Calvin's Conflict with the Anabaptists

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Our second contribution on the Anabaptists is also the third of the papers in this issue which was originally read at the Tyndale Fellowship Historical Theology Study Group in 1980. Mr. Smeeton has been working in Belgium since 1972 and is associated with the Continental Bible College.

From the opening days of the protestant reformation until the beginning of the ecumenical age, Roman Catholics never tired of asking protestants, 'Where was your church before Luther?' It was a valid question. It not only put protestants on the defensive, but divided protestantism into two theological camps. To the magisterial reformers, the task of reformation was not only to remove impurities but to maintain continuity. Anabaptist reformers, on the other hand, saw the task of reformation as the necessity of a new church modelled, not on Catholicism before Boniface (as did Luther), but on the church before Constantine, or even on the New Testament itself. This paper seeks to explore the contact and difference between John Calvin, as a representative of the magisterial reformer, and the anabaptists.[1]

The term 'anabaptist' is a stretch garment which covers a multitude of movements and which were not evident descendants of Calvin or Luther. Perhaps because of the divisions common in the church history surveys, it is easy to forget the vast diversity which characterized the revolt against Rome in the sixteenth century. As Roland Bainton expressed it so well:

> Lutheran, Zwinglian, Calvinist and Anglican, which we today regard as the main varieties of early Protestantism, by no means exhausted the roster of the sixteenth century. Each principality in Germany, such as Hesse, Brandenburg, Wüttenberg; each of the imperial cities like Augsburg and Strasbourg; and each canton and town of the Swiss Confederation, such as Berne and Basel, had a reform of a variant complexion. Any formula descriptive of initial Protestantism tends inevitably toward over-simplification.[2]

The non-magisterial — sometimes called the 'left wing' or even radical — reform is most often called anabaptist. Although the term

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[1] This subject seems to have escaped the notice of modern church historians. This lacuna is strange because it was 'un des sujets les plus grave et le plus à l'ordre du jour, au XVI[e] siècle.' E. Doumergue, *Jean Calvin: Les hommes et les choses de son temps* (Lausanne: Bridel, 1899-1927), VI, 62.

I have been able to locate only two sources which deal directly with Calvin and anabaptism: W. Balke, *Calvijn en de Doperse Radikalen* (Amsterdam: Bolland, 1973) and Karl H. Wyneken, 'Calvin and Anabaptism,' *Concordis Theological Quarterly* XXXVI (Jan. 1965), 18-26.

[2] Roland Bainton, *Studies on the Reformation* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1963).

means 're-baptizer' and stresses the rejection of infant baptism, the anabaptist distinctive position was the necessity of a pure church, not the rejection of infant baptism.[3] Believer's baptism does not explain anabaptist thought any more than infant baptism fathoms Calvin's theology. The anabaptists never applied this title to themselves and objected, often vigorously, to its use. They usually preferred to call themselves 'the brethren' or simply 'christian'.[4]

Because of its breadth the term 'anabaptist' juxtaposes the radical and the righteous, the legalist and the libertine, the fanatical and the faithful; Elton is correct in stating that it was 'a convenient term covering a motley collection of belief and behavior.[5]

How evangelical were these groups? What percentage was godly? Objective estimates are hard to establish. Williams who is sympathetic to anabaptism wrote:

> There were bigots, mountbanks, and scoundrels in the Radical Reformation. But the great majority host of men and women whose lives we have sketched communicate an overwhelming sense of their earnestness, their lonely courage, and their conviction . . . The cumulative effect of their testimony is that Christianity is not child's play, that to be Christian is to be commissioned.[6]

Because of their ecclesiology, the anabaptists disagreed with the magisterial reformers on the role of the secular government in ecclesiastical affairs. Both Calvin and Luther saw the magistrate as essential for the creation of a Christian state in which the individual could raise his family. It was the duty of the state to require a particular ethic, and even partisan theology, from all men. The magistrate was deemed an essential tool for extending and preserving the reformation. The radical, on the other hand, claimed that the church consisted on believers only and such a church should operate completely independent of the state. The implementation of such an ecclesiology threatened the very fibre of society and resulted in condemnations by both the reformed and Roman churches.[7]

HISTORY

Because we know so little about the spread of anabaptism in France, it

[3] Philip Schaff, *The Swiss Reformation* Vol. VIII of *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1910), 75.

