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# The Importance of Calvin for Contemporary Evangelical Theology

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JACQUES MARITAIN, the brilliant and influential scholastic thinker, has described his vocation in life with the words *Vae mihi si non thomistizavero*. And such a cry—for more reasons than one—might well suggest that the time is similarly ripe for a reevaluation of that summa of Reformation theology, John Calvin's *Christianæ Religionis Institutio*. Outside the Anglican Church there are many signs that such a reinterpretation of Calvin is already in process of being made. This fine volume from the pen of the President of Bristol Baptist College is a case in point.<sup>1</sup> The study of Calvinism at the present time is of the utmost importance to all who profess and call themselves Evangelical. Not only does Calvinism contain the logical answer to ancient and modern Thomism but it is historically the ark which has enabled Evangelical theology to survive in the engulfing seas of this modern world.

It is a great pity that to many Anglicans Calvinism is such a *damnosa hereditas* that its name has become but a synonym for the Genevan discipline of Church government or simply another way of writing the ninth Lambeth Article of Religion—*Non est positum in arbitrio aut potestate uniusque hominis servari*. (It is not in the will or power of every man to be saved.) So far have we moved from the days ironically described by Hooker in the Preface to his Ecclesiastical Polity when “the perfectest divines were judged they which were skilfullest in Calvin's writings.” Yet

<sup>1</sup> *Calvinism*, by A. Dakin, B.D., D.Theol. (Duckworth's Theology Series. 5/-).

Calvin is not the Westminster Confession of Faith and, as we shall see, his logical revival of the Augustinian doctrine of predestination is primarily an implication of his theology and not a major premise.<sup>1</sup> Apart from the fact noted in the preface to his book by Dr. Dakin that "No one indeed can cast even a cursory glance over the material (of Calvinism) without realizing that the problems raised are living issues in the world of to-day," intellectual integrity demands that we regard Calvin not only as one whose opinions count as an exegete but as one of the great creative theological minds of the centuries.

The still prevalent caricature of everything Calvin—and about this words cannot be too strong when almost everything we know of him is construed *per contra*—would not matter too greatly in the realm of biographical fact if it did not at the same time have the ultimate effect of eclipsing the truly amazing debt this modern world owes to the great Reformer. It is almost impossible to exaggerate the pervasive influence of Calvinism to this present hour. It has interpenetrated everywhere. Even such an unlikely person as Lord Byron remains a hopeless enigma unless we remember that the titanism of his poetry is but the vehement, if ineffectual, attempt to give a humanistic answer to that sense of sin he inherited from his early Calvinistic upbringing. (Is this the secret of Byron's popularity on the Continent?) We often speak these days of the morale and moral fibre of the English-speaking peoples but do we remember that their ultimate sanction is to be traced in no small part to that ontological interpretation of Christian morality the great dogmatic system did so much to popularize? The growth of the whole democratic way of life owes a debt to Calvin that has yet to be ungrudgingly recognized and adequately acknowledged. "A strong sense of religion seems to enable the Dutch to endure uncertainty," wrote *The Times* correspondent at Amsterdam some twelve months ago when describing the berserk onrush of the Nazi hordes. It would be difficult to find a

<sup>1</sup>The whole question of Calvin's *decretum horribile* (awful decree) and the historic reactions against it open up an interesting subject which would require a separate discussion. For a stimulating and authoritative introduction to it, read a companion volume in the Duckworth's Theology Series, *Arminianism* by Dr. A. W. Harrison. (1937).

more striking testimony to the survival value of Calvinism than this verdict from the thrice-heated furnace of modern war.

Dr. Dakin rightly devotes the second half of his book to "Calvinism as an Ecclesiastical System" and to "Some Aspects of Calvinism," where something is done to trace this labyrinthine influence of Calvin's impact upon the modern world. For this reason alone this book will well repay perusal. Through Milton and, above all, through Bunyan, we are shown, "Calvinism succeeded in giving a fairly uniform theological background to the common mind" and that "even in Calvin's own lifetime, the movement began which was destined to make his life's work one of the shaping influences of the Anglo-Saxon world. His theology counted for much, his ethics for more, and perhaps the spirit and temper of his system for most of all."

