

SPECIAL
ARTICLES

Our Contributors

BOOK
REVIEWS

CALVIN AS AN ORGANIZER.

By Prof. Henry E. Dosker, D.D.

A structure that can stand the test of the ages must be well built, and from the building we argue to the structural talent of the builder. The structure which Calvin built has stood the test of the ages, hence his structural talent must have been great. He reaches out inwardly to church organization and outwardly to civic organization. And he is especially great as an organizer in as far as the principles he established had potentiality for the future which made them capable of a later development, far in advance of their original intent. Let us look for a moment at Calvin as an organizer.

The charge has often been made, and the idea is quite generally accepted, that Calvin was Geneva's "dictator." Not only is this idea wholly incompatible with the Calvinistic scheme as a whole, but it is wholly at variance with the facts. To the older citizens of Geneva Calvin always remained an alien and he became a citizen only four years before his death. With strict impartiality, the Syndics, as late as 1554, when Calvin has mastered all opposition, referred his books, to be published, to the censor as well as others. Two years later Calvin wrote: "I am living like a stranger in the city." He was therefore far from being a "dictator," although the council availed itself frequently of his wise counsel, when needed.

For the Church, Calvin had large ideals, and his spirit was unquestionably conciliatory, as regards other branches of Protestantism. Church union was ever in his mind. Where, in all the writings of the Reformers, do we find a sentiment like this, quoted from a letter to Melancthon, November 29, 1552—"I consider it of the utmost importance that all trace of difference between us be hidden, as much as is possible from the eyes of posterity. For it would appear strange if we, who had to all separate ourselves as it were from all the world, in the very beginning should separate from each other also, instead of uniting together." The schismatic tendency, which has so often revealed itself in the history of the Reformed Churches, is therefore not due to the teachings of their founder. So far did Calvin carry this desire for union that he asked Bishop Crammer to appoint a place in England, where the leaders of Protestantism might meet, to settle the main points of the common faith and to lay the foundations for a permanent union. The death of Edward VI. frustrated all these plans. That in such an event, the organization of Protestantism would have been largely along Presbyterian lines, no one needs to doubt.

Look for a moment at the Church organization of Calvin, which proved itself capable of such infinite adaptation and power to maintain itself, in the most untoward environment. Its two fundamental ideas were the Sovereignty of God and the equality of all believers, all of whom are "priests unto God." By this idea, at one blow, Calvin uprooted the caste of the hierarchy. This universal priesthood focused itself in the Presbyterian office. The Gospel is Calvin's central idea. This Gospel is applied by a conscience, enlightened by the Holy Spirit. It is embodied in the presbyterian form of government. Church and State co-operate in its behalf and it is

enjoyed by church discipline. Everything therefore centres in the Word, whose power is absolute and demands absolute obedience.

All Reformed Churches, whatever their differences, agree in these three characteristics: 1. The institution of the eldership; 2. The parity of these elders or presbyters; 3. The unity of the Church, through a common confession of faith and a conciliar form of government. That is our common heritage of Calvin. He laid the foundations and these were everywhere honored, and proved the strength of the Reformed Churches. Any deviation from these principles has always spelled ruin to the Church involved.

Under the "Ordinances" of 1541 the duties of preachers, elders, doctors and deacons were clearly defined. The preachers were nominated by the clergy and approved by the magistrates, whilst the ratification of the choice was left to the congregation. They swore to obey all the laws, but were left free in the preaching of the Gospel. They were mutually to correct each other, for which purpose weekly meetings were held. The elders watched over the whole Church, the ministry included, and together with the latter maintained discipline. In the early organization of the Genevan Church, State and Church being so closely connected, the elders were chosen by the lesser council, two from that body, four from the council of sixty, six from the council of two hundred. The ministry ratified this choice. Calvin believed in a moderate aristocracy and this view later on distinguished the Reformed from the Methodist Churches.

The deacons were charged with (1) the collection and distribution of alms and (2) with the care for the visitation of the poor. The "Consistory," composed of the clergy and elders, met every Thursday and to it all questions of discipline were referred, although it did not attain the right of excommunication till 1553. This organization, compact and simple as it was, aimed at the deepening of the faith and the purification of the life of the citizens of Geneva, and, irksome as the "ordinances" originally were, they ultimately converted Geneva into a "model city," as history has abundantly witnessed. Guizot has somewhat harshly judged both Calvin's ecclesiastical and political ideals, we believe, through a lack of thorough appreciation.

It is not quite fair to speak of Calvin as upholding a "theocracy," in the accepted sense. In Calvin's system Church and State were strictly co-ordinate, God being supreme in both spheres. The State had the law; the Church, the Gospel and prayer. All church members, as citizens, were subject to the laws of the State, whilst the magistrates, as church members, were subject to the discipline of the Church. How Calvin strove to maintain this ideal is perfectly evident, from his attitude to the families of the rulers. God must remain supreme in Church and State alike. In so far we can call his ideals theocratic.

As regards his influence on the State, he only endeavored to bring the policy of Geneva in harmony with the new ecclesiastical constitution. Politically he believed in a self-perpetuating aristocratic oligarchy. Perhaps he was even inclined to give to the State too much power in Church affairs, but here as

elsewhere he was a child of his own times. But the ideals he laid down were capable of complete and independent development, as history has proved. His system of Church government was never completely developed at Geneva, but the principles underlying it were right and fully triumphed, at a later day, in a more favorable environment.

Thus also in the realm of the State. As has been said, Calvin had a distinct aristocratic bias, he was temperamentally antagonistic to a democracy. And yet through the application of his fundamental principle of the equality of all men before God he laid the foundation for lay power in the government of the nation. In his earlier stay at Geneva he had caused "the citizens—as he himself tells us—to be summoned to swear to adopt the Confession." That was the beginning of individualism in national affairs; that was the foundation stone of a new order of things, in which each individual citizen was to have a part. Before that day the Church, and in Protestant lands, the prince, determined what people were to believe; here at Geneva, not the council but the citizens themselves ratified the choice.

The rights of the people once recognized, the power of individualism once asserted, and the foundations were laid for that great structure, which we call popular sovereignty. Rome's ideal was Church absolutism; Luther's State absolutism; Zwingli's, Erastianism or paternalism. Calvin's ideal was absolute sovereignty, both of the Church and the State, each in its own sphere, and the recognition of the individual, as standing in immediate and undeniable relation to God, to whom alone all were ultimately responsible. And thus Calvin was the pioneer of the modern idea of a free Church and a free State.

FLIPPANT AND IRREVERENT.

Editor Dominion Presbyterian: As one who has taken a deep interest in the "cultivation" of a Canadian literature, will you permit me to express my sorrow at the flippancy and irreverence indulged in by some writers given space in our magazines and newspapers. Instance, a contributor to the Canadian Magazine for February says: "There is an adage about a daughter of the fair one in fig leaves who damned us all for a bite of a Northern Spy."

The only excuse that could possibly be offered for such a reference to man's awful fall, and the entrance of sin into this world, is the ignorance the writer thereof displays. He evidently does not "know his Bible" and so fails to realize the gravity of his offence against reverence and decency. I need hardly say that Eve did not wear fig leaves or other clothing until her disobedience brought her to a knowledge of sin's deep shame; and we are nowhere told that the forbidden fruit was an apple. That tradition comes from paganism.

But even if the writer could plead crass ignorance in mitigation of his offense, the editor who accepted such stuff for the delectation of his readers can scarcely be allowed that plea. He, at least, should know that "want of decency is want of sense."

ULSTER PAT.

"He who speaks much of his sorrows to men, easily comes to speak of them too little to God."—Tholuck.