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THE GENEVAN REVOLUTIONARY

by W. STANFORD REID

ANYTHING from the pen of Professor Stanford Reid is sure of a welcome from our readers. In this paper, originally read in Boston, Mass., at a meeting convened by the New England Calvinistic Association, he takes a fresh look at John Calvin.

THE term "revolutionary" is one which seems to make most Christians shudder. Indeed the Evangelical is one who is usually only too proud of being a "Conservative." In some ways of course this is good, for he desires to keep "the faith once delivered to the saints": the doctrine of the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures, the deity of Christ, His atoning life, death and resurrection, His eventual return in power and judgment. All this is very good and necessary, particularly in our day of weakening principles and fading beliefs. The only trouble is that this conservatism frequently denotes a frame of mind which seeks to avoid contacts with the changing world and its ideas, and which seems to believe that maintaining the *status quo* in every sphere is the fundamental responsibility of the Christian. Thus the modern evangelical is not infrequently a conservative in a purely humanistic sense, desiring nothing to change.

That the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century, and particularly Calvin, did not hold this point of view would seem to be rather obvious. The conservatives of those days were the adherents of the old mediaeval church, and even many of the contemporary humanists. Both ecclesiastics and Renaissance thinkers often desired reform and correction within the church, but few if any favoured a radical and revolutionary approach to all spheres of life. Thus Erasmus, Lefèvre d'Étaples and others drew back. Luther and Calvin followed the views which the would-be reformers enunciated to their logical conclusions, and became revolutionaries who would turn the world upside down. The world could be improved, said Erasmus in his *In Praise of Folly*, but should not be revolutionized.¹ Thus to the Roman Catholic and humanist alike, the Reformers were wrong, for they were shaking the very fabric of society to its foundations. To deal with this charge

¹Cf. Erasmus's statement on Luther and the Reformation in his letter to Pope Leo X (B. J. Kidd, *Documents Illustrative of the Continental Reformation* [Oxford, 1911], p. 54).

Calvin published his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, prefaced by a letter to Francis I of France pointing out that Protestants wished only to return to the old ways. But he could not convince anyone that the basic principles of his teachings were not in truth revolutionary, for he was much more radical than he thought. Forty years after the first edition of the *Institutes* Archibald Hamilton wrote in his *De Confusione Calvinianae Sectae apud Scotos Ecclesiae Nomen Ridicule Usurpantes* (Paris, 1577) to demonstrate the "subversive" character of Calvin's views, while a century later Louis Maimbourg in his *Histoire de Calvinisme* (Paris, 1682) repeated the same charges to Louis XIV. Conservatives of the sixteenth and seventeenth century feared Calvin more than do conservatives Mr. Khrushchev today. To understand the sixteenth-century Reformation and in particular Calvin, therefore, one must always keep in mind his radical and revolutionary teaching which made the Reformation such a dynamic movement.

I. THE CONSERVATIVES OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

TO understand how opposed to the old order Calvin really was it is necessary to look first of all at the conservative forces of the day and then to examine his basic teachings.

The ground motive of mediæval thought, based on the Aristotelian "form-substance" dialectic, was that of the duality of nature and grace. The universe was in a sense divided into two spheres. Nature coincided with the world of material things and human action. Grace was the realm of the spiritual, above nature but not contrary to it. Thus mediæval man found himself in a bipartite world, living in nature by reason and in grace by revelation.²

In order to understand this more fully one must look a little more closely at the mediæval world of nature. While it is impossible to go into the matter in detail, one should note that the most important duty of the natural philosopher was to discover the "essences" of things. Thus the Middle Ages saw a great search for "universals." By studying the particulars of the sphere of nature, man would discover, for instance, the universals of species and genus in which the particulars participate. Such an understanding would lead on to a knowledge of God, who is the ultimate universal, in whose mind are the ideas behind all other universals, but who exists of Himself as the uncaused cause. Thus Thomas Aquinas could by remotion and by following back the Great Chain of Being deduce the existence of God, in whom being

²This is the theme of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Cf. also *Summa Theologica*, 2 II.Q.ii.a.3.

and existence are identical. This he held possible to any man who is predominantly intellectual and who has the will to exert himself sufficiently to ascertain that there is a God.³

