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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

# CALVIN'S INTERPRETATION OF THE REFORMATION

by W. STANFORD REID

**T**HERE is no more welcome contributor to THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY than Professor Stanford Reid. His warm attachment to the Reformed faith and his high standing as a historian combine with his genial humanity to give his writings a quality which we greatly prize. No editorial words are necessary to underline the importance of the subject with which he deals in the following paper.

**I**N recent studies of the thought of John Calvin, considerable emphasis has been laid upon his contribution to the Reformation not as an original thinker, but as a systematizer of both the thought and ecclesiastical organization of the newly created Protestant churches. Wilhelm Pauck, for instance, following the lead of Imbart de la Tour, has pointed out that Calvin was "a second generation reformer" who took that which had already been brought forth by his older contemporaries and welded it into a system of thought and action which was to be of very great importance.<sup>1</sup> While this is to a certain extent true, anyone who dismisses Calvin as merely a systematizer is doing him a very serious injustice and is twisting history, for Calvin was an original thinker in his own right. He contributed many new insights and filled in many large gaps in the Protestant thought of his own day. One of his contributions which is often forgotten, is his consistent and continued insistence upon a proper understanding of the Protestant Reformation itself. Because of his certainty of the meaning and importance of the movement his courage seldom failed, while at the same time he was able to give others needed encouragement to carry on the work of building up the struggling Protestant cause.

The other Reformers never seem to have been as clear about what they were doing as was Calvin. At Augsburg in 1530.

<sup>1</sup> W. Pauck, *The Heritage of the Reformation* (Boston, 1950), p. 77; P. Imbart de la Tour, *Les Origines de la Reforme* (Paris, 1935), IV, 48 f., 111 f.

Melanchthon was talking about returning to the Roman Church, while Luther and Bucer at times seem to have been uncertain as to the lengths to which the Reformation should go. Calvin, however, had no uncertainty concerning the nature of the Reformation, its causes, objectives, difficulties and achievements. It is true that he never wrote a book on the subject, but his interpretation of the Reformation pervaded the whole of his thought and action to such an extent that, as one peruses his writings, his interpretation of the movement is continually found. The result was that this interpretation of the Reformation soon became that of the Reformed Churches of Europe, and has continued to exercise a not inconsiderable influence on historical writing down to the present. Although for a time, under the impact of Marxian interpretations, the effect of Calvin's views weakened, the renewed interest in Calvin's thought which is being manifested today in some circles is bringing his interpretation once again to the fore. Therefore, despite the fact that many may feel that his interpretation was naïve, simple and obvious, with an over-emphasis on the supernatural, it would seem to be advisable, in order to understand both the man and his work, to examine his interpretation of the movement in which he played so important a part.

## I. THE ORIGINS OF THE REFORMATION

In endeavouring to understand Calvin's interpretation of the Reformation, the first step is to ascertain his views of its causation. This can be understood only when one grasps the relevant elements in his theology, which formed the basic presuppositions determining his philosophy of history. Two doctrines were fundamental. Of primary importance was the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, for all history, including the Reformation, is the expression of God's will and purpose. Secondly, there was the doctrine of the nature of the Church, which was to loom very large, since the Reformation was a reformation of the *Church*.

To Calvin the sovereignty of God was essential for a true understanding of the events of his own day, since all things which come to pass do so by virtue of God's sovereign rule. The chapter on Providence in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* sets this forth as clearly as possible. Nothing takes place apart from God's plan which is centred around the history of the Church, for "since God has chosen the Church for his habitation, there is no doubt but he particularly displays his paternal care in the government of

it".<sup>2</sup> Thus, more clearly in the history of His people than anywhere else, does God display His lordship over the movement of temporal events.

This logically raised the question of the nature of the Church. To Calvin, the essence of the Church is to be found in God's eternal election. God, having from all eternity chosen in Christ those who are His, accomplished His purpose in time through the Incarnation, Death, Resurrection and Ascension of Christ, in whom also all the elect are united with each other by virtue of their union with their common Lord. Following Luther, he held that the elect became the historical people of God by justifying faith, through which they were included in the membership of the Church. For this reason, the Church is also "the Communion of the Saints", which always exists since God never leaves Himself without a witness in the world. United to Christ by faith, the true Church can never be destroyed nor overwhelmed even by Satan's greatest efforts.<sup>3</sup>

At this point it is necessary to understand Calvin's distinction between the Church *visible* and the Church *invisible*. The former is composed of all those who profess to be Christians, while the latter is made up of those who not only *profess* to be, but truly *are* in "a state of grace". Thus, although in the Church *visible* there are many hypocrites, one must not for that reason separate himself from it, for it has been given the responsibility of preaching the Gospel, administering the sacraments and exercising discipline.<sup>4</sup> It is the fulfilment of these three functions that determines whether or not the apparent Church *visible* is truly the Church, for even the *visible* Church is not necessarily attached to outward show. This can be seen from the fact that at times the Church supposed *visible* may become so corrupt that it no longer be regarded as the Church. The true *visible* Church then becomes a hidden minority, scattered like sheep but preserved by the secret power of God.<sup>5</sup> As Calvin pointed out in his dedication of the *Institutes* to Francis I of France, "the true Church might be other than the visible Church of the moment and might not be itself discernible".<sup>6</sup> The true *visible* Church is always a small minority, but a minority

<sup>2</sup> *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 6th American edit., J. Allen, ed. (Philadelphia), Bk. I, chap. 17, vi.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk. IV, chap. 1; Calvin, "The true method of giving peace and of reforming the Church," *Tracts on the Reformation*, H. Beveridge, tr. (Edinburgh, 1851), III, 264.

