. He lectured on various subjects, including “syrops,” geometry and astrology. The medical faculty of Paris brought a suit against him for views expressed in his lectures on astrology. In 1537-8 he was a student at the University of Louvain in Belgium, studying theology and Hebrew. In 1540 he went to the medical school at Montpellier, France, for additional medical education (it is possible that he was awarded a medical degree by that institution).

Among those who heard Servetus’ lectures at Paris was Pierre Paulmier, the roman Catholic archbishop of Vienne (France). The archbishop invited Servetus to come to Vienne as his personal physician, and Servetus accepted the invitation. Formally a Roman Catholic, he privately cherished views which were anything but orthodox. In 1545 or 1546 Servetus commenced a correspondence with John Calvin, sending the latter a manuscript of his theological writings and expressing a wish to visit the city of Geneva. Calvin’s reply is lost, but it is evident from a letter of Servetus to Farel, that Calvin warned him that if he were to visit Geneva, it would be at his peril.

The book of Servetus’ theological writings, after being rejected by two Swiss publishers, was finally printed secretly at Vienna (Austria) in an edition of one thousand copies, in 1553. most of these copies were shipped to Lyons and Frankfort for sale in those cities.

The publication of this book proved to be Servetus’ downfall. The book was entitled **Chrstianismi Restitutio** (“The Restoration of Christianity”), and was published semi-anonymously; Servetus’ name did not appear on the title page, but his initials, “M.S.V.,” appear at the end of the book and his name “Servetus” appears at one point in the book (p. 199). There was apparently some question, at first, as to the identity of the author, but it was soon proved beyond doubt that the book was by Servetus.

Because of views expressed in this book, the Roman Catholic inquisitor-general at Lyons (France) took up the matter in March, 1553. Servetus was questioned, then in April he was arrested and questioned further. While the proceedings under the inquisitor-general were still in process, Servetus escaped from prison and disappeared. There is some question as to where he went, though eventually he appeared at Geneva. After Servetus’ escape, the French civil court at Bienne on June 17, 1553, condemned him to be fined and burned alive. (The Roman Catholic ecclesiastical court at Vienne deferred sentence until December 23, 1553, when Servetus was already dead).

In Geneva, Servetus was recognized while attending a church service. Calvin took initiative in urging that he be arrested, which was done. Legal proceedings were instituted against him, which lasted from August 14 to October 26, 1553. The charge was blasphemy, and the evidence consisted chiefly of statements in Servetus’ book **The Restoration of Christianity**. This book was destructive of the very foundations of Christianity. It was both heretical and blasphemous, and attacked the doctrine of the Trinity which is the basis of historic Christianity. Servetus’ views, as expressed in the book, tended strongly toward **pantheism** (the belief that God is all, and all is God). The differences between Romanism and Protestantism were not involved; Servetus undermined the very foundation of both.

Servetus was found guilty of blasphemy. “The fifteen condemnatory clauses, prefacing the sentence at Geneva, set forth in detail that he was guilty of heresies, blasphemously expressed, against the foundations of the Christian religion” (**Encyclopaedia Britannica**). He was executed by burning at the stake, at Geneva, on October 27, 1553.

We should realize that the legal process against Servetus was not carried out by the authorities of the Reformed Church of Geneva, as has often been ignorantly alleged or implied. The prosecution was by a civil tribunal, not by the church courts. Dr. Benjamin B. Warfield says: “Servetus was condemned and executed by a tribunal of which Calvin was not a member, with which he possessed little influence, and which rejected his petition against the unnecessary cruelty of the penalty inflicted” (**Calvin and Calvinism**, p. 25). Calvin requested that the mode of execution be changed from burning to beheading, but this plea was rejected by the

civil authorities of Geneva. Calvin called death by burning an “atrocious.” It is true, of course, that Calvin approved of the sentence of death which was passed on Servetus.

What should be remembered, though, is the fact that Calvin was not alone in believing that Servetus deserved to die. It was the unanimous decision of the Swiss state governments and the Swiss churches that his blasphemy was punishable by death. Moreover, the general opinion of all Christendom at that time approved the sentence. Even such a mild and gentle Christian as the Lutheran Melancthon declared that the sentence was just. In a later day, the English writer Coleridge said that the execution of Servetus was not “Calvin’s guilt especially, but the common opprobrium of all European Christendom” (**Notes on English Divines**, Vol. 1, p. 49).

