

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

The Mission of the Churches
to Higher Education

WAYNE SAFFEN

Calvin and Anabaptism

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Homiletics

Five-year Index

Book Review

Vol. XXXVI

January 1965

No. 1

Calvin and Anabaptism

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Like most of the Reformers, John Calvin (1509—64) loosely applied the terms "Anabaptist," "fanatic," and similar epithets to a number of diverse groups within what is commonly known as the radical, or nonmagisterial, Reformation. In the early years of Calvin's career, for example, an "Anabaptist" (or "Catabaptist") could have been one of the so-called psychopannychists—French Protestants who allegedly denied the traditional doctrine of the state of the soul after death. Also fitting the description were the Libertines, some of whom were Calvin's personal political opponents in Geneva; likewise the prudent Nicodemites (reference to the Biblical Nicodemus) in papalist territories who sympathized with the Reformation but refused to commit themselves.¹ Even Michael Servetus, the anti-Trinitarian for whose death at the stake in 1553 Calvin was responsible, would have been called an Anabaptist. The term also covered all those groups in Switzerland, Southern Germany, Moravia, the Low Countries, and elsewhere who adhered to the left wing of the Reformation.

It is Calvin's relation to the last type only—evangelical Anabaptism proper—which constitutes the chief interest of this study. This precludes extensive investigation of such related movements as psychopannychism, the anti-Trinitarianism of

¹ For a discussion of Calvin's relation to the Libertines and Nicodemites see George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), pp. 598 to 605.

Servetus and John Valentine Gentile,² or evangelical rationalists like Matthew Gribaldi, Sebastian Castellio, Bernardine Ochino, and Laelius Socinus, many of whom started their careers as Calvinists.³

The chief source for this study is Calvin's *magnum opus*, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*.⁴ Admittedly, the *Institutes* are no exhaustive source for Calvin's views of Anabaptism. The references he did make are not always explicit. He sometimes overgeneralized to illustrate a polemical antithesis. At some points he appears to have been obviously misinformed on Anabaptist teachings. There are, however, also advantages in using the *Institutes*. They are comprehensive enough to include most of his relevant objections to radicalism. The view of Anabaptism

² A good readable account of the Servetus episode is Roland Bainton's *Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus, 1511 to 1553* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1953); also Williams, pp. 605—614. For Gentile see Williams, pp. 635—638; Robert M. Kingdon, *Registres de la Compagnie Des Pasteurs de Genève*, II (1553—1564) (Genève: E. Droz, 1962).

³ For the men mentioned see Williams, pp. 622—635.

⁴ The edition used was that edited by John T. McNeill and trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, Vols. XX and XXI in *The Library of Christian Classics* (London: S. C. M. Press, 1960). In dating the different editions which appeared between 1536 and 1559 and in many of the footnotes, the LCC edition follows the critical edition of Peter Barth and Wilhelm Niesel, *Institutio Christianae religionis*, 1559, Vols. III, IV, and V in *Joannis Calvini opera selecta (editio secunda emendata)*; Monachii: Chr. Kaiser, 1959).

which emerges from the *Institutes* is less fragmentary and somewhat better balanced than that which might be constructed merely on the basis of the polemical treatises. Finally, there is the obvious asset that the *Institutes* went through four revisions in the Latin editions of 1539, 1543, 1550, and 1559, following the *editio princeps* of 1536. This makes it possible to trace any developments and modifications which may have occurred in his thinking.

THE EARLY PERIOD AND THE FIRST EDITION OF THE "INSTITUTES"

Calvin's earliest literary production as a Protestant was probably the treatise commonly known as *Psychopannychia*.⁵ It has been suggested that the psychopannychists may have been either a group of Franciscan monks in Orleans or various radical refugee groups in France.⁶ Psychopannychism designates a number of views at variance with the traditional view of what happens to the soul at death. The most common form of psychopannychism is the belief that the soul falls into an unconscious sleep.⁷ Others are that the soul dies with the body⁸ or that the soul

is mystically absorbed into the universal Intellect. The psychopannychists against whom Calvin wrote evidently postulated a sort of soul sleep in the *status intermedius*. Just why Calvin found their teaching so objectionable is not altogether clear.⁹

