

Calvinism.

BY THE REV. RICHARD MERCER WILSON, B.A.,
Curate of Delgany.

WHEN Principal Fairbairn¹ remarks that Calvin's theology was less original and less effective than his legislation, he seems to overlook the peculiar service rendered to the Reformation by the "Institutes." What the "Institutes" did for the sixteenth century,² Dr. Lindsay truly says, "was to make the unseen government and authority of God, to which all must bow, as visible to the intellectual eye as the mechanism of the medieval Church had been to the eye of sense." This was virtually to save the Reformation. The circulation of the "Institutes" was European. Written originally in Latin, the work was subsequently published in French, in Italian, in Dutch, in English, in German, and in Spanish. The opening sections of the "Institutes" deal with the knowledge of God, and of ourselves as comprising the sum of true wisdom. The knowledge of God is naturally implanted in the human mind. But man in his present fallen state needs, and is given, "another and a better help"—the Divine revelation in the Scriptures. Before treating of Calvin's view of Scripture, however, it may be well to consider his doctrine of the Fall. Calvin has been much misrepresented concerning the total depravity of human nature. His position might not inaccurately be described in the words of our Article IX., that "man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil." Calvin distinguishes between the natural and spiritual elements of God's image in man. The image of God not only "comprehends everything relating to the spiritual and eternal life,"³ but it "extends to everything in which the nature of man surpasses that of all other species of animals."⁴ "As the gratuitous gifts

¹ "Cam. Mod. Hist.," vol. ii., p. 366.

² "History of Reformation," vol. ii., p. 157.

³ "Institutes," book i., chap. xv., 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

bestowed on man were withdrawn, so the natural gifts which remained were corrupted after the Fall. Not that they can be polluted in themselves in so far as they proceed from God, but that they have ceased to be pure to polluted man, lest he should by their means obtain any praise."¹ Accordingly Calvin grants "that the image of God was not utterly effaced and destroyed,"² though it was terribly corrupted. "The Lord has left many gifts in the possession of human nature."³ Examples of this are to be found "in physics, dialectics, mathematics, and other similar sciences." And "if we reflect that the Spirit of God is the only fountain of truth, we will be careful, as we would avoid offering insult to Him, not to reject or condemn truth wherever it appears." Man's fall, however, involves his utter inability to renew himself, as is plainly declared in Holy Scripture.

In the Word of God Calvin, in common with the other Reformers, found a sure and infallible guide. Yet it would be a serious misrepresentation of their position to say that it involved simply the substitution of one external authority for another. No doubt the Reformers did set the authority of the Scriptures over against that of Popes and Councils. But to stop short at this statement would be misleading. For the Romanist is very different from the Protestant conception both of Scripture and of infallibility. Medieval theologians regarded the Bible as a sort of spiritual law-book; and, apart from the authoritative method of interpretation imposed by the Church, it was impossible to reach a saving faith. For the Reformers, on the other hand, the Scriptures were a personal rather than a dogmatic revelation.⁴ In the Bible God spoke to them as a man speaks to his fellows. And saving faith was not intellectual assent to certain propositions, but personal trust in a personal Saviour whose life and work manifested the gracious character of God.

As to the authoritative character of Scripture, the Reformers

¹ "Institutes," book ii., chap. ii., 16.

² *Ibid.*, book i., chap. xv., 4.

³ *Ibid.*, book ii., chap. ii., 15.

⁴ Dr. Lindsay, "Hist. of Reform.," vol. i., pp. 453-466.

emphasized the fact that its recognition was awakened by the witness of the Spirit within the believer; the soul enlightened by the Spirit of God responding to the same Spirit speaking through the pages of Holy Writ. Calvin did not regard as valueless the consent of the Church, but he insisted that "our conviction of the truth of Scripture must be derived from a higher source than human conjectures, judgments, or reasons—namely, the secret testimony of the Spirit."¹ This is superior to reason. "For, as God alone can properly bear witness to his own words, so these words will not obtain *full credit* in the hearts of men, until they are sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit." Bishop Welldon² is at fault in describing this as a "narrow and rigid theory, which was peculiar to Calvin." It was a position common to all the Reformers; and it has been reaffirmed³ by modern writers of acknowledged repute.

