

## PREFACE

In 1930 a visitor knocked at Professor Lecerf's door and introduced himself with these words: "Some friends of mine, hearing that I was passing through Paris, have advised me to come and see you. M. Lecerf is a unique personality, they say, he is in fact the last of the Calvinists and when he dies the type will be extinct. So whatever happens, do not fail to pay him a visit."

When God called his servant home in 1943, he had seen the divine blessing upon his labours. Far from being the sole defender of a lost cause, he had become the leader of a living movement, which was rapidly and irresistibly reversing all the positions of the once prevalent modernism. Practically all the young people coming out of the Theological Faculties of France and Geneva were declaring themselves Calvinists. The Reformed Church of France was returning to its traditional standpoint and those who might be described as "survivors" were certainly not those who shared the faith of Auguste Lecerf.

He was not, of course, the sole originator of the movement in question. The grace of God had been at work throughout the world. Every branch of Reformed Christendom was being affected by a theological revival which had its sources in Holland and France. In French-speaking countries first place must be given to Emile Doumergue with his monumental biography *Jean Calvin: Les hommes et les choses de son temps*. Later came Jean de Saussure's *A l'Ecole de Calvin*, the work of Jean Cadier and his group, and the influence of Pierre Maury, translator of Karl Barth and Professor Lecerf's successor in the chair of Dogmatics at Paris. But Lecerf was, by common consent, the most eminent representative of Calvinism in Calvin's native land.

To him came students for their graduation theses, delegates to the synods for their reports, persons of every rank for spiritual direction, all certain of gaining valuable information from his vast store of learning, of finding sure advice in his spiritual wisdom and of receiving an attentive welcome from his friendly heart. His thought was always clear, vigorous and distinct, his culture in many spheres immense: theology, philosophy and

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linguistics were subjects which he could justly call his own. An expert in Hebrew, Greek and Latin, he spoke English like a native and read several other languages with ease. His appearance might have suggested austerity, with his fine features, pale complexion and thin lips. Whether in the pulpit or in private conversation, no one spoke of God with greater solemnity, expounded his thought with greater authority or defended his faith with greater clarity of expression.

Although there was something of the grand seigneur about his bearing, no one could have been more simple, more friendly or more finely comprehensive in his personal dealings. A terrible judge in regard to ideas, he was full of charity in regard to persons; but, holding in horror all display of sentiment and all mere emotionalism, his good nature was often veiled by a malicious sense of humour.

His faith was clearly the work of efficacious grace: there was nothing in his family or ancestry to predispose him to his vocation. Born in London on 18 September, 1872, his earliest days were spent in an atmosphere entirely detached from Christianity, that of the "Communards" who had fled from France after the suppression of their movement in the previous year. Occasionally his mother, a British subject of Italian descent, would pronounce the name of God but that was all. One day when about twelve years of age, walking alone he looked in through the open door of a Protestant church. It was the hour of Sabbath school and the teacher was exhorting the children to consecrate their lives to the service of God. "If there is only one here", he said, "who responds to this appeal, I shall thank God that it was not made in vain." The boy was impressed by the idea that he might be that one, but the thought soon passed from his mind.

Some time afterwards the purchase of a New Testament and the reading in particular of the Epistle to the Romans, together with some first-hand knowledge of the modern Roman Church gained during a period at a school at Angers conducted by a religious order, convinced him that the Gospel was true and that its doctrines were those held by the Reformed Churches.

One day while browsing over the bookstalls on the banks of the Seine in Paris, he noticed a second-hand copy of Calvin's *Institution de la religion Chrétienne*. He began to turn over the pages and at once felt within himself the solemn impact of truth. The volume was purchased and eagerly perused, and he read and re-read it from that moment until the day of his death.

His vocation was decided. Despite family opposition, at the

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age of 17 he was baptized and made his first communion at the Church of the *Saint-Esprit* in Paris, entered the theological seminary and later studied in the Faculty of Theology there. Despite the extreme Liberalism of his professors, of whom Auguste Sabatier was the most eminent, he completed his course at the age of 23 after presenting a definitely Calvinistic thesis on *Determinism and Responsibility in the Calvinistic system*.

There followed 19 years of arduous parochial labours in rural Normandy, succeeded by five years of war with the army, after which Lecerf settled in Paris in order to study, teach and write; but the work he was obliged to undertake left little time or energy for personal achievement. However, he began to give a free course on Reformed dogmatics in the Theological Faculty of Paris, which was soon attended by most of the students. Yet it was only in 1932 that he was appointed lecturer, and not until 1938 that he became professor. He was 60 and 66 respectively when he succeeded in publishing the two parts of the present work. His health had been affected by the material and moral conditions of enemy occupation. He always proclaimed his certainty of final victory, which he did not live to see as he died on 1 September 1943.

Dr. Lecerf's busy life of preaching and teaching did not permit of much leisure for purely literary effort. Some of his best theological articles and papers lie buried in the reports of proceedings of the various International Calvinistic Congresses in which he took part and in the *Bulletin* of the Société Calviniste de France which he founded in 1926. It was under the auspices of this society that he published in 1934 the edition of the *Catéchisme de Genève* in modern French to which reference is made throughout these pages.

That his work remains unfinished is due to his doctrinal isolation and to the difficult conditions in which he had to labour during most of his career. It was his intention eventually to write a complete treatise on *Reformed Dogmatics*, to which the present volume forms but the *Introduction*. From the unpublished manuscripts of his lectures one can envisage what would have been the value of such a treatise. But, anxious to revise his work before publication and confident that God would raise up someone to complete it, he withheld his notes from the press.

Nevertheless, the present *Introduction* sufficiently indicates the extent of his erudition, the suppleness and strength of his mind, the depth and clarity of his thought and, above all, the power of his faith. One of its outstanding features is the care

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which the author has exercised in clearing the ground for Reformed dogmatics, first removing one by one all the concepts standing in the way. Reading these pages, one is impressed with the importance attached to refuting the philosophical systems, religious theories and confessional doctrines whose *a priori* assumptions exclude the principles of Reformed Christianity. In order to achieve this result, the author has taken pains to assess correctly ideas and systems in conflict with his own and to do them full justice. Thus he begins with a critique of the theories of knowledge which are opposed to the idea that religious knowledge can be a true knowledge of a real object; he then continues with a critique of psychological, historical (sociological) and rational explanations of religion, showing that it is faith alone which forms the basis of true religion. He concludes with a critique of the religious doctrines which contradict or limit submission to the truth revealed in the sacred Scriptures, whether by reason of their method of apprehending religious truth (symbolofideism, Bergsonism), in virtue of their doctrine of God (deism, pantheism), or by their criterion of Christian religious truth (immanentism, liberalism, Roman Catholicism, Melanchthonian Lutheranism and Wesleyan Arminianism).

This does not mean that the contents of the book are exclusively or even principally polemical. On the contrary, it contains a wealth of positive ideas and penetrating views, original, finely differentiated and suggestive. It lays the foundations for a firm and solid school of thought. The reader will find in it, everywhere expressed with abundant verve and spirit, in terse, vivid and concise language, the basis, methods and characteristics of the Christian Faith (apart, of course, from its *content* which must be sought in Holy Scripture for Christian life and in dogmatics for systematic thought). Through the medium of this intellectual discipline, we behold afresh the flame which forged the iron faith of our fathers, valiant for truth, witnesses of Jesus Christ. Beholding, we give glory to God that—at a time when all that constituted the power and *raison d'être* of the Churches of His Word seemed to be passing away—He was pleased to raise up and sustain by His sovereign grace, among the cohort of restorers of our Faith: Auguste Lecerf.

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