

The Doctrine of Christian Hope in Calvin's Institutes

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A PRELIMINARY reading suggests that the doctrine of Christian hope does not have any great importance in the writings of Calvin, or for that matter of the Reformers as a whole. Explicit references are disproportionately meagre in the better-known works. There are, of course, the unavoidable annotations in the Commentaries, but there is only one discussion of any appreciable length in the Institutes, as compared with a much more extensive treatment of both faith and charity. Hope seems to be the Cinderella of the Christian graces.

Yet appearances are to some extent deceptive. It is true enough that hope has no quantitative importance, but that does not mean that it is regarded as superfluous or insignificant. The doctrine of justifying faith stands at the heart of the Institutes and imperiously demands a full and detailed treatment. But the Reformation doctrine of faith and justification necessarily involves a reconstitution of hope in the serious New Testament sense. Faith and hope are not mutually exclusive, but complementary. The proper understanding and respecting of the one means a genuine if largely implicit emphasizing of the other. "Wherever this living faith exists, it must have the hope of eternal life as its inseparable companion, or rather must of itself beget and manifest it; where it is wanting, however clearly and elegantly we may discourse of faith, it is certain we have it not."¹

Justifying faith is not a mere belief in God or in certain propositions concerning God and His nature and work. It is a definite belief and confidence that because of that word and act of God which are Jesus Christ, a forgiveness is known, a righteousness bestowed, a new life imparted, a new age and kingdom begun. The whole point of faith is that although these works of God are, they are not yet seen. Faith is faith in Jesus Christ. In Him God has already accomplished these things. But the reality is not yet perceived in the life of this age. Forgiveness is pronounced but not manifested. The Christian is justified but not just. A new life has been imparted but the old one is still lived. The Christian belongs to the age to come, but he has not yet escaped the present age. The reality of redemption is present, but its consummation is still future. We walk by faith, not by sight.

I

It is at this point, and therefore with a strictly eschatological reference, that hope enters. Hope is simply the confident expectation that what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ, and what we already have by faith because we trust His promise, He will in His own time fulfil and manifest. "For if faith is a firm persuasion of the truth of

¹ Instit. III, 2, 42.

God—a persuasion that it can never be false, never deceive, never be in vain, those who have received this assurance must at the same time expect that God will perform His promises, which in their conviction are absolutely true; so that in one word hope is nothing more than the expectation of those things which faith previously believes to have been truly promised by God. Thus faith believes that God is true; hope expects that in due season He will manifest His truth. Faith believes that He is our Father; hope expects that He will act the part of a Father towards us. Faith believes that eternal life has been given to us; hope expects that it will one day be revealed.”¹ Or again, “after embracing the testimony of the Gospel as to free love, we wait till God openly manifest what is now only an object of hope”.² Of course, in some respects hope can expect a measure of fulfilment even in this present life. It is confident that the divine promises will be proved true from day to day. This is still eschatological. It does not belong to the future consummation, but it is the action or working out of the age to come within the present age which perishes. But for the most part hope looks forward to that fulfilment of redemption at the coming again of Christ when the new life of righteousness will be manifested and the kingdom of God actualized.

Because hope grows out of faith, it is not a natural quality or disposition but a gift of the Holy Spirit. That is the ground of its certainty on the subjective side. Just as the work for which it hopes is the work of God, and can therefore be confidently expected, so also the hope itself is the inworking of God, and is not therefore dependent upon human calculations or feelings. But it is also the reason why a supremely confident certainty can be conjoined with a true and profound humility. Not only does hope know that all that lies ahead is entirely of God and His grace. It also knows that it can dare to be hope only because it is of the Holy Spirit. “For we through the Spirit wait for the hope of righteousness by faith.”³ This humble but certain hope is, of course, impossible where faith is merely a human capacity, or the work of God is regarded as immanent or already fulfilled, or salvation is in any sense made dependent on human effort.

