

John Calvin's presence in the Hungarian Reformed Church, 17th - 18th century

Due to the catechism of Geneva and the Hungarian creeds created in the spirit of it, Calvin's theology was well known in Hungary at the second half of the 16th century. The influence of his teachings continued to increase during the 17th century. The "Calvinist" word was used by the reformed people as a self-definition. The Protestant denominations of Hungary could be characterized by two reformers according to contemporaries: "Who have left the papacy, elected Luther and Calvin." Calvin was characterized by a Hungarian preacher as the greatest theologian, who was similar to Augustine; none of the Papist theologians could be a match for him. His works were read not only by pastors but nobles and citizens as well. The volumes of his works were found in the libraries of the reformed colleges.

Heidelberg as the German Geneva

The University of Heidelberg played a major role in mediating Calvin's theology. The capital of Pfalz was the citadel of the reformed theology at the beginning of the 17th century. The Hungarian students having been banned from Wittenberg University (1592) went to Heidelberg to continue their studies. The spirit of Calvin was mainly mediated by David Pareus one of the professors of the Heidelberg University. The fact is very important also, that the professors of Gyulafehérvár Academy in Transylvania (Johann Heinrich Bisterfeld and Johann Heinrich Alstedt) came from the same intellectual backgrounds. Heidelberg demonstrated her practical effect in the Reformed Church in Hungary too. The first Hungarian reformed councils of church-communities based on the model of the Heidelberg church. The famous religious book made by Heidelberg theologians – The Heidelberg Catechism – was printed in Hungary several times and had gained increasing prestige. The pastors were obliged to use that by the Szatmárnémeti council's decision (1646).

Albert Szenci Molnár

Albert Szenci Molnár did a lot to familiarize the Hungarians with Calvin's theology. Inter alia he studied in Heidelberg and also visited Geneva, where he met with Beza. Szenci knew the Geneva Psalms and could sing them in Latin and in German. He had translated them into Hungarian and edited the Hungarian Psalter book in Germany in the year of 1607. This psalter was printed thirty times during the 17th century. Szenci Molnár's prose translations deepened Calvin's spirit even more among Hungarians. First he translated the sermons of Abraham Scultetus (1617). Scultetus was one of the most famous Calvinist pastors in Heidelberg. A

few years later (1624) Szenci translated Calvin's most important work, the Institutes. The Institutes were already known by the Hungarian reformed pastors in the 16th century. One of them wrote this nice poem about it: "Praeter apostolicas post Christi tempora chartas / Huic peperere librum saecula nulla parem." (After the sacred books of the apostles this one is the best). The first Hungarian Institutes had more than 500 pages and was one of the first attempts of the scientific prose in Hungarian.

Predestination

The idea of predestination of the Hungarian reformed piety came from Calvin's theology. Our ancestors suffered many afflictions during the 16th - 17th centuries and they were comforted by their pastors with the idea of predestination. They drew strength from the fact that they were elected by God for eternal life. Consciousness of responsibility, unselfish love of country was also worked by predestination.

Puritanism

During the 17th century an increasing number of Hungarian students went to continue their studies in the Netherlands and some of them visited England. There they spent shorter or longer time and got to know the Puritans' movement. The Puritans followed Calvin's teachings. Their purpose was to gain ground for the exercise of piety besides the pure doctrine of theology. The Puritan theologian William Ames defines theology as "the doctrine of living unto God" (*theologia est doctrina Deo Vivendi*). The appearance of the Puritan ideals in Hungary provoked great debates. Hungarian society was not yet ready to accept the ideas that emerged in Western European civil circles. During the decades, however, the Hungarian Reformed Church has been inspired by Puritanism. A new theological literature was created by it. The puritan sermon and devotional reading material wanted to take care of personal piety. It was important to draw conclusions for the social point of view. The Puritans fought so that people could learn to read. Therefore they emphasized that schools should be organized in their mother tongue and that women can attend a school. Puritanism open the way for modern civilization and helped the development of the bourgeois mentality.

Presbyterian Church system of government

In the Hungarian Reformed Church there gradually developed a new system of governance. During the 16th century congregations were administered by the local councils and the pastors. Puritans wanted to separate the church board and the local council and wanted presbyters (elders) to be elected by the congregation. The synod of the Hungarian Reformed Church made the organization of presbyteries mandatory in 1791.