

The Theology of Calvin's Tract Against the Libertines

by

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Calvin's tract Against the Libertines appeared sometime in early 1545. The precise date of its publication is not known. But based on Calvin's letter of April 28, 1545 to Margaret of Angoulême,<sup>1</sup> the book at least had been in circulation long enough before this date for her to have become aware of its existence.

The treatise is a polemic against the mystical and libertine views of a French-speaking Flemish group who had succeeded not only in establishing their presence in France but had also penetrated Margaret's court.

Margaret of Angoulême (1492-1549) was the Queen of Lower Navarre and Nerac, sister of Francis I, and author of Mirror of a Sinful Soul. She had protected Evangelical Catholics such as Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, William Briçonnet, and Gérard Roussel, and had befriended the Reformation in general. Calvin corresponded with her several times and had received her gratitude for his endeavors cultivating friendly relations between Francis I and German Protestants.<sup>2</sup>

Calvin had hoped to keep silent about the Libertines, because he did not want to offend Margaret. But in May 1544, Valérand Poullain sent Calvin several writings of the Quintinists (the central sect among the Libertines) which reformed brethren had sent him from Valenciennes. It was Poullain's prayer that Calvin would read these works and write the people of Valenciennes "some consolation which would sustain them in their misery and fortify them against these menaces..."<sup>3</sup>

Five months later, October 2, Farel also implored Calvin to write against these "disciples of Simon Magus," exclaiming, "if only they might be extirpated utterly through you."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Calvin to Margaret of Angoulême, in Letters of John Calvin, ed. by Jules Bonnet, trans. by Mr. Constable (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1858), Vol. 1, pp. 453-58.

<sup>2</sup>See Willston Walker, John Calvin: The Organizer of Reformed Protestantism (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 242.

<sup>3</sup>See Valérand Poullain's letter to Calvin, May 26, 1544 in A. L. Herminjard, Correspondances des Reformateurs dans les pays de langue française (Geneva/Paris, 1866ff.), IX, No. 1358, p. 247.

<sup>4</sup>Farel to Calvin, October 2, 1544: Herminjard, IX, No. 1395, p. 335.

In the meantime, reformed leaders were reporting to each other that the Quintinists had increased their activities in the areas of Liege, Tournai, and Valenciennes and that reformed communities had to become concerned.<sup>5</sup>

By mid-October, Valérand Poullain, in a letter to Calvin, expresses joy that the Reformer has agreed to write against the Quintinists.<sup>6</sup> Other developments would occur, but these would serve primarily to confirm Calvin's decision to refute the Libertines.

Calvin himself affirms that the events, briefly traced above, did influence him. In his Preface to the treatise, Calvin cites two factors which motivated him to undertake its publication. First he felt compelled to oppose the sect because of its surprising "growth" and "perniciousness."<sup>7</sup> As one who knew better, he felt called to repulse it. Second, as in the case of his treatise Against the Anabaptists, which he had written scarcely nine months earlier,<sup>8</sup> he was asked by reformed leaders to rebuff the sect.

More discreetly, however, in Chapter IV of the Libertines, he hints at a third reason. He refers to the activities of Quintin of Hainaut and two of his followers who had found refuge in Margaret of Angoulême's court.<sup>10</sup> Lest Margaret become hurt by them through lack of information, he concluded reluctantly that he must break silence and publish an attack against the Quintinists.<sup>11</sup>

However, the treatise had its actual inception as early as May, 1544, when in his Preface to the treatise Against the Anabaptists he explains that he wanted to write a two-volume polemic: one against the Anabaptists and the other against the Libertines.

Who then were these Libertines and what did they teach?

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<sup>5</sup> See Pierre Viret's letter to Rodolphe Gualther, September 5, 1544; Herminjard, IX, p. 329.

<sup>6</sup> Poullain to Calvin, October 13, 1544, Herminjard, IX, No. 1398, p. 341f.

<sup>7</sup> Contre la secte phantastique et furieuse des Libertins que se nomment Spirituelz, par. I. Calvin, a Geneve, par Iehan Girard, 1545; CO VII, cols. 149-248.