Yet, in spite of all that can be said in extenuation, we must repeat the statement already made, that the execution of Servetus cannot be justified. “It cannot...be denied, that in this instance, Calvin acted contrary to the benignant spirit of the Gospel. It is better to drop a tear over the inconsistency of human nature, and to bewail those infirmities which cannot be justified. He declared he acted conscientiously, and publicly justified the act” (**Fox’s Book of Martyrs**, edited by William Byron Forbush, p. 187).

8. Calvin’s accomplishments at Geneva

Those who think of Calvin as a scholar interested only in theological studies fail to realize what a wide variety of interests claimed the Genevan Reformer’s attention. Though Calvin was preeminently a theologian, he was anything but a recluse. On the contrary, he was an intensely active man of affairs. In addition to theology, he devoted himself to church government, to civic improvement and to the advancement of education.

Calvin established at Geneva the Presbyterian system of church government. This was a practical use of Scriptural principles which was to be copied, to the great benefit of Christ’s Church, in a large part of Europe, especially France, Holland and Scotland.

Calvin concerned himself with everything that concerned the welfare of Geneva or the benefit of its people. He was consulted by the civil authorities on all sorts of matters, including law, economics, business and manufacturing. “To him the city owed her trade in cloths and velvets, from which so much wealth accrued to her citizens; sanitary regulations were introduced by him which made Geneva the admiration of all visitors; and in him she reverences the founder of her university” (**Encyclopaedia Britannica**).

The university just mentioned was founded in 1559 as the Academy of Geneva. This institution was one of Calvin’s greatest achievements. Almost immediately it

became the outstanding international center of theological education of the Reformed Faith. From many countries—France, Holland, Hungary, Italy, Germany, England and Scotland—students came to Geneva to study theology under the great Reformer. Returning to their various countries as preachers of the Gospel, they bore the imprint of Calvin’s logical mind and solid Biblical scholarship, thus multiplying his influence many fold even during his lifetime.

Calvin was a tireless worker. In addition to his many other activities, he was a voluminous author. Besides his classic **Institutes of the Christian Religion**, Calvin was the author of many other books. Noteworthy among these are **A Treatise on the Eternal Predestination of God**, written in reply to a Roman Catholic named Albert Pighius, who had attacked Calvin’s arguments from Scripture that Pighius gave up his former opposition and accepted the doctrine of predestination as expounded by Calvin. Another of Calvin’s writings was **A Defence of the Secret Providence of God by which He Executes His Eternal Decrees**. This was written as a reply to an enemy of the truth whom Calvin does not name. It is a book which is still of value at the present day.

Very important among Calvin’s writings are his commentaries on the various books of the Bible. Starting with the Epistle to the Romans in 1540, he produced commentaries on nearly all the books of the Bible. Such is the value of Calvin’s commentaries that they are still being printed and studied after four hundred years. The same is true of Calvin’s sermons, many of which were taken down by his students and hearers at Geneva.

Calvin never enjoyed vigorous health, and his intense labors finally wore him out. He died in 1564 at the age of 55 years. The last years of his life were filled with pain and suffering, yet Calvin continued to work with great energy. He preached his last sermon on February 6, 1564, being barely able to continue to the end of it. Several times after this he was carried to church, but never again was he able to preach or take any active part in the service. However, he continued to work whenever he had sufficient strength to do so at all. To a friend who urged him to rest, he replied, “Do you want the Lord to find me idle when He comes?” Wherever Calvinism has been taken seriously, it has produced lives filled with hard, honest work. In this respect Calvin himself set a noble example.

The mortal remains of John Calvin were laid to rest very simply in a cemetery at Geneva. The location of his grave is unknown; no monument of granite or marble marks the spot where the great Reformer’s mortal body awaits the resurrection day. Yet there is a monument, for the Reformed Faith throughout the world is his monument. Few men in all Christian history have served the Lord so humbly and faithfully; few have had such a wide and lasting influence.