

JOHN CALVIN AND THE BRETHERN OF THE COMMON LIFE

KENNETH A. STRAND
Andrews University

A number of the most prominent leaders in the religious history of western Europe during the 15th and 16th centuries had direct contact with the Catholic reform group known as the Brethren of the Common Life. Such was true, for example, of Desiderius Erasmus and Martin Luther, both of whom during their youth had been students under the Brethren. However, in the case of John Calvin, evidence of similar direct contact with the Brethren is lacking; in fact, this group did not establish any houses, dormitories for students, or schools in France and Switzerland, the two countries where Calvin spent most of his life. Nevertheless, there is evidence that the influence of the Brotherhood did reach him in several significant ways.

It is the purpose of the present brief essay to provide an overview of two main avenues through which John Calvin quite early in his career came in touch with the ideals and practices fostered by the Brethren of the Common Life: (1) his education at the College of Montaigu in Paris, and (2) his contact with the "Fabrisian Reformers." A third line of influence from that Brotherhood reached him later through his association with such men as Johann Sturm and Martin Bucer in Strassburg, both of whom had had contact with representatives of the Brotherhood. However, this third line of influence deserves separate treatment and hence will not be included here.¹

1. *The Brethren of the Common Life*

Before we proceed to a discussion of the influence of the

¹ It is the writer's hope to present a brief article on this topic in a future issue of *AUSS*.

Brotherhood of the Common Life on Calvin, it will be well for us to take a quick look at that Brotherhood itself and at the somewhat larger movement of which it was a part. The Brethren of the Common Life originated in Deventer and Zwolle in the Netherlands with the work of Gerard Groote (1340-1384), who also laid the foundations for two other very closely related groups—the Sisters of the Common Life and the Augustinian Canons Regular of the Congregation of Windesheim.² The Brethren and Sisters were “semi-monastic” in nature, holding property in common and living by certain specific rules or regulations (but without vows which were binding for life). The Augustinian Canons Regular of the Congregation of Windesheim was, of course, a monastic order; but its purpose for existence and its ideals were related to those of the Brethren and Sisters. In fact, the three groups are usually viewed as different parts of the same movement—a movement which has become known as the “*Devotio Moderna*.” Adherents of this movement fostered a practical sort of devotion which sought a close relationship with Christ and the imitation of him in everyday life. Regularity in prayer and in reading of Scripture was specified, as were activities that would reach out to benefit the surrounding communities and be helpful to society at large.³

² The basic work in English on these related groups is Albert Hyma, *The Christian Renaissance* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1924, and Hamden, Conn., 1965). Hyma has also given helpful treatment in his *The Brethren of the Common Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1950) and in his *Renaissance to Reformation* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1951), pp. 124-238. William M. Landeen has produced a comprehensive treatment of the Brotherhood in Germany in a series of four articles “The Beginnings of the *Devotio Moderna* in Germany” (Parts I and II) and “The *Devotio Moderna* in Germany” (Parts III and IV) in *Research Studies of the State College of Washington* 19 (1951): 162-202, 221-253; 21 (1953): 275-309; 22 (1954): 57-75.

³ Various documents, including constitutions of houses, indicate the regulations observed. The text of the original constitution of the Brethren of the Common Life in Deventer is conveniently provided by Albert Hyma, *Christian Renaissance*, pp. 441-474, and has been reproduced in Kenneth A. Strand, ed., *The Dawn of Modern Civilization: Studies in Renaissance, Reformation and Other Topics Presented to Honor Albert Hyma* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1962, 1964), pp. 362-395.

The Brethren in particular were active in training youth in Christian nurture, and to this end they established dormitories and schools in various places throughout the Low Countries and in the German lands.⁴ Moreover, in various localities where they did not have schools of their own they served as teachers in public and parochial schools. Acquaintance with edifying literature was encouraged, and the youth who stayed with the Brethren often devoted considerable time to the copying of good books. When printing with movable type was introduced in western Europe, the Brethren took an interest in this field, and several Brethren houses established printing presses of their own.⁵

The Brethren placed an emphasis on use of the vernacular in order that the common people might be able to understand. Indeed, Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen (d. 1398), a pioneer writer among them, wrote a treatise entitled *De Libris Teutonicalibus* advocating this practice.⁶ Moreover, Groote, Zerbolt, and other early leaders in the movement produced significant devotional treatises, and youth who stayed with the Brethren were taught to keep *rapiaria*. These *rapiaria* were notebooks or "excerpt-books" in which statements helpful for Christian life would be jotted down. It appears that the well-known *Imitation of Christ*

