

ARTICLE VI.

JOHN CALVIN'S CALVINISM.

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THE search-light which the four hundredth anniversary of Calvin's birth is turning upon his influence in modern history ought to make the popular meaning of Calvinism obsolete. The system of theology which he taught is receding. The man he was is coming to the front. His political principles make foundations for all constitutional governments in the world. The first and the most radical of them has just been adopted by the nation that stoned its prophet. John Calvin's Calvinism is his own commanding personality and his far-reaching service to the human race.

He was the scholar of the Reformation. His mother, a lady of wealth and of great beauty, was a devout Catholic and kept her gifted son loyal to the church until its monasteries and ecclesiastical foundations had trained him in the scholarship which made him its most formidable antagonist. Cordier taught him to think in Latin. The slur of "bellowing in bad Latin," applied with too much truth to Luther, was never laid to Calvin's charge. His worst enemies recognized his use of the language of the learned world at that date as almost classic. Falling in with his father's ambition, he added to his classical studies a thorough course of law at the universities of Orleans and of Bourges. But he was a self-educated man. So is everybody who is educated at all. He used to listen to lectures all day, make notes far into the night; then drill his

memory, construct classifications of his own, and prolong the work till daylight. The outcome of this rigid discipline of his own was his feeble health, a miraculous memory, and a skill in speaking and writing so that he never was and never could be misunderstood.

There is scarcely another thing that needs to be recalled of his youth except that he was very popular with his teachers and fellow-students. To be sure, the latter nicknamed him "The Accusative Case," because he was always rebuking their faults. But they liked him all the better, made him president of the "Nation" of Picardy students, and called him to the chair of any professor who happened to be absent. He won the applause of the faculties and of the clergy by his youthful book "*Psychopannychia*" against the doctrine of an intermediate state of unconsciousness, held by a fanatical sect. He was still a good Catholic when Lefevre d'Étaples predicted that he would be the leader of the Reformation.

He describes his conversion as if it were a great change like Augustine's and Luther's. But it affected his conduct so little that we may question his own estimate of it. It turned him from the law to preaching the Reformed faith — that was all. About 1534 he joined the Reformers who were protected by the Court of Marguerite de Navarre. But France was too hot for them. Switzerland was his refuge, and he completed at Basle, August 15, 1535, the book which moved the world more profoundly than any other since Paul wrote his letter to the Romans. This masterpiece, which proved to be the bone and sinew of the Reformation, was sent forth, like Noah's dove, over the raging sea of controversy while its author had no place for the sole of his foot and was living in exile under an assumed name. A daughter of Louis XII., the Duchess of Ferrara, received him as guest, but could not afford him any

facilities for preaching, and he was returning from Italy when the hour of destiny struck one summer night in Geneva.

This city, henceforth to become the Jerusalem of the Reformation, had just thrown off the yoke of Savoy, and established a republic. All men vested with full citizenship met in general assembly stately to elect a council of two hundred, and occasionally to act on appeals from the council, but never to initiate legislation. Authority was again delegated to a council of sixty, and finally to a board of syndics, who were the actual lawmakers and governors of the city for a year, subject to two appeals to councils and to an ultimate appeal to the general assembly.

This political revolution had been coincident with a complete religious reform. The Bishop, taking sides with the Duke, had been expelled, the Reformed faith had been formally adopted by popular vote; and all places of worship were already in use by Protestant congregations. Berne, Neuchâtel, Zürich, and Basle had preceded Geneva in this reform. It was only three months before Calvin's arrival that the General Assembly had met and voted unanimously to abolish the mass and all popish ceremonies, and to live together in amity and in obedience to the law of Christ.

William Farel, a scholar of the Sorbonne, a follower of the earliest Reformers in France, an exile in Switzerland for ten years, and now for two years the preacher and originator of the revolution in Geneva, had just then met his first check. His new saints were not persevering. He lacked the solid learning and the executive ability to guide the forces he had set in motion.