Calvin's doctrine of the Church is almost identical with our own. By the Church is meant "all the elect of God, including those who have departed this life."⁴ But it is also a visible society. "Wherever we see the Word of God sincerely preached and heard, wherever we see the Sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there we cannot have any doubt that the Church of God has some existence."⁵ And "we are never to discard it so long as these remain, though it may otherwise teem with numerous faults."

This visible Church, which is similarly described in our Article XIX., is governed by officers of Divine appointment—pastors (bishops or presbyters), teachers (prophets), elders, and deacons—partly clerical and partly lay office-bearers. The rights of the layman are fully recognized in Calvin's system.

"Ministers are legitimately called according to the Word of God, when those who may have seemed fit are elected on the consent and approbation of the people."⁶ One main duty of

¹ "Institutes," book i., chap. vii., 4.

² The *Nineteenth Century*, December, 1908, pp. 969, 970.

³ See, e.g., Dr. Denney's "Studies in Theology," pp. 205-220.

⁴ "Institutes," book iv., chap. i., 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, book iv., chap. iii., 15.

Church officers is the exercise of discipline. Discipline is the nerve of the Church. It is "altogether distinct from civil government,"¹ and belongs not to an individual but "to the consistory of elders, which is in the Church what a Council is in a city." Nowhere is Erastianism more strenuously and consistently combated than in the writings of the Genevan Reformer. Lutheranism, Anglicanism, and Zwinglianism were all, more or less, dependent upon the State. Calvin's theory furnished the only effective system in the Reformation age for the organization of an oppressed Protestant party. And his ideas worked well in the French Church, where the State was hostile, as in the Church of the early centuries.

Calvin's sacramental theory is in marked agreement with the position of the Church of England. Sacramental views were the main cause of division between the Reformed, or Calvinist, and the Evangelical, or Lutheran, positions, and the Thirty-Nine Articles express the doctrine of the former. Calvin defined a Sacrament to be an "external sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences His promises of goodwill towards us, in order to sustain the weakness of our faith, and we in our turn testify our piety towards Him." In common with all the Reformers he taught that the efficacy of the Sacraments depends upon the promise of Christ contained in their institution. As regards the Lord's Supper, he rejected Transubstantiation, Consubstantiation, and Zwinglianism. He differed from Luther and Zwingli in his conception of substance. They thought of substance as something extended in space; for Calvin the substance of a body lay in its power,² so that he could say, wherever anything acts, there it is.

Accordingly he asserted a real because active presence of Christ in the Supper. "By the symbols of bread and wine, Christ, His body and His blood, are truly *exhibited*³ to us." Yet this participation is spiritual and by faith. "It is enough for us that Christ, out of the substance of His flesh, breathes

¹ "Institutes," book iv., chap. xi., 1, 6.

² Cf. Leibnitz, "Pensées de Leibnitz," p. 106.

³ "Institutes," book iv., chap. xvii., 11 (Latin, *exhibere* = hold forth).

life into our souls, nay, diffuses His own life into us, though the real flesh of Christ does not enter us." Calvin denies "that it can be eaten without the taste of faith," a position afterwards taken up by our Article XXIX. It is interesting to notice how directly the influence of Calvin's Sacramental doctrine on the Church of England can be traced. Dean Overall is generally credited with the authorship of the portion of our Catechism relating to the Sacraments, which was added at the Revision of 1604. But this tradition has been proved ill-founded.¹ All that Dean Overall did was to remodel the Little Catechism of Dean Nowell, already for years in use in the Church of England. Nowell's merits were, however, little more than those of a compiler. His catechism was practically identical with the Short Catechism of 1552. Its authorship is usually ascribed to Poynt of Winchester. Now Poynt had no *distinct* section concerning the Sacraments, which he touched on with great brevity; so to supply this deficiency Nowell had recourse to the Genevan Catechism, published in 1541, an examination of which will do much to confirm this result.

