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The Evangelical Quarterly

OCTOBER 15TH, 1932

THE DISTINCTIVE DOCTRINES OF CALVINISM¹

IN this Conference Calvin's wish is at length being partially realised. His correspondence with one of the outstanding Calvinists of this country, Archbishop Cranmer, tells us how desirous he was that adherents of the Reformed Faith from various countries should meet one another. What both of these men had in mind was an assembly of Churches in an Ecumenical Synod. A meeting of that kind, I am sorry to say, is no longer possible. Confessing our guilt to God with sad hearts, we must recognise the fact that many Churches which still bear the name Reformed have, in reality, abandoned the foundations of the Reformed Faith. Hence a Synod of Churches still reformed in name would be doomed to failure. The necessary unity of faith would be lacking. The only kind of meeting that may hope for success is one in which the members maintain the distinctive doctrines of Calvinism, undiluted and unabridged. Fortunately our compassionate High Priest in heaven has left to us thousands and even millions of such men and women. Indeed, though in many countries Calvinism seemed to be nearing its end, it has pleased Him to arouse it to new life, especially in the last half-century. Its enemies thought it was already suffering from arteriosclerosis; and now they see, with regret, that its youth is renewed like the eagle. And I count this Conference one of the most hopeful signs of this international awakening of Calvinism.

It is a matter of surprise that an international Conference of this kind was not held *long ago*. For Calvinism bears a pre-eminently international character. In this respect precisely it is distinguished from Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism. This is one of its distinctive characteristics. Regardless of how far the Roman Church extends its borders throughout the world, it is not international but cosmopolitan. The Church of one city, Rome, served as the model for all the others. The

¹ Delivered at an International Conference of Calvinists held in London in May, 1932, under the auspices of the Sovereign Grace Union.

language of that particular Church is the official language for all parts of the world. This bishop of that particular Church is the head of Christendom in its entirety. National differences are blotted out as much as possible.

Lutheranism from its very beginning fixed a close bond between religion and state. *Cuius regio eius religio* represented to its leaders the *summum* of state policy. It was German through and through. And though it also gained a foothold in a few other countries, there, too, it did not deny its nationalism.

Calvinism, on the contrary, does not believe in a national church or the supremacy of a single church or prince of the church over churches in other countries. It is only for practical reasons that the churches form groups which coincide more or less with the limits of country. Principle demands, however, that by way of these groups all truly Reformed Churches throughout the world shall seek a federal bond with one another. Besides, Calvinism, unlike Catholicism and Lutheranism, does not have only *one* set of confessions. It leaves every nation free to give expression to its faith in its own language and its own form. Thus there arose—to mention but a few—the Catechisms of Geneva and Heidelberg, and the French, Dutch and Westminster Confessions. But all these Confessions are reciprocally recognised. And it is not only the Calvinistic conception of the Church that is international; so also are its principles for believing-science, believing-statecraft, sociology, morality and art, albeit these are formulated by each nation according to its own taste and developed by each according to its own needs. Calvinism, while retaining national differences, has created *one spirit everywhere*. Perhaps no one has brought out more clearly this international character of Calvinism, in which it is distinguished from other religious currents within Christendom, than the German scholar, Troeltsch.

Nevertheless, it is not in this internationalism that the only distinctive feature of Calvinism is to be sought. That would be distinctiveness in breadth, not in depth. Calvinism would then be condemned as superficial. It would not have been able to stand its ground for three centuries. Still less would it be assured of a future. No, Calvinism has in many respects neglected emphasis on breadth. The most telling proof of this is the fact that the first International Calvinistic Conference is being held *now*. It is in *depth* that Calvinism has especially laboured.

And it is for this reason that it is possible to speak of the distinctive doctrines of Calvinism. This is the subject which your Committee has requested me to treat, and it is with considerable pleasure that I undertake the task.

A note of warning must be sounded at this point. It would be an error to suppose that the distinctiveness of Calvinism, in depth, is to be sought only in the Reformed dogmas. Calvinism is more than a world- and life-*view*, more than a *view* concerning God. It is not merely *doctrine*. If it were, the charge of intellectualism, sometimes directed against it, would be fully deserved. But it is also *practice*. It is religious, moral, political, social, scientific, æsthetic *life*. Doctrine and life do not constitute an antithesis in it. Nor is it primarily doctrine, and only secondarily life. It is doctrine and life at one and the same time. Doctrine and life stand on the same plane. The two exercise mutual influence upon each other. They fit into each other. Neither one may lay claim to priority. Were it only or chiefly doctrine, it would be a dead faith, which the Apostle James denounces with righteous indignation.