[4] Robert Friedman, 'Anabaptist,' *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* Vol. I (Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Mennonite Publishing House, 1955), 113-114.

[5] G. R. Elton, *New Cambridge History* (Cambridge: University Press, 1958), II, 6

[6] G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 864.

[7] *Ibid.*, 846f.

appears impossible to ascertain Calvin's first contact with anabaptism, but he certainly knew something about the Zwichau prophets who troubled Martin Luther and the anabaptists who challenged Zwingli in Zürich. Calvin must have been familiar with the Diet of Speier (1529) that decreed 'every Anabaptist and rebaptized person of either sex be put to death by sword, by fire, or otherwise'.[8]

With certainty, one can state that Calvin's first theological composition, *Psychopannychia*, shows familiarity with some group of anabaptists who taught a form of 'soul sleep'. Even if Wyneken is correct in stating that the psychopannyists were not anabaptists at all, there is no doubt that Calvin considered them to be so. He wrote, 'I am referring to the nefarious herd of anabaptists, from whose fountain this noxious stream did, I observe, first flow . . .' He continues by charging anabaptists with other theological crimes. 'Well may we suspect anything that proceeds from such a forge — a forge which has already fabricated, and is daily fabricating, so many monsters.'[9] This doctrine of 'soul sleep' appears to have been widespread in France, but it is not clear how strongly the position was held in Germany or elsewhere.[10]

48 Calvin also had numerous contacts with various groups of anabaptists during this first stay in Geneva. Two anabaptists from the low countries gained a hearing in Geneva and after a time were allowed a debate, but when they held firmly to their position, they were banished from the city on pain of death. The conclusion of this debate in March 9-19, 1537, was influenced by the events at Münster a year earlier. That catastrophe was too fresh in the minds of the 'Pety Conseil' to allow the cancer to spread to Geneva. Although the leadership was banished, their influence remained and in September of that year, the clergy reported that there were several anabaptists among the inhabitants of Geneva.[11]

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8 Schaff, VIII, 84.

9 John Calvin, 'Psychopannychia,' *Tracts and Treatises* trans. by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1958), III, 416 and 490.

10 Christian Neff, 'Calvin, John', *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* Vol. I, 496.
Calvin's conversion is usually placed before May 1534 which is same year that *Psychopannychia* appears to have been written, but its earliest publication date appears to be 1542, then issued again a few years later with a longer ending.

11 Theodore Beza, 'The Life of Calvin', *Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, trans. by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1958), I, lxviii. Also B. J. Kidd, ed. *Documents Illustrative of the Continental Reformation* (Oxford: Claredon, 1911), No. 287, 572-73. Cf. Neff, 496.
For a scholarly yet sympathetic understanding of the Münster affair, see Gordon Rupp, *Patterns of Reformation* (London: Epworth Press, 1961). For Calvin's reaction, Williston Walker, *John Calvin: The Organizer of Reformed Protestantism* (New York, Putman's Sons, 1906), 201.

During Calvin's stay in Strasbourg he had contact with anabaptists again. In 1539, Calvin was the chief spokesman at the Synod of the Strasbourg Evangelical Church which had been called to consider the anabaptist question. Beza claims Calvin converted many anabaptists while in Strasbourg, including Jean Stordeur who soon thereafter died of the plague. His widow, Idelette, became Mrs. John Calvin.[12]

Calvin's polemical task against the anabaptists was reassumed in June 1544 when he issued *Brieve instruction pour amer tous bons fidèles contre les erreurs de la secte commune des anabaptist.* Although his main trust was ethical, not theological, Calvin did consider two doctrines not held by all anabaptists: a less-than orthodox view of the incarnation and 'soul sleep'. This work is also significant because in it Calvin considers evangelical anabaptists, in contrast to the libertines, as accepting the authority of Scripture.[13]

In a separate work a year later, Calvin wrote *Against the Libertines.* This sect of spiritualists taught a pantheistic theology and practiced a hedonistic ethic. Although they are often classified as anabaptist, Calvin saw a distinction. Because they rejected magisterial authority, they could be called anabaptist, but additionally they rejected ecclesiastical authority and even Biblical authority. In Geneva their unified strength had banished Calvin once, and at the time of the Servetus affair almost drove him from the city a second time.[14]

