

# The Relevance of Calvin Today

By JEAN CADIER

THIS title will appear to some to beg the question. Certainly, without the interest aroused in 1959 by several centenaries, the four-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of Calvin's birth, the four-hundredth anniversary of the first Reformed synod in Paris and of the founding of the Genevan Academy, who would be able to speak of relevance in considering this man? For he was so deeply rooted in his own sixteenth century, with its extraordinary advances but also its funeral pyres, its refinements and also its cruelties. Who reads *The Institutes* now apart from a few specialists? But you may be reassured. I do not desire, nor would it be possible, to make Calvin a modern man, and I frankly recognize that it is neither true nor fair to judge him with the spirit of our twentieth century. My purpose is otherwise; it is to show that, on some great problems of our time, the Reformer has in advance provided guidance, ways of stating issues and principles of life, which can still help us to find an answer to them. In this sense, perhaps you will admit that Calvin has a contemporary relevance?

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First of all, let us set out a comparison between our century and his; both were periods of transition. Before our eyes we see displayed a world that has become too narrow. New satellites are projected into outer space in the expectation that like meteors they will reach beyond the limits of the earth to some unknown region of the universe. But these lunar experiments are only a symbol of other excesses and audacities of the spirit. A man of my generation sometimes feels himself strangely out of his element when he meets men of the new generation. I think of my visit, some months ago, to the Brussels Exhibition, of exploring in a new world and one that is hard to assimilate, of astonishment before the daring of science and thought. It might perhaps be said that every century has known such upsurges, which have left those who witnessed them in amazement (for example, the Romanticism of the nineteenth and the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century), and which have filled some with the thought of an approaching cataclysm. Did not Pierre Méjanel, one of the pioneers of the nineteenth century Awakening, write in 1831 an *Essay on the Last Convulsions of a Perishing World*? But there is more than that in our day; the progress of science in the last half-century, the establishment of a new society dominated by technology, the hopes and fears to which the development of nuclear physics has given birth, have made us see clearly that we have entered a new era, which calls in question the concepts of the preceding era. In psychology, in morality, in sociology, new forms of expression, coloured by a scientific outlook, are propounded; each of us, swept away by the break up of an old world and the emergence of a new world, strives meanwhile to understand, to assess correctly, to be truly up-to-date, and also to be truly man. For what is threatened is the very notion of man, of human personality, submerged beneath the mass of workers and

technicians, and outstripped by the very extent of his successes. But where are we to find the standard of our thought and our behaviour?

Now it is in this that Calvin's era was analogous. In his time also, the world was in ferment. Less than twenty years before the birth of the Reformer, Christopher Columbus found the West Indies, and beyond them lay new worlds for discovery and for the satisfaction of their conquerors' greed. In 1522 Magellan was the first to sail round the world. The earth also gave up her secrets. Some years later, in 1543, Copernicus' book, *The Revolution of the Heavenly Spheres*, proved that the earth revolves round the sun, and so destroyed every geocentric view of the universe. At the same time, a new humanism was born in the rediscovery of ancient literature. It was the Renaissance, with its splendid flowering in the realm of art as well as in that of literature. But this exaltation of discovery and of new conceptions of the world did not pass without fear and dissatisfaction springing from a failure of adaptation to so sudden and unexpected a view of the world. Dürer has portrayed in the features of his *Melancholia* the sadness brought by this knowledge. She is pensive and it is as if she had been overwhelmed by her discoveries. One senses the search for some "supplément d'âme" which would allow self-rediscovery in the midst of a scientific development which within the course of a few years has become immense.