For this reason the attempts to compress the essence of Calvinism into a short formula of doctrine may under no conditions be supported. The search for the essence of spiritual phenomena, the essence of religion, the essence of Christianity, the essence of Catholicism, Lutheranism, Calvinism, was first instituted by Rationalism; and through the influence of that Rationalism the search is ever renewed. Men entertain the delusion that spiritual magnitudes can be fully circumscribed in a single thought and completely expressed in a few words. In this the pride of human reason manifests itself. Even in the lower realm of natural phenomena this is impossible. Can anyone state, in a brief definition, what the essence of life is? or of nature, of the oak, of the lion, of the Englishman, Frenchman, Dutchman, German, or American? Hardly! Innumerable distinctions would have to be made, and even then there would always remain a mysterious something that defies analysis. How does the following description of an Englishman strike you—he is an islander, characterised by gentlemanliness, energy and common sense? You would have to smile at such simplification. More difficult still would it be to determine the essence of Calvinism in such a fashion. For that, Calvinism is too rich, too complicated, too many-sided.

WHAT IS CALVINISM ?

Perhaps the most satisfactory answer that can be given to the question, What is Calvinism ? is this : It is at once the broadest and the deepest Christianity ; or, if you will, it is the purest Christianity ; or, as I should prefer to qualify it, it is the most consistent and likewise the most harmonious Christianity. All other forms of Christianity suffer from half-heartedness. They dare not accept everything that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ demands for doctrine and life. They compromise with what is non-Christian, make concessions to the devices of sinful reason and the desires of the depraved heart. They harbour remainders of ancient paganism. Calvinism, on the contrary, does not stop half-way ; it does not cast back longing glances, as Lot's wife did. It seeks to follow Christ to the very end, even if one's own personality must needs be nailed to the cross. It fears God, and no one besides Him. Further, all other forms of Christianity suffer also from one-sidedness. But Calvinism, no matter how it insists on consistency, detests nothing quite as much as it does what the Germans call *Konsequenzmachelei*. It does not draw the consequences from one truth and neglect the other ; it desires to live, not only according to some, but all the commandments of God. Do not think, however, that I want to idealise Calvinism as it manifests itself in reality. I admit that it has never fully realised itself, and that it never will. More than any other religious persuasion, Calvinism confesses with the Apostle Paul: not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect, but I press on, if so be that I may lay hold on it.

Calvinism, I repeat, is the most consistent and most harmonious Christianity. This pertains to its doctrine also. Attempts have been made to fix upon *one* central dogma in Calvinism. Some contend that this central dogma is the doctrine of predestination, others the glory of God, and others still the sovereignty of God. The same honour has been claimed for the doctrine of providence, the eternal and unchangeable decree, Holy Scripture as the infallible principle of our knowledge of God, free grace, the theocentric creation-, redemption- and eschatological-idea. And this list is still incomplete. It is futile to hope that unanimity will ever be reached in this attempt. You ask, why not ? It is because truth is contained in *all* of these views, and yet not one of them can be called the correct *one*.

Do any Christians deny predestination, the honour of God as the end of all existence, the sovereignty; providence, grace of God—to limit myself to these? Of course not! But non-Calvinists fail to do full justice to these truths—the full justice that they have in the Scriptures. Not on one, but on various of these points they fetter Christian truth. It is but a halting Christianity that they have. And the strength of Calvinism does not lie in its acceptance of the consequences of *one* of these dogmas, but of *all* of them. The distinctiveness of Calvinism does not lie in this, that it propagates one certain head of doctrine more than other churches do. It is distinctive in the whole of its doctrine: in its view of the covenant, in its conception of justification and sanctification, in its doctrine of the sacraments, in its church-concept; literally in everything. Doctrine is not like a typewriter. If a typewriter has a few defective letters it can nevertheless be used, provided that the missing letters be filled in on the manuscript by hand. That is to say, Catholicism and Lutheranism are not Christianity with one doctrine partly lacking, and Calvinism is not Christianity with this part-doctrine supplied. But doctrine is like a body, of which Paul says: if one member suffers all the members suffer with it. To be inconsistent in one truth is to destroy the harmony among all truths upon which faith reflects. One inconsistency necessarily gives birth to another. The objection might be raised: but are you not severing the tie that binds the Calvinist and the non-Calvinist? I reply: nothing could be farther removed from my purpose. Certainly I would not deny that between consistent and inconsistent; or more and less consistent, Christians, there is always some agreement. It is this agreement that permits me to call many non-Calvinists my brothers; if they but love the only Saviour wholeheartedly. It is this agreement that keeps me from falling into exclusivism, that makes me broad-hearted. But that does not alter the fact that along with this agreement between the non-Calvinist and the Calvinist there is a difference, and that a difference that extends over the whole length, breadth and depth of Christian doctrine.

