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## CHRIST AND THE CHURCH<sup>1</sup>

THE primordial principle of Calvinistic theology, the root idea whence it springs, is that of the absolute sovereignty of God. This sovereignty manifests itself in His sovereign action upon the universe, and this action is produced by means of His Word.

The Word of God is thus one of the essential principles of Calvinist dogmatics. Indeed, it might even be called *the* essential principle, since we cannot know God and His sovereignty apart from His Word<sup>2</sup>; for in His essence, in so far as He is not revealed, God escapes us. If then ontologically, His sovereignty is primary, for us men it is His Word which occupies the first place.

The poverty of all human language ministering divine realities renders it important that we should understand exactly what is meant by this term "Word". It would be a gross error to take it in the external and material signification of "the spoken word" that we give to it in common parlance. The Greek *λόγος* has the far more intimate and spiritual sense of "reason", "faculty of reasoning" or "exercise of the reason"; it signifies thought acting, thought in its creative activity.

According to Bucer, one of Calvin's masters, "if the human word is a sound, and can be considered strictly as the commencement of an act, the Word of God is both a power and an act, for it is joined inextricably to the act which it realizes: God speaks . . . , and the event occurs."<sup>3</sup>

The Word of God is a power which emanates from Him and shall not return to Him until it has realized its full efficacy (Isaiah lv. 11). This Word is transmitted to us by means of the Bible, not as though it were imprisoned therein, but as "we find it there in sufficient quantity for our salvation". "We are taught thereby", writes Bucer,<sup>4</sup> "all that it is necessary for us to know."<sup>5</sup> The Bible, the Word of God adapted to the use of man, the human expression of the Divine Word, contains the maximum of all that we are able to understand concerning God. Hence, if for the sovereign Deity His Word remains

<sup>1</sup> Written for this Quarterly and translated from the French original by Rev. S. Leigh Hunt, Brighton.

<sup>2</sup> J. de Saussure, *A l'Ecole de Calvin*, pp. 36 sqq., 46 sqq.

<sup>3</sup> J. Courvoisier, *La Notion d'Eglise chez Bucer*, p. 58.

<sup>4</sup> *Summary*, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> J. Courvoisier, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

free in regard to Scripture, for us men Scripture is the rule ; it possesses the force of divine law ; it is for us the Word of God.

In these conditions, on all the points concerning which it speaks, we have simply to bow before its verdicts, not claiming liberty to seek and choose otherwise than within the limits of Holy Scripture. It will not be from the political and social ideology dear to our century or to the period of our grandparents, nor from personal prejudices and idiosyncrasies, that we shall borrow our doctrine. We shall gather it rather in the Bible, and from the Bible, not considered as the historic document of a human epoch, be it the most original from the Christian point of view, but accepted as the fixed and definitive expression—at any rate, with regard to us men—of the ever free and sovereign Word of God.

Determined above all things to respect the absolute sovereignty of God, let us now enquire from His Word what the Church of God is, and what it ought to be.<sup>1</sup>

## I

Certain historians have questioned whether Jesus intended to found the Church at all, or even—which is by no means the same thing—a Church. As there are formal texts on the subject (e.g. Matt. xvi. 18, xviii. 17), these writers have not hesitated to deny their authenticity. It is cases of this sort which have shown the present writer to what an extent Biblical criticism has become mixed with philosophical prejudices, fruits of an epoch, and how very debatable is much of this criticism in the light of scientific arguments that are indisputable because founded on facts and proof.

All that we know of Jesus—His customary (Luke iv. 16) and active (ibid. iv. 17, 21) participation in the services of the synagogue ; the care that He took from the commencement of His ministry (Mark i. 17-20) to constitute an organized group of disciples (John xii. 6 ; xiii. 29) ; the two verses of St. Matthew which have been disputed because they put into the mouth of Jesus the mere word “ Church ” ; His words and parables ; the manner in which, so soon after His crucifixion, the disciples continued to assemble together—all this contains

<sup>1</sup> Vide J. de Saussure, *A l'Ecole de Calvin*, pp. 39, 199.

