

IN BASEL

II.

The Immortal "Institutes"

(1535?-1536)

STRIPPED OF MEANS, the travelers arrived in Basel. On their way—already before Strasbourg—du Tillet's servant, that pickpocket, had left with all the cash the travelers carried with them. Calvin chose a humble lodging which probably could still be found among the small Gothic houses in the suburb of St. Alban.²¹ He called himself Lucanius in order to hold himself aloof from undesired visitors.

Here he was undisturbed, had few contacts, except with Nikolaus Cop, the former rector of Paris, some scholars, and religious refugees from France, among them Viret, who later became Reformer of Lausanne, and Courault, formerly a monk, then court preacher for the Queen of Navarre. In spite of frailty and partial blindness, he had been able to flee the persecutions just in time, traveling from Paris to Basel on foot. Occasionally Calvin saw Myconius, the successor to Oekolampad. He enjoyed the leisure to which he had been unaccustomed for so long. Then, too, there was the unknown bliss of living among a people of his own faith, in a city where Mass was repudiated, without the processions that offended his eyes. Although they spoke a language different from his own, and their customs varied from those of his country, he felt at home. Indeed, here he could work . . .

ALL HE HAD TO DO was to put his pen to paper, hardly ever glancing at his notes. The manuscript stood clearly in his mind before he even began to write the first line.

In the unrest of the last days he had thought the plan through many times, formed the individual chapters—he could say them from memory.

Thus, aside from Luther's translation of the Bible, there came into being the most powerful work of the Reformation, the classic handbook of the Reformed Church: *Institutio religionis Christianae*—instruction in the Christian religion.

True, this first Basel Edition has only six chapters. To Thomas Plater, the same who started as a poor Wallisian goat-herd and became a professor of Greek and a publisher, who once under the guise of a chicken merchant took care of the news service between Zwingli and the Evangelicals participating in the religious debate at Baden, to him belongs the glory of having published the work. In the course of twenty-four years these chapters steadily increased. Not patchwork but free growth like that of a tree whose crown unfolds mightily. Moreover, the author never had to retract one sentence. Vainly one searches among other Reformers and among scholars in general for a second example of such directness of work from the very beginning. Letter upon letter, all came as if cast. Almost incredible is the consistency of this work—and that of the author!

Six chapters at first: concerning the law, faith, prayer, the sacraments and the false sacraments, and Christian liberty.

Out of the original six chapters grew eighty in the edition of 1559, four mighty books. "All wisdom if it is to be called true, full wisdom, consists in the knowledge of God, and in the knowledge of ourselves. Both are interwoven in such a way that it is hard to say which comes first and which follows."²²

Thus begins the first book.²³ Here not the Christian but the philosopher wants to speak who sees the Divine hand in all things created and who endeavors to enter the human soul.

Nevertheless, he does not postpone leading the reader upon the right track: "Self-knowledge . . . ? In our innate pride we think ourselves just and perfect, unless we are led to believe otherwise through convincing arguments of our unrighteousness and foolishness . . . By nature inclined to hypocrisy, we are satisfied with the vain show of righteousness instead of the reality.

Surrounded by filth, we assume that to be pure which is the least defiled, just as the eye which is accustomed to black paint can take gray for snow white."²⁴

With whom are we to measure ourselves in order to recognize our unworthiness? "Man will never arrive at a clear knowledge of himself unless he holds up his weakness against the glory of God."²⁵

In the margin are references to Holy Scripture. The author wants every argument documented.²⁶

Chapter after chapter in unrelenting consistency the way points to the knowledge of the Creator in order to measure our smallness by Him. God reveals Himself in the world, in the wonders of nature, and in Holy Scripture.

The first book is followed by three that deal with redemption, the appropriation of salvation in Christ, and the external means of salvation. It is a mine of information for the searching Christian, a theology of action, a perfect exposition of Scripture.

