

CALVIN'S SUDDEN CONVERSION (*SUBITA  
CONVERSIO*) AND ITS HISTORICAL MEANING  
*'COR MEUM TIBI OFFERO, PROMPTE ET SINCERE'*

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ABSTRACT

In Calvin research of the Twentieth Century, different approaches towards the question about Calvin's 'conversion', as mentioned in the introduction to his commentary on the Psalms, have been followed. In this article a number of these approaches are discussed, as well as certain other issues, which should be taken into account. After a discussion of these issues the conclusion is drawn that Calvin's conversion was not the product of a gradual recognition and human decision, but an event of a decisive regeneration, resulting in true and evangelical faith under the sovereign guidance of God. Calvin's thought on the sovereignty of God provided the guiding principle for the Reformed faith. Therefore, Calvin's conversion was more than the conversion of an individual. It was rather a matrix for the formation of the Reformed faith and the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches. It was also the guidance and special providence of God, completing the Reformation.

1. INTRODUCTION: *'COR MEUM TIBI OFFERO,  
PROMPTE ET SINCERE'*

The above saying of Calvin was his personal motto dedicating himself to God. Calvin lived a life completely devoted to a completion of the Reformation and the birth of the Reformed Church. Many Calvin scholars have expressed a special concern for the decisive event signalling a beginning in his remarkable career as a Reformer. In the *Preface to the Commentary on the Psalms* he made a brief comment on his *subita conversio* without referring to a specific year. This has been a source of considerable controversy among Calvin scholarship.<sup>2</sup> The reason why many Calvin scholars try to de-

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- 2 Williston Walker, *John Calvin: The Organizer of Reformed Protestantism 1509-1564* (New York & London: The Knickerbocker Press, 1906/1909), pp. 70-105; Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), pp. 35-41. A. Wolters, "Recent Biographical Studies of Calvin" in: In Honor

termine the date of his conversion may be related not only to a better understanding of his personal life, but also to the meaning and importance of this event for the history of Protestantism.

If we try to figure out the date of his conversion based solely upon some chronological hints in his life and circumstances surrounding him, we will be faced with “a baffling problem out of our reach” as Emile Doumergue has pointed out a long time ago.<sup>3</sup> The question of different interpretations regarding the date of his conversion may perhaps be solved if it is considered at the same time from different perspectives. For a balanced evaluation of his conversion, it could be fruitful to consider it from both historical and theological perspectives.

In the current discussion on the date of Calvin's conversion, the fact that priority has been given to its theological perspective instead of a historical perspective has resulted in differing interpretations, according to the theological positions of the interpreters. For example, a Roman Catholic theologian, Alexander Ganoczy, argues that Calvin's conversion mentioned in his *Commentary on the Psalms* cannot be regarded as a sudden conversion in the sense of a complete and sudden withdrawal from the Roman Catholic Church. Ganoczy rather understands it as a gradual realization of Calvin's calling to the ministry while remaining in the Roman Catholic Church until 1539.<sup>4</sup> Ganoczy concludes his biography of Calvin with a plea for ecumenism, based upon the illusion that Calvin received his call to the ministry within the boundary of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>5</sup> In his argument Ganoczy painstakingly attempts to reduce the meaning and significance of Calvin's conversion. Karl Barth in his *Commentary on Romans* interprets Calvin's conversion — from the perspective of the dialectical theology of crisis — as an event of existential encounter with God by the act of God commanding and demanding, but not as a specific historical event occurring in time.<sup>6</sup> There-

of John Calvin, 1509-64: Papers from the 1986 International Calvin Symposium (McGill University, 1987), pp. 349-360.

3 Emile Doumergue, *La jeunesse de Calvin*, p. 345.

4 Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, pp. 241ff, 264-66; cf. A. Wolters, *op. cit.*, p. 357.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 312.

6 Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 138-141:

The history of the individual is here a means by which to recount the eternal history of the acts of God that we do not see as such on the plane of historical things ... The new taste is in time, the sudden conversion beyond all time in eternity.

fore, the date of Calvin's conversion as a historical event cannot be a matter of concern to Barth.

But Calvin's conversion was not the conversion of just another individual in the history of church. His conversion was a decisive and historical event controlled by God's sovereignty in order to recover a true Church. Also it was a significant event for the completion of the Reformation in the history of the Church. If we cannot be convinced of its historical significance and its importance, we will lose the historical horizon of our Reformed faith and Church, and of the birth and orthodoxy of the Presbyterian Church as well.