Although most anabaptists were trinitarians, an additional form of anabaptism with which Calvin had contact is represented by Servetus. The death of Servetus became the *cause celebré* of the libertines in the sixteenth century and of liberterians till the present day. Schaff states that Servetus might not have been anabaptist,[15] but Calvin clearly considered him to be one. He wrote, 'Servetus, who was both an anabaptist and the worst of heretics, agreed entirely with Westphal . . .'[16] Whether Calvin should personally be held responsible for the final execution is a moot question. Calvin was a promoter of magisterial reform in which it was the right, yes the duty, of the government to punish heresy.[17]

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[12] Neff, 496.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] James Mackinnon, *Calvin and the Reformation* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1936), 94. Also John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 169-175.

[15] Schaff, VIII, 751.

[16] John Calvin, 'Second Defence in Answer to the Calumnies of Joachim Westphal,' *Tracts and Treatises,* II, 264.

[17] See Williams, *Radical Reformation,* 323 and 626; Bainton, 140-178; McNeill, 173ff; Doumergue, VI, 173-373.

A fourth literary effort directed against the anabaptist was the *Institutes* themselves. In his 'Prefatory Address', the Genevan theologian explains that 'He (Satan) aroused disagreements and dogmatic contentions through his Catabaptists (Calvin's favorite term for anabaptists) and other monstrous rascals in order to obscure and at last extinguish the truth.'[18] By the 1559 edition, Calvin had expanded the chapters on knowledge (of God and man), the relationship between the two testaments, infant baptism, the value of scripture, and warnings against millenarianism. This emphasis reflects a reaction to anabaptism.[19]

Because of Calvin's objection to non-magisterial reform, he saw all such groups as dangerous. In failing to recognize differences in the numerous groups, Calvin attributes the excesses and idiosyncrasies of one group to the whole group. This oversimplification is strange in view of Calvin's numerous ecumenical contacts and his marriage to the widow of an anabaptist leader.[20]

It is interesting to note that Calvin was sympathetic with anabaptists in Catholic Italy, yet hostile to similar groups in Geneva.[21] While Calvin's attack was on 'les marginaux' some evangelical anabaptists are
50 conspicuously absent from his consideration. Even some of the evangelicals with whom Calvin was familiar, he did not like. Of Menno Simons, Calvin wrote 'Nothing can be more conceited than this donkey nor more imprudent than this dog.'[22] Menno, for his part, equally apt at language, never returned the compliment.[23]

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[18] John Calvin, 'Prefatory Address to King Francis', *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battle, Vol. XXI of the Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Westminster, 1960), 28. All following references to this work will be listed as *Institutes* followed by the book, chapter, and paragraph.

[19] Francois Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought* trans. by Philip Mairet (London: Collins Fontana, 1967).

[20] George Huntston Williams, *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* Vol. XXV of the Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Westminster, 1957), 26. Also Wyneken, 29. Williams, *Radical Reformation*, 580-81.

[21] *Ibid.*, 545.

[22] Wyneken, 29. Also Menno Simons, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Scottdale, Pennsylvania, 1956), 405 note by editor. This comment of Calvin's prompted Klassen's strong charge that Calvin 'knew less of the movement than any other major reformation leader, but he did not hesitate to pronounce sentence even though he had only fragmentary evidence.' Calvin never met Simons and knew of him only through an opponent. Peter James Klassen, *The Economics and Anabaptism, 1525-1560* (The Hague: Mouton, 1964), 14f.

This opinion of Simon was a result of Calvin's understanding of the Menno's view of the incarnation, *Institutes*, II, xiii, 1-2.

