

THE BACKGROUND OF CALVIN'S THOUGHTS

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Abstract

Every age, God will raise up certain people who will become church leaders in their day, to be witnesses of God through the truth of God's word. Their presence did not only appear suddenly, but also through a long process of life and education. In this article, we will explore about The Background of Calvin's Thoughts, whose influence has revealed the world of theology to this day. Calvin was not only influenced by France Humanism but also medieval Theology at that time. Voluntarism was a popular theology in Calvin era. Calvin received only education in theology from medieval tradition on the first stage of his studies because he never studied theology at university. Calvin's method which was used to build his theology is inseparable from his studying in Civil Law in Orleans. His studying in Orleans has changed Calvin to be a good jurist and he used his skill later in Geneva to compile codifications of legislation and regulation for Church and government in Geneva. In addition to regulation of life, Calvin also noticed the purity of Christian faith teaching.

Keywords: Calvin's Thoughts, Christian Faith, Voluntarism, Humanism

Calvin was influenced by the pattern of thought of that era such as France humanism, theology in the middle ages namely voluntarism and reformation teaching which was introduced by reformers in particular Martin Luther. His education background is Law also affects his thoughts in theology.

France Humanism

Johannes Calvin was born in July 10 1509, with the name Jean Cauvin in Noyon city, Northern France. In the latter

days, Cauvin name was changed to be Calvinus,

a Latin name according with custom among the educated family. His family also determined that Calvin will be a priest but when he prepared himself to study theology in Paris (1523-1528), there was a dispute between his father and diocese in Noyon so that the original plan was nullified.

Therefore, Calvin did not study theology but he studied in faculty of Law in Orleans (1528-1529) and then in Bourges (1529-1531). After he finished

his studying, he came back to Paris to learn about literatures and languages such as Latin, Greek and also Hebrew. Through various literatures in the middle ages, he learned Christian humanism.¹

There was a group of Christian humanism which consists of the scholars who wanted to study the roots of Christian culture together especially in the ages of the ancient church, Greek and Romans cultures. Ancient time was upheld as the highest era of human life when people tried to live in accordance with God's will and their own characters. Therefore, the scholars, in Calvin's era, studied variety of ancient languages and read diligently the writings from pagan writers such as Greek and Romans the original languages in addition to Bible and the writings of many theologians of the ancient Church.

Through these literatures, according to their understanding, Christian community can know the life of original church which has not been affected by deterioration that happened in the future. Moreover, believers can see the truth of Christian faith which was not obscured by theological method that is used in the middle ages.² The outcome of education of Humanism³ which Calvin received has encouraged him to write his first commentary about one of the Seneca's writings⁴ and made his famous work for Christian congregations "Institutes of the Christian Religion".

The impact of this Humanism movement made the reformers, including Calvin, put a deep interest in the ability of writing and speaking. Therefore, history records that Calvin always pays attention to adduce his theological views not only by

¹. The term "humanism" is an invention of the 19th century. In German, the word Humanismus was first coined in 1808 to refer to an education that gave the main place to classical Greek and Latin works. In English, the term humanist first appeared in 1589 which means literary scholars, especially for those who really master the sciences related to Latin language and literature. However, there are two main views that define the term humanism. The first view states that humanism is a movement that pays attention to the sciences that study classical works and philology. The second view states that humanism is a new philosophy of the Renaissance. However, Kristeller gives the right view of humanism which he considers as a cultural and educational movement, especially with regard to increasing or promoting fluency in the field of writing and speaking (oral) while morals, philosophy, and politics are secondary. The point is that humanism focuses on the problem of the ways in which an idea is obtained and expressed rather

than on the problem of the actual substance of the ideas.

². Djoko Sulisty, *Johanes Calvin* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2000), 3-5.

³. Calvin's life was influenced by the humanism that developed in France through his radical studies of law in the early 16th century. The absolute French empire under Francis I with its increasing trend towards centralization of government had seen the legal (field of law) as essential to the modernization of France. . As a result, a group of experts based at the universities of Bourges and Orleans developed an interest in studying the theoretical aspects of generally accepted statutes. Thus, the French tried to develop their legal procedures by approaching directly the original classical statutory sources in their native language. This is the background of Calvin's method of learning and thinking in theology.