<sup>4</sup> *Institutes*, *loc. cit.*, iv, v.

<sup>5</sup> "True Method . . .", pp. 264, 297.

<sup>6</sup> G. D. Henderson, *Church and Ministry* (London, 1951), p. 78.

which, while at times not discernible by man, continues to exist protected by Christ, "by whose hand she is sustained, by whose protection she is defended, by whose power she is preserved in safety".<sup>7</sup> At times the Church may be divided within herself over interpretations of Scripture, but that should make its members only the more "disposed to cultivate brotherly intercourse".<sup>8</sup> The true Church, even if the supposed *visible* Church is apostate, still exists, albeit out of sight, in the unity of faith.

At the same time, Calvin was very conscious of a dialectical movement in the history of the Church. The true Church does not exist in a state of suspended animation, for it is responsible to preach the Gospel. As it does so, opposition arises owing to the work of Satan who hates all that is good.<sup>9</sup> The result is tribulation for the people of God, both from the external pressure of persecution and from the internal weakness of false Christians. The true Church then becomes a remnant, while the professing visible Church goes on its apostate way. Relief will come only by God's grace through a revival and reformation of the Church leading to fresh conflicts and problems. Thus Calvin saw the history of the Church as a continual defection from and return to God, an oscillation between orthodoxy and apostasy. Yet throughout it all, the true Church abides safely "under the shadow of the Almighty", whether it be large and powerful or small and persecuted. The Church will never perish, but will ultimately conquer through Christ.<sup>10</sup>

In applying his philosophy of Church history, Calvin accepted the basic premise that the New Testament Church was the prototype or model for the Church throughout history. Although it knew heresies and difficulties, yet the divinely inspired apostles led it surely and firmly, so that the New Testament record pictures for the later Church an organization which succeeding generations should follow.<sup>11</sup> It shows the true doctrine of the Church as well as the proper form of government and the divinely-ordained method of worship. To depart in principle from any of these three is to endanger seriously the Church's purity.

<sup>7</sup> *Institutes*, "Dedication," p. 33; "De Scandalis," *Tractatus Theologici Omnes* (Geneva, 1576), p. 118.

<sup>8</sup> *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, 1948), p. xxvi.

<sup>9</sup> *Institutes*, "Dedication," p. 37; Bk. IV, chap. 1, iv.

<sup>10</sup> "De Scandalis," pp. 117 f.; "True method . . .", pp. 264, 297; A Ruchat, *Histoire de la Réformation de la Suisse* (Nyon, 1837), V., 529.

<sup>11</sup> "Reply of John Calvin to Sadolet's Letter," *Tracts*, I, 34, 43.

To Calvin, the post-apostolic Church was by no means in the same rank, nor possessed of the same authority as the New Testament body. Gradually the ancient form of the Church was "sullied and disfigured by illiterate men of indifferent character". Thus the Church gradually became tainted with error, which, however, was nothing like the subsequent corruption of the Middle Ages.<sup>12</sup> The reason for this decline was really Christianity's growing popularity because of the believers' faithfulness to the Gospel under persecution, when "it triumphed under the cross". Popularity was followed by an influx of hypocrites and heretics who displaced faithful pastors, often sending them into exile. The result of this was that the true Church became small and difficult to see, although it continued to pass on the truth.<sup>13</sup> The apostate *Visible Church*, on the other hand, became powerful and wealthy.

The condition of the *Visible Church* from this point on continued to deteriorate, although Calvin held that most of the Romanist errors were of relatively recent date. He argues at some length that although the Roman Church claimed to adhere to the early fathers, actually it was opposed to the majority of them in most of its practices and views, especially in its teaching concerning Papal supremacy.<sup>14</sup> Apparently Calvin blamed Aristotle and Plato for a good portion of the corruption which had invaded the Church. Aristotle, by declaring the world to be eternal, defrauded God of His glory, while Plato got things fairly well muddled by his reasoning.<sup>15</sup> The outcome was corruption of doctrine, corruption of worship and corruption of government, so that the *Visible Church* ceased to be truly the Church.

Calvin's charges against the Medieval Church were definite and explicit. Basic to its corruption of evangelical doctrine was the subordination of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to the Church. The arrogating of supreme power to the ecclesiastical organization was manifested, for instance, in ecclesiastical declarations concerning the Canon of Scripture by which the Apocrypha was stated to have been divinely inspired. Going even further, the Church claimed the right to interpret the Scriptures infallibly, a claim which Calvin maintained was utterly false. The right to interpret Scripture is conferred alone by the Holy Spirit upon

<sup>12</sup> *Institutes*, Bk. IV, chap 2, i; "Epistle Dedicatory," *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, 1949), I, xvii.

<sup>13</sup> "De Scandalis," pp. 121-2.