Aquinas, however, pointed out repeatedly that man suffered under two disabilities. One was that, being finite, he was unable to attain to truths beyond reason, while the other was that, being a creature of passions, which by the Fall had escaped from the control of reason, man usually went astray both morally and intellectually. The only answer to these two difficulties was the grace of God offered through the church, from which came the Biblical revelation and its interpretation, and by whose sacraments man received the divine power to overcome the sinful urges of his lower nature which pervert his will and intellect. Thus, while man could know and live by natural law seen in the light of reason, for him to attain to the knowledge of the divine, and thus to eternal life, the church was absolutely necessary.⁴

While this may sound rather theoretical and theological, it was, nevertheless, fundamental to the whole complex of mediæval thought and society. Although the common man did not usually grasp all the fine points of the philosophers and theologians, he did understand that the universe was separated into two orders of "the world" and "the Church." One might get along very well in this world simply by using one's reason, but to attain to what lies beyond, the church with its priesthood, its Canon Law and its sacraments remained the only way. Dante's picturing of Aristotle and the other pagan philosophers in the topmost section of the *Inferno* shows this clearly. Human reason placed them as far up the ladder as possible, but they dwelt eternally in hopelessness because they had not received grace from the church. The sacraments, the priesthood, the religious orders and all other trappings of the mediæval church made the distinction between nature and grace only too clear.⁵

Thus the Church's dogma and rules were basic to the living of a Christian life and one's eventual entry into Paradise. In all of this tradition came to play an increasingly important part. More and more non-Scriptural elements were added to both the church's theology and her worship. Fostered by such movements as the popular preaching order of Franciscan Friars, the Virgin Mary and numerous saints became the focal points of the common

³*On Being and Essence*, 4. ⁴*Summa Theologica*, III, Q.1x.

⁵Cf. Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, (New York, 1958), pp. 216 ff; Dante Alighieri, *Divina Commedia, Inferno*, IV: 131; *The Banquet*, Tr. IV, cap. vi.

man's thinking. This in turn led to an emphasis upon pilgrimages to visit saints' shrines, and an increase in the amount of the church services devoted to the traditions of, and prayers to, the saints. As Father McRobert has explained :

In particular the breviary became cluttered with festivals of popular and of local saints and it was no easy matter, on occasions, to reconcile the local and general calendars. An undue proportion of the office was taken up with legends of saints, some of them of very doubtful value. This accumulation of feasts suppressed the Sunday and ferial offices and eliminated, to too great an extent, the scriptural readings and the weekly recitation of the complete psalter. Occasionally, moreover, elements of a superstitious character disfigured the liturgical books.⁶

In this way tradition and the teachings of men, set forth as divine revelation, tended to dominate the whole of mediæval life.

From this root grew the inevitable fruit, legalism. The saying of certain words, the performing of certain liturgical acts and above all else implicit trust in and obedience to Mother Church became vitally important to one's eternal welfare. This attitude in turn produced superstition. It is no accident that the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw a growth of belief in witchcraft which reached its most complete expression in the *Malleus Maleficarum*. And even if people were not influenced too greatly by such superstitious concepts, externalism in religion became only too common. As long as one performed his religious duties as prescribed by the church, all was well, the result being a moral decline which reached its nadir in the church itself, and in particular in Rome, during the rule of the notorious Borgias and Medicis at the beginning of the sixteenth century.⁷

It was only natural, with such a decline in the church and religion generally, that many of the more mentally active should tend to concentrate their interest on man and his intellect altogether apart from the ecclesiastical organization. With the division of reality into nature and grace there has always been a tendency to think of man as really intellectually autonomous, even in his search for universal essences. With the rise of Nominalism and its interest in the particulars of experience this tendency became even more marked. Added to this, from 1250 on, the growing knowledge of and interest in the thought and letters of the ancient

⁶D. McRobert, "Some Sixteenth Century Scottish Breviaries," *Innes Review*, III (1952), 44.

⁷Dawson, *op. cit.*, chap. XII; J. Waterink *et al.*, *Culturgeschiedenis van het Christendom* (Amsterdam, 1950), III, chaps. I-IV.

Greek and Roman worlds provided a further stimulus to such a philosophy of human autonomy and perfectibility. This attitude was most eloquently summed up by Pico della Mirandola in his oration on "The Glory of Man."⁸

The outcome of the concatenation of these forces was humanism. Man is the microcosm of the macrocosm or the universe. If he but uses his reason to develop himself properly and adequately he will attain to the divine, or if the divine is unacceptable he will at least become Castiglione's perfect courtier. While God and the Church were often recognized, and in some cases even emphasized by the humanists, when one examines their views, repeatedly one comes back to the fact that man was held to be the dominant figure, the one who ruled the cosmos. But it was always difficult for the humanists to stop at this point. If nature was man's, was there any reason why he should not by his own power storm the gates of heaven, if there were indeed a heaven? From his base in nature man now prepared himself to become divine.