The psychopannychists were probably not, strictly speaking, Anabaptists. Calvin usually referred to them as *hypnologi*. In the prefaces to *Psychopannychia* of both 1534 and 1536 he called them *Anabaptistae* and once, in the body of the work, *Catabaptistae*,¹⁰ a term he liked to apply to the radicals in his earlier years. The precise identification of the original psychopannychists is obscured by Calvin's subsequent revisions in the work before a printed text appeared. By 1542 he seemed convinced that this heresy was one of the dominant themes of the radical theologians. This may have been the case to a degree with the Italian rationalists, and Calvin may have been thinking in terms of them when he finally prepared the work for printing. There is some reason to believe that Calvin may also have had in mind Michael Servetus.¹¹

In the 1536 edition of the *Institutes* the Genevan Reformer twice called his opponents *Catabaptistae*. The first occurrence is in the Prefatory Address to King Francis of France, where he pointed out that they were the ones who were really

⁵ It was written in 1534. In 1536 he composed a new preface for it, intending publication. But there is no concrete evidence that it was printed before 1542, when it finally appeared under the title *Vivere apud Christum non dormire animos sanctos, qui in fide Christi decedunt*, Vol. V in *Calvini opera, Corpus reformatorum* (Brunsvigae: C. A. Schwetschke et filius, 1866), XXXIII, 165—232. English trans. by Henry Beveridge in *Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, ed. Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1958), III, 413—490.

⁶ Williams, pp. 584 f.

⁷ Properly called psychosomnolence.

⁸ Thnetopsychism, or mortalism; also popularly but improperly called psychopannychia.

⁹ See Williams, pp. 24, 582.

¹⁰ *Psychopannychia*, English trans., pp. 415 f., 490. The English inconsistently translates "Anabaptists" in the prefaces.

¹¹ Williams gives evidence for this theory, p. 586. Calvin had scheduled a meeting with Servetus sometime in 1534 while both were in Paris, but Servetus failed to show up. Cf. Bainton, p. 81. Psychopannychism was one of the charges brought against Servetus at his trial in Geneva in 1553; Williams, p. 609.

to blame for many of the ills falsely attributed to the Protestant Reformation. (Pref. Add., 7)

The second mention of the *Catabaptistae* is found in the section refuting the practice of rebaptism. Calvin used the illustration of the seal on an official government document. The sacraments are like seals which validate and guarantee the promises held forth in the contents of official papers (IV, xiv, 5). He extended the metaphor by noting that the sealed document does not depend for its validity on the carrier who delivers it.

This argument neatly refutes the error of the Donatists, who measured the force and value of the sacrament by the worth of the minister. Such today are our Catabaptists, who deny that we have been duly baptized because we were baptized by impious and idolatrous men under the papal government. They therefore passionately urge rebaptism. (IV, xv, 16)

While it is perhaps true that there were some points of agreement between the Donatists of North Africa and the Anabaptists of Calvin's day, it is hardly correct to say that the Anabaptists rebaptized for the same reason. The Anabaptists were not so much concerned with the fact that those who formerly administered Baptism were unworthy as they were that the recipients, because they were only infants or otherwise not accountable for what was taking place, were unworthy. Even if they were concerned about the worthiness of the administrator, this issue was not a dominant feature of the 16th-century debate on rebaptism. The *locus* on rebaptism was augmented slightly in the 1539 edition, but nothing was ever done to amend the inadequacies of the original interpretation.

The 1536 edition also had a rather extensive treatment of civil government.¹² Not surprisingly the political views of the radical reformers were given major consideration. The radicals, he asserted, did not distinguish properly between the government of Christ's kingdom and that of civil jurisdiction.

Yet this distinction does not lead us to consider the whole nature of government a thing polluted, which has nothing to do with Christian men. That is what, indeed, certain fanatics who delight in unbridled license shout and boast: after we have died through Christ to the elements of this world, are transported to God's Kingdom, and sit among heavenly beings, it is a thing unworthy of us and set far beneath our excellence to be occupied with those vile and worldly cares which have to do with business foreign to a Christian man. To what purpose, they ask, are there laws without trials and tribunals? But what has a Christian man to do with trials themselves? Indeed, if it is not lawful to kill, why do we have laws and trials? (IV, xx, 2)

Calvin would admit that civil government would be superfluous if everyone were already perfect. Those who reject government do so on the basis of an unrealistic and irresponsible perfectionism.

