

# John Calvin: A Lecture on the Occasion of his 400th Birthday, July 10, 1509—1909<sup>1</sup>

*Herman Bavinck*  
*Translated by John Bolt*

The [Protestant] Reformation deserves its own distinct place in the midst of the movements and events that inaugurated the new [modern] era. It was born out of the soul's need for assurance of salvation, bore a religious-ethical character, and sought to reform the church of Christ in accord with the apostolic mandate.

Luther was the passionate prophet who first articulated the Reformation's great ideas in a voice that penetrated people's hearts and in a language they all understood. Alongside Luther, Zwingli deserves honor for undertaking an independent reformation in Switzerland, which, though related to the German Reformation, developed its own character by subordinating justi-



*Portrait of John Calvin at the  
Bibliothèque de Genève  
(Library of Geneva)*

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<sup>1</sup>Originally published as Herman Bavinck, *Eene lezing ter gelegenheid van den vierhonderdsten gedenkdag zijner geboorte. 10 Juli 1509–1909* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1909); Available online at <http://www.neocalvinisme.nl/hb/broch/hbcalvijn.html>. The original contains no notes or images except for a black-and-white facsimile of John Calvin's portrait, displayed above, by an unknown painter. The following notes and images are supplied by the translator.

fication by faith to the glory of God's name.

Calvin, born on July 10, 1509, in the northern French city of Noyon, was twenty-five years younger than Luther and Zwingli and stood on the borderline between the first and second generation of Reformers. Nonetheless, he deserves to be counted with the aforementioned because he brought the two together into a higher unity, systematized the ideas of the Reformation, and organized its labors. With some justification Calvin has been called the "savior" of Protestantism, preserving the Reformation stream from silting up and allowing its life to flow widely and broadly into our modern history.

There is a noteworthy, providential harmony between the education that Calvin received as a youth and the task to which he was called as an adult. Unlike Luther, Calvin did not come from peasant stock but grew up in a middle class family that had achieved a measure of prosperity and social standing. His father, Gérard had married Jeanne Lefranc from an important family, and he occupied a significant post in the service of the church. The young Calvin thus had the opportunity to mingle with the sons of the respectable and even noble classes and in those circles to learn the manners that made it possible for him later in life to operate easily in the upper strata of society. These experiences gave him, despite his simplicity, an aristocratic bearing. For his own part, he valued this privilege highly. Though he was extraordinarily dedicated to his studies, he was definitely not a one-sided person only interested in learning. On the contrary, he lived in the midst of good company, was remarkably sensitive to the well-being of his fellow students, and demonstrated dedication to the smaller and greater responsibilities of friendship.

In addition to the privileges of this cultured life, Calvin also enjoyed an outstanding literary education. Only fourteen years of age, in August 1523 he was sent by his father to Paris to be educated at the Collège de Marche by the humanist scholar Maturin Cordier, who shared the humanist zeal to reform the Latin schools. Cordier guided the young Calvin through the mysteries of the Latin and French languages, thereby laying the foundation for the mastery over both languages that Calvin exhibited later in his writings, a

mastery still praised in our day by literary experts such as Ferdinand Brunetière.

Admittedly he only benefitted from Cordier's instruction for a short time because he was soon transferred to the Collège de Montaigu. Nonetheless, Calvin benefitted from this change because under the tutelage of Noël Bédier (Natalis Beda) he became familiar with the older, medieval methods of instruction and was able to see clearly the difference between the two. This instruction in Latin and French was followed later on in Bourges by Mechior Wolmar's instruction in Greek. It is also likely that in the summer of 1531, having returned to Paris to resume his humanistic studies, Calvin enjoyed instruction in the Hebrew language by the renowned François Vatable.

Calvin demonstrated his complete facility with the foremost Greek and Latin writers in his first published work, a commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia* (*On Compassion*; The preface is dated April 4, 1532). Still, his vantage point in this work remains wholly humanistic. He makes only sparse use of Holy Scripture and the Church Fathers. Not until later did he place his linguistic ability, his philological awareness, his fine literary sense, and his powerful and passionate style in the service of the gospel. Notwithstanding his great literary ability he did not become a renowned writer. Words for him were not an end in themselves, only a means. His humanism was put in the service of the Reformation. Just as Moses was reared in the wisdom of the Egyptians in order to lead God's people by it, so too did Calvin in his later years put the knowledge gained in his literary education to use in translating and interpreting Holy Scripture and in the education and governance of the church of Christ.

A similarly superb formation in law was added to this literary education. Initially, Calvin's parents intended for him to serve the church and, therefore, according to the strange custom of the day, he was provided a benefice. However, when he had completed his preparatory studies his father made known his wish that his son study law as a more suitable way to gain wealth and honor. These changes in the wishes of the elder Calvin undoubtedly were precip-

itated by a conflict with the Roman Church council of Noyon that lasted until the father's death and concluded with his excommunication. The father lost his sympathy for serving in the church and steered his young son in the direction of law.

Apparently the young Calvin had no objections, and he followed his father's wish. Perhaps, then, he had already come under the influence of his cousin Olivetan's<sup>2</sup> reservations about the truth and purity of the Roman church and religion. However that may be, at the end of 1527 or beginning of 1528, Calvin left Paris, first for Orléans to enjoy the tutelage of the famed jurist Pierre de l'Estoile, a representative of the old way, and then to Bourges where the law was taught on the new humanist foundation by the equally famous Andreas Alciatus.<sup>3</sup> Calvin progressed rapidly in this science and was awarded an honorary doctorate. Above all else, this study



Calvin's Preface to Olivetan's La Bible Qui est toute la Sainte escripture

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Robert Olivétan (c.1506–1538) translated the first French Protestant Bible from the original Hebrew and Greek texts (*La Bible Qui est toute la Sainte escripture*, 1535). John Calvin wrote a Latin preface for the translation.

