# JOHN CALVIN
## THE MAN AND HIS ETHICS

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TO THE MEMORY OF JOHN CALVIN A MAN OF GREAT FAULTS AND GREAT VIRTUES

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# PREFACE

It is now almost four centuries since Calvinism was born. John Calvin adopted the Protestant faith sometime between April 1532 and November 1533, and in 1536 he wrote the first edition of his epoch-making treatise, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Today, adherents of Calvinistic churches number in their membership many thousands, and in churches indirectly influenced in form or doctrine by Calvin are many other thousands. Though his theology is in eclipse, it is far from obsolete.

The significance of Calvin's ethics has been neglected in the making of many books upon his theology. Yet even in his own day, the impression made by his moral ideas was probably as great as that made by his doctrine, and it has been more lasting. Through various channels -- mainly French, Dutch, Scotch, and English -Calvinistic morality made its way to American shores, and the morality of the Protestant portion of the western world still bears its stamp. The Puritan conscience is in large measure the Calvinistic conscience, and in spite of tendencies to decry everything "puritanical," the Puritan conscience, or its effective heritage, persists.

To all but a few of those whose religious or moral ideas have been molded by him, Calvin is but a name. The name connotes usually a shadowy figure -- often a sinister figure -- one who believed in predestination and other strange ideas that nobody now accepts. Yet the thin, imperious theologian who taught predestination and ruled Geneva in the quarter century which spanned the middle of the sixteenth century was one of the strongest personalities of all time. Frail in body, gigantic in intellect, and iron-clad in soul, he laid the stamp of his personality on future Calvinists, and others. He was a man of great faults and great virtues; and these faults and virtues were crystallized into a moral code which after four centuries is still effective in our social order.



The influence of Calvinism upon one aspect of modern social ethics, the spirit of capitalism, has been recognized since the publication in 1904-1905 of Max Weber treatise, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*. This essay is of permanent significance and has called forth an extensive controversial literature. However, Weber drew most of his documentary evidence from the writings of the English Puritans of the latter part of the seventeenth century, and the Calvinism of that day was not that of its founder. His essay reveals no first-hand acquaintance with Calvin. Nor have any of Weber's critics, so far as I have been able to discover, made a textual study of Calvin's economic ethics. In fact, I have found no book in English which deals primarily with any phase of Calvin's moral theory. Yet Calvinism cannot be understood apart from Calvin. It is to fill in this hiatus in reference not only to Calvin's economic concepts but his moral philosophy in general that this study has been undertaken.

The first three chapters are biographical, for Calvin's moral ideas were inextricably bound up with his personality. Since the Calvinistic conscience was set firmly in a theological framework, it has also seemed necessary to restate the major outlines of Calvinistic doctrine. A summary is given in chapter IV. The two following chapters consider the ethical implications of certain religious convictions arising from the duty of glorifying God. The

remainder of the book deals with problems of social ethics in the family, the economic order, and the state.

The purpose of the book is to examine as thoroughly as possible Calvin's moral ideas and their application. To do this, I have combed the fifty-nine volumes of the *Calvini Opera*, and have attempted, as far as the compass of the book would permit, to make available in English the most pertinent source material from Calvin's writings. While the *Institutes* deal mainly with theological rather than ethical questions, Calvin's sermons, commentaries, and letters abound in ethical material in Latin and French which has hitherto been largely overlooked. Though the limits of space have necessitated much sifting, I have either paraphrased or quoted



in translation the passages which are most characteristic of Calvin's point of view and which bear most directly on present day conditions.

I have also tried in some measure to show how Calvin's influence spread and what practical effects it had. In particular, I have suggested at intervals its connection with Puritan ethics, and through Puritanism its effect on present day morality. However, to trace adequately the processes by which Calvin's Calvinism grew into that of his followers in various countries through even one century, to say nothing of its transformations down to the present, would be a task requiring the writing of many volumes. If the book gives a faithful account of the original Puritan conscience as found in Calvin himself, it will have fulfilled its purpose.

The research necessary for the writing of the book was made possible through the generosity of the Sterling Foundation of Yale University. To the scholarly mind and friendly counsel of Professor Roland H. Bainton of the Department of Church History of the Yale Divinity School, I am much indebted for assistance both in directing the research and criticizing the manuscript. To Professor Reinhold Niebuhr of Union Theological Seminary and Professor George C. Cell of Boston University I owe my initial interest in the subject. My thanks are due also to other friends -to Professor Amy M. Gilbert and Professor Harry C. York of Elmira College for their critical judgment on some chapters, to Rev. Emmett W. Gould for helpful suggestions as to form and style, and to Miss Catherine Akerman for efficient clerical assistance.

Citations from the *Institutes* follow in general Allen's translation and those from the commentaries the rendering of the Calvin Translation Society. For other translations the author is responsible.

The illustrations were obtained from the *Soci?t? Anonyme Atar* of Geneva, and are reprinted by permission from a brochure upon Calvin compiled by the *Compagnie des Pasteurs* of that city.

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# CHAPTER IV
## THE THEOLOGY OF THE CALVINISTIC CONSCIENCE
## 1. MORALITY AS LEX DEI

Calvin did not have an ethical system in a philosophical sense. To the "frigid" theories of the philosophers he gave short shrift.[1] Like Jesus, he was concerned, not with ethical theory, but with the practical question of how to live in obedience to the will of God. Unlike Jesus, he conceived the will of God in terms of Biblical literalism and set up a legalistic moral code. Calvin had an ethic -a powerful, dominant, driving ethic -- and it rested on his bed-rock conviction of the absolute and final authority of the Will and Word of God.

Calvin was not an ethical theorist; yet few men of any age have had a more clear-cut set of moral ideas. Seldom did he have the shadow of a doubt as to what was right and what was wrong. Never did he waver in his conviction that it was his duty to impose these moral convictions upon himself, and upon everybody within reach of his tongue or pen. Though it be at the cost of sweat and anguish and even blood, God's righteousness must be upheld. Had he been more of a theorist, Calvin might have been less certain that he knew God's will. But Calvin was a theologian and a jurist. He was sure he knew what God demanded, and he felt himself called to be God's prosecuting attorney in the celestial battle against unrighteousness.

Strong as was Calvin's emphasis on moral obligation, it seems not to have occurred to him that the moral mandates he imposed

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[1] "It [the Gospel] ought to affect the whole man with a hundred times more energy than the frigid exhortations of the philosophers." *Institutes,* III, vi, 4.

References to the *Institutes* will hereafter be indicated without other designation, by giving the number of the book in large Roman, the chapter in small Roman, and the section in Arabic numerals.



on himself and the Genevans needed any justification other than the command of God and the Scriptures. The law of nature was to be obeyed, but only because it coincided with the law of Moses. He had, as we shall see, a good deal of regard for human welfare and spoke many words of sound common sense about the just treatment of one's neighbor, but the idea that the summum bonum could be the enrichment of personality -- either in oneself or another -- was foreign to this thinking. For the hedonistic outlook he had the utmost scorn, and many of his invectives against the Libertines are ablaze with denunciations of the pleasure-seeking attitude. We are not, to be sure, to make ourselves miserable in this life -- it would be insulting God to refuse to use the gifts he offers -- but we are ever to remember that this life is but a pilgrimage to the life beyond where lies our true felicity.[2]

In the Decalogue, Calvin says, are found all God's commands for moral living. The rest of the Levitical injunctions, in fact all the moral precepts of the Bible, are but interpretations of its meaning. Even Christ has added nothing; he has but restored to its pristine purity the moral law which had been glossed over and corrupted by the rabbis.[3] To Christ's teaching nothing

can be added, for he "has spoken in such a manner as to leave nothing to be said by others after him."[4] It is a perverse error to suppose Christ a "second Moses" to supplement the limitations of the Mosaic law.[5] The doctrine put forth by the early fathers and by God's true ministers adds nothing to what is found in the Scriptures. The Reformed doctrine is not new, as some ignorantly claim; it is but a true interpretation of the old doctrine given by God to man for all time in the law of Moses. The law of the ten words is an infallible rule revealing with perfect justice the whole will of God, and all particular laws are compassed within it.[6]

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2 III, ix, 1-4; III, xviii, 3.

3 *Opera*, vii, 81. *Contre les Anabaptistes*.

4 IV, viii, 7.

5 II, viii, 7.

6 Calvin believed that the ceremonial requirements of the Mosaic law had been set aside by the coming of the Gospel, but not its moral injunctions. *Opera*, xxviii, 107. Ser. on Deut. 23:12-17.



A homely example will make clear the way in which Calvin thus subsumed all moral precepts under the Decalogue. He was staunchly opposed to a practice then common in theatrical performances, that of men's putting on women's clothes to take the part of female characters. (Fortunately for Calvin's peace of mind, women did not yet wear male attire.) The Scriptural justification for this scruple he found in Deuteronomy 22:5, "The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment; for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God." He discourses at length upon this evil practice, then remarks that the Lord is not here giving an eleventh commandment, for the whole law is given in the ten. But which of the ten? The answer in Calvin's mind is clear. "When God forbade adultery he not only forbade the act . . . but he forbade as a whole all immodest actions, both in dress and conversation."[7] To dress up like a woman is to break the seventh commandment!

The sum of all morality, then, is to obey the Ten Commandments, and thus to obey God. Yet before the Ten Commandments can be obeyed they must be interpreted. Calvin saw this; and he had no idea of admitting the right of everybody to interpret the Decalogue at will. As the rest of the Bible was written to show the true meaning of God's law as revealed to Moses, so must later expositions make clear the application of these commands. But how? Calvin had a simple answer. He believed firmly that God had imparted to his elect servant, John Calvin, the wisdom to do this for the Genevan church and for all who sought his counsel. Through Calvin's lips, God spoke.

In Calvin's sermons, commentaries, tracts and letters he has much to say about how a follower of the true doctrine must live if he would obey God's law. From these statements and from the legislation he recommended it is possible to learn Calvin's view of almost every problem of practical morality. Whether or not this

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7 *Opera*, xxviii, 20. Ser. On Deut. 22.5-8.

view be also God's is another question -- but a question Calvin did not see.

## 2. BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

More consistently than any other Reformation leader, Calvin taught that the Bible was the sole authority in matters of faith and conduct. He drew at length upon the pronouncements of the early church fathers -- so far as their views harmonized with his own. He drew upon the Schoolmen more extensively than one who was attacking their church so vigorously and scornfully was willing to admit. But above all else he drew upon the Bible (or upon his interpretation of the Bible) for his system of doctrine and system of morals.

There was nothing new in this. The other Reformation leaders claimed also to rest their doctrine upon an infallible Bible, and the only new element was the intensity and consistency with which Calvin adhered to the principle. Like all the rest, but again with more rigid consistency, he believed implicitly that *his interpretation* of the Bible was the true one. It seems not once to have crossed his mind that Castellio might be right in saying that the Song of Solomon was a Hebrew love-tale falling below the rest of the Bible in divine inspiration, or that Servetus might possibly not be defying Moses and blaspheming the Holy Spirit in questioning the fertility of Palestine. Calvin was not wholly a traditionalist, for in some instances -- for example, in his declaration that the taking of interest was not forbidden by the Scriptures -- he went beyond his times.[8] Nor was he wholly a literalist, for in regard to practices apparently sanctioned by the Bible which Calvin did not approve of -- such as polygamy in the Old Testament and community of goods in the New, he put forth a good deal of ingenious logic to show that the Bible did not really mean what it seemed to say.[9] But he was a thorough-going Fundamentalist. The writers of Scripture seemed to Calvin the "sure and authentic amanuenses of the Holy Spirit."[10]

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10 IV, viii, 9.

8 *Opera*, xa, 245-249.

9 *Ibid.*, xb, 258 f.



Calvin was not oblivious to the problem raised by conflicting interpretations of the all-authoritative Word. In his judgment the Church -- if one means the Roman Catholic Church -- has no rightful authority to interpret Scripture. Many of his sharpest thrusts are against the misinterpretations, and what he often terms the gross ignorance, of the Papists.

However, if "the Church" means the Reformed Church, that is another matter. Calvin's own attitude toward ecclesiastical authority is semi-Catholic.[11] A true church of God, he says, is one in which "the Word is purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ.[12] There was no doubt in his mind that the Genevan church was a true church, pure in doctrine and sacraments, and that the Roman churches were impure in both. The Church, if it be a true church, is thus for Calvin "the mother of all those who have God for their Father,"[13] and is the custodian both of salvation and of sound doctrine.

But who, within the Church, is to decide what constitutes sound doctrine? The ministers are to interpret the Word, and to them is given the power of the keys in matters of doctrine and sacrament.[14] Yet the ministers are merely instruments in God's hands. The Scriptures show

everywhere, Calvin says, that prophets, priests and ministers are called to speak in the name of the Lord, and not of themselves.[15] In the last analysis, the Bible is not to be interpreted according to the authority of church or minister or any other human agent, but of God alone. It is his Holy Spirit which gives the power to read the Scriptures aright.

Calvin seems here to be on the verge of substituting the authority of inner experience for that of external pronouncement. Had he

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11 "For the Roman imperialism Calvin simply substitutes a Scriptural imperialism. The Biblical church is the ultimate and final authority over the really regenerate man. . . . This is simply Roman Catholicism without the name Roman." T. C. Hall, *History of Ethics Within Organized Christianity* (Scribners, 1910), pp. 519, 520.

12 IV, i, 9.

13 IV, i, 1.

14 IV, i, 22.

15 IV, viii, 2.



gone on to make this substitution, Calvinism would have had a very different history. But he stopped just short of it. True, the Holy Spirit gives the power to read the Scriptures aright. But this inner witness of the Spirit by no means gives authority to pick and choose at will! "Our Lord," says Calvin, "cannot permit such an injury to his Word that one should emulate the wiles of Satan and say, 'Go to, now, I will choose what seems good to me.' He will not let a man make himself judge and sit above God's truth which the angels adore in all reverence."[16] On the contrary, "those who are inwardly taught by the Holy Spirit acquiesce implicitly in Scripture."[17] And only the elect are thus inwardly taught.

Calvin thus rested his whole system on the conviction that the Scriptures are verbally inspired, and that when read aright by the elect they have an absolute and unique authority. As for who are the elect, that lies with God. Calvin never doubted that he himself was one. And he believed with equal assurance that if anyone disagreed with his reading of the Scripture, that person was being led astray either by the devil or by the perversity of his own nature.

It is to misjudge Calvin to see mere egotism or obstinacy in this tacit assumption of his own infallibility as the mouthpiece of Jehovah. He sincerely believed himself to be the humble instrument of God, speaking with no human wisdom but only with the light which came to him from on high. He was, as we have seen, singularly free from personal conceit. But he was very certain that the Holy Spirit had given him grace to see in the Scriptures the truth of God. When he said that one must acquiesce implicitly in Scripture, what he meant was that one must acquiesce implicitly in Scripture with John Calvin's interpretation on all disputed passages. He was not the first to make such an assumption regarding one's own powers. Nor was he to be the last.

His opponents could see presumption in this almost na?ve self-

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16 *Opera*, xxvii, 233. Ser. on Deut. 13: 1-3.

17 I, vii, 5.

assurance. Castellio remarked that Calvin talked as if he had been in Paradise,[18] and spoke of him sharply as "this Jew who reads Moses with a veiled face."[19] But Calvin saw no presumption in such certainty. Few of the Genevans saw any. It will be recalled that in 1552 at the close of the Trolliet controversy, even during a Libertine r?gime, the Council voted that the *Institutes* contain "the holy doctrine of God," and forbade anyone to speak against that book or that doctrine.[20] It was assumed without question by Calvin and his people that God had granted to him through the Holy Spirit the wisdom to read the Word of God aright. To doubt this was presumption.

## 3. THEOLOGICAL DOCTRINES

We must look now at the doctrines that Calvin believed to be so firmly grounded upon the Scriptures. The ideas which not only dominated his theology but most directly affected his ethics were the absolute sovereignty of God, man's helplessness and total depravity, and the doctrines of predestination and election.

