

Extract taken from  
Professor F. Wendel's "Calvin"  
(First published 1950)

Chapter 3

CALVIN'S CONVERSION

Calvin's conversion has been the topic of innumerable and not very interesting controversies.\* It used to be assumed, on the evidence of a letter of Calvin's to Bucer, that he took the side of the Reform as early as 1532,† until one day it turned out that the date of that letter was wholly uncertain, and in any case must have been later than 1532. The one and only document we have from Calvin himself attaches no date to the event in question, but contains some no less interesting information about it. This is a passage in the preface to the Commentary on the Psalms of 1557:

"And at first, whilst I remained thus so obstinately addicted to the superstitions of the Papacy that it would have been hard indeed to have pulled me out of so deep a quagmire by sudden conversion, [God] subdued and made teachable a heart which, for my age, was far too hardened in such matters. Having thus received some foretaste and knowledge of true piety, I was straightway inflamed with such great desire to profit by it, that although I did not attempt to give up other studies I worked only slackly at them. And I was wonderstruck when, before the year was out, all those who had some desire for the true doctrine ranged themselves around me to learn, although I was hardly more than a beginner myself."‡

In this passage Calvin himself says that he had shown obstinacy in his attachment to the Roman Church. We can surely see in this a direct allusion to the reading of the Protestant writings that he had been able to procure up to that time, to the (at least very probable) attempts by Olivétan, Wolmar and others to win him over to the Reformation, and his resistance to them. Calvin

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\* The following studies are among the most thorough: LECOULTRE, 'La Conversion de Calvin,' in the *Revue de Theol. et de Philos.*, Lausanne, 1890; A. LANG, *Die Bekehrung Calvins*, Leipzig, 1897; K. MULLER, 'Calvins Bekehrung' in the *Nachrichten der Gesellsch. der Wissensch.*, Gottingen, 1905; K. HOLL, *Johannes Calvin, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. III, p. 255, n. 1; WALKER, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 78 ff.; p. WERNLE, 'Zur Bekehrung Calvins' in the *Zeitschr. fur Kirchengeschichte*, 1906 and 1910; A. LANG, *Johannes Calvin*, pp. 14 ff.; DOMERGUE, *op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. 327 ff.; PANNIER, *Evolution religieuse (passim)*; IMBART DE LA TOUR, *op. cit.*, pp. 20 ff. It is needless here to go over the whole of this discussion.

† *Opp.*, 10b, 22.

‡ *Opp.*, 31, 22.

affirms later on that his conversion was sudden. There is no need to quibble over the term. It must have been one of those abrupt changes of direction such as Luther had known, which are usually the result of a long unconscious preparation. Even if, a quarter of a century later, Calvin was simplifying the story, the expression he uses does not exclude his having had previous knowledge of the leading ideas of the reformers, nor even his having been an advocate of a moderate reformism before he adhered openly to the Reform and at the same time broke with Rome.

On the other hand it seems impossible not to apply to Calvin himself the well-known passage in the Epistle to Sadolet where he makes an advocate of the Reform describe his conversion:

“The more closely I considered myself, the more my conscience was pricked with sharp goadings; so much that no other relief or comfort remained to me except to deceive myself by forgetting. But since nothing better offered itself, I went on still in the way I had begun: then, however, there arose quite another form of teaching, not to turn away from the profession of Christianity but to reduce it to its own source, and to restore it, as it were, cleansed from all filthiness to its own purity. But I, offended by this novelty, could hardly listen to it willingly; and must confess that at first I valiantly and bravely resisted. For since men are naturally obstinate and opinionated to maintain the institutions they have once received, it irked me much to confess that I had been fed upon error and ignorance all my life. One thing especially there was that prevented me from believing in those people, and that was reverence for the Church. But after I had listened for some time with open ears and suffered myself to be taught, I saw very well that such a fear, that the majesty of the Church might be diminished, was vain and superfluous.”\*

Apart from the evidence of Calvin himself, there are some indications that enable us to date his conversion approximately.† On August 23rd, 1533, he was present at a session of the general Chapter of Noyon, in the course of

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\* *Opp.*, 5, 412—*Opusc.* 194.

