

THE IMPORTANCE OF CALVIN STUDIES  
FOR  
CHURCH AND COLLEGE  
by  
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I. Introduction

The topic assigned to me by Professor Leith is quite obviously a blank check, and one discovers that a blank check is more easily contemplated than filled out! To address seriously the question of the importance of Calvin studies for the Church, would necessarily involve a review of the major loci of his theology. Such a sum as this we cannot attempt. The importance of Calvin studies for the academy represents a smaller, but still extensive, number of possibilities. The right relation of church and school, the planning and funding of education, recruitment of students and faculty, the shaping of curricula, and the achievement of excellence are all areas in which we can learn from Calvin -- but not today.

The genius of the Calvin Studies Society is that it brings together teachers and ministers, the interests of the academy and the church. Such a correlation best represents the thought of John Calvin, and to serve it we ought to consider the contribution of Calvin studies to issues important for both our constituencies. Admittedly, Calvin's primary contribution to both groups will be discovered in the central affirmation of his theology. But I propose that we take up three clusters of somewhat secondary problems which impinge equally upon the church and the school. They are: the importance of good learning, the relation of faith and knowledge, and the proper use of language.

II. The Need for Learning

Calvin went to great lengths to call both church and school to good learning. He writes,

If the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics, mathematics and other like disciplines . . . let us use this assistance. For if we neglect God's gift freely offered in these arts, we ought to suffer just punishment for our sloths.

If educators are honest with themselves they must acknowledge their own need for this advice. The disarray of public secondary education is a growing national scandal which owes as much to our imposing upon the schools every problem of our society as it does to a philosophy of education that has substituted personality development for knowledge. Our colleges, universities, and seminaries have devalued learning for

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<sup>1</sup>John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, II/2/16, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1977.

its own sake in favor of so-called "practical courses" and "experiential learning," which grant academic credit for work in an office, a hospital, or a church. When instructors are evaluated more on measurements of student pleasure than learning, and when the inevitable results of that are seen in the increasing use of films, "reading days," and discussion groups, and the decreasing requirements for essays, and tests, then one will have to admit that the whole enterprise of education itself is in need of instruction.

Calvin always wanted the best education for the city and congregations of Geneva. Soon after his return in 1541 he secured the services of Sebastian Castellio to administer the city's school. Castellio would later leave Geneva for the University of Basel, but the foundation for good learning had been laid. For a decade Calvin's plans to build an academy were thwarted by various theological and political struggles, but in 1559, having secured the necessary funds, he opened his school. His first faculty was strengthened by Theodore Beza and other professors who had been expelled from the university of Lausanne, owing to the meddling of Calvin's old nemesis, Bern. The curriculum at Geneva centered around the classical disciplines of literature and rhetoric, mathematics, philosophy and theology. While Calvin never realized an earlier plan to include law and medicine, his school did prepare young men for service in the church and government. Its growth was phenomenal. By the time of Calvin's death in 1564 there were twelve hundred students in the lower school and three hundred in the college. The influence of the Academy was pervasive in the growth of Reformed Christianity throughout Europe, England and Scotland. Although it was not chartered to grant degrees, the program of Calvin's school was so rigorous, and produced such a degree of excellence, that it was said that "a boy in Geneva could give a more rational account of his faith than a doctor at the Sorbonne."<sup>2</sup>

Calvin ought to be interesting to every educator. He lectured twice a week to great crowds of hearers (some say as many as a thousand). He raised money for buildings, and lost no opportunity to invite to Geneva the best scholars available. His skillful, though unsuccessful, inducements to Mercer to leave Paris, and a gentle letter of rejection to Francis Boisnormand may serve as models for administrators engaged in similar tasks.<sup>3</sup>

But if our schools need Calvin's emphasis upon good learning and knowledge, so does the Church. Calvin himself made no distinction in this regard. He founded his academy, he said, "to raise up seed for the time to come, in order not to leave the church a desert for our children."<sup>4</sup> Ministers were to be scholars. Concerning teachers and pastors, Calvin admitted only

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<sup>2</sup>Georgia Harkness, John Calvin, New York, Henry Holt and Co., 1931, p. 53.