Our adversaries claim that there ought to be such great perfection in the church of God that its government should suffice for law. But they stupidly imagine such a perfection as can never be found in a community of men. For since the insolence of

¹² The final version of this *locus* actually began with an introductory section not added until 1559, in which Calvin contrasted radical thought with what were apparently the political ideas of Machiavelli as the two opposite extremes. (IV, xx, 1)

evil men is so great, their wickedness so stubborn, that it can scarcely be restrained by extremely severe laws, what do we expect them to do if they see that their depravity can go scot-free—when no power can force them to cease from doing evil? (IV, xx, 2)

The wording suggests that Calvin could have had the Libertines in mind here. But 1536 is rather early for this conflict, and Calvin could just as well have had in mind many of the principal leaders of the evangelical Anabaptist movement. Calvin was familiar with the seven articles of the Schleithem Confession of 1527, several of which challenged traditional thinking on civil authority.¹³ Calvin must also have been familiar with the views of various Swiss and South German Anabaptists, though he mentioned none by name and showed little insight into the real implications of their views.

Calvin defended the mixing of church and state so detested by the radicals. The 1536 edition explicitly committed to civil government "the duty of rightly establishing religion" (IV, xx, 3). Subsequent sections, most of them dating from 1536, presented Calvin's justification for the government's right to wage war (IV, xx, 11,

12), its right to collect taxes (IV, xx, 13), and a defense of the Christian's right to go to court (IV, xx, 17—21), all of which suggest Anabaptist antitheses. These comments on rebaptism and civil government are the major references to Anabaptism in the first edition of the *Institutes*, which appeared the same year that the revolt at Münster collapsed.

As early as the first Genevan period Calvin had several opportunities for first-hand acquaintance with Anabaptists. In mid-March 1537 two missionaries, Hermann of Gerbihan near Liège and Andrew Benoit of Engelen, were apprehended in Geneva. The town council granted their request for a public disputation with the Reformed theologians. According to the official records, however, Calvin was not personally involved in the two-day debate in the Franciscan monastery of Riva. The two infiltrators were banished.¹⁴

Less than two weeks later, on March 29, 1537, a second disputation was held with two more members of the sect. This time Calvin personally debated with two men from Liège, John Bomeromenus and John Stordeur. Again the result was that the disturbers of religious peace were banished. But by this time they had created somewhat of a following.

In 1538 Calvin himself had to leave Geneva. His correspondence reveals that en route to Strasbourg he became aware of the workings of the fanatics at Metz, where two Anabaptists had been drowned and one banished. "So far as I could ascertain by conjecture, that barber who was the companion of Hermann was one of

¹³ See John C. Wenger, "The Schleithem Confession of Faith," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, XIX (October 1945), 243—253, where a translation appears. Article IV called for separation "from the wickedness which the devil planted in the world," including the use of "devilish weapons of force" either "for friends or against enemies." Thus this confession denied the justification for waging war. Article VI prohibited the involvement of a Christian in civil government. The last article forbade the use of oaths. John E. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1963), pp. 282—292, also contains a translation of this document.

¹⁴ Christian Neff, "John Calvin," *Mennonite Encyclopedia* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1955), I, 495 f.

them. I fear that this pestilential doctrine is widely spread among the simple sort in that city."¹⁵ While at Strasbourg, Calvin seems to have become increasingly conscious of the threat posed by the radicals.

In 1539 he participated in the synod of the Strasbourg Evangelical Church, one of the main purposes of which was to deal with the Anabaptist problem. By early 1540 Calvin was able to report to Farel that he had had some success in converting the sectarians with whom he was now carrying on discussions. One of these was Hermann of Gerbihan, who had invaded Geneva in 1537. "In regard to infant baptism, the human nature of Christ, and some other points, he now acknowledges that he had fallen grievously into error. There are some other things in which he still hesitates."¹⁶ In addition, a certain John—either Stordeur, or Bomeromenus—had at length consented to have his boy baptized. If this was Stordeur, then Calvin was baptizing his own future stepson.¹⁷

Some three weeks later Calvin elaborated on the conversion of Hermann in another letter to Farel. Hermann had confessed being guilty of the crime of sectarianism and was now in agreement with Calvin on the doctrines of free will, the

deity and humanity of Christ (apparently with special reference to the concept of the celestial flesh), regeneration, infant baptism, and other things. The one point Hermann still had difficulty with was Calvin's doctrine of predestination, since he could not differentiate between God's pre-science and providence. Calvin had baptized Hermann's two-year-old daughter. Calvin again mentioned a certain "John" (the English translation has "Hans"), now of Ulm, who has "come to his senses" also.¹⁸

Calvin not only made converts from the ranks of the Anabaptists. They also supplied him with a wife. Early in August 1540 he married Idolette de Bure, widow of John Stordeur, Calvin's erstwhile opponent at Geneva and perhaps one of Calvin's converts of the name "John." Still at Strasbourg, Calvin also persuaded Paul Volz, the former pastor of St. Nicholas' Church, who had for a time gone over to the Schwenckfelders, to return to the fold of the magisterial Reformation.