<sup>3</sup> Andreas Alciatus (Alciati; 1492–1550) was an Italian jurist and founder of the French humanist school of jurisprudence. Alciati is famous for his *Emblemata* (1531), a collection of short Latin verse texts and accompanying woodcuts that created a new European genre, the popular emblem book. The illustration provided (on the following page) is Emblem 5, “Human Wisdom is Folly Before the Lord.” Alciati’s accompanying note reads: “What should I say? How should I address by name this biform monster, which is not man, and not a snake? Rather a man without feet, a snake without upper parts, he can be called a snake-footed man and man-headed snake. The man farts out a snake; and the snake has belched a man. There is no end to the man, and no beginning to the beast. Thus at one time Cecrops reigned in learned Athens; thus Mother Earth brought forth the giants. This image signifies a cunning man, but one lacking in religion, and one who cares only for earthly things.” (Alciati’s *Book of Emblems* is available online in English at <http://www.mun.ca/alciato/etext.html>.)

of law benefitted Calvin in many ways for his later life: It sharpened his mind, opened his eyes to the differences between social classes, developed his diplomatic skills, and stood him in excellent stead for ordering the ecclesiastical and civil life of Geneva.

Nonetheless, all this preparation, notwithstanding its value, was insufficient to turn Calvin into a Reformer. For this something else was needed—a definite conversion needed to take place in his soul. From his childhood onward, Calvin possessed a pious demeanor and a strict conscience. He was guilty of no gross sins. Accusations to the contrary are pure slander. However a great change took hold in this life, long in preparation but finally and suddenly out in the open. When he arrived at Paris in 1523 the new, reformational ideas had penetrated many circles, and men such as Lefèvre had already made the case for needed reform in the church long before Luther. Luther's writings quickly became influential and were echoed by others. All of Paris was in upheaval. It is likely that Farel, a student of Lefèvre's, had established a secret church by 1523. The opposition did not sit still. The renowned theological faculty of the Sorbonne swiftly condemned Luther's doctrine as heresy, and the parliaments declared themselves decidedly against any novelty in religion. Francis I occasionally leaned in a different direction but had little inclination toward the Reformation. It was not long before persecution broke out. The first Protestant was martyred at the stake on August 18, 1523.

All this must have left a deep imprint on Calvin's serious personality—an imprint undoubtedly strengthened by his interaction with men such as Olivetan, Melchior Wolmar, Etienne de la Forge, G. Roussel, and others who were to a greater or lesser degree inclined to the new ideas. It did not take long before Calvin himself took the determined step and joined the Reformation. Though



*From Alciati's Book of Emblems, 5, "Human wisdom is folly before the Lord"*

doubts had arisen in his heart, he had held back because of reverence for the church. And yet, finally, the decisive hour arrived. Exactly when this took place we do not know. All we can say is that it took place before October 1533.

It is unknown to us how the change happened. Calvin, who did not like to talk about himself, spoke infrequently and sparsely about it. Actually, he only referred to it once in his later writings, in the Preface to his *Commentary on the Psalms* in 1537. He says there that previously he “was too obstinately devoted to the superstitions of Popery” until “God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame.” In his fine 1539 letter to Cardinal Sadoleto he provides, by way of example, a description of someone who became convicted of the errors of Rome and joined the Reformation. Perhaps this description drew from his own experience; for, in the description we get a picture of someone who in a lightning stroke uncovered the pool of errors in which he had been swimming, judges his previous life with weeping, and sighs and makes himself available to God. Now he was fully persuaded, and all doubt was banished from his heart.

Calvin thus came to the Reformation along similar paths as Luther and Zwingli—a deep religious-moral experience also characterized his conversion. Yet, amidst the similarity there was also distinction. Luther experienced deep guilt and discovered the joy of God’s forgiving grace in Christ. Zwingli experienced the gospel as a liberation from legal bondage toward the glorious joy of adoption as God’s child. Calvin experienced a deliverance from error to truth, from doubt to certainty. The German Reformer held on for dear life to the Scriptural word: “The just shall live by faith.” The Swiss Reformer’s favorite verse was the invitation from Jesus: “Come to me all who are weary and heavy burdened and I will give you rest.” The Reformer who was born in France found his strength in Paul’s boast: “If God is for us, who can be against us.”

Calvin was unable to remain long in Paris after his conversion. A remarkable event took place on November 1, 1533. Calvin’s friend Nicholas Cop, rector of the university, delivered a rectoral address that has justly been called the French equivalent of Luther’s 95

theses and a manifesto of the French reformation. There are some who believe that Calvin was the author. If this is true, we would have the first evidence of his conversion. But even if this cannot be proved, and others judge it to be unlikely, the address remains of no lesser significance. It resulted in a storm of outrage and unleashed a persecution that easily surpassed the earlier one. Cop himself was forced to flee, and many others followed suit. Calvin too fled Paris. In May 1534 he refused the payment he had up to then received from his benefice. After wandering for a time in France, where we are not able to keep track of him completely, he left his fatherland and took abode in the city of Basel in February 1535.

He labored intensely to complete his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that he had started earlier in Angoulême. The fury of persecution continued in France. When the persecution evoked great bitterness in Germany, Francis I defended himself in an edict dated February 1, 1535, with the pretext that only [impious] Anabaptists and those who sought to disturb the peace and order of the state were being burned at the stake, not the pious adherents of the Reformation. When Calvin became aware of this edict he could no longer be silent. He completed his *Institutes* in great haste in order to defend his persecuted brothers from such a slanderous charge. He added to the work a preface to the King of France, dated August 23, 1535, which is stylistically one of the most polished products that flowed from Calvin's pen. It is also one of the most brilliant defenses of the Christian faith ever written.

When the book finally appeared in print in March 1536, published in Latin by the Basel printer Platter, Calvin had already left the city in order to stay a short while in the court of the Duchess Renata of Ferrara, who was sympathet-



Renata, Duchess of Ferrara

ic to the Reformation.<sup>4</sup> After staying for a few weeks he returned to Basel, spent a short time in France, and on his return journey arrived in Geneva and stayed overnight with the intention to continue on his trip.

However, matters were guided in a different direction. For several reasons, including the industrious agitation of Farel, the Reformation had found entry in Geneva. On August 27, 1535, it was officially endorsed by the civil authorities. Nonetheless, there was a long way to go before it took root in every heart and became a formative power in the life [of the city]. Demolition had taken place, but construction still needed to be done. Farel and those around him did the best they could, but they were not fully prepared for the enormous task that had now been placed on their shoulders. By chance, in July 1536, Farel heard that Calvin was in Geneva. He visited Calvin and pleaded with him to stay in order to further and complete the work of the Reformation in the city. But Calvin dismissed the request, excusing himself because of his youth, his inexperience, his natural bashfulness, and the need to continue with his study. But Farel would not let him go, and he repeated his entreaty, finally adjuring him with these words: “You may continue with your studies, but in the name of the Almighty God I declare to you: You will experience God’s curse if in the work of the Lord you refuse to help us and seek yourself more than Christ!”