<sup>3</sup>Jules Bonnet, Editor, Letters of John Calvin, Vol. IV, Marcus R. Gilchrist, Translator, New York, Burt Franklin, pp. 35 f, and pp. 341 f.

. . . this difference between them: teachers are not put in charge of discipline, or administering the sacraments . . . but only of scriptural interpretation. . . But the pastoral office includes all these functions. . .

This is the source of the Reformed Churches' traditional emphasis upon a well-educated clergy--a tradition which today is in jeopardy. Consider, for example, the calling and preparation of ministers. Our problem begins with the fact that we have failed to give adequate attention to Calvin's doctrine of the call to ministerial office. For Calvin, this call is two-sided. There is what he calls the "secret" call of God to the individual conscience, and there is the "outward" call of the church, expressed by the vote of the people, which appoints the candidate to his office. Now it is interesting that Calvin emphasizes that the secret or inner call "does not have the church as witness."<sup>6</sup> Apart from some unusual case of public infamy, the church must simply accept the candidate's testimony as sincere. But the church must make judgment concerning the adequacy of the candidate's gifts and preparation for his office. Calvin was convinced that the judgments involved in the church's outward call would not conflict with God's secret call, because

Those whom the Lord has destined for such high office, he first supplies with the arms required to fill it,<sup>7</sup> that they might not come empty-handed and unprepared.

But see how we have turned that around. Presbyterian churches, influenced no doubt by the spiritualist movements of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, now feel that they must somehow be impressed with testimonies of an inner call, and ought seldom to allow judgments as to externals to frustrate a sincere desire for the ministry. Sessions rarely, if ever, examine the school transcripts of young persons seeking their endorsement. In a similar way, the seminaries are reluctant to dismiss those who manifestly cannot or will not learn the knowledge and skills required.

So it all comes down to the Presbytery. Recall for a moment this familiar scene: the candidate has preached a sermon containing much good will and sincerity, but sadly lacking in fundamental literary and theological skills. Now he stands to be examined. The spouse, parents, aunts and uncles--the whole family--is present. A large contingent from the calling church is there--an expectant assembly! But as so often happens, the candidate cannot distinguish the Gospels or the theologies of the major reformers, and believes he can administer the sacraments

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<sup>4</sup>John T. McNeill, The History and Character of Calvinism, New York, Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 192.

<sup>5</sup>John Calvin, Institutes, IV/3/4.

<sup>6</sup>Institutes, IV/3/2.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

when and how he pleases. Questions from the floor fail to improve the situation. Yet, a motion is made to sustain the examination. A few reckless voices of protest are raised. The mother is in tears, the presumptive congregation is angry. Appeals to sincerity and the secret call of God are made. The vote is taken. The candidate will be ordained.

And what is the result? The cost of such amicability runs high as in the years ahead the church suffers disorder and discord from those who neither know nor follow its government. Inept preaching which fails to articulate the message of scripture robs thousands of spiritual food. The badly educated pastor is ill equipped to respond to the deepest pain in the human heart--however empathetic he or she may be. And if he remains ignorant of theological history, such a minister will fail to guard himself and his flock from heresies old and new which dilute and distort the Christian faith.

At least this is the way that Calvin saw the issue with the Anabaptists. Their retreat into a perfectionalistic and spiritualistic cocoon was the result of a faulty view of the incarnation, as seen, for instance, in the theory of Sattler and Simons of Christ's "spiritual body" in the womb of Mary.<sup>8</sup> That such a view was Marcionite gnosticism was evidently as unknown to the Anabaptists as were the implications which flow from it. So Calvin wrote:

. . . even the greatest theologians who have belonged to their sect have been so ignorant of history and all antiquity that I do not think a single one of them has ever known what Marcion's name signifies.

It is clear that for John Calvin learning and knowledge were as important for the church as for the school, and both teacher and minister will profit by giving some attention to his insistence upon this point.