## 2. A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON CALVIN'S CONVERSION

Drawing on Calvin's *Institutes* we should focus on the theological aspects of his conversion<sup>7</sup> before discussing its specific and historical date, mentioned in the *Preface* of his *Commentary on the Psalms* (1557).<sup>8</sup> In his *Institutes* Calvin first identified conversion with repentance (*poenitentia*) and defined repentance as follows:

Indeed, I am aware of the fact that the whole of conversion to God is understood under the term "repentance", and faith is not the least part of conversion [...]. On this account, in my judgment, repentance can thus be well defined: it is the true turning of our life to God, a turning that arises from a pure and earnest fear of Him; and it consists in the mortification of our flesh and of the old man, and in the vivification of the Spirit.<sup>9</sup>

- 7 Nijenhuis believes that Calvin's statements found in the *Preface* to the *Commentary on the Psalms* were theological rather than historical; Cf. W. Nijenhuis, "Calvijns 'subita conversio', notities bij een hypothese", *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 26 (1972), pp. 248-269.
- 8 Calvin started to preach on the Book of Psalms in 1552 and began writing his commentary on Psalms in 1553. Since we already know that from 1549 onwards, Calvin, on almost every Sunday, preached on the Psalms and preached the last sermon on the Psalms in 1554, we can deduce that, in fact, he started to study the Psalms before 1552. Cf. W. Nijenhuis, "Calvins 'subita conversio', notities bij een hypothese". *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 26 (1972), p. 285.
- 9 *Inst.*, 3.3.5 (quotations from Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. [The Library of Christian Classics XX], ed. John T. McNeill, transl. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977).

Such a repentance has an effect which leads to a change of the soul itself as well as to a change in external actions<sup>10</sup> and brings a desire to live a holy and devout life.<sup>11</sup> Calvin also identified repentance with regeneration and explained its goal as a recovering of the image of God in us:

Therefore, in a word, I interpret repentance as regeneration, whose sole end is to restore in us the image of God that had been disfigured and all but obliterated through Adam's transgression [...] Accordingly, we are restored by this regeneration through the benefit of Christ into the righteousness of God; from which we had fallen through Adam.<sup>12</sup>

The result of regeneration is the recovery of the righteousness of God in us. Also the process of recovery was identified with sanctification, a process which is gradually accomplished.<sup>13</sup> But it is important to take note of the fact that conversion not only has the characteristic of gradual change, interconnected with repentance and sanctification, but that it is also related to regeneration as the first step in the order of salvation (*ordo salutis*), as it is commonly employed in systematic theology.

In the past, conversion was mainly understood as the process of gradual sanctification by means of repentance, including the mortification of the flesh and the vivification of the spirit.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, the decisive character of

10 *Inst.*, 3.3.6.

11 *Inst.*, 3.3.3.

12 *Inst.*, 3.3.9.

13 *Ibid.*

And indeed, this restoration does not take place in one moment or one day or one year; but through continual and sometimes even slow advances God wipes out in his elect the corruptions of the flesh, cleanses them of guilt, consecrates them to himself as temples renewing all their minds to true purity that they may practice repentance throughout their lives and know that this warfare will end only at death. (Cf. *Inst.*, 3.6.5.)

*Comm.* II Cor. 3:18, Jer. 31:18:

We turn, as I have already said, by little and little to God, and by various steps; for repentance has its progress.

*Inst.*, 3.3.2:

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.

14 Calvin understood regeneration as the beginning of spiritual life, identifying it as repentance and sanctification. According to this definition, Calvin put more emphasis on the result of regeneration and its subsequent process of develop-

regeneration was minimized. But Calvin argued that, with the second creation, which we attain in Christ, in the commencement of conversion (*conversionis originem*), God begins his good work in us.<sup>15</sup> He does that by arousing love and desire and zeal for righteousness in our hearts; or, to speak more correctly, by bending, forming, and directing our hearts to righteousness. Such transformation and renewal of man is possible only by the help of God. In such a conversion a new spirit and new heart are given.<sup>16</sup> In terms of the perspective of a new creation or second creation, regeneration was understood as the beginning of spiritual life.<sup>17</sup> And Calvin understood repentance, which is the recovery of God's righteousness, as beginning with regeneration, by which believers are born again at once and which continues throughout their whole life.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the vivification of the spirit, which is an aspect of repentance, means a desire to live in a holy and devoted manner, a desire arising out of rebirth.<sup>19</sup> Repentance originates from new birth (*renascentia*), which is regeneration.<sup>20</sup>