This adjuration moved Calvin to the innermost depths of his soul. It seemed to him that he was hearing the voice of God himself in these words, and so he yielded to it and stayed. From this time on Calvin and Geneva belonged together.

Calvin was well prepared for the work that awaited him here. The *Institutes*, published only months earlier, contained the program for his labors. Calvin knew what he wanted. It was clear to him and his spirit was keen. The publication of this volume was Calvin’s first, great reformational act, and at the same time a significant event in the history of Christ’s church.

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<sup>4</sup> Renée de France (1510–1574; Italian: *Renata di Francia, Duchessa di Ferrara*) was the second daughter of Louis XII of France and Anne of Brittany; she became the Duchess of Ferrara in 1534.



*“The Reformation Wall” in Geneva’s Bastions Park features Farel, Calvin, Beza, and Knox. Construction on this monument began in 1909, the year of this essay.*

What stands out above everything else in this instruction in the Christian religion is the complete certainty, the rock-hard conviction that shines through on every page. The man who is speaking knows that he is in the grip of truth, that he has made God’s business his own, and that he is beyond all wavering. It is true that Calvin had previously entertained doubts. But following his conversion he is absolutely certain and considers all doubting as the most serious sin that can beset a Christian. There is not the slightest indication of any change in his conviction at any later time. The book he published was small in its scope, and he would amplify it many times. But he never changed its content. The basic ideas in the last edition are identical to those of the first. What he believed at the outset he confessed until the end. Of course, Calvin built his *Institutes* on the foundation of his predecessors—Luther, Melancthon, Erasmus, Bucer, Zwingli, and Farel. He was clearly more of a sys-

tematizing spirit than a creative one. Nonetheless, he did much more than simply repeat what his predecessors had said. He took the scattered building blocks, organized them, and added to them. He rounded off the ideas of the Reformation, filled in the lacunae, moderated excesses, pruned hyperbolic statements, all with French sharpness and clarity, creating a synthesis in the confession of truth. Thus, thanks to his labors, a new type of Christian piety and theology came into being.

The certainty of which Calvin speaks in the *Institutes* is definitely not of a scientific or scholarly kind but of a religious-moral sort. It is the certainty of faith concerning the salvation that is in Jesus Christ. For Calvin this faith is a matter of absolute certainty—it is sure and solid because of the Holy Spirit's work in the human heart. Nothing in the entire world can satisfy us but the grace of God in the person of Christ who comes to us in the pages of Holy Scripture. And there it shines forth before us in all its fullness and truth. The grace of God in Christ is the core and heart of Calvin's *Institutes*. The work is not an attempt to set forth a scholarly argument, and even in the arena of dogmatics it is not a full statement. Yet, especially in the first edition, as a short summary statement of faith, the *Institutes* sticks to the simplicity of Holy Scripture itself. The essence of the Christian faith was and remained for Calvin this simple truth: In Scripture God tells us how much he loves us. The content of special revelation is God's mercy towards us and the assurance that this mercy effects in our hearts. Revelation and experience of salvation are intimately bound together. Objective truth and subjective assurance—unshakeable confidence about the reality of revelation and undoubting certainty about our own salvation—belong together as two halves of the same ring. Faith embraces both together in one and the same act.

Calvin does not stand still, however, with this certainty. He does not distract himself with the experiences of his own soul but proceeds from this certainty of God's grace in Christ and follows it to its origin and source. He climbs up from the creature to the Creator, from the temporal to the Eternal, from the visible to the Invisible, from becoming to Being, from the vicissitudes of history

to the unchanging decree of the Lord. He is not driven by logical reasoning or passion for systematic completion, but he is instructed by Scripture and led by his own soul's experience. If God's grace is truly and fully grace, and if the certainty of faith is absolute, then both point directly to the divine energy that is hidden behind them and manifested in them. God reveals his almighty and merciful will in the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ and in the assurance of salvation that the Holy Spirit's witness has implanted in the heart [of the believer]. Grace and election, the Gospel and the complete sovereignty of God, are not in opposition and mutually exclusive according to Calvin; rather, grace, in the true and full sense of the word, is electing in nature, and the Gospel is nothing other than making known and realizing the divine will concerning salvation. The Gospel is at the same time the source of our knowledge of God and the means of grace.

In reaction to rationalism, modern philosophy re-conceives the essence of the world as will, as energy, and as power.<sup>5</sup> In a highly nuanced sense, Calvin shares this conviction. He rejects the notion of God as a benevolent guardian over his creation as well as that of God as a deistic being who calls the material world into existence with all its potentialities and then leaves it all to its own development. For him, God is almighty, sovereign, ungrounded will, a will manifested in everything, especially in the diversity and inequality of creatures and furthermore in the moral division that exists among human beings and brings about the manifold miseries of life. He acknowledges an almighty and freely powerful will that withholds privileges, that revokes blessings, that determines disasters and evils, and that brings about ruin and destruction through sin and unrighteousness. It will not do, says Calvin, to close one's eyes to this. Reality proclaims it. Scripture bears witness to it. A sovereign will rules that gives no accounting for his acts. There is an undeniable decree that undergirds this mysterious world of misery and grief.

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<sup>5</sup> Bavinck repeatedly criticized the naturalism of nineteenth-century thinkers such as Ludwig Büchner, *Force and Matter; or, Principles of the Natural Order of the Universe*, 4th ed., translated from the 15th German edition (New York: P. Eckler, 1891).