<sup>8</sup> See CO VII, cols. 49-142.

<sup>9</sup> See the letters of Poullain, Viret, and Farel in Herminjard, IX, Nos. 1358, 1392, 1395, and 1398.

<sup>10</sup> See Walker, p. 242.

<sup>11</sup> Contre ... Libertins, CO VII, cols. 162ff.

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### Who Were the Libertines?

According to Calvin, "Libertinism" represented an aberrant movement within Protestantism that was much larger in scope than the sect he wished to expose. He was cognizant of this movement's presence in Holland, Belgium, and Lower Germany,<sup>12</sup> but it was the French-speaking group he best knew and whose influence he wanted to eliminate.

To his knowledge, the French-speaking Libertines could be traced to a Flemish Coppin, a native of Lille, who began propagating the sect's views in the region of Lille around 1525. Coppin was succeeded by a Quintin of Hainaut, a man of some abilities, who soon became the acknowledged founder of the movement.

Calvin did not know exactly when or how the movement spread to France, but by 1534 Quintin and two of his followers, Bertrand of Moulins and Claude Perceval, were established in Paris, where Calvin reports that he personally met Quintin.<sup>13</sup> The three were later joined by a former priest, Anthony Pocquet. Calvin also learned from Etienne de la Forge, the Waldensian with whom he stayed in Paris while working on Seneca, that the Quintinists had left their own country due to "some crime rather than because of their message."<sup>14</sup>

Calvin did not know how long they were active in France, but their prolonged presence there concerned him. Also while in France they had continued to work in their own country, probably around Valenciennes, where they had enjoyed a surprising success according to information Calvin had received.<sup>15</sup>

Bertrand of Moulins had since died, but Calvin understood that the remaining three had found refuge at Margaret of Angoulême's court. Here Quintin served as an usher, Perceval as a valet, and Pocquet as a chaplain--all of which annoyed Calvin deeply.

Calvin also relates that Pocquet, who had lived formerly in Geneva, came to him in 1542, seeking his endorsement. Pocquet announced that Bucer had granted the Quintinists recognition in Strassburg and wanted Calvin to do the same for them in Geneva. Calvin was stunned to learn of Bucer's possible action, refused Pocquet's request, and Pocquet was required to leave.

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., col. 159.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., col. 160.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>See n. 3 above.

Calvin estimates that the sect numbered about 4,000 but that as many as 10,000 may have been tainted by their errors.

What did the Libertines teach?

Granting, momentarily, that Calvin's Quintinists are synonymous with the Libertines he attacks in his treatise--an identification which Calvin certainly assumes--what did the Libertines teach? In general, Calvin describes them as teaching a mystical and pantheistic form of determinism, characterized by a crass antinomian and libertine ethic, tinged with a radical or spiritualized eschatology.

Calvin devotes a manuscript of 200 pages to elaborating and refuting these views. His treatise follows a clear outline:

Preface

- I. The Relationship Between Libertinism and the Early Heresies of the Church  
Chaps. I-III
- II. The Origins of Libertinism  
Chaps. IV-VI
- III. The Spiritualistic Hermeneutics of Libertinism  
Chaps. VII-X
- IV. The Principal Doctrines of the Libertines
  - A. God and Creation XI-XII
  - B. Providence and its Consequences XII-XVI
  - C. The Person and Work of Christ the Redeemer XVII-XVIII
  - D. The Christian Life XIX-XXI
  - E. Eschatology XXII
- V. Examples of Libertine Literature  
Chaps. XXIII-XIV

Conclusion

Having explained his motives for writing this treatise in the preface, Calvin turns in the first division to charge that Libertinism is nothing more than a sixteenth-century form of Gnosticism. Rather than offering anything new, vital, or fresh to the Reformation, Libertinism is a tragic restatement of early Christian heresies.

Calvin accuses Quintin with having resuscitated the heresies of Cerdon, Marcion, and the Manichees.<sup>16</sup> This is not due to any cleverness on Quintin's part or to the fact that Quintin might have studied the fathers or even knows what the early heresies were. Rather Calvin charges that this Gnostic revival is due to Quintin's ignorance of Christian doctrine and church history.