⁴. Seneca is Roman philosopher and he wrote many famous books.

speaking (his sermon and teaching) but also by his writing (his books) to promote Reformation movement.

He wants to purify the life of Roman Catholic Church according to the Gospel (New Testament) and rekindles Luther's ideas about the meaning of Gospel and reformation of church.⁵ The influence of Humanism is very strong not only in Calvin's thoughts but also on the development his teaching. Though Calvin never study theology but influence of Humanism in his life, pushed him to learn theology by himself through the original languages of Bible such as Greek and Hebrew as well as the writings of his predecessors.

Because of his hard work to study by himself, he obtained double predestination teaching which is derived from his predecessors and then he continued this doctrine. Then, he spread his teaching by his books especially *Institutio* book and his sermons.

In summary, Humanism influenced Calvin's life especially in his teaching both writing and speaking. Although he never attend school of theology at that time, but he

wrote some books and taught his followers very well because of spirit of Humanism.

Medieval Theology: Voluntarism

Calvin was not influenced by France Humanism but also medieval Theology at that time. Voluntarism is a popular theology in Calvin era. This view teaches that the essence of good works is located in God's will not an intrinsic merit of human action.⁶

Voluntarism refused intellectual view which argues that the God's intellect recognizes the existence of moral value in good deeds and in line with that, God will give rewards for its good works. Hence, there is a direct relationship between moral value and good deeds which are deserved to be rewarded.

Voluntarism opposes this view and argues that intellectual view makes God to rely on His creations because every good deed from human which deserve to get rewards cannot be allowed to be predetermined but God should be free to choose any values which favor Him.⁷

Therefore, Voluntarism states that there is no relationship between moral value and good deeds which deserve to be

⁵. F.D. Wellem, *Brief Biographies of Figures in Church History* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1987), 186.

⁶. Alister E. McGrath, *John Calvin and Late Medieval Thought: A Study in Late Medieval*

Influences upon Calvin's Theological Development", (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 58-78.

⁷. Alister E. McGrath, *History of Reform Thought* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2000), 104.

rewarded. It means that every good work is not based on value which attached to it but solely based on the worthiness which God chooses to give it to human. The main teaching of Voluntarism can be summarized into Duns Scotus proverbs which adduces that the value of human offering only determined by God's will and not because of goodness which attaches in human being.⁸ God himself will give any values to human good works based on His election and will. Therefore, this view tries to keep God's freedom and His sovereignty.

In *Institutio* book, Calvin uses Voluntarism teaching in relation with Christ's works and explains that the basis of Christ's works are not located in self sacrifice of Jesus Himself but based on God's decision to accept His sacrifice as an enough work for human redemption. Calvin argues that if Jesus sacrifice is separated from God's will, Christ cannot have any merits (*nam Christus nonnisi ex Dei beneplacitoquidquammereripotuit*).⁹

Not only in Christology, but also Calvin applies Voluntarism view in Soteriology. Calvin teaching is a strong pessimistic view about human nature with his fallen state which is identified as a

decisive point in the history of human salvation and strong emphasis upon God's will to redeem mankind.

Consequently, he refuses man's role to get justification or rewards. Calvin thinks that God can accept every man directly into fellowship with Him without any good deeds from man. All believers are saved not derived from themselves which can satisfy God but solely from God's will. Eternal death is experienced by unbelievers also depend on God's sovereignty.

In conclusion, Calvin teaching in soteriology is influenced by voluntarism and he describes that human does not have any moral value in his works. If God gives justify and give a reward to him, it is because God's will. There is no human role in salvation.

The Development of John Calvin Thoughts

Calvin received only education in theology from medieval tradition on the first stage of his studies because he never studied theology at university. His first theological education was derived from his father because of his works as a clerk of bishop. His father also motivated Calvin to study

⁸. Robert R. Boehlke, *History of the Development of the Mind and Practice of Christian Religious Education* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2002), 385-388.