Calvin does not, however, follow the course taken by many in our day and conclude from this miserable reality that this almighty and unfathomable will must be blind, irrational, cursed, and that it is in the realm of possibility that the entire world is a work of darkness above which human consciousness can only rise for a fleeting moment. Nor does he take the route of many who share this world view of justifying himself over against God and accusing him of injustice. Rather, he takes his stance with Paul and Augustine on God's side, casts humanity in the dust and calls out: "Who are you, O man, to talk back to God and to put him before your judgment seat?"<sup>6</sup>

He adds two more points. First, there is no active will of God that brings only misery: For, evil is not an autonomous power; Sin is not a substance but a corruption and deformation of the good; The material as well as the spiritual is a creature of God's power. Second, therefore, whatever injustice and misery the world portrays for us, the earth is still full of God's good gifts: For, all creatures are governed by his wise and holy decree, and even the smallest part displays his glory; No human being is completely and totally outside God's grace, a common grace that extends to the whole world, lets the sun shine on the just and the unjust, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Moreover, above everything, because of the person of Christ and the witness of the Holy Spirit, we know that the will of God in all its endless diversity of expression is at the core of its essence *saving grace*, and we know that it leads humanity and the world out of darkness into light and through death to eternal life. God's judgments are unsearchable and his paths beyond tracing out. Yet in faith we understand that the world is governed not blind chance or unfathomable fate but by the will of an almighty God and faithful Father.

Just as Calvin proceeds from the certainty of God's grace and returns to his sovereign, determining will, so also he presses forward, beyond the diversity of all that is created to the final destiny

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<sup>6</sup>Romans 9:20

of all things. Repeatedly one encounters in Calvin's writings the expression, *coram Deo*, in the presence of God. He locates the whole creation, all things, particularly human beings, in direct connection with God and places them before his face. Everything is contemplated in the light of eternity, which casts over all creatures the luster of God's glory. The entire world in its length and breadth is taken as an organic and harmonious whole existing between the purpose of God and the destiny he intends for his creation. Creation is an instrument, an organ, a plaything in the hand of his will for the glory of his name. In that cosmic whole every creature and every sphere of life has its own place: Heaven and earth, plant and animal, humans and angels, family, state and business, calling, science, and craft—They are all empowered with wisdom and called to work at discerning God's will. Each has its own nature and law. Nevertheless, even with all that diversity there is an underlying unity: All originate from the same divine will, and all—whether they are aware of it or not, whether they are in agreement with their own wills or in conflict with them—serve to glorify God's excellencies.

It is the privilege and calling of the church of Christ *consciously* and *willingly* to live for the glory of God, and Calvin himself lived that way. For him God was not only a God from afar but also a God who is near. He experienced God's presence and walked in the light of his countenance, giving his body and soul completely as a sacrifice to God expressed in obedience. As his life and doctrine were of one piece, so he asked others to live: Word had to become deed, doctrine life, and faith a work. The divine will made known in Christ and witnessed to in human consciousness by the Holy Spirit had to be expressed in the energy and activity of the believer's will. A Christian was not permitted to close him or herself off in innerness or to take refuge in the salvation experience of personal feelings; rather, Christians who live in accord with God's will must extend themselves to the final purpose of all his ways—the glory of his name. We are not our own. We are God's possession. His will is our law. Obedience to that will is the highest virtue of the Christian. Good works, therefore, are necessary, not to inherit eternal life, but as the fruit of faith, as tokens of God's grace, as signs of his election.

In Calvin's judgment this confession of election is so far from encouraging indifference and godlessness that, instead, it strengthens the believer's self-awareness, fills the believer's heart with assurance of salvation, and thereby directs the believer's will to intense activity. In Calvin's thought the moral life is accorded the highest value and receives religious and eternal significance. The Christian's good works, then, are not just so many isolated acts but are the expression of one unified moral life: They proceed from one source, are directed by one law, and serve one goal. Admittedly, Calvin's view bears a puritanical, even a rigorist character. Self-denial and meditation on the future life are strongly encouraged. Yet in principle he remains opposed to all asceticism. The dying of the old man has the resurrection of the new man as the other side of the coin. The Christian is a truly human child of God, fully prepared to do all good. The church is the organized fellowship of believers that always shows herself to be God's people by her holy walk. The final goal of all things is the glory of God to which all creatures—men and women, parents and children, office and calling—are called into service.

This was the high ideal that inspired Calvin and that he outlined in his *Institutes*. He did not leave it at that, however. He sought to bring this ideal into being, first in his own person, and subsequently in every sphere into which his influence was felt. Calvin was not only gifted with a sharp penetrating mind, with a strong and reliable memory, with a burning passion, but also with a committed resolute will. He was a force of nature, a man of power and action, a dominant spirit. Rarely has the combination of clarity and power been so united as it was in him. And in Geneva the unsought opportunity was given to him to put these gifts to use and to turn his ideals into reality.

Initially treading carefully, he remained in Farel's shadow. However, slowly but surely, thanks to the force of his personality, he came to stand on center stage. He drafted a Confession in 21 articles to which all the citizens of Geneva were obligated to swear.<sup>7</sup> He

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<sup>7</sup> *The Genevan Confession of Faith* (1536); Available online at <http://www.creeds.net/reformed/gnvconf.htm>. Recent scholarship attributes



*Cathédrale St-Pierre, Geneva, where Calvin preached*

set forth a Catechism for instructing the youth.<sup>8</sup> Through his preaching and teaching he acquainted his listeners with the content of the entire Scriptures, including the Old Testament. And he established a church order by which the life of the church could be regulated.

Calvin's reforming work soon met fierce resistance. In fact the opposition became so strong that only two years after his arrival, on April 23, 1538, both he and Farel were deposed from their offices, and within a few days they were banned from the city. Pulled by Bucer, Calvin went to Strasbourg to become the preacher to the French congregation, and he soon felt at home in his new field of labor. With uncommon zeal he devoted himself to his tasks of preaching the Word and explaining the Holy Scriptures; home visitation; discipline and diaconal work; opposing the Anabaptists, many of whom he won to his own point of view; and studying the

this confession to Farel, or at least to Farel and Calvin.

<sup>8</sup> *The Catechism of the Church of Geneva* (1545); Available online at <http://www.ondocrine.com/2calo504.htm>.

numerous religious and political questions of the day. In many respects the stay in Strasbourg was beneficial for Calvin. Not only was it there that he found in Idelette de Bure a gentle spouse who faithfully stood by his side for nine years until her death in 1549 and to whom he felt linked with bonds of tender love, but also Strasbourg occupied a prominent place in the German realm and was at the center of Reformed Protestantism with a large, prospering church and an outstanding preparatory and higher school. In Sturm, Bucer, Capito, Hedio, and others,<sup>9</sup> Strasbourg had a score of men who had committed with heart and soul to the Reformation and who served it with unyielding faith.