Fresh from reading the book which had made Calvin famous, he hastened to him the moment he heard of his arrival, and insisted that his presence there in the nick of time was an

interposition of God. Calvin refused to listen. He was intent on further prosecution of his studies. He had no zeal for strife. He could not be moved from this resolution, and announced his purpose to set out for Basle the next morning. Then Farel raised his hand toward heaven and exclaimed with the deepest solemnity: "John Calvin! If you forsake us in this time of need, when your scholarship and capacity to organize and guide our churches are absolutely necessary, then from this time forth the curse of God will rest upon you and your idolized studies!"

Calvin was awed, as never before or after, by this awful appeal. He gave up his plans, and at once began the great work of his life as teacher, preacher, and statesman. He was gaining influence not only in Geneva but in all the Protestant cities, when a controversy caused his banishment. The members of St. Peter's Church claimed the privilege of receiving the sacrament with no questions about their conduct, and appealed to the syndics and the councils in succession. They were sustained not only in Geneva but, on consultation, by the authorities in all the other cities. Then was born one of the first and most vital principles of Calvin's own Calvinism. He stood out against all the authorities, insisting that things purely spiritual could not be enforced by civil power, and refused to give the sacrament to several prominent citizens who were notoriously impure in life. This was his first actual revolt against political control of spiritual things, and it proved to be the germ of our principle of the total separation of church and state.

Two things must be noted at this point which will be more and more apparent as we proceed: John Calvin's Calvinism is practical and not merely theoretical. The rule assigning distinct jurisdictions to political and spiritual authorities had

been elaborated in the "Institutes." It worked the first time it was applied in Geneva. He was not constructing a useless system in that great work, but laying out a road to follow all his life. There is not a trace of fanaticism in Calvin. And his Calvinism is more political than theological. This second characteristic is true, to some extent, of the Reformation as a whole. But it permeates Calvinism through and through. The state is quite as divine in its origin, and as remedial in its agency, as the church. Defining logically and jealously their separate jurisdictions, Calvin assigns to each an equal authority and corresponding responsibilities. This is the pervading characteristic of Calvin's Calvinism.

His banishment gave him three peaceful years in Strassburg. A strenuous effort to win Geneva, torn by continued controversies and misrule in his absence, back again to the Church of Rome, called forth from Calvin a noble letter to Cardinal Sadolet. Without an allusion to the wrongs he had suffered, he pleaded for the peace and liberty of his beloved friends in the threatened city. His magnanimity won their hearts, and he was recalled with acclamation, May, 1541. From this date to the end of his life, Geneva was the metropolis of the Protestant world, and Calvin was the heart of Geneva. Luther died five years later. Melancthon and the most scholarly men in the German churches were already adherents of Calvin on nearly all points in which the two great Reformers were at variance. John Knox had been his pupil and assistant in Geneva, and his followers in Scotland were more rigid Calvinists than the Huguenots themselves. The Netherlands, in their symbol of 1618, adopted the most rigid formula of Calvinism ever composed. These twenty-three years in Geneva, beginning in the thirty-second year of his life, made Calvin so supreme throughout the Protestant world that no-

body was second to him. He was in constant correspondence with universities, synods, and churches of his own faith; with cardinals and the Pope himself; and with the greatest statesmen and monarchs of surrounding nations. To an extent which we have all failed to recognize and of which he was totally unconscious, John Calvin's Calvinism was his own imposing personality.

Why is it that bare dogmas have been applauded and stigmatized by turns as Calvinism? A lecturer to a Sunday-school convention happened to make a casual allusion to them a few years ago, when the question was sprung upon him: "What are the five points of Calvinism?" "Total depravity, Predestination, Atonement for the elect only, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of Saints." There was a loud outcry in protest of this statement, but the lecturer asked the audience to choose an arbiter in whom they could confide. They named a professor in their own theological seminary. "Our speaker is absolutely correct in his enumeration," he promptly answered: "but these are mysteries of our faith which never ought to be enumerated at all. They must be pondered and explained, each by itself. As for hurling all of them at once, in this solid mass, nobody can stand such a broadside as that."