<sup>14</sup> "Reply to Sadoleto," *loc. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> "Epistre," *Commentary on Genesis* (Grand Rapids, 1948), I, xxx.

whomsoever He will, but the bishops suppressed any interpretation but their official one, perverting what was known to be the truth. Their claim that the Church's tradition and laws were the final authority, Calvin felt to be a means of bringing the common people to accept false doctrine and to submit to laws which were a far heavier burden than those of the Old Testament economy. By so undermining Biblical authority and substituting a false apostolic succession that gave unwarranted authority to the Church, the door had been thrown open to multitudinous errors.<sup>16</sup>

First and foremost amongst these errors was the perversion of the doctrine of salvation. Man's depravity had been cried down while man had, at the same time, been credited with an uncorrupted will which was autonomous. Thus he had been taught that he could save himself by his works. Instead of his good works being the fruit of salvation, they had become a cause of it, thereby overthrowing the whole doctrine of justification by faith. Man, himself, not Christ, was to make the ultimate satisfaction for sin. The outcome of this belief was that man was kept in a continual suspense, not being able to have really any assurance that he had attained eternal life. He could have no true confidence in turning to God, only uncertainty and instability, because of his own sinfulness.<sup>17</sup> Thus the doctrines of sin and justification, along with all Christian assurance, had been completely subverted.

Because of what had been done to the doctrine of salvation, there had also taken place a radical alteration in that doctrine's outward signs: the sacraments. The Roman Church's sacramental practices represented to Calvin the epitome of superstition. Humanly devised sacraments had been added to the divinely established two of baptism and the Lord's Supper, while even these originals had been radically altered. For instance, he attacked the sacrament of Penance as bringing men once again into bondage to the law. The Lord's Supper, on the other hand, changed into the Mass, given to the laity "in one kind", and "muttered" over by a priest was "an unbloody sacrifice which God nowhere required", a human substitute for Christ. Thus the whole medieval sacramental system was something entirely novel. "For what need is there for pretending a sacrament in appointing a person to put dogs out of the church? . . . Is there such majesty in waiting on a bishop, that spiritual mystery is to be coined out of it?" The fact

<sup>16</sup> "True method . . .", p. 266 f.

<sup>17</sup> "Reply to Sadoleto," pp. 37 f.; "The Necessity of Reforming the Church," *Tractis*, I, 122 f.

is, Calvin held, the sacraments had been made into merchandize, for "anyone who considers must see that churches are just ordinary shops, and that there is no kind of sacred rite which is not there exposed for sale".<sup>18</sup>

By this adulteration of the doctrine of salvation and this subversion of the sacraments, the door was thrown open to innumerable other superstitious practices, such as the worship of images, prayers to the saints and the celebration of their days, and prayers for the dead.<sup>19</sup> Calvin coupled with these abstention from meats and clerical celibacy. He held that God has given men all good things to enjoy and such prohibitions cast God's gifts back at Him. Moreover, such abstention was superstitious since it was not required by God, but led men to trust in outward observances which brought them under the law perverting the true concept of spiritual worship. In the same way, clerical celibacy was a snare to the conscience since it was an unscriptural requirement which was contrary to both the precept and example of the Apostles.<sup>20</sup>

A fourth way in which the Medieval Church fell far short was in government and discipline. Calvin accuses it of virtually destroying the pastoral office by neglecting to teach the people. Added to this the clergy, to a large extent because of the practice of clerical celibacy, were guilty of sexual looseness and lustful living. Their disregard for any order or discipline was also shown by the way in which ecclesiastical offices were bought, sold, and bestowed upon unworthy recipients such as children or those who neglected their duties. At the same time little attention was paid to the morals of the common people as long as they accepted implicitly the Church's religious direction. Discipline was enforced only when someone objected to the Church's teachings. Then he was persecuted to the death. "This excessive rigour increases from day to day, so that now on the subject of religion it is scarcely permitted to make any inquiry at all." Thus discipline had been destroyed by being employed only to suppress the truth.<sup>21</sup>

All these faults could, theoretically, have been rooted out of the Church by its leaders, for Calvin pointed out that provincial synods had in the past dealt with matters which needed to be changed. Indeed, many in the Church were hoping that a General

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 124 ff.; "True method . . .", pp. 299, 302, 310.

<sup>19</sup> "The necessity of reforming . . .", pp. 116 f.; "True method . . .", pp. 315 f.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 326 ff.

<sup>21</sup> "The necessity . . .", pp. 128 ff., 183 ff.; "De Scandalis," p. 135.



Council would be called to bring about the necessary reforms. Calvin, however, felt that there was relatively little chance of attaining such a desirable solution. Any council which might be called would be made up of clergy who had a vested interest in maintaining the Church's present state of corruption.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, such a gathering would be largely controlled by minions of the pope, who was not interested in reform. To back his critical attitude towards the papacy Calvin pointed to Luther's contretemps with Pope Leo X. Moreover, even if a council were called with good intentions it would achieve little, for reforms would not be instituted on the basis of the Scriptures, but rather according to the Church's false standards and the wishes of the hierarchy.<sup>23</sup> These are the reasons for the failure of all previous attempts to reform the Medieval Church from within.