† P. BARTH, ‘25 Jahre Calvinforschung’ in the *Theologische Rundschau*, 1934., and J. CADIER, *Calvin*, Geneva, 1958, have resumed the thesis of E. DOUMERGUE and of K. ROLL, according to which Calvin’s conversion occurred before the Marburg Colloquy. This is founded upon the frequently quoted passage in the *Second Defence against Westphal* (*Opp.*, g, 15) and upon Beza’s *Life of Calvin*, which make the conversion coincide with the commencement of the studies in law in 1528. But Calvin’s text signifies only that he had begun to detach himself from the Papacy (*Quum enim a tenebris papatus emergere incipiens*) and had read Luther’s writings (*legerem apud Lutherum*); he does not say he had broken with the Roman Church and he gives no precise date. The sentence about the Marburg Colloquy simply introduces the statement that these ‘conversations’ had taken place before Calvin began to write (*porro antequam scribere aggressus sum, Marpurgi . . .*). P. SPRENGER, *Das Ratsel um die Bekehrung Calvins*, Neukirchen, 1960, places the *subita conversio* in 1527-8, but at the same time reduces its significance to little more than a point of departure for a new spiritual orientation.

which it was decided to organize a procession against the plague.\* The insistence with which Calvin in later days denounced ‘nicodemism’—that is, the attitude of members of the Reform who lacked the courage of their opinions and continued in the outward observance of Roman practices—and his own ever-watchful conscience in this respect, render it unthinkable that he already considered himself one of the reformed at that time.† On the other hand, we find him again at Noyon in May 1534, which is less than a year later, and this time he journeys thither in quite another state of mind, for he is returning to his native town to surrender his ecclesiastical benefices.‡ That is, he regards his enjoyment of them as incompatible with his severance from Rome. Necessarily, therefore, his conversion must be placed between these two dates.

In the course of the year 1533 the partisans of the Reform had had the impression that the King and his advisers would support their cause in the end. Lefèvre d’Etaples, and with him the advocates of ‘a moderate reformation, were openly enjoying the royal favour and allowing themselves some rather unexpected liberties. Sermons of an evangelical character were delivered in the Louvre itself at the request of Marguerite of Navarre, and Francis I allowed it. But on All Saints’ Day, 1533, the new rector of the University, Nicolas Cop, had to pronounce the customary discourse in the Church of the Mathurins. For the text of this harangue he chose the beatitude ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit’, and in one part of his sermon he extolled certain ideas cherished by the Reformers concerning the function of the Gospel and justification by faith. This discourse was long held to be the work of Calvin:§ and it must be admitted that arguments are not lacking in favour of that hypothesis. Nicolas Cop was one of the sons of the King’s physician and one of Calvin’s intimate friends ever since he first came to Paris. Moreover, it was believed that a part of the original draft had been discovered, written in Calvin’s own hand. Calvin also seems to have been in danger at the same time as Cop—on the day after this outburst. Anyhow he took to flight under some disguise or other, and this could have been regarded as an admission of paternity. Calvin would then have been making his opinions known for the first time through the mouth of Cop, and would have been already, by 1533, so far committed to the Reform as to avow it in public. But if the last point can hardly be contested, that cannot be said of the rest. Although some have thought they could assert that ‘the whole discourse sounds very much like the authentic Calvin,’\*\* it has now been demonstrated that the opening is borrowed almost literally from the Paracleticus that Erasmus put at the front of the third edition of his New Testament, and that the interpretation of Matthew v. 3 reproduces entire passages from a

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\* LEFRANC, op. cit., p. 200.

† Cf. his letter to Marguerite of Navarre of 28<sup>th</sup> April 1545. *Opp.*, 12, 67.

‡ Ibid., p. 201.

§ Ibid., p. 712; LANG, *Die Bekehrung Calvins*, pp. 43 ff.; the same author’s *Johannes Calvin*, P. 205.