We come now to Calvin's doctrine of election. We have deliberately chosen to put this point last, by way of protest against the widely prevalent but completely mistaken views as to the relation of this subject to Calvin's system. It is an error to describe predestination as the "central doctrine" of Calvinism. "It is brought in, not at the head of his system, but towards the close of his third book as a corollary from his exposition of the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and sanctification."² So little is it a peculiarity of Calvinistic theology, that it underlay and invigorated the whole Reformation movement. One might as well speak of the doctrine of justification by faith as specifically Lutheran.³ *All* the Reformers asked and answered the question, "What shall I do to be saved?" Likewise were they agreed on the question of

¹ Groves, "The Little Catechism of Dean Nowell."

² Dr. Orr's "Progress of Dogma," p. 292.

³ See Professor Warfield's splendid article in the new Schaff-Herzog Encyclopædia.

predestination. And it was Melancthon, not Calvin, who "gave it a formal place in his primary scientific statement of the elements of the Protestant faith."

Yet, though not the formative principle of Calvinism, this doctrine of absolute predestination, with its twin idea of preterition, is undoubtedly "the head and front of the offending of his system." It is not, however, a new doctrine of Reformation times, similar to the new application of justification by faith. It has its roots in Augustine. Perhaps it will be sufficient on this point to notice that Professor Mozley, who has carefully examined this question,¹ quotes with approval the following words: "Those who suppose that St. Augustine differs from Calvin in his doctrine of predestination do not really know the doctrine which St. Augustine held, and suppose it to be different from what it was." Bishop Browne² must therefore be regarded as at fault in stating that Augustine's views were materially different from Calvin's. Coming more directly to the subject, we find that, whereas Bishop Browne seems to attribute Calvin's statement of this doctrine to his love of system and logical precision, Calvin himself explicitly lays down that "to desire any other knowledge of predestination than that which is expounded by the Word of God is no less infatuated than to walk where there is no path."³ This is the first principle of investigation. And in Scripture he finds that the origin and cause of election is not placed in the virtues and vices of men, but in the good pleasure of God. "The Lord finds nothing in men themselves to induce Him to show kindness, it is owing entirely to His own mercy, and accordingly their salvation is His own work."⁴ "If we cannot assign any reason for His bestowing mercy on His people, but just that it so pleases Him, neither can we have any reason for His reprobating others but His will. When God is said to visit in mercy or harden Whom He will, men are reminded that they are not to seek for any cause beyond His

¹ Mozley's "Baptismal Regeneration," p. 204, n.

² Browne on "Articles," pp. 410-415.

³ "Institutes," book iii., chap. xxi., 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, book iii., chap. xxii., 6.

will."¹ The will of God is the ultimate cause of all that is. And predestination is the viewing *sub specie æternitatis* what actually happens in time. It is, however, an error to represent God's will, with Calvin, as an arbitrary will.² He expressly repudiates the heathenish fiction of absolute power.³ Nor is he guilty of the arrant dogmatism of which he is sometimes accused. He declares that God's will is holy and good, though we may not know or fully understand the reasons for what actually takes place in the government of the world; and, refusing to countenance the idea that "everything must be perverse which is hidden from the flesh," he is not ashamed to acknowledge with St. Paul that the judgments of God are "unsearchable."