To sum up Calvin's position, one can best use his own words: "Doctrine and truth have been turned into a lie. The service of God has been polluted by infinite superstitions."<sup>24</sup> Thus, "the truth of Christ, if not vanquished, dissipated and entirely destroyed, is buried as it were, in ignoble obscurity."<sup>25</sup> The result of this situation was that clergy and people alike were wrapped in sloth and stupor, and even the Church's scholars and theologians gave little ground for hope, seeing that they were spending all their time wrestling with theological and logical obscurities and subtleties.<sup>26</sup> "The denser the darkness in which anyone shrouded a subject, the more he puzzled himself and others with preposterous riddles the greater his fame for acumen and learning."<sup>27</sup> They opposed reform as a consequence of their vested interests as clerics, "because their belly is their god, their kitchen is their religion". It was for this reason that the Protestants had broken with the Roman Church, for it was no longer truly the body of Christ, having perverted the true doctrine, sacraments, and discipline of the Church.<sup>28</sup>

## II. THE REFORMERS AND THEIR OBJECTIVES

Because of this situation in the Church, to Calvin the advent

<sup>22</sup> "The necessity . . .", pp. 200 ff.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198; "Dedication," *Commentary on the Catholic Epistles* (Grand Rapids, 1948), pp. xiv-xvii.

<sup>24</sup> *Lettres de Jean Calvin*, J. Bonnet, ed. (Paris, 1854), I, 291.

<sup>25</sup> *Institutes*, "Dedication," p. 22.

<sup>26</sup> "De Scandalis," p. 135; "Reply to Sadoletto," p. 60.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44; *Institutes*, "Dedication," p. 25; Bk. IV, chap. 2, vi.

of the Protestant Reformers was inevitable. The Roman Church was so corrupt that it would not tolerate a return to Biblical standards, forcing the Reformers to choose between silence and expulsion. The indestructible true Church, having once more become visible, had to break with Rome. "It was necessary," said Calvin, "for us to withdraw from them in order to approach to Christ."<sup>29</sup> Rome was at daggers drawn with the truth, so that those who loved truth could no longer remain in fellowship with the papacy.

But what were the causes of the Reformation? What actually set off the explosion? As far as Calvin was concerned, the Church of Rome had within it no spiritual power which could account for the change. Rather, the real source of the Reformation was that which the Romanists had deprived of all authority, the Bible. This was not the creation of the Church, as Rome claimed, but on the contrary in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the Church itself found its origin. Therefore, when men studied the Scriptures they were soon faced with the differences between Rome's "delusive pretensions" and "the order presented by the Lord."<sup>30</sup> Yet even the Scriptures by themselves were not the ultimate cause, as though the Reformation had come merely as the result of man's discovery of some new form of knowledge. There had to be more than an intellectual understanding of what the Bible said. There had to be submission to, and acceptance of, the divine revelation set forth in it, and this took place only through the enlightenment of man's heart and mind by the sovereign action of God's Holy Spirit. The Bible was the means whereby God revealed His will to men, but the Spirit alone made this revelation effective. Thus the Reformation was, in a sense, a miracle, the spiritual darkness in the medieval church being such that no one could have come to the truth had it not been for the direct action of God.<sup>31</sup> This is one of the most important points in Calvin's interpretation of the Reformation, for he insisted that it was solely by the intervention of God, that any spiritual revival was achieved.

Although giving God all the glory for the Reformation, Calvin does not neglect the human agents in the movement. He always refers to Martin Luther as the man who instituted the reform and

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk. IV, chap. 2, vi-x; "Reply to Sadoletto," pp. 44 f.

<sup>30</sup> "De Scandalis," p. 135; *Institutes*, Bk. IV, chap. 1, xi; "True method . . .", p. 329.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 296; "The Necessity . . .", p. 115.

who pointed the way to the others who carried on the great work of renovating the Church.<sup>32</sup> Among those whom he mentions as Luther's collaborators are Bucer, Oecolampadius, Peter Martyr and Bernard Ochino. That they "were holy prophets of God, is attested by the noble and truly divine specimen which they gave of their ministry", but they would never have been chosen by the Church's rulers. It was only because they were called of God that they accomplished so great a work.<sup>33</sup>

Calvin's attitude to Luther comes out clearly in his personal relations with the German Reformer. As Imbart de la Tour has pointed out, the Genevan Reformer in his early days was clearly a disciple of Luther, for it was the latter who had detached him from Rome. It was Luther's catechism which formed the basis of the first edition of the *Institutes* in which Calvin set forth typically Lutheran doctrines such as human depravity, justification by faith and the like. Nevertheless, Calvin was no slavish imitator, for he went further than his teacher, attacking the use of images, spiritualizing the Lord's Supper and stressing the importance of God's law and ecclesiastical discipline.<sup>34</sup> Although Calvin never met Luther, he had numerous friendly personal contacts with Melancthon who influenced him to a certain extent, despite the Frenchman's frequent annoyance with him for his compromising attitude.<sup>35</sup> Calvin on one occasion even went so far as to say that the Augsburg Confession was so indefinite that it was "neither flesh nor fish, and was the cause of great schisms and debates among the Germans."<sup>36</sup> But whatever he had to say about *Confessio Augustana*, he always acknowledged that Luther was God's instrument for beginning the Reformation.

