

The Conversion of John Calvin

One of the most momentous events in the history of grace was the conversion of John Calvin. In the kindness of God to His Church and to the world, it produced a theologian of outstanding systematic ability, a Biblical commentator unsurpassed in spiritual penetration, an organizer who shaped both the civil laws of Geneva and the future course of its university, and a Reformer who moulded the tiny city state into 'the most perfect school of Christ since the days of the apostles,'(Knox) and whose vast correspondence and generous hospitality to foreign exiles was of international significance. The very existence of the term 'Calvinism', signifying his distinctive teachings, a doctrinal system professed by many churches, and a worldview embracing theology, morals, politics, philosophy, science and culture, is sufficient testimony to the momentousness of his conversion.

In view of Calvin's extreme reticence about all matters of a personal nature, a magnificent Augustine-like reference to his conversion in a letter to Sadoletto is as precious as it is rare. 'Every time that I looked within myself,' he recalls, 'or raised my heart to Thee, so violent a horror overtook me that there were neither purifications nor satisfactions which could in any way cure me. The more I gazed at myself the sharper were the pricks which pressed my conscience, to such a point that there remained no other solace or comfort than to deceive myself by forgetting myself. But because nothing better was offered me, I continued on the course that I had begun. Then, however, there arose a quite different form of doctrine, not to turn us away from our Christian profession but rather to bring it back to its proper source and to restore it in its purity, cleansed, as it were, from all filth. But I, offended by the newness of it, was scarcely willing to listen to a word of it and I admit that at the beginning I valiantly and courageously resisted it. For, as men are naturally obstinate and stubborn in maintaining the system that they have once received, I had to confess that all my life I had been nourished in error and

ignorance. And there was one thing especially which kept me from believing these people, that was reverence for the Church. But after I had sometimes listened and suffered being taught, I realized that any such fear that the majesty of the Church might be diminished was vain and superfluous. And when my mind had been made ready to be truly attentive I began to understand, as if someone had brought me a light, in what a mire of error I had wallowed, and had become filthy, and with how much mud and dirt I had been defiled. Being then grievously troubled and distracted, as was my duty, on account of the knowledge of the eternal death which hung over me, I judged nothing more necessary to me after having condemned with groaning and tears my past manner of life, than to give myself up and to betake myself to Thy way...' (1)

Here is an account of a wrestling with God every whit as intense as that of Luther. Calvin's sheer horror at the sight of his own depravity, his agitated despair at the impotence of all church-prescribed cures, his initial resistance to the newly-encountered evangelical doctrine, his tormented attempts to tear himself from the grip of the church of his childhood, his gradual subdual by the light and power of the truth, his broken-hearted repentance and final submission to God, form a masterly piece of self-disclosure concerning the great change.

A further recollection yields a less intense account of the same momentous experience. 'God in his secret providence finally curbed and turned me in another direction. At first, although I was so obstinately given to the superstitions of the papacy, that it was extremely difficult to drag me from the depths of the mire, yet by a sudden conversion He tamed my heart and made it teachable, this heart which for its age was excessively hardened in such matters.' (2)

Here again, the terms 'curbed' and 'turned' and 'tamed' suggest an inward struggle of immense proportions. Nevertheless, it left the subdued disciple with a certainty of having been laid hold of by

God that was to dominate the rest of his life. Strohl, therefore, is perfectly correct in diverting our attention from Reformation protests against longstanding Romish abuses to the Reformers' 'discovery of the living God, author of all grace. None of those,' he continues, 'who were blessed with the privilege of being gripped by God ever attributed the least merit to himself on this account. It was for them all a mystery of divine mercy... for grace, by its own sovereign initiative alone, takes hold of those whom it has chosen.' (3) Of no-one was this truer than of Calvin.

Precisely when Calvin's conversion took place cannot now be ascertained. The energy that has been spent and the ingenuity exercised on this point have been more or less fruitless, because the events of his life between 1528 and 1533, the period of his first Christian activity, have never been precisely recorded. Calvin himself mentions no particular calendar month or year, and we must resist the temptation to play the game of date-fixing. Yet if the time is uncertain, the fruits are not. Nevertheless, of some circumstances surrounding his conversion we may be sure.