Yet it is a revival of interest in Calvin's theology that is the clamant need of modern theology. It is an astonishing thing that there has been no English edition of Calvin's Institutes in recent years in spite of the fact that such a publication venture would be an undoubted success. The important First Edition of the Institutes (1536) has yet to be translated into English. Those who have not found it easy to get a copy of the Institutes must thank Dr. Dakin that in the first Part of this book he gives such an admirable and detailed account of the theology of this great classic. It should prove an admirable introduction to those who have yet "to be brought in contact with his earnest spirit and feel the mighty sweep of his thought" through a study of this monumental work itself. With Dr. Dakin we hope that it will lead others to savour the spirit and teaching of Calvin at first hand.

At the present hour of disillusionment and crisis we may perhaps be excused for thinking that a theology which has visibly altered the destiny of men and of nations has some special claims upon our intellectual regard. There have always been those who would minimize the influence of Calvinism in the Church of England. It is a commonplace to say that there would have been no Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion were it not for Calvin. And as Tulloch dryly remarks, "The Thirty-Nine Articles cannot be taken as a

characteristic specimen of Anglo-Catholic theology."<sup>1</sup> We cannot be content to say of Calvinism what Dr. Bicknell said in 1925: "Traces of its influence still haunt popular theology."<sup>2</sup> The present-day vogue of our Barths, Brunners, Kraemers, Visser T. Hoofts and many others represent a neo-Calvinistic irruption which is among the most striking phenomena of current theology. Is there not here eloquent testimony to the inherent strength and vitality of the teaching of Calvin? And when we think of the travail pangs of this new age and of the unknown future to which we are hurrying we may be tempted to wonder whether the present revival of Calvinism has not come for such a time as this. A modern historian has said that Calvin's chief title to a place in the history of religion and civilization was his answer to "his master problem by what means could we best secure the expression of a changed faith in a changed life? Or, in other words, how could the Church be made not simply an institution for the worship of God, but an agency for the making of men fit to worship Him."<sup>3</sup> It is the master problem of the Church to-day.

If the greatest weakness of contemporary Evangelicalism in the Church of England is its neglect of theology, then the case for a revaluation of Calvinism is overwhelmingly urgent. No one would wish to argue or even seem to give the appearance of arguing for a mere return to Calvinism *pur sang*, but we do not hesitate to say that Calvin and his message have never been more relevant than to-day. A fresh study of the man of whom we can say "his mind was the mind of Erasmus, though his faith and conscience were those of Luther" might well be that propædeutic we need for a re-statement in terms of the problems of our day of an Evangelical theology not unduly timorous of its differentia and at the same time not merely reactionary in a Barthian sense. When we consider that the ultimate principle—and a study of Calvinism drives one continually back to the theologically ultimate—of Evangelicalism is a theological principle we can readily understand why the neglect of theological learning has meant too often a feebly held Evangelicalism and

<sup>1</sup> *Rational Theology and Christian Philosophy in England in the 17th Century*. Vol. i., p. 65. J. Tulloch.

<sup>2</sup> *A Theological Introduction to the XXXIX Articles*, p. 249. E. J. Bicknell. 1925.

<sup>3</sup> *Cambridge Modern History*. Vol. ii., p. 364. A. M. Fairbairn.

why here as elsewhere a tide of enervating sentimentalism has swept over the Church.

Theology is a word we come inevitably to associate with the great Reformer and it is theology, too, in the great tradition. No one has applied himself so wholly to the vindication of the *gloria Dei* as no one has so drawn his cares and studies this one way. For the Institutes are a manifesto of that theocentric view of the universe where everything in this finite world of change and decay is grounded in the eternal nature of God. Behind the complexity of the world there is the simplicity of a Sovereign Will. Whereas Lutheranism might acquiesce in the joy and peace of justifying faith, the probing and reverent mind of Calvin ascribed all to the *soli Deo gratia*. The undoubted offence which Calvin's "*decretum horribile*" gives to the modern humanistic mind might be mitigated were it realized that for Calvin it was only the logical application of the principle of predestination so universally accepted by the theologians of the Reformation, not to speak of St. Paul and Augustine, and as Haering<sup>1</sup> reminds us it is the "absoluteness" of Divine grace and not its "particularity" that the Reformers had in mind. The sublimity of Calvin's attempt to carry the problem of evil to the mystery of the Divine initiative may overstep the boundaries of a truly Biblical theology—and his Christology illustrates the same tendency—yet its supernaturalism is a refreshing protest against that phenomenology of the Christian consciousness which to-day so commonly passes muster for Christian theology.