Williams summarizes, 'Calvin suspected that the denial of a fully Adamic flesh in Christ was related to the denial of a substantial soul susceptible to wakeful existence

THEOLOGY

Theologically the clash between Calvin and the anabaptists centred on (1), the question of authority, (2), ethics, (3), Christian experience. Because of the breadth of the movement, it is impossible to speak of an anabaptist position. Their view of Biblical interpretation stretched from literalism to mysticism. Anabaptists, generally, allowed a greater role for the 'inner word' and 'the witness of the Holy Spirit' in matters of faith and practice. The 'light which lighteth every man' was available to all. The magisterial reformers were misunderstood as insisting on the letter of the word and, as the anabaptists were fond of quoting, 'the letter kills, but the Spirit brings life.'[24]

Calvin accused anabaptists of abandoning Scripture in order to obtain new revelations, therefore, 'by heinous sacrilege these rascals tear apart those things which the prophet joined together with an inviolable bond.[25] And elsewhere Calvin insisted

> for by a kind of mutual bond the Lord has joined together the certainty of his Word of his Spirit so that the perfect religion . . . causes us . . . (to) embrace the Spirit with no fear of being deceived when we recognize him in his own image, namely, in the word.[26]

Some anabaptists experienced *charismata,* but Calvin had set his face against any private revelation.[27] With a pastoral concern for the local church, Calvin forbade both the itinerate apostle and the prophet.[28] But this is not to say that Calvin minimized the work of the Holy Spirit. The person and work of the Holy Spirit are prominent in the *Insti-*

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after the death of the body, with the capacity to look forward with pleasure to the last judgment.' Williams, *Radical Reformation*, 545 and 597.

23 John Horsch, *Menno Simons: His Life, Labors and Teachings* (Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Mennonite Publishing House, 1916), 213.

24 R. N. C. Hunt, *Calvin*, (London: Centenary Press, 1933), 75-76. See Thomas Muntzer's sermon before Duke John, Williams, *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, 58.

25 Calvin, *Institutes*, I, ix, 1.

26 *Ibid.*, I, ix, 3. Calvin rebuked 'certain anabaptists' (libertines) for relying solely on the Spirit's prompting, but who lived by their own lusts. They, says Calvin, 'conjure up some sort of frenzied excess instead of spiritual regeneration' and asks 'what sort of spirit do they belch forth?' *Institutes*, III, iii, 14.

27 'This, however, remains certain: the perfect doctrine he has brought has made an end to all prophecies.' *Institutes*, II, xv, 2. See also, Paul F. Jensen, 'Calvin, Charismatics and Miracles'. *The Evangelical Quarterly* LI (July-Sept. 1979), 131-144.

28 Paul Elbert, 'Calvin and the Spiritual Gifts', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, XXII-III (September 1979), 235-256.

tutes.[29] 'If Calvin is to be remembered for anything, he should be remembered for his development of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.'[30]

The question of authority naturally returns to the disagreement on the nature of the church. Anabaptist ecclesiology ranged from extreme breadth to exclusive holiness, but generally considered the true church to be a pure fellowship of believers. The question was whether all members of the civil community should 'by charitable judgment' be counted as Christian unless they, by word or deed, deny Christ. In such a case, ecclesiastical discipline was civil banishment. The anabaptists, on the other hand, stressed that the church should count only those who by mature judgment profess Christ.

Calvin testified that the visible church counts both the wheat and the tares and charged the anabaptists with the donatist heresy.[31] In his letter to Cardinal Sadolet, Calvin claims that Catholics and anabaptists make the same error: they both separate the word from the spirit and church visible from the church invisible.[32]

Calvin denied having learned his doctrine of church discipline from the anabaptists and claimed that they learned it from him. This
52 position is hardly defensible for the doctrine was incorporated into the Seven Articles of Schleitheim which were adopted in 1527 at a time when Calvin was still Catholic and just past his eighteen birthday.[33] Calvin may also have learned something of anabaptist missionary zeal from the radical Strasbourgers.[34]

Because of their ecclesiology, anabaptists saw themselves as sheep and

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29 An exhaustive list would be impossible, but the following passages should be noted because of Calvin's conflict with anabaptism:
Institutes, I, v. 13. The Holy Spirit rejects all man made cults.
Institutes, I, ix, 1. Fanatics cannot appeal to the Spirit.
Institutes, I, ix, 2. The Spirit agrees with Scripture.
Institutes, III, i, 2. The Word and the Spirit belong together.
Calvin's concept of the Holy Spirit is in terms of the individual, especially in terms of (1) inspiration and (2) justification, whereas the New Testament also included the idea of the Holy Spirit in the *koïnonia* of the church. Deward Lindsay, *The Holy Spirit and Modern Thought* (New York: Harper, 1959), 137.