⁴ Basic materials regarding their educational work are to be found in Hyma, *Brethren*, pp. 115-126, and Julia S. Henkel, "School Organizational Patterns of the Brethren of the Common Life," in *Dawn of Modern Civilization*, pp. 323-338 (also reprinted more recently in Strand, ed., *Essays on the Northern Renaissance* [Ann Arbor, Mich., 1968], pp. 35-50); Julia S. Henkel, "An Historical Study of the Educational Contributions of the Brethren of the Common Life" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1962); and R. R. Post, *The Modern Devotion: Confrontation with Reformation and Humanism* (Leiden, 1968).

⁵ For a survey of their printing activity, see Kenneth A. Strand, "The Brethren of the Common Life and Fifteenth-Century Printing: A Brief Survey," in *Dawn of Modern Civilization*, pp. 341-355 (reprinted in *Essays on the Northern Renaissance*, pp. 51-64).

⁶ This treatise was discovered by Albert Hyma in the Stadtbibliothek in Nuremberg and published by him in his "The 'De Libris Teutonicalibus' by Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen," in *Nederlandsch Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis*, 17 (1924): 42-70.

of Thomas à Kempis actually had its origin in such *rapiaria* from the Deventer Brethren house where Thomas resided prior to his entry into the monastery of St. Agnietenberg.⁷

We have already mentioned that the Brethren established no houses, dormitories, nor schools in France and Switzerland. Neither were there any foundations by the Sisters and the Windesheimers in those countries. However, in the late 15th to early 16th century, the last-named group did send bands of missionaries to carry on a program of reform in monasteries in northern France and particularly in the region near Paris.⁸

2. Calvin's Education at the College of Montaigu

The major portion of John Calvin's first stay at the University of Paris, which he entered in 1523 at the age of 14, was spent at the College of Montaigu. There, from 1524 to 1528 he studied under Noel Béda. Béda, in turn had been a star pupil of John Standonck, who several decades earlier had reorganized the Montaigu so significantly as virtually to make it a new establishment.⁹

Standonck's work at the Montaigu began about 1483. He had come from the north, where he had studied under the Brethren of the Common Life in Gouda, and he carried some of the Brethren's reform ideals to Paris. He gained prominence in various ways, serving at one time as rector of the University of Paris for a short period of time. At the request of King Charles VIII, he even had the privilege of presenting a reform program

⁷ The literature on the authorship of the *Imitation* is, of course, extensive. For documentary evidence to support the statement made here, see especially Hyma, *Brethren*, pp. 145-194, and also Hyma's English edition of Book I of the *Imitation* based on the Eutin manuscript (A. Hyma, ed., *The Imitation of Christ by Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen* [Grand Rapids, Mich., 1950]).

⁸ For details, see Hyma, *Renaissance to Reformation*, pp. 350-354.

⁹ A basic study on the Montaigu is that of Marcel Godet, *La congrégation de Montaigu (1490-1580)* (Paris, 1912); and helpful detail regarding Standonck is given by Augustin Renaudet, *Humanisme et Renaissance* (Geneva, 1958), pp. 114-161 (the chapter is entitled "Jean Standonck: un réformateur catholique avant la réforme"). A. Hyma has provided a useful summary regarding Standonck and his work at the Montaigu in *Renaissance to Reformation*, pp. 338-350.

before a convocation assembled at Tours. This reform program, with its attacks on various clerical abuses and on the sale of indulgences, bears a striking resemblance not only to the type of reform recommended by pioneer leaders in the *Devotio Moderna* but also to some of the reform appeals made later by Martin Luther in his *Address to the German Nobility* and by Calvin in his *Necessity of Reforming the Church*.¹⁰ The reputation of the Montaigu under Standonck's leadership drew to the school numerous students, who in turn went forth as missionary reformers.

Standonck eventually drew up for the Montaigu a constitution, or "plan of reorganization," which in many respects paralleled the emphases of the Brethren houses in such matters as regulations concerning prayer, reading of Scriptures, keeping of *rapiaria*, encouragement toward confessing faults one to another and reproving one another when wrong-doing was involved. The constitution went through various steps in its development, but its final form was officially adopted in 1503. It set forth the basic organizational scheme which was used in the institution for many years—even to the time of Calvin's stay and beyond.