Calvin's conception of the sovereignty of God is essentially Augustinian, though with more consistency than Augustine's warmly human, mystical nature would permit. God is the triune and just Creator, the all-powerful Governor, by whose sovereign will all things are determined. Man may seem to labor for his daily bread, yet it is God who nourishes him. Man may seem to earn rewards by his good works or bring upon himself the deserved penalty for his sins, but it is God who metes out rewards and penalties with a just, though often inscrutable, wisdom. No impersonal mechanism, or arbitrary decree of "fate," settles human destinies; the world of men and things is completely under the direction of an all-just, all-powerful, all-wise God.[21]

With Duns Scotus, Calvin held that the will of God is wholly unconditioned. God does not act as he does because it is good

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18 *Contra Libellum Calvini*, p. 19. Calvinus 4.
19 *Ibid.*, p. 129. Cal. 122.
20 *Supra*, p. 39. *Registres du Conseil*, Nov. 9, 1552. *Opera*, xxi, 525.
21 Walker, p. 409 f., summarizes admirably the implications of this doctrine.



to do so; but because he so acts, the act is good. Therefore it is foolish, as it is impious, to ask a reason for God's action. He acts because he wills to act, and that for the trusting believer is reason enough. Calvin puts the doctrine unequivocally:

The will of God is the supreme rule of righteousness, so that everything which He wills must be held to be righteous by the mere fact of His willing it. Therefore, when it is asked why the Lord did so, we must answer, Because He pleased. But if you proceed further to ask why He pleased, you ask for something greater and more sublime than the will of God, and nothing such can be found.[22]

Had Calvin been more of a metaphysician, he could not have been satisfied to pass by so easily the nest of difficulties which beset the philosopher on such a basis. But Calvin was not a metaphysician; he was a theologian. To him it seemed fitting that men should "lower their eyes"[23] and withhold all idle, sacrilegious speculation as to the why of things. God disposes as he wills -and that is enough.

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In a system with these premises, it is obvious that man is bound to have a minor place. Man's utter helplessness is the correlate of God's absolute sovereignty. In fact, man is worse than helpless; for he is under the curse of Adam's sin. Neither righteousness nor reward can come to him through his own power or merit.

Adam, to Calvin, was a very real person. Had an evolutionist arisen then to cast doubts upon Adam's existence, Calvin would have thrust him out as the messenger of Satan, and would, no doubt, have burned him at the stake. Fortunately Darwin did not appear till the world was more nearly ready for his message. Calvin had no doubt whatever that all man's woes are the result of the original act of disobedience in the garden. Marriage, for instance, before the fall was a pure and stainless institution; after Adam

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[22] III, xxiii, 2.

[23] *Baisser les yeux*. One is tempted to translate this "close their eyes" -- to obvious facts. But this would be to misread Calvin. The ugly facts of life were real enough to him, but he believed that they were to be humbly and patiently accepted as the dispensations of an all-wise God.



sinned it became a necessary remedy for incontinence.[24] Before the fall, man was made in the image of God; by Adam's sin he became defiled with drunkenness, avarice, and all manner of evil desires. In all the events of life, even in such apparently commonplace matters as putting on and taking off our clothes, we are enjoined to remember our father Adam's sin, and be warned.[25] The familiar couplet of the New England Primer,

In Adam's fall,
We sinned all,

had not yet been formulated. But Calvin implicitly believed this, and used a great many more than six words in saying so.

Calvin accepted the Pauline conception of the solidarity of the race, leaning heavily upon Romans for his doctrine of man's fall through Adam and redemption through Christ. With Augustine, he believed that man not only had been originally created in a state of goodness but endowed with free will. Adam's sin has tainted the whole human race and robbed man both of his goodness and his freedom. In this state man suffers from "an hereditary corruption and depravity of our nature" and is totally helpless to lift himself from his fallen state. "The soul, when plunged into that deadly abyss, not only labors under vice, but is altogether devoid of good."[26] God, to be sure, has given man the law as his guide. But man is unable to perform saving works by which to redeem his soul from bondage, and the law serves but to convince him still further of his hopeless state.

In this condition of deserved and helpless condemnation, God in his mercy sends the eternal Son to enter into sinful flesh and suffer in man's stead. Through his three-fold office of prophet, priest and king, Christ's atoning work is wrought. As prophet he reveals God. As priest he makes atonement by his obedient life and death for the sins of men, and appeases the Father's wrath.

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[24] *Opera*, xlix, 401 f. Comm. on I Cor. 7:1, 2.
[25] *Ibid.*, xxviii, 20. Ser. on Deut. 22: 5-8.
[26] II, iii, 2.



As king he becomes the head of the church of the elect whom he has thus redeemed.

The person and work of Christ occupies no small place in Calvin's thought. Through Christ we find salvation; in Christ we find an example of perfect holiness. Yet Calvin's system of doctrine is more Hebraic than Christian. It rests more upon the Old Testament than the New. His writings lack the note of warm, personal fellowship with Christ, and in his moral injunctions the Decalogue looms above the Sermon on the Mount. The place of Christ in Calvin's scheme of things is theological rather than personal and ethical.

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It is through the Holy Spirit that Christ's atoning work is made available to man. But not to everybody. Only God's elect can find salvation. Calvin follows Luther in rejecting the possibility of finding salvation through good works or sacraments or priestly absolution, and accepts the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith. Calvin maintains that this act of faith is not a free act on man's part; it is rather the free gift of God to those to whom he elects to give it. The divine self-sacrifice of God in Christ, prompted by God's love for an undeserving and sinful race, is efficacious only for those whom the Holy Spirit incites to faith. Such faith leads to repentance, and with repentance comes justification, i.e., the imputation of Christ's merit to the penitent. A new life of righteousness then begins, and this leads on to sanctification, a process of spiritual growth which is bound to continue in God's elect because they are God's elect, though complete perfection in this life is unattainable.

Here we come upon the significance of two characteristic Calvinist doctrines which had more meaning in an earlier day than in ours, irresistible grace and the perseverance of the saints. God chooses whom he will for salvation, and man is as powerless to resist as to initiate this action of divine grace. And being once chosen, the elect are predetermined to persevere in the path of holiness. These doctrines, so comforting to the elect, so discourag-



ing to those outside the fold who might like to be of the elect, fall strangely on modern ears. But they are a clear-cut conclusion from the rest of Calvin's system. If God is the all-powerful Governor and man is totally helpless and unworthy, it follows that God must do all the choosing of whom to save. And having once chosen, he cannot be expected to change his mind and let his elect backslide.

If Calvin's premises be granted, the doctrines of predestination and election thus become sun-clear. If God is all-powerful, he determines every act. If he is all-wise, he foreknows and predetermines every detail of human destiny. To say that some achieve salvation through their own initiative is to place limits on the divine sovereignty, and such an inconsistency Calvin rejects with inexorable logic. The empirical facts are that some appear to be saved and some to be damned; the only explanation consistent with the absolute sovereignty of God is to say that God elects some for salvation and others for eternal punishment.

Predestination was no new doctrine. Augustine and Luther had maintained it. But both had shrunk from carrying it to its ultimate conclusions. Augustine had said, as Calvin now did, that salvation comes only through the free mercy of God and that God elects some to be saved. But Augustine was not quite equal to drawing the stern conclusion that God elects others to be damned. So he side-stepped the issue by saying that God leaves some to their own devices, and merely *permits* some to be lost without decreeing that they *must* be. Luther's position was essentially Augustinian. While he was willing enough to say that the faith by which man may be justified is a divine gift, he had too high a regard for the love of God to say flat-footedly that God voluntarily chooses to withhold this gift from some. Zwingli emphasized much more clearly than Luther the universal causality of the will of God, and came close to Calvin's position. But not until Calvin do we find a theologian who carried the premises to their drastic consequences.

Calvin believed, to be sure, in a God of love and mercy who is willing to extend his grace to sinful men and thus bridge the



impassable gulf which man has fixed for himself. But he believed still more in a God of power and justice, and in a divine sovereignty which must be upheld whatever the cost. With Luther the concept of love is the center of his idea of God; with Calvin, that of majesty.[27] And because of the transcendent majesty of God, if God chooses to leave some men in their sins and allow them to suffer the deserved penalty for their guilt, it is not for human minds to question or complain. Still less is it permitted to charge God with injustice. The sun is not evil if its light, falling on putrid flesh, causes foul odors to arise.

Calvin's premises are from his theology, his conclusions from the logical precision of his mind and the stern inflexibility of his temperament. Had Calvin been a warm-hearted but inconsistent mystic like Augustine or Luther, the course of Calvinism, and of history, might have followed a different channel.

## 4. PREDESTINATION VERSUS FREE WILL

Calvin's critics have frequently pointed out an irreconcilable conflict between his doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty and man's responsibility. The author believes this criticism to be just. Man must be free in order to be responsible. If one cannot justly be blamed for what one cannot help, the predestination doctrine leaves little ground for blame. Yet Calvinism calls men to account for their sins more sharply than does any other form of theological belief. There is a conflict here which Calvin did not reconcile.

But Calvin fully believed that he had solved the conflict; and to understand Calvin, one must see the question through his eyes. His doctrine of Adam's sin is the crux of the matter.

Everybody is guilty of sin because of Adam's fall, while the power to escape sin comes only as the free gift of God. Man's power to do wrong is part of his hereditary corruption: his power to do right is the gift of God to the undeserving. For example, the tendency to unchastity which leads man to flagrant offenses against the moral

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[27] Cf. *Troeltsch, Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* ( T?bingen, 1912), p. 616.





law is his own fault; the gift of continence, bestowed upon a few, is a special endowment of God.[28] Man must blame himself for his sin; he must thank God if he is able to escape sin.

Calvin is very vigorous in his denunciation of the idea that God is responsible for human sin. He is at his best when he can refute this idea in the thought of another. He speaks with utter scorn of the scholastic doctrine:

That invention which the Schoolmen have introduced, about the absolute power of God, is shocking blasphemy. It is all one as if they said that God is a tyrant who resolves to do what he pleases, not by justice, but through caprice. Their schools are full of such blasphemies, and are not unlike the heathen, who said that God sports with human affairs.[29]

He is still more vehement in an attack upon the Spiritual Libertines, who, according to Calvin, were pantheists who denied to man any free will. It is interesting to find this arch-opponent of free will rising up to smite the doctrine of a sect which questioned man's freedom and moral responsibility.

After having forged a single spirit, destroying the nature of the angels in heaven and the devils in hell, and likewise human souls, they say that it is this one spirit which does everything. Not meaning what the Scripture does, when it speaks of God, that all creatures live and move in Him, are subject to His providence and serve His will: but that everything which happens in the world is to be directly regarded as His work. In so doing they attribute to man no free will, any more than if he were a stone; and they remove all distinction between good and evil so that nothing can be done wrongly, in their opinion, since God is the author of it.[30]

Calvin then illustrates by an incident which one suspects of being apocryphal, since the records contain no reference to an event which would almost surely have created a public uproar, had it occurred. A Libertine leader, Quintin ( Calvin calls him "that

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[28] *Infra*, p. 133.

[29] *Opera*, xxxvi, 391. Comm. on Isaiah 23: 9.

[30] *Ibid.*, vii, 183.*Contre la Secte des Libertins*. Ensuing quotations are from the same passage.

great hog Quintin" -- nothing else is known of him), is said to have encountered one of the faithful on the street at the scene where a man had been killed. The following conversation is reported:

"Alas, who committed this terrible act?"

Forthwith he [ Quintin] replied in his Picardy dialect, "Since you want to know, I did it."

The other, much astonished, said to him, "How could you be such a villain?"

To which he replied, "It isn't me; it's God."

"What?" said the other, "are crimes to be imputed to God which He commands to be punished?"

Then the rotten thing disgorged some more venom and said, "Yes, it's you; it's me; it's God. For what you or I do, God does; and what God does, we do, since He is in us."

This point being granted, Calvin says, it is necessary either to impute sin to God, or to declare that there is no sin in the world, since God commits none. "Thus," he argues, "all distinction between good and evil disappears. Then it follows that nothing can be blamed as bad, since everything is the work of God. Men with free rein can do whatever comes in their way, for they will be in no danger of sinning, and to restrain some desire would be to restrain God." He applies this in particular to the ethics of domestic relations:

Example: Some one has committed adultery? One cannot chide him for it; for that would be to blaspheme God. A man covets his neighbor's wife? Let him enjoy her if he can; for he would only be doing the will of God, and even that would be a divine act. Whoever can seize his neighbor's goods, whether by subtle means or violence, let him do so boldly. For he will do nothing which God does not approve.

After further discussion and more examples, Calvin sums up what he regards as the dire and blasphemous consequences of the Libertine view that man has no free will:

Three dreadful consequences follow. The first is that there would be no difference between God and the devil -- indeed, the god they forge



for us is an idol worse than a devil in hell.[31] The second is, that men would no longer have any conscience to avoid evil, but like brutes would follow their sensual appetites without discretion. The third is, that everything would have to be adjudged good -- whether adultery, murder or theft -- and all the worst crimes imaginable would be regarded as praiseworthy acts.

Seldom have the logical consequences of the destruction of man's moral freedom received keener analysis! Calvin could see clearly what it meant, when he was talking about the Schoolmen or the Libertines, to rest everything in the absolute power of God. But to few of us is it given to see ourselves as we see others. This gift was not granted to Calvin.

## 5. MORAL CONSEQUENCES

The leaders of the Reformation did not deliberately set out to enact changes in ethical concepts. What they were interested in primarily was the establishment of sound doctrine. If any alteration in ethical outlook came as a consequence of a new religious emphasis, it was an indirect and unforeseen, sometimes unwished for, development. Consequently it is not surprising to find them, for the most part, adopting the accepted moral standards of the day and urging people to righteousness on the basis of the traditional religious concepts. There is, of course, sharp differentiation in matters relating to duties which pertain to religious observances. A binding moral obligation to attend Mass becomes, in Protestant hands, a sin to be censured and publicly punished. The movement from a celibate priesthood to a married clergy effected certain changes in the ethics of the family. The rise of the Anabaptists, with their scruples against war and leanings toward a socialistic state, created the furor which always comes when any innovation in moral practice is suggested. Yet there cannot be said to have arisen with the Reformation a distinctive Protestant ethic in the sense in which there arose a distinctive Protestant doctrine. Differ-

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[31] One is reminded here of Castellio's remark that Calvin's Christ had left nothing for the devil.



ences in religious outlook and theory, with differences in the social milieu, eventually brought about a differentiation on some points; but such changes came slowly, and were the result of cultural influences among which religion was not the only factor.

Calvin's theology had an effect upon his ethics, and upon the ethics of his followers. The Puritan conscience has had no little influence in shaping the moral standards of the American commonwealth, and the Puritan conscience owes much to Calvin. But it would be a mistake to suppose that Calvin's theology had all the effects that might be expected on the basis of theoretical considerations alone. People have always lived by habit and emotional drives far more than by intellectual concepts.

An excellent example of this appears in the doctrine of predestination. The most obvious logical outcome of a doctrine which makes man the helpless recipient of God's grace or condemnation would be moral inactivity. It is easy to point out theoretically that if man has no power to shape his destinies or save himself from his sins, there is no need of his trying to do anything about it. For Calvin no such justification of moral idleness ensued. No man of his day had a keener sense of the imperative obligation to strain every nerve to banish sin. Nor did the doctrine lead to moral lethargy in many of his disciples, either contemporary or subsequent. Few people of any age have worked harder to chase the devil into hiding than have the Calvinists.

Various practical effects, however, did ensue from the predestination doctrine in conjunction with the idea of the absolute sovereignty of God. One of these is the enhancement of the sense of moral obligation just referred to. The supreme virtue, Calvin says, is holiness. This means that above all else, God's honor must be exalted and God's will obeyed. To break in any least detail one of God's commandments is to offend God. To defraud one's neighbor of his rightful due is to offend God. To give rein to one's natural impulses toward pride or avarice or lewdness is to offend God. Any deviation whatever from the strict path of moral rectitude is a direct affront to the Almighty. And because

he is the Almighty, and in his inscrutable wisdom has elected some for salvation, it is all the more incumbent upon the elect to pursue the path in which he has set them by his grace.

Out of the doctrine of election grows another moral incentive. Nobody can say with absolute certainty of another whether or not he is of the elect, for the invisible church of the elect does not coincide with the visible church. Yet one may be assured of his own election by an inner witness, and what is more, one may reveal it by the quality of his works. Good works can never save a man -- Calvin never tires of making clear man's helplessness -- but good works may be a sign that God has saved him.[32] Naturally, one who feels himself thus chosen wants to give external evidence of it. To disobey the laws of God and continue in sin would be the clearest possible evidence that God's saving grace had passed him by. Thus it came about that the Calvinist labored with untiring zeal to "make his calling and election sure."

Nor was this a matter of mere display. The Calvinist doubtless had a natural, and quite pardonable, desire to reveal his election to his neighbors. But the election doctrine had an inner incentive which appears most clearly in contrast with the Lutheran conception. Luther made the witness of the spirit the chief criterion by which to distinguish the saved from the unsaved; Calvin accepted this but added an emphasis on righteousness and moral activity as the evidence of salvation which does not appear in Lutheranism. Luther was a mystic; Calvin a man of action. Luther looked upon the saved man primarily as the vessel or receptacle of the Holy Spirit; Calvin regarded him as the instrument or tool by which God's will is wrought.[33] Luther could say, "Tears go before works and suffering surpasses doing." Not so Calvin. Man as the tool of God, the executor of his ordinances, must be forever active. Faith must be an effectual faith revealing

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[32] *Infra*, p. 183.