In order to clarify the fact that regeneration is not the result of human work, but of God's sovereign work alone, Calvin affirmed that the new creation of the heart or the will is the work of God. Subsequently, he made God the author of spiritual life from beginning to end.<sup>21</sup> And in his commentary on Acts 5:31 Calvin argued:

ment. This was a reflection of the eschatological character in his anthropology. At the same time, it was a warning given to the Anabaptists who believed regeneration could solve all the following problems associated with salvation. Cf. *Inst.*, 3.3.14.

15 *Inst.*, 2.3.6.

16 *Inst.*, 2.3.8.; cf. *Comm.* Ezek. 18:32.

17 *Inst.*, 2.3.6:

It is clear from the context that he is speaking of regeneration, which is the beginning of the spiritual life (*de regeneratione eum loqui, quae principium est spiritualis vitae, ex contextu patet*).

*Comm.* Act. 1:3: "Regeneration is the beginning of this kingdom, and the end thereof is blessed immortality."

18 *Inst.*, 3.3.9.

19 *Inst.*, 3.3.3.

20 *Inst.*, 4.16.25. Here Calvin interchangeably uses the two terms, "new birth" and "regeneration".

21 *Inst.*, 2.3.6.

For Christ giveth us the Spirit of regeneration for this cause [...] And if it belongs to Christ to give repentance, then it followeth that it is not a thing which is in man's power.<sup>22</sup>

From all these arguments, it is clear that Calvin must have thought of regeneration as an event occurring at a certain decisive point in time, as it would constitute a first step toward life-long repentance or sanctification.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, when we try to understand what Calvin means by his "sudden conversion" in his *Preface* to the *Commentary on Psalms* we should interpret "conversion" as referring to a decisive event brought about at once by God.

### 3. THE SUDDENNESS OF CALVIN'S CONVERSION

In the *Preface* of the *Commentary on the Psalms* (1557) Calvin described his sudden conversion as follows:

When I was as yet a very little boy, my father had destined me for the study of theology. But afterwards when he considered that the legal profession commonly raised those who followed it to wealth this prospect induced him suddenly to change his purpose. Thus it came to pass, that I was withdrawn from the study of philosophy, and was put to the study of law. To this pursuit I endeavored faithfully to apply myself in obedience to the will of my father; but God, by the secret guidance of his providence, at length gave a different direction to my course. And first, since I was too obstinately devoted to the superstitions of Popery to be easily extricated from so profound an abyss of mire, God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame, which was more hardened in such matters than might have been expected from one at my early period of life. Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness I was immediately inflamed with so intense a desire to make progress therein, that although I did not altogether leave off other studies, I yet pursued them with less ardor. I was quite surprised to find that before a year had elapsed, all who had any desire after purer doctrine were continually coming to me to learn, although I myself was as yet but a mere novice and tyro. Being of a disposition somewhat unpolished and bashful, which led me always to love the shade and retirement, I then began to seek some

22 *Comm. Acts* 5:31. Cf. *Comm. Acts* 3:18 :“but that conversion whereof I have spoken is a notable work of God's mercy”. *Comm. Acts* 9:1; cf. A. Ganoczy, *op.cit.*, pp. 251-2.

23 Cf. Lynn Baird Jr. Tipson, “The Continental Reformed Tradition”, *The Development of a Puritan Understanding of Conversion* (Yale University, 1972), pp. 56-128. Kim, Kwang-Yul, “The Concept of Definitive Sanctification in John Calvin's Thought”, *Chongshin Review*, vol. 2 (Oct. 1997), pp. 82, 96.

secluded corner where I might be withdrawn from the public view;  
but so far from being able to accomplish the object of my be desire,  
all my retreats were like public school.<sup>24</sup>

From this preface we can make some deductions regarding Calvin's understanding of his conversion. First of all, he believed that the sovereign providence of God and the teaching of God's Word made his conversion possible.<sup>25</sup> In a sovereign way God opened a new way and seized his heart by the Word.<sup>26</sup> God, by a sudden conversion, subdued and brought his mind to a teachable frame. Calvin confessed that after his conversion he had such a strong urge and desire for piety:

God begins his good work in us, therefore, by arousing love and desire and zeal for righteousness in our hearts.<sup>27</sup>