When such thinking was, or for that matter is, applied to life it becomes secularism; and the fifteenth century saw secularism grow apace. With the revival of trade and the rise of the middle class, wealth and luxury became more common and available to more people. Thus the ambition to obtain more of this world's goods in order to use them for self-aggrandisement, self-satisfaction and enjoyment became increasingly man's objective. While this trend is first particularly noticeable in Italy, wherever commerce expanded and great wealth became available, as in fifteenth and sixteenth-century Flanders, France, England and the Rhine Valley, such secularism with its eye fixed firmly on the things of this world accepted them as the actual if not the titular deity. Men such as Savonarola, John Colet, Desiderius Erasmus and others might have their doubts about such folly, but by and large among the intellectual and economic leaders the sphere of nature was becoming man's God, a philosophy which shows itself only too clearly in the thinking of a Machiavelli and a Benvenuto Cellini.⁹

It was against this whole complex pattern of thought and society that Luther and Zwingli raised their banner of revolt. The Church with its separation of reality into nature and grace at the

⁸E. Perroy *et al.*, *Le Moyen Age* (Paris, 1955), 3ème partie; J. H. Randall, *Making of the Modern Mind* (Boston, 1940), chap. VI.

⁹G. R. Potter, ed., *The New Cambridge Modern History*; I, *The Renaissance* (Cambridge, 1957), chap. III.

centre of the tangle was the main target, but the concurrent humanism and secularism for which it was largely responsible also came in for the early Reformers' vigorous criticism. Calvin was even more revolutionary than his predecessors, for he did not merely attack and criticize but set up a complete system which could and did in some areas supplant the old ways of thought and action. He was therefore the Protestant revolutionary *par excellence*, and against him were directed the main attacks of the conservative forces which he was endeavouring to overturn.

II. CALVIN'S REVOLUTIONARY PROGRAMME

In attempting to understand Calvin as a revolutionary, it might be well to ask first what caused him to be more revolutionary than the other Reformers? Calvin would probably answer that ultimately his revolutionary attitude resulted from the work of the Holy Spirit. While one may accept this interpretation one must also point out, knowing that God works by providential means, that there seem to have been two principal historical reasons for his radical approach. In the first place he was a Reformer of the second generation. His position in time enabled him to look at the Reformation a little more objectively than could the others. As he was not involved in the labour of trying to hammer out the basic elements of doctrine on the anvil of faith, he was able to see more clearly their implications and their application. Secondly, as a man of keen intellect and understanding, he was willing and able to work out systematically, to their ultimate conclusions, the fundamentals of Protestant thought. Whether he liked it or not, this forced him to a revolutionary position which surpassed anything hitherto set forth by the other Reformers.¹⁰

This raises another point. Was Calvin merely a follower of his predecessors? In answering this question one must point out that in the first place he was a great systematizer. Having been trained both as a humanist and as a lawyer he was eminently fitted to analyse both the Bible and other writers, and to set forth their teaching in a logical pattern. This made him both the Reformation's greatest expositor and its most doughty controversialist. The very fact that he was logical and systematic in his thinking meant that he could employ the work and thought of others most effectively. When one has said this, however, one has not said all that is possible concerning Calvin, for while he was always willing to admit that he based his position on that of Luther and Bucer, he also went much farther. By his very systematic approach he

¹⁰B. B. Warfield, *Calvin and Calvinism* (New York, 1931), pp. 20f.

was able to gain new insights and understanding, to see new ways of application which his fore-runners had missed. Thus he carried Protestant thought out to its logical conclusion. In so doing he gave life to new ideas and original applications, which led him to reject many of the old views held by his predecessors, who had not always seen the implications of their own principles. Thus it would seem that Calvin was as original in his thinking as any man can be.

At this point one must consider the character of Calvin's revolutionary thinking and programme. Merely saying that he was more systematic and logical than his predecessors is not enough for the content of his system of thought was obviously of a most radical nature. To discuss Calvin's views in detail would necessitate one's setting forth a complete exposition of the teachings contained in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. This is clearly impossible owing to the lack of time and space. Moreover, it would probably be much more effective to read Calvin's two volumes for oneself. For the purpose of bringing the revolutionary character of Calvin's thinking into focus, therefore, we shall content ourselves with concentrating upon three basic points: the fundamental position of the Bible, man's complete dependence upon and responsibility to God, and the absoluteness of God's sovereignty. Here lie the foundations of Calvin's revolutionary system.