Unquestionably, the first seeds of saving truth were sown in Calvin's mind during his first stay in Paris. At the College Montaigue, where he was studying for the priesthood, Calvin was strongly protected against Biblical religion by the blind intolerance of popery, the daily diet of scholastic philosophy and his rigid observance of church ritual. Yet reform was in the air, and the purpose of God was not to be thwarted. This three-layered suit of armour in which the brilliant young novice encased himself was pierced by the testimony of his cousin Robert Olivetan. Beza, Calvin's first biographer and successor at Geneva, speaks of Calvin 'having tasted something of pure religion' through Olivetan's zeal, as a result of which he began 'to see his way out of papal superstitions.' More particularly, 'he began to devote himself to reading the Bible, to abhor superstitions, and so to separate himself from these rites.' (4)

Here we have a definite influence and an initial change of direction. Calvin's faith in an infallible church was being shaken and replaced by attention to an infallible book. The Bible to which Beza refers was the French New Testament of Lefevre d'Etaples, published in 1524 and circulated among his disciples, one of whom was Olivetan. In its pages Calvin discovered evangelical truth set out with divine authority and clarity. Under the grip of God, he could not mistake its message: Christ died for the ungodly, who are justified solely by faith in Him. 'Like a flash of light,' he informs Sadoletto, 'I realized in what an abyss of errors, in what chaos, I was.'⁽⁵⁾ Thus Luther's great discovery of Justification by Faith Alone 'was early pointed out' to Calvin also as the only solution to the problem of his sin. Divine light showed him the solution, and divine power applied it to him. 'It was on this ground that the conflict took place.'⁽⁶⁾ Whether or not he was awakened by the dark teaching of popery to a sense of his guilt and vileness before a holy God we shall never know.⁽⁷⁾ What we do know, however, is that all its mediators of intercession could not release him from his dreadful bondage, and that, as in the case of Augustine, who tried the same escape route, God would not let him deceive himself by hiding from himself.

Such a decisive awakening, neither sought nor anticipated by Calvin himself, was never that of an intellectual, trying to choose between competing religious systems. It was the struggle of a blind and wilful rebel finding himself in the grip of an angry God. That God, however, had loved him with an everlasting love; and now that the 'time of love' had arrived, the rebel must be changed and subdued. In this connection Wylie is correct to stress that the 'severity of Calvin's struggle was in proportion to the strength of his self-righteousness,' for this aspect of his character had been nourished in him by popery from childhood.⁽⁸⁾ The very blamelessness of his outward life, the whole bent of his earnest and virtuous mind, and his devout commitment to every prescribed church ritual all contributed to the agonizing intensity of his encounter with God. Humanly speaking, his defences had been impregnable, and every drug from the church's spiritual pharmacy

had rendered him insensible to mere evangelical persuasion. But God applied His saving truth to the perplexed novice's conscience, and the work of conversion was begun.

In recalling Calvin's Paris experience, we must not underestimate his presence at the martyrdom of several Lutheran believers whose brutal death the bells of Notre Dame summoned every citizen to witness. The horrendous spectacle of defenceless Christians being burnt to ashes in the Place de Grave could not have left the sensitive and impressionable young Calvin unmoved. As he found himself among the crowd of priests, citizens and soldiers gathered round the stake, he observed the peace and courage these martyrs displayed in death, a peace and courage he himself confessedly lacked.

Sometime in 1528, Calvin renounced his novitiate in favour of the study of law. Why he did so may not have been wholly connected with his father's ambitions for him. Probably that 'strict conscientiousness' which characterized his entire life made it impossible for him to proceed to the priesthood, now that he had begun to emerge 'from the darkness of popery' and had 'acquired some little taste for sound doctrine.'⁽⁹⁾ Whatever the reason, his transfer to Orleans with its famous law faculty was a major step in his spiritual journey.

It was at Orleans that a learned Wurtemberger, Melchior Wolmar, became the second human agent in Calvin's conversion. Wolmar 'ostensibly taught the Greek of Homer, Demosthenes or Sophocles' in the university, 'but less publicly, though with small attempts at concealment, the Greek of another book, far mightier and more important. He had known this book in Germany, and in Luther's hands he had seen it change the face of that country. There, he said, was the answer to every problem, the remedy for every abuse, and the rest for every heavy-laden soul.'⁽¹⁰⁾ The book was, of course, Erasmus's Greek Testament.