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<sup>8</sup>John Calvin, Brief Instruction for Arming all the Good Faithful Against the Errors of the Common Sect of the Anabaptists, 1544, translated by Benjamin W. Farley, his note 6 on Article V, unpublished manuscript, p. 135. Theological speculation on the nature of Jesus' body in Mary's womb is not without precedent. Augustine is careful to note that Mary's virginity was not "marred even in bringing him forth," (Enchiridion, Ch. XXXIV) and somewhere--in The City of God--he allows himself to say that Jesus passed out of Mary like "water through a tube!" but he everywhere insists that Jesus' pre-natal humanity was whole and complete, indeed, that "no part was wanting." (Enchiridion, XXXIV) His theological insistence on this point protects Augustine from what his desperate attempt to preserve Mary's physical virginity might otherwise imply.

<sup>9</sup>Calvin, Op. cit., Article V, p. 121, Farley's translation.

### III. Faith and Knowledge

If, with the help of Calvin, we can recapture a sense of the need for a more disciplined approach to learning, we are still confronted with the question of the proper relation between knowledge and faith. Here again useful guidance may be had from Calvin.

In most colleges and universities there is an assumed superiority of knowledge, or science, over faith. Such an assumption is partly the product of past grievances remembered, and partly the product of the astonishing success of the scientific method in modern times. But the antagonism of science and faith is more usually caused by the failure of either or both to stay in their proper spheres. When science corrects religious descriptions of the world of nature, it only corrects bad science and in no way challenges Christian faith. On the other hand, when science claims "knowledge" of ultimate causation, or when it supposes that its view of nature is sufficient to define its value and meaning, then science has become bad religion requiring theological correction. That mistakes of this sort are actually made on both sides is well illustrated in much of the present debate over "Creationism."

In our churches we do not ordinarily find the revisionist attempts of Creationism. On the contrary, we seem as willing as the schools to acquiesce to the assumed superiority of science. We do this when we let science determine our questions, and adjust the church's message to scientific answers. Of course we must be aware of scientific information, but if what we have to say in our sermons about the termination of life, about politics, or about economics is prefaced by the ever-changing testimony of science, it is little wonder that the voice of the church is weak, vascillating, and self-contradictory.

If we are rightly to understand the proper relation between faith and knowledge, we might consider the example of Calvin. This suggestion may surprise some. Afterall, was not Calvin a Medieval man who, with the other reformers, directed thought back to the ancient world, to Augustine and other Church Fathers? Did not Calvin, like Luther, reject the claims of philosophical science as represented by Aristotle and Aquinas? And does not his theology, with its absolute claim for the authority of scripture, really preclude any interest in science? Such is much of the inherited wisdom about Calvin.

It is true that Calvin died before the scientific explosion of the seventeenth century, but it is also true that he lived on its threshold. Bacon, Galileo, Kepler, Hobbes, and Descartes all appeared within thirty years of Calvin's death. The way was already prepared for modern science by the epistemology produced by the Nominalists' revolt against the Thomistic system. Luther admitted himself to be a follower of Occam, and Calvin's study under John Major in Paris must surely have placed him too under the influence of the via moderna. Calvin was always more interested in observation and evidence than in the symetry of syllogism, as seen, for instance in his appreciation of medical science. At one place he reproves the libertines for condemning medicine as the invention of the devil.

Must such natural knowledge that exists in clear reason and is approved by the holy Scripture be taken as enchantment and illusions of Satan?<sup>10</sup>

Apparently, Calvin did not accept the Copernican system. In his exposition of Joshua 10:12, he writes that God "whirls the immense orb [of the sun] with indefatigable swiftness."<sup>11</sup> But it is significant that he does not take commentary on this verse as an occasion for rebuking Copernicus as do both Luther and Melanchthon. Furthermore, when he interprets the creation of the lights in heaven (Genesis 1:14), he appears more than open to scientific discovery.

Moses described in popular style what all ordinary men without training and education perceive.... Astronomers, on the other hand, investigate with great labor whatever the keenness of man's intellect is able to discover. Such study is certainly not to be disapproved, nor science condemned.<sup>12</sup>.. Clever men who expend their labor upon it are to be praised...