A new era in Calvin's career dawned with his return in September 1541 to Geneva. It is clear that by this time Calvin's various personal encounters with Anabaptists should have provided him with ample material for a fairly accurate appraisal and treatment of their doctrines. An examination of the revised Latin editions of the *Institutes*, particularly the second, reveals the depth and accuracy of Calvin's grasp of their teachings.

¹⁵ Calvin to Farel, September 1538, No. 140 in *Thesaurus epistolicus Calvinianus*, Vol. X/2 in *Calvini opera*, CR, XXXVIII/2, pp. 246 f. English trans. of Calvin's *Letters*, ed. Jules Bonnet (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, n. d.), I, 82. The Hermann is almost certainly the Hermann of Gerbihan mentioned previously. The companion of Hermann at Geneva in 1537 has been identified as Andrew Benoit, but Williams, p. 589, n. 23, notes the ambiguity connected with the word "barber."

¹⁶ Calvin to Farel, 6 February 1540, No. 206, Vol. XI of *Calvini opera*, CR, XXXIX, 11; *Letters*, I, 172.

¹⁷ Cf. Williams, p. 590, n. 30.

¹⁸ Calvin to Farel, 28 February 1540, from Strasbourg, No. 211, Vol. XI of *Calvini opera*, CR, XXXIX, 25. For the John of Ulm mentioned in this letter, Williams, p. 591, n. 32, definitely prefers Bomeromenus rather than the man whose widow Calvin would be marrying that same August.

REVISIONS OF THE "INSTITUTES"
AND OTHER LATER DEVELOPMENTS

In 1539 Calvin augmented the *locus* on Scripture in Book I, Ch. ix, by noting that certain "fanatics" have appeared on the scene who "imagine some way or other of reaching God" apart from the Scriptures.

For of late certain giddy men have arisen who, with great haughtiness exalting the teaching office of the Spirit, despise all reading and laugh at the simplicity of those who, as they express it, still follow the dead and killing letter. (I, ix, 1)

For Calvin the Spirit is not imparted except through the Scriptures. Revelation is not a continuing process. Extra-Scriptural disclosures, for all one can tell, may just as well be of the spirit of Satan as of the Spirit of God. The Spirit is inextricably bound to the Word.

For by a kind of mutual bond the Lord has joined together the certainty of his Word and of his Spirit so that the perfect religion of the Word may abide in our minds when the Spirit, who causes us to contemplate God's face, shines; and that we in turn may embrace the Spirit with no fear of being deceived when we recognize him in his own image, namely, in the Word. So indeed it is. God did not bring forth his Word among men for the sake of a momentary display, intending at the coming of his Spirit to abolish it. Rather, he sent down the same Spirit by whose power he had dispensed the Word, to complete his work by the efficacious confirmation of the Word. (I, ix, 3)

Calvin by no means disparaged the activity of the Spirit, but he insisted that the Spirit does not work apart from the Word. In short, "the Word is the instrument by which the Lord dispenses the illumination of his Spirit to believers." Most of this

passage appeared in the 1539 edition. It would seem to describe best the beliefs of certain Spiritualists, such as Sebastian Franck, and their concept of the inner Word. This appears to be the only reference in the *Institutes* to such prophets of the inward operation of the Spirit.

Calvin updated his discussion of the Third Commandment in the 1539 edition by noting how the Anabaptists refused to swear oaths. They claimed to be following the dominical injunction of Matt. 5:34, "Swear not at all," stressing the words "at all." But Christ did not rule out oaths enjoined by the Law, Calvin countered, but only those which had become substitutes for the divine name. Calvin interpreted the passage, in effect, to say: "Swear not in vain at all" (II, viii, 26). A number of radical groups forbade all oaths. Article VII of the Schleitheim Confession furnishes one example.

