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the "Accusative Case": John Calvin

by DANIEL WALTHER



Calvin's home is on the main road between Paris and Belgium. Damaged during the war, it has been rebuilt.

IT IS sometimes difficult for us to imagine that some people were ever young. Take, for instance, the Reformer, John Calvin. Whenever we think of him, an intolerant person with an emaciated face ravaged by sorrow and pain rises before us; an unsmiling face with lean, harsh features; eyes that burn with a saint's passion and ascetic fervor. The very name, John Calvin, conveys the idea of intolerance, of puritan severity. We think of the unbearable laws in Geneva and the cruel punishment, often death, meted to some sixty-eight persons.

But this picture of extreme harshness is not fair to Calvin. Many of those who knew him best speak of his humility, his loyalty as a friend, his affability, and his unconditional surrender to God's will.

Not much is known of his youth. There are several reasons for this. Few documents refer to his youth. Had his friends known that he would become a famous religious leader they naturally would have been more careful to preserve his sayings and record his actions. Moreover, John Calvin was never a

talkative individual, as was Martin Luther, whose private life is well known. Luther talked and wrote constantly about his personal affairs. His house was always open. In fact, some of his utterances must be taken at least with one grain of salt.

On the other hand, John Calvin lived in a house that was rarely open. Practically nothing is known about his home life or his wife. He seldom spoke of himself, and only on the rarest occasions referred to a personal religious experience. There was a timid trait in his personality and an aristocratic attitude that kept him aloof from the masses. Then, there was a theological reason. He firmly believed that God was everything and man less than nothing. Hence, he did not consider himself important except as God's instrument.

To find Calvin's birthplace, one drives out of Paris, taking the main road to Belgium. On the way one passes through the small town of Noyon.

There is nothing there to attract the superficial tourist. But wait! Someone mentions that Calvin was born in this

place, and since Noyon is a little town and everybody knows everything about everybody else, his house is easily found. It is one of those landmarks that you can't miss. There is one principal square in the city, and Calvin's house is right there, at the grain market. The house is very old; after all, when Calvin was born there in 1509 it was far from new. The house is Calvin's, and yet it is not. It was partly destroyed during the war, and it has obviously been restored. I wonder whether Calvin himself would recognize it immediately.

No matter how insignificant a little French provincial town such as Noyon may appear, it has its importance; Charlemagne was crowned Frankish king there in 768.

When John Calvin was born, Martin Luther and Zwingli were approaching the age of thirty. Thus he actually belonged to the second generation of the great Reformers. Like other small boys in Noyon, John Calvin attended a school called the *Capettes*, so named because of the special cap which the students wore.

The birthplace of Calvin is in the province of Picardy, whose people were known for their love of argumentation. It was a country rich in warriors and servants of God, such as Peter the Hermit, who preached the First Crusade; Lefèvre, who was one of the great Renaissance teachers in Paris; and Robespierre, the awe-inspiring leader during the French Revolution.

The earliest recollections of his friends were that John Calvin was an exceptional, brilliantly gifted child—endowed with an excellent memory; he easily led his class. His personal gifts were early noticed and his friendship was sought. As a child he began a beautiful friendship with the young De Hangest boys, whose father was the most influential personality in the community.

And in this friendship is early demonstrated one of Calvin's traits; although reason rather than feeling was dominant in him, he had the ability to form precious and loyal friendships that lasted all his life. Another trait, formed in part by his early association with these young people of noble birth, was his aristocratic attitude.

His father was a successful and respected notary public. His mother was Jeanne Le Franc, of Noyon. Of her we do not know very much either, except that in her youth she was praised for her beauty and piety. There were five sons, the Reformer being the second.

The boys were still in their teens when their mother died. The father remarried and had two daughters, one of whom later followed John to Geneva. Calvin's eldest brother, Charles, became a priest at Noyon. But he was of an irascible disposition and had endless troubles with the church. In fact, he was excommunicated and refused burial in holy ground. Another brother, Antoine, followed Calvin to Geneva—a loyal evangelical, but he is seldom mentioned.

Calvin's boyhood school years made him conscious of his own relatively humble origin, but his contacts with gentility developed in him good manners and urbanity.