Wolmar's teaching of Greek aroused suspicion of his links with the Lutheran 'heresy'. 'We are finding now a new language,' wrote a benighted contemporary. 'We must avoid it at all costs, for this language gives birth to heresies. Especially beware of the New Testament in Greek; it is a book full of thorns and prickles.'(11) Significantly, 'Wolmar had already, at Orleans, moved beyond the Reformism of his master Jacques Lefevre into a commitment to the Reformation.'(12) The home of the accomplished linguist, therefore, became a centre of private Lutheran studies in the city. Among Wolmar's disciples were Theodore Beza, Francois Daniel and Nicolas Duchemin, all of whom were to become Calvin's life-long friends. It was into this circle that the new law student was introduced, and it was during their meetings that Wolmar recognized both Calvin's outstanding mental abilities and his potential for the public service of God. 'While walking with him one day and reasoning with him on the direction of his future career, he advised him to devote himself to theology, the queen of all the sciences, and to leave the Code of Justinian for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.'(15) Here, then, was the second decisive influence on Calvin's spiritual life.

If Calvin's first encounter with divine truth produced the turbulent upheaval he described, this second episode proved that he could not be thoroughly won over to the Reformation without a complete intellectual re-adjustment. Urged on by that burning hunger for truth which characterized his whole life, he now sought a way to replace his former Romanism with a complete system of Biblical doctrine. To this end he searched the Scriptures, ransacked the 'Fathers', applied his grasp of law and philosophy to the issues at stake, clarified the salient points in the Reformation debate and pursued his vision of a new, Reformed church.

His immersion in Scripture, especially the four Gospels and the epistles of Paul, convinced Calvin that salvation was entirely by the free and sovereign grace of God, conveyed through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. His study of the 'Fathers' convinced him that they stood on the side of reform rather than with the apostate

church. His review of contemporary Romanism convinced him that compromise with it was impossible. Yet Calvin could not acquiesce in the overthrow of Romanism before he felt himself in possession of a complete doctrinal system, ready to replace the other.⁽¹⁴⁾ This fact alone is sufficient to account for the long silence between 1529 and the first edition of the Institutes (1536), where he summarizes his new-found Reformed faith. Calvin himself hints as to how he spent these years when he recalled that from the time when 'he began to love and revere God as his Father' he was 'set on fire with a desire to increase in the knowledge and love of God.'⁽¹⁵⁾ Accordingly, even while he continued to pursue his studies in law he 'diligently cultivated the study of sacred literature' and 'made such progress that all in that city (Orleans) who had any desire to become acquainted with a purer religion often called to consult him, and were greatly struck both with his learning and with his zeal.' Calvin himself modestly records that, even within a year of his conversion, 'all who had any desire for purer doctrine kept coming to me to learn, although I was still a novice and a tyro.'⁽¹⁶⁾

Sometime in 1529 a new stage in Calvin's spiritual development began. Along with a few friends in the law faculty, he moved to Bourges, where the famous Italian jurist Alciati had recently been appointed to a chair in jurisprudence. His stay there lasted about 18 months, during which period he continued his study of Greek. Yet clearly 'Law and Greek did not consume all his days' at Bourges.⁽¹⁷⁾ He delivered lectures on rhetoric at the local Augustinian convent where the future Reformer Marlorat was prior. More important still, he began to preach.

This fact is of immense importance. Despite both his natural diffidence and his desire to find a lonely retreat for study, the same hand that dragged him out of the ditch of popery 'led him and whirled him about', giving him no rest till 'He had brought him to the light and to action.'⁽¹⁸⁾

Parker attributes Calvin's preaching to his new-found Evangelical zeal. 'No doubt,' he remarks, 'he could have preached had he been still a Roman Catholic, or...a humanist,' but if 'one of the marks of an Evangelical Christian is the urge to bear witness to his faith, to lead others to a like knowledge of the Redeemer...then it is perfectly consistent that we should hear of him preaching while at Bourges.'⁽¹⁹⁾ But we cannot think of Calvin preaching without a call. From the very outset, he was a docile disciple, not a zealous enthusiast. Even his burning ardour for God's glory and the salvation of others would never have made him run where he was not sent. The only consistent explanation is that, like the apostle Paul, Calvin was divinely set apart for the ministry almost immediately after he became savingly enlightened in the knowledge of Christ.

