

CALVIN, JOHN (1509-1564), was born at Noyon, in Picardy, July 10, 1509. His father, Gerard Calvin or Cauvin,¹ was a notary-apostolic and procurator-fiscal for the lordship of Noyon, besides holding certain ecclesiastical offices in connection with that diocese. The name of his mother was Jeanne Lefranc; she was the daughter of an innkeeper at Cambrai, who afterwards came to reside at Noyon. Gerard Calvin is described as a man of considerable sagacity and prudence, and on this account held in esteem by the leading men of the district. His wife added to considerable personal attractions the graces of a vivid and earnest piety. Their family consisted of four sons, of whom John was the second, and two daughters.

Of Calvin's early years only a few notices remain. His father destined him from the first for theological studies, being moved to this by the evidences afforded in his boyhood of a religious tendency, and perhaps also by a shrewd apprehension of the kind of pursuits in which he was most fitted to excel. The esteem in which the father was held opened for the boy a place in the household of the noble family of De Montmor, where he received his elementary education along with the children of the house, though at his father's expense. In his thirteenth year his father, whose circumstances were not affluent, procured for him from the bishop the office of chaplain in the Chapelle de Notre Dame de la Gesine. A few days after his appointment he received the tonsure, and on the 29th of May 1521 he was installed in his office. The plague having visited Noyon, the young De Montmors were sent to Paris to pursue their studies there, and thither Calvin accompanied them, being enabled by the income received from his benefice to meet the expense of a residence in the metropolis. His first school was the Collège de la Marche, at that time under the regency of Maturin Cordier, a man of excellent character, of sound learning, and of high repute as a teacher. To him Calvin ever acknowledged himself indebted for the benefits received under his tuition. In dedicating to him his Commentary on the First Epistle to the Thessalonians, as "eximie pietatis et doctrinae viro," he declares that so had he been aided by his instruction that whatever subsequent progress he had made he only regarded as received from him, and "this," he adds, "I wish to testify to posterity that if any utility accrue to any from my writings they may acknowledge it as having in part flowed from thee." From this institution he removed to the Collège Montaigu, where he had for instructor a Spaniard, who is described as a man of learning, and to whom Calvin was indebted for the culture of his already acute intellect, by the study of dialectics and the scholastic philosophy. Whilst at school the future reformer distinguished himself by his superior abilities, and his indefatigable assiduity. He speedily outstripped all his competitors in grammatical studies, and by his skill and acumen as a student of philosophy, gave fruitful promise of that consummate excellence as a reasoner, in the department of speculative truth, which he afterwards displayed. Intensely devoted to study he cared little for the pastimes in which his fellow scholars indulged; he shunned society, and was more disposed to censure the frivolities of those around him than to seek the solace of their companionship; severe to others he was still more so to himself, and his pale face and attenuated frame bore witness

¹ The family name of Calvin seems to have been written indifferently Cauvin, Chauve, Chauvin, Calvus, Calvinus. In the contemporary notices of Gerard and his family, in the capitular registers of the cathedral at Noyon, the name is always spelt Cauvin. The anagram of Calvin is Alouin, and this in its Latinized form Alcuinus appears in two editions of his *Institutio* as that of the author (Audin, *Vie de Calvin*, t. 520). The syndics of Geneva address him in a letter written in 1540, and still preserved, as "Docteur Caulvin." In his letters written in French he usually signs himself "Jean Calvin." He affected the title of "Maître," for what reason is not known.