Standonck's plan was more rigorous than what was normal among the Brethren, and his somewhat ascetic tendencies were probably encouraged by contact with such an individual as the Parisian ascetic Francis de Paule, rather than through his association with the Gouda Brethren.¹¹ Erasmus, who resided briefly at the Montaigu in 1495, referred later to his experience there as including deprivation of food and sleep, and consumption of spoiled wine and rotten eggs.¹² Undoubtedly his description

¹⁰ These basic works are readily available in various source collections. Excerpts which cover major points in both of them have recently been made available in Kenneth A. Strand, ed. and comp., *Reform Appeals of Luther and Calvin* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1974).

¹¹ However, even the Gouda Brethren may have been more inclined toward asceticism than was usual among the Brethren of the Common Life in general. In any event, the Gouda house was very poor. Cf. Hyma, *Renaissance to Reformation*, pp. 349-350.

¹² See Hyma, *Renaissance to Reformation*, p. 214, and cf. Erasmus' state-

contained at least some exaggeration, but it does point in the direction of rigor and asceticism beyond what the Brethren normally would encourage. Interestingly enough, Calvin's much longer stay at the Montaigu some three decades later did not lead him to paint a similar picture.

Although Béda evidently maintained the general atmosphere which his mentor had created, his own instruction followed the lines of scholastic theology much more than was customary in the case of the Brethren and their pupil Standonck. In view of this, one would have to assume that as far as Béda was concerned personally, he shared with Calvin the ideals of the Brethren and of Standonck in only a somewhat diminished way. However, the influence of the Montaigu was not limited to Béda personally. The daily schedule and other aspects of the program which reflected the innovations of Standonck could not but have touched the life of young Calvin. Moreover, Standonck had provided the Montaigu with a library containing writings of pioneer leaders of the *Devotio Moderna*, such as those of Gerard Zerbolt. With this literature Calvin must certainly have become acquainted.

In support of this last suggestion there is an independent line of evidence which provides an interesting parallel: About the time that Calvin left Paris in 1528, Ignatius Loyola arrived there and studied at the Montaigu. Clear indications of a strong impact of the Montaigu's reform program *and its library* on Loyola have been pointed out, the constitution for his own Society of Jesus bearing in certain respects such striking resemblances to Standonck's constitution as to make it obvious that the similarities are more than coincidental.¹³ In view of the knowledge that

ment given in Richard L. DeMolen, ed., *Erasmus* (London, 1973), p. 17: ". . . I carried little away from these except a body plagued by the worst humours, plus a most generous supply of lice." Reference is made in the same context to "sleepless nights" and to burdensome labors.

¹³ See the comparisons given by Godet, *Montaigu*, pp. 103-106. It appears that in preparing his *Spiritual Exercises* Loyola was also rather strongly influenced by Zerbolt's *Spiritual Ascensions*, as well as by other works, though

Loyola was thus touched by the ideals of Standonck and the Brethren of the Common Life as reproduced at the Montaigu, is it reasonable to assume less with regard to Calvin, who spent *several years* at the same institution *just prior* to Loyola's arrival?

One further point bears at least passing mention here; namely, Calvin's reputation for correcting his student colleagues.¹⁴ This tendency of open strictness in regard to others as well as to himself may indeed have been related to his personal bent of character. But is it possible that there may also have been more to the matter than this? Could it be that his activity in reproving his schoolmates represents a sincere effort on his part to live in harmony with ideals fostered by Standonck's regulations that inmates of the Montaigu should be encouraged to reprove one another in cases of wrongdoing?

3. *The Impact of the Fabrisian Reform*

The "Fabrisian Reform" movement was a humanistic-type reform which was especially prominent in and near Paris during the early 16th century. Its key leader was the famed French humanist Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples (who used the latinized name *Faber Stapulensis*, from which the term "Fabrisian" arises). Closely associated with Lefèvre were William Briçonnet, for a time bishop of Meaux, and various other humanistic reformers, such as Bude and Vatable, who were among Calvin's teachers when he returned to Paris for further humanistic studies after having completed his law training at Orléans and Bourges. Also in the group of Lefèvre's disciples were Gerard Roussel and Guillaume Farel, with whom Calvin had close association at different times in his career. Most of the Fabrisian reformers did not leave

some of this influence may have reached him at Manresa before his stay at the Montaigu.