not the slightest suggestion that the idea of a Church was an after-thought.<sup>1</sup> All that we know of Jesus favours the view that He intended from the first to found a Church. There has prevailed, however, and there still exists, a philosophy that would make the individual the centre of all things, the end of all things, the source of all things, and the community nothing but a product of his free-will, an association deliberately formed by independent persons, the result of a "contract" established between themselves. According to this philosophy, Jesus, the perfect Man, must have been the type of the individualist, must have preached a purely personal religion. The Church cannot have been anything more than an after-thought according to this hypothesis, a secondary and already somewhat deformed state of Christianity, and consequently her Founder could not have pronounced the word, nor conceived the idea.

Consciously or unconsciously, everyone has a philosophy of some sort; we ask only that the product of philosophical prejudices shall not be imposed upon us in the name of science.

In reality, as M. Boegner has pointed out,<sup>2</sup> it can be demonstrated on the ground of history alone, that it was our Lord's intention to found a Church, or more precisely, to substitute the Christian Church for the ancient Jewish Church in the bosom of which He was born and grew up, and in which, as we have just recalled, He played such an active part.

In this matter history cannot give us more than probabilities, and consequently does not engender more than mere opinions. The true solution of such a problem, the only one capable of creating certitude, is not to be found in the historic but in the dogmatic order.

Besides, what we require to know is not so much, if we may be permitted the expression, whether Jesus foresaw the Church, as whether Christ willed it. In other words, that which interests us, is not so much whether, as a human being, as an historic Person, Jesus envisaged the contingent existence of the Church, but to discover whether, as a divine Being, as an eternal Person, He willed the supernatural reality of the Church.

Strictly speaking, such distinctions lead to dangerous, and in the long run, untenable dualisms. Were we to concede, however, the fullest possible scope to St. Paul's idea of a *κένωσις* of

<sup>1</sup> Cf. M. Boegner, *Qu'est-ce que l'Eglise ?* pp. 13, 14.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 14 sqq.

Christ from His incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth (Phil. ii. 7 : *ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσε*) extending even to His prescience ; were we to admit on the historic plane, the most revolutionary theses concerning the ignorance of Jesus in regard to the future appearance of a Church—such concessions and admissions would not prevent us from maintaining on the dogmatic plane, the prevision of the Church by the pre-existent Christ, as a necessary organ by the divine will, of His redemptive work.

Now, once more, this final certitude is the only one that matters to us absolutely. Dogmatically, the conviction that Christ willed the Church is founded, in one sense, on faith in the divine inspiration of Scripture, and in another, on faith in the divinity of Christ. For if on the one hand, the Word of God contained in the New Testament gives us a doctrine of the Church, and if, on the other hand, Christ is the Word of God “made flesh” (John i. 14),<sup>1</sup> it is inconceivable that the said Word of God should be self-contradictory. “God is not a man that He should repent” (Numbers xxiii. 19 ; 1 Samuel xv. 29), or change His mind.

Admitting then that, if the New Testament revelation transmits to us a doctrine of the Church, and that this Church must have been willed by Christ, let us now examine what Scripture teaches us on the subject.

The constitutive elements of the doctrine of the Church are scattered throughout the New Testament, but it is perhaps in St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians that the most characteristic expressions on the subject are to be found. From the first chapter Christ is presented to us as “the head” of the Church, and the Church as “the body of Christ”. Literally, Christ is the “head over all things” (verse 22), “far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come” (verse 21). He is then “the head”, the chief of a celestial and terrestrial hierarchy, of which the whole, forming the Church, constitutes His “body”. The two figures of “chief” and “head” complete each other, one evoking the idea of subordination, the other suggesting complementary elements; the one body composed of different members, specialized, interdependent, each necessary to the other.

<sup>1</sup> Vide J. de Saussure, *A l’Ecole de Calvin*, pp. 110 sqq.

The term *σῶμα* employed by the Apostle, signifies "body", as we have seen; it can also be translated by "organ" and in Greek this last word *ὄργανον* is used to signify "instrument". Now, is not this precisely the office of the body in regard to the spirit, to be its instrument, its servant and the medium of its activities? To say that the Church is the body of Christ is tantamount to saying that she is the instrument of His work in the world, the transmitter indispensable to the visible and sensible expression of His will.