This spiritual help it was Calvin's task to give to the new world, as it arose on the ruins of former ideas. Certainly, Calvin was in one sense still a man of the Middle Ages. The authors he had studied in the Collège Montaigu under the rule of the obscurantist Beda were the great authors on which medieval thought was nurtured, and his prodigious memory grasped them permanently; St. Augustine (the recent work of Smits shows that Calvin has quoted him explicitly more than seventeen-hundred times; his thought constantly reappears in the doctrine of the Reformer), Peter Lombard, Master of the *Sentences*, and St. Bernard. The author of *The Institutes* has a widespread theological learning and draws extensively on medieval sources. But at the same time this man, nurtured in antiquity, was open to the spirit of his age. His first publication, a commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia*, was the work of a humanist. But he made clear, in this first essay, that for this new world other things were needed than a learned analysis of a text of ancient philosophy. He then turned to the Word of the Eternal Revelation; he took for his age, the melancholic and immoderate sixteenth century, a message drawn from the living streams of Holy Scripture. It was the affirmation of the majesty of God and of His sovereign grace.

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Let us try to see why this message of God's sovereignty had something to say to those men of the sixteenth century, and why, in our own day, so close to Calvin's in the break up of accepted ideas, the advance of the giant Discovery, and the immense transformations that have come upon life and thought within the course of a few years, he still has something to say to us.

We may be sure that because the message is true it is relevant for

every century. But further, it is peculiar to these centuries of the passing of the old and the emerging of the new that there is a double feeling of both the greatness and the wretchedness of man. Greatness, because of his successes, his inventions, his boldness in the face of worlds and spaces unknown. Greatness, because of his accurate mathematical predictions, and because of his conquest of nature. But also wretchedness, for that same man feels himself outstripped by this new world he has discovered. He is afraid and he has some reason to be afraid. He fears destruction by nuclear power whose terrible effects he well appreciates. Certainly he can always take refuge in indifference, refuse to think, envelop himself in an optimism that ignores the facts, and seek to forget in attempts at distraction. But this is an untenable position for the man who really wants to be a man and to think out the purpose of his existence. There is then another attitude, that of faith in the presence and sovereignty of God. That is the position of Calvin.

For another thing, this vast progress of technology can only be obtained by enormous groups of workers. The industrialization of the last century has created a mass mentality. It has aroused a pride in big business, a group responsibility which gradually destroys the value of the individual. The fact that in recent wars some have made light of the human person springs less from the sadistic cruelty of a few than from a general contempt for the worth of the individual, who is sacrificed to the cause of the group or the race. A restoration of the dignity of the individual is essential. Here again we shall see that the thought of Calvin has something to say to us.

Finally, the most formidable evil of our day, all the more formidable since it is no longer considered an evil, is the denial of God throughout life. This notion pursues its destructive work with general approval. We are witnessing a vast attempt at secularization, and using it as a means of escape from the presence and authority of God in every domain, a profanation of existence itself. The characteristic note of modern life is its wish to evade the rule of God. Religion appears to the best folk as an entirely private affair, a sort of secret relationship between God and man, hidden in the depths of the inner sanctuary, without external manifestation. The modern spirit has succeeded in creating a divorce in man between the sacred and the profane. In the scientific realm, the principle of excluding the transcendent is basic. In that of education, the secular character of the instruction, which in some countries goes as far as complete silence on God, is considered a necessity. In the political realm it is admitted that God has no place, even when there are religious ceremonies at the opening sessions of parliament. Even in the realm of the family the practice of family worship and family religion is almost completely abandoned. Consider other aspects of modern life, such as industry, commerce, business; it is agreed that the world is no more than a deconsecrated sanctuary. But most serious of all is that the majority of Christians accept this situation as normal and that we are more and more admitting a restricted view of the Church's activity and witness. Here again Calvin has something to say to us.