Catholic, Protestant, and even Reformed historians have described Calvin's teaching as Old Testament-like. This conception is also found in his biographer Ernst Staehelin.²⁷ It is not tenable. Calvin sees the will of God, to which one has to submit, in all of Scripture. He knows only *one* Holy Spirit, not one for each Testament. That which is particularly Christian and evangelical does not stand in the background, but he finds free grace with Moses as well as with the Apostle Paul who in the ninth and following chapters of Romans refers frequently to Moses.²⁸ Moses for the state, Paul for the justification of souls, this is Calvin's stand. One finds in him the same contrasts as in the Prophets and Apostles. They were men of iron consistency yet of tender and affectionate heart, full of zeal for the truth, never against it, really incomprehensible to merely sophistic consideration. Every attempt to press them into stereotyped forms leads to wrong conclusions and causes confusions.

Calvin takes the *whole* Bible absolutely seriously: this the secret of his being reveals.²⁹

THE SUPERIOR demonstration of forceful conviction which is aware of its perception attracts the reader tremendously. The conclusions are of a clarity that brings each link of the chain into tangible nearness. There is no trace of the vanity of Humanism. Calvin did not want to glorify himself through his writing. He sought as little personal honor in this as he ever sought during his entire career. There is no trace of the pompousness of quoting, a means with which other learned contemporaries encumbered their books. Rarely is a name cited from ancient Rome, a reminiscence of antiquity; in its place there is an abundance of divine knowledge. Calvin's amazing memory had been fed by Holy Scripture and the Church Fathers. He did not write for the sake of publishing a book—his aim lay far beyond. The book shows the way to his aim.

Like his thinking, so is his style: not ambiguous, but crystal clear, despising unnecessary flowering of language, a mirror of his purity. In fact, the French language, in which he wrote a great deal later on, owes much to his style. No history of literature underestimates his pioneering significance.

Space is too small to linger over the *Institutes*. Only the doctrine of predestination will be discussed since it is the most disputed teaching of the Reformer. Through free choice, God has determined man's salvation from eternity, independent of his works.

With a certain discomfort one begins to read the expositions³⁰ on this question after having read the marvelous chapters on the freedom of the Christian man and on prayer. Predestination! The word is repugnant to the modern frame of mind.

However, if one reads through these much reviled chapters once, the impression is different from the expectation. What causes resentment is perhaps the cold, dogmatic presentation. Nevertheless, one feels moved. What, after all, does this election by grace show to the attentive reader? What is this doctrine of salvation that cannot be earned through works, this clarification of the unconditional mercy of God? It is the deep humility of the creature before the Creator. Again and again it recurs, "We are nothing, less than nothing, compared to the Being who is all."

And if the dogmatic expression of this feeling does not cause Christians to tremble in terror, then it is because they see in this confession the greatest sacrifice that man can bring unto God, to measure his misery by the infinite grace of the Creator.

This doctrine of election, which Calvin, like Paul an Apostle by grace, derives honestly from Holy Scriptures, was not his discovery. The Church Father, Augustine, already had taught it. With him as with Calvin, and for that matter also with Paul and in the Gospel of St. John, it is not just a special doctrine concerning the question of whether God will save one portion of humanity by predestining them and not another, but it is broadened here to form the basic doctrine of grace.

“Wherein lies the personal assurance of salvation of the Christian?” This is the question which leads Calvin to the doctrine of election. And he answers, “Alone in the grace of God.” If this grace is to be real grace, then the acceptance of it cannot depend upon the work of man and his will, not even in the least. The ground and nature of grace is the free will of God. Man has nothing to do with it. Grace is the sole work of God. Whoever possesses it has been called to a new life. He is a new creature. Whoever lacks it remains in death and slides with each passing day deeper and deeper into the depravity of the old nature. Therefore, since grace comes from God alone, and the possession or lack of it—there is no in-between—decides the life or death of the soul, it is evident that through the gift of His grace God saves some to eternal life. In order to clarify this, Calvin developed his doctrine of election. It is the doctrine of grace which comprehends its real meaning as a freely given gift of God in the most logical and deepest sense.³¹

Luther and Zwingli upheld the doctrine of election in its full dimensions.³² In later Lutheran polemic it is just the interpretation of grace which is, in attempt, set alongside of Calvin's doctrine of election, and out of his doctrine a philosophical system of God's predestining the destiny of man is read in artificially.