From Strasbourg Calvin was also given opportunity to participate in the important Colloquies at Hagenau, Worms, and Regensburg<sup>10</sup> and to become personally acquainted with some of the German princes and Reformers, including Melanchthon. In Strasbourg it was possible, more so than in Geneva, for Calvin to get a sense of the progress of the Reformation in all of Europe and to discern how matters stood with the political powers. From here he was able to take into his view the whole of Christendom, and it became impressed on his mind that nothing was more important for the Reformation than unity and cooperation. In Strasbourg he became a Reformer who belonged not to one city or national but to all of Protestantism.

Enriched in understanding and experience, Calvin returned to Geneva after a full three years. Ecclesiastical and political circumstances had developed in such a manner that his return was generally and eagerly desired. After initial wavering Calvin responded to the longing [for his return], and in September 13, 1541, he re-

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<sup>9</sup> Jacob Sturm von Sturmeck (1489–1553); Martin Bucer (1491–1551); Wolfgang Fabricius Capito (1478–1541); Caspar Hedio (1494–1552).

<sup>10</sup> These colloquies on the doctrine of justification, with Reformed, Lutheran and Roman Catholic participants, took place in 1540–1541. A 2004 dissertation on these colloquies completed at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam argues that Calvin played a much more significant role than had been believed: See Johannes Maarten Stolk, *Johannes Calvijn en de godsdienstgesprekken tussen rooms-katholieken en protestanten in Hagenau, Worme en Regensburg (1540–1541)* ([Kampen]: Kok, 2004).

entered the city from which he had been banned. His reputation fully restored, his position strengthened, he was now even more resolute and determined to make his vision become a reality. He began in a circumspect and magnanimous manner, but he never lost sight of his great goal: The church of Christ becoming the people of God and living fully according to the Word of God. He introduced a new and strict church order with a consistory (i.e., the preachers and twelve elders appointed by the magistrates) watching over the worship and moral conduct of Geneva's citizens and administering various penalties (i.e., rebuke, public confession of sin, ecclesiastical ban) in order to keep them in the right path. The consistory, however, had no jurisdiction over civil penalties. In this way Calvin granted the church its own sphere and independent task. As a fellowship of believers the church had to fulfill an additional calling beyond maintaining the pure preaching of the Word—she was to be a community/fellowship [*gemeenschap*] whose elders exercised discipline over all its members and whose deacons demonstrated mercy to all the poor and sick.

Nonetheless, in addition, the magistrates were also called to further the glory of God when drafting laws, governing, and judging. Already in his Prefatory Address to the *Institutes*, dedicated to Francis I, Calvin expressed his conviction that the King was God's servant and obligated to glorify God in his task by being led by God's Word. Church and state, he tells us in the *Institutes*, are like soul and body—they are to be distinguished while at the same time intimately joined together in serving the same final goal. While the state has its own sphere and no authority in matters of faith or human conscience, it must in its own way labor for the coming of God's kingdom. [Included in this labor] are maintaining pure doctrine, protecting the true church, removing all idolatry, and having a regard for the first as well as the second table of the law. Accordingly, the structure of Geneva's civil authority was restructured. A new administration was established to punish all law-breakers with harsh penalties. Extensive regulations were put in place for all offices and positions. Marriage and family, work and leisure, customs and morals were strictly supervised and disciplined. Thus the entire life [of Genevans] was regulated in detail and placed under the ec-

clesiastical and civil authority.

Now of course during the time of the Reformation people were accustomed to the patriarchal rule of the magistrates and the close regulation of their lives by discipline. Notions of a people's liberty and individual rights were developed later. In spite of this, there was no absence of criticism against the regime Calvin sought to establish in Geneva. In the struggle to bring his ideal to reality Calvin had to overcome considerable resistance. He had to take on those who were not accustomed to a strict rule of life, some of whom were under the influence of a pantheistic libertinism and wanted to live by the dictates of their own hearts (e.g., Pierre Ameaux and Jacques Gruet).<sup>11</sup> He also had to eliminate the opposition of the older, aristocratic families (e.g., Perrin, Favre, Bertelier) who wanted to retain their previously privileged positions and did not want to submit to the authority of this foreign interloper. He also had to defend his [trinitarian] orthodoxy against Caroli<sup>12</sup> and his doctrine of predestination against Castellio,<sup>13</sup> Bolsec,<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Gruet is famous for having pinned a nasty letter about Calvin on the pulpit of St. Pierre. After an investigation he was found guilty of numerous offenses and beheaded in June 1547.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Caroli (1480–1545) was a University of Paris theologian who accused Calvin and Farel of Arianism and Sabellianism because of their reluctance to affirm the Athanasian Creed. A series of colloquies in 1537 (Laussane and Bern) failed to resolve the matter. Calvin's later (1545) reflection on the Caroli dispute can be found in *CO* 7:289–340.

<sup>13</sup> Sebastian Catellio (1515–1563) was a French Reformed preacher who advocated freedom of conscience and thought.

<sup>14</sup> Jérôme-Hermès Bolsec (d. c. 1584) was a French Carmelite theologian and physician, who, after becoming a Protestant, took up cudgels against Calvin in 1551. Banned from Geneva for his fiery bombast against Calvin's person, he was given refuge in the court of Renata, Duchess of Ferrara (see note 4 above). He wrote a vicious biography of Calvin that was published in 1557. Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 16–17, describes Bolsec's work as follows:

. . . Jerome Bolsec, with whom Calvin crossed swords in 1551 . . . published his *Vie de Calvin* at Lyons in June 1577. Calvin, according to Bolsec, was irredeemably tedious and malicious, bloodthirsty and frustrated. He treated his own words as if they were the word of God, and allowed himself to be worshipped as God. In addition to frequently fall-

and Trolliet.<sup>15</sup> The most serious conflict was with the Spaniard Michael Servetus, for the conflict involved much more than a heterodox minister of the time: It embroiled all of Christendom in [a struggle with] neo-Platonic pantheism. After being condemned and sentenced with the death penalty in the Roman Catholic city of Vienna, in an act of unbelievable blindness Servetus fled to Geneva, almost deliberately to meet his end. Shortly after his arrival in the city he was arrested and charged with heresy, blasphemy, and slandering Calvin. Two months later, on October 27 1553, he was burned alive at the stake. This was Calvin's life until 1555—a constant strife. The Reformation in Geneva would only come into being after a long and frightful struggle.

