

**CALVINISTIC BITTERNESS : ITS ORIGINS**

(Specially written for the *Tablet*.)

When reading the history of the reformers of the sixteenth century we are astonished at the extreme bitterness shown by some of the leaders against the Church in which they had been baptised, in which they had grown up, and in whose schools they had received, often gratuitously, whatever higher knowledge they possessed. No doubt if we were fully acquainted with their family and personal histories we should understand. One of the sourest and most splenetic of those apostates was John Calvin. You ask the cause of his extreme hostility. Why should he who had eaten the bread of the Church from his childhood, who had been brought up in the Church's schools and at the Church's expense, show from his boyhood a tendency to rebel malignantly against the mother that had reared him? A little insight into his early history throws light on the matter. His bodily constitution and temperament throw light upon his sourness and mendacity. We get some pertinent information from M. Louis Battifal, the author of one of the series of five volumes on French history now published by Heinemann, London. In the volume entitled *The Century of the Renaissance*, Battifal gives vivid pictures and portraits of the leading Frenchmen of the time. As he passes, he touches upon Calvin, and throws light on the origin of the reformer's ultra hostility to the Church. Battifal writes:—

"John Calvin was born at Noyon in 1509. His father was a certain Gerard Calvin, who was attorney, registrar to the diocesan courts, notary to the cathedral chapter, and procurator—fiscal of the episcopal lands,—in short a sort of ecclesiastical lawyer. John Calvin's earliest recollections were connected with his father's quarrels with the dignitaries of the Church. When on one occasion Gerard Calvin was summoned to show his accounts he refused, whereupon he was abused, threatened, and excommunicated. Finally, in 1531, the unfortunate attorney died in disgrace, and was denied religious burial! Charles, the eldest of his four sons, succeeded to his father's business. He, in his turn, was excommunicated, and died three years later in similar circumstance! So, John Calvin, who was the second child, could hardly be expected to feel sympathetically towards the Church officials." Yet they treated him very kindly. We find that church revenues were given to help on his education. This kindness did not soften his sour, bitter temper, so whilst a student at Paris we find him consorting with a group of young men who were studying the new, strange, heretical Lutheran doctrines, and who assembled at the house of a Lutheran convert, Etienne de la Forge. Etienne was suspected of spreading the new German

heresy. So, in 1535, he was denounced to the authorities, arrested, condemned, and sentenced to the stake. His friends were dispersed, and Calvin was obliged to flee in haste. He wandered about, going to Nerac, Poitiers, and Noyon, where he was recognised, arrested, and thrown into prison. On his release, he crossed into Switzerland and published his book, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, at Bâle, in 1536. In this book Calvin turns God into a fierce ogre, who, by an eternal decree, condemns men to hell regardless of their merit or demerit. In it he attacks, of course, almost every dogma of the Old Church. To his family and personal history we must add the state of his health. Battifal describes him in his college days "as a diligent, hard-working student, who ate little, was in delicate health, and suffered from bad digestion. He was a student of subtle intellect, with a great gift for disputation." Later in life he became a sort of theocratic, uncrowned king in Geneva. Battifal says that his implacable spirit, prodigious activity, indefatigable energy, and unbending dogmatism are sufficient to account for the immense authority wielded by him in that little town. He ruled the place with a rod of iron. Alzog assures us that so efficient were his police, deacons, and elders, that should any citizen be rash enough to give utterance to a sentiment disrespectful to Calvin's character or adverse to his policy and doctrines, the indiscretion was promptly followed by a punishment so terribly severe that others would carefully guard against repeating the offence. "So," concludes Battifal, "he wore himself into the grave. Exhausted by headaches and indigestion, gout, gravel, and asthma, his emaciated and hollow cheeks revealing the weakness of his constitution, Calvin's life flickered out on May 27, 1564." This piece of biography explains much in the reformer's history and in the tendency of his theology. Sad to think that such a man was enabled by circumstances to transmit his bigotry and morose, unchristian spirit to millions of otherwise happily constituted people, reproducing, even on their facial outlines, his sourness and spleen. The gloomy temper of Calvin, and his bad digestion, have at bottom been the originating cause of endless *odium theologium*, of squalid religious squabbles, of much persecution, and even of wars for the past 350 years. Fancy all those Calvinistic religious troubles in Geneva, France, Holland, and Scotland being traceable back still further—to the money troubles of a little attorney who lived and mismanaged accounts at Noyon about the year 1509! What great results develop from small beginnings!

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