For Calvin, a willingness to see the truth wherever it is found was a theological necessity. If God is sovereign over his work of creation, the light of his Spirit will not be confined to the community of faith. This is what Kuiper has called his doctrine of "common grace," and its locus classicus is found in the Institutes, Book II, Chapter 2, sections 13-17:

Shall we deny that the truth shone upon the ancient jurists who established civic order and discipline with such great equity? Shall we say that the philosophers were blind in their fine observation and artful description of nature? .... Shall we say that they are insane who developed medicine, devoting their labor to our benefit? What shall we say of all the mathematical sciences? Shall we consider them the ravings of madmen?<sup>13</sup>

So for Calvin there is no necessary conflict between science and faith. But conflict can arise when science loses a proper sense of its limits. In his 1549 tract against astrology Calvin was critical of the science of "Judicial" astrology just for this reason. While he attacked the empirical basis of this science, citing the case of twins who develop very different qualities and characteristics,<sup>14</sup> his main

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<sup>10</sup> John Calvin, Against the Fantastic and Furious Sect of the Libertines Who are Called "Spirituals," 1545, Translated by Benjamin W. Farley, unpublished manuscript, Ch. XXIV, p. 108.

<sup>11</sup> John Calvin, Commentaries, The Edinburgh Printing Co., Edinburgh, 1847.

<sup>12</sup> John Calvin, Commentaries, "The Library of Christian Classics" Vol. XXIII, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1957, p. 356.

<sup>13</sup> Institutes, II/2/15.

<sup>14</sup> McNeill, *Op. cit.*, p. 208.

objection was that the claims of astrology challenge the providential control of life by God. Against any science, that would forfeit the meaning and destiny of life to natural forces, Calvin writes:

... there is no erratic power, or action, or motion in creatures, but that they are governed by God's secret plan in such a way that nothing happens except what is knowingly decreed by him.<sup>15</sup>

Faith then has nothing to fear from science. However deep into the expanding recesses of particle structures science may go, or however vast and far its reach into the universe, its findings cannot disturb or distress the reality of God, whose being is greater and whose purposes are deeper than his creatures' capacities of understanding. Nor is this an example of what Bonhoeffer called a "stop-gap" view of God. That would be the case only if the theologian used this concept of God to answer and thereby "stop" the residual questions of science.

And for this reason science need not fear a conflict with faith. The scientist speaks about the world he can see or hopes to see, but the theologian speaks of the unseen reality of God and the meaning of God for human life. Calvin makes this existential focus clear when, discussing the cosmogony of Genesis, he writes that, "as it became a theologian, he [Moses] had reference to us rather than to the stars."<sup>16</sup> Again, when he considers the story of the rainbow, Calvin gladly acknowledges that the rainbow "is but a reflection of the sun's rays upon the clouds opposite," and that "indeed" the rainbow was "previously a rainbow."<sup>17</sup> Calvin has no desire to challenge optical science. If we are able to see the rainbow as a "natural sacrament," signifying God's covenant of grace, this has nothing to do with the refraction of light.

Of course Calvin was a child of his age. His understanding of the world and the supernatural contained elements that must seem to us fantastic. But the point is that what he did know of science he found not to be in conflict with faith. And that is because he understood both the grandeur and limit of knowledge and the proper source and subject matter of faith. If we could learn this from Calvin then the scientists and theologians of the academy might pass in the halls of learning with more respect and less apprehension, the Church might set its agenda more by the Bible than the Scientific American, and our congregations, hearing less of the words of men, might hear more of the word of God.

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<sup>15</sup>Institutes, I/16/3.

<sup>16</sup>John Calvin, Commentaries, Edinburgh, op. cit. ("reference" is rendered "respect").

<sup>17</sup>Institutes, IV/14/18.

#### IV. Language

The vigorous pursuit of learning and the maintenance of a proper relation between faith and reason require that we speak and write clearly. The decline of English usage in our time is a fact of cultural life that no part of our society can escape, least of all the school and the church. While the study of any great literature will help to remedy this situation, the writings of John Calvin may be of particular use.

If our grade schools are part of the cause of our linguistic decline, our colleges and seminaries must share the blame, insofar as they have refused to adjust their curricula for remedial instruction. Some faculty, perhaps themselves the product of non-literary education, tend to require fewer and fewer essays. The results can be astonishing. Among a professor's collection of student "bloopers," one may find dozens of the following:

A virgin forest is a place where the hand of man has never set foot.