To the other Reformers, Calvin manifested much the same attitude. As already pointed out, he held that they had been called by God to this work, so that they were fulfilling the divine plan for the reformation of the Church and the saving of souls. Among the various Protestant leaders, Bucer of Strasbourg was probably the most influential in the development of Calvin's own thought.<sup>37</sup> Next to Bucer in importance was Zwingli and his successor at

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 115, 132.

<sup>33</sup> "De Scandalis," pp. 136, 145; "True method . . .", pp. 298-9.

<sup>34</sup> P. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, New York, 1923, VII, 385 ff.; Imbart de la Tour, *op. cit.*, IV, 39, 43.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 42; *Calvini Opera Omnia*, Amsterdam, 1667, XI, 5, 9, 17.

<sup>36</sup> Ruchat, *op. cit.*, VII, 400.

<sup>37</sup> Pauck, *op. cit.*, chap. VI.

Zurich, Bullinger. Although Calvin refused to follow Zwingli in his tendency to rationalism, he nevertheless regarded him and his followers very highly, continually endeavouring to restrain Lutheran attacks upon the Zurich church when the two were trading blows on the subject of the Lord's Supper.<sup>38</sup> These men, along with many others, Calvin believed, had obeyed God's Word and Spirit in the call to cleanse the Church. They were the human agents of reformation.

Yet while giving the palm to the preachers and the theologians, Calvin held that God had also another instrument: the civil authorities. In his dedicatory epistle of the commentary on the *Acts of the Apostles*, he points out that if a few poor people such as the early Christians could do great things "there remaineth no excuse for Christian nobles, who are of any dignity, seeing God hath furnished them with the sword to defend the Kingdom of his Son".<sup>39</sup> Letters written throughout his life to various rulers and magnates develop this theme. In 1544 he urged the German princes to take in hand the work of reform as of even greater importance than fighting the Turk. Six years later he appealed to Edward VI of England in the same vein. To Anthony of Navarre he pointed out that God had called him to his office for the very purpose of aiding and defending the Church.<sup>40</sup> To determine Calvin's understanding of the different agencies which brought about reform, one can never lose sight of the importance of the civil government. In writing letters of exhortation to rulers, Calvin always emphasized how much they had already accomplished, and how greatly they were obligated to perform this work of reform as effective instruments in God's hands.

With regard to the propriety of the subject's taking arms against the civil government to bring about reform, Calvin had very different views. As he stated in the last chapter of the *Institutes*, he believed that because of the divine origin and authority of civil government men were to submit to the established authorities in all things. When a government was tolerant, co-operation with it was very necessary, for such a government was one of God's means of achieving the reformation of the Church. Where the

<sup>38</sup> Imbart de la Tour, *op. cit.*, IV, 44 ff.

<sup>39</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. xvii.

<sup>40</sup> "Epistle Dedicatory," *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, 1949), p. xxiii; *Original Letters relating to the Reformation*, H. Robinson, ed. (Cambridge, 1847), II, nos. 335, 338; "The Necessity . . .", pp. 200, 205 ff.; Ruchat, *op. cit.*, VII, 341-2.

rulers opposed the Gospel, on the other hand, Christian submission might have to take the form of martyrdom. Rebellion had never accomplished anything since God did not bless, even for the reform of His Church, the breaking of His fundamental constitution of the state.<sup>41</sup> Rebellion was no help towards the purifying the Church. Commenting on the abortive conspiracy of Amboise, he said: "I never approved of their expedition, for, according to my judgment, they undertook more than God permitted . . ."<sup>42</sup>

While thinking of the agents of divine action in the Reformation, Calvin, who never lost sight of human responsibility, had also considerable to say on the subject of the Reformers' objectives and purposes. What did the Reformers aim to accomplish? This was no academic question, for only as it was answered properly could they expect God's blessing.

In attempting to explain the motives that dominated the Reformers, Calvin was very sure that there were certain objectives which they did not have. There could be no economic explanation of their activities, for the Roman Church, Calvin declared, would have paid them well to keep quiet. Moreover, when they organized their churches, they had turned over control of finances to laymen, taking for themselves only very modest stipends. In so doing they were far from following the example of the Romanists. Nor did they follow the bad medieval example of attempting to occupy civil offices. Rather they had restored to the civil magistrate the secular power and authority misappropriated by the bishops.<sup>43</sup> If Calvin had been queried on his own influential position in Geneva he would have pointed out that never did he hold any official civic position. Indeed, he did not even become a citizen until late in his life, and then only at the invitation of the city authorities. If he exercised any influence it was solely because the people and magistrates agreed with him. If they should cease to accept his views, and should insist that he should change his, he was quite prepared to leave, as he had already done once before.<sup>44</sup>

Another objective attributed to the Reformers, but scoffed at by Calvin, was the dismemberment and destruction of the Church. Calvin had very strong views on the subject of schism, which he

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, VII, 328, 401-2; *Comm. on Hebrews*, p. xxiii.

<sup>42</sup> Ruchat, *op. cit.*, VI, 324-6.

<sup>43</sup> "Reply to Sadoletto," pp. 28-9, 58-9.