[33] Max Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*, in *Gesammelte Aufs?tze zur Religionssoziologie*, pp. 108, 125. Weber makes a good deal of the economic influence of this conception of good works as the sign of salvation. I think Weber overstrains the point, for when Calvin talks of one's vocation he means usually one's divine "calling," not his secular occupation.



itself in outward deeds. This doctrine will receive further analysis when we study Calvin's economic influence.[34]

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But Calvinism was not devoid of mysticism, and its mystical note had also its moral effects. One profound emotional effect the predestination doctrine had which it is difficult to regain in the present day. This is summed up in the familiar Puritan phrase, "to be willing to be damned for the glory of God." To ridicule this phrase is to miss the spirit of Calvinism.

To the Calvinists of three centuries ago it connoted a very real and transcendent religious experience. It meant an affirmation of God's supremacy in the cosmos, and a bowing of man in utter humility before the moral demands of an all-wise Providence. It meant a deep-

reaching conviction that ultimately all things are in God's hands, and that however feeble man's efforts, the allpowerful Governor can be trusted to order human destinies aright. In short, it meant such a selfless devotion to the glory of God that the fate of any individual seemed insignificant if only this Transcendent Majesty be exalted.

We have traveled so far from such a mystical experience that it is hard to make the glory of God as meaningful today as it was to the Calvinists. Perhaps our nearest analogy is in the experience that comes occasionally when one finds himself small and helpless before the forces of nature, and sees in the power of the tempest or the majestic fury of the sea the hand of an all-ordering God. In an emotional crisis the religious spirit feels, sometimes, that it matters little what happens to me, or to my petty affairs, provided the will and work of God be done. This is akin to what the Calvinist meant when he said he was willing to be damned for God's glory.

Such a view could not fail to have moral consequences. It gives the key to something else often ridiculed, Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon on "Sinners in the hands of an angry God." Sinners would not be in God's hands at all unless God were the

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[34] *Infra,* Chs. IX-X



supreme determiner of human destinies. And sinners would not be in the hands of an angry God unless God hated sin. A God supremely righteous demands righteousness in his servants. A God supremely just and supremely powerful will not tolerate sin. Sinners must turn from their evil ways, or suffer the deserved penalty for their sins at the hands of a God of moral justice. This is strong doctrine, but an age of cock-sureness and self-esteem might learn something from it!

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The Calvinist's obligation to glorify God gave a potent, yet restricted, incentive to social morality. Man was enjoined to serve his neighbor. Yet if ever there came a clash between service of God and service of neighbor, it was inevitable that service of God would be put first. Likewise, it was inevitable that any effort at righteousness apart from religion would be looked upon with distrust. Calvin is very clear in his conviction that mere righteousness avails nothing if God's glory be not honored:

For what kind of righteousness will you pretend to, because you refrain from harassing men by acts of theft and rapine, if at the same time you atrociously and sacrilegiously defraud the majesty of God of the glory which is due Him? because you do not pollute your body with fornication, if you blasphemously profane the sacred name of God? because you murder no man, if you strive to destroy and extinguish all memory of God? It is in vain therefore to boast of righteousness without religion. . . . We therefore call the worship of God the principle and foundation of righteousness because if that be wanting, whatever equity, continence and temperance men may practice among themselves, it is all vain and frivolous in the sight of God.[35]

Such a doctrine was destined to have a salutary, and at the same time a fatal, consequence. On the one hand it established the moral discipline of Geneva firmly on a religious basis. It went far toward the shaping of the Puritan conscience, for without the powerful drive of religious duty, it is doubtful whether either Calvin or the Puritans could have brought human instincts so fully under

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[35] II, viii, 11.



control. The Calvinist's exaltation of God laid the foundations of the American commonwealth upon the solid sub-base of religion. On the other hand, it implicitly cast reflections upon any morality not religiously engendered, and thus was bound to breed a spirit of supercilious intolerance toward those outside the fold. It tended to exalt the worship of God above the requirements of simple human justice; and has been in no small degree responsible for the feeling that religion concerns itself with matters of personal piety, while "business is business" and not to be mixed up in any embarrassing way with religious scruples.

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A similar effect grew out of Calvin's characteristic emphasis upon sound doctrine. Doctrinal requirements were exalted above moral requirements.[36] To be more exact, the morality of enforcing sound doctrine was placed above the morality of loving one's neighbor. Calvin insisted that doctrine must be of the life and not of the lips only.[37] But for one's doctrine to be of the life, one must, from Calvin's point of view, be willing to strain every nerve to make this doctrine prevail. The actual effect in a case of clash between sound doctrine and sound morals appears clearly in the Castellio controversy. Calvin was not at all impressed, apparently, by the fact that Castellio had been willing to risk his life to minister to those dying in the pest-house when all the regular clergy refused to go. Castellio might be a sincere, high-minded, self-sacrificing citizen -- but when he proved unorthodox on the Song of Solomon and a phrase of the Apostle's Creed, that was enough in Calvin's eyes to debar him forever from the Christian ministry.[38]

When Calvin placed doctrinal above moral requirements, it was with no thought of decrying sacrificial living. His whole dis-

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[36] Beza sets forth clearly the view that doctrine is more important than life in his reply to Castellio *De H?reticis*.

[37] III, vi, 4.

[38] The certificate of dismissal which the Genevan ministers gave Castellio when he left to go to Basel makes the issue very clear. "In that office (the headship of the school) he so bore himself that we judged him worthy of the sacred ministry. That he was not admitted was not on account of any faults of life, nor any impious dogma regarding the chief points of our faith, but this one reason prevented which we have set forth." Herminjard, ix, 159.

ciplinary system was calculated to exalt and enforce righteousness; and though it was righteousness of an inflexible sort, it was tempered with a recognition of the duty of love and charity toward one's neighbor. He even recommended a measure of Christian liberty in things unessential (the *adiaphora*).[39] But he was very careful to say that neither charity nor liberty should carry one into the engulfing waters of heresy! With a frankness that leaves no room for doubt, he ranks liberty, charity and purity of faith in an ascending scale: "As our liberty should be subject to charity, so charity itself ought to be subservient to the purity of faith. It becomes us, indeed, to have regard to charity; but we must not offend God for the love of our neighbor."[40]

In this exaltation of purity of doctrine, Calvin was entirely sincere and entirely consistent. If it is man's supreme task to glorify God, and if God has given a clear and indisputable revelation of the truth in the Holy Scriptures, and if God sends his Spirit to enlighten the elect to read the Scriptures aright and acquiesce implicitly, and finally, if Calvin himself is of the enlightened and elect, then no alternative is left save to regard the doctrine of the *Institutes* as absolute truth and the supreme moral criterion.

So Calvin punished heretics. And Calvinists after him punished heretics. It has often been remarked that the New England Puritans were inconsistent in displaying intolerance toward those of other religious convictions when they themselves had fled from Europe as victims of religious persecution. But there was not the least inconsistency about it. It was ingrained in their theology to repudiate the idea that religion could be a matter of private interpretation; it was ingrained in their moral code that it was the duty of the elect to enforce purity of faith in the community by any disciplinary measures that might prove necessary. If men

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[39] Both Luther and Calvin have this doctrine of the *adiaphora*, but there are many more *adiaphora* in Luther's system than in Calvin's. Cf. Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress*, p. 82.

[40] III, xix, 13. Calvin is not unmindful that Paul ranked charity above faith. But he explains this by saying that what Paul meant was merely that charity is serviceable to more people, since only the few can be justified by faith. Cf. *Opera*, i, 798.



suffered in the process, that was regrettable -- but charity must be subservient to purity of faith. "We must not offend God for the love of our neighbor."

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This exaltation of purity of faith above human sympathy suggests a further consequence of Calvinistic doctrine. The idea of God's towering greatness carried with it as a corollary the concept of man's littleness. Out of this came two tendencies almost diametrically opposed, yet both inherently Calvinistic. One is the obvious tendency to depose man. If the whole scheme of things exists not for man's benefit but for God's glory, it follows that the way any individual treats himself or his neighbor will be of minor consequence in comparison with the way he honors God. If the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever, the first of Christ's two great commandments will overshadow the second, and the Decalogue the Sermon on the Mount. It is not by accident that so large a part of the doctrine and practice of Calvinism is built upon the Old Testament, for the exaltation of human personality which

permeates the message of Jesus is foreign to its spirit. Calvin draws upon Paul for his conception of the atonement, but even this accentuates still further the gulf between man and God. A sovereign God does everything; undeserving man does nothing. A familiar Calvinistic hymn puts this characteristically:

Alas! and did my Saviour bleed,
And did my Sov'reign die,
Would He devote that sacred head
For such a worm as I?

It is not so bad to consider oneself a "worm"; there is a good deal of chastening and wholesome humility about such a concept. The energy now expended by theologians in trying to save God was unnecessary in a day when it was believed implicitly that God saved men. But however wholesome the awareness of one's own impotence, it has disastrous consequences when extended too



literally to other "worms." It obscures the value of human personality, and the central teaching of Jesus sinks into the background. Exactly this thing happened in Calvinism, and herein lies an explanation of the severity and unfeeling piety of the Puritan temper.

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Yet with this tendency to think lightly of man went another strain, less obvious on the surface, which was eventually to result in the exaltation of the individual man. On it the foundations of the Puritan spirit of political independence and economic individualism were laid.

Calvin, we have seen, rejected any sacramental or priestly medium of salvation. Each individual must travel his own way alone, save only as God sees fit to vouchsafe his mercy and grant salvation.[41] And God is no respecter of persons. Good works will not avail to purchase salvation for any -- nor will money, or rank, or prestige, or power. Far from securing salvation through any such shallow channel as the purchase of indulgences or the saying of Masses, man is powerless before the will of an all-ordering deity. Even his money is a gift of God acquired through no merit of his. "Whatever a man possesses has fallen to his lot not by a fortuitous contingency, but by the distribution of the supreme Lord of all."[42] Position also is God's gift, not man's achievement. It behooves princes and lords, like common folk, to humble themselves before God. In the eyes of God, no external trappings will avail.

So the Calvinistic doctrine became a great leveller. We have noticed that Calvin refused to let Fran?ois Favre and his rich and self-esteeming, but reprobate, family escape the penalty meted out for their offenses by the city of Geneva. This is wholly in keeping with his spirit and doctrine. Calvin and the Calvinists hated sham and self-glorification, for they believed profoundly that God's favor was not to be bought by any of the things which men call greatness. Calvin was not ready to say that all men are created free and equal; but he believed that all men are created equally un-

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41 Weber, p. 94.
42 II, viii, 45.

free, and out of this principle came reinforcement for the spirit of liberty.

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In similar fashion, the autocracy of the Genevan state tended to suppress individual initiative, yet Calvin's system had in it the seeds of democratic action. Calvin believed firmly that citizens must obey without question the duly constituted authorities, for these authorities get their power from God. Magistrates rule as God's lieutenants. It says plainly in God's Holy Writ, "Be ye subject unto the higher powers." These higher powers, both civil and ecclesiastical -- in Council and Consistory -- by exercise of their authority in Geneva produced a regimentation of private life which has seldom been surpassed in stringency.

Yet Calvinism gave rise also to the spirit of independence, and fomented revolutions. We shall trace in a later chapter the historical processes by which it became, in theory and practice, the spiritual undergirding of resistance to tyranny. Suffice it to say at this point that Calvin believed not only that subjects must obey the higher powers, but that all men, rulers as common people, must obey the Higher Power from whom all human authority derives. Magistrates who disobey God thereby forfeit their right to govern; and lower magistrates by processes of constitutional resistance must depose the higher. It was not a long step, among Calvin's followers, to the conclusion that the overthrow of tyranny, if need be by force of arms, is the direct command of God. When the conviction is reached that the common man may defend his God-given rights against a godless ruler, the foundations of democracy are laid.

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Calvinistic theology left another legacy which is still a vital issue. The clash between Fundamentalism and Modernism cuts through almost every Protestant denomination, but it appears in fullest vigor in the church which is the most direct lineal descendant of



Calvinism. There is a reason. It would be an over-simplification to say that the controversy which ejected Dr. Fosdick from the First Presbyterian Church of New York City in 1925 can all be traced to the work of Calvin in Geneva almost four centuries ago -- but there is an intimate connection.

Calvin was a Fundamentalist,[43] and present day Fundamentalists who want historical as well as doctrinal and Biblical authority on their side are fully justified in claiming him. One finds Protestant Fundamentalism in its genesis -- clear, direct, consistent -- in the doctrine and practice of John Calvin.

But Calvin was not only a Fundamentalist: he was a keen thinker, a highly educated man, a scholar of towering intellectual capacity. He believed in education, and he set before his followers the requirement of both an educated ministry and an educated laity. He founded a university for the better education of the people and the training of young men for the ministry. He insisted that children be given free, compulsory education. He set the example for the high regard for education which led the Puritans to establish Harvard College in 1636,

almost as soon as their feet had touched New England soil. He was the patron saint of New England Congregationalism, which produced Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards, and a host of other intellectual giants. And New England Congregationalism is now predominantly liberal in its theological outlook.

In Calvin's day, there was no particular difficulty in being both a Biblical authoritarian and at the same time a keen thinker with a trained mind. The spirit of modern science had not yet risen to trouble the waters of religious thought in any general way, and the principles of historical and Biblical criticism were not yet accepted by any except a few erratically independent and much. frowned-upon thinkers like Castellio and Servetus.

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[43] The term is used here in its popular sense. In the sixteenth century the *fundamenta* were a weapon of liberalism, for the fundamentals were made as few as possible by liberal thinkers in order to lessen strife. Castellio and Acontius developed this type of thinking. Cf. Walter K?hler, *"Geistesahnen des Johannes Acontius"* in *Festgabe f?r Karl M?ller* ( T?bingen, 1922), pp. 198ff.



But times were destined to change. Scientific and historical thought was bound to make headway. And as the church moved on into a changing world, the growing organism of religious thought found its living tissues confined by the fetters of a rigid authoritarianism. The fetters were not tight enough, as in the Catholic faith, to force its leaders and laity into conformity. Nor were they pliable enough to make way for a painless growth. Calvin had injected into the church two principles, temporarily but not ultimately compatible, which were destined in the years ahead to come into conflict. An authoritarian theology will not permanently lie down in peace with an educated ministry.

Calvinism is not the only factor which has contributed to the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy. But it is a very potent factor, and its influence has spread into other folds not originally Calvinistic. Its effect appears clearly in a contrast of Presbyterianism with the largest non-Calvinistic Protestant denomination, the Methodist. The Methodist church has pursued its way comparatively untouched by the storms that have rent other denominations, and the difference is due in no slight measure to temperamental differences in the founders. Calvin was a theologian, with a theological system that was exact, precise, authoritarian. Wesley was a practical mystic, with a great evangelistic zeal and a theological attitude of "think and let think." The Presbyterian church has set a high standard of educational requirements for its ministry; the Methodist has stressed religious experience more than education and has opened its pulpit to almost every religiouslyminded man who felt himself called to preach. The result is that the Presbyterian church has an educated ministry and theological controversy; while the Methodist has evangelistic zeal, a relatively less educated ministry and theological peace. Obviously, there are advantages and limitations on both sides!

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The moral effect of the Calvinistic theology was to give rise to a set of paradoxes. Intense practical activity was joined with mystical self-forgetfulness; shrewd concern for success in this life with

absorption in the next; zealous service to neighbor with equally zealous persecution for doctrinal aberrations; man's abasement with his exaltation; autocracy with democracy; conservatism with progress.

These paradoxes root in a fundamental inconsistency -- the attempt to deny, and at the same time to affirm, human freedom. Each one follows consistently from its premises. In its development, each took on the color of the social environment and was molded by human impulse, yet never wholly lost contact with its intellectual foundations. Calvinistic doctrine, plus the logic of events, was predestined to be more fruitful than Calvin could foreknow.



# CHAPTER V
## THE CHIEF END OF MAN

Q. 1. *What is the chief end of man?*

A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

Q. 2. *What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?*

A. The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.

So runs the beginning of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. This statement, formulated a century after Calvin's day, is the manifesto of Scottish and English Puritanism after Calvinism had taken root and grown to power. It reflects the spirit of Calvin so accurately that it might well have come from his own pen.