Specifically, Cerdon emphasized two principles, one which he called good, the other evil, maintaining that everything in the world came from the good and shared its substance. Consequently, Calvin concludes that

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<sup>16</sup>See Contre ... Libertins, CO VII, cols. 156-158.

Cerdon denied the resurrection (since everything by nature returns to its origin) and taught that Christ suffered only as a phantom. Calvin does not elaborate, but Cerdon's overt pantheism and gnostic Christology are cited to illuminate as well as to condemn similar motifs in Libertine theology. Marcion, according to Calvin, taught essentially the same views as Cerdon.

It is the Manichees who best shed light on the Libertine movement. Hermeneutically, the Manichees rejected the Old Testament and retained from the New only that which served them. Theologically, they posited a dualism of good and evil and made man a combination of the two forces. In their view, the human soul was basically good and was capable of returning to its divine origin when purified. Finally, in terms of ecclesiology or self-government, the Manichees recognized two orders: the elect, to whom alone the highest wisdom was revealed, and auditors, who were lured into the movement while being informed that their failure to grasp the esoteric points of faith was not due to any deficiency in Manichaeism but to a deficiency in the groping auditors.

Calvin is confident that the Libertines "have only revived these old heresies," taking a little from each one, and "creating a mass of confusion," but transcending them all in "folly and impudence." Calvin goes so far as to claim that the Libertines have built all their illusions on "the foundation of the Manichees" with regard to their two essential principles: that man's soul is synonymous with God's Spirit and that everything else is either "of the world, or of Satan, or is nothing."<sup>17</sup>

In the second division, Calvin traces the origin of the Libertine movement. As already indicated, Calvin does not presume to criticize the sects of Holland, Belgium, and Lower Germany. It is the French-speaking group, led by Quintin and Pocquet, whose influence he wishes to curtail.

Having earlier introduced Quintin and Pocquet, we can pass on to an important observation Calvin offers. Knowing of the limitations of these two men, how does one account for the movement's phenomenal growth? Calvin provides two explanations. One is the recurring temptation of "foolish curiosity." Calvin notes that there are persons unfortunately who grow discontent with "the simplicity of the Scriptures" and who indulge in "frivolous speculations."<sup>18</sup> And two, there are also persons, whom Calvin designates as "profane people," who have grown tired of carrying Christ's yoke. They simply want an easier moral path to follow, a concession which Libertinism is quick to grant.

Whenever these two conditions are present among Christians, then deception occurs.

It is in the third division that Calvin analyzes the Libertines' hermeneutics. Four of their procedures are explained and criticized.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., col. 158.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., cols. 164-165.

One, Calvin charges that the Quintinists employ a style of language that conceals their true purposes. Like the "loud-mouthed boasters" of II Peter 2:18 and Jude, vs. 16, the Quintinists are described as speaking in a "high" or "haughty style," using "an unbelievable tongue," a "unique jargon," warbling "like birds," "garbling" their words, "babbling" and "bantering," so that "when you hear them speak," warns Calvin, "you will only be hearing high German."<sup>19</sup>

One is tempted to surmise that the Quintinists were guilty of glossolalia, but Calvin's intent seems otherwise. Calvin's point is that the Quintinists' lofty, obscure style of language hinders communication and prevents understanding.

Two, Calvin explains that central to their methodology is the practice of simulation. It is their express wish to give everything a double meaning. Their justification for this practice is based on Psalm 2:14: "He who sits in the heavens laughs at them" and Matthew 10:16: "Let us become wise as serpents." Jesus himself, note the Quintinists, used parables which even his disciples failed to understand until Christ explained them.

Calvin charges, however, that this practice only sanctions their speaking with a "double tongue" and finding "double meanings" throughout Scripture. Moreover, it reveals a profound misunderstanding of Jesus' use of parables and makes him guilty of simulation, too. Hence, instead of teaching what is "clear, pure, certain, and open,"<sup>20</sup> they deliberately obscure God's plain Word.

