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# The Evangelical Quarterly

JULY 15th, 1937

## CALVINISM IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

*(An address delivered before the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church, sitting at Cape Town, S.A., on "Calvin Night", 19th Nov., 1936. A sad interest attaches to this article as Prof. Malan died soon after it was received, Ed.)*

ONE of the most remarkable and at the same time most encouraging signs of the present age is the notable revival of Calvinism in so many countries of the Christian world, yea one may well say everywhere where this particular type of religion has spread in the course of the centuries. We think in this connection of England, Scotland, Holland, France, Germany, Hungary in Europe; of the United States of North America and our own South Africa. There are signs of renewed interest on every hand, a fresh study of the great Calvinistic fundamentals, a firm conviction that we possess in Calvinism a sound outlook on life and the world that rests on the infallible Word of God, and that still has actual value for the solution of the problems of humanity in the twentieth century. At the same time we notice how Calvinists in the different countries seek contact with one another, try to strengthen one another's hands, put forth efforts to give direction in matters religious and spiritual as one great international body.

All this, we repeat, is a very encouraging sign of the times. It fills our hearts with new expectation for the future, even though the outlook of the present day is in more than one respect dark and gloomy. And if we look into the matter, we notice that there are *definite reasons* in the modern world and church situation which account for this notable revival of Calvinism. We note the following:—

1. *The disillusionment caused by the great world war of 1914 to '18 to Western civilisation.* Before that period there

was much of human glorification. Many thought that they themselves could achieve everything through their own science and technique, that they no longer had need of God. And then the awful catastrophe happened, and man's proud air-castles toppled over.

But even after the Great War conditions in the world remain critical, and dark stormclouds gather continually on the horizon. And it is very clear that human diplomacy is unable to solve the tremendous problems with which the world is faced to-day, that even the League of Nations has in many respects disappointed the high expectations which it had raised.

Through this disillusionment many are once again led to seek more than human certainty, to seek after the living, unchanging God; and they are more inclined to acknowledge His sovereignty over all things. And the fact that Calvinism specially stresses this Sovereignty of God is one reason why we see such a notable revival of this religious system at the present time.

2. *The disintegrating forces that have been undermining Protestant theology for a considerable time.* So, e.g., we find many prominent theologians trying to accommodate the truths of the Bible to the scientific and philosophical notions of the present day. And this has necessarily led to the weakening and even the abandonment of many important truths which are revealed to us in the Word of God.

The attacks were specially directed against the plenary inspiration of the written and the absolute authority of the incarnate Word. Thus the Church was deprived of a fixed standard for life and doctrine, and was made subject to the changing opinions of men. Now, however, a happy reaction has set in and the call is once more heard: "Back to Holy Scripture, the infallible Word of God, and back to Christ, the eternal Son of God." And because Calvinism specially stresses these great truths, it is no wonder that there is such a remarkable revival in our day.

3. *The deep conviction confirmed by actual experience that Calvinism has a living message for the present time.* It is admirably suited to offer an adequate counterweight to the many dissenting currents and tendencies that undermine the sound religious and spiritual life of the Christian Church. We return to this point later on.

Perhaps it is desirable at this stage to comment on the term Calvinism, since objection has been raised as though advocates of this particular life and world doctrine would honour Calvin above his deserts. This objection, however, falls to the ground. It simply fails to understand what is really meant by this term. For this same objection would then apply to *Lutheranism* and *Wesleyanism*, which have been thus named after Luther and Wesley. And yet both these terms have been fully established in the course of history, not with the purpose of honouring the said founders in an improper manner, but simply to designate the religious system which they have called into being. This is likewise true of Calvinism.

Furthermore, there is no other designation which so aptly describes this system of doctrine. We cannot designate it "Reformed", for this does not cover the same ground as Calvinism does. There are Calvinists in doctrine both in the Episcopal and Baptist Churches, but we cannot call them "Reformed", because they have a different system of church government. The following would be a correct definition of "Reformed": *that* church is "Reformed" that has both a Calvinistic creed and a Presbyterian form of church government. This means that Calvinism is a much wider term than "Reformed". Indeed, only one third of the hundred and twenty million Calvinists in the world belong to the "Reformed" Church. As long as a more suitable term cannot be suggested we may rest content with the generally accepted designation, Calvinism.