What then is this message of Calvin? It is what we have already mentioned, the message of the sovereignty of God over the world. Even when the world expands before our eyes, when rockets pass beyond the stratosphere, God is still the Lord of the universe, the God who has created the heavens and the earth. Even at its farthest point the exploration of man does not escape the realm where God reigns. By his insistence from the first pages of *The Institutes* in reminding us that all our life comes from God, that we exist only as we are sustained by Him, that we are His creation, that we are subjects of His dominion, Calvin puts man back into his true condition as a creature of God. Thus is all human pride beaten down. And Calvin continues: "The person who thus knows God, because he perceives that He governs all things, entrusts himself to His keeping and protection, and places himself entirely in His care. Because he recognizes God as the author of all things good, he turns to Him, when oppressed by affliction or need, in the expectation that He will be his Helper. In so far as he trusts Him as good and merciful he rests in Him with a sure confidence, and doubts not that in all his adversities there will always be a remedy to hand in the divine goodness and clemency (*Inst.* I. ii. 2). Thus the great fear evaporates. And down the centuries since the birth of Calvinism there has been a type of men at the same time both humble and confident—humble before the divine sovereignty, and confident through their immovable trust in this sovereignty. They are at the same time men of obedience and of defiance, who fear nothing and nobody, when they know themselves to be led by the will of God. This Calvinism made the French "Huguenots", the Dutch "Beggars", and the New England "Puritans" intractable contenders for the faith, dedicated pioneers, heroic martyrs, men who did not flinch before the threats of the great or the onslaught of unrestrained fury. Now who will say confronted with the uncertainties of the hour that it is not realistic to give a new attention to this message of obedience and confidence in God, who made men like this, free from fear and cowardice?

Certainly the ideologies of our time also have their pioneers and their heroes. I do not deny this. I fear, however, that this heroism may be devoted to a collective courage, a courage in the mass. I see here one of the characteristics of our time made even more pronounced. How can we rediscover the sense of personality? Again Calvin has something to say to us. The sovereignty which God exercises is not vague and remote. It is personal and addresses itself to men as persons. It is particular. God accomplishes His plan through men whom He calls and to whom He gives orders and confides a task, at the same time as He provides them with the strength to carry it to a successful conclusion. This is the meaning of the Bible, which is a history showing the action of God through men called by Him and living in His presence. The dignity of these men lies in the summons that God addresses to them. It comes from the vocation that they have received and which makes them rise out of the crowd to fulfil a precise task. Listen to Calvin on this point:

"God's command to each of us is to consider his vocation (understanding by vocation that which God speaks to a man) in all the actions

of life. He knows the burning restlessness of the human mind. He knows the fickleness by which it is carried hither and thither, and the ambition and greed by which it is incited to grasp at many different things at once. Lest, therefore, we throw all things into confusion by our folly and rashness, God has ordained to each of us that which He would have us do, according to our position and manner of life. To prevent anyone from thoughtlessly overstepping his proper limits, He has called such modes of life *vocations*. Every man, therefore, should consider his estate as a station assigned to him by God, so that he should not be up in the air or chopping and changing without thought throughout his life. . . . If we do not have our vocation as a perpetual rule, there will be no constant point of reference and no harmony between the different parts of our life. Thus he who directs his life to this end will have it properly ordered, because he will not attempt more than his vocation justifies, and will not allow himself to be driven on by his own recklessness, knowing well that it is not right for him to go beyond his vocation's limits. He who is an unimportant person, will none the less be content with his circumstances, fearing to desert the post to which God has appointed him. It will also be a very great relief in all our cares, toils, and vexations, when we are persuaded that God is our leader and guide in everything. Each will conduct himself more patiently in his own particular way of life, and will surmount its afflictions, anxieties, and distresses when all are fully persuaded that no one bears any burden other than that which God Himself has laid on him. From this will result the singular consolation that no work will be so mean and sordid that it does not have a splendour and a value in the sight of God, provided that in its performance we are fulfilling our vocation." (*Institutes*, III. x. 6.)

