



What sort of man was John Calvin?

We were in discussion about various matters. Then the subject of John Calvin came up. I was absolutely flabbergasted when my interlocutor said that Calvin was a hard man, not very nice to know.

Dumbfounded I dropped the subject because I really did not have any defense. The reason for that was that I had never thought about it as I had been brought up putting Calvin on a pedestal next to Augustine, Luther and other church fathers.

Did that mean that I considered Calvin a saint? No, of course not. Calvin was a man like us, who had to daily contend with a sinful nature. But I was flabbergasted as I wondered where this negative view of Calvin had come from. So when the next opportunity arrived I searched and found in my library a booklet which answered my questions.

Why so negative?

My first question dealt with where my interlocutor had gotten his negative view of Calvin. What I didn't realize is that there are literally umpteen books attacking Calvin as a person. I discovered that when I opened a book that had long been in my library but was still unread. You know the type — it was one of those books purchased because it might come in handy one day.

Well it became handy indeed. The book, or rather booklet, is called the *The Humanness of John Calvin* and was written by a Richard Stauffer. Stauffer, a Swiss Pastor, wrote his book in 1964 and it shows that he is well acquainted with the writings of Calvin. Early in the book Stauffer, especially in the footnotes, gives extensive quotes from those who were no friends of Calvin.

In the introduction to this 96 page booklet Stauffer remarks:

"Luther, by his spontaneity and his exuberant spirit, even succeeded in awakening sympathy from his very opponents, and Zwingli commanded respect as a lucid patriot and a courageous soldier in the very ones who would contest his theology, but the French Reformer not only has suffered calumny from his enemies, he has also been misunderstood and misinterpreted by his great-grand children."

In a footnote he writes that Emile Doumergue correctly notes: *"In relation to repugnance and hatred, one finds that Protestants rivaled Catholics."*

A little further he writes: *"In 1577, a Carmelite who had been converted to evangelical ideas, Jerome-Hermes Bolsec, after having returned to the Roman Church, published a biography of the Reformer which was no more than a vile tract. Calvin was accused in it with being ambitious, presumptuous, arrogant, cruel, evil, vindictive, and above all, ignorant. Also he was described as an avaricious and greedy man, as an imposter who claimed he could resurrect the dead, as a lover of rich fare, worst yet: as a gad-about and a Sodomite, who, for his infamous habits, had been sentenced in the city of his birth, Noyon, to be branded with a red-hot iron."*

Stauffer continues over the next couple of pages quoting mainly Roman Catholic but also Protestant writers who have done their utmost to picture the Reformer as a thoroughly evil man.

His humility was distasteful

From the Roman Catholic perspective this is understandable because Calvin more than any other was able to clearly show the evil of Roman doctrine which enslaved people to men rather than make them slaves, servants of the living Savior.

But where does this hatred, for that is what it is, of Calvin come from in the Protestant camp?

I think we must seek the answer in the way that Calvin, more than anyone, sought to give all honor for our salvation to Jesus Christ. He opposed all forms of what later would be called Arminianism. It is not our own efforts that save us but only the completed sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ.

His effort prompted hatred

Another reason for the hatred toward Calvin is, without doubt, that he labored without ceasing to help the spread of the Reformed doctrine. While giving a write-up on the book *Letters of John Calvin*, one reviewer noted:

*"The man, who regularly lectured to theological students, preached on average five times a week and authored enough material to fill forty-eight enormous volumes, could scarcely be expected to show enthusiasm for correspondence. Yet the **Complete Works of John Calvin** include another **eleven volumes** of his correspondence."*

His letters show his nature

Calvin's correspondence, his many letters, are very revealing in themselves. Who did he write to? What subjects did he write about? The answer to these questions are as broad as human concerns at that time.

In the *Letters of John Calvin* preface it recalls the dedication which Calvin penned in honor of his teacher of Latin, one Mathurin Cordier, whose Latin Grammar was still being used in the 19th century.

This is what Calvin wrote: "...it was under your guidance that I entered on a course of studies, and made progress at least to the extent of being of some benefit to the Church of God. When my father sent me as a boy to Paris I had done only the rudiments of Latin. For a short time, however, you were an instructor sent to me by God to teach me the true method of learning, so that I might afterwards be a little more proficient ... for me it was a singular kindness of God that I happened to have a propitious beginning to my studies ... It was my desire to testify to posterity that, if they derive any profit from my writings, they should know that to some extent you are responsible for them."

Reader, do you here recognize the description given by Jerome-Hermes Bolsec?

It would be easy to simply copy some of the letters in this book, but as with most letters from so long ago they would need some modernizing and also the background to the letter would need to be explained. So I hope that no one will find me amiss when I only quote from some of the letters and give a very brief background. Should anyone argue that I did not pick the quotes at random I am the first to admit it.

The first letter I will quote from is one addressed to John Knox in which Calvin expresses his joy at the advance of the Gospel in Scotland. Remember John Knox had studied under Calvin in Geneva. At the same time he uses the opportunity to express his sympathy to John Knox who had just lost his wife.

This is what Calvin wrote: "Farewell, distinguished sir and honored brother. May the Lord always stand by you, govern, protect, and sustain you by his power. Your distress for the loss of your wife justly commands my deepest sympathy. Persons of her merit are not often

to be met with. But as you have learned from what source consolation for your sorrow is to be sought, I doubt not but you endure with patience this calamity. You will salute very courteously all your pious brethren. My colleagues also beg me to present to you their best respects."

At the time of Calvin's death in 1564, Farel who years before had persuaded Calvin that his task lay in Geneva, wrote to one Fabri the following:

"Oh why was I not taken away in his stead, and preserved to the church which he has so well served, and in combats harder than death? He has done more and with greater promptitude than any one, surpassing not only the others by himself. Oh, how happy he has run a noble race! May the Lord grant that we run like him, and according to the measure of grace that has been dealt out to us."

Shortly before his death Calvin had written to Farel: *"Farewell, my most excellent and upright brother; and since it is the will of God that you should survive me in the world, live mindful of our intimacy, which, as it was useful to the church of God, so the fruits of it await us in heaven. I am unwilling that you should fatigue yourself for my sake. I draw my breath with difficulty, and every moment I am in expectation of breathing my last. It is enough that I live and die for Christ, who is to all his followers a gain both in life and death. Again I bid you and your brethren farewell."*

Conclusion

Let me finish this article by quoting once again from the booklet *The Humanness of John Calvin*. The booklet concludes with the words written by Nicolas des Gallars, who was one of Calvin's colleagues in Geneva for several years:

"What labors, what sleeplessness and worry he bore, with what keenness and finesse he foresaw dangers, with what zeal he guarded against them, what fidelity and understanding he showed in everything, what a kind and obliging spirit he had toward those who came to him, how quickly and frankly he answered those who asked him even the most serious question, with what wisdom he settled both privately and publicly the difficulties and problems which were posed for him to settle, with what sensitivity he comforted those who grieved and lifted up the broken and discouraged, how resolutely he opposed the enemies, how ardently he attacked the prideful and the obstinate, with what grandeur of spirit he endured misfortune, with what restraint he behaved in prosperity, and finally with what dexterity and élan he discharged all the duties and responsibilities of a true and faithful servant of God, I could certainly not be able to convey fully by the use of any words."

I have quoted only a little of and about Calvin but would direct any student to read these and similar books themselves. It will certainly close the door upon some of the calumny which passes for serious study in some quarters.

Rene Vermeulen

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