Three, Calvin claims that their key hermeneutical principle is: "the letter kills but the spirit gives life."<sup>21</sup> In place of emphasizing a passage's "natural sense" and "simple sense," they prefer its "spiritual sense." Consequently, in the absence of any sound hermeneutical norm, they freely engage in allegorical interpretations, high speculations, and new revelations.

All of this is further compounded by their failure to understand the Spirit's office as interpreter. The Spirit was sent to illumine both what Christ taught and what the prophets proclaimed. Rather than adding anything new to the Scripture, the Spirit's office is to enable men to understand Scripture. Thus the "Spirit and the Scripture," states Calvin, "are one and the same."<sup>22</sup> Any principle of interpretation that subordinates Scripture itself--i.e. forsakes its natural and plain sense--is to be rejected.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., col. 169.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., col. 172.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., col. 173.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., col. 176.



Four, Calvin charges that the Quintinists so freely apply the word "Spirit" to include everything as to empty it of meaning. Hence they can justify the most reprehensible behavior under the guise of being "spiritual."

The material which I have just reviewed comprises the first ten of twenty-four chapters which Calvin devotes to refuting the Libertines. In many respects, these first ten chapters provide the introduction. Having set the stage, Calvin now describes and criticizes the major articles of Libertine doctrine. This section begins with Chapter XI and continues through Chapter XXII. I am suggesting that it forms the fourth major division of his treatise and may be subdivided into the topics indicated in the outline. Let us examine, albeit briefly, each of these topics.

#### A. God and Creation. Chaps. XI-XII

In these chapters Calvin explains that Libertine theology teaches that there is but one, single, divine Spirit, or universal essence, which exists and which indwells every creature. This one, living Spirit is extended everywhere and constitutes everything.

Calvin condemns this pantheistic view as heretical and akin to "ancient pagan suppositions." It is totally contrary to the biblical revelation of man as a unique and distinct being, created in time, who exists as a creature separate from God's essence. At no point is man's soul or essence ever to be confused or blended with God's.

How then do the Libertines account for the "devil," the "world," "sin," and the "old man"? These are understood as misconceptions of fallen man's reasoning or as cuiders.

Cuider is a crucial term, if not a principal Libertine doctrine. It is not a word that Calvin coins but a term which he ascribes to the Libertines. It is an archaic word<sup>23</sup> and functions both as a verb and as a noun. According to J.-D. Benoit,<sup>23</sup> its modern equivalent as a verb should be Croire (to believe) and as a noun croiance or opinion (belief or opinion). Cotgrave's famous 1611 French-English Dictionary lists many possibilities: as a verb: "to think,...deeme, imagine, suppose, presume, have an opinion of, make a ghesse at"; as a noun, "a thought, conceit, ghesse,...imagination, opinion, supposition, presumption."<sup>24</sup>

Calvin implies that the Libertines meant by cuiders to convey the opinion that something in question is not "real" but only the product of human "imagination" or "fantasy." Things are cuiders because of the mistaken way in which people "conceptualize" or "presume" or "suppose" them to be. Hence, for the Libertines, the "devil," the "world," "sin," and the "old man" are cuiders.

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<sup>23</sup>See Jean-Daniel Benoit, "Glossaire, Tables et References," in Institution de la Religion Chrestienne (Paris: Vrin, 1963), V, p. 410.

<sup>24</sup>See the listings for "Cuider." The work does not contain page numbers.

Of course Calvin rejects this view as utterly foreign to Scripture, where the "devil", the "world", "sin," and the "old man" are hardly human suppositions but represent real entities, or conditions distinct and separate from the reality of God.

#### B. Providence (Determinism) and its Consequences.

In Chapters XIII-XVI Calvin touches upon the central nerve of Libertinism, which is its pantheistic determinism. The term is ours, but the insight is his. Calvin saw that, if allowed to pass unchallenged, the pantheistic proposition that God's Spirit indwells all and constitutes everything threatens to undermine a responsible doctrine of providence. Thus he sets about to discredit it by showing that it is incompatible with biblical revelation and by tracing its philosophical and theological consequences to their logical extremes.