Along with such a change in heart, Calvin was at last able to possess the purer doctrine and some taste and knowledge of true godliness apart from the superstitions of popery which was like a profound abyss of mire.<sup>28</sup> And he described himself as a mere novice and tyro (*novitius et tiro*) with a strong desire for true godliness. In other words, in true godliness and doctrine, which is in evangelical faith, his new life as a novice has begun. The new and clear situation that Calvin describes, demonstrates that his conversion occurred at a specific point in time as a decisive event, made possible by the sovereign work of God. This is the first step of conversion which Calvin described and the event of his sudden regeneration in evangelical faith.

F.L. Battles identifies Calvin's restatement or theological reflection regarding his experience of conversion in Calvin's earlier works. In a *Preface* (written between 1534-1535) to the *French New Testament* (translated by his cousin, Pierre Robert Olivetan) Calvin stressed that the true way of salvation is possible only in Jesus Christ the Mediator of the Covenant. This he repeats in the first chapter of the *Institutes* (1536). Also in his *Reply to Cardinal Sadoleit's Letter* (1539) Calvin explained the reason why he had to be converted from the false faith and the false religion, divorced from true salvation and evangelical faith. Here Calvin stated that the Roman Catholic Church, which hid the light of the Word of God, did not teach him how to worship God with his whole heart and the way to true hope for salvation. He also stated

24 John Calvin, "The Author's Prefaces, xl-xli" in *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. I, trans. James Anderson (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979).

25 Jean Cadier, *The Man God Mastered*, pp. 39-40.

26 John T. McNeill, *History and Character of Calvinism*, pp. 109ff.

27 *Inst.*, 2.3.6.

that the Roman Catholic teaching on the redemption and resurrection in the Cross, was false.<sup>29</sup> Near the end Calvin confessed that he had been thrown into a state of deep despair and chaos. But led by God and the Word of God, he experienced a decisive event of regeneration once and for all. Now he confessed with a promise to God that he would wholly dedicate himself to Him:

Being exceedingly alarmed at the misery into which I had fallen, and much more at that which threatened me in the view of eternal death, I, as in duty bound, made it my first business to betake myself to thy way, condemning my past life, not without groans and tears. And now, O Lord, what remains to a wretch like me, but instead of defence, earnestly to supplicate thee not to judge according to its deserts that fearful abandonment of thy word, from which, in thy wondrous goodness, thou hast at last (*once and for all*) delivered me.<sup>30</sup>

Battles argues that right before his conversion, Calvin was captivated by an important question of faith regarding a contrast between Christianity and other religions, between true religion and superstition. He also mentions that the decisive Scripture passages for Calvin's conversion were Romans

28 T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography*, p. 164.

29 "Reply by Calvin to Cardinal Sadolet's Letter" (1539), *Calvin's Tracts and Treatises*, vol. I, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids : Baker Book House, 1983), p. 61:

I, O Lord, as I had been educated from a boy, always professed the Christian faith. But at first I had no other reason for my faith than that which then everywhere prevailed. Thy word, which ought to have shone on all thy people like a lamp, was taken away, or at least suppressed as to us ... Then, the rudiments in which I had been instructed were of a kind which could neither properly train me to the legitimate worship of thy Deity, nor pave the way for me to a sure hope of salvation, nor train me aright for the duties of the Christian life. I had learned, indeed, to worship thee only as my God, but as the true method of worshipping was altogether unknown to me, I stumbled at the very threshold. I believed, as I had been taught, that I was redeemed by the death of thy Son from liability to eternal death, but the redemption I thought of was one whose virtue could never reach me. I anticipated a future resurrection, but hated to think of it, as being an event most dreadful.

30 "Reply by Calvin to Cardinal Sadolet's Letter" (1539), *Calvin's Tracts and Treatises*, vol. I, p.64. OS 1, 486, 27-31:

*Et nunc, Domine, quid aliud misero mihi superest quam ut deprecationem tibi pro defensione offeram, ne horrendam illam a verbo tuo defectionem ad calculum revoces, a qua me semel mirifica tua benignitate vindicasti?*

Cf. Heiko A. Oberman, "*Subita Conversio: The Conversion of John Calvin*", *Reformiertes Erbe*, pp. 285-86. Oberman translates *semel* as "once for all".