It is difficult today to reconstruct the state of mind of one who could be a great thinker and Christian leader, and could cause another to be burned at the stake for heresy. In an age which has achieved some measure of tolerance, it is hard to appreciate the value Calvin placed on doctrinal conformity. There is much in the Calvinist's application of the doctrine of the chief end of man that is stern to the point of cruelty. But it is to misread Calvin, and his followers also, to see in it only sternness and cruelty. Calvin and the Calvinists believed that man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever because they had a great God -- a God so far transcending all human creatures that man could best find his own joy and glory in exalting him.

This chapter will deal mainly with certain unlovely outgrowths of the Calvinist's ideal. When one believes with his whole heart that it is the chief end of man to glorify God, and that the Scriptures contain the only rule for the right performance of this chief



duty, and that *his own interpretation* of the Scriptures is the only true interpretation, then that person will not be very tolerant. He will view heresy as poisonous venom, and the heretic as a

snake in the grass. He will punish blasphemy as a direct affront to the Most High. He will look with suspicion on any form of worship that appears to contradict the express command of the Most High, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me; thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image." This is what happened in Calvinism. Calvin and the Calvinists believed the three cardinal offenses against God to be idolatry, blasphemy and heresy. Of these we shall treat in this chapter. If the chief end of man be considered here largely in negative terms, this may be charged to the negatives of Calvin's doctrine and in turn to the older "Thou shalt nots" on which he built his system.

## 1. THE SIN OF IDOLATRY

The sin of idolatry loomed the larger in Calvin's thought for the reason that he was somewhat of an innovator.[1] In a sense, he rediscovered the second commandment, which had practically been buried out of sight for several preceding centuries. The medieval church approved image worship. It had been able to gloss over the prohibition against making graven images by the use of a form of the decalogue which combined the proscription of images with the worship of one God, the full number of commandments being kept by the division of the tenth into two parts.[2] The second commandment could thus be easily covered up, or dropped out. Luther adopted this form, and Lutheranism to this day has a decalogue which places the proscription of images parenthetically under the first commandment and divides the tenth. As late as 1548, Cranmer approved for use in the English churches a decalogue from which the second commandment was omitted.[3]

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1 Calvin was not the first to attack image worship. Iconoclasm had been practiced by Carlstadt, Zwingli and other Protestants before his time, and the introduction of the Reformation into Geneva had been accompanied by iconoclastic riots.

2 C. H. Moehlman, *The Story of the Ten Commandments*, pp. 109, 110.

3 The full text of the second commandment was restored to the Anglican Catechism in 1552. In 1563, the Heidelberg Catechism incorporated Calvin's reading.



Calvin went straight to the Scriptures, and found there what the medieval church had been leaving out. As early as the first edition of the *Institutes* in 1536 we find him saying:

That the law is divided into ten precepts, is beyond all controversy, being frequently established by the authority of God himself. The question, therefore, is not concerning the number of the precepts, but concerning the manner of dividing them. Those who divide them so as to assign three precepts to the first table, and leave the remaining seven to the second, expunge from the number the precept concerning images, or at least conceal it under the first; whereas it is undoubtedly delivered by the Lord as a distinct commandment. But the tenth, against coveting the property of our neighbor, they improperly divide into two. . . . Such a method of division was unknown in purer ages.[4]

The first two, Calvin says, forbid the toleration of any attitude, word or act which would detract from the pure worship of God. "The first foundation of righteousness is certainly the worship of God; and if this be destroyed, all the other branches of righteousness, like the parts of a disjointed and falling edifice, are torn asunder and scattered."[5] This being the case, God at the outset had to lay down, as a preface to the whole law, a provision to keep it from being

abrogated by contempt. To "have no other gods before him" means to give him the sole pre?minence. To this end he enjoins men to avoid all creature-worship, impiety, or superstition by which the glory of his deity might be obscured.[6] The second commandment adds explicitness to the first, and forbids us to profane his legitimate worship with carnal observances or superstitious rites. God commands us to flee from the "external idolatry" of representing him in visible form or paying religious adoration to images; he forbids us also to play the adulterer in our affections by giving to any creature the first place in our hearts

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In 1566, the Roman church included the second commandment in its decalogue, and since then has authorized catechisms which include and others which omit it. The Council of Trent in 1563 sanctioned the veneration of images but warned against superstition and avarice in their use. Cf. Moehlman, 111 f.

4 II, viii, 12.

5 *Ibid.*,11.

6 *Ibid.*, 16.



which should be God's.[7] When God calls himself a "jealous God" this means that he will brook no rival. He has justly declared that he will avenge his majesty and glory upon those who transfer it to creatures or graven images, punishing transgressors to the third and fourth generation even as he shows mercy and goodness to the posterity of those who keep his law.[8]

This in brief, is Calvin's statement in the *Institutes* -- all in very general terms. But if one wants concreteness, there is plenty in Calvin's sermons! Here "idolatry" means Catholicism; "superstitious rites" the saying of Masses, the use of incense and the veneration of relics; "graven images" the images of the saints.[9] Calvin was blunt, and none too gracious, in denouncing and ridiculing all Roman practices which seemed to him to desecrate the pure worship of God.

Calvin's sermons and commentaries abound in condemnations of idolatry. As the god Dagon fell before the ark of the Lord, so all idols must fall when God reveals his majesty through the preaching of the (Reformed) Gospel.[10] It is in vain, he says, for the Papists to try to cover their iniquity by calling the objects they worship images rather than idols, for as God condemned the Jews for making images of Sicuth and Chion, so he forbids today all making of graven images.[11]

By the institution of the priesthood, Christ is robbed of his priestly dignity. God promised that Christ should never have a successor but they make a million of them -- and such people! If they were angels of Paradise they would still have to be regarded as devils, but the Papists choose all the vermin of the world, all the riff-raft and rascals, and call them successors of our Lord Jesus

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10 *Opera*, xxix, 446. Homily on I Sam. 5: 1-6.

11 *Opera*, xliii, 100. Lect. on Amos 5: 26.

7 *Ibid.*,17, 18.

8 *Ibid.*,18-21.

[9] Cf. John Knox, "By Idolatry we understand, the Mass, Invocation of Saints, Adoration of Images and the keeping and retaining of the same: and all honouring of God not contained in his holy Word." *Book of Discpline*, ed. Laing, II, p. 188.



Christ.[12] They make idols of the Virgin, and by giving her the office of advocate they further rob Christ of what was given him by the Father.[13] We should despise all crosses and mitres, all the flourishes of this world and the horns of the Pope by which he seeks to exalt himself up to God; and should look upon them as abominations full of rottenness and infection through which Satan, our mortal enemy, seeks to poison us.[14]

The Mass is as bad as the priests who preside over it. The promise which gives Christ's body to believers, under the symbol of bread, no more belongs to Masses than to Bacchanalia or Turkish feasts.[15] To bend the knee before a bit of bread is an idolatry no less iniquitous than was bending it before the Serpent.[16] "It is plain that the god whom the gesticulating priest keeps exhibiting whenever he turns round his altar is not brought down from heaven, but is of the kind extracted from a cook-shop!"[17] Since in the Mass Christ's body is traduced, his death mocked, and an execrable idol substituted for God, it ought to be called the table of demons rather than the table of the Lord.[18]

Calvin deals sharply with a practice common in his day, that of trying to be a Protestant at heart while attending Mass to escape persecution. Calvin was not the man to tolerate sham in any field, least of all in so holy a thing as the worship of God. To say that it is permitted to go to Mass if God be served in the heart is to admit a double heart. They serve idols in trying to please the enemies of God, and they value their lives above God's honor. It is not permitted to stamp two coins on one piece of gold or put two contrary seals on one public document, much less to try to deceive God or man by such duplicity. It is a great shame to pretend to serve God when one does not, "and a still greater shame

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[12] *Opera*,l, 577. Ser. on Gal. 4:1-4.
[13] *Opera*, xxix, 213. Ser. on Deut. 34: 1-6.
[14] *Opera*,1, 326. Ser. On Gal. 1: 8-9.
[15] "On Shunning the Unlawful Rites of the Ungodly", in *Calvin's Tracts* ( Calvin Translation Society, Edinburgh, 1851), III, 385.
[16] *Ibid.*,391.
[17] *Ibid.*,385.
[18] *Ibid.*,387.



that a mere worm of the earth should wish to take precedence of his Creator:"[19]

Some say the idolatries of the heathen are forbidden, but not those of the Papists. No such extinction exists, Calvin says.[20] It is a general rule that "all human inventions which are set up to corrupt the simple purity of the Word of God. . . are real acts of sacrilege, in which Christians cannot participate without blaspheming God."[21] If some call this doctrine too severe and Calvin too strait-laced, this does not alter the fact of the case. "Let our soft-hearted

folks now go and complain of me as too rigid. Whether I speak out or hold my tongue, we all continue to be bound by this law which God lays upon us."[22]

Some mean well, and are sincerely troubled. But if in their confusion they come to Calvin for advice, he will merely refer them to the general rule to flee all idolatry. To ask for more explicit direction would be like asking the preacher to cut out their gowns or sew their shoes after he has exhorted them to dress plainly.[23] God's word is unequivocal.

One wishes, however, that Calvin himself had been a little more explicit about what should be done with such offenders. He was outspoken in his belief that persistent heresy merited the death penalty; he was far more guarded about Catholicism. Citing the authority of the seventeenth chapter of Deuteronomy, he says, "We have seen previously [24] that if a man or woman is found who has enticed others to pervert the service of God, he ought to die. Now here the Law is still more rigorous; that is to say, *that if an idolater is found in the midst of the people, whether man or woman, that*

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19 *Opera*, viii, 382. *Homily on Fleeing External Idolatry*.

20 He admits elsewhere that there is a difference between the superstitions of the heathen and the Papists, but says that this is immaterial. *Opera*, xxvii, 292. Ser. on Deut. 14: 21-23.

21 *Opera*, viii, 383.

22 *Ibid.*,384.

23 *Ibid.*,390.

24 In the thirteenth chapter of Deuteronomy, Calvin's main authority for the use of the death penalty upon heretics.



*ought to be a mortal and capital crime.*"[25] If this seem harsh, Calvin says, one must remember that a mortal creature is not to be placed before the living God. If a traitor is not to be pardoned, neither is an idolater.

Idolaters merit the death penalty. Catholics are idolaters. The natural conclusion of these premises is that Catholics merit the death penalty. Yet Calvin seems to have been very reluctant to complete the syllogism.

Though Calvin in scores of passages heaps ridicule or denunciation upon the Papists, I have been able to find only one in which he says that they ought to be put to death. In a letter to the Duke of Somerset, Protector of England during Edward VI's minority, he urges the rooting out of Roman abuses in that country in these words:

There are two kinds of rebels who have risen against the King and the Estates of the Kingdom. The one is a fanatical sort of people who, under color of the Gospel, would put everything into confusion. The others are persons who persist in the superstitions of the Roman Antichrist. Both alike deserve to be repressed by the sword which is committed to you, since they not only attack the King but strive with God, who has placed him upon a royal throne.[26]

There is an intimation here that Calvin regards both Protestant heretics and Roman Catholics as sufficiently dangerous characters to make the death penalty justifiable. Yet even in this

letter he drops the suggestion without developing it. He has much to say about the need of extirpating papal abuses, but only this brief word about extirpating the Papists themselves. Had Calvin really meant seriously to recommend the use of the death penalty, it is unthinkable that he would have been content to make the recommendation in so casual a fashion.[27]

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[25] *Opera*, xxvii, 433 f. Ser. on Deut. 17: 2-7. Italics Calvin's.

[26] October 22, 1548. Bonnet, French ed., I, 276; English, II, 173.

[27] Lord Acton's interpretation ( *History of Freedom*, p. 178), that Calvin desired to kill the Catholics but feared to say so, lest it bring persecution on the Protestants, seems to me quite unwarranted. Calvin was too outspoken in matters of conviction to justify the imputation of this motive.



Still more manifest evidence of his reluctance is the fact that he did not, in practice, attempt to employ the death penalty upon any Catholic. Servetus has no Catholic counterpart. Catholics were banished from Geneva, but there is nothing unique in this, since it occurred before Calvin's arrival and was a common practice. Aside from his insistence that the company of true believers be not polluted by the presence of Papists, Calvin's venom found expression in words rather than overt acts.

In a nature which usually drew conclusions with inexorable logic, this reluctance to advocate the killing of Catholic idolaters is significant. It indicates that Calvin was not, by his own volition, a persecutor, and that considerations of human charity sometimes outweighed legalism. It indicates, too, that in Calvin's eyes apostasy was worse than papistry; the virus of Protestant heresy a more deadly poison than that of Roman error. Of this we shall say more later.

## 2. RELICS

Denunciation was not Calvin's only weapon against the "superstitions and idolatries" of his day. He knew how to use a laugh to good effect. In speaking of God, he says, we must be reverent, but when it is a matter of the superstitions and follies in which the world has been so long entangled, one can only roar.[28] Upon occasion, Calvin himself could roar with rage or with mirth. His *Inventory of Relics*[29] gives a list of objects which received the adoration of pious Catholics, with many sly digs at the credulity with which they were venerated.

The Papists, he says, have the blood of Christ in a hundred places, liquid, coagulated, or mixed with water. They not only have the vessels in which he turned water to wine, but the wine itself. This also is found in many places, and may be drunk each year, with no diminution of quantity, by those who bring an offering. They have the shoes of Christ, though the apostles never

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[28] *Opera*, ix, 866.

[29] *Opera*, vi, 409-452. Its full title is, "An Admonition, showing the advantages which Christendom might derive from an Inventory of Relics."

heard of them; and the table of the Last Supper, though the Last Supper was in a hired room and the table was left behind. They have two linen towels with which Jesus washed the disciples' feet, one of them bearing the imprint of Judas' foot. They have the bread on which the five thousand were fed, also the piece of broiled fish which Peter offered Jesus after the resurrection. "It must have been wondrously well salted," Calvin observes, "if it has kept for such a long series of ages." They formerly had St. Peter's brain, but it turned out upon examination to be pumice-stone.

There are enough pieces of the true cross to make a ship-load. Every little town has one, though some confess that they did not get theirs from Palestine, for it was dropped by an angel. The crown of thorns must have been planted again to grow twigs for relics, and the seamless robe has been many times divided. The spear with which the soldier pierced Jesus' side is in four different places. Six cities have the napkin with which St. Veronica wiped Jesus' face, and many others have fragments, though there is no mention of St. Veronica in the Bible. One napkin must have produced as many others as a hen does chickens!

There are crucifixes which grow beards, and many which have spoken. Tears, both natural and miraculous, also flow from crucifixes. They could not retain Jesus' natural body, but they have his hair and teeth, and two pr?puces. The impression of our Lord's body on the linen grave-clothes has been preserved, likewise his foot-prints after the resurrection. Even the mark left by his hips on a stone at Rheims when he turned mason to help build that church is shown to the credulous.

Though the body of the Virgin ascended to heaven, her hair has been preserved, and they have enough of her milk so that if she had been a cow she could not have given so much in her whole life. Had she been of the race of giants, she would not have had a shirt so long as the one they possess, while they have shoes belonging to St. Joseph which would fit only a boy or a dwarf. It is strange, Calvin observes parenthetically, that it never occurred to them to preserve the parings of her nails. To speak of relics of



an angel would seem a jest, did they not have the dagger and shield of the Virgin's attendant, the archangel Michael, the dagger resembling a boy's toy and the shield the brass circles on a horse's harness.

As for John the Baptist, ancient history says that his body was burned except the head, yet different shrines claim so many parts of it that he must have been a monster, unless the Papists are impostors. His ashes, supposed to have been scattered by the winds, have been caught and preserved at various places, while six churches have the finger with which he pointed to Christ.

Every apostle must have had four bodies, if one may judge from the number of fragments. There are enough pieces of Lazarus to make three bodies, though Magdalene, being a woman and necessarily inferior, has only two. St. Anne has two bodies, three hands, and an extra arm. Stephen's body must have been dissected, for his bones are in more than two hundred places. As for the lesser saints, there are a hundred wagon loads, and more, of their bones scattered about Europe. These are so mixed that one who worships before them runs the risk of

worshipping the bones of a thief, a dog, or an ass, while the Virgin's ring may be that of a strumpet.

These are but a few of the items Calvin cites. In an enumeration which fills forty-three pages of the Opera, he ridicules the idolatry and superstition of the Roman church, and warns the followers of the true faith to fall into no such error.

## 3. FOOD AND SEASONS

Along with the veneration of images and relics, Calvin placed the observance of special foods and special days as practices instituted by the wiles of Satan to draw men from the true faith. Christianity, he says, does not hinge upon the observance or nonobservance of a day, or upon the eating of pork or mutton. In such quibbles "Satan often finds little subtleties to alienate us from the Gospel without our knowing it."[30]Calvin is for Christian

[30] *Opera*, l, 276. Ser. on Gal, 1: 1-5.



liberty, but for a liberty tempered with restraint. However, like most reformers, he was more zealous for the exercise of liberty in matters which concerned his opponents' observances than his own. He could denounce the Catholics for making an issue over eating meat on Friday or observing saints' days, but he stood rockribbed upon the necessity of making everybody in Geneva attend the Protestant church service.