There was a custom then, strange to us today, by which a father bought for his son a lucrative benefice. This was simply the purchase of an ecclesiastical function, such as of a priest, and that job yielded financial securities. There was apparently nothing unethical in this; this type of simony was no more questionable then than the spoils system in the United States political fabric. John was not twelve years old when

his father purchased for him the first of such benefices. With another benefice later on he had an adequate income for his studies. He did not exercise the function of the priest (that was done by an older person, an ordained priest), but the job had been purchased and the revenues were his.

He was only fourteen years old when he left his home town to attend the University of Paris. He only occasionally returned.

The University of Paris was the intellectual center of Europe in his day, representing the conservative element in theology. The University clung, indeed, to medieval methods and beliefs and rejected the new learning. It was especially opposed to the intellectual currents of the Renaissance. In particular did the University reject the efforts of the Humanists. These endeavored to teach Biblical languages, such as Greek and Hebrew, and endeavored to seek in the wisdom of ancient Greece the answer of the day. The medieval church had prohibited the study of Greek (a situation that conceivably might be envied by some students today).

When Calvin entered the University he was at once subjected to strict, cruel conditions. The students were given a meager and an inadequate type of food, and they lived under conditions dictated by an unbelievable degree of asceticism. Halls and sleeping quarters were filthy. Students were subjected to corporal punishment. They had to begin their studies and recitations at 5:00 A.M., and the program continued until 8:00 P.M. with a couple of free hours to care for such necessities of life as meals, meager though they were. Young Calvin found nothing abnormal in these conditions. In fact, he did even

Because this day is all I own,
I feel compelled to not postpone
Accomplishing what should be done
Of work and play, while this day's sun
Shines down on me. As I review
The giant list of things to do—
Those notes to write, good recipes
To try, renewed attempts to squeeze
The budget, counseling our brood,
That book to read in quietude,
The mending, friendships to affirm—
The more I list the more I squirm,
Since I can neither beg nor borrow
A minute portion of tomorrow.

more than required; he studied harder and longer than he was obligated to. No wonder that, according to his friends, such a severe regime ruined his health—for the rest of his life he suffered from internal distress.

There were a few bright spots however. First, he enjoyed the comfort and trust of cherished friends, some of whom, like the De Hangest boys, had come with him from his home town. In fact, a few in this family joined Calvin later on in his religious beliefs. Then there was the pious Robert (Olivétan) who had a marked influence on his religious life. When he entered the Collège de Montaigu, Calvin met still other friends to whom he was devoted all his life.

And then there were some of his teachers. The one who had the most significant influence on him was his Latin teacher, Cordier. In these classes he was at once captivated by Cordier's mastery. He was a gifted teacher indeed, who made his students love his subject. Calvin was impressed by his excellent methods, but above all, by his genuine kindness of heart.

What a privilege for a young man to be guided in his early student years by a gifted and kind master. The feeling of friendship was mutual; and it lasted until the year of their death (they both died in the same year). When Calvin was Geneva's reformer, his master, Cordier, followed him and offered his services, which Calvin accepted gratefully.

Of an entirely different type was the dean of the school of theology. Noel Bedier was easily the most fanatical defender of Catholic dogmatism. He was consumed by the sacred fire of tol-

To page 20

without showing disdain or impatience. Only those who consider that their word is the final decree let loose a volley of words to burn others. After they are through they proudly announce, "Well, I took him down a notch or two," as if they were the hero of the day.

What a pity when we measure our strength or importance by our weapons of destruction instead of by how much tenderness for others we have in our hearts. Any of us can be a verbal gun toter or atomic bomb. Few of us have the greater power of self-restraint and patience.

3. *Words of rebellion.* Expressions of rebellion are the product of a deep-seated resentment of fellow human beings. Those of us who rebel against life because we feel that we haven't had a fair deal, vent our spleen by heaping our dissatisfaction on those with whom we live. We are hurt, so we try to even the score by hurting others.

This past year a student of mine announced to me that he no longer believed in God's love.

"I have had nothing but trouble since I joined the church," he said, "and I'm finished with it. I've lost all my money; I have an ulcer; and my

wife is giving me all sorts of trouble. I've lost confidence in God."