In 1539 Calvin also found the radicals guilty of teaching a false relationship between the two Testaments. He felt that they denied a spiritual salvation for Old Testament people. According to the opponents—"that wonderful rascal Servetus and certain madmen of the Anabaptist sect, who regard the Israelites as nothing but a herd of swine . . . as fattened by the Lord on this earth without any hope of heavenly immortality"—the Old Testament dispensation was merely carnal and temporal (II, x, 1). There is some evidence that Servetus was guilty as charged, but the allegation is hardly accurate for the majority of evangelical Anabaptists. Many went out of their way to demonstrate, as did Calvin, the fundamental unity and continuity of the two Testaments. If there were exceptions, it was again pri-

marily among the Spiritualists and Libertines.

There were some changes in the 1539 *locus* on Christology (II, xii—xiv). These may have been the result of Calvin's direct encounter with Hofmannite ideas of the celestial flesh.¹⁹ However, most of this section, though it did treat the subject of Christ's true humanity, seems too general to be considered as aimed at Hofmannite, or for that matter, Schwenckfeldian ideas. The one passage that might be interpreted in the light of Melchior Hofmann's Christology is II, xiii, 1, but this is a passage which was heavily revised in the last edition (1559) and may refer more precisely to Menno Simons. It will be considered later in this study.

One allusion in the 1539 recension would seem to suggest strongly the rigoristic branch of Anabaptism, such as the Dutch, among whom the use of the ban became an issue. Calvin made the point that faith and repentance are inextricably linked together, and then went on to say:

But lacking any semblance of reason is the madness of those who, that they may begin from repentance, prescribe to their new converts certain days during which they must practice penance, and when these at length are over, admit them into communion of the grace of the gospel. I am speaking of very many of the Anabaptists, especially those who marvelously exult in being considered spiritual. . . . Obviously, that giddy spirit brings forth such fruits that it limits to a paltry few days a repentance that for the Christian man ought to extend throughout his life. (III, iii, 2)

¹⁹ Williams, p. 589, credits this observation to William Keency in his Hartford Seminary multigraphed seminar paper, "An Analysis of Calvin's Treatment of the Anabaptists in the *Institutes*."

But a closer examination of this passage may reveal that Calvin had an entirely different type of Anabaptist thought in view. The "very many of the Anabaptists" here may be not the strict Dutch at all, but their very opposites, the spiritual-minded but loose-living Libertines.

This interpretation is borne out by the subsequent development of Calvin's line of thought. In this same chapter he went on to make the point that sinfulness continues to inhere in believers (III, iii, 10—13; this passage actually is of 1543 origin). Then followed a section entitled "Against the Illusion of Perfection."

Certain Anabaptists of our day conjure up some sort of frenzied excess instead of spiritual regeneration. The children of God, they assert, restored to the state of innocence, now need not take care to bridle the lust of the flesh, but should rather follow the Spirit as their guide, under whose impulsion they can never go astray. . . . "Take away," say the Anabaptists, "vain fear—the Spirit will command no evil of you if you but yield yourself, confidently and boldly, to his prompting." Who would not be astonished at these monstrosities? Yet it is a popular philosophy among those who are blinded by the madness of lusts and have put off common sense. (III, iii, 14)

This would appear to be a classical description of Libertinism. Believers are restored to a state of perfection in which it is impossible for them to sin. Furthermore, in the words which Calvin put into the mouth of the Anabaptists there could also be an allusion to the Anabaptist doctrine of "yieldedness" (*Gelassenheit*). Calvin perhaps combined random elements of radical thought quite arbitrarily. It should be noted that he saw a kind of common

denominator between rigoristic Anabaptism and Libertinism—the belief in temporal perfectionism. The rigorist regards perfection as an achievable goal, the Libertine as an accomplished fact. Calvin repeatedly called attention to this flaw in radical theology.

Once Calvin accused the Anabaptists of denying his doctrine of predestination. They were one of four sects (the others being the Pelagians, Manichees, and Epicureans) who tendered the objection that if God indeed predestines, men would not be responsible for their errors and wickedness (III, xxiii, 8). It is not clear just whom Calvin had in mind here.

In the 1539 *locus* on eternal punishment, Calvin challenged the universalistic views of unidentified persons who claimed that God would be unjust to punish men eternally, especially in view of the fact that their sins are committed only temporally. Calvin replied, "Granted. But God's majesty, and also His justice, which they have violated by sinning, are eternal. Therefore it is right that the memory of their iniquity does not perish" (III, xxv, 5). A number of Anabaptists and Spiritualists are known to have had universalistic sympathies. As usual Calvin did not specify who the errorists were.²⁰ It is of at least passing interest that in this same passage he took up the error of chiliasm, but made no reference to current radical aberrations on the point, as well he might have.