at once to the rigour of his abstinence and the ardour with which he prosecuted his studies. In his nineteenth year he, through the influence of his father, obtained the living of Marteville, to which he was presented on the 27th of September 1527. After holding this preferment for nearly two years, he exchanged it in July 1529 for the cure of Pont l'Évêque, a village near to Noyon, and the place to which his father originally belonged. He appears to have been not a little elated by his early promotion, and although not ordained, he preached several sermons to the people. But though the career of ecclesiastical preferment was thus early opened to him, Calvin was destined not to become a priest of the Church of Rome. A change came over the mind both of his father and himself respecting his future career. Gerard Calvin, looking at things only from a worldly point of view, began to suspect that he had not chosen the most lucrative profession for his son, and that the law offered to a youth of his talents and industry a more promising sphere.² His son, on the other hand, had come under an influence of a very different kind, but which, with still more decisive impulse, inclined him to relinquish the ecclesiastical life. Through the counsels of his relation, Pierre Robert Olivetan, the first translator of the Bible into French, he had been led for the first time to study the sacred volume, and to test his religious opinions and practices by its dictates. The result was that, though not yet detached from the faith of the Romish church, he was very willing to relinquish all thoughts of becoming a priest in that communion. He accordingly readily complied with his father's suggestion; and having resigned his cure, he removed from Paris to Orleans, in order to study law under Pierre de l'Étoile, a distinguished juriconsult, and at that time professor there. On this new pursuit Calvin entered with characteristic ardour, and such was his progress in legal knowledge, that he frequently occupied the chair of the professor, while his general reputation for ability and scholarship stood so high that, on leaving Orleans, he received the grade of doctor without payment of the usual fees, as a compliment to his merits. Other studies, however, besides those of law had occupied him whilst in this city. God, who had destined him for a very different career, was in His providence preparing him for the work he had to do. His mind, at first hardened by the influence of early superstition, was, he himself tells us, brought by sudden conversion into a state of docility.³ An ardent desire to attain proficiency in sacred knowledge took possession of him, and though this did not lead him to renounce other studies, it rendered him frigid in the pursuit of them. At all times, indeed, a diligent student, he seems at this time to have been impelled by his zeal beyond those bounds which a wise regard to health would impose. It was his wont, after a frugal supper, to labour till midnight, and in the morning when he awoke, he would, before he arose, recall and digest what he had read the previous day, so as to make it thoroughly his own. "By these protracted vigils," says Beza, "he secured indeed a solid erudition, and an excellent memory; but it is probable he at the same time sowed the seeds of that disease which occasioned him various illnesses in after life, and at last brought upon him premature death."⁴

From Orleans Calvin went to Bourges to prosecute his studies under a learned Italian of the name of Alciati, whom Francis I. had invited into France, and settled as a professor of law in that university. Here he became acquainted with Melchior Volmar, a German, then professor of Greek at Bourges, and a man of sound erudition

² Calv., *Prof. ad Comment. in Psalmos*.

³ *Prof. ad Psalmos*.

⁴ *Jo. Calvini Vita, sub init.*

as well as exemplary character. By him Calvin was taught Greek, and introduced to the study of the New Testament in its original language, a service which he gratefully acknowledges in one of his printed works. The conversation of Volmar also seems to have been of use to him in deepening his religious convictions, and confirming him in his attachment to the doctrines of the Reformation. These were now beginning to be widely diffused through France. Twelve years had elapsed since Luther had published his theses against indulgences,—twelve years of intense excitement and anxious discussion, not in Germany only, but in almost all the adjacent kingdoms. In France there had not been as yet any overt revolt against the Church of Rome, but multitudes were lending a friendly ear to the Reformed doctrines, and a few were in secret rejoicing in having heartily embraced them. To such Calvin united himself whilst at Orleans, and after his removal to Bourges he became a teacher, both in private conference with inquirers and by discourses in more public assemblies. "Before a year had elapsed," says he, speaking of his conversion, "all who were desirous of a purer doctrine were in the habit of coming to me, though a novice and a tyro, for the purpose of learning."⁵ And Beza tells us that he not only fortified the few believers who were in the town, but preached often in some of the neighbouring mansions and hamlets, whereby he wonderfully advanced the kingdom of God in many families, among which he specifies that of the lord of Lignièrès, who with his lady heard with approval the new doctrines.⁶ In engaging in such efforts, Calvin appears to have yielded to a constraining sense of duty rather than to have followed the bias of his own inclinations. "By nature," says he, "somewhat clownish (*sub-rusticus*), I always preferred the shade and ease, and would have sought some hiding-place; but this was not permitted, for all my retreats became like public schools."⁷ Nor did he infuse any of the enthusiasm which usually marks the young reformer into his addresses. "He taught the truth," says Beza, "not with affected eloquence, but with such depth of knowledge and so much solid gravity of style, that there was not a man who could hear him without being ravished with admiration."⁸