It goes without saying that it is not here a question of necessity imposed upon Christ who is sovereign and can act in any other way that may seem good to Him, but rather the effect of a free decision on His part, due solely to His good pleasure. It has pleased Him to incarnate His universal redemptive action in the body of the Church, as it has pleased God to incarnate His supreme revelation in the Person of Jesus Christ. He could have acted otherwise, but this is a fact—which we do not stay to discuss, but merely state—that the Deity chose this method of action and that the Incarnation remains the essential mode of His penetration into a world which is not a world of incarnate spirits.

## II

Christ has thus given in His Church a transmitter of His will, a dispenser of His grace. "Our Lord", writes Calvin, "has committed to her all the treasures of His grace, in order that she may be their custodian, and that she may dispense them by her ministry." Such affirmations may appear at first sight to detract from the all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ alone as the Redeemer of men. We must therefore define in what sense He is complete in Himself, and in what sense He is incomplete without His Church. Calvin explains that God has "so accomplished all perfection of instruction in His Son that it is necessary for us to know Him to be the final and eternal testimony that we shall have of the Deity . . . and to speak truly, that we have no more to expect or to desire from men, since the very Word of life has familiarly conversed with us in flesh." Christ "has so spoken that He has left nothing for others to say after Him. It is necessary, I say, once more, that Christ alone should speak, and that all the world should keep silence; that

Christ alone should be obeyed, and that all others should be ignored. . . . This alone has been left to the Apostles, and remains now to their successors, to observe diligently the commandment by which Christ defined their mission when He bade them go and teach all nations, not that which they had forged for themselves, but that which He had commanded them."

This does not prevent our Reformer from declaring elsewhere that "it is the highest honour of the Church, that until He is united to us the Son of God reckons Himself in some measure imperfect. What consolation it is for us to learn that, not until we are along with Him, does He possess all His parts, or desire to be regarded as complete" (Commentary on Eph. i. 23).

Christ complete in Himself alone, Christ incomplete without the Church; the conciliation is offered to us by the phrase: "That filleth all in all." "This is added", continues Calvin, "to guard against the supposition that any real defect would exist in Christ if He were separated from us. His desire to be filled, and in some respects, made perfect in us, arises from no lack or necessity; for all that is good in ourselves, or in any of the creatures, is the gift of His hand."

In conclusion, the Church is the fulness, the accomplishment of Christ, but it is He who accomplishes all things in her. His fulness is not displayed except in the Church. The treasures contained in Him can only be explicitly manifested in the Church, but it must ever be remembered that those treasures are from Him, and that it is He who transmits them to the Church in order that she may dispense them. Our salvation is complete in Christ, but the manifestation of this salvation with all its consequences, all its privileges, all the wonders that it entails for us, is only complete in the Church.

Why is this? It is because Christ has been pleased to incarnate Himself under the species of personality, while the Church represents a collectivity. Now there are divine relationships which cannot manifest themselves to us except under the species of collectivity, which cannot be revealed by an isolated personality. If we have been instructed concerning these relationships, it is because Christ was careful to inculcate them from the commencement of His ministry, by surrounding Himself with a society of disciples—in a word, a Church.

## III

Thus, from the very fact that Christ, during His earthly life, assumed the character of a human personality, He could not, apart from the Church, realize the full incarnation of God in this world. For God, who is the Trinity, is at the same time unity and multiplicity, a society of Persons in the bosom of the unique Being. In order that God might reveal Himself to us in His fulness, it was necessary then, since He incarnated Himself in Jesus Christ so far as personality is concerned, that He should incarnate Himself in the Church so far as society is concerned.