30 David F. Wells, lecture at Trinity Evengelical Divinity School, Feb. 11, 1970.

31 Wyneken, 26. Calvin, like Luther and Melanchthon, appealed to imperial law (*codex justinianus*) which had perscribed death for any person rebaptised. Thus a law directed against the Arians and Donatists was applied to anabaptists. Bainton maintains that the term *anabaptist* was invented in order to subject the non-magisterial reformers to the imperial laws. Bainton, 215f. Calvin frequently links anabaptism and donatism, *Institutes*, IV, i, 13; IV, viii, 12; IV, xii, 11-12; IV, xv, 16.

32 Doumergue, V. 16.

33 Neff, 497.

34 Frank H. Littell, *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 173 note 129.

the civil government as the shearer. Anabaptists reasoned that unholy living resulted from wrong doctrine. They were unhappy with the Lutheran reform because it did not appear to result in greater moral purity than had catholicism. For them, deed was more important than creed.

Not only did the anabaptists disagree with Calvin on the importance of ethics, but also on its content. Anabaptists, in varying degrees, practiced communal living, refused to pay taxes, to bear arms, to go to court and to take oaths. They saw these positions as a consequence of their insistence on the separation of church and state.[35]

If Calvin did not clearly understand the various anabaptists' theologies, he clearly understood their practices. In *Brieve Instruction and later in the Institutes,* Calvin offered his rebuttal to anabaptist ethics:

On civil government's right to wage war: 'But kings and people must sometimes take up arms to execute such public vengeance.'[36]

On the right to collect taxes: '. . . tribute and taxes are the lawful revenues of princes.'[37]

On the Christian's use of law: '. . . the magistrate is the minister of our good.'[38]

Although disagreeing with anabaptist ethics, Calvin in these passages and others was surprisingly temperate especially when compared with the numerous passages in which he mercilessly attacked the theology of dissidents.

Calvin disagreed with the anabaptists not only on theology (Biblical and ecclesiastical authority) and ethics, but also on the nature of religious experience. Calvin's concept of religious experience was devotional, not mystical, in nature. Calvin's strong devotional strain was reflected in his sermons and commentaries. Even theology was not to be solely an intellectual exercise, but was to be a path into the presence of the Father.[39]

Calvin would have agreed with the anabaptists on the necessity of religious experience, but differed with them on the nature and authority of such experience. Calvin's own intellect and experience was opposed to any subjective authority. The anabaptists centered on the Holy Spirit,

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[35] Bainton, 171f; Hunt, 75f; Mackinnon, 31; and Wyneken, 21.

[36] *Institutes,* IV, xx, 11.

[37] *Ibid.,* IV, xx, 13.

[38] *Ibid.,* IV, xx, 17-21.

[39] John H. Krominga, ed. *Thine is My Heart* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1958) 'Introduction'. *Cf.* Richard Stauffer, *The Humanness of John Calvin* translated by George H. Shriver (New York: Abingdon, 1971).

Calvin on Jesus Christ. He described, and circumscribed the inner witness of the Holy Spirit as narrowly as possible, rather than give any ground to the anabaptists.[41]

Calvin did not prepare theology in the luxury of a peaceful academic tower; he wrote as a general fighting in the midst of battle. He was wise enough to see that even those who disagreed with him were pointing to needed areas. Anabaptist teaching influenced him up to a point. Calvin was concerned about the sanctified life, but not perfection; church discipline, but not rigorism; independence of the church from the state, but not separation.

Calvin feared that a total separation of church and state would be separation of church from society. On the other hand the anabaptist insistence on religious liberty (i.e. separation of church and state) led to the enshrinement of this concept in the western democracies.

Whether Calvin correctly understood his anabaptist opponents is beyond the scope of this paper, but he did take issue with them on theology, ethics, and religious experience. He denounced them because he understood them to substitute subjective religious experience for the objective written Word of God.

41 Rupert Eric Davies, *The Problem of Authority in the Continental Reformers* (London: Epworth, 1946), 146f.