\*\* J. Vienot, *Histoire de la Réforme française*, vol. 1, p. 117.

sermon by Luther which had been put into Latin by Bucer in 1525.\* As for the rest of the discourse, it is much more in line with Lefèvre than with Calvin.† Besides, it has recently been established that, in his own later sermons on the same text, Calvin gives a very different interpretation of it, and openly argues against Cop's exegesis.‡ There remains the problem of the existence of a manuscript in Calvin's hand; but the researches of A. Lang and K. Müller enable us to conclude that this could only be a copy of an original which has disappeared.§ All that remains, then, of the hypothesis that Calvin was the author of the discourse, is that Calvin was a friend of Cop and seems to have been sufficiently interested in his oration to have copied out a part of it. That he was also 'wanted' after the Cop scandal is not surprising either, when we remember that the friendship between the two men was well-known, and that it was common form to proceed against everyone who could possibly have been confederate with a chief culprit: so much so indeed, that when Cop and Calvin had taken flight, some fifty other persons were arrested—which does not mean that they had all collaborated in Cop's discourse.

It is anyhow probable that Calvin had approved his friend's intention. We may well suppose that by that time he had already reflected seriously upon the religious problems which were present to all his contemporaries, and even that he had overcome the 'obstinacy' which had so long kept him in the bosom of the Roman Church. At the least he had been drawn into the reformism of Lefèvre and his following. And the very structure of his discourse suggests that Cop still believed in the possibility of a peaceful reformation of the Church which would find room for an Erasmus as well as a Luther.

After leaving Paris on the day after the famous oration, under the threat of pursuit, Calvin took refuge at Angoulême with one of his friends, Louis du Tillet, curé of Claix, who sheltered him under a pseudonym and also put the three or four thousand volumes of his father's library at his disposal.\*\* This was too timely a godsend for Calvin not to have profited by it in order to perfect his theological knowledge, and already perhaps to lay the foundations for the future Institutes. From there he went on as far as the court of Marguerite of Navarre at Nérac, where he met Lefèvre. We know nothing of what passed between the two men at that meeting; but the reserved attitude of Lefèvre entitles us to think he did nothing to persuade Calvin to break with the Church. Indeed, after an impartial examination of Lefèvre's writings, whatever has

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\* For the texts, see LANG, *Bekehrung*, pp. 46 and 49 ff.

† R. STAEHELIN, art. 'Job. Calvin' in the *Realencyclopädie für prot. Theolog. und Kirche*, 3rd edn, vol. III, p. 657; K. MÜLLER, 'Calvins Bekehrung,' pp. 224-42; NOESGEN, 'Die bei der Entstehung der Theologie Calvins mitwirkenden Momente' in the *Neue kirchliche Zeitschr.*, vol. xxii, Erlangen, 19, 1, p. 566, n. 3. M. MANN, op. cit., pp. 164 ff.

‡ E. MUELHAUPT, *Die Predigt Calvins*, Berlin, 1931, pp. 4 ff.

§ The same is true of the complete version preserved in the Archives of the Chapter of St. Thomas at Strasbourg.

\*\* DOUMERGUE, op. Cit., Vol. 1, p. 369. A. AUTIN, *L'Echec de la Réforme en France*, pp. 720 ff. and 272.

been advanced to show that Lefèvre ever really adhered to the Reform or to its theological principles\* can be cast out into the limbo of tendentious legend.

Under these conditions it becomes possible, without great risk of error, to determine the time of Calvin's sudden conversion, that is, of the radical change which he says took place within him immediately before the brief visit he paid to Noyon in order to surrender his benefices to the Canons there. What we know otherwise of the reformer's scrupulous character obliges us to believe that he cannot have waited long before renouncing the material advantages that attached him to the Roman Church when once he had become clear about his new orientation.

The steps he took after this visit to Noyon are not too difficult to follow.† He returned by way of Paris, stopped at Poitiers and Angoulême, and re-entered Orleans for the last time. It was there that he wrote or finished his treatise *De Psychopannychia* (Upon the Sleep of Souls).‡ In this he attacked a certain Anabaptist teaching to the effect that the souls of the dead went to sleep at death and until the Last Judgment. The work may have been published in 1534,§ but it is more likely that, on Capiton's advice, Calvin postponed publication of it until 1542.