1:21 and 25.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, it is clear that Calvin experienced true piety, that is conversion from a false religion of superstition to pure doctrine, which worships creatures rather than the Creator of all things. This conversion, which he experienced, was indeed regeneration.

As was mentioned in his *Reply to Cardinal Sadolet*, Calvin made it clear that he renounced his past life, filled with superstitions of Popery, and pleaded for the salvation of God in the midst of his misery arising out of his sinful nature and of immanent threat of eternal death. We cannot view his sudden conversion as an inner experience of gradual recognition, hidden for several years. It would be illogical to think that the Reformer lived for several years with such a heavy conflict and an agony, while he was gradually moving away from the false religion. Such an argument is the result of a theological standpoint which regards conversion merely as a product of human efforts of long reflection and realization. But in his *Commentary on the Psalms* Calvin tells us that his conversion was a historical event made possible by God's sovereign providence and the work of the Word. Indeed it was a historical event occurring in Calvin's life.

#### 4. GRADUALNESS OF CALVIN'S CONVERSION

Recently many Calvin scholars emphasized the gradual character of Calvin's conversion, since it looks almost impossible to locate its exact date. Calvin's conversion cannot be seen apart from the surrounding situation. However, if one — from a theological viewpoint — emphasizes the gradual nature of Calvin's conversion as a process throughout his whole life, the questions regarding the date as well as the historical nature of his conversion do not have to be taken into account.

In other words, while ignoring the element of regeneration, which is the starting point of new spiritual life, one can merely emphasize the gradual character of sanctification. This would result in an intentional attempt to interpret Calvin's conversion without relating it to historical events.

In his theological understanding of Calvin's conversion, Bouwsma ignores the element of regeneration, that is the beginning of new life and a historical event, because he confines it to the limits of repentance and sanctification alone. Like Ganoczy, Bouwsma argues that Calvin had criticized the superstitions of Roman Catholicism until 1539 like many Evangelical humanists

31 F. L. Battles, "*Calculus Fidei: Some Illuminations on the Structure of the Theology of John Calvin*", *Interpreting John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), pp. 139-178.

at that time, but that there was no change in his loyalty toward Roman Catholicism.<sup>32</sup> Thus Bouwsma does not acknowledge Calvin's sudden conversion, mentioned in the *Preface* to his *Commentary on the Psalms*, as a historical event which guided his new life or conversion of faith, but rather as "a change in concern".<sup>33</sup>

Many scholars, emphasizing the gradualness of Calvin's conversion, argue that the word *subita* should be taken as *subie*, meaning "experienced". They argue that the phrase *subita conversio* should be interpreted as "experienced conversion".<sup>34</sup> They also attempt to simplify or minimize the meaning of conversion by taking Calvin's sayings on conversion as "conversion to teachableness [i.e. ability to learn]" (*conversio ad docilitatem*).<sup>35</sup> Taken literally or in context of the *Preface*, however, such interpretations seem to be an unnatural reading of the text. Thus there is no reason not to translate *subita* as "sudden".<sup>36</sup> Accepting the gradualness of Calvin's conversion, others argue that a seed for conversion was already inseminated by the influence of Pierre Robert Olivetan in 1528 and that it was completed after many years. But Calvin regarded the completion of conversion possible only at the moment of death.<sup>37</sup>

## 5. THE DATE OF CALVIN'S CONVERSION

For a better estimation of the date of Calvin's conversion, we shall review the problems inherent in the argument for an earlier date of his conversion. Regarding the date of his conversion, most biographers of Calvin can be divided into two groups. First, some of them believe that it occurred during the early period of his studies at University in Paris. Secondly, others argue that it took place at a much later stage. Hence a precise date could vary from 1528 to 1539.

Theodore Beza and Nicolas Colladon stated that Calvin experienced his conversion while studying law at Orleans under the influence of Olivetan

32 W. J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, p. 11.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

34 Jean Cadier, *The Man God Mastered*, p. 40.

35 Paul Sprenger, *Das Rätsel um die Bekehrung Calvins* (Neukirchen: Neukirchner, 1960), pp. 56ff.; W.H. Neuser, "Calvin's Conversion to Teachableness" *Nederduits Gereformeerd Theologische Tydskrif*, 26 (1985), pp. 14-27; Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, p. 10.