IS THERE A CENTRAL DOCTRINE?

If, then, it is not correct to speak of the distinctive doctrine of Calvinism, if, then, all the dogmas of the Reformed Faith are distinctive, is there perhaps one doctrine that is the starting-point

for, the foundation of, all the others? You will feel that, if Calvinism has such an all-dominating dogma, this would likewise have to be *the* dogma of Christianity. For I repeat: Calvinism is nothing other than the purest, the most consistent and most harmonious Christianity. Hence I must place before you this question: did Christ, did the apostles and the prophets preach one truth—*e.g.* predestination, providence, the sovereignty of God—to which they subordinated all the others? I hardly think that you will make bold to point out that particular truth. Moreover, you would immediately encounter opposition. Unanimity among Calvinists could not be expected. God's revelation places before us a number of truths. Without doubt the only wise God has placed them in a logical inter-relationship. His whole revelation, after all, is grounded in the Logos. But we, with our finite or rather our darkened intellects, cannot trace out perfectly the divine logic in them. The case is not such that, once we know one cardinal truth, we can deduce others from it. If that were so the others would not need to be revealed to us. Through reasoning we ourselves should be able to ascertain them. The truths of revelation can only be accepted through faith. And faith does not ask, Do I perceive the logical coherence? but rather, Hath God spoken it? For our consciousness, the truths of faith often constitute an antithesis. One does not follow from the other; the two seem rather to exclude each other. Instead of being guided by rationalism, and rejecting one or the other of them, the Calvinist holds to both and reverently recognises that God has hidden from him the logical agreement obtaining between them. Christian faith leaves plenty of room for mystery. In this, again, Calvinism is distinctive: it does not, like so many other persuasions, attempt to get rid of mystery, but accepts it unweakened. Dialectic, whatever its form, it therefore thrusts aside. Mystery must remain mystery. And for that mystery it fervently thanks God, whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts, and whose ways are higher than our ways.

Once more: all the doctrines of Calvinism are distinctive. Now you will not expect me to prove this with regard to all of them. To do that I should have to develop a whole Dogmatic and Ethic for you. You will allow me to limit myself to a few of them. I hope that my proof concerning these may be so convincing that you will feel free to assume the distinctiveness of the others.

THE MOST PROFOUND DOGMA: THE SELF-SUFFICIENCY OF GOD

The profoundest Christian dogma is not that of predestination, the sovereignty or providence of God, but the self-sufficiency of God, or, as the old theologians called it, the *aseitas Dei*. Why is it the most profound? Well, predestination, sovereignty, providence presuppose a relation between God and the world. But the doctrine of the self-sufficiency of God carries you far beyond that relation. It tells you that God triune is wise, good, just, holy, love, veracious, mighty, beatific, glorious in Himself; that He needs no relation to anything outside Himself to realise Himself in these qualities; that the existence of the world does not add to His glory in the slightest degree. He is not served by men's hands; as though He needed anything. He makes His name glorious throughout the earth; yet the glory, which He had from eternity, is not thereby augmented. He gathers to Himself a people, that they may proclaim His praise; but His praise is not enhanced by it. What, then, is the significance of the world? Why does it exist? We don't know. Thus the existence of the world becomes a vexing riddle. Pantheism has attempted to solve this riddle by identifying the world with God. Certain Christian groups try to escape the difficulty by keeping silent as much as possible about the *aseitas Dei*. But this is the distinctiveness of Calvinism: on the one hand it confesses the self-sufficiency of God with holy earnestness, and on the other it takes just as seriously the reality of the world as differing qualitatively from God. It accepts each of these truths to its uttermost consequences. Yet it guards itself against stating that this is a contradiction. It unites the two harmoniously. For it finds rest, for thinking and living, in mystery.