<sup>44</sup> *Institutes*, Bk. IV, chap. 1, iv; J. T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (New York, 1954), p. 185.

condemned roundly. At the same time, however, he insisted that the Reformers did not leave the true Church. As he said to Cardinal Sadoletto, the Church "is the society of all the saints, a society which spread over the whole world, and existing in all ages, yet bound together by one doctrine, and the one Spirit of Christ, cultivates and observes unity of faith and brotherly concord. With this Church we deny that we have disagreement."<sup>45</sup> The unity of the faith is the true unity of the Church, which the Reformers were endeavouring to realize by reintroducing true doctrine, the true sacraments and true discipline. They were attacking the corruption of the faith, a corruption that had become endemic, destructive of the true unity and fellowship of the saints. Thus they were not dividing the true Church. Rather, the Romanists, when they saw the logic of the Reformers' position, were guilty of disunity by persecuting them and ejecting them from the Church. Not the Reformers, but the hierarchy were the schismatics.<sup>46</sup>

The real motive of the Reformers, on the other hand, was the calling of men back to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. To submit to tradition and custom as required by Rome was wrong unless they were in accord with the Scriptures. "Custom" was quite likely to be wrong, as it was often but the private evil practice of many. "Tradition" also might be in error, for even the Church Fathers were fallible, so that to them the Church owed "deference, not submission". It was obedience to such extra-biblical authority which the Reformers rejected.<sup>47</sup> Their idea was to have the Church return to true subjection to the Scriptures as its guide in both faith and action. Because the Papists, however, objected to this, the division was inevitable, for the Scriptures, God's Word, must be obeyed.<sup>48</sup>

Once they had accepted the Scriptures as their final authority, the Reformers were forced to take action to "purify the Church's worship. In accordance with biblical teaching they desired to bring men to serve and honour God as He required. This meant negatively the putting away of idolatry in the removal of images, the

<sup>45</sup> "Reply to Sadoletto," p. 33.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 54-60; *Institutes*, "Dedication," pp. 33-37; "De Scandalis," p. 128; "The Necessity . . .", pp. 165, 179, 190 f.; "True method . . .", p. 264; *Opera*, IX, 136; Henderson, *op. cit.*, p. 72; Imbart de la Tour, *op. cit.*, IV, 112 f.

<sup>47</sup> *Institutes*, "Dedication," pp. 26-32; "De Scandalis," pp. 143-145; de la Tour, *op. cit.*, IV, 36-38.

<sup>48</sup> "Reply to Sadoletto," pp. 31-32; 46-50; *Orig. Letters*, II. No. 336; Ruchat, *op. cit.*, VII, 382, *Opera*, IX, 242.

abolition of prayers to the saints and the rejection of all "empty and childish observances" devised by men. Positively, they had to reintroduce the common tongue into worship, to simplify liturgical practices and to give man a new sense of the nearness of God to whom he could not approach directly.<sup>49</sup>

Purification of worship meant also a renovation of the sacramental system. The Reformers had set before themselves the objective of abolishing all sacraments but two, baptism and the Lord's Supper, which they believed to have been instituted by Christ, while at the same time ridding these of all superstitious practices. They had endeavoured to restore baptism to its pristine simplicity, and had added to the service an explanation of its meaning. As for the Lord's Supper, they had freed it from all suggestion of a sacrifice by rejecting all teaching of transubstantiation, and had reinstated communion in both kinds. Added to this the service in the common tongue explained the sacrament's meaning, teaching that the elements were not mere signs, but that to true faith "there is a truth conjoined with them which they represent".<sup>50</sup>

All these changes by the Reformers arose out of the fact that they took seriously the Biblical doctrine of redemption. As Calvin stresses the fact that corruption had arisen from the unscriptural doctrine of salvation, so also he insisted that a true doctrine of salvation changed everything else. The Reformers were anxious to point out that man had no hope in himself, but only in the merits of Christ. All good works were tainted and corrupt so that man could offer nothing to God. The Roman Church on the other hand had elevated man to such an extent that it depreciated Christ.<sup>51</sup>

Since their doctrines were anathema to the Roman Church, the Reformers were obliged to set up their own ecclesiastical organization. In this they returned to Biblical precept and example, endeavouring to model their churches on that of the New Testament. As Calvin pointed out, they had reinstated the pastoral office, ordaining only worthy men, proven in life and in doctrine, who fulfilled adequately the office of teacher. At the same time they endeavoured to free themselves from superstitious practices, such as the prohibition of the eating of meat on Friday, the insistence upon clerical celibacy, and the employment of auricular confession.

<sup>49</sup> "The necessity . . .", pp. 132 f., 169 f.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 150 f.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 145 f., 174 f. ; "True method . . .", pp. 240 f.