There can be no doubt that Calvin all too often manifested the imperfections of his character as he sought to make his vision become reality. While he could be polite and friendly—as, for example, in the exchange with Cardinal Sadoletto—as a rule he addressed his opponents with countless insults. The possibility of their good faith never seems to have crossed his mind. Thanks to his prickly and mercurial nature—he once acknowledged to Bucer that he had the temper of a wild animal—he not infrequently succumbed to words and deeds that do not pass the standard of Christian love. Many, even among his friends, disapproved of his vehemence and rigidity

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ing victim to his homosexual tendencies, he had a habit of indulging himself sexually with any female within walking distance. According to Bolsec, Calvin resigned his benefices at Noyon on account of the public exposure of his homosexual activities. Bolsec's biography makes much more interesting reading than those of Theodore Beza and Nicolas Colladon; nevertheless, his work rests largely upon unsubstantiated anonymous oral reports deriving from "trustworthy individuals" (*personnes digne de foy*), which modern scholarship has found of questionable merit.

For a thorough discussion of the Bolsec matter see Philip C. Holtrop, *The Bolsec Controversy on Predestination, from 1551 to 1555: The Statements of Jerome Bolsec and the responses of John Calvin, Theodore Beza, and other Reformed Theologians*, 2 vols (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen, c1993).

<sup>15</sup>Jean Trolliet was a Genevan notary whom Calvin had previously rejected as a minister; he attacked Calvin's view of predestination as a doctrine that made God the author of sin.

which alienated others who might have been eventually drawn by tenderness. The passion to control all of life with laws and regulations left far too little room for the spiritual working of the Word and for the freedom of the conscience. The boundary lines between consistory and council, church and state, and the [proper] activity of both in relation to punishment were all drawn improperly so that the potential for conflict was unending. Thanks to the vehemence of his passions Calvin did no small damage not only to his own reputation, but also to the cause he represented. In spite of all the rationalizations that could be provided for it, think of how terrible that one pyre of Servetus has been for Calvin's own reputation and for the later history of Calvinism.

Yet one thing is certain: In all of this Calvin never sought his own advantage. In fact, had he stayed in the Roman church a glorious future would have befallen him. He sacrificed his quiet study in Basel and later his pleasant and blessed labor in Strasbourg to answer the call of Geneva where misunderstanding, indignities, and libels would be his plentiful portion. He did it because in that call he discerned the will of God. When Francis I began to persecute the faithful in France under the pretext that they were guilty of political mutiny Calvin broke his silence. According to his own testimony, silence then would have been unfaithfulness. He frequently employed the image of a dog that barks when its master is attacked. Calvin served his own Savior and King with the same faithfulness. According to the testimony of Pius IV, money had no attraction to him.<sup>16</sup> He gave a good portion of his income as preacher for the support of those in need and for the spread of the gospel. His estate, in total, amounted to little more than 4,000 guilders.<sup>17</sup> Like his pupil, Knox,

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<sup>16</sup> Bavinck mistakenly refers here to Pius II who was pope from 1458–1464; clearly it is to Pius IV, pope from 1559–1565. The oft-quoted statement is: "The strength of that heretic, consisted in this, that money never had the slightest charm for him. If I have had such servants my dominion would extend from sea to sea." See Philip Schaaf, revised by David Schaaf, *Creeds of Christendom*, 6th ed., 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), I:434.

<sup>17</sup> Calvin's own final will and testament (available online at [http://www.reformed.org/calvinism/index.html?mainframe=/calvinism/calvin\\_will.html](http://www.reformed.org/calvinism/index.html?mainframe=/calvinism/calvin_will.html)) provides a total figure of 225 "golden crowns."

Calvin feared no man and was no respecter of persons. It was as if he lived in the presence of God. On occasion he would halt in the middle of a speech, with one hand take off the hat on his head, point to heaven with the other and utter this brief phrase: “Everything for the glory of God!” Few people were as thoroughly driven by the fear of God and so completely dedicated with their entire life and thought and labor to his service as Calvin was. He was devoured by a zeal for the house of God.

Thanks to this exemplary dedication, matched with an unbelievable capacity for work, Calvin transformed frivolous Geneva into a model city of the Reformation whose piety and sound morality were generally praised. Refugees came from far and near to witness this spectacle and were inducted into the purposes of the Reformation. Calvin himself was such a refugee—he only became a citizen on December 25, 1559—but Geneva drew him because it was a “city of refuge” on the crossroads of France, Switzerland, and Italy that could become a center for the whole Reformation. Under Calvin’s leadership that is exactly what happened. Not only was he faithful to the small things so that nothing passed by his attention, but also he was incredibly many-sided. His sojourn in Strasbourg had enriched his vision and multiplied his relationships. His labors over time took on international significance. His goal was actually nothing less than the reformation of all of Christendom.

For Calvin Geneva became the watchtower from which he oversaw the entire religious and political movement of his day. He tirelessly fought the Roman Catholic Church. He skewered her errors with subtle irony and biting sarcasm, for example, in his expose of relics.<sup>18</sup> He also pulled on the harness against the Anabaptists, the Libertines, and those who opposed the doctrine of predestination. By word and by writing, in speech and in correspondence, by way of a thousand sermons and a healthy, rich, and to-the-point exposition of nearly all the books of the Old and New Testaments, Calvin became the spiritual adviser and leader of the Reformation in practically all of Europe. He promoted the cause of

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<sup>18</sup> See John Calvin and Valerian Krasinski, *A Treatise on Relics* (Nabu Press, 2010 [1923]).

the persecuted Christians and encouraged those imprisoned and facing martyrdom to be faithful and to stand strong. He opposed active rebellion against civil authority, but nonetheless approved of the Huguenot resistance in France after 1562, standing by the Huguenots with his counsel and deeds. He rejoiced in the Reformation's achievements in England under Edward VI, and his soul was thoroughly occupied with the persecution against the Reformation that followed under Bloody Mary. He negotiated with the King of Poland, encouraging him to take a more active part in promoting the reformation there,<sup>19</sup> and he corresponded with the Bohemian church on several matters of faith. He had numerous faithful pupils in The Netherlands and exercised great influence there through his writings and straightforward advice. His correspondence, of which hundreds of letters have been preserved, shows how well he was personally acquainted with the foremost leaders of the Reformation. These letters not only reveal Calvin's numerous connections with Lutheran and Reformed leaders, with kings and queens, but also they bear clear witness to his warm heart, intimate friendship, and empathy; his devotion and self-denial; his rich knowledge and wisdom.