It is not an overstatement, I believe, to claim that these chapters constitute the heart of the treatise. For they not only expose the philosophical foundation of Libertinism, but they also provide Calvin's clearest and cleanest attempt to articulate a doctrine of providence that is both biblically and theologically sound.

As Allen Verhey, in a recent study of these chapters,<sup>25</sup> points out, it is rather commonplace to view Calvin as a determinist who in the final analysis denies humankind freedom. But these chapters (XIII-XVI) permit one to challenge such a view.

At the same time this section poses an impregnable problem for the historian who wishes to know whether Calvin's accusations even approximately describe Quintin's true position. Perhaps Calvin, in his honest zeal to trace the theological ramifications of Quintin's mystical-pantheism, has confused his own projected consequences with Quintin's real views and moral outlook. Nonetheless, Calvin insists that his presentation of Quintin's determinism is accurate, and he goes so far as to support it with anecdotal references in which he depicts Quintin as a flippant, theologically shallow, and irresponsible opportunist, whose demeanor and activities are in keeping with the consequences he projects.

Assuming, therefore, that Quintin did maintain the pantheistic proposition that Calvin ascribes to him, Calvin argues that such a principle undercuts a plausible Christian doctrine of providence. If God does everything without qualification, then Calvin perceives three unacceptable consequences: one, the God of providence becomes synonymous with all that is tragic, evil, and demonic; two, conscience becomes unnecessary; and three, distinctions between good and evil lose all their significance. In fact, Calvin's point is that the Quintinists actually embrace or accept these consequences. Let us examine each briefly.

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<sup>25</sup>See "Calvin's Treatise 'Against the Libertines,'" Calvin Theological Journal, 15, 2 (November 1980), pp. 190-219.



First, if God is the unqualified causer of all causes, then, in Calvin's estimation, God becomes synonymous with all that is tragic and evil. This view is repugnant because it obviously attacks God's goodness. But the Scripture repudiates such pantheistic determinism and reveals the proper way in which God governs the world. In fact, it attests that God "works in a threefold manner."<sup>26</sup>

First, God works through the natural order. Writes Calvin, "there is a universal operation by which he guides all creatures according to the condition and propriety which he has given each at creation."<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, Calvin warns, this "natural operation" does not replace or militate against free will. For: "this universal operation of God's does not prevent each creature, heavenly or earthly, from having and retaining its own quality and nature and from following its own inclination."<sup>28</sup>

Second, God causes his creatures "to serve his goodness, righteousness, and judgment."<sup>29</sup> That is to say that by "a special ordinance...<sup>30</sup> he guides all things in accordance with what he deems to be expedient."<sup>30</sup>

This means that the activities of nature and men are instruments by which God exercises his moral prowess in both global and private affairs. Or, what pagans knew as Fortune, Christians may ascribe to Providence.

Now what the Libertines fail to grasp, explains Calvin, is that (1) God does not work so effectively in these instruments as to erode the believers' acting in their own behalf. For God does not use evildoers as if they were stones, but he uses them as "thinking creatures," who are endowed with reason and will and who act in their own right. And (2) God's use of evildoers in no way sanctions the motives or actions of such persons. The failure to draw this distinction simply undercuts the authority of mystical determinism.

The third way in which God operates is through his Holy Spirit, by means of which he regenerates a fallen humanity and draws it to himself.

So much for the first consequence.

The second consequence which follows from an unqualified proposition that God is the causer of all causes is that "one's conscience need no longer be concerned about anything."<sup>31</sup> Calvin

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<sup>26</sup> Contre ... Libertins, CO VII, col. 186.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., col. 187.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., col. 192

rejects this notion on two biblical grounds: one, that God gave the Israelites the Law for the purpose of guiding and quickening consciences, and two, that God himself implanted conscience in every human life, thus making man a moral being. Hence, any theology that minimizes conscience is wholly to be rejected.