The most important and one of the longest of all additions to the 1539 edition

²⁰ The *Institutes* editors propose John Denck, Balthasar Hubmeier, Sebastian Franck, and Melchior Hofmann as advocates of the sort of doctrine Calvin described.

is the entire 16th chapter of Book IV, on infant baptism. It is relatively easy to detect in this revision a familiarity with Article I of the Schleithem Confession.

They attack infant baptism with an argument seemingly quite plausible, by boasting that it is not founded upon any institution of God, but has been introduced through men's presumption and depraved curiosity, and at last received into use rashly and with stupid complacency. (IV, xvi, 1)

Calvin followed Zwingli's lead in making much of the relation of Baptism to circumcision (IV, xvi, 3). In fact, they are so completely analogous that the only difference between them is in external features. Both convey grace and the promise of forgiveness (IV, xvi, 4). By denying this analogy the Anabaptists, in Calvin's opinion, were in effect contending that the Old Testament covenant was purely temporal and physical. This heresy he had already dealt with. Calvin could almost agree with certain of his opponents who viewed circumcision as a type of Baptism:

They therefore say that that physical infancy which was engrafted into the fellowship of the covenant through circumcision foreshadowed the spiritual infants of the New Testament, who were regenerated to immortal life by God's Word. In these words, indeed, we see a feeble spark of truth. (IV, xvi, 12)²¹

But the typological view did not go far enough. Circumcision was more than just a physical matter; it already conveyed spiritual gifts, like Baptism, which superseded it.

²¹ The editors suggest Melchior Hofmann (*Bibliotheca reformatoria Neerlandica*, ed. S. Cramer, V, 294) for this typological view.

Calvin demonstrated familiarity with most of the commonplaces of antipedobaptism; for the most part his refutations were equally commonplace. Who knows, he said in effect, but that infants can perhaps understand in their own way, though of course not in the same way as an adult. (IV, xvi, 19)

To sum up, this objection can be solved without difficulty: infants are baptized into future repentance and faith, and even though these have not yet been formed in them, the seed of both lies hidden within them by the secret working of the Spirit. (IV, xvi, 20)

One of Calvin's counteraccusations was that the Anabaptists taught that infants who were not baptized were lost (IV, xvi, 26). This seems a trifle far-fetched.²² Actually, most of the Anabaptists would have found such a doctrine quite uncongenial to their argument against infant baptism. Calvin also dealt with the usual Anabaptist argument based on the literal sequence of "teach" and "baptize" in the Great Commission. (IV, xvi, 27)

Toward the end of this supplementary chapter there are a number of sections which were first added in the 1559 edition against the teachings of the late Michael Servetus. Servetus was one of a number who contended that Baptism should be

²² Calvin may have been following Zwingli on this point. Or he may have been thinking of Servetus. Calvin himself definitely taught that Baptism was by no means absolutely necessary for salvation, thus denying, for example, the need for emergency baptism (IV, xv, 20—22). This would, in effect, place Calvin much closer to the radicals than to Lutheranism (cf. Augsburg Confession, Art. IX). Baptism for Calvin was a sign or token added to the promise which was already objectively valid in and of itself. Thus faith can save without Baptism.

postponed on the ground that Christ was not baptized until the age of thirty. So why, countered Calvin, do the Anabaptists not wait until they are precisely that old? "But even Servetus, one of their teachers, although he persistently advocated this age, in his 21st year had already begun to boast himself a prophet" (IV, xvi, 28).²³ Servetus, "not the least among the Anabaptists—indeed, the great glory of that tribe," was also the target of a long addition in 1559 in answer to the 20 objections to infant baptism he had posed in his *Christianismi restitutio* of 1553. (IV, xvi, 31)

The 1543 edition appears to have contained fewer alterations inspired by the Anabaptist menace. The changes center in one *locus*: the doctrine of the church. Significant portions of this discussion were included already in 1539. Calvin appears to have directed his attack here against the views of the more puritanical and separatistic groups, perhaps the Dutch, but more likely certain groups in or near Switzerland.

