CALVIN IN GERMANY

Christopher Ocker

Scholars have sometimes pointed to the importance of John Calvin’s three Strasbourg years (early September 1538 to 2 September 1541), where he settled, more or less, into a schedule of preaching and bible lecturing that he kept for the rest of his life.1 “Calvin, when he left Strasbourg, was more himself, he was more Calvinist.”2 “The three Strasbourg years made Calvin a stronger man; his development was now completed.”3 “It was in Strasbourg that Calvin became ‘Calvin’”; it was “the best three years of his life.”4 Strasbourg stood squarely in the middle of imperial debates; it was a city at the pivot of princely and urban interactions in the Protestant League of Schmalkalden, and both


2 Pannier, Calvin à Strasbourg, p. 55 (Pannier’s emphasis).

3 Lang, Johannes Calvin, p. 61.

a source and a conduit of the League’s French and Swiss diplomacy. With the opening of the gymnasium illustre in 1539, it intended to be, alongside Wittenberg, a second center of an international movement. Geneva was still struggling for independence. Only a few years before, its urban magistrates first wrested control from their bishop, while in most of Europe cities had been challenging the bishop’s civic power for over three hundred years.\(^5\) Geneva was a peripheral city, and Calvin had been a somewhat irrelevant public figure during his first residence there (1536–1538).\(^6\) It would be wrong to view Strasbourg as an interlude to a great Genevan career, as an exile worse than Switzerland, or as a mere station in the development of the great man. Calvin, when he arrived, was relatively young (29), but also unimportant.\(^7\) In Germany, he basked in the sunshine of illustrious evangelicals. It was no asylum or retreat.\(^8\) After arriving, he found himself in the ranks of theological advisors to the Protestant League, and he enjoyed a political education, as a review of these three years shows. How did Germany affect him?

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The Holy Roman Empire first inspired what we could consider a righteous ambition, but it was also an improbable one. Calvin later recalled Strasbourg, like Geneva, as an act of God, which we may take in the

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\(^6\) “It would be a serious mistake to view the crisis of 1538 [which produced Calvin’s exile] as the first round of a dispute which ended in 1555” [the exile of Perrin and the consolidation of reform]. Naphy, Calvin, pp. 222–3.

\(^7\) In September 1538, Martin Bucer was 38, Wolfgang Capito was 43, Philip Melanchthon was 33, and Jean Sturm was only 27 but already had been a professor of the Collège de France and enjoyed an international reputation in rhetoric and dialectic.