That the position of the Bible in Calvin's thought is central, none will deny. For many years he has been known as "the theologian of the Word." He has held this position because of his acceptance of the Bible as the Word of God for, as he says, "since we are not favored with daily oracles from heaven, and since it is only in the Scriptures that the Lord hath been pleased to preserve His truth in perpetual remembrance, it obtains the same complete credit and authority with believers . . . as if they heard the very words pronounced by God himself." Thus the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, being the written Word of God, speak with divine right to the hearts of men. Moreover, Calvin is never tired of insisting that the Scriptures are the only source of our knowledge of the revelation of God.¹¹ Consequently they possess unique sovereignty, the sovereignty of God Himself.

¹¹*Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia, 6th edit.), bk. I, chap. VII : 1; E. A. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York, 1952), pp. 89ff; A. D. R. Polman, "Calvin on the Inspiration of Scriptures," in *John Calvin, Contemporary Prophet*, J. Hoogstra, ed. (Grand Rapids, 1959); R. S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Edinburgh, 1953), chap. VIII.

By this Biblical emphasis, Calvin flatly excludes human reason as the ultimate authority. He repeatedly asserts that man's reason is so corrupt and faulty that he neither can know nor wants to know any truth unless the grace of God intervenes to restrain his corruption. Calvin's reaction, therefore, to a discussion of his originality would have been decidedly negative, for he would have held that if his ideas were truly original they were wrong. Only if he thought Biblically would he be thinking God's thoughts after him and so thinking correctly. Since Calvin's day Calvinists have accepted this basic presupposition, holding that they are Calvinists, his spiritual descendants, because he was an accurate expositor of the Bible.

This brings one to the question of Calvin and his method of Biblical exegesis, for in that also Calvin was radical and revolutionary. In expounding the Scriptures he employed the most recently developed methods of the humanists, by applying the grammatico-historical method of interpretation. What do the Scriptures actually say? was his question. The old four-fold method of interpretation he rejected for what might be called a literal approach, since by the old system one heard not God, but man, speaking. Thus, while accepting the authority of the Old Testament, he made it subordinate to the New. Moreover he recognized poetry as poetry, prophecy as prophecy, and history as history. By this means and by this means alone, he felt, would one be able to hear God speaking authoritatively in and through the Bible.¹²

Yet Calvin was no rationalistic Lorenzo Valla in his Biblical studies, for he realized probably more clearly than any other Reformers that the corrupt human intellect could not attain to God's truth merely by reading the Scriptures. At times one obtains the impression that Luther held that the Bible of itself was enough, but Calvin insisted that one could truly understand the Scriptures, actually hear God speaking, only when the Spirit of God had opened one's ears and one's heart to His Word. Then, and not before, would one recognize the Bible as the Word of God and understand what it had to say. Thus Calvin, while insisting on the most scientific techniques for understanding the text, likewise held firmly to the belief that solely by divine grace could one really hear and appreciate the fact that God was speaking in and through the written Word.¹³

¹²Warfield, *op. cit.*, p. 9; cf. Calvin's "Epistle Dedicatory," *Commentary on Romans*.

¹³*Insts.* bk. I, chap. VII; Dowey, *op. cit.*, pp. 172 ff.

That such a position was revolutionary is easily seen when one compares it with the thought either of mediaeval scholasticism or of Renaissance humanism. Calvin's insistence on the authority of the Scriptures and the necessity of the operation of the Holy Spirit cut the ground from under both ecclesiastical traditions and humanistic rationalism. He rejected both points of view and did it with a consistency and thoroughness unknown to the other Reformers. Thus he was, by his very view and use of the Scriptures, a thoroughgoing revolutionary. Moreover, his position with regard to the Bible remains revolutionary today, for were the non-Christian to accept it he would be obliged to change his position completely, while even most Christians would find that Calvin's whole-hearted application of the doctrine of Biblical authority and his method of exegesis demand of their thought almost as radical a change.

