

IN GENEVA

V.

The Years of Struggle

(1541-1555)

"FINALLY HE COMES TO YOU, this incomparable, this rare instrument of the Lord. Our century knows of no other like him—indeed, if beside him one can still speak of another . . ." ¹⁰¹ In this manner the people of Strasbourg announced to the Genevans the coming of the long-awaited one. They assured the departing Calvin they would consider him their fellow citizen for life. They even offered him the continued income of his theology professorship. But without reflection, Calvin rejected it. It smelled too much of a beneficiary-living business. It was enough that his departure was made more difficult by their devotion to him.

The trip was not without incident. In Neuchâtel, Farel's passionate hot-headedness once again got him into trouble. From the pulpit he had denounced a public scandal which the daughter of a high official had raised. Therefore he was supposed to leave the city. Calvin was able to settle the matter. In Berne, where at the time the relation with Geneva was tense, he got the cold shoulder.

More than the external events, the pressure of being forced to sacrifice the activity which was so much to his liking for one such as this at the scene of his most painful experience, weighed upon him. Every step was accompanied by a sigh.

"When I returned to the flock from which I had been torn, I did so with sadness, tears, forebodings, and anxiety of heart. God and a few good friends are witnesses of this. And they would

like to have spared me this sorrow . . . For although I would have offered my life for the welfare of the Genevan Church, my shyness continued to whisper good reasons into my ear why I should not carry this burden again," he confessed later in the Preface to his commentaries on the Psalms.¹⁰² The account of his Catholic biographer,¹⁰³ "Triumphantly he now traversed in part the same regions through which three years ago he had strayed as a stranger seeking help," is refuted by this and other testimonies. Not a triumph, but a bitter road of suffering.

THE COUNCIL and the people received the former outlaw with open arms. They were waiting for him as the savior in need. In readiness stood a roomy house on Canon Street, the top floor of which offered a view of the landscape around the lake. It was late in summer, the beginning of September, 1541.

The first reception before the Council proceeded in the most promising manner. Tensely two dozen pairs of eyes looked upon the new arrival of whom such great things were expected. Five years before he still had looked somewhat young as a Reformer. Now he was thirty-two. His stay in the Alsace, his association with scholars from everywhere, had made him even more mature, more secure in the world. Master over all his repressions, he stood before the members of the Council, medium in height, pale countenance slightly tanned, his animated eyes addressing one then another. Something fine, a winsome quality, radiated from his being. It was this particular, indescribable trait which constantly won him new friends. Really, a number of Councilmen were quite embarrassed. They were glad not to have to stand alone before this earnest-looking minister, for their bad consciences called for a severe penitential sermon. Farel at least would not have spared them. Others, who belonged to the present majority party, were actually hoping for such a thing. They enjoyed the humiliation of their colleagues. But nothing came of it. Modestly he said,

"I am here to serve Geneva. And to enable me to perform my service the Church must be established in accordance with the

Word of God.” Heads nodded in agreement. The settlement of the Church regulations was the first condition of his return, laid down in Strasbourg. So the Council named six laymen from its body who were to work out a Church constitution with the preachers.

They felt relief, for this peculiarly excellent man seemed to have it within his power to create quiet and order in this city which had been severely torn by civil strife. Because of his importance and the efforts he expended in providing lodging for strangers passing through the city, he received a higher remuneration than his colleagues. He was honored in the joy of welcome with a trimmed cloth suit costing eight *Sonnentaler*, and the Council decided to transport his family and his goods from Strasbourg with public funds. This is sufficient for Kampschulte to conclude, “With almost creeping submission we saw the representatives of the people pay homage to their leader. A government which subjected itself so deeply before him wrote the death sentence over its own authority . . .” From this he concludes Calvin’s conception of how he obtained the right to rule over Geneva.¹⁰⁴ This matter of “creeping submission” is certainly wrong. That is not the Genevan. He was not like that then. After all, it will not do to explain the free Genevan spirit of Reform from the standpoint of monastic submission. Calvin had to wait another eighteen years before he was even offered citizenship. However, Kampschulte’s description will influence the writing of history for decades, which is why I am detaining myself to take issue with him. A sentence like the one above cannot but lead astray and can cause great harm in the understanding of Calvin. Especially when its author—who incidentally after the publishing of his work entered the Old Catholic Church, not the Reformed—is praised even by Protestants as an exemplarily objective reporter and who is considered the crown witness.

