

AN EXPLANATION OF THE EARLY
SUCCESS OF CALVINISM.

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Of the religious movements embraced in the Protestant Reformation, the most successful was that which bears the name of Calvin. Lutheranism prevailed in German territories and Scandinavia, but won to its religious views no other peoples, and even in its native Germany at certain great crises, it exhibited a lamentable weakness when confronted by a united papal church. Zwinglianism, more intellectual and biblical than Lutheranism and more ethical in spirit, spread over a part of Switzerland and of Southwestern Germany, but in reality did little more than prepare the way for a greater movement. Anabaptism, though the truest expression of the spirit of individualism, though in harmony with a great swelling tide of democratic sentiment, though profoundly religious and a re-embodiment of the love and martyr spirit of the ancient church, shrank from the dreaded contact with secularism and sank beneath the cruel stripes of intolerant foes. Anglicanism, supported by nationalism and the English love of political freedom, was lacking in religious depth and missionary zeal and secured a permanent footing on English soil alone. Calvinism, the creed of the little Swiss city of Geneva, soon outran them all. It absorbed the work of the Zwinglians; spreading into Germany it supplied to Protestantism there the stamina in which Lutherans had been so deficient; it gave rise to the mighty Huguenot movement in France; it overran the Netherlands; gave the burghers strength to resist great Spain for a hundred years and created the Dutch Republic. Crossing the water it overthrew the royal power in Scotland and set up a church-state, based on Calvin's creed; it became a tremendous force in England even threatening to oust Episcopacy, and transplanting itself to the new world it contributed to the erection of the great republic.

While Calvinism may be properly regarded as an embodiment of the aggressive reforming spirit that was

in John Calvin and its immense influence explained as the impact of a mighty spirit upon its own age, I think a fuller explanation will result from an examination of the inner nature of the movement and of its relation to general conditions of the time. Calvin was peculiarly qualified to assume the leadership in Protestantism by his religious and moral principles, his cast of thought and his gift of statesmanship. Through these we can see how the system that goes by his name met the needs of the Europe of that day.

1. The religious and moral principles of Calvinism. Foremost among these is Calvin's *sense of God*. With him this overbears all other thought. Yet, for Calvin, God is not so much the Infinite and Ineffable, too far exalted for contact with man and matter; nor so much the gracious Father whose name is Love, as the Great Jehovah, whose personal will is the source of all real existence, all law and all good. The idea of absolute sovereignty was familiar to men of the Reformation time and to many of them not objectionable. The feudal ideas of correlated power and dependence as the foundation of government had by no means faded away. In England, France and Spain great, absolute monarchies laid a controlling hand on everything. The Holy Roman Empire still impressed men with the idea of one great central authority in the secular realm, and it was paralleled by the idea of a Holy Church at whose head sat the great spiritual monarch, the Pope. Notwithstanding influences subversive of the strength of these ideas, they still pervaded the popular imagination and constituted a natural stepping-stone to the idea of One Supreme. The idea of God so powerfully presented by Calvin took up these conceptions of authority, elevated them to a higher sphere and overshadowed them so that men in ever-increasing numbers conceived strength to resist, if need be, such subordinate or usurped authorities in obedience to what they believed to be the will of the Absolute Monarch of Heaven and Earth.

Connected with this sense of the majesty of God, the Omnipotent Will, is Calvin's *reverence for an absolutely valid moral law*. The declared will of God is law for men. Moral principles thus rest on an immovable foun-

dation and admit of no exception. They come to us with an authority which man is incompetent to question and which, in its very nature, can make no compromise with disobedience. An awakened moral consciousness, doubting or renouncing traditional authority in morals and willing to rest in the utterances of the moral reason, found a powerful attraction in this doctrine. It condemned the temporizing of Rome. It annulled the distinction between mortal and venial sins. It abrogated the authority of canon law. It made all violation of right an insult to God. Neither Lutherans nor Anabaptists had presented God as Lawgiver and man as absolutely his servant in this clear and emphatic manner. Consequently, in many quarters, the Reformation, with its renunciation of the authority of the Church and its appeal to faith and love, had seemingly opened the floodgates of immorality to many who had rejected the Judaism of Rome, but were still too pagan in spirit to abandon her paganism. Calvinism dammed back this current by its stern insistence on an unalterable moral code and more than others justified on this ground its protest against Rome. Calvin's writings are pervaded throughout with *a conviction of the sinfulness of men*. There are times when a reader feels that his nickname, "the Accusation," given by his college-mates, must have been appropriate, for he has almost a fondness for dilating on human sin. But, after all, this emphasis on depravity was on outcome of his reverence for God and his knowledge of the wickedness and immorality then abounding. Calvin had experienced a revulsion against all turpitude. Moreover he was a close student of the Prophets, Paul and Augustine. The latter's view of mankind as a *massa perditionis* had deeply impressed him. Heart and eye corroborated the testimony of the ancient theologian. Moreover at an earlier time the Catholic church had given the same witness. Some of the effects of this teaching appear in movements of thought both within and without the church, which show that the sense of guilt lay heavy on many a human heart in the Reformation days. The Papal church had exploited this sense of sin in the interests of ecclesiasticism and as a result the consciences of men were being prostituted