His residence at Bourges was cut short by the sudden death of his father, which occasioned his return to his native place. Immediately after his father's decease, he seems to have paid a hasty visit to Paris, and then to have returned to Noyon, where he resided for a couple of years or so. At the close of this period he appears to have returned to Paris, where he apparently resided from 1529 to 1532, as letters written by him are dated from Paris in these years. While there he lodged with a tradesman, Etienne de la Forge, who early fell a victim to his zeal for the Reformation, and "whose memory," Calvin says, "should be blessed among believers as a holy martyr for Christ."⁹ In his house the friends of evangelical truth were wont to meet, and Calvin not only associated with them, but frequently preached in their assemblies. To the great joy of all such, he at length entirely relinquished his legal pursuits and devoted himself afresh to theology, giving himself up wholly to the work, preaching with great energy, and using all the means in his power to win converts to the truth, as well as to confirm those by whom it had been already embraced. By this time the Reformation had attracted so many adherents in France, that the upholders of the established system became infuriated, and attempted to stay its further progress by

the most cruel persecutions. It was whilst these were raging that Calvin issued his first publication, an edition of Seneca's tract *De Clementia*, with an elaborate commentary. This book he published at his own cost, and dedicated to Claude Hangest, abbot of St Eloi, a member of the De Montmor family, with whom Calvin had been brought up. The commentary, which is written in that pure and terse Latinity which characterizes all Calvin's works composed in the language of ancient Rome, displays extensive acquaintance with ancient literature, though the author has fallen into the extraordinary mistake of running the two Senecas, father and son, into one, and making the philosopher die 115 years old. It has been suggested that Calvin published this work with a view to influence the king to put a stop to the persecution of the Protestants, but there is nothing in the treatise itself or in the commentary to favour this opinion.

This work was published in April 1532, and seems to have brought Calvin more of honour than of profit. It appears, indeed, that he had some difficulty in paying the cost of its publication; and it is probable that it was partly in order to meet this that he sold at this time the slender patrimony which his father had left him. He at this time also relinquished the ecclesiastical preferments which he had hitherto continued to hold, an act which, though demanded by the change that had taken place in his religious views, was entirely voluntary on his part, and, when viewed in connection with his then straitened circumstances, must be put to the credit of his integrity and disinterestedness. He was now in his twenty-fourth year, and was already recognized as at the head of the Reformation movement in France. An occasion soon occurred which brought him into open collision with the dominant party. Nicholas Cop, the newly-elected regent of the Sorbonne, had to deliver an oration according to custom in the Church of the Maturins, on the feast of All Saints. Being intimate with Calvin, he pronounced an oration which the latter had prepared for him, "of a totally different sort," says Beza, "from what was customary."¹⁰ It was, in fact, a defence of the Reformed opinions, especially of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. This was more than the Sorbonnists could bear, and Cop, being summoned to appear before the parliament, found it necessary to make his escape from Paris to Basel. An attempt was at the same time made to seize Calvin, but being forewarned of the design by his friends, he also made his escape. His lodgings, however, were searched, and his books and papers seized, to the imminent peril of some of his friends, whose letters were found in his repositories. He himself retired first to the castle of Lord de Hazeville near Mantes, and after that to Saintonge, where he was the guest of Louis du Tillet, a canon of Angoulême, and where at the request of his host he prepared some short discourses, which were circulated in the surrounding parishes, and read in public to the people. He subsequently removed to Nerac, the residence of the queen of Navarre, the only sister of Francis I., who then favoured the Reformers, and through whose intercession the storm that had broken out against them was for the time abated. Here he became acquainted with the venerable Jacques Lefevre d'Estaples, a scholar and man of science, whom the queen had rescued from the fury of the Sorbonnists, and engaged as tutor to her children. By him Calvin was warmly received, and his future eminence as a reformer of the church predicted.

It has been asserted that it was whilst resident at Saintonge that Calvin prepared the first sketch of his *Institutio Christiana Religiosis*; but this has not been proved. His residence in that retirement continued only

⁵ *Epist. Ded., Comment. in Ep. II. ad Corinthios praef.*

⁶ *Prof. ad Psalmos*.

⁷ *Hist. Eccles.*, t. i. pp. 6, 7; Lille, 1841.

⁸ *Prof. ad Psalmos*.