PREDESTINATION AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF MAN

This same phenomenon presents itself with regard to two other truths. Just as it is impossible that the existence of the world be deduced logically from the self-sufficiency of God, so also is it impossible that God's decree concerning the world be deduced from it. Nevertheless, God has determined all His works from eternity. He has predestinated all that takes place in this world. This is what revelation teaches. And this is what Calvinism confesses. The Calvinistic conception of predestination is regarded as too severe by other Christians. It is absurd to believe—so it is contended against us—that God should have

regulated in His counsel even the most insignificant incidents in our lives. For that He is far too exalted. The Calvinist replies : It is rather a proof of God's greatness that He has left nothing to chance or the approval of man, but has worked out His world-plan to its last detail. Why, for the Calvinist sin itself is not excluded from the predestination of God. " Dreadful ! " men cry from various sides ; " you make God the author of sin." The Calvinist protests against this conclusion. True, without God's will the creature cannot so much as move, apart from His decree Adam could not have sinned. But this doesn't excuse man. Calvinism emphasises just as strongly the responsibility of man as it does the predestination of God. Human responsibility is preached with more vigour by Calvinism than by Catholicism, Lutheranism or any other persuasion. It is immovable in its teaching that not only all our deeds, but also all our thoughts and desires shall some day be judged. The question has been asked : How do you reconcile the two ? The Calvinist responds reverently and humbly : It is not necessary that I reconcile them. God reconciles them. That is sufficient for me. For Him it is perspicuous. For me it is a mystery. And in that mystery lies the harmony for me.

THE SOVEREIGNTY AND THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD

Calvinism provokes other Christians to contradiction also because of its doctrine of the sovereignty of God. Again, it is not because it confesses this doctrine—in that it does not stand alone—but because it carries this doctrine through to its ultimate consequence. Sovereignty is a relation—more specifically a justice-relation. That God is sovereign means that over against the creature, more particularly man, He has only rights, no duties ; and that man, on the other hand, has only duties toward Him, but can lay claim to not a single right against Him. God's right is absolute. The Almighty enacts His laws for all of life and for every part of it. He demands unconditional obedience. No one can call Him to account. " Shall the thing formed say to Him that formed it, Why didst Thou make me thus ? " (Romans ix. 20). The relation between God and man is not even represented adequately by that of master and slave or king and subject. Man must serve Him with body and soul, in religious worship and in daily labour, every second of every day. The doctrine of sovereignty must impress us with the incalculable

qualitative distance between the Highly Exalted One and us. Were there no correlative doctrine, Calvinism could but make us tremble before the God of heaven. It would fill us with indescribable anxiety. But Calvin himself already laid at least as much stress upon the fatherhood of God as upon His sovereignty. Not in vain for the Calvinist did Paul say to the heathen: "For we are also His offspring" (Acts xvii. 28). According to Calvin this fatherhood of God stretches out just as far as His sovereignty. Like a father God cares for the ravens, when they call, for the sparrows and for the lilies. By virtue of creation man is a son of God. In an altogether unique sense God is the Father of those whom Christ purchased with His blood. "They have not received the spirit of bondage again unto fear, but the Spirit of adoption unto children, through whom they cry, Abba, Father" (Romans viii. 15). There is a distance that cannot be bridged; but there is also an inner affinity. God is all justice; but He is also all love. Thus the doctrine of the sovereignty of God and of His fatherhood hold each other in equilibrium. Here, too, harmony shines forth in full brilliancy.

ELECTION AND THE COVENANT

From the doctrines of predestination and the sovereignty of God, there does not yet flow forth logically the doctrine of election. It were also possible that God should elect no one. Then too, predestination, *i.e.* the free determination of the lot of mankind, and sovereignty would remain intact. But it has pleased God to form, before the foundation of the world, a new humanity in Christ Jesus. How Calvinism has been despised because of its doctrine of election! How men have tried to persuade it to soften this doctrine somewhat, to leave at least something in man on the basis of which he is destined to eternal life. But Calvinism remained immovable. It would not make any concessions, because God Himself, in His Word, made no concessions. It taught that election is strictly personal. The bonds of the old humanity are loosened. Esau and Jacob were sons of the same parents; nevertheless God said: "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated." God does not limit Himself to the laws of inheritance. But, however much Calvinism insists upon this, however earnestly it warns us not to be assured of our election because of our birth from believing parents, it nevertheless acknowledges that the God of election is also the God of the

covenant. As a rule He draws the line of election through the line of the generations. His promises are extended not merely to believers, but also to their children. He wants to be not only their God, but also the God of their seed. The doctrine of the covenant of grace weighs just as heavily with the Reformed Christian as that of election. He does not allow the balances to swing over to either one of the two sides. Both truths are equally precious to him. For him they bear, not a human-logical harmony, but a divine harmony.

SIN AND GRACE

Where do you find a profounder conception of sin than in Calvinism? Truly, it does not spare man. Every one of his deeds is a misdeed; every word, thought, desire is sinful. The smallest sin makes one worthy of death; how many times over, then, are we not worthy of death! Man's nature is totally depraved. Man has not simply become a stick and a stone, as Luther held. The situation is much more terrible than that! For a stick and a stone are not active. But human nature always works in opposition to God's will. However, if by its doctrine of sin Calvinism as it were crushes us to earth, by its doctrine of grace it lifts us up again. Grace is sovereign and free. Grace only gives; it asks nothing of man. It abrogates sin fully. It is irresistible and inadmissible. It guarantees the perseverance of the saints.