His discussion of Christian liberty in the *Institutes* contains a passage which analyzes with remarkable keenness the psychological effect of quibbling over non-essentials as a matter of religious scruple. It is aimed, of course, at Catholicism. Yet it gives a true picture of what Calvinism itself fell into in the hands of his Puritan followers. For this reason it is worth quoting almost in full.

We are bound by no obligation before God respecting external things, which in themselves are indifferent. . . . And the knowledge of this liberty also is very necessary for us; for without it we shall have no tranquillity of conscience, nor will there be any end of superstitions. Many in the present age think it a folly to raise any dispute concerning the free use of meats, of days, and of habits, and similar subjects, considering these things as frivolous and nugatory; but they are of greater importance than is generally believed. For when the conscience has once fallen into the snare, it enters a long and inextricable labyrinth, from which it is afterwards difficult to escape.

If a man begin to doubt the lawfulness of using flax in sheets, shirts, handkerchiefs, napkins and table cloths, neither will he be certain respecting hemp, and at last he will doubt the lawfulness of using tow; for he will consider with himself whether he cannot eat without table cloths or napkins, whether he cannot do without handkerchiefs. If any one imagine delicate food to be unlawful, he will ere long have no tranquillity before God in eating brown bread and common viands, while he remembers that he might support his body with meat of a quality still inferior. If he hesitate respecting good wine, he will afterwards be unable with any peace of conscience to drink the most vapid. . . .

In short, he will come to think it criminal to step on a twig that lies across his path. For this is the commencement of no trivial controversy; but the dispute is whether the use of certain things be agreeable to God, whose will ought to guide all our resolutions and all our actions. The



necessary consequence is, that some are hurried by despair into a vortex of confusion, from which they see no way of escape; and some, despising God, and casting off all fear of him, make a way of ruin for themselves.[31]

There is no asceticism here. Neither the rigidity of Puritan morals in "things indifferent," nor the comfort-denying austerity of the Puritan menage, were in the intention of the founder of Calvinism. A "vortex of confusion" might have been averted by following his advice. The trouble lay in the lack of a criterion by which to tell what constitutes the "things indifferent." Calvin simply assumed that his judgment was the only true judgment -- and paved the way for the undoing of his teaching.

## 4. BLASPHEMY

Calvin says a great deal in general, and not very much in particular, about the sin of blasphemy. His treatment of the third commandment in the *Institutes* contains a straightforward, rather brief, statement of the scope of the injunction, then goes off into a refutation of the position of the Anabaptists in condemning all oaths. Three things, he says, are involved in the commandment: first, to show a fitting reverence in every thought and word that refers to God; second, to abstain from abusing the holy word and mysteries of God for avarice, ambition, or amusement; third, to refrain from injuring God's works by obloquy or detraction. To "sanctify" the name of God is to praise God for his wisdom, justice and goodness. It is forbidden to utter the holy name lightly or rashly -- and still more to "make it subservient to the superstitions of necromancy, to horrible imprecations, to unlawful exorcisms, and to other impious incantations."[32] Taking God's name in vain is primarily a sin against God, hence it appears in the first table, but when joined with perjury it becomes also a sin against one's. neighbor. The Anabaptists are

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[31] III, xix, 7. To make the meaning clearer, I have stated in paragraph form what the original gives as a continuous passage. The same has been done in other long quotations.

[32] II, viii, 22.



wrong to take literally Christ's word to "swear not at all," for Jesus could not have meant to set aside what the Father elsewhere expressly enjoins.[33]

Calvin's interpretation is ethical as well as theological, and not very startling. He shows breadth of judgment in recognizing that blasphemy is a matter of thought as well as word, and that the commandment relates not merely to ordinary profanity but to a misuse of holy things. Whatever narrow element Calvin introduced came in his application of the injunction rather than in his theory.

However, in his application, he spoke in no gentle tones. While he did not directly recommend the use of the death penalty for blasphemy, he defended its use among the Jews, and he had no doubt of the duty of the state to mete out appropriate punishment. Not only must preachers preach against it; civil officers must bestir themselves. "Judges and magistrates ought not to slacken the rein when God is mocked, his name put in shame, his religion fouled under foot. We have seen heretofore that blasphemies were more grievously punished than murder."[34] Citing the injunction of Leviticus 24: 16 for the stoning of the offender, he points out that this was not the people's own doings, but the will of Heaven.[35]

Calvin can think of plenty of uncomplimentary things to say about Geneva's blasphemers -- wretches who are trying to bury the judgments of God and would like to have Geneva cast into the abyss. He remarks parenthetically that everybody knows who they are and there is no need to mention names -- an adroit dig at Servetus, perhaps, and Calvin's Libertine opponents.[36] The rest must arouse themselves or be worse than brute beasts. If God lifts a heavy hand, it is to wake up those that are asleep.[37]

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[33] II, viii, 26.
[34] *Opera*, xxviii, 57. Ser. on Deut. 22: 25-30.
[35] *Opera*, xxv, 212. Comm. on Lev. 24: 13.
[36] Some of Calvin's friends, particularly Bullinger and Musculus, thought that he should have defended the execution of Servetus on the ground of blasphemy rather than heresy.
[37] *Opera*, xxxiv, 214. Ser. on Job 21: 1-6.



The most interesting evidence of Calvin's opinion and that of his Genevan contemporaries about the seriousness of blasphemy is found in the ordinances which relate to this offense. The records contain a double set of documents, the legislation Calvin proposed and that which the Council adopted.[38] In almost every instance the Council -- perhaps fearing they might themselves get caught in the clutches of the law -- toned down the penalties he wished imposed.

Punishments were graded according to the seriousness of the offense, ranging in an ascending scale from "frivolous oaths" through plain "blasphemy" to "defying and renouncing God."

For *frivolous oaths*, Calvin prescribed kissing the earth for the first offense; in case of refusal, being put in prison a day and a night on bread and water. If the offender laughed or refused to desist, three days' imprisonment. The Council's provisions are more explicit. One is not permitted to "swear lightly by the name of God" under penalty of:

For the first offense, to kiss the earth and cry to God for mercy.

For the second offense, to kiss the earth again on one's knees, crying to God for mercy, and pay ten sous.

For the third offense, to pay sixty sous and be put in prison a day and a night on bread and water.

For the fourth offense, the preceding penalty and exile from the city for three months.

For *blasphemies* (not specifically defined, but apparently a stage more serious than the preceding), Calvin and the Council agreed on the fitting penalty, except that Calvin wanted larger fines and wanted the kissing of the earth done at the door of the church nearest the scene of the offense. The provisions as adopted specify:

For the first offense, to be put in prison a day and a night on bread and water, to kiss the earth on one's knees asking God for mercy, and pay ten sous.

For the second offense, kissing the earth as before, two days in prison, and twenty sous.

[38] *Opera*, xa, pp. 59-63.



For the third offense, three days and sixty sous, also kissing the earth with head bared and asking for mercy in the place where the offense was committed.

For the fourth offense, the preceding penalty with exile from the city for six months.

For *defying and renouncing God,* there is a marked difference between Calvin's opinion and the Council's. Calvin thought such an offender ought to be put in the stocks for three hours; be put in prison on bread and water till the next Sunday; and then be led to the door of the church to ask pardon of God, torch in hand.[39] This for the first offense: for the second, to be branded and banished from the city. The Council, whether from greater liberality or greater fear of getting ensnared, said nothing of public humiliation at the church or of branding. Their edict reads like those for the less serious types, though with more days in prison and larger fines. The kissing of the earth is to be done in the presence of the officers of justice. Only at the third offense do the stocks appear, when the guilty party is to have three days in prison and three hours in the stocks, or banishment for one year from the city, at the discretion of the magistrates.

Other provisions made the enforcement of the penalties more certain. If one rebelled, or made fun of the penalty, he might be retaken as a rebel against God and justice and punished with a double penalty, according to the exigencies of the case. If anyone *overheard another* swear, blaspheme, or deny or renounce God, he was obligated to admonish the offender and report the case, under pain of being fined ten sous. Calvin, with the characteristic eagerness of the Calvinistic conscience to assume responsibility for others' sins, wanted the penalty for failure to admonish and report to be the same as for the offense itself.

Apparently swearing was more common in taverns then elsewhere, for inn-keepers were expressly forbidden to permit it. If they beard any, they must report to justice under penalty of sixty sous fine and a day's imprisonment for each time. Yet

[39] Cf. the penalty imposed on Pierre Ameaux, *supra*, p. 33.

apparently not many such reports were given. One suspects that they were sometimes obliged to close their ears or lose good customers.

The records also give the legislation enacted against blasphemy in the surrounding villages.[40] This is similar, and blasphemy is here defined as "swearing by the body or blood of our Lord, or similarly." To renouncing God is added the offense of renouncing one's baptism, for no sharp line was drawn between the honor due to God and to the Reformed faith. The use of imprisonment and the stocks is supplemented by an ominous provision for "more severe corporal punishment at the discretion of the *messieurs*."

Of all the anti-sacrilege regulations, the quaintest is one which makes it an offense to go to church to pray at any save the appointed time of worship. After specifying the hours at which the churches shall be open for service the provision adds:

The churches shall be closed for the rest of the time, in order that no one may, out of superstition, enter outside of the hour [of service], and if anyone is found making some particular devotion within or near there, he shall be admonished. If he be found unwilling to correct this superstition, he shall be punished.[41]

This is stamping out Catholicism with a vengeance - to make it a punishable offense even to go to church to pray except with the congregation! The Calvinists were great sticklers for doing things systematically. One wonders whether the Lord would have been as much offended as the Genevans at a prayer uttered out of season.

## 5. HERESY

In close proximity to the ordinance last cited there stands another which reads:

If any one contradicts the Word of God, he shall be sent before the Consistory to be reprimanded, or before the Council to receive punishment, according to the exigencies of the case.[42]

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40 *Opera*, xa, 55.
41 *Ibid.*
42 *Ibid.*,56.



This sounds simple and trivial. There is no mention here of fines or imprisonment, of kissing the earth or banishment. But "punishment according to the exigencies of the case" was a phrase weighted with much meaning. With such latitude, a crime could be committed in the name of religion which will forever stain the annals of Geneva.

The problem of heresy, or conversely of religious liberty, is much too big to be treated with any adequacy in this brief survey.[43] That it loomed large in the history of Calvinism is obvious. We have already noticed the main outlines of the process which brought Servetus to the stake. This is paralleled by the execution of the Quakers who were hanged for heresy on Boston Common. Only a faith with iron in it, and a distorted sense of the will of God, could lead to such a consummation.

Men do not persecute very often because they love to see others suffer.[44] Only the sadist does that, and sadism is a form of mental abnormality which fortunately is rare. It takes either callous indifference or a strong sense of duty to nerve one to lead another to the stake or gallows. The normal individual will willingly die, or kill, only for a great cause.

Such a great cause is the glory of God. When one is convinced that God's glory transcends all earthly considerations, and when one is also convinced that God's glory is being fouled in the dust and men's minds poisoned by false doctrine, one can bring himself to kill for God. As national loyalty leads one both to endanger his own life and to take that of another "for king and country," so religious loyalty will lead a person convinced of the greatness of the cause and the futility of other means of remedy to use force and even to take life to uphold God's honor. To this motive is added the duty to protect one's brother. When wolves are about to devour the sheep, it is not only the most effective, but the kindest,

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[43] Nikolaus Paulus, *Protestantismus und Toleranz im 16. Jahrhundert* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1911), pp. 228-275, contains a valuable analysis of the Calvinistic attitude toward heresy.

[44] For the summary of Calvin's theory of persecution which follows, the author owes much to an unpublished manuscript by Professor Roland H. Bainton of Yale University.



policy to kill the wolves and save the sheep. When a serpent is poisoning men with venom, it would be false charity to take pity on the serpent and let men die.

This, in brief, is the kind of logic Calvin used. There is no reason to doubt that he was perfectly sincere, or meant to be, when he said he felt no personal resentment toward Servetus. He would have treated any one else -- even his nearest friend or kinsman -- in the same way, if he had thought him guilty of persistently dishonoring God and ruining men's souls. God's glory must take precedence over every human affection.

The thirteenth chapter of Deuteronomy is Calvin's justification for much of his theory of the duty of exterminating heretics. Here in defense of the stoning of false prophets he observes:

We ought to trample under foot every affection of nature when it is a question of his honor. The father should not spare his son, the brother the brother, nor the husband his own wife. If he has some friend who is as dear to him as his own life, let him put him to death. . . . If we are not to put the cart before the ox, we must begin with God. . . . If then a husband loves his wife without regard for God, he is worthy to be classed among the brute beasts.[45]

To dishonor God is the worst crime any one can commit, and God is dishonored by false doctrine.[46]

If we rightly consider what it is to speak falsehood in the name of Jehovah, it will certainly appear to us to be more detestable than to kill an innocent man, or to poison a guest, or to lay violent hands on one's own father, or to plunder a stranger. Whatever crimes can be thought of do not come up to this; that is, when God himself is involved in such dishonor as to be made an abettor of falsehood. What, indeed, can more peculiarly belong to God than His own truth? . . . Now to corrupt pure doctrine, is it not the same as if to put the devil in God's Place?[47]

Calvin never tires of pointing out that the heretic's sin against God is a worse crime than other offenses which get their punish-

45 *Opera*, xxvii, 251. Ser. on Deut. 13: 6-11.
46 *Opera*, xxiv, 360. First Precept on Deut. 13: 6.
47 *Opera*, xliv, 348. Comm. on Zech. 13: 3.



ment by law. For robbery one gets hanged; shall he go scot-free if he robs God of his honor?[48] If a city suffers the least damage, reparations are demanded; shall God's honor be injured with impunity?[49] When a prince is injured, even by being spoken against, no one objects to the punishment of the offender; is God less than earthly princes? "If a revolutionary stirs up insurrection and tries to move the people to sedition, off goes his head and no one protests. Why? Because it is necessary to conserve the state and the police. Yet here is God who has sovereign empire, and a worm of the earth rises against him and endeavors to seize his honor, abase his empire and superiority, and it is a matter of indifference."[50] To fail to punish such offenses is to affront God and give support to Satan.

Calvin's doctrine of the absolute authority of Scripture is the source of much of his intolerance, for he believed with all the ardor of his soul that anything which contradicted Scripture was heresy. Vain curiosity and presumptuous pride, he says, have been the ruin of many, and have made them set up their own views in place of the Word of God. "Some have attempted to mix the Koran with the Bible, the dreams of the pagans and the superstitions of the Papists with the purity of the Gospel, and cull out the best. . . . But our Saviour will not so let men trust their own powers."[51] It is futile to try to substitute conscience for the authority of Scripture, for before conscience can be trusted, it must itself be brought into harmony with the word of God.[52] To say that heretics need not be punished because each may interpret Scripture according to his own judgment is to open the door to every kind of slippery practice and undermine the power of the Christian faith.[53]

48 *Opera*, xxvii, 255. Ser. on Deut. 13: 6-11.
49 *Opera*, liii, 142. Ser. on I Tim. 2: 1-2.
50 *Opera*, xxvii, 244. Ser. on Deut. 13: 2-5.
51 *Opera*, xxvii, 233. Ser. on Deut. 13: 1-3.
52 Cf. Beza, *De H?reticis*, 94.
53 It is unnecessary to suggest that such reasoning is by no means antiquated. The difference between the present day and Calvin's is not so much in point of view as in consistency in carrying the point of view to its consequences. Servetus was burned at the stake; heretic preachers and professors today get "fired."



Calvin found no lack of Biblical justification for ruthlessness in stamping out the enemies of God. The Old Testament gave him plenty of such instances. Is it not recorded in God's Word, he asks, that God sometimes ordered whole cities to be utterly destroyed, and all the inhabitants thereof? But what of it? They were damned already. The little children might seem to be innocent; but by the judgment of God, all from greatest to least were under

condemnation. Predestination joins hands with Old Testament ethics to make Calvin say, with rather startling confidence, of the children slain in the razing of an impious city, "We may rest assured that God would never have suffered any infants to be slain except those who were already damned and predestined for eternal death."[54]

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To be a heretic was not merely to hold doctrine contrary to the (Calvinistically interpreted) Word of God; it was to be guilty of a lapse from the truth. Jews and Turks were not heretics, for they never had had the light. It is significant that the Protestant persecutors of Calvin's day left the Jews and Turks almost wholly undisturbed, and showed their disapproval even of the Catholics much more by word than action. The Catholics might be superstitious, and were under condemnation as idolaters, but they held to the fundamentals. It was heretic Protestants, such as Servetus and the Anabaptists in Europe and the Quakers in New England, that must die for the purging of the Church.