The affair of the placards (October 1534), by provoking a violent reaction from the authorities against everyone who was either directly or distantly suspected of complicity in the plot—which the 'Lutherans' were accused of having fomented against religion and the public order—put an end to Calvin's days of tranquil study.\*\* It became dangerous for him to remain in the country now that he had been brought to the attention of the authorities by his propagandist activity in favour of the new faith. Moreover, he was anxious to find a refuge where he would be sheltered from persecution, able to pursue his studies in theology, and have sufficient calm to write the 'catechism' that he in-

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\* In this sense, cf. GRAF, 'Faber Stapulensis' in the *Zeitschrift für hist. Theol.*, 1852; DOUMERGUE, op. cit., Vol. 1, pp. 400 ff., and 542-51; x. DORRIES, 'Calvin and Lefèvre' in the *Zeitschr. für Kirchengeschichte*, 1925, pp. 544-81, has shown convincingly that Lefèvre remained outside the Reform and cannot be counted one of the real inspirers of Calvinist thought. At the most he had only a temporary influence upon Calvin before his conversion. See also the study by J. BARNAUD, 'Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples' in the *Études Théologiques et Religieuses*, Montpellier, 1936.

† On this subject, consult the data collected by DOUMERGUE, op. cit., vol. I, pp. 441-68, with a great wealth of detail.

‡ A re-edition of this was published by W. ZIMMERLI in 1932 in the collection *Quellenschriften zur Geschichte des Protestantismus*. It is preceded by a useful Introduction.

§ This is the opinion of the publishers of the *Opera Calvini*, vol. 5, pp. xxxv. ff. The title of the edition of 1542 is *Vivere apud Christum non dormire animis sanctis, qui in fide Christi decedunt, Assertio*. The end of the *Psychopannychia* does not appear except in the edition of 1545.

\*\* Upon the affair of the Placards, cf. V. L. BOURRILLY and N. WEISS, 'Jean du Bellay: les Protestants et la Sorbonne' in the *Bulln de l'Hist. du Protest. français*, Vol. LIII, 1904, pp. 106 ff. and IMBART DE LA TOUR, *Origines de la Réforme*, vol. 111, pp. 552 ff. On the contents of the placards, L. FEBVRE, 'L'Origine des Placards de 1534' in the *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, vol. vii, pp. 62 ff.

tended to compose for the Reform in the French language. He decided in favour of Basle, which was then, as now, one of the chief intellectual centres of Europe and was celebrated for its printers as well as for Erasmus's recent sojourn there.

For Calvin, conversion had meant a break with his previous studies, and—or so at least he thought—a break with the humanism which had hitherto been the aim of his life. And indeed it would be a falsification of this conversion to suppose that after the event Calvin became simply a Protestant humanist. Deeply though he had been impressed by humanism in his younger days—and as we have seen, this impression was deeper and more durable than is often recognized—Calvin must necessarily have interpreted his conversion as a total change of orientation. Until that moment, the humanist values had constituted, to his mind, the highest attainment possible to man. In relation to religion, humanism, to the extent that it included the cult of the ancient wisdom, had appeared to be a preparation and approach to the truths of Christianity. But now he realized that there was a break in continuity between the philosophy of the ancients and the Christian faith. To humanism, which by definition rested upon the greatness of man, he had now and henceforth to oppose the corruption of mankind by its sinfulness and alienation from God. To the partisans of free will and human autonomy he must now reply by preaching man's dependence and his ineluctable submission to the decrees of predestination. As in the conversion of Luther, though in a far less dramatic manner, an awakening to the consciousness of sin was the decisive moment in Calvin's conversion. The humanists, even Christian humanists, had never had more than a formal or impersonal notion of sin. For the Reformers it was a reality that concerned every individual and was determinative of his most intimate being.

Calvin could therefore no longer believe in the humanism he had known. But although, after 1534, he laid deliberate emphasis upon all that henceforth separated him from it, we know that he remained no less humanistic in method and in his particular type of intellectual outlook. Before his conversion he took humanism to be the end in itself. After that event it was no more than a means; and as has been said of him, no less correctly than tersely, he employs humanism to combat humanism.\* He continues to admire the philosophers of antiquity, he still respects Erasmus and his disciples, and all his life he will never cease to admire and make use of their labours and their writings, but he will always take care never to go too far with them. He will always point out that it is better 'not to follow the philosophers farther than is profitable'.†

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\* M. MANN, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

† *Instit.*, II, 2, 4.