Thirdly, if God is the unqualified causer of all causes, then it becomes unnecessary to condemn anything, and Christians are excused from the task of making moral judgments. Indeed, according to Calvin, the Libertines cite or allude to a number of New Testament passages to support their "principle that it is wrong to pass judgment."<sup>32</sup> These passages are: Romans 8:29; Matthew 7:1, 5; Romans 14:10; and John 8:7. On the contrary, Calvin replies, these passages do not obviate the need to make judgments, but only judgments of hypocrisy! God still wills moral discernment and concern for one's neighbor.

### C. The Person and Work of Christ the Redeemer.

In Chapters XVII and XVIII Calvin discusses the Libertine view of the person and work of Christ and what occurs in regeneration.

Calvin accuses the Quintinists of holding a Gnostic view insofar as they perceive Christ as a union of the Spirit which indwells everything and cuides. By cuides Calvin seems to mean that they view Christ as a phantom, that is, that Christ did not actually suffer and die but only appeared to.

This Spirit-phantom fulfills the role of a "model." "It all comes down to this," writes Calvin, "that what Christ has done and suffered is only a farce or a morality play, acted out upon a stage, which represents the mystery of our salvation for us."<sup>33</sup> In fact, in their view, explains Calvin, "we are all Christs, and what was done in him, he has performed in us." That is why Jesus said, "It is finished," or still better, "All is finished."

This position seems to suggest some form of "second-Adam Christology," in which Christ's act is redemptive because it awakens in all other beings (who are no less divine than he) the awareness of their reconciliation as something which has already ontologically occurred. He simply displays for others what is ontologically true.

This understanding of redemption illumines their view of regeneration. For regeneration simply means "to return to that innocent state which Adam enjoyed before he sinned." This view is further clarified by its association with the concept cuides.

According to Calvin, the Libertines teach that before the fall, Adam existed in a state of innocence. In this condition of innocence his actions and will were not regarded as good or evil, they were simply

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., col. 194.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., col. 199.

the result of God's spiritual indwelling. In this state of innocence, Adam saw "neither black nor white." However, when Adam and Eve ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, their eyes were opened and they "saw sin." They began seeing white and black, or they began making distinctions between good and evil. As a result, they became slaves to sin. And it is this condition of making distinctions between good and evil, as well as being a slave to these distinctions, that is cuidar, from which in Christ all believers are set free. Hence, one may now do what Adam did before he sinned, which is, follow one's "natural sense" of direction.

Calvin charges that such a Christology or Soteriology is gnostic and fails to understand the radical nature of sin. There can be no perfection in this life; only forgiven sinners.

#### D. The Christian Life. Chaps. XIX-XXI

Calvin now turns to examine the vast personal, religious, social, and economic repercussions that Libertinism unleashes. In Calvin's mind, its ethical consequences are as shattering to the Christian Life as are its deterministic and philosophical consequences to a doctrine of providence.

If God causes everything, and distinctions between good and evil are purely cuidar, or "imagined," then anything goes. For any normative principle for distinguishing between wills or actions has been suppressed.

This suppression is most apparent in the Libertine views of Christian Liberty, Vocations, and the Fellowship of Believers. In the absence of any normative principle, Calvin observes that "they...extend Christian Liberty to include everything lawful for man, without any exceptions."<sup>34</sup> When this principle is transferred to vocations, Calvin finds three diabolical consequences. One, no vocation is evil; two, no evils attach to any vocation; and three, "every inclination in man, whether..natural or a bad habit, is a calling of God."<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, such a principle erodes every just order of society and undermines, in particular, the institution of marriage--a matter which Calvin illustrates at considerable length. Finally, with regard to the Fellowship of Believers, Calvin accuses the Libertines of operating with such licence as to make a mockery of the New Testament practice of holding goods in common. Calvin explains that the Libertines emphasize this practice, along with the Anabaptists, in order to deceive the simple-minded and to avail themselves of the fruit of others' labor.

Calvin rejects each of these positions. In place of them he offers a Reformed view of Christian Liberty, in which Christians are still bound to the Law, but not by its rigor; of Vocations, in which Christians are admonished to avoid those callings repugnant to Scripture; and of goods, in which Calvin defends the right to possess

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., col. 206.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., col. 212.

and to use private property, while exhorting and imploring Christians to remember the world's indigent by sharing with them from the believers' own storehouse of goods.