This tendency to show greatest severity toward heretics among the Protestant sectaries has several explanations. It was doubtless due in part to the fact that possessors of a Calvinistic conscience are prone to disturb the members of their own family more than they annoy the neighbors, simply because they feel a greater responsibility for their souls' welfare. It was due in part also to an environmental factor, for the Calvinists did not, to any great extent, live

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[54] *Opera*, xxiv, 363. First Precept on Deut. 13: 15. Professor Bainton makes this comment, "Calvin scarcely yields the palm to Arnold Amalric, the papal legate, who when there was doubt as to how to distinguish the Catholics and the Cathari, exclaimed, 'Kill them all. God will know which are his.' "



in close proximity to Jews, Turks or Catholics, and so felt less necessity for exterminating them. It was due, furthermore, to an intellectual concept of the nature of heresy. While all Christians were thought responsible in a general way for bringing light to those in darkness, the darkness of those who had never seen was looked upon as a misfortune, that of those who had seen and turned away, a sin.

Vigorous as was Calvin's condemnation of heresy, he never advocated the wholesale slaughter of heretics. He believed that for heresy to merit the death penalty, the lapse must be an obstinate and serious one. More broad-minded than many of his successors,[55] he recognized three grades of error -- that which could be pardoned with a reprimand, that to be mildly punished, and that to be exterminated by death. A slight superstition, he said, might be corrected with patience; but when religion is shaken from the foundations then one must have recourse to the extreme remedy.[56] This is why Calvin took such pains to show that Servetus had been obdurate. His persistent refusal to recant seemed to Calvin to stamp him as an obstinate, stiff-necked heretic, defying God to the last and giving no evidence of repentance. Though Servetus prayed for his persecutors on the way to his execution while Farel belabored him for not repenting, and died calling on the Son of the eternal God, this to Calvin was evidence of obstinacy rather than martyrdom. As Calvin saw the incident:

At his death he showed a brute-like stupidity whereby one could see that he took nothing in religion seriously. . . . Although he gave no sign of repentance, neither did he say a word in defense of his doctrine. . . . He had no reason to fear that his tongue would be cut out. Why could he not state briefly why he obstinately refused to call on the eternal Son of God? Who will call this the death of a martyr?[57]

One is prompted to wonder why, if God is really the all-determining arbiter of human destiny Calvin thought him to be, the vindication of his honor might not safely be left in his own hands

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55 Beza in his *De H?reticis* is less liberal.
56 *Opera*, viii, 477. *Refutatio Errorum Michaelis Serveti*.
57 *Ibid.*, 498 f. Cf. *supra*, p. 44.



without so much human intervention. But in Calvin's thought, to neglect to smite God's enemies would be to shirk a manifest duty laid upon the elect as God's lieutenants. "We are the vindicators of God against the impious."[58]Calvin's theory of persecution is implicit in the conviction that because God's will is inviolable, the elect must be his instruments to crush apostasy and defeat the wiles of Satan.

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Such is Calvin's view of heresy as an offense against God. But he believed it also to be an offense against man, and this reinforced the severity of his condemnation. The heretic who spreads the virus of false doctrine imperils the immortal soul of his brother -a crime infinitely worse than to injure his transitory body. Heresy is like an insidious disease -- to be eradicated, if need be, by strong medicine or the surgeon's knife. "The mockers who would suffer all false doctrines and let any one disgorge what he likes are not only traitors to God but enemies of the human race. They would bring poor souls to perdition and ruin, and are worse than murderers."[59] Here again the heretic is more dangerous than the Jew or Turk, for the latter are open enemies while the heretic works subtly to corrupt the souls of his fellow-Christians. God will let loose his wrath upon the community that tolerates such contagion.

Though the facts did not always substantiate the charge, Calvin and his contemporaries believed that heresy would loosen the bonds of morality. We noted that an attempt was made in the trial of Servetus to prove him guilty of moral laxity, but this had to be dropped for lack of evidence. The connection between free-thinking and free-living in the Libertines was cited as evidence of the insidious effects of false views about God, the devil, and the soul.[60]The Anabaptists were freely anathematized with charges of communism, polygamy, free love, anarchy and treason.[61]

To justify or shield the sinner was to participate in the sin.

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58 *Ibid.*,362. First Precept on Deut. 13: 12.
59 *Opera*, xxvii, 245. Ser. on Deut. 13: 2-5.
60 *Opera*, vii, 153-248. *Contre la Secte des Libertins*.

[61] *Opera*, vii, 53-142. *Contre les Anabaptistes*.



"Any one who objects to the punishment of heretics and blasphemers," Calvin says, "subjects himself knowingly and willingly to the like condemnation of blasphemy."[62] This was a dart in the direction of Castellio, whose *De H?reticis* had criticized Calvin sharply for his part in the Servetus affair. Even more bluntly he remarks, "That they may be free to vomit their virus they plead for toleration and deny that heresy and blasphemy should be punished. Of such is that dog Castellio."[63]

## 6. THE CALVINISTIC THEORY OF PERSECUTION

If heresy is an offense against society, it follows that the strong arm of the law must be laid upon the offender for society's protection. To repress heresy is to protect the flock from the ravages of a wild beast. "Christ left his disciples as sheep in the midst of wolves. . . . Christ desires us to imitate his own meekness, but this is no reason why the magistrates should not protect the safety and tranquillity of the church. To neglect this is the deepest perfidy and cruelty."[64] It is the duty of pastors to gather the sheep into the fold and keep them there as best they can, "but if wolves and robbers come, they must cry, Wolf! Wolf!"[65]

Such is the doctrine that cost Castellio his position and brought Servetus to his death. It is the doctrine that caused the banishment from Massachusetts of Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson. It is the doctrine that caused Quakers in the Puritan colonies to be whipped at the cart's tail, imprisoned, branded, banished, hanged.[66] In its major features, it is the doctrine that caused Europeto run red with the blood of martyrs, Protestant and Catholic. It does not excuse Calvin that he was no less a persecutor than others of his day -- much less a persecutor, in fact, than Catharine

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[62] *Opera*, viii, 476. *Refutatio Errorum Michaelis Serveti*.
[63] *Opera*, xl, 649. Lecture on Daniel 4: 1-3.
[64] *Opera*, xxiv, 357. First Precept on Deut. 13: 5.
[65] *Opera*, xxvii, 244. Ser. on Deut. 13: 2-5.
[66] "So far [to 1660], in the Puritan colonies, mainly in Massachusetts, over forty had been whipped, sixty-four imprisoned, over forty banished, one branded, three had had their ears cut off, five had had the right of appeal to England denied them, four had been put to death, while many others had suffered in diverse ways." James Truslow Adams, *The Founding of New England*, p. 272.



de' Medici or the Duke of Alva, whose victims were numbered by the thousands. To cause the death of one was to persecute too much. Calvin persecuted -- but it was no mad frenzy that led him to it.

Calvin's doctrine of persecution was the coolly reasoned product of a theology which combined God's sovereignty, man's littleness, Biblical literalism, and Hebraic ethics. When God's glory must be upheld at any cost, it is not for a mere "worm of the earth" to raise an obstacle. When man is believed to be so inconsequential and so sunk in sin that he can be

thought of as a worm, the natural restraints of human sympathy lose their hold. When many an example of the slaughter of God's enemies can be cited from an inerrant Bible, God's follower feels obligated to act as God's lieutenant to stamp out unbelief. When one's whole outlook on life is tinctured with the spirit of Moses rather than Christ, there is no mourning at the death of Pharaoh's cohorts. Lacking any one of these dominant beliefs, Calvin and the Calvinists could not have persecuted.

The doctrine of persecution was an outgrowth, too, of a factor which lay not in the theology, but in the temperament, of Calvin and his Puritan successors. This was the combination of an overwhelming sense of duty with the almost complete inability to see another's point of view. God's will *must* be done; God has revealed his will to *me*. Had Calvin and the Calvinists lacked either the Puritan conscience or the Puritan self-assurance, not even their theology could have made them persecute. But they had both the theology and the temperament, and the outcome was predestined.



# CHAPTER VI
## GOD, THE DEVIL, AND THE SABBATH

In the previous chapter we observed how Calvin and the Calvinists tried to glorify God by suppressing idolatry, blasphemy and heresy. We shall now look at two other aspects of the Calvinistic conscience; the fear of the devil -- particularly that phase of the power of the devil displayed in witchcraft, and the imperative obligation to preserve the sanctity of the sabbath. The Puritan's horror both of magic arts and of sabbath-breaking root back in Calvin's teaching; yet in both, Calvin himself was more tolerant than his Puritan successors. He was austere enough, but his austerity was tempered with much shrewd sense, and even with magnanimity of a sort. The frenzy of the witchcraft persecutions and the silly literalism of the Puritan sabbath regulations were later developments. If Calvin was responsible for these excesses, it was only as any leader is responsible when he utters a principle that his less capable subordinates carry out of bounds.

### 1. MAN'S OLDEST ENEMY

The devil, to Calvin, was a very real person. Like Adam, he was so important that Calvin could not have got along without him. Again like Adam, he is responsible for the plight man finds himself in. Such subtle questions as where he came from, or why an allpowerful God should permit such a rival, did not trouble Calvin's thought. His was a theological, not a metaphysical, mind.

It is unnecessary to bore the reader with a rehearsal of all that Calvin has to say about Satan. There is much repetition. The central theme of all his observations is that Satan is a wily creature speaking smooth words and putting on an attractive front to catch men unawares and draw them into sin. To go



after idols, superstitions, and heresies is to sacrifice to the devil and not to God. There is no middle ground at all between God and the devil -- so Calvin asserts flatly. This tendency to

sharp cleavage between good and evil characterizes much of Calvin's thought, and is responsible in large measure for Calvinism's lack of mercy for the sinner.

## 2. MAGIC ARTS

Calvin accepted the current notion of the existence of witches who had commerce with the devil. There was never in Geneva any such wholesale execution of witches as took place in Salem a century and a half later; but at the time of the panic over the plague, witches were put to death with his approval, as conjurers of disease.[1] This raises the question as to whether the Salem witch-exterminators could look to Calvin for authority.

Calvin said very little about witchcraft as such, and never prescribed the death penalty for witches, though he uttered many warnings against falling prey to the wiles of the devil in the form of magic arts. He was very sure that it is against God's will to have commerce with the devil, either to seek illicit knowledge or to try to communicate with the spirits of the dead; but his writings contain no definite statement of the appropriate penalty for such offenses.

This is probably due in part to the fact that it was not a very acute problem in Geneva. The alleged plague-spreaders were put to death for causing the death of others, and with credence granted to belief in the power of witches -- a belief well-nigh universally held in that day -- it was natural that they should receive capital punishment as murderers. However, it is significant that the records show no evidence of executing witches for minor offenses, and Calvin's reticence is itself an indication that he did not think the sin of witchcraft necessitated such a penalty. Heresy was clearly a sin to be extirpated root and branch; magic arts were offenses to be preached against.

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1 *Supra*, p. 30.



The kind of magic art which Calvin arraigns most sharply is that which tries to penetrate hidden mysteries and find out what it is not for man to know. Fortune-telling and spiritualism come in for more denunciation than witchcraft. Men have a natural curiosity, Calvin says. This got Adam into trouble, and men should learn from his example. Instead, they keep on trying to be like the gods and find out everything. Our nature is corrupted by two evils; an immoderate desire to know and the use of forbidden means. The light of intelligence is a singular gift of God, and we should be content to acknowledge our ignorance and ask God for needed light instead of having recourse to Satan. "From these sources, from a foolish curiosity and a licentious boldness, flowed all the superstition and error that has come into the world. So God dealt with these pests by forbidding magic arts. . . . The best kind of knowledge is sobriety, to be satisfied to know only what is expedient."[2]

But while God forbids all such superstitious practices as the work of Pharaoh's magicians or the Chaldean sooth-sayers, he gives to some of his chosen servants -- Daniel, for example, the gift of divination. *Divination* itself means to get knowledge by divine aid -- the more shame to those who seek it from the devil.[3] Most of our dreams have natural causes, such as our daily thoughts, the state of the body, too much eating or drinking, etc. But some dreams are under divine regulation, such as Nebuchadnezzar's and Calpurnia's.[4] Similarly, there may be something in astrology, but the seed of the father and mother is a hundred times more

important than the stars in forming the traits of a child.[5] Such conjuration is not to be mistaken for true learning.

Calvin pays his respects to spiritualism in his observations on Saul's visit to the witch of Endor. In calling up Samuel from

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2 *Opera*, xxiv, 266. First Precept on Deut. 18: 9.

3 *Opera*, xl, 554. Lect. on Dan. 1: 17.

4 *Opera*, xl, 558 f. Comm. on Dan. 2: 2. In general, Calvin had a poor opinion of the ancients, other than those who figure in Biblical or ecclesiastical history. It is the more surprising to find him here citing as example not only Calpurnia's dream but that Of Augustus' physician.

5 *Opera*, vii, 519. *Contre l'Astrologie*.



the dead, she showed herself in league with Satan. The devil's ministers profane the name of God and pretend to utter prophecies in his name, yet their art is wholly instigated by the devil. "Deluded by the foolish affections of nature," men are induced to inquire curiously about the condition of the dead in order to know that it is well with them in the new life -- and Satan seizes this occasion. Not that affection itself is bad -- the evil lies in what it drives men to. "To the higher affections is added a sort of stupid eagerness to speak with the dead . . . as if some great good were to come of such converse."[6] The devil, fostering this error, pretends to give us excellent advice about our enterprises, and claims to induce the dead to indicate their state to the living. But whether living or dead, we must depend on God alone and on his Word. Only so can we overcome the vice of curiosity and reject all the diabolical illusions by which Satan works his wiles.

Calvin is very clear about the evilness of magic arts. "God says in sum, *That if we want to be his people, we cannot be wrapped up in sorceries, or divinations, or enchantments, or conjurations with the dead, or conjurations with familiar spirits.*"[7] (Italics Calvin's.)

Calvin is not so clear as to whether he thinks the devil really does all the things he claims to do. He is sure that God's power is adequate to thwart Satan's; Christ holds him in check as if with his foot upon his throat.[8] Satan is a pretender. Yet he seems to ascribe to the devil a goodly measure of real power -much more than is consistent with an *all*-powerful God. From his Biblical premises came the belief in an all-powerful God and a semi-powerful devil, and Calvin never thought it necessary to try to reconcile these concepts.

Like Calvin, the Puritans attached great theological importance to the devil. James Truslow Adams has remarked that the devil

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6 *Opera*, xxx, 644. Hom. on I Sam. 28: 7-11.

7 *Opera*, xxvii, 493. Ser. on Deut. 18: 9-15.

8 *Opera*, li, 551. Ser. on Eph. 4: 7-10.

was the saving grace of the Puritan doctrine, for he supplied the melodrama in what would otherwise have been a fatalistic, legalistic system.[9] The finest English Puritan poem has Satan for its hero, and Satan appears on almost every page of American Puritan prose. But the real tragedy, with Satan as its leading character, lay not in literature, but in life. As one contemplates the turbulent frenzy of 1692 when two hundred persons in northeastern Massachusetts were accused of being in league with Satan, one hundred and fifty imprisoned, and twenty-nine put to death, one wishes that Calvin might have gone further in his rejection of superstition -- and that his followers might even have gone as far as he.

## 3. FROM LORD'S DAY TO PURITAN SABBATH

In the matter of sabbath observance, there is a marked difference between Calvin's doctrine and that of the New England Puritans. The Puritans were sabbatarians, and the pharisaic literalism with which they insisted on the observance of the fourth commandment is familiar history. In the Massachusetts Bay Colony all labor must cease at three on Saturday afternoon, and woe unto him who engaged in any labor or frivolity before Sunday night! From fines and whippings for those caught walking or playing in the streets on Sunday, Massachusetts went on in 1727 to penalize even the holding of funerals on Sunday. "Connecticut had a kind of pre-Baumes sabbath law punishing Sunday burglary by one ear off, first offense; two ears off, second offense; and death, third offense."[10]Connecticut punished by minor penalties any who went out of the house on Sunday "except for worship or necessity." New York -- less rigid in general morality than the New England colonies -- in 1659 passed a law against travel, labor, shooting, fishing, sporting, playing, horse-racing, frequenting ale-houses, etc., on the Lord's day. Laws of varying severity were passed in all the colonies. Even Rhode Island, home of religious liberty, forbade "gaming, tippling, immodesty and wantonness" on the sabbath.