The popularity of the sale of indulgences proves this. It was natural then that Calvin's thunder against sin, his treatment of sin as a crime and his condemnation of the whole corrupt papal machinery found an echo in the more earnest and serious-minded souls everywhere. Granted his doctrine of sin, the impossibility of salvation through the church's ministrations followed. A corrupt church trifling with the spiritual needs of the world appeared as very anti-Christ.

But this negative support of Calvin's views found its positive counterpart in his *certainty of the divine favor*. Whether or not the theoretical basis which he used as a support to this religious conviction will stand the test of criticism, there can be no doubt that herein Calvin gave a welcome response to a common need. The Church of Rome maintains its hold on its adherents partly by keeping them in continued uncertainty of their future happiness, and consequently in constant dependence on the ministrations of the church and the completeness of their own compliance with her demands. At that time multitudes had lost their confidence in the church and yet, being unable to enter into the half-mystical experiences of Luther or the Anabaptists, were still floundering in confusion. Human action and human experience are so fitful that no abiding confidence can spring from these alone. Calvin directed men to the unalterable decrees of the divine will and the fixed purpose of God to save, and thus lifted the future destiny of men above all contingency. Here at last was firm standing-ground for those who were able to receive it, and with the shout, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" they triumphed over Catholicism.

2. Thus far of Calvinism as religion. But Calvin was more than believer; he was also thinker. In fact, his system of thought rather than his religious attitude has become traditional. We turn then to the *characteristics* of the Calvinistic system of thought.

We remark at the outset the *inclusiveness of Calvin's theology*. His combinative power was phenomenal. Elements most diverse from sources most diverse were welded together by the mighty hammer of his intellect and presented as a system. The Catholic, the Rationalist,

the Biblicist and the Mystic have all their place. Tradition, logic, written statute and Christian consciousness add each its quota. No radical in theology was he. No attempt was made to reconstruct Christian doctrine from the first, for the old Catholic doctrine was retained and vindicated by him. On the question of the Trinity and the divine-human Christ, he was in perfect accord with the Athanasian creed, though no stickler for set terms. In regard to original sin, atonement, regeneration, predestination and the sacraments, he could quote approvingly from the Fathers. He never disputed the historical continuity of the church, as did the Anabaptists, and thus he drew to Protestantism many who, though anti-Papal, were Catholic. The humanist, the friend of the Renaissance found a friend in Calvin. Unlike Luther, he never indulged in expressions of contempt for Reason. He acknowledges its functions for discovery in his natural proofs of the existence and attributes of God and its corroborative testimony to the divine origin of the Scriptures. His translations and expositions of Scripture and his derivation of doctrine from the Bible would satisfy the most ardent biblicist of the time. Even mysticism finds a place in his system, where, e. g., he acknowledges that knowledge of God and self-knowledge are mutually involved and where he acknowledges the unimpeachable inner testimony of the Spirit to the truth of Scripture.

He organized Protestant thought and gave it body. Luther, while more original and profound than Calvin in many of his utterances, spoke rather with the fervor of the prophet. He was no systematizer. He was clear and emphatic in his doctrine of justification by faith and his negative views of Catholicism were well known, but there was lack of coherency in his more positive views. The Anabaptists' love of freedom, their emphasis on spirit, character and conduct rather than doctrine as expressing true Christianity, held them back from a reasoned and rounded system of teaching. It was plain that if Protestantism was to succeed, it must have a positive, distinct message that would appeal to intelligence. It needed a well-understood battle-cry. This it received from Calvin. He gave to the world a Protestant dog-

matic markedly opposed to Romanism. Henceforth Protestantism stood for definite doctrines and compelled Roman Catholicism to be definite too. Moreover, his whole system appeared as the harmonious utterance of authoritative Scripture and it vindicated Protestantism against the Roman Catholic contention that confusion and contradiction were the inevitable consequences of a renunciation of the authority of the church. To be sure Calvin was no friend to sectarianism. He was intolerant of teachings opposed to his view, as witness his severity toward the long-suffering and much-persecuted Anabaptists and his execution of Servetus, but in this he was not so much the bigoted sectarian as the stern legislator who thought he was upholding the authority of revelation against the wantonness of sinners. That he justified his action by an appeal to the Old Testament was the result of his extreme Protestant biblicism. How much soever we may lament the awful mistake he made in enforcing his views upon unwilling men, this very thoroughness, this severe repression of opposition, this determination to establish by law a unitary system of morality and doctrine was more in harmony with the spirit of an age that had been trained in submission to authority, upheld by force and that felt the dangers of absolute liberty, than were the liberal views of the Anabaptists.