### E. Eschatology

The last doctrine Calvin reviews and critiques is the Libertine view of the resurrection. According to their teaching, the resurrection has already occurred. Since the redeemed person knows himself or herself to be in union with the one, single, spiritual essence which indwells all living beings, a future resurrection is not only a misunderstanding of Christ's but a totally unnecessary event.

Based on Calvin's rebuttal, one gathers that the Libertines cited in their behalf John 11:26: "Whoever believes never dies, but has passed from death to life"; Ecclesiastes 12:7: "the spirit of man will return to God who made it, while the body will return to the earth from whence it came"; and Ephesians 2:19 and Colossians 3:1.

Calvin dismisses their interpretation as a bald falsification of the biblical facts. In its place he reiterates that God has created souls as life-forms distinct from himself. He then reaffirms a future end-time, filled with judgment and grace, toward which a moral humanity moves in faith and hope.

Finally, Calvin comes to his last section, in which he presents, word-for-word, one of Pocquet's booklets and warns against certain Libertinelike tracts, in order that his readers might be alert to the errors they contain.

Pocquet's piece is rambling and digressive, obscure in many places, and pulsates with an eschatological emphasis that these are "the last days." As Calvin acknowledges, the piece does not plainly detail the hidden and, in his view, erroneous doctrines of the Libertines. Rather it is meant to appeal to the unwary and to win them by its sweet promises, as Calvin has warned the Libertines do.

The Pocquet tract does breathe the esoteric air of mysticism, stresses that "we are all members of Christ," and that he was "made every man." It teaches that "everything is (caused by) the will and providence of God." But it does not flaunt an amoral attitude or endorse an antinomian ethic,

The part about Adam and Eve "seeing sin" and thus becoming slaves to it is mentioned. So also there is an appeal to live in the Spirit, which means that one has been vivified by the second-Adam and hence may lay aside any fears of death or hell. Pocquet goes so far as to claim that the fear of death and hell is "an error," and he plainly states that "one can make fun of it as a vain thought." But then he also emphasizes union with Christ and a life of love, peace, and purity.

Calvin calmly retorts that what else ought one expect from "this mass-mouthing villain."

At last, Calvin offers a conclusion. It is terse and to the point. It is notable because of its clear, clean admonitions.

Christians must not be "diverted from the pure simplicity of Jesus Christ." Calvin reminds his readers that God has made them "rational creatures," endowed with "gifts of intelligence." They must not surrender these gifts or exchange them for a darkness that can make them sub-human or irrational.

He also implores them to accept as their criteria "good and useful doctrines," or teachings that are morally sound and edifying and that grow out of the sacred Word. If they will make the good and the useful normative, then they will be able to avoid the excess of "speculation" and the defect of the "profane."

God has made men creatures of reason and has implanted conscience within them. Any theology that mitigates either or compromises either, as Libertinism does, must be rejected by biblical Christianity.

#### Assessment

What is one to say of all this? Certainly Reformed Theology today has much to glean from this treatise. In a time of tongues, cults, and moral permissiveness, Calvin's admonitions are relevant to the Church. First, they are relevant to the task of the Church as it seeks to formulate and be guided by sound theological principles. And second, they are relevant to the Christian life for the same reasons which Calvin propounded in his own day.

But from a historical and a theological viewpoint, how fair was Calvin toward his opponents? And can the problem even be solved? In a long section in the Introduction to this treatise, I have attempted to trace the major modern assessments of Calvin's critique and understanding of Libertinism. That review need not be repeated here.

It is possible, if not likely, that Calvin overlaid his impressions of Quintin's pantheistic and deterministic theories with a libertine attitude which Quintin and his followers would have denied. Even so, Calvin's work retains its full integrity. For Calvin understood, with incisive perspicacity, the "consequences" Quintin's views posed. Hence, when pressed into it, he accepted the challenge and refuted Libertinism with his typical astuteness.