And we may do so the more readily, because we do not use the term Calvinism to render thereby improper homage to the person of Calvin. On the contrary, we acknowledge that although he was specially gifted by the grace of God to bring about the great work of "Church-Reformation", yet he was only an instrument in the hand of God to Whom all honour is due. Besides, Calvin, too, was the product of his age and must be seen and appreciated in the light of the sixteenth century when he lived and laboured. For this reason, also, we do not endeavour to follow the great Reformer of Geneva in every small detail. The changed conditions in the world and in the Church between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries must certainly be taken into account, and in the presentation of the truth this fact must be noted. At the same time we

believe that Calvin has deduced certain great fundamental principles from Holy Scripture, and established them for the Christian Church of all ages. We are convinced that it is our duty to adhere to these fundamental principles and to build steadily upon the foundation which he has laid.

To these fundamental principles belongs *inter alia* the acknowledgement of God's Sovereignty over all things and especially in the matter of man's salvation. Closely connected herewith is the doctrine of predestination which Calvin called the "cor ecclesiae", the heart of the Church. We also mention the wholehearted acceptance of Holy Scripture as the Word of God and the absolute standard for life and doctrine. Finally we note that Calvin laid equal stress on human freedom and responsibility as on the sovereignty of God. Without attempting logically to harmonize these two fundamental truths, our Reformer rightly emphasized both, and thereby effectively repudiated the false accusation that Calvinism was the same as Determinism or Fatalism. History has furnished abundant proof that Calvinism has succeeded in strengthening the moral life of nations, and that some of the strongest characters which the world and the Church have ever seen were the products of Calvinism.

We now proceed to show somewhat in detail in what respect Calvinism still has a message for our day, and how it is admirably suited to offer the true antidote against the many heretical currents and tendencies in the modern religious world. And this is sufficient reason why the Dutch Reformed Church should remain true to the fundamental Calvinistic principles and develop them in the right manner.

## I

### HUMANISM

Firstly, then, we take note of Humanism, i.e., that system of thought wherein the human factor is unduly emphasized at the cost of the divine. Applied to the religious sphere one can summarize Humanism as the attempt to save one's self. In this case man must and can do everything for himself. He must and can also save himself through his own efforts. Here it is not God Who in sovereign mercy condescends to fallen man, but man who tries to raise himself to God by his own

efforts. Some, indeed, in their self-righteousness and arrogant pride, make even a bolder statement: God only realizes Himself in and through man. Consequently it is not God Who creates man, but rather man who creates a God for himself.

This is true of all the modern religious cults, Theosophy, Anthroposophy, Christian Science, etc. They all rest on a pantheistic basis which denies the transcendence and personality of God and identify Him with the universe. In all these cults there is no room for the cross and salvation through a crucified Saviour. Of course not, for the cross preaches the deep humiliation of man, and tells him that he is a sinner hopelessly lost in himself. And it is just this message that modern man in his arrogant pride rejects. Now it is Calvinism with the emphasis that it lays on the sovereignty of God in creation as well as in the salvation of man that can offer the true antidote. Instead of unduly glorifying man as Humanism does, Calvinism teaches: God on the throne, and man in the dust at His feet. Instead of calling on man to save himself Calvinism teaches according to Holy Scripture: Man can only be saved through grace by faith in the atoning work of the one Mediator, Jesus Christ. It is only when man has tried in vain to save himself and has abandoned all hope of achieving this end that he will be ready to listen to the saving message of the cross, the message which the Apostle Paul taught and which Calvin emphasized: "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

## II

### MODERNISM

Secondly we mention Modernism, which does not acknowledge the plenary inspiration of Scripture and refuses to accept it as the Word of God and the absolute standard for both life and doctrine. On the contrary the Modernist undertakes to treat the Bible as ordinary literature, to criticize it and to make additions and omissions according to his own human predilection.

At the same time Modernism weakens some of the fundamental truths of the Christian faith. Even where it retains the familiar terms it attaches a changed and weakened meaning to them by which the innocent are often deceived. This is

true of such notable doctrines as the real deity of Christ, the atonement wrought by Him on the Cross, and His resurrection from the dead. In our opinion the charge of wilful deception by a play on words cannot in this case be successfully refuted.

The best means of counteracting the weakening of these great scriptural truths we find in Calvinism. Faithful to the teaching of Calvin, Calvinism loyally accepts Holy Scripture as the Word of God and acknowledges its absolute authority for both life and doctrine. Furthermore, we find in Calvinism a true exegesis based on sound hermeneutical principles, that is to say, human opinions are not read into Scripture, but the Word of God is expounded in a right scientific manner, yet in constant dependence on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In this respect, also, Calvinism has still an important contribution to make to the theological and religious thought of our day.