⁹ *Hist. Eccles. ubi sup.* ¹⁰ Calv., *Contr. Libertinos*, c. 4.

¹¹ *Hist. Eccles.*, vol. i. p. 9.

for a very few months; for, in 1534, we find him first at Noyon, his native place, and soon after again in Paris. Here he was compelled to remain concealed, in consequence of the measures which the enemies of the Reformation were still pursuing against its adherents. At the risk of his life, however, he came forth to meet one whom he was afterwards to encounter under very different circumstances, the Spanish physician, Servetus or Servetus, who was even then engaged in propagating his heretical notions concerning the Trinity. Servetus having expressed a desire to have a conference with Calvin, it was arranged that they should meet and discuss their conflicting opinions; but though Calvin waited for him long at the time and place appointed, Servetus failed to make his appearance, "being," says Beza, "unable to endure the sight of Calvin," but more probably deterred by the danger to which both were exposed from the hostility of the ruling powers. Calvin's design in acceding to this colloquy seems to have been a kindly one towards Servetus. "Not without danger to my life," he himself says, "I offered to deliver him from his errors."¹ Nor was Servetus the only errorist whom Calvin endeavoured at this time to confute. The Anabaptists of Germany had spread into France, and were disseminating many wild and fanatical opinions among those who had seceded from the Church of Rome. Among other notions which they had imbibed, was that of a sleep of the soul after death. To Calvin this notion appeared so pernicious, that he composed and published a treatise in refutation of it, under the title of *Psychopannychia*. In this work he chiefly dwells upon the evidence from Scripture in favour of the belief that the soul retains its intelligent consciousness after its separation from the body,—passing by questions of philosophical speculation, as tending on such a subject only to minister to an idle curiosity.

The *Psychopannychia* was published in 1534 at Orleans, whither Calvin had been constrained, in consequence of the violence of the persecution at Paris, to retreat. On his way thither he stopped for some time at Poitiers. Here many gathered round him desirous of instruction from him; and in a grotto near the town he celebrated for the first time the communion in the Evangelical Church of France, using a piece of the rock as a table. From this time forward his influence became supreme, and all who had imbibed or become tinged with the Reformed doctrines in France turned to him for counsel and instruction, attracted not only by his power as a teacher, but still more, perhaps, because they saw in him so full a development of the Christian life according to the evangelical model. M. Renan, no prejudiced judge, pronounces him "the most Christian man of his time," and attributes to this his success as a reformer. Certain it is that already he had drawn upon him the notice of those who were seeking to extinguish in blood the light which had been kindled, and which he was so prompt to hold up to view; so that he was obliged to seek safety in flight. In company with his friend Louis du Tillet, whom he had again gone to Angoulême to visit, he set out for Basel. On their way they were robbed by one of their servants, who so entirely stripped them of their property, that it was only by borrowing ten crowns from their other servant that they were enabled to get to Strasburg, and thence to Basel. Here Calvin was welcomed by the band of scholars and theologians who had conspired to make that city the Athens of Switzerland, and especially by the learned Simon Gryneus, and by Wolfgang Capito, the leader of the Reformation at Basel. Under the auspices and guidance of the latter, Calvin applied himself to the study of Hebrew.

Francis I., desirous to continue the persecution of the Protestants, but anxious at the same time not to break with

¹ *Calvini Refut. Errorum Serveti, Opp.*, t. viii. p. 511.; Ed. Amstel.