This suggests a third characteristic of Calvin's theology—perhaps to be expected in one who had been trained for the bar—*his legal habit of mind*. To him the Bible was a divine law-book. Its teachings were the statutes of the Supreme Lawgiver. He made it the Protestant text-book on morals, religion, doctrine, church order and even political institutions. The same characteristics appear in some of his outstanding doctrines. The divine decrees antedate all history. Salvation and condemnation flow from God's election and reprobation, and all human conduct is the outcome of the same unchanging law. The atonement of Christ is a legal transaction and so is the Justification of believers. To many of the present day this is a stumbling block in Calvin's system, but it was much less so in his day. The temper of the age was legal. Europe's inheritance of old Rome's ideas, the growth of monarchial power in the period im-

mediately preceding the Reformation with the accompanying tendency toward the unfolding unitary systems of law and, most of all, the evolution of papal machinery, the administration of papal government, the growth of canon law with the inevitable result that jurisprudence became the chief study of ecclesiastics, combined in stamping upon the Catholic world the legal complexion of thought. Protestantism in Calvinism appeared clothed with the highest claim to divine legality and satisfied the consciences of men who sought the right to break away from the Roman church, but as yet had scarcely dared to denounce her as an organized rebellion against the authority of High Heaven.

3. Calvin was far from being a mere theorist. He put his theories into practice with great success. He rendered to Protestantism the *services of a great statesman*. In the government of Geneva he presented a system that honored religion by recognizing it as supreme in the state and that maintained the character of a good secular government also. Thus far Protestantism had failed to give both to religion and civil government their dues and in this respect had appeared inferior to Catholicism. The Roman Catholic Church had professedly established the right of religion to supremacy on earth. But it had acknowledged the divine origin of civil government also. These were stated as the soul and the body in man. Despite great conflicts between the church and several of the states of Europe, this theory proved fairly workable. The church stood for law and order. It had upheld civil governments in return for the subserviency of civil rulers to the church's aims. In this regard Protestantism was at a disadvantage. In Anglicanism and Lutheranism it subordinated the church to the state by treating religion as a function of civil government. In neither of these forms of Protestantism did the church enjoy self-government. Under such conditions religion was bound to be a plant of sickly growth and it is no wonder if to many intelligent men of evangelical temper the Catholic church, with all its failings, was preferable to such politico-religious establishments.

On the other hand, Anabaptism seemed even more objectionable. Its implications were, apparently, the over-

turning of all authority, both ecclesiastical and secular. Rejecting realism, the Anabaptists had discredited the career of the Great Church by regarding it as the history of a fatal lapse from primitive Christianity. To a world just beginning to be free, they seemed equally to threaten the stability of every known form of secular government. The Peasants' war and the Münster uproar seemed to warrant such fears. Monarchy and Aristocracy saw their very existence threatened by the rise of dread democracy. The suspicion grew that Protestantism was ultimately destructive in character. On the one hand it threatened the church, on the other the state.

It was reserved for Calvin to free the Reformation from such a charge. The system he established in Geneva falls far short of more modern conceptions of the rights and mutual relations of religion and civil government, but it proved to men of his time that Protestantism did not spell *anarchy*. It was a church-state, rather than a state-church and thus was free from the reproach which Catholicism flung at Anglicism and Lutheranism. It recognized the peculiar, divinely-allotted sphere of civil government and this washed out the stain of Anabaptism. Without being anti-monarchical (for Calvin was virtual king in Geneva,) it combined aristocracy and democracy and thus attracted sympathy from all sides. Moreover, it possessed stability. During those troublous times it not only presented the spectacle of a well ordered city government in which lawlessness and moral looseness of all sorts were sternly put down, not only a state from which Anabaptist and other disturbing opinions were banished and the ancient Catholic faith firmly maintained, not only a city of refuge to which the persecuted of a like faith from other lands might flee, but it also demonstrated its ability to preserve its territory inviolate, notwithstanding the ill-will of its enemies. Calvin proved to the world of his time that Protestantism was workable, and thus he provided a rallying-center of positive Protestantism that was to force its way onward in spite of all opposition. Perhaps Calvin's greatest achievement was: he organized Protestantism and enabled it to contest successfully with Roman Catholicism the supremacy of Europe.