Henry VIII found walking difficult because he had an abness on his knee.

The girl tumbled down the stairs and lay prostitute at the bottom. (Which produced the professorial note) "My dear sir, you must learn to distinguish between a fallen woman and one who has merely slipped!"<sup>18</sup>

Clearly, we need all the help we can get--and not only in our schools.

The ministry and congregational life of the Reformed tradition are supposed to be based upon the living Word, Jesus Christ, the written word of scripture, and the spoken word of the sermon. This being the case, any lack of interest in words and their meaning, or any incapacity as to their use, must be disastrous for the church. And yet illiteracy in our church is everywhere apparent. For example, a much heralded "Mission Consultation" of the "southern" Presbyterian Church a few years ago enjoined us "to implement partnership by inviting maximum participation in all decisions in a multilateral context," which (of course) was "to enable the dynamic from dependence through independence to interdependence to occur." More recently, Mecklenburg Presbytery acted "to elect a part-time hunger enabler person." -- which motion caused one bookish presbyter to state that he was glad the nominee would not be doing that full-time! Our lack of clarity is often humorous. One church bulletin has: "The congregation will move to the narthex and the chancel. Babies will be baptized at both ends." Another announces: "The Young Mothers Group will meet on Tuesday. Women interested in motherhood should see the minister in his study."

A lack of respect for the written word becomes more serious, however, when certain constituencies in our church seek to de-sex the

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<sup>18</sup>Richard Lederer, "Looking at Language,"



language of scripture and worship. To be sure, some translations have produced male nouns and pronouns where none are required, and some habits of speech in the worship can and ought to be changed. But the outrageous attempt to "correct" the Bible's general reference of God as male is a blatant act of disobedience which threatens the integrity of the source of faith and thus faith itself -- as the obvious gnosticism of Mary Daly's thought clearly shows. Study of Calvin's writings may inspire a greater respect for the written word and enable the church to avoid both the practical and theological consequences of illiteracy.

Calvin was one of the greatest stylists of the Sixteenth Century, and as such provides a model of literary excellence. Beza states in his biography that Calvin "was sparing in the use of words," [which we may doubt] "but he was by no means a careless writer [which is beyond doubt!]." And he goes on to say that "no theologian of this period wrote more purely."<sup>19</sup> Calvin's influence on the French language rivals that of Luther on German. Wendel claims that Calvin's French "was of a range and elegance comparable to Pascal's or Bovet's. In refinement of taste he comes very near to Erasmus."<sup>20</sup>

It is not surprising, then, to find Calvin emphasizing languages and rhetoric in his school, or confessing to Beza: "I have never been able to repent of my love of poetry."<sup>21</sup> Certainly there is ample poetic imagery in the Institutes, especially when Calvin is tracing early in Book One the glory of God in nature, the arts, and human being. But his style is not always irenic! In the manuscript before us Anabaptists and Libertines are said to be beasts, brutes, mad-dogs, asses, swine, pests and vermine. Otherwise they are monsters, fanatics, dreamers, fools, scatterbrains, scoundrels, wretches, scum, scabs, filth, foulmouths, beggars, demoniacs, clowns, riffraff, and rascals. Their views are insane pernicious absurd vicious malicious detestible audacious abominations, because, being bereft of sensible language, they mumble, bobble, warble, garble and yelp, and they seduce, blaspheme, poison, infect, profane, and debauch. And that represents less than half of such vocabulary from just these two tracts! I suspect that Calvin's lexicon of pejoratives may exceed by half the whole vocabulary of some undergraduates. And if one objects to such brutal language, he must nevertheless admit that Calvin, like Cicero, lifts invective to the level of poetry!

In any case, Calvin insisted upon clarity. Some of his harshest words are directed against the Qunitinist libertarians who, he says, possess "une langue sauvaige," which our translator has wisely rendered as "an unbelievable tongue," as the words "savage" or "wild" do not quite fit Calvin's complaints that

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<sup>19</sup>Theodore Beza, "Life of Calvin," in Calvin's Tracts and Treatises, Vol. I, Grand Rapids, Eerdmann Publishing Co., 1958, p. cxxxvii.