By many the doctrines of election and reprobation are regarded as subversive of all human responsibility and moral obligation. Such would do well to consider the use which Calvin made of this doctrine. For him its special value lay in its comfort, as giving assurance of salvation to the Christian believer. Human nature being corrupt, what assurance has any man of salvation save in the Divine purpose to rescue him? "Ignorance of this principle detracts from the glory of God and impairs true humility." "Predestination duly considered does not shake faith, but rather affords the best confirmation of it."⁴ Far more than with any of the other Reformers, the Christian life is regarded in Calvin's system as one of self-denying effort and struggle. "If the end of election is holiness of life, it ought to arouse and stimulate us strenuously to aspire to it, instead of serving as a pretext for sloth."⁵ Nor is reprobation an excuse under which the ungodly may shelter themselves. "Though their perdition depends on the predestination of God, the cause and matter of it is in themselves." "None perish without deserving it, and it is owing to the free goodness of God that some are delivered." Calvin is here at one with

¹ "Institutes," book iii., chap. xxii., 11.

² Professor Walker is at fault in describing Calvin as addicted to Scotist doctrine.

³ "Institutes," book iii., chap. xxiii., 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, chap. xxiv., 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, book iii., chap. xxiii., 12.

Augustine and St. Paul, regarding predestination as higher than free-will, and refusing even to rest in the unsatisfying acknowledgment of an insoluble antinomy. To the objection that the doctrine of election destroys all exhortations to a pious life Calvin rightly replies that it is plainly taught by St. Paul, the fervour and steadfastness of whose preaching none can dispute.

We have said that predestination is not, as it is commonly regarded, the formative principle of Calvinism. One lamentable result of this popular misconception has been the overlooking of Calvin's real contribution to the development of Christian doctrine. Professor Warfield, in his introduction to Kuyper's work on the Holy Spirit, enumerates three gifts of the first value to the Church's thought and life which have come from the Genevan Reformer. From him the presentation of the work of Christ under the schema of Prophet, Priest, and King has passed into a Christian commonplace. To him we owe the whole conception of a science of "Christian Ethics"; he was the first who outlined its idea, and developed its principles and contents. To him also we owe the first formulation of the doctrine of the work of the Holy Ghost; he developed it especially in the broad departments of "Common Grace," "Regeneration," and the "Witness of the Spirit." Baldly stated, this sounds like an exaggeration; but "it is simply true that these great topics received their first formulation at the hands of John Calvin, and it is from him that the Church has derived them."

What the fundamental principle of Calvinism really is, this has been well stated by many writers. We quote the words of a most able article by Professor Warfield. "The fundamental principle of Calvinism lies in a profound apprehension of God in His majesty, with the inevitably accompanying poignant realization of the exact nature of the relation sustained to Him by the creature as such, and particularly by the sinful creature. He who believes in God without reserve, and is determined that God shall be God to Him in all his thinking, feeling, willing—in the entire compass of his life-activities, intellectual, moral,

spiritual—is, by the force of that strictest of all logic which presides over the outworking of principles into thought and life, by the very necessity of the case a Calvinist.”¹ Carrying up all things into the sovereign will of a gracious God, Calvinism is a splendid and helpful, though necessarily imperfect, monism. It is “the only system in which the whole order of the world is brought into a rational unity with the doctrine of grace.” As regards its present position, it must be confessed that its star is not in the ascendant. But it has done noble work in the past. “The spiritual indebtedness of Western Europe and of North America to the educative influence of Calvin’s theology is well-nigh measureless.”² “His system, passing like iron into the blood of the nations which received it, raised up in the French Huguenots, the English Puritans, the Scotch, the Dutch, the New Englanders, brave, free, God-fearing peoples.”³ And it will help us to face, with hope of conquest, the spiritual dangers of our time. As a recent writer has said, “It is deep enough, and large enough, and divine enough, rightly understood, to confront them and do battle with them in vindication of the Creator, Preserver, and Governor of the world, and of the justice and love of the Divine Personality.”⁴

¹ New Schaff-Herzog Religious Encyclopædia, vol. ii., p. 359.

² Professor Walker’s “Calvin,” p. 248.

³ Dr. Orr’s lecture on Calvin in “The Reformers,” p. 293.

⁴ W. Hastie, “Theology as a Science,” pp. 97, 98.