He began by formulating the classical distinction between visible and invisible church (IV, i, 7).²⁴ Having established that there are still sinners and hypocrites

²³ Calvin alludes to the publication of Servetus' *On the Errors of the Trinity* in 1531, when the author was about 21 years old.

²⁴ As Calvin is often credited with being among the first to formulate this doctrine, the role of the radical reformers takes on a new significance because of the antithesis they represented. The distinction between visible and invisible church might have been Calvin's answer to the Anabaptist insistence on the church as a purified, free, voluntaristic association of gathered saints, thus tending to externalize the church. For Calvin the church consisted, it is true, of saints, but with sinners and hypocrites still hidden amidst the saints.

in the empirical church, Calvin urged toleration of these imperfections. Those who violated this principle were the Cathari (with St. Epiphanius and other Greek fathers, Calvin meant the third-century Novatianists, the Donatists, and "some of the Anabaptists, who wish to appear advanced beyond other men.") These last, "when they do not see a quality of life corresponding to the doctrine of the Gospel among those to whom it is announced, they immediately judge that no church exists in that place." Calvin acknowledged that they had to some extent a valid view.

But on their part those of whom we have spoken sin in that they do not know how to restrain their disfavor. For where the Lord requires kindness, they neglect it and give themselves over completely to immoderate severity. Indeed, because they think no church exists where there are not perfect purity and integrity of life, they depart out of hatred and wickedness from the lawful church, while they fancy themselves turning aside from the faction of the wicked. (IV, i, 13)

Closely associated with their separatism and sectarianism was their strict application of excommunication, usually administered by select individuals. (IV, i, 15)

The error at the bottom of their sectarianism and puritanism was a misguided perfectionism, the claim that believers no longer sin.

Once the Novatianists stirred up the churches with this teaching, but our own age has certain Anabaptists (not very different from the Novatianists) who are lapsing into the same madness. For they feign that in baptism God's people are reborn into pure and angelic life, unsullied by any carnal filth. But if after baptism anyone falls away, they leave him

nothing but God's inexorable judgment. In short, to the sinner who has lapsed after he has received grace they hold out no hope of pardon. For they recognize no other forgiveness of sins than that by which they were first reborn. (IV, i, 23; this passage actually of 1539 origin)

Not all the modern "Novatianists" were so extreme.

Certain men, somewhat more prudent, when they see the teachings of Novatus [sic] refuted by the great clarity of Scripture, do not deem every sin unpardonable, but only voluntary transgression of the law, into which one knowingly and willingly falls. (IV, i, 28; also 1539)

The moderates apparently held that at least sins of ignorance were forgivable.²⁵

The ecclesiology of the Anabaptists seems to have been a concern for Calvin in the 1543 revisions. He again accused them of perfectionism in the discussion of church discipline. In excommunicating they were as severe as the ancient Donatists: "The Anabaptists act in the same way today. While they recognize no assembly of Christ to exist except one conspicuous in every respect for its angelic perfection, under the pretense of their zeal they subvert whatever edification there is" (IV, xii, 12). There was probably some basis in fact for this critique. But that all Anabaptists were as perfectionistic as Calvin described them is open to doubt.

Calvin's three major polemical treatises against the radicals were not published until after his reinstatement in Geneva,

²⁵ This more moderate position may suggest Article II of the Schleithem Confession (the "brothers or sisters . . . who slip sometimes and fall into error and sin, being inadvertently overtaken").

September 1541. The appearance of the first (extant) printed edition of *Psychopannychia* in 1542 has already been noted. In 1544 he wrote the *Brieve instruction pour tous bons fideles contre les erreurs de la secte commune des anabaptistes*, a systematic presentation and critique of the main tenets of Anabaptism, organized along the lines of the seven articles of the 1527 Schleithem Confession.²⁶ To the *Brieve instruction* was appended a discussion of the Incarnation, which treated peculiar Anabaptist doctrines of the humanity of Christ, and a further treatment of psychopannychia. The third and last of the antiradical treatises was the one *Contre la secte phantastique et furieuse des Libertins, qui se nomment spirituelz* (Geneva, 1545).²⁷ In it Calvin distinguished between the Libertines and the Anabaptists proper and absolved most of the later Anabaptists of the extremes of the former.

Calvin's last personal encounter with an Anabaptist may have been with a certain Belot, whom Calvin had arrested in Geneva in 1546.²⁸ There is evidence that Calvin

had an indirect acquaintance with Menno Simons as a result of the debates Martin Micron had with Menno in 1554 and that Calvin wrote against Menno's doctrine of the celestial flesh.²⁹ But for most of the later years of Calvin's life the Anabaptists seem not to have been nearly so great a threat as they had been earlier.