We wished to cite at length this "texte capital" as M. Emile-G. Lonard<sup>1</sup> calls it, for it assigns a place in the thought of Calvin for the conception of the life of the individual, of "each" one, guided by God and called by God. Man does not frame his own life, as all the humanists think he does. He receives its pattern from God. We discover here again this double sense of humility and heartening certainty, which we have stressed above. It is a humility without servility and a certainty without presumption. What greatness there is in this concept of a life of which God has taken the control and which he has inserted into His own plan in such a way that man does not have to raise himself by personal ambition, rivalry, or proud force, but has only to lead his life as in the sight of God. Each man has his set task without considering himself capable of accomplishing it all or interchangeable or omniscient. The labour of each man is not for his own personal glory or for the glory of a faction, a party, or a nation, but for the glory of God alone. The call of God constitutes the worth of the person and delivers him from the tyranny of the mass which is so oppressive in our time.

Above all, this vocation is for the whole of life. Here the Calvinist message has exorcized that separation of the sacred and the profane, and consequently that secularization of which we have noted the danger above.<sup>2</sup>

This splendid vision that Calvin had of a city of God takes hold of

us. We must not consider the struggle against the personal and moral indiscipline of Geneva in the light of the carping prohibitions of the Consistory. We must listen rather to the preaching of the Word of God which, each morning, sounded from the pulpit and was a tireless reminder of the divine presence at the beginning of each day. We should recognize in this intention of placing everyday life under the will of God the origin of the Academy of Geneva, whose four hundredth centenary we celebrate this year.

We cannot, it is true, push back the tide of pagan indifference which is the mark of our age. Nevertheless, we must, each in the affairs which concern us, effect that integration of the sacred in every department of our life, knowing that all our life is for God and from God, refusing all the convenient separations which are really evasions, and accepting the task of making our whole life a witness to the presence of God. In this too we are able to speak of the relevance of Calvin.

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Next, in order to grapple with this relevance on the practical level of the life of the Church, we ought to consider the efforts of the Reformer toward the unity of the Reformed Churches.

From the beginning, there were various divisions between the pioneers of the gospel message. There were at first the ultra-spiritual movements, the anabaptist preachers who wished to point out to Luther that he had not gone far enough in his reforming work. These were the people who wished to exalt the inspiration of the individual. There was especially the difference with Zwingli on the mode of the presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Luther, who fastened literally on the words of Christ at the institution of the Supper, *This is my body*, summed up his doctrine in the famous formula, "I believe with Wycliffe that the bread remains and I believe with the sophists (meaning the scholastic theologians) that the body is there" (*The Babylonish Captivity*). In this way he asserted the coexistence in the bread of the substance of bread and the substance of the body of Christ. This is what has been called consubstantiation. Zwingli would not admit this substantial presence of the body of Christ, for two reasons. First, he declares that since His ascension Christ has been sovereignly raised into the heavenly glory. He is seated at the right hand of God. How, then, could he leave this glory? How could he "descend" in order to be brought in under the bread? Zwingli depends on the words of Christ after the discourse on the bread of life (John vi. 63): "It is the spirit which gives life, the flesh profits nothing. The words which I have spoken to you are spirit and life." The presence of Christ in the Supper cannot be corporeal and substantial, but spiritual, through the symbol of bread. It is well known that the Lutheran doctrine and the Zwinglian doctrine ran foul of each other at the Colloquy of Marburg in 1529. After two days of discussion, the two Reformers parted company without reaching an agreement, without even extending the hand of fellowship or receiving the sacrament together. The growing reform movement was divided on the question of the mode of the presence of Christ in the Supper.

Calvin himself said much later, in his *Second Defence of the Holy and*

*True Faith in the Matter of the Sacraments, against the Calumnies of Joachim Westphal* (1556), that this division at Marburg had acted on him as a curb in his first steps towards the gospel. "For, beginning gradually to come out of the gloom of the papacy, and having had some taste of sound doctrine, when I read in Luther that Oecolampadius and Zwingli left nothing in the sacraments but bare signs and figures without the truth (without the reality), I confess that this turned me away from their books, so that for a long time I refrained from reading them. But before I began writing, they had conferred together at Marburg and by this means their first vehemence had moderated somewhat. . . . Afterwards I made close acquaintance with the chief supporters of Luther, who defended him most vigorously. What is more, it would not be difficult for me to prove by good witnesses what the judgment of Luther himself was about me, after he had looked into my writings. However, I will be satisfied with taking Philip Melancthon alone as an example of them all" (*Opuscules*, pp. 1503-1504).