After all, the audience was quite right and the professor might have made a better rejoinder. These are the Five Points of Augustinianism. It is true that Calvin adhered to them, and taught them, and made them vital to every confession he ever composed. But he did not originate one of them. You might as well call the political practice of rewarding henchmen in caucuses and conventions with the spoils of office, by the name of a living boss instead of ascribing it to Andrew Jackson.

But there is no use in protesting. Calvin's name has obliterated the names of all the authorities he followed, and over-

shadowed the names of Edwards and of all the rest who followed him. The old Catholic doctrines and the modern extremes of conservative theology are going to be called Calvinism to the end of time. But the fact is incontestable that there is no genuine Calvinism in them except the use Calvin made of them. That was a stroke of genius.

He never had any use at all for mere abstractions. He selected his weapon when it was needed. A trenchant weapon was certainly needed just then in Geneva. His first work for his city was to make it a decent place to live in. No words can describe the misrule and debauchery which he faced. Liberty had run into riot. The most atrocious crimes went unpunished. During the prevalence of the plague, in which one-tenth of the population perished, thieves were detected placing infected garments where exposures would give opportunities for plundering the dying.

Calvin always confessed himself a coward at a distance from danger, but close up to it he never flinched. His preaching was often interrupted at first by denunciations. He was stoned and shot at in the streets. He was denounced as a new pope, worse than the bishop they had banished. The liberals were intent upon silencing him. But in the end, no Hebrew prophet ever received such an eager response to his denunciations of idolatry as Calvin won for his appeals to the people and to their rulers. All pretense of merely consulting him was thrown aside. He wrote out, word for word, their code of municipal regulations which was in force years after his death. Blue laws? Of course. The times were blue. Our Puritans never painted so deep a hue. One father was locked up until he would consent to discard for his baby the heathenish name of Claudius and call it Abraham. Gamblers were set in the pillory with their cards suspended around their necks. Three

men laughed in church, and got out of prison after three days by humble confession. Children were whipped in public for singing comic songs to psalm-tunes, for eating cakes during a long sermon, and for reading frivolous books. More than four hundred degrading punishments for such trivial offenses are on record during two years. Severity increased after Calvin's death: torture to extort confession; the death penalty for striking father and mother and the burning of witches in Switzerland and in Scotland sixty years later.

Indirectly Calvin was certainly responsible for these atrocities; just as our Puritan ministers were responsible for the Salem tragedy. He left on the statute-books awful blemishes which he might have erased. He was the only man in Geneva with intellect capable of a more liberal policy. Long before he died he acquired authority enough to enforce law and order by milder measures. There may be some excuse for striking hard at first. But all danger of license and insurrection was over in a short time. He soon made Geneva the soberest, the safest, and the most law-abiding community in the world. He put down libertines and rioters, and created a solemn, temperate, and happy metropolis for godly men from the ends of the earth. And yet, like Savonarola in Florence, Calvin never held a civil office. He was nothing more, but also nothing less, than a conscience inflamed with the fear and love of God. Since the people waited for his word from the pulpit before casting their votes, and since the syndics knew that he was by far the best lawyer in Geneva, he soon became the virtual dictator of church and state. He was a vigilance committee of one.

Whence came this unprecedented power of a private citizen? It was the authority of God. His appeal was direct to the conscience of men. He forced them, by their own common sense, to govern themselves. In the statesmanship of this signal

restoration of law and order in Geneva was the germ of stable government with liberty which has grown to grand proportions in our times. This was John Calvin's own Calvinism.

And yet the darkest shadow falls across his record at this auspicious moment. Heresy must have martyrs. It is a pity that a better man than Servetus should not head the list. He was a persistent liar, a foul reviler, and at the best a vain dreamer. But it is a greater pity that the man who has unquestionably contributed more than all others in the sixteenth century to establish the religious liberty of the twentieth, did not redeem this magnificent opportunity to rise above his own passions and above the dense darkness of his times, to defend the right of free thought and free speech for his bitterest adversary, and by this one brilliant achievement to make Geneva the very City of God!