¹⁴ See Th. Beza's *Vita* of John Calvin in *Corpus Reformatorum*, 21: 121. As given in English translation in the Edinburgh edition (reprint ed., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1958), vol. 1, p. lx: ". . . even at that youthful age, he was remarkably religious, and was also a strict censor of every thing vicious in his companions."

the Roman Catholic communion, though Farel did, of course, become a full-fledged Protestant reformer.

In 1534 Calvin visited Lefèvre himself in Nérac in southern France, a place of refuge to which the elderly humanist had repaired a few years earlier at the invitation of Marguerite d'Angoulême. Although this visit occurred late in the older man's career (he died in 1536), it coincided with a period in Calvin's own life when the young man was beginning to manifest a decided interest in religious reform. But undoubtedly even more important for Calvin than this visit with Lefèvre was his association with Lefèvre's disciples, including Bude, Vatable, and Roussel. This was an association which certainly made an impact on the budding reformer. Then too, one must not discount the influence of Lefèvre's own writings on Calvin.

That Calvin derived various of his reform ideals and concepts from the "Fabrisian Reform" movement can scarcely be doubted, and has generally been recognized by the experts. But just what were—or seem to have been—some of these reform ideals and concepts?

E. Doumergue has considered Lefèvre's important *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul* of 1512 as in a sense the "first Protestant book," pointing out that in this publication Lefèvre anticipated Luther on such matters as *sola scriptura* and justification by faith. Doumergue also indicates that the views expressed by Lefèvre regarding baptism and the eucharist, use of the vernacular for public prayers, and the need for clerical reform went beyond what was common in traditional circles.¹⁵ It is pertinent to note here, further, that Lefèvre's *Commentary on the Psalms*, published three years earlier than the one on Paul's epistles, formed a major source for even Luther in that Reformer's preparation for his important lectures on the Psalms, delivered at the University of Wittenberg from 1513 to 1515. Moreover, later publications by

¹⁵ See Emile Doumergue, *Jean Calvin: les hommes et les choses de son temps*, 1 (Lausanne, 1899): 78-84.

Lefèvre, such as his *Commentary on the Four Gospels* and his Bible translation (NT, 1523; OT, 1528), give still further evidence of the so-called "Fabrisian Protestantism."

As has been already suggested, the kinship of certain essentials of this "Fabrisian Protestantism" with aspects of Calvin's reform ideals and activities, as well as the line of influence from the Fabrisian circle to Calvin, are quite generally recognized. What has frequently been overlooked, however, is the indebtedness of Lefèvre to earlier reformers in the North. As Albert Hyma has aptly pointed out, Doumergue in referring to Lefèvre's *Commentary* of 1512 fails to tell us that "two years before this work appeared Lefèvre visited the Brethren of the Common Life at Cologne," that in 1510 he induced Badius Ascensius (a humanistic Paris printer who had spent some time with the Brethren in Ghent) to print the *Rosary of Spiritual Exercises* of John Mombaer (a Windesheim reformer who for a time was active in reforming monasteries in northern France), and that in 1512 he edited a work of Ruysbroeck (a Dutch mystic who had influenced Groote).¹⁶ Hyma goes on to point out that some of Lefèvre's "Protestant" views were already expressed in the aforementioned works by Mombaer and Ruysbroeck.¹⁷

The emphasis which was placed on use of the vernacular by leaders of the *Devotio Moderna*, by Lefèvre, and by the major Protestant reformers is an especially striking phenomenon. In this connection it should be noted that Lefèvre's own attitude on this matter did not originate with his *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul* in 1512, but rather seems to have taken shape at about the time of his visit to the Brethren of the Common Life in Cologne two years earlier.¹⁸

Excellent documentation for several basic similarities between

¹⁶ See Hyma, *Renaissance to Reformation*, p. 372.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Augustin Renaudet, *Préréforme et humanisme à Paris pendant les premières guerres d'Italie (1494-1517)*, 2d ed. (Paris, 1953), p. 622.

the religious thought of Lefèvre and that which was characteristic of the *Devotio Moderna* has been provided by C. Louise Salley in her extensive comparisons between Lefèvre's *Commentary on the Four Gospels*, on the one hand, and works such as the *Imitation of Christ* and the writings of Wessel Gansfort, on the other.¹⁹ That Lefèvre was familiar with the *Imitation* and with writings of Gansfort is clear from his direct references to them, as well as from comparison of his works with those earlier productions.