The young man was filled with bitterness and wanted to take out his inner desperation by doing something that would hurt someone else as badly as he had been hurt.

The point is, being Christians does not save us from the consequences of being free moral agents. Every day we make our choices. Every day we reap consequences of choices made. We ought not to spew words of rebellion in protest of our freedom to choose, for this is God's gift to us.

God was serious when He gave us our freedom and we must learn to take the consequences of our choices. God cannot spoon-feed us and protect us from discomfort without destroying our freedom. We must accept the disciplines of life without bitterness. There is no profit in rebelliously using sharp words against God, against religion, and against people. Each of us has his share of heartaches, which, if accepted in a spirit of gentleness, will make of us more-understanding human beings toward others with difficulties.

The real Christian is mellowed by hardships, not embittered. As he is mellowed he is also strengthened to bear up

and to effuse an attitude of victory.

How can we use our words so that we show ourselves to be the friendly person we want to be? The only way to show ourselves friendly is to cultivate the art of magnanimity, that is, to put friendship into action by being large-minded—forgiving those who are not friendly toward us, loving our enemies, smiling at the one who shouts angry words at us, being patient with trying circumstances, remaining calm when everyone else is derisive and ready for a fight.

Driving in our car, working at the office, or enjoying our friends, let us refuse to knife with painful words. Kindness is the guard against such action. I do not mean "door-mat" kindness, but rather "door" kindness—where you open up wide and let the sunshine of love pour through.

Walter M. Horton tells of a pious deacon who, pushed beyond endurance by the persistent malice of an enemy, vowed publicly to kill this hateful man. His enemy heard of the vow and laughed to his friends over what the "good, harmless old fool would do."

What the deacon did, to the astonishment of everyone, was to take every opportunity to be good to his enemy. At first it was a source of merriment, then annoyance; but in the end, after the deacon had risked his life in saving the man's wife from drowning, the deadlock between the two was finally split wide open, and a new friendship began.

"All right," said the enemy, "you've done what you said you'd do. You've killed me—or at least you've killed the man I was. Now, what can I do for you?"

There will always be some who never respond to your friendship—not even when you go the other mile in love. But don't let this provoke to verbal stabbings. If your love does not soften the hearts of those to whom you offer it, then bear their continued callousness and ill service in the same spirit as did Christ; return good for evil, take persecution without trying to retaliate; and soothe the turbulent atmosphere caused by those who use violence, persecution, and foul play as their daily tools.

Jesus loved people enough to use words as a healing salve to wounded hearts, but never as cutting knives. He was tolerant, patient. He did not allow the evil of the world to turn Him against the forces of good. Let His spirit influence your vocabulary as you strive to show yourself friendly.

THE "ACCUSATIVE CASE": JOHN CALVIN

From page 10

erating nothing but the old way of life. Owing to him, a number of evangelicals were sent to their deaths.

As for Calvin, we have the testimony of his fellow students who expressed their appreciation for his true-blue character—his "attractiveness," yes, his "charm." That picture fails to depict the harsh traits that we often think of. Some historians stress his savage disposition and dwell on his dislike of his fellow man. In a way, these descriptions can be expected, because it is impossible for a strong personality like Calvin to be neutral.

True, at times even some of his comrades considered him a little too zealous and conscientious. He earned the nickname of the "Accusative Case." It was not, as one of his later bitter critics said, because he delighted in reporting delinquent students to the authorities (although the "reporting" was quite customary in schools even then), but as his later successor and friend, Beza, said, he was distressed in seeing the dissipated and immoral life around

him. Of a sensitive nature, he often was led to severely censure and scold those of his fellow students who were not living a decent moral life. Thus, his accusations went directly to the delinquent.

While we know little about him, it is certain that young Calvin was much given to study, and if he had had his way, he would have loved more than anything else to study for the rest of his life the humanities—philosophy and the languages—rather than law, as his father demanded.

But God chose otherwise. He was only twenty-five when he published the first edition of what was, and still is, the most brilliant and rational treatise of Protestant theology—the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

Yes, young Calvin wanted to have his way. But in his teens he learned one thing that was to dominate him throughout life: that nothing mattered except doing God's will—the will of God, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.