It is almost impossible to imagine the extraordinary willpower and capacity for work of this man. Calvin only reached the age of 55, and he had to wrestle with a great deal of opposition, illness, and pain. Grievous tribulations in his own household and family, disappointment with his friends, and abuse from enemies were abundantly his lot. But Calvin made the most of the time. Sleeping little and living a simple and sober life, he sought little for himself, had few wants, and brought his soul and body into complete service [of his Lord]. His life was dedicated to Christ and therefore bore rich fruit. His only child died in 1542 shortly after birth, and when others saw in this event a judgment of God, he was able to comfort himself with the thought that God had given him many spiritual children over the whole world.

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<sup>19</sup> See *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, ed. Jules Bonnet, trans. Marcus Robert Gilchrist, 7 volumes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983 [1858]), VI, 98–99; 244–45; 317–19; 323–25.

In this international labor Calvin displayed a breadth of soul, a passion for unity and peace, and a conciliatory and accommodating tone not normally associated with him, which, for that reason, is all the more striking. No one surpassed the Reformer of Geneva in breadth of his perspective and wideness of horizon. In 1537 he refused Caroli's demand that he bind himself to the words and terms of the Athanasian Creed. When he was a minister in Strasbourg he accepted the order and liturgy of the French church and held back from instituting changes. Against Charles V in 1544 he argued that it was necessity for Protestants to overthrow the yoke of the Pope and to protect true religion. In his response to the 1549 Interim<sup>20</sup> he came to the fore as the spokesman and defender of the whole Protestant movement. He attempted to unite the Swiss and Lutheran churches on the doctrine of the Lord's Supper in the Consensus Tigurinus of 1549. The latter, however, rewarded his noble initiatives with gross ingratitude and rudely rejected them, especially after the Westphal entered the fray in 1552.<sup>21</sup>

Still, Calvin always retained the highest respect for Luther, honoring him as an outstanding servant of God. Until his death he also maintained his friendship with Melanchthon, notwithstanding the latter's vacillations. In Worms he even subscribed to the Augsburg Confession and defended it, provided he could interpret it in its altered form in accord with the intention of its author. He wrote a preface for the French edition of Melanchthon's dogmatic manual in which Calvin set forth his own views on predestination but still spoke with great appreciation for the German reformer's work and warmly commended it. Except when he had to defend it against opponents, he presented the doctrine of predestination with caution. In the Genevan Catechism predestination is more presupposed than

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<sup>20</sup>The Augsburg Interim was a decree issued on May 15, 1548 by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Augsburg after he had defeated the forces of the Schmalkaldic League. It ordered Protestants to readopt traditional Catholic beliefs and practices, including the seven Sacraments.

<sup>21</sup>Joachim Westphal of Hamburg (1510–1574) was a Gnesio-Lutheran who in 1552 published a warning against those who deny the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper: *Farrago confusaneorum et inter se dissidentium opinionum de coena Domini, ex Sacramentariorum libris congesta.*

laid out. Very wary of controversies about secondary matters and the divisions that often flowed from them, he spoke out in the strongest manner against those who left the church because of minor departures in doctrine and life though the essential truths of faith remained. He accepted the polity of the Polish and English churches even though they departed from Presbyterian order in more than one area. Although he accepted no deviation from the demands of God's Word and fiercely opposed the so-called Nicodemites, he tread softly with weaker brothers, willingly and patiently answering their numerous queries. His letters to his friends display great open-heartedness, though his tendency to grant his trust too quickly was often violated and abused. It was a source of rich gladness to his heart that there were others who remained true to him until his death and who would further his own work in his spirit after his departure; for, the greatest and richest blessing on Calvin's labors was granted after his death.

He died peacefully around eight o'clock in the evening on May 27, 1564, after having taken leave from the members of [Geneva's] city council and the pastors in a dignified manner with moving words. But his spirit lived on, and his ideas were worked out [by those who followed him]. And where Calvin's words and writings found entrance, either directly or by way of his pupils, in an amazing way he awakened the self-consciousness of people in all classes and ranks [of society] to greater trust in God and greater faith in themselves. This was a time when doubt and uncertainty reigned. Faith in the church, in religious leaders, in worship, in the reality of invisible things, had received a mighty shock. Mockery had replaced honor and respect, and the lamentable division and conflicts among Protestants had alienated many serious and conscientious people from the Reformation.

Then Calvin appeared, and by his word and example he restored faith and enthusiasm in people's hearts, shored up conviction concerning the eternal things, and helped make life, even that of the least significant person, worth living. For the notion that one is the object of God's eternal, unchanging, and almighty love and that, therefore, one is firmly and unshakably convinced of this



*Gnesio-Lutheran Joachim  
Westphal of Hamburg  
(1510–1574)*

by the testimony of the Holy Spirit in ones heart, casts all defeat and doubt to the side. Incorporated into the fellowship of all the elect, one was oriented to deeds of world renunciation as well as world conquest. Calvin himself was a sharp and sure character and formed other characters through his teaching and life. In a day when society was slowly changing, he did not resist [those changes] in either a despotic or hierarchical manner but took them by the hand and led them in the sure paths of the divine Word. The Reformation that proceeded from Geneva, contracted as it were as a covenant between the gospel, now purified

from all kinds of medieval error, and the new bourgeoisie. While Luther, it has correctly been said, stood with one foot in the past and the other in the present, Calvin placed his one foot in the present and the other in the future.

This became obvious in the first place in his reformation of the church. Calvin's activity in Geneva and abroad was above all else dedicated to restoring the church in accord with Christ's own order. For years he labored intensely but fruitfully for the church's independence, for her freedom to administer discipline without interference, and for the pure administration of word and sacraments. But Calvin did not conceive of the church only in its official or institutional form, he also recognized in her the fellowship of true Christian believers who through their confession and life witness to the fact that they were God's people, anointed by Christ as prophets, priests, and kings. For Calvin, the church is at one and the same time mother and fellowship of believers. While Luther more or less devalued these precious notions, narrowed church reform to the restoration of preaching, and left her polity to the civil authority, Calvin deduced from the Kingship of Christ the church's independence so that neither king nor priest could lord it over her.