Among important parallels noted by Salley are statements regarding *sola scriptura*, justification by faith, imitation of Christ in the life, contempt for the present world (in the sense that "the Christian should desire to be unknown in this world in order that he may receive glory in the next," to use Lefèvre's words), mystical union between God and the Christian individual, distaste for empty formalism, critical attitude toward excessive veneration of saints and of the Virgin Mary, and appraisal of education as worthwhile only as it is placed within the context of the love of Christ.²⁰

One cannot but be impressed by the parallels between the religious thought of Lefèvre and the Northern reformers, on the one hand, and of Lefèvre and the later Protestant Reformers, on the other. There are particularly striking similarities regarding such fundamental doctrinal matters as the authority of Scripture and the meaning of justification by faith, as well in relationship to practices such as use of the vernacular. In some respects, Calvin's thought is even more similar than Luther's to that of Lefèvre and the Dutch reformers. One may notice, for example, the stress which Calvin places on good works—in the context,

¹⁹ C. Louise Salley, "Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples: Heir of the Dutch Reformers of the Fifteenth Century," in *Dawn of Modern Civilization*, pp. 75-124. Gansfort spent at least a dozen years with the Brethren in Zwolle between 1432 and 1449, and he resided again in Zwolle during the last fourteen years of his life (d. 1489).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 104-115.

of course, of justification by faith. Although Luther by no means rejected good works, Calvin's belief that Christ does not justify anyone whom he does not also sanctify is more akin to the emphasis revealed in expressions in the writings of Lefèvre and the *Devotio Moderna*.²¹ Also, Calvin's treatment of the sacraments, especially the Lord's Supper, is more like the spiritual emphasis of Lefèvre and the Northern reformers than is Luther's belief in Christ's corporeal presence in the Eucharist.²²

Even though a strong case can be made for links between Lefèvre and his followers with the *Devotio Moderna*, on one hand, and with Calvin, on the other, care must be taken not to overemphasize these links to the extent that Lefèvre is considered to be truly a "Protestant before his time" or that Calvin is considered to be a direct spiritual descendent of either the Fabrisian Reformers or the *Devotio Moderna*.

With respect to Lefèvre, it is important to remember that he never officially broke with the Roman Catholic Church and that in many respects his religious views were not identical with those of the Protestant reformers. One is much inclined to agree with Salley that although Lefèvre "has sometimes been portrayed as the fountainhead of a French Protestant movement which arose independently of Lutheranism, a consideration of Lefèvre's own writings makes evident that he was really not a 'Protestant before the Reformation.'"²³ She notes that his "tenet concerning justi-

²¹ Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.16.1; and see Salley, "Lefèvre," pp. 107-109.

²² Cf., e.g., Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.1-11, with Gansfort's statement, "'Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, ye have not life in yourselves.' Manifestly it must be admitted that the life, of which he speaks, is the life of the inner man, i.e. life in the Holy Spirit. Necessarily therefore it must also be admitted that when he says, 'Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood,' we are to understand that it is an inward eating and drinking, i.e. of the inner man. . . . For such eating of that flesh and drinking of that blood is so acceptable to God that simultaneously with it the Spirit and life are bestowed upon those who eat. He who thus eats already has the benefit of outward sacramental eating. . . . To eat therefore is to remember, to esteem, to love" (from E. W. Miller and D. W. Scudder, *Wessel Gansfort: Life and Writings* [New York, 1917], 2:28-30).

²³ Salley, "Lefèvre," p. 115.

fication by faith and grace was not exactly the same as Luther's justification by faith alone" and that he also "accepted the traditional credos respecting purgatory, veneration of saints, invocation of the Virgin Mary, the Real Presence, the Immaculate Conception, and prayers for the dead."²⁴

3. *Conclusion*

Both Lefèvre and Calvin were certainly influenced by factors from more than one direction, and the latter's religious development was especially complex. Even in his early career, Calvin was influenced by Olivétan; moreover, he imbibed of Luther's theology, he read from Zwingli's writings, and he drew from many other sources as well. But although influence from the reformers to the North should not be overemphasized, neither should it be overlooked. There is at least a very strong likelihood that in a direct way through the Montaigu and indirectly through Lefèvre and the Fabrisian reformers, Calvin was exposed to ideals and teachings of the Brethren of the Common Life—ideals and teachings which made a lasting impact on him.

²⁴ *Ibid.*