The fourth Latin edition of the *Institutes* in 1550 appears to have no significant new allusions to the radicals. A final edition appeared in 1559. It has already been noted, for example, that this edition contained a further revision of a passage that had appeared already in 1539 and treated the humanity of Christ. Calvin specified that he was refuting the false views of the Manichees and Marcionites, but what he said would seem to presuppose an acquaintance with some version of the "celestial flesh" doctrine, presumably Menno's (II, xiii, 1). Calvin took issue with the idea that Christ's flesh merely passed through the Virgin and that she herself contributed nothing. The false doctrine implied that only the male seed causes conception. This should be a purely philosophical or medical issue, said Calvin, but he was nevertheless personally convinced "that the woman's seed must share in the act of generation." (II, xiii, 3)³⁰

By 1559 the threat of the anti-Trini-

²⁶ Vol. VII of *Calvini opera*, CR, XXXV, 49—142. The treatise was soon translated into English, *A short instruction agaynst the pestiferous errors of Anabaptistes* (London: J. Daye and W. Seres, 1549), no. 4463 in A. W. Pollard and G. R. Redgrave, *A Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, and Ireland, 1475—1640* (London: The Bibliographical Society, 1956), p. 97. In using the Schleithem Confession Calvin was following Zwingli's precedent. Wenger, p. 243, contends that Calvin had available a no longer extant French translation of the articles.

²⁷ Vol. VII in *Calvini opera*, CR, XXXV, 145—248.

²⁸ Neff, p. 496; Williams, p. 597. The incident is recounted by Calvin himself in a letter to Farel of 21 January 1546, No. 752 in Vol. XII of *Calvini opera*, CR, XXXX, 256 f.

²⁹ Williams, p. 487. Calvin remarked concerning Menno: "Nihil hoc asino posse fingi superbius, nihil petulantius hoc cane" (Nothing can be more conceited than this donkey, nor more impudent than this dog). For a possible rejoinder by Menno see his *True Christian Faith*, trans. Leonard Verduin, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1956), p. 405.

³⁰ Menno's idea that women are without seed was developed in his *Reply to Gellius Faber* (1554) and elsewhere.

tarians had come much more clearly into focus. They were now referred to as the "fanatics" (II, vi, 4; the reference appears to be to John Valentine Gentile). Strangely, the heresy which inspired an entire book as early as 1534, psychopannychism, and which Calvin regarded as worth including as an appendix to the *Brieve instruction*, was first treated in the *Institutes* in this 1559 edition (III, xxv, 4, 6). Even then the treatment was rather superficial. Also in 1559 there was a passage which alluded possibly to the doctrine of certain radicals concerning the ministry (IV, i, 6). It was vague enough that it could have applied to a number of groups. The Anabaptist doctrine of the ministry appears not to have been a particular concern for Calvin in the *Institutes*.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

In conclusion several general observations may be in order. One is that it must be borne in mind that Calvin did not distinguish very neatly or objectively between the multiplicity and variety of groups within the radical Reformation. Consequently he tended in some instances to attribute the excesses and idiosyncracies of a few to the movement as a whole. In spite of numerous points of contact with various sectarians, his knowledge of their theology was not uniformly first-rate.

On the basis of the *Institutes* it is to be noted that Calvin had a fairly broad acquaintance with most of the major tenets of the radicals. He was most concerned, however, with a few of the more peculiar teachings of what ultimately turned out to be the more marginal members of the movement, such as the psychopannychists, the Libertines, the rationalists, and anti-Trinitarians. Certain members are almost conspicuous for their absence or seeming lack of importance. The theology of Caspar Schwenckfeld might be cited as one example. Again, the Spiritualists' theology of the inner Word and repudiation of external means seems to have troubled Calvin a great deal less than it did Luther. The communitarian groups of Bohemia, Moravia, and elsewhere likewise received scant attention.

If any one feature of Calvin's views stands out, it might be his belief that the faulty perfectionism of most of the sectarians cast its shadow over their theology. It affected both their attitude toward civil authority and their ecclesiology, not to mention whatever adverse affect it may have had on their personal beliefs and piety. This is perhaps the outstanding insight developed consistently in the anti-radical polemics of the *Institutes*.

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