⁹. Johannes Calvin, *Christian Teaching Institute* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1980), 201.

theology in Noyon although it failed eventually.¹⁰

In addition to his father's role, he also developed his understanding of theology by studying by himself.¹¹ He prepared himself by studying the original languages of Bible both Greek and Hebrew to deepen his studying. Beside of original languages, he also equipped himself with lots of teachings which were developed by Augustine and early fathers Church.¹²

Therefore, there is no wonder if double predestination teaching of Calvin is similar to Augustine. But above all these, Calvin is inspired by the thoughts and Luther's spirit in Reformation. He was deeply affected by Luther's thoughts so he should be expelled from his homeland and became a pastor in the city of Geneva at the end of 1533.¹³

In addition Augustine and Luther teaching, Calvin also influenced by Aristotle's philosophy as he lived in medieval ages which is called scholastic. His interest in philosophy can be seen in his commentary on Seneca's book, a Roman philosopher who lived in first century and became a teacher of Nero.

This book is a description of moralistic about "soft heart".¹⁴ In conclusion, his father, Augustine and Luther teachings also his interest in philosophy influenced Calvin to adduce his double predestination teaching.

The Works of John Calvin

Because of the affect of Christian Humanism which criticized theology and the teaching of Roman Catholic Church, Calvin began to seek theology which based on Holy Scripture. In the mid of 1534, he also rejected the income (salary) which he got from Roman Catholic in Noyon.

This is a sign that he doesn't want to be bound or under the authority of Roman Catholic Church anymore. In 1535, he wrote his book 'Institutio' and published it. Through that book, people can see that Calvin has turned to reformer teaching.

He also pointed out that he is a Luther's follower. After leaving Paris, he then went to Basel and wrote the teaching of Christian religion (*religionis Chirstianae institutio*).¹⁵ In that book, Calvin exposed the main topics of Christian faith in accordance with the principles of

¹⁰. H. Berkhof and I.H Enklaar, Church History (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1985), 157.

¹¹. Christian De Jonge, *What Is Calvinism?* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2001), 6.

¹². Van Den End, *Treasure in a Vessel* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2001), 186.

¹³. W.F Dankbaar, *Calvin's Way of Life and His Works* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1967), 178.

¹⁴. H. Berkhof and I.H Enklaar, Church History, 160.

¹⁵. Djoko Sulistyo, *Johanes Calvin*, 7-8.

Reformation theology which was developed by Luther who poured it out into six chapters.

In 1536, Calvin left Basel to go to Italia and Paris. Nevertheless, he was forced to take different road through Geneva because of military intervention. Guillaume, Evangelical preacher in Geneva, asked Calvin to help him to raise Reformation spirit and teaching in that city.

Calvin accepted the offer and served from 1536 to 1538 to reform churches and city not only physically but also spiritually. Because of his discipline, there were lots of pastors who governed ecclesiastical life strictly and oversaw the purity of faith of people through strict regulations.

However, this strictness created lots of resistances so that people who opposed Reformation got notches in Geneva. As a result, Calvin and Farel, his friend, were banished from that city. He also went to Strasburg city because of invitation of Martin Bucer, a reformer too.

Calvin was asked to serve congregations who speak French in that city. In addition to serve in Strasburg, he also learned many things about worship and organizing of the church which will be used when getting back to Geneva. In 1540, he

got married with Idelette de Bure in Strasburg.¹⁶

Meanwhile, Geneva was experiencing crisis due to a pastoral letter which was written by cardinal who wanted to take back church in Geneva under Roman Catholic Church. Geneva leaders realized that only Calvin who can deny that letter.

This decision was confirmed by the supporters of Reformation which urged both Calvin and Farel to be called back. Farel refused the invitation but Calvin accepted this calling and he kept serving in Geneva from 1541 until his death.¹⁷

Calvin began to govern the life of church in Geneva and wrote about the regulations of church which were accepted by council of the city. After curbing church, Calvin asked Church and government to work together in order to monitor the life in the city.

His good arrangements of church and government cannot be separated from Calvin's background in Strasburg and his education in Orleans. He had finished his education in Civil Law in Orleans and studied the main elements which formed Humanism in France.