More by demand than personal choice, therefore, Calvin entered this new sphere. At first he preached 'in the stone pulpit' of the 'ancient church' of the Augustinians, then in the nearby villages of Asmieres, 'where his word sowed seeds which' had 'never been stifled' as late as 1544, and Linieres, 'in a barn near the river.'⁽²⁰⁾

In 1531 the death of his father finally opened the door for Calvin to devote himself fully to the work of the ministry. This event released him from the filial obligation to pursue a legal career and left him free to follow the course set for him by his heavenly Father.

The publication a year later of his Commentary on the heathen Seneca's treatise on Clemency puzzled many Calvin scholars. Talk of his 'lingering humanism' abounds in their writings. Some suggest that the timid young convert was now wavering in view of the immense dangers that faced a minister of Christ in the France of Francis I. A different explanation is more likely. Just as Seneca pled with the Roman tyrant Nero for clemency towards persecuted minorities, so Calvin would plead with Francis for clemency towards his persecuted Huguenot subjects. As Francis was still ordering the burning of believers while welcoming the new

literature on the classics, the publication of an old classic with Calvin's own persuasive comments might yet restrain the tyrant and bring him to grant toleration.

The sketchy record of the events bound up with Calvin's conversion finally takes us back to Paris, where it began. By 1533 Calvin had thrown in his lot with the persecuted church in the very shadow of the throne and the stake. At the home of the future martyr Etienne de la Forge he began to conduct private services to which hearers of all ranks of society were drawn. 'That Calvin's conversion...was sincere and fundamental is proved not only by his state of mind and by his preaching the Gospel in France at a period of such danger, but also by his works, in which such an invincible firmness and such deep convictions of the truth as it is in Jesus are manifested.'(21)

The works to which Henry refers are his tireless activities in and around the capital on behalf of the Gospel and reform. An enemy bears him witness: 'We have seen our prisons gorged with poor mistaken wretches whom without ceasing he exhorted, consoled or confirmed by letters.' No jailer could prevent willing messengers from endangering their lives to convey these letters to the persecuted. So rapid was the spread of truth under his efforts that the same enemy lamented that 'part of our France' had been won over to the Reformation, while more and more preachers were being sent by Calvin to spread the Gospel everywhere, 'in holes and corners...even in Paris itself, where the fires were lit to consume them.'(22) Significantly, Calvin is said to have concluded every sermon he preached at the home of Etienne de la Forge with the ringing assurance, "If God be for us, who can be against us?"(Rom 8.31). Not only had the 'power of the Spirit gained a speedy and a final victory in the heart of Calvin'(23), it began to pull down strongholds erected against God throughout the entire land.

The chequered narrative of Calvin's conversion and its first fruits reaches its climax in the public but veiled profession of his faith

that took place in extremely dangerous circumstances in 1533. According to custom, Calvin's friend Nicolas Cop, the newly-elected Rector of the Sorbonne, was to deliver an oration on the 'Feast of All Saints', 1st November. Unknown to the electors, who had raised him to the very pinnacle of popish heterodoxy, Cop had imbibed the doctrines of grace and accepted Calvin's offer to compose the oration for him. Calvin 'framed...an oration very different from what was customary', Beza informs us. 'Very different indeed,' adds Bungener, 'for the merit of works was roughly handled and justification by faith was distinctly preached.'(24) The oration was indeed a manifesto of Reformed doctrine. Its closing reference to the Gospel as the sole standard of 'Christian philosophy' brought both Calvin and Cop into the open as avowed enemies of benighted Mediaevalism, and marked a turning-point in Calvin's public confession of Christ. From then on, Calvin was the sharpest arrow in the Almighty's quiver in the Reformation conflict.

'Thus was fought', comments Wylie aptly, 'one of the great battles of the world', the battle for Calvin's soul.(25) The precise date of his conversion is immaterial. Whether Robert Olivetan or Melchior Wolmar were the chief human agents is irrelevant. Calvin himself placed little importance on mere human instruments. His confrontation with the holy majesty of God was too all-consuming for him to focus attention on his spiritual midwives. But the fruit of his conversion remains to this day.(26)

References

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26. The foregoing account is substantially confirmed by Alexandre Ganoczy in *The Young Calvin*. 1988. 49-91.