One cannot criticize or condemn this doctrine if it is torn out of the context of the entire life work of its most noble proclaimer. It is wrong, however, as is so often done, to make this

the "central dogma" of the *Institutes*, else it would not have been put as late as at the end of the third book. Other doctrines could be mentioned, such as the divine law, the Church, or the people of God, the honor or lordship of God, which put the doctrine of election into a questionable first place. Calvin's thinking, indeed, has more than one central point.³³

God loves the world, Christ sheds His blood for the sins of the world—and yet the world consists in reality and according to the eternal decree of God of the few whom the Son of God receives through the Father from all equally lost and perishing flesh. The question is not: "Is the doctrinal system of Calvin correct?"—it is answered through Scriptures—but: "Did Calvin know the arguments against this system, and how did he deal with them?" To that it can be answered that he never feels himself bound through his doctrine not to offer to everyone who comes the grace of God with the most solemn adjurations. His dogmatic conclusions are not chains that prevent him from being the messenger of the Good News to everyone.³⁴

In vain one searches in Calvin's theology, in his practical applications, or in his life for traces of that fatalism which his opponents try to find in this "terrible" dogma.³⁵ No one admonishes himself and others more strictly to loyalty, sacrifice, devotion, and progress in the Christian life than he. No one more zealously urges work for the Kingdom of God. "Let each one of us seek to make those whom we meet partners of our peace; yet our peace will only rest upon the children of peace. Let us speak to the heart of each one whom we meet, let us offer him the remedy of salvation, so that he and through him others may not perish. But it belongs to God to bless our words in those whom He has chosen."³⁶

Actually free will is not lost in the activity of the Calvinist. On the contrary, this will, made free by grace, possesses an abundance of freedom. The most sincere Christians find in it peace and quiet. Rousseau and other advocates of the greatest personal freedom who thereby seemingly place upon man a much greater responsibility are, as their lives prove, driven by their passions.

By their fruits shall ye know them . . .

"The one-sided force of this iron conception is always nobler and more majestic than the one-sided weakness of a one-sided Pelagianism." Thus wrote Lutheran Tholuck fully a hundred years ago.

History proves that the doctrine of election, which is by no means a non-essential part of Calvinism even as his defenders frequently interpret it, kills neither the ambition to work nor pure morals nor hope. Rather it fortifies men in difficult circumstances within and without.

Therefore no further testimonies by theologians—they are too plentifully represented in literature. Instead those of two historians, neither of whom is Calvinist or Protestant.

Henry Martin,³⁷ the Catholic: "One might suppose that the doctrine of predestination would result in nothing other than care-free existence, or idle hopelessness, that it would destroy all determination to a devout life. But nothing of the sort with disciples of Calvin. The compelling power of the growing Protestantism is so strong that men, conscious of their salvation, do their work as a natural fruitage of their faith, thereby justifying their doctrine. Even after the relapse from the first great enthusiasm one can see how a strong generation, strict with itself, and of unusual moral and physical vitality, continues to exist."

And Jules Michelet,³⁸ the unbeliever: "Geneva existed because of its moral strength. It had no territory, no army, nothing for space, time and matter. It was the city of the Spirit, built out of Stoicism upon the rock of election by grace. Against the monotonously dark dragnet in which Europe was caught through the laxity of France, this academy of heroes was needed. To each nation in danger, Sparta sent as an army a Spartan. Thus Geneva . . . Let Loyola undermine the ground, let Spanish gold and the sword of the Guise blind and bribe! In this peaceful place, in this dusky garden of God bloomed blood-red roses under the hand of Calvin for the salvation and the freedom of the soul. If there be any need for martyrs in Europe, the need of a man to be burned or broken upon the wheel, this man is in Geneva, ready to go with the singing of psalms."