This did not mean that they neglected discipline, for pastors who were proven faithless were deposed, and the common people were kept under close surveillance. By these means the Reformers hoped to develop a strong and closely-knit church fellowship.<sup>52</sup>

A mere ecclesiastical fellowship, however, in Calvin's eyes was not the ultimate goal of the Reformation. Christianity meant nothing if it were not applied to everyday life. Even carrying arms and employing one's body and goods in "the quarrel of the Gospel", was not enough unless Christians submitted themselves to their Lord who had bought them at so great a price. The Reformers, therefore, had the aim of extending Christ's rule into all life. To quote Lord Acton: "His [i.e. Calvin's] purpose was to reform society as well as doctrine. He did not desire orthodoxy apart from virtue, but would have the faith of the community manifested in its moral condition."<sup>53</sup> Thus the Reformers desired their doctrine to be not a shadowy philosophy to which one gave a mere mental assent, but an all-controlling belief which was to dominate political, social, economic, artistic and all other spheres of life. The reform of the Church was to be the rebirth of society for the glory of God.<sup>54</sup>

### III. THE OBSTACLES TO THE REFORMATION

If one attempts to understand Calvin's estimate of how far the Reformers were achieving their ends, he must keep in mind Calvin's view of the historical process. Anything which God does for the salvation of his people will always be opposed with might and main by Satan "who goeth about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour". Thus Calvin took it for granted that there would always be plenty of opposition to the Reformation. After all, history is the account of a continual struggle between the Church and the World. For this reason he did not expect great numbers to give their support to the movement, since only the elect would appreciate its true meaning and worth. But even amongst those thought to be truly in the Church and truly in favour of the Reformation, there would be hidden enemies.<sup>55</sup>

Before we attempt to deal with the identity of the actual foes,

<sup>52</sup> "The necessity . . .", pp. 154, 158; *Comm. on Acts*, p. xxi.

<sup>53</sup> Ruchat, *op. cit.*, VII, 597-8; Lord Acton, *Lectures on Modern History* (London, 1907), pp. 132, 133; T. Beza, "Life of John Calvin," *Tracts*, I, xliii.

<sup>54</sup> *Commentary on the Epistles to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, 1948), I, 30; *Institutes*, Bk. III, chaps. 6, 7.

<sup>55</sup> "De Scandalis," pp. 145-6; "The Necessity . . .", p. 122 f., 165 f.



however, it must be realized that Calvin always held that God's ways were past finding out. Consequently, in Calvin's eyes, it was quite possible that God might cause the reform movement at times to retreat. In 1563, writing to the Prince de Condé, he stated that it might be God's desire to place the Protestants in a position of insecurity and to subject them to persecution. At other times he even went so far as to say that a military victory for the Protestants might be their greatest disaster, since it might puff them up with pride and make them *self-reliant*. The Reformers had always to remind themselves that even the greatest apparent defeat was in the plan of God, who might let the Church suffer, to its ultimate advantage. All the achievements of the Reformers had to be viewed in the light of God's inscrutable purpose.<sup>56</sup>

Yet although Calvin was ever ready to acknowledge the inscrutability of God's workings, he also realized that there were obstacles which Christians had to overcome. One of the chief of these was lack of Church unity. This did not surprise him since Satan was always prepared to stir up strife among the brethren. Calvin held, however, that every possible effort should be made to achieve unity, an objective not too difficult of attainment since they were all fundamentally agreed that all of salvation found its source in the grace of Christ.<sup>57</sup> He endeavoured to keep Luther and the Zwinglians from attacking each other, and supported Cranmer's effort to call a conference for the purpose of reaching a general agreement on beliefs. Going even further, in 1549, he signed a Consensus of Faith with Bullinger concerning the Lord's Supper.<sup>58</sup> By all these various means he hoped to overcome the conflicts and differences which were holding up the progress of the movement for reform. He did not believe in ignoring differences in order to attain external unity, but felt that mutual discussion would lead to greater agreement in beliefs leaving organization to take care of itself. Only in unity of belief would the Church be able to go forward.<sup>59</sup>

Part of the disunity of the churches was attributed to hypocrites, "morose professors of the Gospel", who had worked their way

<sup>56</sup> Ruchat, *op. cit.*, VII, 399-400; "De Scandalis," p. 123.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 133-4; de la Tour, *op. cit.*, IV, 112 f.

<sup>58</sup> *Opera*, IX, 31, 33; *Comm. on Romans*, p. xxvi; *Orig. Letters*, II, 337; Ruchat, *op. cit.*, V, 125, 126, 369.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, V, 99, 100, 369; VI, 330, 332; *Opera*, IX, 5; "True method . . .", p. 266; W. S. Reid, "The Ecumenicalism of John Calvin," *Westminster Theological Journal*, vol. xiv (1951-2), 30-43.

into positions where they could cause trouble. Calvin by no means accepted the idea that everyone who professed to support the Reformers did so honestly. There was much impiety, wantonness and foolish curiosity even among those who made the most vigorous Christian professions. There were pretended Protestants who would actually "wish the light of doctrine wholly extinguished". In 1551 he warned Edward VI of England against "vagabond and dissolute persons" who might come into the Kingdom as Protestants. Nine years later he was giving the same advice to Radziwill of Okila.<sup>60</sup> He had no delusions about many of his supposed followers, who, he felt, were often a greater detriment 'han help.

Hypocrisy and spiritual feebleness were frequently manifested by the secular authorities also. He acknowledged that many of the princes who supported the Reformation had taken over Church lands for their own use, but added, that such misappropriation was not new; it had been going on for a long time under the Roman Church's aegis. Many of the Protestant princes, on the other hand, had employed the confiscated lands for the support of the preaching of the pure Gospel.<sup>61</sup> Calvin, however, was not afraid to berate civil authorities who were indifferent to the Reformation, or who were afraid of getting into difficulties for the cause of Christ. As he wrote to Anthony of Navarre who had sent a compromising message to the pope: "God wishes that we should act more frankly to sustain His cause. For this reason, your manner of temporizing up to now, Sire, will never receive His stamp of approval."<sup>62</sup> The attitude of the civil powers, then, was another of the internal obstacles to the movement for Reform.