36 John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 109.

37 *Inst.*, 3.3.9.

around 1528.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, T.H.L. Parker dates Calvin's conversion at the end of 1520s or at the beginning of 1530s, while Calvin was studying law at Bourges, under the scrutiny of the *Preface* to his *Commentary on the Psalms*.<sup>39</sup> There are scholars who believe the beginning of his conversion must have occurred at an earlier time: John Cadier,<sup>40</sup> Paul Henry,<sup>41</sup> A. Lefranc,<sup>42</sup> E. Doumergue,<sup>43</sup> and Wilhelm Neuser.<sup>44</sup> But there are some problems associated with this early dating.

First, Parker estimates the date of the conversion to be rather early (1529-1530). He believes that the context of the *Preface* to the *Commentary on the Psalms* can provide us with the conclusion that it had occurred during the period of his studies at Bourges. But Calvin left Paris and went to Orleans in order to finish his studies of law in the May of 1532, and stayed there until June 1533.<sup>45</sup>

Also the context of the *Preface* to his *Commentary on the Psalms* reveals that within a year after the experience of the conversion, Calvin sought freedom to find a quiet place to hide himself. This fact indicates that he already had finished studying law, which allowed him freedom. Therefore, there is no persuasive reason to limit the date of the conversion to the period of his stay at Orleans.<sup>46</sup> If Calvin had converted himself to evangelical faith around 1528, we should be able to encounter clear evidence of his conversion from

38 Theodore Beza, *Life of John Calvin*, pp. 4-5:

Because, having been made acquainted with the reformed faith, by a relation named Peter Robert Olivet (the person to whom the churches of France owe that translations of the Old Testament from the Hebrew, which were printed at Neufchatel), he had begun to devote himself to the study of the Holy Scriptures, and from an abhorrence at all kinds of superstition, to discontinue his attendance of the public services of the Church.

39 T.H.L. Parker, *A Life of John Calvin*, p. 195.

40 Jean Cadier, *The Man God Mastered*, pp. 37-40.

41 Paul Henry, *Life and Times of John Calvin: the Great Reformer*, trans. Henry Stebbing (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1854), pp. 29-31.

42 Abel Lefranc, *La jeunesse de Calvin* (Paris, 1988). pp. 97-99

43 E. Doumergue, *Jean Calvin, les hommes et les choses de son temps. vol 1: La jeunesse de Calvin* (Lausanne, 1899), p. 299.

44 Wilhelm H. Neuser, "Calvin's Conversion to Teachableness", *Nederduits Gereformeerde Theologische Tydskrif* 26 (1985), pp. 14-27.

45 Alsiter E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin*, p. 62; Albert Hyma, *The Life of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943), p. 29.

46 Williston Walker, *John Calvin*, p. 96.

his writings and activities. But in *De Clementia*, published at Paris in 1532, Calvin mentioned the Bible only three times in connection with a philosopher's concern. In this work he did not show any interest in the evangelical faith. In fact, *De Clementia* betrays the young Calvin's humanistic concern at its peak. His zeal for Hellenistic and Latin writings is visible throughout this early work.<sup>47</sup> This fact cannot be harmonized with Calvin's resolute saying that he would not engage in studies other than the knowledge of true piety after the conversion. Thus it would be difficult to conclude that Calvin was converted before writing *De Clementia* (1532).

According to Beza, Calvin published two letters sent to Nicolas Duchemin and Gérard Roussel in a book in 1537 (the *Epistolae duae*). In this book he harshly criticized the hypocrisy of the Nicodemites.<sup>48</sup> They were those who secretly confessed faith in Christ, but kept participating in the ceremonies of Popery, without considering the fact that inner faith and piety should correspond to outer practices. Calvin continuously attacked the Nicodemites after publishing this book. Many people found him to be too harsh in his critique against the Nicodemites.<sup>49</sup> If Calvin had experienced a conversion, resulting in outer change and in a life of holy devotion, then he himself would have to be counted as one of the Nicodemites, whom he had so severely criticized, when he had in fact continued to hide his evangelical faith for several years.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, the reasoning that Calvin experienced an inner conversion at an earlier period and thus separated himself from the Roman Catholic Church, but only at later stage of his life publicly demonstrated his evangelical faith, cannot be consistent with his thought and actual life.