Though Calvin leads us back to the Sovereignty of God and so to a teleological conception of the universe where God is *prima causa omnium*, he never loses sight of the great Christian doctrine of the Fatherhood of God as revealed in Christian experience and in the Word of God. But it is in his doctrine of salvation from sin that Calvin shows himself to be the Evangelical theologian. Calvin's theory of the Atonement has often degenerated in the hands of his followers till it has seemed to argue for a tritheism or at least a merely forensic interpretation of the Atonement. Calvin, however, was too good a Biblical theologian not to recognize that "a subjectivity lies behind the alleged objec-

<sup>1</sup> *The Christian Faith*. Vol. ii, p. 794. (E.T.) T. Haering. 1913.

tivity" (Stevens) and with Augustine he insists that this is to be found in the initiative of the Divine love. Though Calvin, of course, rightly insists upon the objectivity of the Atonement he was more concerned to see in it as well an expression of that Divine Sovereignty and so of that free grace of God from which alone cometh our salvation. His theory of the Atonement is much deeper than his followers always realized and he was too good an Augustinian to be satisfied with any interpretation of it not fully Biblical. In a recent article, Dr. Headlam has stated:<sup>1</sup> "The strength of Evangelical Christianity has always been its firm grasp of the reality of the Atonement. When it has insisted on its particular theory, it has begun to fail. Its religious experience has been true, its theology has been bad." Whatever we may think of this opinion, there can be no doubt that Calvinism has given Evangelicalism a firm grasp on the objective reality of the Atonement which it can only relax at the peril of its own frustration.

It is when we come to Calvin's teaching on the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti* and his *autopistic* interpretation of the Scriptures as the Word of God that we reach his most vital contribution to that evangelical tradition which he has done so much to enable to survive. Along with the tragic need of the world for Redemption, it is here that Calvin can perhaps help us most. When we think of John Wesley and Aldergate Street, May 24th, 1738, and of the Evangelical Revival we have commentary enough on the spiritual dynamic behind the apparent aridity of Calvin's doctrine. Surely the task of present-day Evangelicalism is to recover and revalue in the current but not debased coinage of a vital and relevant modern theology Calvin's teaching on the prevalent working of the Spirit of God in the soul of man both for his salvation and to attest the truth of Revelation. If the present tendency to regard the Bible as a mere depository of truth from which we can select that which pleases us most—and how expressive of this tendency is the phrase "Bible Readings"—is still dominant, then Calvin has something to say in recalling us to that Biblical realism so eternally relevant to the passing needs of the generations of men. The new humility we are being taught in these

<sup>1</sup> *The Church Quarterly Review*, January-March 1941. *The Atonement in History. Reformation Theories*, p. 170.

days will do much to chasten the Church to accept anew the yoke of Revelation it has too readily put off.

There are many signs to-day of a re-emergence of a Biblical theology and that not merely by way of reaction. We dare not narrow the issues to Luther *versus* Erasmus. A new intolerance must not replace the moribund liberalism and its "empirical Christianity." Our whole approach to the problems of life must be altered at the centre. Modern Evangelicalism must recall the Church from that fatal preoccupation with the blue prints of man's vision of a new world order to the eternal hills of God from whom alone cometh our aid. It is for this reason that we hope Dr. Dakin's book will not be overlooked for more up to date but less relevant theological literature. It is unfortunately without a bibliography where a bibliography is badly needed, but as a short synopsis of Calvinism its merits are undoubted. Its chief merit—and Dr. Dakin would wish nothing better—is that it will send the reader to Calvin himself. For it is not too much to say that if Evangelicalism in the Church of England is to recover both its theological depth and the power of its Gospel—and need we add without any loosening of the ties of Church Order—a fresh study of Calvin would do more to set this afoot than almost anything else. The sad ruins of many of our Parish Churches to-day speak also of that Resurgam that must come to our theology to-morrow if we are to speak the Word of God to the age that is to be and if a new generation is to enter into that liberty wherewith Christ has made us free.

“ What though I am not wealthy in the dower  
Of spanning wisdom ; though I do not know  
The shiftings of the mighty winds that blow  
Hither and thither all the changing thoughts  
Of man ; though no great ministering reason sorts  
Out the dark mysteries of human souls  
To clear conceiving ; yet there ever rolls  
A vast idea before me, and I glean  
Therefrom my liberty.”