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[10] Moehlman, *The Story of the Ten Commandments*, p. 156.

[9] *The Founding of New England*, p. 82.



In Calvin, we find no such austerity. There was rigidity enough about the Genevan Sunday r?gime; but it was a rigidity concerned primarily with getting people to church. To absent oneself from sermon was a grave offense; what one did afterward was not a matter of such concern. To be sure, labor on the Lord's day was prohibited, but the prohibition of toil was never carried into such minuti? of literalism as among the Puritans. Geneva never countenanced the free, loose, frolicsome Sunday approved by Continental Romanists and by England under the Anglican r?gime; neither did the laws or practice of Geneva approximate in severity those of early Massachusetts or Connecticut.

To discover how the early Reformation leaders looked upon the sabbath, it is necessary to go back some centuries in church history. Within a half-century after Jesus' death, Christianity had divided into two groups, Jewish Christians who observed a seventh-day sabbath and Gentile Christians who kept the Lord's day in commemoration of Jesus' resurrection. There was a general opinion among the fathers of the early church -- Ignatius, Tertullian, Justin Martyr, Chrysostom and others, that the sabbath had been abrogated and the Lord's day given instead as a day of worship. For about five centuries the Lord's day was not identified with the sabbath. From the sixth century on, it began to be affirmed occasionally that the glory of the Jewish sabbath had been transferred to Sunday, but the identification of the two was by no

means general. Even the early Protestant reformers drew a distinction between them, and their liberalism in regard to the keeping of the fourth commandment appears a bit startling to modern ears. Zwingli held that the ceremonial sabbath had been abolished and therefore anyone might work after attending divine worship. Luther considered the sabbath commandment an altogether external matter, and recommended the keeping of Sunday on grounds of expediency rather than necessity.[11]

Like the early fathers and Zwingli and Luther, Calvin insisted

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[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 149, 150. The Augsburg Confession (art. xxviii) repudiates the sabbath substitution theory.



that the ceremonial aspects of the sabbath had been abrogated. He placed the exact moment of its abrogation at the time when the veil of the temple was rent.[12] The sabbath was given, he says, to foreshadow the spiritual repose of the people of Israel, and with the coming of the Gospel all shadows were done away. But it was given also for two other reasons, as a day of worship on which to hear the Word and perform the rites of religion, and as a day of rest for servants -- the last being added by Moses as a subordinate injunction. These last two reasons for its observance stand, and their significance has been transferred to the Lord's day. Therefore it is the Christian's duty to observe Sunday as a day of worship and repose.

Perhaps the most compact statement we can quote to show Calvin's view-point is from the Genevan catechism of 1545 in reference to the fourth commandment.[13]

*Minister*. What command is given about the keeping of this day?

*Child*. That the people assemble to be instructed in the truth of God, to make common supplication, and to give witness of their faith.

*Minister*. How do you understand that the commandment is given also for the relief of servants?

*Child*. To give some relaxation to those who are in the power of others. Likewise this serves the common good; for each is accustomed to work the remainder of the time, when there is a day of repose.

*Minister*. Now let us say how this commandment pertains to us.

*Child*. Regarding the ceremony, it is abolished; for it is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. (Col. 2:19)

*Minister*. How?

*Child*. Our old man is crucified by virtue of his death, and by his resurrection we live in newness of life. (Rom. 6:6)

*Minister*. Then what remains to us?

*Child*. To observe the order established by the Church, to hear the word of the Lord, to take part in the public prayers and the sacraments: and not to go contrary to the spiritual ordinances which exist among the faithful.

There may be a subtle utilitarianism in the suggestion that men will work more the rest of the time if there is a day of

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12 *Opera*, ix, 588.
13 *Opera*, vi, 65 f.





repose, but there is sound sense. The Genevans were compelled by law to work six days in the week and refrain on Sunday;[14] likewise they were compelled by law to go to church on Sunday "to observe the order established by the Church."

In commenting elsewhere upon the proper observance of the sabbath, Calvin shows his usual shrewdness and a rather high ethical sense. He protests repeatedly against the narrowness and superstition of the Jewish observance of the day in the time of Christ. It was given as a day of sanctification, spiritual repose, and gratitude to God, and as such it should still be observed. To observe it rightly, we must govern our thoughts and appetites. "It is in vain for hypocrites to burden themselves and put on a fine show, for while they have covetousness, envy, rancor, pride, cruelty, and fraud in their hearts, they will certainly violate the day of repose."[15]Calvin would have no profiteer try to buy God's favor by going to church.

The day is given us to teach us to bridle our affections and worship God. This, of course, ought to be done every day, but "for our infirmity, even our laziness, a day had to be chosen."[16] It would be well for the people to assemble in the name of the Lord every day. However, Calvin remarks pathetically, it is hard enough to get them there on Sunday! A great part have to be constrained as if by force.

Calvin says nothing of mowing lawns or tinkering automobiles on Sunday, but apparently human nature then had some of its present tendencies. A great many, he says, think to have Sunday in which to attend better to their business, "and they reserve Sunday as if there were no other day in the whole week to think about this. The bell rings for church, yet they can think only about their work and take stock of this and that."[17] Others stay at home and gourmandize. Others prefer to go off and have a good time. (Considering the slight opportunity for Sunday diversion

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14 *Opera*, xxi, 211. *Reg. Con.* XXX, fol. 248; June 4, 1537.
15 *Opera*, xxvi, 287 Ser. on Deut. 5: 12-14.
16 *Ibid.*, 291.
17 *Ibid.*, 292.

then afforded in Geneva, one wonders what Calvin would say of twentieth century practice.) After commenting on such desecrations he regretfully remarks, "All this is so common it is a great pity, and would to God it were harder to find examples."[18]

So much for Calvin. He wanted the Lord's day observed with religious reverence and fitting decorum, but there is little here, except the imperative obligation to attend church, which savors of the Puritan sabbath.

For the real origin of the Puritan sabbath, we must look three decades after Calvin's death. In 1595 an English Puritan by the name of Nicholas Bownde[19] published a book entitled *The True Doctrine of the Sabbath, plainly laid forth and soundly proved*. He argued that the sabbath had existed from creation, that its observance was designed to be perpetual and universal, and therefore that the sabbath had not been abrogated. The Lord's day, though the first day of the week, must really be the sabbath, Bownde declared, and in it no work was to be done nor any recreation indulged in. The Jewish sabbath was thus made over into the Christian Sunday. The Puritans adopted and promoted this point of view, though the Church of England, always more lenient toward Sunday recreations, opposed it as the sabbatarian heresy.

Bownde's book had great influence among the Puritans. The attempt of Elizabeth and her prelates to repress it were in vain. What Bownde did was merely to put the capstone on a process which had been taking shape for centuries, and seal it with a Calvinistic rigidity. But it was the turning-point. Henceforth the Puritans were to be literalists in their observance of the Lord's day. When the *Book of Sports* for sabbath recreation was issued by the Stuarts and all clergy were required to read it in their parishes or surrender their benefices, this was no slight factor in depriving Puritans of their livings and Charles I of his head. The Puritans who came to America under such circumstances were bound to be

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18 *Opera*, xxvi, 293.

19 Or Bound.



sabbatarians. It took a long time then for the pharisaism of a Jewish sabbath to drop out of the Christian Sunday. And when it dropped, in the anti-Puritan reaction, not much was left.

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This chapter and the preceding one have dealt largely in negatives. We have seen what Calvin and his Puritan successors denounced. They did not approve, nor were they hesitant to say they did not approve, of what they called idolatry and blasphemy and heresy, of commerce with Satan and profanation of the sabbath. Yet in all these negatives there is a positive note. Calvin and the Puritans denounced these practices because they revered and honored God. In each of these offenses they saw an affront to God's majesty. "The glory of God" was no glib phrase; it was a driving and dominant ideal accepted and lived by as man's chief end.

The Calvinistic conscience drove Calvin to sacrifice himself and others to the uttermost. The verdict of history after four centuries is that his sacrifice of others, and sometimes of self, was austere to the point of cruelty. The same is true of his successors. Had the glory of God been

tempered with a realization of the dignity of man, had the Calvinist's God been the God of the Sermon on the Mount, had Christian charity outweighed legalism, the outcome might have been different, and more admirable. Yet it scarcely becomes an irreverent age to think lightly of the Calvinist's reverence; and it may be doubted whether the glorification of comfort and the worship of prosperity is a more inspiring ideal than the glory of God.



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# PART III
## THE CALVINISTIC CONSCIENCE AND MAN'S DUTY TO MAN



# CHAPTER VII
## DOMESTIC RELATIONS

In the previous chapters we have looked at Calvin the man and Calvin the theologian. We have seen what Calvin thought about man's duty to God, and how this overtowering sense of duty in matters of religion influenced social relations. Basic, powerful, relentless, such an all-dominating conviction of a transcendent God before whom man must utterly abase himself could not fail to have its effect for good and ill on moral living.

We must now see what Calvin had to say about man's duty to man. In this study of social ethics we shall not leave duty to God behind. This would be impossible in a system that made God the ever-present force controlling all human conduct. However, the view-point of inquiry will be the duties laid by God upon an elect Christian in his relations with his fellow-men.

We shall begin with a look at Calvin's theory of family and sex relations. This has been studied less than any other phase of Calvin's thought, and practically nothing has been written on it. Yet it is of much interest, both because of its contemporary significance and its later influence. Calvin's observations give a clear-cut statement of the Protestant theory of the family at a time when it had very recently become differentiated from the Catholic, and was still in process of taking form. His views upon the abrogation of celibacy by the clergy and the legitimacy of divorce were for that day heretical and revolutionary.

### 1. THE CONTEMPORARY SETTING

To understand Calvin's views on the ethics of family life it is necessary to try to see the situation from the contemporary standpoint. Protestantism has now so fully accepted the idea of a

married clergy and the legitimacy of divorce under some conditions that it is difficult to realize that the Reformers instituted a radical innovation. Calvin married in 1541. It was only sixteen years earlier, in 1525, that Martin Luther had married Katharine von Bora, and set the tongues of the European world to wagging. Luther had been a monk, Katharine a nun, and both had taken vows of perpetual celibacy. Both had become intellectually and morally convinced that celibacy was an unnatural state not commanded by the Scriptures, and both felt that God had released them from their vows by showing them a better way. So they married, and begot children.

But though Luther was firmly convinced that the clergy ought to marry, he could never bring himself to sanction divorce for any cause other than adultery, and this but grudgingly. A famous case arose in which Luther was pressed to choose between advocating divorce and bigamy, and he cast his vote on the side of the latter. The landgrave Philip of Hesse had a wife. She apparently had faults -- Philip said she did -- but adultery could not be proved against her. And Philip had an uncomfortable combination: a conscience and an uncontrollable (or uncontrolled) desire for immoral relations with other women. Had he lacked the conscience, he would simply have indulged his desire, and raised no question. Since he had the conscience, he thought that an attractive wife would enable him to keep within the matrimonial bond. But he already had a wife. And what to do about it? He sent to Luther to find out. Luther of course recommended chastity and self-restraint; but Philip replied that this was to no avail. The only way out that would satisfy Philip's conscience was either bigamy or divorce. When the matter was reduced to such an alternative as this, Luther advised Philip to marry the second woman and not tell the world about it.[1]

That a great religious leader of honored memory should prefer bigamy to divorce strikes the modern mind as strange. But the reason is not difficult to find. It says plainly in the Bible that

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[1] James Mackinnon, *Luther and the Reformation*, IV, p. 265 ff.



divorce is forbidden for any cause save adultery. It does not say that bigamy is forbidden; in fact, Abraham, Jacob, and other Old Testament characters practiced it and apparently enjoyed the favor of God. So if one must choose, it seemed clear in Luther's mind that bigamy was preferable.

Calvin was born just twenty-five years after Luther, and he did his work on the basis of a quarter century advance. By the time Calvin was ready to declare his views, the marriage of the clergy had become an accepted practice among Protestants. The question of divorce was still in a state of uncertainty and suspicion. Calvin was staunchly opposed to bigamy, or any other form of polygamy, but he went far beyond his times in the liberality of his views upon divorce. We shall see a little later what these were.

## 2. THE SIN OF ADULTERY

There was one point on which both Luther and Calvin were well agreed, the heinousness of the sin of unchastity. The *Scarlet Letter* has immortalized the New England Puritan's pitiless

condemnation of adultery. In this the Puritans followed closely in the lead of their theological head. On page after page he condemns this grave offense. One almost suspects him of having a complex on the subject, for he lugs in his denunciation of *palliardise* in conjunction with almost every moral problem he discusses.

To the Calvinistic conscience, unchastity was the unpardonable sin against society. The adulterer, Calvin says, not only sins against his fellow-man but against God, for he profanes the holy temple of God and disfigures the body of Christ of which we have been made members. And to commit adultery is not merely to commit the overt act; it is to be guilty of immodesty in speech or dress or gesture.[2] It is for this reason that he so severely condemned dancing and "immoral" songs. His objection to the theatre was based not only on his aversion to having men assume feminine attire, but to a fear that such "mummeries" might lead spectators

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2 *Opera*, xxviii, 20, 59. Sers. on Deut. 22:5-8, 25-30.



into paths of lewdness. He enjoins purity of thought as well as action, and in a statement which comes as near to the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount as one finds in Calvin he says, "I call continence not only keeping the body free from fornication but also keeping a chaste mind."[3]

In view of the severity of Calvin's condemnation of the offense, it is surprising to find the legislation of Geneva fixing penalties which are comparatively mild. If the sin of unchastity were committed by the unmarried, the punishment was to be imprisonment for six days on bread and water and the payment of sixty sous "for the bank." If either of the offenders was married, the imprisonment was to be for nine days and the payment according to the seriousness of the offense. Then, as if to leave no shade of doubt, the ordinance adds a third stipulation, "Those who are betrothed must not cohabit until the marriage is celebrated in the church, otherwise they will be punished like adulterers."[4]

Imprisonment for nine days on bread and water and the payment of a fine was nothing to be desired; yet it was far less terrifying than the stoning sanctioned by Deuteronomy or the branding practiced in New England. This raises an interesting, and so far as I know unanswered, question as to why the Genevan legislators were satisfied with such leniency. The best guess is probably that the Libertines, who by no means shared Calvin's scruples in the matter, were strong enough politically to prevent the passage of more drastic legislation. In any case it is clear that Calvin did not approve such mildness. In his sermon on Deuteronomy 22: 13-24[5] which enjoins the stoning of those taken in adultery, he holds up to ridicule and scorn the idea of merely putting adulterers in prison for a few days, "as if one had carried off a glass of wine to say, 'Taste which is the better.'" When a person is accused of robbery he is tried and hung. But when one steals the bed of another, which is the worst kind of robbery, he merely gets put in

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3 IV, xiii, 17.

4 Opera, xa, 58.

5 *Opera*, xxviii, 41 f.

jail where he has as much freedom as one would have in a public tavern, while everybody comes to pay court to him and pity the poor prisoner! Adulterers might better not be punished at all, Calvin says, than by such procedure. "It is to expose justice to scorn and mock God and all his commandments."[6]

In the same sermon Calvin strongly suggests, though he apparently hesitates to say flatly, that adultery ought to be punished by death. He delivers a fierce invective against the adulteress:

She injures her husband, exposes him to shame, despoils also the name of her family, despoils her unborn children, despoils those whom she has already borne in lawful wedlock. When a woman is thus in the hands of the devil, what remedy is there except that all this be exterminated?[7]

Then he adds with reference to the stoning commanded in Deuteronomy 22:21:

And so it must be, in such a great extremity when the punishment is so severe, that the Lord wishes this to serve as an example to us, that those who have lived in such scandal in their lives may teach us by their death to keep ourselves chaste.[8]

Later, after saying that this is a worse offense than robbery which is punishable by death, he exclaims, "Do you not see that it is an insufferable crime, and one which ought to be punished to the limit?"[9] A literal reading of this injunction to punish *"jusqu'au bout"* can scarcely mean anything else than the death penalty. However, as he does not elsewhere in his condemnation of adultery say that the guilty parties should be put to death, he may mean here to justify the Deuteronomic practice and point out its stern moral lesson without clearly recommending the death penalty to the Genevans. As in the case of Catholic idolaters and witches, Calvin could not quite bring himself to say, in so many words, that such offenders merit death.

It was very clear in Calvin's mind that every individual had a

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6 *Ibid.*, 52.
7 *Ibid.*, 51.53.
8 *Ibid.*, 52.
9 *Ibid.*, 53.



responsibility for the stamping out of such foul corruption. Nobody could be exempt by closing his eyes, going his own way, and living in decency himself. To permit adultery is to participate in the adulterer's guilt. "If we suffer them and let them be nourished by our indifference, we shall be held before God as brothelkeepers and procurers."[10] If the fires of adultery be not quenched, they will consume the whole city and country, and we shall all be under the curse of God. Calvin's sense of responsibility for others' sins was strong. The Calvinistic conscience has never been content to legislate for itself alone.