It is astonishing that one word has ever been written in our times to extenuate this crime. Calvin, before and after the event, assumed the full responsibility. He opposed every appeal for clemency in the Council of Two Hundred. He did try in vain to have a more merciful death sentence imposed; but he announced his intention long before to put Servetus to death, and he carried it out relentlessly.

And yet up to that hour he had never written a word to justify — he had written voluminously to condemn — such a proceeding. His first book, the text of "Seneca de Clementia" with copious notes, in which he borrows the sentiments of a heathen philosopher to denounce papal persecutions; all the principles of the "Institutes," and its magnificent preface in express words, proclaim religious liberty. Capital punishment for heresies is abhorrent to all of his teachings. We can write a brief by literal quotations from his pen, to prove that neither the church nor the state of Geneva had a shred of

jurisdiction in this case. There is absolutely no defense nor excuse for him. Our only appeal must be from John Calvin in the panic of this awful hour to John Calvin's own Calvinism, which, more than all other writings of the Reformation, has led us into clearer light.

The tranquil life in Geneva until its close in 1564 was interrupted by another tragedy for which he was not responsible. It fell with a crash when the Reformation was at its zenith in France. Calvin was training and sending ministers all over his native country. Churches were founded in Paris itself in 1555, and a general synod was permitted to meet in peace in 1559. Two thousand churches were rapidly formed. One of them with a membership of seven thousand was in Lyons, a city so near Geneva as to be almost under his personal care. Bishops wrote in consternation to Rome that all France was turning Calvinist.

Suddenly the toleration which had been formally accorded was violated by the Duke of Guise. One of the closing chapters of the "Institutes" covers this case: a legitimate government existed with a solemn compact in force to punish the perpetrators of such an outrage. The time had not come, also described with the keenest discrimination in the same chapter, when complicity with violation of law on the part of the government may wear out its legitimacy and leave nothing but anarchy. Then only, and then at last, resistance to tyrants is obedience to God. If not against Calvin's protest, certainly not by his advice, the Huguenots took the sword and perished by the sword. Their declaration went beyond the plea of self-defense; they frankly avowed their purpose to extend the Reformed faith by arms. The contest was uncalvinistic, unchristian, and disastrous.

Calvin had his forebodings from the beginning. He was

fully aware that the King of Navarre was serving his own ambition in leading the attack and in persuading Condé, Admiral Coligny, the brothers Chatillon and Rochefoucauld, to follow him. In the evening of December 19, 1562, Calvin was lying on his couch, too anxious to do anything but pray, when he suddenly exclaimed: "I hear distinctly the blast of war-trumpets in the air, I cannot convince myself that this is a delusion. Let us pray, for I am sure our brethren are in danger."

This is one of the best authenticated cases of telepathy on record. That very day Beza preached to Coligny's army, seized the colors, and led the columns in the battle of Dreux. He escaped with Coligny, but Condé was taken. Fugitives from the defeat came in confusion to Geneva. The war dragged on till the peace of Orleans (March 7, 1563) left the Huguenots with their former rights severely restricted. The massacre of St. Bartholomew's day and the revocation of the Edict of Nantes were the final outcome of this needless and calamitous conflict.

But the Huguenots, driven from home, flocked to the Netherlands, to Great Britain and later to this country. The loss to industry, to learning, and to every feature of civilization in France can never be estimated. Every safe and wholesome principle of the French Revolution would have grown in peace out of French Calvinism. The loss was gain everywhere else, and not least in Calvin's home. Accessions to his French churches were enormous. His Italian church was growing rapidly. The English contingent was remarkable. The Bible was translated and printed in our language at Geneva. The supervision of all the churches, with frequent preaching in his own, and daily instruction of ministers in training, filled his tranquil years almost to the last day of his life.