When Calvin mounted the pulpit of St. Peter’s, the people crowded the wide nave. Eagerly they waited for the first sermon and hoped it would cause a sensation. Anyone who came for this, however, was disappointed. But there was a surprise. The pastor who had come back opened the Scriptures and began by con-

tinuing exactly where he left off three years before. He wanted to show that he had been forced to interrupt his preaching office but that he never gave it up.¹⁰⁵

That was the only revenge on the congregation which had expelled and exiled him like a criminal. Not a word of the past, nothing about his adversaries. That would be ignoble, an insult to the losers. These feelings he expressed in letters. He showed a loving attitude also toward the two ministers who stayed on. He did not let them feel how low they had fallen because they had permitted themselves to be used as instruments in the hands of a God-estranged party. And yet it would have been easy for him to remove them from their offices. In time his magnanimity earned him nothing but ingratitude.

The Guillermins, who with such persistency worked for and accomplished his return, expected him to handle their opponents quite roughly. But he did not please them in this way. He wanted to show himself "not as the revengeful party head but as everyone's pastor, instituted by God." Kampschulte, who cannot but discover these facts to be literally so, is forced to admit, "Such a moderation was something absolutely new and unusual in the community which had been torn asunder by the most violent party fights and feuds. And this moderation could not but make a fine impression upon the great majority. This mild, reconcilable position after his return constitutes one of the most beautiful pages in the life of Calvin . . ."

That is fine. But it is too much praise already. The "impartial" biographer feels constrained to modify this statement in the second part of this sentence, ". . . and posterity would praise his merit even more if he had been less conscious of it himself." This he says because Calvin reported freely about his actions to Farel and Myconius, intimate friends, who with trembling hearts were waiting for the first news from Geneva. He was happy and grateful over the victory which the voice of the Saviour of peace had won in his heart over intentions of revenge!

In his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, Calvin commented on the words of the Lord concerning the meek (Matthew 5:5): "That the meek who instead of flaring up excitedly at each

insult rather bear it all than to become like the godless; that these meek are promised the possession of the earth, may seem quite strange. For precisely those take possession of earthly power who are ready to fight at the slightest provocation and who quickly raise their hand in revenge when they suppose themselves injured. Do not the infidels rage more furiously, the more they are borne with meekness? Is it not said that 'one must howl with the wolves' because the wolves devour him who makes himself the meek lamb? Christ, however, who places His power and His Father's protection against the unbridled power of evil, elects the meek as lords and heirs of the earth . . . Contradiction? Yes; notice in what constant unrest the proud and haughty live! Though in their restless existence they may be called the lords of this world a hundred times over, in reality they have nothing, even if they possess all. In the name of the children of God I say, in quietness they may enjoy their earthly life even if they may not call a foot of land their own. This is not a presumptuous possession. They possess the earth and know that it is given by God . . . Exposed to all the darts of fate, at the mercy of the wickedness of infidels, surrounded by dangers, they are trusting pilgrims under God's protecting hand, and now already have a foretaste of the grace of their God. This is sufficient for them until at the Last Day they gain possession of their world-wide inheritance."

These words are fitting here: One or another reader may, with the author, see in them an explanation of the Reformer's truly great attitude of magnanimity after his return to the city in which so many with their insults had given him cause for hatred and revenge.

Calvin was a man of meekness and of peace who avoided all dissension so long as it pertained to private affairs. This statement is out of tune with the picture which his secret and open opponents among historians have painted of him. But when God and His Kingdom were attacked, it was different. Then he felt himself the instrument of the Most High and became relentless. All gentleness disappeared. Did not the Son of God who promised the meek and peaceful so much, swing the whip to cleanse the desecrated temple?

The amazing, moving fact in the life of this man is this humanly observable split personality which psychologically has perhaps no counterpart. Only he who has experienced to a small degree with close friends how decisively the resignation to the will of God can change the nature of man, will be able to solve this riddle.

His contemporaries had perhaps more understanding for such a process than our century which is so proud of its science of the soul. "Animum immutare divinum opus est" ("To change the soul is the work of God"), said Oekolampad, the Reformer of Basel.

PERHAPS this is the place to touch upon Calvin's maladies. They alone provide a satisfactory explanation of the excitement which at times appears in the expressions of the tormented man, even if his lack of sleep and his indefatigable labors are not taken into consideration.

As a consequence of his privations and vigils during his youth, early in his life he was afflicted with a headache concentrated on one side which hardly ever left him during his life. These pains were wont to enhance his emotional excitement to such an extent that during many a night he was "inhumanly" tormented by them.

Subjected to maladies of the trachea, he had with pains in his side to spit blood when he had used his voice too much in the pulpit. Several attacks of pleurisy prepared the way for consumption whose helpless victim he became at the age of fifty-one. Constantly he suffered from the hemorrhoidal vein, the pains of which were unbearably increased by an internal abscess that would not heal. Several times intermittent fever laid him low, sapping his strength and constantly reducing it. He was plagued by gallstones and kidney stones in addition to stomach cramps and wicked intestinal influenzas. To all this there was finally added arthritis. It was no exaggeration when he parenthetically wrote in a letter, "If only my condition were not a constant death struggle . . ."