Involved in Calvin's view of the Scriptures was a second revolutionary tenet, man's dependence upon and responsibility to God. If one accepts the position that he must heed and obey implicitly God's inscripturated Word, one presupposes the prior obligation to obey God. Thus, says Calvin, the creature of God has the responsibility of seeking to do God's will and manifest His glory in all things, "for there is no part of our life, and no action so minute, that it ought not to be directed to the glory of God, and that we must take care that even in eating and drinking we may aim at the advancement of it."¹⁴

This applies not only to the unbeliever. Calvin, as one may see by only a cursory glance at the *Institutes*, took the doctrine of the Fall and of man's total depravity very seriously. By sinning, man has not merely lost a *donum superadditum* of grace whose disappearance allows the passions to overcome the reason; he has become corrupt in all his parts so that every action is likewise corrupt.¹⁵ Calvin was not, on the other hand, prepared to accept the teaching that by sin man had become "a block and a stock." Rather he held that by the grace of God, man's sin is restrained so that, while totally depraved, he still continues to be a man and is still responsible to glorify God.

It is because man has this continuous obligation to glorify God and yet is totally unable to fulfil it that God in His mercy has redeemed a great multitude through Jesus Christ His Son, who "by his obedience has really procured and merited grace from the

¹⁴Comment on 1 Cor. 10 : 31; H. G. Stoker, "Calvin and Ethics," in Hoogstra, *op. cit.*

¹⁵*Insts.* bk. I, chap. XV : 7; bk. II, chap. III.

Father for us.”¹⁶ But even this was not enough, since man would not lay hold upon the author of salvation did not God draw him that he might cast himself upon Christ as his one hope of eternal life. Thus to Calvin the problem of man’s inability to love God with all his heart was solved only by the gracious redemptive action of the Triune God. This is the work of the Spirit “by which we are introduced to the enjoyment of Christ and all his benefits.”¹⁷ By Him man is brought back to realize his own hopelessness and, in utter despair of achieving anything for himself, to turn to God in faith. When man has come to this position, finding Christ as his Saviour and Lord, to Calvin he should have a new and deeper sense of his responsibility to God. As a Christian he realizes that his whole life and well-being here, as well as hereafter, are dependent upon God. Therefore, he should seek to glorify God by every means possible, using his liberty fully but judiciously and striving to conform himself to Christ. Only in this way will he truly manifest his responsibility to the redeeming God.¹⁸

While many Christians today may think that these views are not very unusual, Calvin’s point of view differed as radically from that of the Middle Ages with its separation of nature and grace, reason and revelation, as it did from that of humanism’s insistence upon the autonomy of human thought and action. Indeed he even went farther than most of his fellow-Reformers, and much farther than many evangelicals today, in insisting that the Christian must submit to God’s word in all aspects of the Christian life. In so doing he began a social and political revolution in Europe which may not yet have seen its end.

In considering Calvin’s revolutionary ideas, however, we have not yet come to that which is absolutely central. The authority of Scripture and the utter dependence of man upon God are both important but they both presuppose the absolute sovereignty of God Himself. It is true that Calvin derives the doctrine of God’s sovereignty from the Scriptures, but he is also never weary of telling us that the Scriptures are to be believed and obeyed because they are the Word of the sovereign God, recognized as such by virtue of the free gift of God’s Spirit. Similarly the responsibility of man to God arises from the fact that man is a creature of God

¹⁶*Ibid.*, bk. II, chap. XVII : 3.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, bk. III, chap. I : 1.

¹⁸This I have dealt with more fully in “The Christian in the World : A Facet of Calvin’s Thought,” *The Gordon Review*, III (1957), 40 ff.

who sustains, governs and judges him according to His perfect sovereign will.¹⁹

In all his thinking Calvin was determined to maintain the Biblical position that God "as an absolute sovereign rules his own empire for himself, and is thus beyond all danger of change." This doctrine he strengthened by his insistence upon the view that the Bible taught the absolute equality of the three persons of the Trinity, so that when the Son and the Spirit acted and act in history they do so in the full power of the Godhead. To Calvin, God is sovereign in every sense of the word for "this world is administered by God's secret providence, and . . . nothing happens but what he has commanded and decreed."²⁰ Here is probably his most clear-cut statement of the doctrine.

That this belief was not peripheral but stood at the very centre of his whole system of thought is abundantly clear. His doctrines of creation and of providence, as they appear in the *Institutes*, are inconceivable apart from his belief in the sovereignty of God. His concept of the world, its origin and its continuance, is based upon the fact that all exists by God's free will and action alone. How much more is this true of his doctrine of redemption, in which he sets forth the view that God's saving work arose entirely and totally from His sovereign power and grace. It is in the light of these facts that one must see his exposition of the Biblical doctrine of election and other, perhaps unpopular, teachings that he propounded.²¹ As Lecerf has pointed out, this doctrine controlled all his thinking.