### III

#### SECTARISM

Next we come to Sectarism, which is so very active in the present century, and is rightly designated as one of the most serious dangers threatening the life of the organized Church. One of the characteristics of Sectarism in its manifold manifestations is the formation of select circles to which only the true "saints" or "initiated" may belong. This is one reason why Sectarists separate themselves from the organized Church. According to their idea the churches consist too much of a mixed company of converted and unconverted members.

Another characteristic of Sectarism is the hankering after what is extravagant and sensational in their religious exercises. They want their religious life continually roused by artificial methods which, however, do not agree with the sobriety of the New Testament.

These Sectarian movements of our time can best be countered by the teaching of true Calvinism. Calvinism, true to Holy Scripture, does not confine religion merely to religious meetings, and does not simply abandon the world to its lot. On the contrary its strong conviction is that religion ought to exercise its influence in all the departments of life, in the

home, the school, the state, society, in art and science and industry, no less than in the Church. Furthermore, Calvinism does not stress the emotional element in a one sided manner, but desires that the entire man, his intellect, and will as well as his emotions, should be dedicated to God and religion. It sends down the roots of its spiritual life deep into the eternal truths of God's Word, and drawing its strength from those inexhaustible sources it does not require the continual rousing of the emotions as is the case with the sects. The stream of true piety flows steadily and cleanses through its influence all the different spheres of life.

#### IV

#### PROMISCUOUS CHURCH UNION

We come next to promiscuous church union which has been specially prominent of late. The idea is to combine the different denominations into one big concern by weakening the characteristic doctrines and systems of Church government of the denominations concerned. To establish the Kingdom of Heaven on earth along these lines is the idea of those who propagate this movement.

But this movement is certainly not Scriptural, because it is not given to man to establish the Kingdom of Heaven in its outward form on earth. This will only happen when the King of Righteousness comes again in His glory. Moreover, such an unnatural and artificial combination of the different denominations must inevitably lead to a colourless inter-denominational body which is unable to give definite guidance or direction.

Instead of this promiscuous church union pure Calvinism stresses loyalty to one's own fundamental principles. And rightly, too! For if any denomination will be able to contribute a real share towards the upbuilding of the œcumenical Christian Church, the one spiritual body of which Christ Himself is the Head, then it *must* be loyal to its own fundamental principles. At the same time Calvinism certainly cherishes the wider interests of the œcumenical Christian Church, and is ready to contribute its modest share towards the upbuilding of the whole body. It does not believe that the unity for which Christ prayed in His High Priestly prayer in St. John xvii was meant



to be an outward unity, but rather the deeper spiritual unity of all true believers which does not exclude the pluriformity of the different, separate churches.

Furthermore, Calvinism certainly seeks to promote the union of like-minded spirits from all the different countries of the world. In fact, there is no other religious system which is more international than Calvinism is. It is, and aims to be, a world-wide movement. But—and herein it differs from promiscuous church union—it seeks the union of those who in principle think and feel alike; it seeks the unity of truly like-minded spirits. And this is after all the only union which can be permanent and which will bring true blessing to the Church of Christ.

## V

### THE AUTOCRACY OF THE STATE

We now draw attention to the idea of State-Autocracy which is specially prominent in Germany at the present time under the Hitler régime. The protagonists of this movement hold that the State is all powerful; everything must bow before it, also the Christian Church. In this case the Church is not autonomous in its own sphere, but must receive its instructions from the head of the State. The Church is bound in the first place to promote the interests of the State. Calvinism naturally protests against this movement, and rightly, too. For if the idea of State Autocracy should gain general acceptance, the spiritual autonomy of the Church must necessarily suffer. And then it could not but deny its loyalty towards its one Head and King, Jesus Christ. Therefore Calvinism stresses in obedience to the Word of God: State and Church are, and ought to be, each autonomous in its own sphere. At the same time both stand under the ordinance of God, the State no less than the Church. The only difference is that whereas the State functions in the sphere of general grace, the Church functions in the sphere of particular grace. And therefore the Church may not receive its instructions from any Head of State, but only from its glorified Lord and King to whom it is responsible. How necessary, also, in this respect, is the witness of true Calvinism in our day!

We could still mention other undesirable movements of our age, as, for example, the New Education, but the time

at our disposal does not allow fuller treatment. We are convinced, however, that we have adduced sufficient grounds to prove our statement that Calvinism possesses permanent value for our day. Our prayer is that God may ever keep the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa true to its Calvinistic basis. May the motto of our Church ever be: *Soli Deo Gloria*: to God alone all the honour! "For of him and through him and to him are all things: to whom be glory forever."

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