Thus Calvin was at the outset much closer to Luther than to Zwingli in his doctrine of the Supper. In 1541, he published at Geneva his *Little Treatise on the Lord's Supper*. In the conclusion of this treatise he enters upon the question of the difference between Luther and Zwingli. He shows how, in the heat of the discussion, first one and then the other had forgotten the essential thing, which was to affirm that, in any case, they both wished to maintain the presence of Christ. This is the assertion to which Calvin returns: "We confess all with one voice that in receiving the sacrament in faith according to the ordinance of the Lord we are truly made partakers of the very substance of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. . . . This takes place by the hidden and miraculous power of God, and the Spirit of God is the bond of this participation, and for this reason it is said to be spiritual" (*Opuscules*, p. 195).

Despite the fact that he still employs the term substance, Calvin insists above all on the participation of the believer in the life of Christ in the Supper. In this he is modern. He has seen that the questions of essence and substance, which had been debated at Marburg, were not the true questions. Every time that theology has been overloaded with these terms, it has entered into inextricable difficulties, as much on sacramental as on christological grounds. Calvin used the word "participation", which demonstrates that there is an action of the Spirit of God, a grace provided by the Spirit, by means of faith. This is a dynamism, a work of God which continues under His control. Modern theology has caused the notion of substance to evaporate, replacing it by the concept of person. The whole tendency of modern physics and, as a result, of philosophy, is to abandon the notions of matter, of substance, of fixed elements, in favour of movement. In this way many of the scholastic theological problems have been set aside, so that in effect Calvin in the sixteenth century pioneered the way for the abandonment of substantialism.

He attempted therefore to restore the unity of the Reformation. Beginning with the followers of Zwingli, he turned to the Church of Zurich. Zwingli had died on the field of battle at Kappel, in 1531, and had been succeeded at the head of the Church by Bullinger. In

1549 Calvin concluded an *Agreement on the Sacraments* with the pastors of Zurich, the text of which is commendable for its fervour toward Christ. Afterwards he hoped to establish a similar compact with the Lutherans. Unfortunately, this agreement of Zurich (*Consensus Tigurinus*) contained in its 24th Article a phrase which was to revive the struggle. When he had condemned Romanist transubstantiation, Calvin continued: "But we do not consider that it is any less an absurdity to shut up Jesus Christ under the bread, or to join Him together with the bread, than to say that the bread is transubstantiated into His body." The words were seized upon by the Lutheran theologians, Joachim Westphal and Telman Heshusius, and this was the starting point of an interminable exchange of tracts, replies, and defences, which widened the breach instead of narrowing it. Calvin was particularly unhappy about this. In 1552, he replied to Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, who had proposed a conference in an endeavour to bring about the unity of the Reformation: "When the members are being torn to pieces, it is the body of the Church which lies bleeding (*membris dissipatis, laceratum jaceat ecclesiae corpus*). As far as I am concerned, if I could be of any use I would not be afraid to cross ten seas if that were necessary" (*Opera Calvini*, Vol. XIV, Letter 1619). After four centuries of separation, Lutheran and Reformed Christians are coming together. Comparisons of their doctrines are making it apparent that the points which led to the separation are no longer of very great importance.<sup>2</sup> The great plan foreseen by the Reformer is perhaps on the way to realization. Here, once more, we can speak of the relevance of Calvin.

<sup>1</sup> Emile-G. Léonard: *La Réforme*, in *Histoire Universelle*, 3. Encyclopédie de la Pléiade, 1958, pp. 58-60.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *La sécularisation du monde moderne et la réponse réformée*. *Revue Réformée*, 1954, 1 and 2.

<sup>3</sup> See the texts in *Foi et Vie*, 1958, No. 6, "Luthériens et réformés."