It was just because of this belief in God's sovereignty that Calvin was never prepared to intrude into the mysteries of God's being or actions. In his comments on Deuteronomy 29 : 29 he is very insistent that the secret things belong to God, a position which he sets forth in all his writings. This comes out particularly in his comments on those who would attempt to explain the relationship between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility when he says, referring to Romans 9 : 20, "as though the Spirit of God were silent for want of reason, and not rather that by his silence he reminds us, that a mystery which our minds cannot comprehend ought to be reverently adored, and that he thus checks the wantonness of human curiosity." Since God is sovereign, man has no

¹⁹A. Lecerf, *Etudes Calvinistes* (Neuchatel, 1949), pp. 11-24.

²⁰*Insts.*, *loc. cit.*

²¹*Ibid.*, bk. III, chap. XXII : Dowe, *op. cit.*, pp. 210 ff.; Lecerf, *op. cit.*, pp. 25f.

right to demand that God explain all his actions to us; and even if He should explain such mysteries, "we cannot contain his immense wisdom in our small measure."²² For Calvin, therefore, man's ignorance of the diverse unexplained mysteries of the faith is merely a necessary corollary of God's absolute sovereignty.

It is Calvin's consistent acceptance of this doctrine that has made him such a revolutionary thinker. Others in the Middle Ages, such as Bernard of Clairvaux, had spoken of God's sovereignty in certain areas of existence. William of Occam had expounded God's sovereignty particularly in relation to His will which became the essence of arbitrariness, but he had not even carried this through to its logical conclusion. Calvin, however, beginning with the Biblical doctrine of the ontological Trinity as the sovereign God, followed the Scriptures, carrying the doctrine into every field of thought and action. This meant a rejection of Roman Catholic synergism as expressed in the "faith and works" of the Council of Trent. It also meant a denial of the autonomy of man's reason and determination as expressed in the humanism of a Pico della Mirandola or a Pompanazzi. Instead he laid new foundations for all human thought and action.

Setting forth the universal sovereignty of God, he made nature something new. As Jerome Zanchius, one of Calvin's followers, pointed out during the latter's life-time, nature is God's handiwork which reveals God. For this reason men should learn more of the physical sciences in order that in the light of the Scriptures they may know and understand God more fully. This point of view had not a little to do with the growth of the early study of natural science. For since God is sovereign over nature as Creator and Sustainer, nature is the proper object of man's interest and study to the glory of God.

Coupled with this, God's sovereignty extends also to human society. Individuals are responsible to obey and serve God in this world in every aspect of life. Here Calvin laid the foundation for much of the "rugged individualism" and the tendency to non-conformity which has characterized western development, and yet he would not have agreed with the lengths to which it has sometimes gone, for he insisted that the commands of God, negative as well as positive, must always be obeyed. To achieve this end he also maintained that society must come under the sovereignty of God, both ruler and subject being directly responsible to him who is Lord of lords and King of kings. Here lie the origins of some

²²Comment on Rom. 9 : 20.

aspects of modern democracy, tied inseparably to the sovereignty of God.²³

Such an attitude in the sixteenth century was incontestably revolutionary for it struck hard at the roots of mediæval and renaissance society. The hierarchical church and monarchical despotism experienced the unpleasant sensation of being brushed aside to give place to the sovereign God. There is little wonder that priest and monarch, scholar and soldier, turned on this doctrine with terrible fury to denounce it and to destroy it wherever they could track it down. Yet they did not succeed, and Calvin's ideas have become part of our Christian heritage. The only thing is that today his ideas have become so clouded with rationalism, ecclesiasticism and pietism that most people no longer know his revolutionary doctrine.

What then does Calvin have to say to twentieth-century Christians? First and foremost they are to be revolutionaries, not with bomb and knife, but by witnessing to God's sovereignty. They must not, however, witness in abstract terms. Rather they should set forth the fact that God is the sovereign Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer, the Lord of all. This is revolutionary in all times and in all circumstances, for it strikes at the root of man's smugness and self-confidence, facing him with his nothingness before the sovereign God.

The Christian must then go on to witness to man's responsibility to believe the promises freely offered unto him by God. Furthermore he must stress the fact that belief should always result in obedience to God's commands. True faith must produce life, a life which shows forth the glory of the Sovereign. These are the obligations which the Christian must present to men. But if one truly believes this, then one's own life should show this revolutionary approach that Christians may once again begin to turn the world upside down.

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²³Cf. C. G. Singer, "Calvin and the Social Order"; and W. S. Reid, "Calvin and the Political Order," in Hoogstra, *op. cit.*; Lecercf, *op. cit.*, pp. 99 ff.