<sup>20</sup>Francois Wendel, Calvin, New York, Harper and Row, 1963, p. 35.

<sup>21</sup>McNeill, *Op. cit.*, p. 196.

one understands (this language) about as little as a bird's song. They so disguise their meaning that one can neither determine what their subject matter is or whether they are affirming or denying something.<sup>22</sup>

Anyone who has read much of the hermeneutical theology of Ernst Fuchs, so popular a decade ago, will recognize the problem.

On the other hand, when Calvin attacks the Libertines' "double tongue" and notes that "they have no difficulty in saying one thing first and then another thing later," and calls that "incredibly impudent" and "double dealing,"<sup>23</sup> then some of us who went to another Swiss university may, ourselves, begin to feel uncomfortable! And when Calvin complains that, "When you hear them speak this way you will only be hearing high German!,"<sup>24</sup> -- one need not wonder, mutatis mutandis, what modern theologian he might have had in mind! Whatever Calvin's opinion of dialectical theological might have been, it is clear that he himself did not escape it. Bauke has called his work a "complexio oppositorum."<sup>25</sup> And this opinion seems justified when Calvin states that God "overrules the impulses of men so that their freewill remains intact,"<sup>26</sup> or, "We cannot comprehend how God in a dialectical way can both will and not will that a thing should happen."<sup>27</sup> Of course, "dialectical" is Niesel's word; Battles uses "divers." But in any translation, Calvin's theology is filled with dialectical tensions and opposite claims. In that sense it is difficult and complex. But it is always beautiful and it is always clear.

Finally, the great care with which Calvin composed his astonishingly large corpus was as much a result of theological conviction as aesthetic inclination. The fact that God reveals himself through the Word meant for Calvin that language has sacramental possibilities. Just as God condescended to the weakness of man by taking our flesh upon himself, so too a similar act of grace can be seen in his use of human language, speaking to us simply and clearly. Against the linguistic posturing of the Libertines he writes:

. . . let us adopt the language that (scripture) uses without being lightheaded. For the Lord knows quite well that if he were to speak to us in a manner befitting

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<sup>22</sup> Calvin, Against....the Libertines...., Ch. VII, Ms. pp. 34-35/

<sup>23</sup> Calvin, Op. cit., p. 37.

<sup>24</sup> Calvin, Op. cit., p. 34.

<sup>25</sup> McNeill, Op. Cit., p. 202.

<sup>26</sup> Wilhelm Niesel, The Theology of John Calvin, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1956, p. 77. The reference is to Corpus Reformatorum, 36/222.

<sup>27</sup> Institutes, I/18/3.

his majesty, our intelligence would be incapable of reaching that high. Thus he accomodates himself to our smallness. And as a wet-nurse coos to its baby, so he uses toward us<sup>28</sup> an unrefined way of speaking in order to be understood.

Calvin's speech and writing was never unrefined, but however elegant, however rich and complex its formulation, it was always simple.

The coffee is cold, and many of you have miles to go before you sleep. So let me conclude. The Calvin Studies Society is made up of ministers and teachers who believe that Calvin has much to offer both the church and the school. The variety of the benefits of his teaching are as limitless as the imagination of those who study him. Today, I have only tried to show that Calvin's great love of learning should inspire us who teach in school and in the churches to dedicate ourselves to a more disciplined and rigorous approach to our tasks. From Calvin's doctrine of common grace we may discover a theological respect for and celebration of scientific knowledge, and from his doctrine of the universal sovereignty of God we may become more sure of the independence and integrity of theology in its relation to science. Finally, from Calvin's emphasis upon and example of good writing, we may learn better how to use words in our various ministeries of the Word.

I wanted to speak today also of Calvin's ethics, of his willingness to make value judgments, and how both church and school, like the Quintinists, so reluctant to follow his example in this regard, might nevertheless benefit by it. But that amount had to be erased from the already inflated sum I have written on Professor Leith's check -- which, I fear, may already have overdrawn the generous account of good will you have invested in these proceedings.

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<sup>28</sup> Calvin, Against . . . the Libertines . . ., Ch. VII, Ms. pp. 36.