An example will suffice, perhaps, to make clear this complex relation between Christ and the Church. Notice what Calvin says à propos of the famous declaration of St. Paul: "I fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for His body's sake, which is the Church" (Col. i. 24). The Reformer first rejects the common mediaeval interpretation of the passage, which attributed to the saints and martyrs "such abundance of merit that they could spare a part for others", and add "their blood to that of Christ . . . for the remission of sins", thus reducing Him to the level of "an ordinary little saint, scarcely recognizable among a host of others". "When the Apostle says that he will 'fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ' . . . he is not referring to any defect in the virtue of His redemption, purgation or satisfaction." Christ is the sole Redeemer, and the reference here is to "the afflictions with which it is expedient that the members of His body shall be exercised, so long as they are in the world. . . . Having once suffered them Himself, He suffers them day by day in His members." It is only in the Church that He manifests the fulness of His sufferings; yet it is He Himself who "suffers all the time in His members, for He has given us so much honour that He even esteems and calls our afflictions, His own". It is then Christ who "filleth all in all" in the Church, and from Him alone proceeds all the initiative, all the merit and all the honour in respect of what is done and suffered by the Church.

To use an Evangelical illustration, it is the sap from the vine that nourishes the branches (John xv. 1-6). Vine and branches are organically united; it is in the branches that the vine



manifests its power of fructifying, but it is from the vine alone that these must bear fruit.

Finally, an Apostolic illustration will help us to realize the tenderness of these intimate relations between Christ and His members. St. John and St. Paul both call the Church "the spouse of Christ" (Eph. v. 23-32; Rev. xxi. 9, xxii. 17). We shall see at once the force of this similitude, its identity with that of the head and the body, and the facility with which St. Paul is able to pass from one to the other in the course of a single text, if we recall with Calvin that "the woman was formed of the bone and flesh of her husband". "The two shall be one flesh"; "that is to say", comments Calvin, "they shall be as one person," comprising complementary elements, as we observed just now in regard to the head and the body. "The husband", says St. Paul, "is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the Church, the body of which He is the Saviour."

"The great mystery" of Ephesians v. 32 "is that Christ breathes His life and power into the Church." "For my part", says Calvin, "I am overwhelmed by the profundity of this mystery, and am not ashamed to join the Apostle in confessing at once my ignorance and my admiration. How much more satisfactory is this than to follow one's carnal judgment in undervaluing what St. Paul declares to be a profound mystery! Reason itself teaches how we ought to act in such matters; for whatever is supernatural is clearly beyond our comprehension. Let us labour more to feel Christ living in us, than to discover the nature of the communication."

This Church called "the body of Christ" and "the spouse of Christ" is, as Calvin points out, "also called 'holy'"; for all who have been elected by divine providence to be incorporated in the Church, are sanctified by spiritual regeneration. "Since the Church is called holy, let us consider wherein consists the sanctity in which she excels, lest by refusing to acknowledge any Church save that which is perfect, we leave no Church at all." It is true indeed, as St. Paul says, "that Christ 'loved the Church, and gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish' (Eph. v. 25-7). Nevertheless, it is true also that the Lord is daily smoothing its wrinkles and wiping

away its spots. Hence it follows that its sanctity is not yet complete ; it makes daily progress, but is not yet perfect ; it advances daily, but has not yet attained the goal ” (*Institutes* IV, i. 17).

This antinomy of the sanctity and imperfection of the Church need not surprise us, for Christianity itself is an antinomy which consists in the incarnation of the eternal in the temporal, of the divine in the human, of perfection in corruption. The very antinomy serves to emphasize the greatness of the mystery of Christ’s union with His Church. The Church is holy in so far as she is divine, and imperfect in so far as she is human. Like her head, she is not partly divine and partly human, but entirely divine and entirely human. If we remember that it is Christ who “ filleth all in all ”, we shall understand better how the Church can be completely holy by the work of Christ, and at the same time completely corrupt by the fault of man. This results from power and resistance ; hence it may be said that the Church is at once entirely holy in the divine purpose and by the human will and actions which it produces (Phil. ii. 13), and entirely imperfect by human resistance. But however we may seek to limit the bounds of this mystery, or to illuminate it by similitude or comparison, it still remains a mystery, more admirable than comprehensible. “ *Mysterium hoc magnum est : hoc autem ego dico, respiciens in Christum et ecclesiam* ” (Eph. v. 32, *Beza*).

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