the Protestant princes of Germany, resorted to the unworthy expedient of instructing his ambassador to assure the latter that it was only against the Anabaptists, and other parties who called in question all civil magistracy, that his severities were exercised. Calvin, indignant at the calumny which was thus cast upon the Reformed party in France, hastily prepared for the press his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which he published as a confession of the Reformed faith, and dedicated to the king. Some obscurity rests over the early history of this book. The question has arisen whether it appeared first in French or in Latin. The probability is that it appeared first in French, for the French dedication to Francis I. is dated 1st August 1535, whilst the earliest Latin edition came out in 1536.² Of the edition of 1535, however, no copy is known to be extant; the first French edition with a date is that of 1540, but this was after several editions in Latin had appeared. In its first form the work consisted of only six chapters, and was intended merely as a brief manual of Christian doctrine. It appeared anonymously, the author having, as he himself says, nothing in view beyond furnishing a statement of the faith of the persecuted Protestants, whom he saw cruelly cut to pieces by impious and perfidious court parasites.³ In this work, though produced when the author was only twenty-five years of age, we find a complete outline of that theological system which has since borne his name. In none of the later editions, nor in any of his later works, do we find reason to believe that he ever changed his views on any essential point from what they were at the period of its first publication. Such an instance of maturity of mind and of opinion at so early an age, would be remarkable under any circumstances; but in Calvin's case it is rendered peculiarly so, by the shortness of the time which had elapsed since he gave himself to theological studies. It may be doubted also if the history of literature presents us with another instance of a book written at so early an age, which has exercised such a prodigious influence upon the opinions and practices both of contemporaries and of posterity.

After a short visit to the court of the duchess of Ferrara, which at that time afforded an asylum to several learned and pious fugitives from persecution, Calvin returned to France to arrange his affairs before finally taking farewell of his native country. His intention was to settle at Basel, and to devote himself to study. But being unable, in consequence of the disturbed state of the country, to reach Basel by the ordinary route, he had to take the route through Geneva. Whilst in this city his further progress was arrested, and his resolution to pursue the quiet path of studious research was dispelled, by what he calls the "formidable obstetation" of Farel.⁴ After many struggles and no small suffering, this energetic spirit had succeeded in planting the evangelical standard at Geneva; and anxious to secure the aid of such a man as Calvin, he entreated him on his arrival to relinquish his design of going farther, and to devote himself to the work in that city. Calvin at first declined, alleging as an excuse his need of securing more time for personal improvement, which could not be obtained were he engaged in ministerial work. To the ardent Farel this seemed a mere pretext for indolence. "I tell you," he continued, "in answer to this pretence of your studies, in the name of Almighty God, that if you will not devote yourself with us to this work of the Lord, the Lord will curse you as one seeking not Christ so much as himself." Startled by this denunciation, and feeling as if God had laid his hand on him to detain him, Calvin consented to remain at Geneva, where

² This edition forms a small 8vo of 514 pages, and 6 pages of index. It appeared at Basel from the press of Thomas Platter and Balthasar Lasius in March 1536.

³ *Præf. ad Psalmos.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

he was immediately appointed teacher of theology. He was also elected preacher by the magistrates with the consent of the people, but this office he would not accept until it had been repeatedly pressed upon him. His services seem to have been rendered for some time gratuitously, for in February 1537, there is an entry in the city registers to the effect that six crowns had been voted to him, "since he has as yet hardly received anything."

Calvin was in his twenty-eighth year when he was thus constrained to settle at Geneva; and in this city the rest of his life, with the exception of a brief interval, was spent. The post to which he was thus called was not an easy one. Though the people of Geneva had cast off the yoke of Rome, they were still "but very imperfectly enlightened in divine knowledge; they had as yet hardly emerged from the filth of the papacy."¹ This laid them open to the incursions of those fanatical teachers, whom the excitement attendant upon the Reformation had called forth, and who hung mischievously upon the rear of the reforming body. To obviate the evils thence resulting, Calvin, in union with Farel, drew up a condensed statement of Christian doctrine consisting of twenty-one articles. This the citizens were summoned, in parties of ten each, to profess and swear to as the confession of their faith—a process which, though not in accordance with modern notions of the best way of establishing men in the faith, was gone through, Calvin tells us, "with much satisfaction." As the people took this oath in the capacity of *citizens*, we may see here the basis laid for that theocratic system which subsequently became peculiarly characteristic of the Genevan polity. Deeply convinced of the importance of education for the young, Calvin and his coadjutors were solicitous to establish schools throughout the canton, and to enforce on parents the sending of their children to them; and as he had no faith in education apart from religious training, he drew up an elementary catechism of Christian doctrine which the children had to learn whilst they were receiving secular instruction. Of the troubles which arose from fanatical teachers, the chief proceeded from the efforts of the Anabaptists; but these Calvin and his colleagues so effectually silenced by means of a public disputation held on the 18th of March 1537, that they never afterwards appeared at Geneva. In the course of this year also, the peace of Calvin and his friends was much disturbed, and their work interrupted, by a turbulent and unprincipled preacher named Peter Caroli, who, after many changes of religious profession (with none of which, however, had he associated anything of true religion, or even much of ordinary morality), had assumed the character of a stickler for orthodoxy. In this character he accused the Geneva divines of Sabellianism and Arianism, because they would not enforce the Athanasian creed, and had not used the words "Trinity" and "Person" in the confession they had drawn up. In a synod held at Bern the matter was fully discussed, when a verdict was given in favour of the Geneva divines, and Caroli deposed from his office and banished. Thus ended an affair which seems to have occasioned Calvin much more uneasiness than the character of his assailant, and the manifest falsehood of the charge brought against him, would seem to justify. Two brief tracts, intended to expose the evils and warn against the seductions of Popery, one entitled *De Fugienda Idolatria*, the other *De Papiasticis Sacerdotiis*, must be added to the labours of Calvin this year.