He thus lifted believers up from the pitiful situation of immature laity, gave to them the confession as their own personal possession—it was said that in Geneva anyone could give an account of his faith as well as a doctor from the Sorbonne—and prepared the way for a Presbyterian and synodical polity.

Calvin saw in the church something more than a community that gathered on Sunday for the preaching of the Word. Under his leadership the church became a society that during the week also exercised its influence within and without. The office of preacher was only one of many. In addition there was the office of elder to which responsibility was given for personal home visitation, oversight, and discipline; the office of deacon, which was responsible for showing mercy to all the poor and sick; and, finally, the office of doctor, which had the task of unfolding, defending, and teaching the truth. To demonstrate, as it were, the truth of the [congregation's] independence, Calvin retired the choirs and placed the singing of psalms on the lips of the congregation. This [phenomenon] was heard not only in church buildings but echoed in homes, in workplaces, in the barns, and in the fields.

In a similar way we can take note of Calvin's influence on statecraft. Calvin was no democrat in the modern sense of the word. His doctrine of predestination which roots all differentiation among creatures in the will of God is in direct conflict with socialist notions of equality, and he regarded the idea of popular sovereignty to be blasphemous and absurd. It was his desire that church and state, clearly distinguished in origin, essence, and calling, could still be united in working together for the glory and honor of God's name. As a symbol of this, the Coat of Arms of the City of Geneva, inscribed on its public buildings and on its coins and banners, includes the Christ monogram. And with respect to the form of the state,



*Geneva's Coat of Arms*

Calvin indicated his clear preference for an aristocratically ruled republic in which the power of the highest authority would be tempered by the vote of the people, and especially by the lesser magistrates, while the influence of the people would in turn be similarly moderated by the leading of the civil authority.

In this way he managed to extend the idea of freedom from the independent bourgeoisie to all the people. Leaning on the confession of election, Calvin gave to subject peoples a sense of dignity and self-worth that an Anabaptist passivism, which left the defenseless as so many sheep to be slaughtered, could not bear. While Lutherans opposed all resistance and, in Austria under Emperor Ferdinand I, for example, without any significant persecution and martyrdom, allowed themselves to be led back to the Roman Church,<sup>22</sup> Calvin brought the people in the state as well as the church to self-awareness and impressed upon them the conviction that the people do not exist for the sovereign but the sovereign for the people. In the same way that Calvin was a church reformer and statesman who, like David of old, was called from a humble state to become the messenger and servant of the Gospel, so he instilled in all his followers a religious conviction with political consequences that served as an impregnable bulwark of political freedom. The Huguenots in France, the Puritans in England and Scotland, and the Sea Beggars in the Netherlands all built on the foundation of Calvin's principles and found therein the legitimacy, the courage, and the power for their heroic struggles.

Calvin's labors for all of society were no less richly blessed. Like Zwingli he had a powerful social passion. Not only has this [social] significance of the Swiss Reformation been acknowledged for a long time, but in recent years it has even been claimed that it in no small measure helped give rise to the capitalism of our day.<sup>23</sup> Of course, if

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<sup>22</sup> Ferdinand I (1503–1564) was Holy Roman Emperor from 1558. When his brother Charles V ordered a general Diet in Augsburg to discuss the religious problem of Europe's territories, Charles himself did not attend. Instead he delegated authority to his brother, Ferdinand. The key resolution of Augsburg was the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*.

<sup>23</sup> Max Weber's important essay, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* was published in the *Archiv für Socialwissenschaft und Sozial-*

with this term one has in mind the capitalist spirit of mammonism that is only concerned about acquiring earthly goods, then this inclination is in irreconcilable conflict with the gospel and with Calvin's cleaned-up confession. The Reformed faith is not materialistic but idealistic and ethical in nature. Just as he had done for the church and the state, so Calvin directed the whole of society to the glory of God and the service of his kingly rule. In particular, he placed all human vocations on a religious foundation from which they can only be removed at great cost to themselves.

By contrast, capital in and of itself is, no less than any other gift of God, a curse or a shame. The Reformation in fact restored the validity and dignity of natural life and removed the profane character with which the Middle Ages had imprinted the natural world. Luther is likely the first who translated Paul's Greek word with "calling" (*beroepe*).<sup>24</sup> In the same way that the Reformation brought people to self-awareness in church and state, so too marriage and family, profession and labor were all restored to honor in society. Calvin in particular poured the luster of godly glory over the whole of earthly life, and he placed all of natural life in the ideal light of eternity. He defended the lending of capital, the legitimacy of business, and he described art, science, and philosophy as rich gifts of God. He even established a school in Geneva for literary, scientific, and religious studies, and he knew that there was an inner bond between the earthly and heavenly calling. Perhaps his understanding of this seems inadequate to us now. In his time it was an extraordinary reformational act that had rich and blessed consequences. By means of it numerous civic and social virtues blossomed and bloomed. Domesticity, cleanliness, industriousness, diligence, fidelity, concern for order, reserve, simplicity, frugality—all of these came to characterize the nations influenced by Calvin. Where the power of his principles went forth, the welfare of the people improved. To this very day these principles are operative in Protestant countries—in contrast to Roman Catholic *countypolitik*, Volumes XX and XXI, 1904–1905.

<sup>24</sup> Bavinck does not specify the Greek word here; it undoubtedly is κλήσις, which is found, *inter alia*, in 1 Cor. 7:20: "ἕκαστος ἐν τῇ κλήσει ἣ ἐκλήθη ἐν ταύτῃ μὲνέτω."

tries—and more so among those of the Reformed confession than of the Lutheran.

Whatever tribute we now bring to Calvin on this commemoration of his four-hundredth birthday, and whatever memorials are erected in Geneva or elsewhere, he himself erected the most beautiful and enduring pillar of honor in the hearts and lives of his numerous spiritual descendents. These can give their predecessor and leader no greater tribute than by continuing to confess with heart and mouth, word and deed: “From him and through him and unto him are all things; to him be the glory forever!”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Romans 11:36