Although it was a sudden conversion, it was not completely separated from the context. As was mentioned in the Preface of the *Commentary on the Psalms*, there was a secret guidance of God which led to a sudden conversion. As witnessed by Beza, Calvin would have a strong interest in the study of Scripture, influenced by Pierre Robert Olivetan's evangelical faith. Also his Greek teacher Wolmar, a Lutheran, gave him a taste of the spirit of the Reformation. Furthermore, Calvin read Luther's book on the Lord's Supper.<sup>51</sup>

47 *Ibid.*

48 Theodore Beza, *Ioannis Calvini Vita*, CO 21,127.

49 "Petit traicté monstrant que doit faire un homme fidèle entre les papistes" (1543), CO, 6.540-578; "Excuse à messieurs les Nicodémites, sur la complaincte gu'ils font de sa trop rigueur" (1544), CO, 5.409-460.

50 Cf. *Inst.*, 3.3.3; 3.3.6.

51 *Calvin's Tracts and Treatises*, vol. II, trans. H. Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), p. 252.

All these conditions — internal, as well as external — prepared him for conversion. However, the conversion itself was sudden and abrupt in its nature.<sup>52</sup>

On May 1531, Calvin heard that his father Gerard Cauvin had passed away while he was excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church. On 1 November 1533 Calvin was forced to leave Paris on account of the rectoral address, given by his friend Nicolas Cop, the rector of the University of Paris. Finally, Calvin went to Noyon in order to give up all his ecclesiastical rights on May 4<sup>th</sup> 1534. This event not only signifies Calvin's official break from the Roman Catholic Church, but indicates that his conversion had already taken place. We can, therefore, conclude that Calvin was converted to the evangelical faith by the work of the Word and the Spirit, while experiencing regeneration in the period between 1533 and 1534.

## 6. HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF CALVIN'S CONVERSION

Before his conversion Calvin was captivated by his adherence to a superstitious and false faith, as well as by his academic ideal and ambition of humanism. It was only the work of the sovereign providence of God that brought him to the world of true faith and eternal truth. If he had not been led by the sovereign hand of God, Calvin could have never escaped the tyranny of Popery. Because of the difficulty and fear to confess his ignorance and fallacy, he had an unwilling ear in the beginning and strenuously and passionately resisted the doctrine of the Reformation.<sup>53</sup> But under God's forceful guidance Calvin was finally liberated from all the restraints and embraced the evangelical faith and its truth. Thus Calvin repeatedly emphasized the fact that his conversion was made possible not by the human power and will, but by the sovereign grace of God.

The fact that Calvin had such a strong faith concerning the sovereignty of God is confirmed by his life after his conversion. For example, when he was staying at Geneva, he could not refuse God's hand of sovereign providence leading him into the wilderness of the Reformation. When Martin Bucer forced him to cooperate with the Reformation of Strasbourg, Calvin had to obey God's sovereign will. And in 1541 he was for a second time called to participate in the cause of the Reformation at Geneva, this time

52 Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation; A Study of Calvin as Social Reformer, Churchman, Pastor and Theologian* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1988), p. 9.

53 *Calvin's Tracts and Treatises*, vol 1, p. 62.

by Guillaume Farel. Calvin once again submitted himself to God's sovereign will.<sup>54</sup> Throughout the rest of his life the sovereignty of God always worked as a guiding principle in Calvin's theology and faith, as well as in his thought and life.

The event of his conversion, which also was regeneration into evangelical faith, was a fruit of the work of the Word of God. In his *Reply to Cardinal Sadolet*, Calvin says:

I heard from thy mouth that there was no other light of truth which could direct our souls into the way of life, than that which was kindled by thy Word.<sup>55</sup>

After experiencing regeneration, Calvin devoted himself wholly to the study of Scriptures, because he firmly believed that the sole source (*principium unicum*) of all theological writings, including sermons and commentaries, was always Scripture alone.

The conversion of Calvin, as testified by his own words, was not the product of a gradual recognition and human decision, but the event of a decisive regeneration, resulting in true and evangelical faith under the sovereign guidance of God. Calvin's views on the sovereignty of God provided the guiding principle to the Reformed faith. Therefore, Calvin's conversion was more than the conversion of an individual. It was rather a matrix for the formation of the Reformed faith and the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches. It was also the guidance and special providence of God, completing the Reformation.

#### *Trefwoorden*

Calvyn

Bekering

Gereformeerde geloof

Reformatie

Psalmkommentaar

#### *Keywords*

Calvin

Conversion

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Reformation

Commentary on the Psalms

<sup>54</sup> *CO*, 31.27.

<sup>55</sup> *Calvin's Tracts and Treatises*, vol. 1, p.56.