Hardly was the affair of Caroli settled, when new and severer trials came upon the Genevan Reformers. The severe simplicity of the ritual which Farel had introduced, and to which Calvin had conformed; the strictness with

which the ministers sought to enforce not only the laws of morality, but certain sumptuary regulations respecting the dress and mode of living of the citizens; and their determination in spiritual matters not to submit to the least dictation from the civil power, led to such violent dissensions that Calvin and his colleagues refused to administer the sacrament to the people. For this they were banished from the city. They went first to Bern, and soon after to Zurich, where a synod of the Swiss pastors had been convened. Before this assembly they pleaded their cause, and stated what were the points on which they were prepared to insist as needful for the proper discipline of the church. They declared that they would yield in the matter of ceremonies so far as to employ unleavened bread in the eucharist, to use fonts in baptism, and to allow festival days, provided the people might pursue their ordinary avocations after public service. These Calvin regarded as matters of indifference, provided the magistrates did not make them of importance, by seeking to enforce them; and he was the more willing to concede them, because he hoped thereby to meet the wishes of the Bernese brethren, whose ritual was less simple than that established by Farel at Geneva. But he and his colleagues insisted, on the other hand, that for the proper maintenance of discipline, there should be a division of parishes—that excommunications should be permitted, and should be under the power of elders chosen by the council, in conjunction with the clergy—that order should be observed in the admission of preachers—and that only the clergy should officiate in ordination by the laying on of hands. It was proposed also, as conducive to the welfare of the church, that the sacrament of the Lord's Supper should be administered more frequently, at least once every month, and that congregational singing of psalms should be practised in the churches. On these terms the synod interceded with the Genevese to restore their pastors; but through the opposition of the Bernese this was frustrated, and a second edict of banishment was the only response.

Calvin and Farel betook themselves, under these circumstances, to Basel, where they soon after separated, Farel to go to Neufchatel, and Calvin to Strasburg. At the latter place Calvin resided till the autumn of 1541, occupying himself partly in literary exertions, partly as a preacher in the French church, and partly as a lecturer on theology. In 1539 he attended the convention at Frankfort as the companion of Bucer, and in the following year he appeared at that at Hagenau and Worms, as the delegate from the city of Strasburg. He was present also at the diet at Ratisbon, where he became personally acquainted with Melancthon, and formed with him a friendship which lasted through life. It is to this period of his life that we owe the completed form of his *Institutio*, his Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, and his Tract on the Lord's Supper. Notwithstanding his manifold engagements, he found time to attend to the tenderer affections; for it was during his residence at Strasburg that he married Idelette de Bures or van Buren, the widow of a person named Störder, whom he had converted from Anabaptism. In her Calvin found, to use his own words, "the excellent companion of his life," a "precious help" to him amid his manifold labours and frequent infirmities. She died, in 1549, to the great grief of her husband, who never ceased to mourn her loss.

During his absence, disorder and irreligion had prevailed in Geneva. An attempt was made by Sadolet, bishop of Carpentras, to take advantage of this so as to restore the papal supremacy in that district; but this design Calvin, watchful over the interests of his ungrateful flock, though exiled from them, completely frustrated by writing such a reply to the letter which the bishop had addressed to the

¹ Beza, *Vit. Calv. an. 1536.*