His studying in Orleans has changed Calvin to be a good jurist and he used his skill later in Geneva to compile

¹⁶. Ibid., 15.

¹⁷. Van Den End, *Treasure in a Vessel*, 187.

codifications of legislation and regulation for Church and government in Geneva. Calvin utilized his knowledge and experience about *corpus iuriscivilis* to make legal ownership and judicial procedures for Geneva city.¹⁸

In addition to regulation of life, Calvin also noticed the purity of Christian faith teaching. His strictness can be seen from his response how he treated Bolsec, a theologian, who has different views with Calvin in particular predestination teaching. Bolsec has been excommunicated from Geneva by Calvin. Michael Servet who refused the teaching of Trinity has been burned till died in 1553. Therefore, Calvin concerned not only with organization of Church but also Bible doctrines. He wrote his catechism and compiled a lot of theological book especially Bible commentaries and *Institutio* which has been expanded.

Calvin's influence was felt not only in Geneva but also until the city of Zurich. For instance, with the help of Herinrich Bullinger, he formulated Tigurinus consensus which made all Christian in Swiss was united in 1549.¹⁹

Hence, Calvin has become a prominent world's leader especially in

Reformation teaching. This is because he usually sent letter to give advices and guidance to the Evangelical leaders in Europe such as France, England, Scotland, Poland and Hungary. Because of his hard work, Geneva became the center of reformation and many countries which sent their people to be educated in Geneva.

This education was instituted in an academy which established in 1559 and his successor after his death is Theodorus Beza (1519-1605) who became the first president of that institution. The students, who came from different parts of Europe, saw ecclesiastical life has been regulated very well according to Calvin's instructions so that Church in Geneva became a pattern and model for other places.²⁰

This condition is in accordance with Calvin consciousness that his duty is not limited to Geneva city but also to the development of Gospel in other countries and first of all in his homeland, France. Geneva has been made by Calvin to be a protection and beacon for many churches.

Moreover, Calvin succeeded to give direction for Reformation in purification of church and renewal theology of middle age which was begun by Luther. In summary, Calvin was considered as a second

¹⁸. W.F Dankbaar, *Calvin's Way of Life and His Works*, 210..

¹⁹. Van Den End, *Treasure In A Vessel*, 188-190.

²⁰. Robert R. Boehlke, *History of the Development of Thought and Practice of Christian Religious Education*, 436-441.

generation of reformer because he continued what Luther did for Reformation. Not only he proceeded Luther's works, but also he has done what Luther never done it before such as made an ecclesiastical organization and also his formulation about justification of faith.

Calvin's method which was used to build his theology is inseparable from his studying in Civil Law in Orleans. However, history also recorded that there is possibility that Calvin learned from Bude²¹ about how important to be a competent philologist²² in order to approach original languages directly and interpret it in parameter of linguistics in its historical based on the context and implement that truth to situation of his days.

All of these educational backgrounds strengthened his explanation and arguments about Holy Bible especially in his sermons.²³ Hence, Calvin's thoughts and theology cannot be separated from his background.

Based on these achievements, it can be said that Calvin has given a huge impact in Church history because he implemented

spirit of Reformation in church (Ganoczy) and also embodied Luther's dreams to make one ecclesiastical organization which able to defend Christian community against threats from inside and outside. In May 27 1564, Calvin died at the age of 54 and had left the world his theology which was propounded very clearly in the book of *Institutio* and his regulations about church and government.²⁴

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²¹. He was one of the pioneers of the humanist movement in France and suggested that the French government should return directly to the Roman legal system which he found more impressive and economical as a tool to find the new legal system needed in France. In other words, he suggests a way of working that goes straight back to the original sources (ad fontes), rather than additional remarks or comments, as useful research tools.

²². The science of language, culture and history of a nation as contained in written materials.

²³. Johannes Calvin, *Institute for the Teaching of Christianity*, 213..

²⁴. Robert R. Boehlke, *History of the Development of Thought and Practice of Christian Religious Education*, 395-400.

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