It is interesting to note also what Calvin says of venereal disease as a punishment of God upon the adulterer. God, he says, has raised up new maladies as punishment for wrong-doing. This

one was not mentioned in Moses' law, or even known to our fathers of a hundred years ago. But within fifty years God has sent "this pox" to punish the adulterer. And apparently sterner measures still are necessary. "These mockers of God . . . only wipe their muzzles and laugh if God strikes them with an ugly disease so that they are eaten up with canker." But God has still more in his strong-boxes which he will let loose upon the earth if men will not cease from sin.[11]

Calvin was well aware of what Jesus said to the woman taken in adultery. But he staunchly refused to admit that this meant that any mercy was to be shown. What Jesus meant, he says, is merely that he did not wish to be the judge in the case, as he refused to divide an inheritance between two brothers. Jesus did not come "to abolish the law of God, his Father, annihilate all order, and make his church into a pig-sty." We are enjoined to live in chastity to the end of the world, and when marriages are thus maintained we may expect the blessing of the Lord to prosper us.[12]

If the Puritan was stern to the point of unfeeling cruelty in his denunciation of the sin of unchastity, it is not surprising.

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10 *Opera*, xxxiv, 653. Ser. on Job 31: 9-15.
11 *Opera*, xxviii, 404, 465. Sers. on Deut. 28: 25-29, 59-64.
12 *Opera*, xxviii, 53.



And there is still enough of Calvinism abroad in the land to make Hester Prynne's offense, in the eyes of "respectable" people, a sin which brands the sinner in deepest scarlet.

## 3. THE ABROGATION OF CELIBACY

Calvin had two reasons in joining with Luther in protesting against the vow of celibacy; the conviction that marriage was a holy institution ordained of God and therefore permitted to all, and the equally strong conviction that marriage was a very necessary human institution if unchastity was to be avoided. While the second may not have surpassed the first in his thinking, he says much more about it. His horror of adultery filled him with scorn at the current monastic practice, and he was more blunt than gentle in pointing out the futility of the vow of celibacy.

Continence, he says repeatedly, is a special gift of God, not granted to many.[13] "Continence is a remarkable gift, indeed a rare one, and bestowed upon very few."[14] It is therefore sheer presumption on the part of one who has not received this gift from God to think that he can live the celibate life. In fact, to take a vow of celibacy is "to act precisely as if any unlearned and illiterate person were to set himself off as a prophet or teacher or interpreter of languages."[15] In either case, a special endowment is necessary. No individual has a right to entertain a confidence that God will bestow upon him the gift of continence; and for such as do not receive it, God has provided a safe and legitimate remedy in marriage.[16] Marriage is a veil by which the fault of immoderate desire is covered over, so that it no longer appears in the sight of God.[17] To take the vow of perpetual virginity and reject the proffered remedy is to rebel against God.[18]

Calvin, as usual, is clear-cut in his reasoning. Answering a set

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13 *Opera*, v, 330; vii, 42, 670; xxviii, 131; xxxvi, 346; xlv, 533; xlix, 406 *et al.*
14 *Opera*, vii, 664.
15 *Opera*, xlix, 407. Comm. on I Cor. 7:8.
16 IV, xiii, 17.
17 *Opera*, xlix, 406. Comm. on I Cor. 7:6.
18 II, viii, 42.



of articles put out by the faculty of the University of Paris, he neatly analyzes in firstly, secondly, thirdly fashion the matter of taking vows:[19]

In regard to vows three things must be observed: first, whether what we vow is in our power; second, whether the end is good; third, whether it is pleasing to God. If these are lacking, or any one of them, the vow is invalid and of no account.

In the first place, the Scriptures teach that perpetual continence is not in the power of everyone. For Christ testifies that not all hear this word. (Mt. 19:11.) Also Paul suggests . . . that this is a singular gift, not granted to all (I Cor. 7:7). Therefore he orders all who burn to take refuge in the remedy of marriage. Whoever cannot contain, he says, let him take a wife. Likewise to avoid adultery, let each have his own wife.

Calvin then goes on to show that in the monastic vow of obedience the end is not good, and that the vow of poverty is displeasing to God. Therefore he concludes -- Q.E.D. -- that all three vows of the monastic life are invalid and of no account.

Furthermore, he cites plenty of pragmatic evidence. Experience shows, he says, that wherever this yoke has been imposed on priests they have been shut up in a furnace of lust to burn with perpetual fire. "It is scarcely possible to find one convent in ten which is not rather a brothel than a sanctuary of chastity."[20] Opponents of the true gospel may sing the praises of virginity, but this avails nothing when they fail to practice it. "If one takes a wife, it is regarded as a capital crime; if he commits adultery a hundred times, it is atoned for with a small sum of money."[21] The vow of celibacy has deprived the church of many good and faithful ministers, for pious and prudent men will not thus ensnare themselves.[22] God has provided a remedy for all this in marriage; and those who have already taken vows of celibacy ought to consider themselves absolved by God from such a superstition. "For if an impossible

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19 *Opera*, vii, 42. *Articuli Facultatis Parisiensis, cum Antidoto.*
20 IV, xiii, 15.
21 *Opera*, vi, 498.
22 *Opera*, xlix, 407. Comm. on I Cor. 7:7.



vow be the ruin of souls, which it is the will of the Lord to save and not destroy, it follows that it is not right to persevere in it."[23]

On the other hand, Calvin could scathingly denounce the adulterer, and on the other, could assert that we should all be adulterers save for the grace of God and the saving remedy of marriage. This was a natural consequence of his theology. He was true to his predestinarian convictions when he declared that continence was a gift bestowed only by the grace of God. In Adam's sin all human nature was corrupted, and our sins are our own fault. Through God's mercy and free gift, not through our merit, we find release.

## 4. WHAT IS MARRIAGE FOR?

Calvin gives a clear, blunt statement of the purpose of marriage. His conception, like that of his contemporaries, savors more of the flesh than of the spirit. So far as I have been able to discover, neither Calvin nor Luther ever speaks of marriage as an institution established for the mutual companionship of husband and wife, though both say that the wife is given to be a helpmate for her husband. The two functions of marriage repeatedly affirmed are to beget offspring and serve as a remedy for incontinence. So essential did Calvin deem the physical aspect of marriage that he regarded a physical incapacity for sex intercourse as sufficient ground for the annulment of a marriage, and on his recommendation such a provision was written into the Genevan statutes.

With a frankness that is a bit startling even to a sex-hardened age, Calvin remarks:

The unsexed[24] and eunuchs, without virility, are excluded from marriage by Christ. . . . And certainly there is nothing more repugnant to sense than the error that the fidelity of a woman cannot be released when she thought she was marrying a husband and finds herself deceived. Indeed, such a frustration of union overthrows the very nature and end of marriage. For what else is marriage than the union of

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[23] IV, xiii, 21.

[24] Literally, "the cold" (*frigidos*). It is unclear whether he means that a mere psychological lack of the normal amount of sex feeling is sufficient ground for the dissolution of a marriage.



male and female? Why, indeed, was it instituted except for these two ends, either to beget offspring or as a remedy for incontinence?"[25]

Calvin is clear in his conviction that a union which cannot fulfill the second of these two functions is no union at all, and therefore null and void. He is less outspoken. on the question of sterility as a ground for divorce, and makes no provision for it in the divorce laws. In condemning Elkanah for taking a second wife because the first was barren, he says that when one desires to have children, he should earnestly pray about it, as Isaac did. Then if the prayer is not granted, he should accept the denial of his petition in all patience and humility, as the dispensation of an allwise God in whose hand are both the giving and withholding of offspring.[26]

Marriage, as originally ordained by God, had only the one function of begetting offspring; it was through Adam's sin that it became a necessary remedy for incontinence. And through Adam's sin came all its evils -- for Calvin recognizes that the married state has its limitations. "If our father Adam had remained in integrity, it is certain that marriage, as an instrument of

God, would have been a perfect and angelic life."[27] But it is no longer a perfect and angelic life. Nor is it all unmixed sweetness. Answering the objection that it is arduous to have to live always with one wife, Calvin remarks -- either cleverly or na?vely, "Let us remember that, since our nature was corrupted, marriage began to be a medicine; and therefore we need not wonder if it have a bitter taste mixed with its sweetness."[28]

Strong as was Calvin's opposition to ecclesiastical celibacy, he expresses much sympathy with Paul's position. When Paul says it is good for a man to refrain from connection with a woman, he does not mean, Calvin says, that marriage itself is evil, but only that it would be expedient to refrain because of the troubles,

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25 *Opera*, xa, 231. Advices on Matrimonial Questions.
26 *Opera*, xxix, 260.
27 *Opera*, xxviii, 159. Ser. on Deut. 24: 1-6.
28 *Opera*, xlv, 532. Comm. on Mt. 19: 10.



anxieties and vexations of married life. It is as if one said, "It were good if one did not have to eat or drink or sleep," for then one could devote all his time to meditation on heavenly things; and since there are many impediments in married life which keep a man entangled, it were *good* on that account to be free.[29] True, it is better to marry than to burn. "It is not, however, without good reason that he [ Paul] returns so often to proclaim the advantages of celibacy, for he saw that the burdens of matrimony were far from light."[30] One must not become despondent, Calvin says, if one marries and then finds troubles ensuing. Many promise themselves "unmixed honey" and then get disappointed. One wonders whether Calvin speaks here from his own limited domestic experience. In any case, this bachelor-widower was an astute observer of human affairs!

## 5. SACRAMENT OR CIVIL CONTRACT?

Calvin follows Luther in holding that marriage is not a sacrament. The Papists are in error, he says, in holding it to be such. As usual, he is more vigorous than gracious in pointing out their error. They have been ignorantly deceived by a mistranslation in the Vulgate. Paul says in Ephesians 5:31-32, "For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and his church." The Catholic church has fallen into the double error of rendering *mystery* as *sacrament*, and of holding this statement to apply to marriage when it really has reference to the mysterious union of Christ with his church. The blunder is the more inexcusable, Calvin thinks, because the same word is used elsewhere (I Tim. 3:9, 16; Eph. 3:9), and no claim made that this betokens a sacrament. "Let this oversight, however, be forgiven them; liars ought, at least, to have good memories." And if marriage is a sacrament, then why, with brain-

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29 *Opera*, xlix, 401. Comm. on I Cor. 7:1.
30 *Opera*, xlix, 421. Comm. on I Cor. 7: 32.

less versatility, do they stigmatize it as impurity and exclude priests from it?[31] Softness of speech was not among Calvin's virtues!

Marriage, of course, is a good and holy ordinance of God; on that all can agree. "And so agriculture, architecture, shoemaking, and many other things, are legitimate ordinances of God, and yet they are not sacraments."[32] A sacrament must not only be a work of God, but it must be an external ceremony appointed by God for the confirmation of a promise. That there is nothing of this kind in matrimony even children can judge. But, they say, it is a sign of a sacred thing, that is, of the spiritual union of Christ with his church. This too proves inadequate as an argument, for on such a basis there will be as many sacraments as there are similitudes in Scripture -- even theft will be a sacrament, for it is written, The day of the Lord cometh as a thief. (I Thess. 5:2.) Calvin concludes that to hold marriage to be a sacrament on such reasoning would argue a want of mental sanity.

This denunciation of the Catholic position led the Dutch Calvinists, and through them the New England Puritans,[33] to regard marriage as a civil contract, to be entered into before civil magistrates. Yet Calvin did not advocate the solemnizing of marriages by a magistrate. Marriages in Geneva took place in church just before the sermon on a day when a regular service was being held. The civil authorities could determine the conditions under which marriage could be entered into and dissolved, but Calvin seems to have taken it for granted that it was the minister's business to perform the ceremony. It is God himself who joins male and female in holy union; it is to his ministers of the true faith that he gives authority to act for him in holy things.

Calvin highly disapproved of having a marriage celebrated with a Mass and paid for like any commercial transaction, though he did

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31 IV, xix, 36.

32 *Ibid.*, 34.

33 The Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1646 passed an edict that "no person whatsoever in this jurisdiction shall join any persons together in marriage, but the magistrate, or such other as the General Court or Court of Assistants shall authorize, in such place where no magistrate is near." Similar enactments were passed in New Haven and Rhode Island. Moehlman, p. 225.



not attempt to say that a Catholic marriage was not binding. He remarks indignantly:

I ask you: the priest who sells a Mass, is he not committing a sacrilege? What then of him who buys it? Our Lord says a good wife is the special gift of Providence. When we ought to be grateful to Him and ask Him to consummate this gift by bestowing His blessing on the marriage, is it not to provoke His wrath to use such an abomination?[34]

Calvin does not express himself on the question of ministers' fees, but it is easy to guess his opinion. Marriage is a holy ordinance of God, and wives are free gifts of Heaven.

## 6. MARRIAGE REGULATIONS

The form of service sanctioned by the civil authorities of Geneva is given in full in the Opera. In general structure it is not unlike the modern Protestant service, though it contains more Biblical citations. There is, of course, no use of prayer-book or ring; this would savor too much of Romanism. The wife promises to obey, for it had not occurred to wife or husband yet to raise the question. In accord with Catholic practice, public notice must be given in advance, elopements thus being automatically eliminated. The introduction to the text of the ceremony reads:

It is necessary to note that before celebrating the marriage, it is published in church for three Sundays: so that if anyone knows any hindrance, he can announce it early, or if anyone has an interest in it, he can oppose it.

This done, the parties present themselves at the beginning of the sermon. Then the minister says: --[35]

A set of ecclesiastical ordinances passed by the Council in 1561, apparently at Calvin's instigation, also throws light on marriage procedure in Geneva. The marriage could take place on any day when a regular service was being held *except* Communion Sunday. On this day there must be no extras, "in order that there be no

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[34] *Opera*, vi, 556.
[35] *Opera*, vi, 203.



# CHAPTER XIII
## CONCLUSION

The sixteenth was a great century. It was the century of Raphael and Michelangelo, of Spenser and Shakespeare, of Erasmus and Rabelais, of Copernicus and Galileo, of Luther and Calvin. Of all the figures that gave greatness to this century, none left a more lasting heritage than Calvin. It would be inaccurate to call him the greatest man of his times, for greatness has no common denominator. Yet one who takes the trouble to acquaint himself with the life and thought of this half-forgotten reformer can scarcely doubt either the power of his personality or the sweep of his influence.

Some of the men who helped to make history in the sixteenth century adorned their age with a lasting gift of grace and beauty. Not so Calvin. His function was not to adorn. Rather, it was to lay a granite foundation. In Geneva he put together in solid fashion the foundation stones on which a sturdy moral structure could be reared. He did his work so well that the structure still stands, altered but undestroyed. The structure is not faultless. It has rough edges and jagged points, and some of these not even the wear and jostle of four centuries have brought to smoothness. But it is an enduring structure, and one not wholly lacking in a stern sort of beauty.

There is no need to bore the reader with a long conclusion. There is so much in Calvin's ethical theory and practice which finds a parallel in modern life that it would be easy to point

morals -- to end the book with "This story teaches --" This temptation I shall resist, confident that the reader who wants such morals will draw them for himself.

The book does not need to end with a Q.E.D., for it was not



written to prove anything. It aims simply to tell the truth about Calvin. Its author has tried to present without prejudice the story of this man of great faults and great virtues, and to give an accurate account of his moral theory and practice. As Calvin said of himself, "I have not to my knowledge corrupted or twisted a single passage . . . and when I could have drawn out a far-fetched meaning, if I had studied subtlety, I have put that temptation under foot."[1] The author is not a Calvinist, either by church affiliation or conviction, and holds no brief for Calvin or for Calvinism. But with the study of this rugged figure has come a growing sense of comradeship -- almost of personal friendship -- and it may be that these chapters have endeavored, beyond their writer's original intent, to lift from Calvin's shoulders some of the opprobrium which has settled there through the centuries.

The story is told, but not finished. Much has been omitted which would have added interest and value to a longer book, and there are problems in the field of Calvin's influence which have been scarcely touched. The investigator who wishes to probe further into the Calvinistic moral philosophy will find plenty of fresh territory. In the words of Calvin's disciple, Cotton Mather, "The author hath done as well and as much as he could, that whatever was worthy of a mention might have it; . . . and now he hath done, he hath not pull'd up the Ladder after him; others may go on as they please with a compleater Composure."[2]

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1 *Opera*, ix, 893.

2 Preface to *Decennium Luctuosum*, in *Original Narratives of Early American History*, XIV, p. 182.



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