Such weakness and shortcomings of the Reformation movements made it very difficult to withstand external pressure. Satan would endeavour to crush the Church from without if he possibly could, his chief means of doing this being persecution. Therefore, Calvin was forever warning Protestants that persecution would come. Never would they be able to rest from their labours. Believers were to realize, however, that these very persecutions themselves would be a means of strengthening the Church to achieve

<sup>60</sup> *Comm. on Genesis*, I, liii; *Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists*, "Epistle Dedicatory" (Grand Rapids, 1949), I, xxxii; *Comm. on Acts*, I, xx; "The Necessity . . .", p. 179; "De Scandalis," pp. 117 f.; *Orig. Letters*, II, Nos. 336, 337.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, II, *loc. cit.*; "The Necessity . . .", p. 186 f.; *Comm. on Acts*, p. xvii.

<sup>62</sup> Ruchat, *op. cit.*, VII, 390-2.

greater victories. But despite his optimism concerning the ultimate outcome of the struggle, Calvin felt very certain that persecutions were serious obstacles to the progress of reform.<sup>63</sup>

From all of this we can see that Calvin did not look at the Reformation as a grand and glorious "walkover". He interpreted it rather as a struggle that would never cease. He was no easy optimist who talked in terms of continual victory and achievement, but through much sad experience he realized that the Reformation would not be successful except by "blood, sweat and tears".

#### IV. THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE REFORMATION

Despite his realistic attitude towards the opposition in attempting to reform the Church, Calvin was not downhearted. He believed that much was being achieved. Therefore, he faced the question of the Reformation's outcome without any qualms. The Reformation was bound to win.

Part of his confidence was based upon that which the Reformation had already accomplished. By virtue of the work of the Reformers, "the light of the Gospel, which having arisen upon us through the wonderful goodness of God, is shining forth in every quarter."<sup>64</sup> Knowledge of the sovereign grace of God has been widely disseminated. Men's spiritual needs had been met, bringing them freedom from the bondage of the laws and ceremonies of the medieval church and giving them confidence that their sins had been forgiven, while much also had been achieved in moral improvement.<sup>65</sup> Among the Protestants, particularly the clergy, the ethical standard of life was much higher than in the old church, an evidence of God's approbation.<sup>66</sup>

Yet this confidence that they were preaching the Gospel and properly leading the Church did not mean that victory would soon come, bringing in its train peace and quietness. To Calvin, the faithfulness of the Reformers was a guarantee that they would not have peace. Moreover a false peace was even more dangerous to the faith, than open attack. As he pointed out to Mlle. de Budé in 1546, even in Geneva she would find no peace. Nowhere would she find it in this life, if she adhered to Jesus Christ. Seven years later he wrote to the Sieur de Varrelles:

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, V, 541 ; VII, 332 ; "De Scandalis," p. 126.

<sup>64</sup> *Orig. Letters*, II, No. 337.

<sup>65</sup> "Reply to Sadoletto, pp. 54 ff. ; "The Necessity . . .", pp. 179 ff. ; "De Scandalis," p. 137.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* ; "Reply to Sadoletto," *loc. cit.*

How difficult is it for our weak flesh to persist constantly, despite the fact that we see no end either to our conflicts or to the Kingdom of Evil. But when we are equipped with God-given arms, we need not worry because we shall never see the end of all Satan's machinations.<sup>67</sup>

Conflict and persecution would strengthen the Christian Church and believers, built up in their faith, would become better able to withstand persecution.<sup>68</sup>

Yet as Calvin looked at the Reformed church of his own day, he had to admit that while much had been accomplished, she was still small and despised. Her enemies adorned with her spoils were treading her down, and if anyone resisted, he was destroyed with fire and sword. He urged Protestants to maintain their witness, humbly and quietly, even if only in small groups. They were not to attempt rebellions or physical warfare, for the Church always lived under the cross and in its preservation under such conditions God's glory was greatly manifested. The Church would always have to walk by faith, trusting that with it was God, guiding and leading it on to glory.<sup>69</sup>

Calvin's confidence found its roots in his unshakable assurance that the Reformation was a divinely ordained movement. In and through history, God was ever reviving and reforming His Church, to manifest His glory. In 1539 he wrote to Farel from Ratisbon stating that Capito felt the whole movement was finished. But said he, "Truly if our vocation is from God, as we do not doubt, the Lord will bless, no matter how all things may oppose". More than twenty years later he wrote Admiral Coligny encouraging him to keep up the struggle for the faith with the assurance that since he was carrying out the work appointed to him by God, he could go forward with confidence.<sup>70</sup> Ultimately the victory of the truth which was in Christ was certain, for God was on the Reformers' side.

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<sup>67</sup> Ruchat, *op. cit.*, V, 529, 541, 543.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, VII, 332; "De Scandalis," p. 126.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 118-122; Ruchat, *op. cit.*, VII, 326, 327, 332.

<sup>70</sup> *Opera*, IX, 6; Ruchat, *op. cit.*, VII, 381.