By its doctrine of inability to good Calvinism makes man utterly passive. But by its doctrine of regeneration and conversion it attributes the highest activity to the believer. It cries out to him: Do not forget for an instant that, according to the word of Paul, you are a co-labourer with God.

And thus I could continue. But time forbids. Undoubtedly this brief survey of doctrine is sufficient to justify the conclusion: Calvinism is consistent in everything, but it never falls into one-sidedness. It preserves balance; it sustains the harmony.

Allow me still to touch lightly upon a few doctrines in which the distinctiveness of Calvinism clearly manifests itself.

HOLY SCRIPTURE

I mention, first, the doctrine of Holy Scripture. While Luther assumes a free attitude toward Scripture, and while

Catholicism subordinates it to the authority of the Church (as a result of which Bible-criticism was advanced considerably), the Calvinist regards Scripture, in its entirety, as the Word of God and bows before it unconditionally. It is not man who passes judgment upon Scripture; it is Scripture that passes judgment upon man. Scripture in all its parts is inspired by the Holy Spirit. It reveals infallibly not only the way of salvation, but it also contains, as the testimony of Christ in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden, the fundamental principles of all scientific knowledge. It is only from the Scripture that we know how the world came into existence; what the essence of the soul, of nature, of history is; why government was instituted; how races and nations originated; what the norms of the true, the good and the beautiful are; what will be the end of all things; and much besides. It is the *principium cognoscendi* not only of theology, but also of the principles of all believing science.

THE TESTIMONY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Second, I want to call your attention to its doctrine of the testimony of the Holy Spirit, first worked out by Calvin. The centuries before him had sought, in one way or another, the ground of certainty concerning truth, and also concerning Scripture-revelation, in man. But Calvin realised that this does injustice to God's honour. The final ground of certainty, he proclaimed with prophetic voice, can lie only in God. As God's Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, so His Spirit also testifies in our hearts that that which God Himself has revealed by means of the Scripture, is the truth.

COMMON GRACE

And now I shall mention a third one out of the variety of doctrines. It cannot be denied that in creation, which is accursed, there is still a wealth of beauty that delights the eye. Nor can it be denied that in humanity outside of Christ we still find justice, benevolence and other virtues. Hence the question arose: How is this to be explained? The non-Calvinists replied: There is still a good kernel in nature and man. The worm of evil has attacked only the husk. No, no, protested Calvin, the whole world lies under the judgment of God. The loveliness, the nobility that you see, does not originate from the world, from

man; it is a token of God's common grace. The doctrine of common grace fills a large place in the writings of Calvin. This common grace does not lead to salvation, but it prevents this earth from becoming a hell. God still continues to be long-suffering and forbearing. God still makes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.

CALVINISM THE PUREST CHRISTIANITY

As you see, then, in its doctrines too, Calvinism is the most consistent and the most harmonious—the purest—Christianity. It does not owe this to Calvin. Calvin was but an instrument. It owes this only to the gracious dispensation of God. And when we propagate Calvinism and sing its praises, we do this, not to impose our ideas upon others, but because we do not want to keep this gift of God for ourselves. We have received it freely; we wish to give it freely. We are moved with compassion over those who have contaminated the water of Christianity with the imaginings of the flesh, and then drink of it. We invite them: here there is purer water; quench your thirst here. In the spirit and strength of an Elijah we call out to them: How long will ye halt between two opinions? Be *consistent* in your Christianity! And our call must penetrate into all places where Christians dwell; indeed, even into the habitations of the heathen. Follow in the footsteps of Calvin, who wrote to Cranmer: "I long for one holy communion of the members of Christ, which is found, indeed, upon all lips, but not in all hearts. As for me, if I can be of service, I should gladly cross ten seas in order to bring about this unity." Unite, therefore, Calvinists of all lands! Let your voices swell and become as the voice of many waters. Impress this upon yourself, your children, your fellow believers: they must persevere, unitedly, internationally, in the doctrines of Calvinism—that is, the doctrines of the apostles—and in prayer. In the name of Him who ascended to heaven, and shall so come in like manner to judge the quick and the dead, I beg of you: do not hide the treasure of Calvinism in a napkin for fear of the multitude. Put it out at interest! Confess it! Live it! Behold, the Judge is at the door.

V. HEPP.

Amsterdam.