From this study of his personality and of his work in Geneva, we are now prepared to trace with accuracy the salient features of John Calvin's Calvinism, perpetuated in our own ethical and political principles. I have no hesitation in naming the use he made of two vital truths of Scripture as sufficient to account for the enormous impulse he has given to modern civilization—the Sovereignty of God, and Predestination. Only I must protest, at the outset, against looking for statements of these two doctrines in the symbols of our fathers. His own "Institutio Christiana" must be our guide—and, chiefly, the inspired and ringing preface to that book. It was addressed as a dedication to the King of France. Calvin's resort to these two doctrines has a practical purpose in his plain words to the King, which is undisguised and trenchant. Human sovereignty was then in the ascendant. And it was an accursed thing in the camp of the Lord. Erasmus was afraid to touch it. Zwingli hesitated. Luther stood in awe of it when the test came. The son of a peasant himself, the life-long friend and brother of the common people, was entreated to lead the peasant's revolution. He knew that with his commanding influence over monarchs and cabinets he could gain all the just rights of the peasants, suppress their fanatical leaders, reduce their extravagant demands to the measure of incontestable equity, and without bloodshed secure lasting peace. In his old age the hero of Worms was scared by the phantom of the divine right of kings to do devilish wrong. Hard times demand hard men. A stern hand was needed then. With no experience of poverty in his youth, brought up in affluence and in scholarship which made all his environments aristocratic, and at the height of his unchallenged power, Calvin took sides with the poor and with the oppressed in all lands and in all times. The man who is repelled by his

austerity or even by his many and glaring faults, and so fails to appreciate his immense service in delivering church and state from mutual antagonisms and oppressions and in making way for the era of civil liberty, is either a trifler or else he is densely ignorant.

Calvin has torn the accursed thing out of all the constitutions of Europe in these few centuries with his doctrine of divine sovereignty. The king can do no wrong; but who is king? Not Saul after he forsakes God. Appeals cannot go on forever. Authority must stop somewhere. Who shall define its boundaries? Calvin's doctrine and Calvin's republic making the doctrine breathe and live in Geneva have created modern nations.

And there was Paul's and Augustine's doctrine of Predestination. Calvin did not care a straw for the metaphysical speculations of the Father, and the mysticism of the Apostle did not confuse him. He bethought himself that this rusty and ponderous thing might be just the weapon he needed in battling against principalities and the powers of darkness. He remembered how his own father tried to predestinate him to the law, and how popes and monarchs were always trying to predestinate everybody to some ignoble destiny. Then the mighty assurance possessed his soul that there is one Sovereign in the universe who does things and never tries to do them. God has a business in hand. He can, he will, he does, predestinate men to be conformed to the image of his Son. Nothing less radical nor less shattering to the pride of men who were posturing as infallible popes and absolute monarchs could have ever rubbed the spots out of the creeds of the church, nor prostrated thrones before the advancing cry *Vox populi, vox Dei!* Calvinism is original only in this: it applies the old doctrines of human depravity and divine

sovereignty, like a keen axe, to the very roots of all the shams and oppression in this world. Never a man lived who was more scrupulous, more zealous, and, against the grain of a timid nature, more courageous in demolishing everything that is false and noxious in the life of men and of churches and of states, nor more resolute in "making truth to the last fibre of it the rule of faith and practice."

You and I are Calvinists if we are patriotic Americans. We are not Calvinists to-day, if we pick up the very words of Calvin's creeds and insist they shall be the everlasting mould of gospel truth. Calvin refused to have dictated creeds adopted in his churches — not even the Apostles', the Nicene, and least of all his own. If he were to come back and find us brandishing his rusty weapons, he would pity our superstitions. His doctrines have done their work. The mighty truths in them have saved the best lands of the Old World from despotism, and created a new world here, where his principles have achieved their best triumphs. Our country is Calvinistic through and through in the complete separation of church and state, and in the prevalence of civil and religious liberty. Our Calvinism must be not less loyal to God than his, and a great deal more tender towards men. We must advance beyond his footsteps with his faithfulness and courage. If we are beset with his infirmities and sins, then his assurance of forgiveness and effectual calling must give us inspiration for the unreserved service of God with all our powers of mind and heart.