The distinction between faith and hope is obviously a fine one. Calvin allows that in the New Testament the two are often related and even “confounded”.⁴ In 1 Peter 1. 5, for example, “the Apostle attributes to faith what more properly belongs to hope”.⁵ The main key to their mutual relationship is to be found in Hebrews 10. 1, where faith is described as “the substance of things hoped for”.⁶ Calvin takes it that substance here means a “kind of prop” or possibly a “confidence”: “as if he had said, that faith is a kind of certain and secure possession of those things which are promised to us by God”.⁷ He enlarges his exposition in this way: “Again, to intimate that until the last day . . . the things pertaining to our salvation are too lofty to be perceived by our sense, seen by our eyes, or handled by our hands, and that in the meantime there is no possible way in which these can

¹ Instit. III, 2, 42.

² Loc. cit.

³ Loc. cit.

⁴ Loc. cit.

⁵ Ibid. 43.

⁶ Loc. cit.

⁷ Ibid. 41

be possessed by us, unless we can transcend the reach of our own intellect, and raise our eye above all worldly objects; in short, surpass ourselves, he adds that this certainty of possession relates to things which are only hoped for, and therefore not seen. For as Paul says (Romans 8. 24), 'hope that is seen is not hope', that we 'hope for that we see not' ".¹ It is evident that if redemption were not hoped for, there would be no faith: but on the other hand, if there is no faith, there can also be no hope. Faith is a present laying hold of the work of God. Hope confidently expects its future consummation.

The things hoped for are not of course an unrelated addition to the work of God appropriated by faith, and they are certainly not a working out of the present world-process. On the contrary, they are the actualization of that which we now know and inherit because we believe the divine promises. As Calvin says in relation to the resurrection, because Jesus Christ has conquered death, "on believing we are said to have passed from death unto life". Yet in fact we do not know the reality of eternal life. In this world and until the coming again of Christ, "we are exercised under a hard warfare, as if the victory obtained by Christ had produced no fruit".² But as this passage also makes clear, if hope looks to the fulfilment of the divine promises, it is not looking to something general or abstract. The promises of God are Yea and Amen in Jesus Christ, who is Himself their fulfilment. Therefore as Jesus Christ is the true object of faith He is also the true object of hope. It is His parousia and presence which is the fulfilment of the promises. What we look for is "the glorious appearing of our great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ".³ Of course, this appearing does mean the reality of righteousness and life. But it is not for these things as such that we hope. It is for Jesus Christ Himself who is our life and righteousness. He is that treasure in heaven on which we keep our eyes fixed in hope.⁴

II

The value of hope is self-evident, for it enables us to preserve a right sense of proportion in relation to our present situation. Hope teaches us that the pressing realities of the present age are not the true realities. The things which are seen are temporal, the things which are not seen are eternal. The true age is the age to come, the age inaugurated by Jesus Christ, the age to which we belong by faith, the age which will be consummated at the parousia. But if this is the case, hope enables the Christian to persevere. There are so many things which seem to oppose faith. The fulfilment of the divine promises is delayed. The process of mortification, of entry into the Cross, is an unpleasant one. The one who banks on eternal realities is regarded as a fool by the world at large. The present age exerts a constant and powerful pressure to disturb and destroy faith, which by its very nature cannot point to a substantial vindication. But faith is strengthened by hope. "For as no man can expect anything from God without previously believing His promises, so on the other hand, the weakness of our faith which might grow weary and fall away, must be supported

¹ Loc. cit.

² Instit. III, 25, 1

³ Loc. cit.

⁴ Loc. cit.

by patient hope and expectation." "The office of hope is to perform what the prophet enjoins, 'Though it tarry, wait for it' (Hab. 2. 3). Faith must be supported by the patience of hope, and fixed on the contemplation of eternity, consider that 'one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day'" (2 Peter 3. 8; Ps. 90. 4).¹ But there is, of course, another side to it. Sooner or later, the apparently substantial realities of this world crumble before the inexorable sentence of sickness, decay and death. For those who are outside the age of redemption, there is then no hope, only despair, cynicism, or at the best a wistful yearning. But the Christian sees sense where everyone else sees only perplexity or nonsense. The Christian looks forward where everyone else can only look around or back. In hope he quietly awaits the coming of Christ and the resurrection which is the fulfilment of the promised redemption.

Self-evidently, Christian hope as Calvin understood it is something other and more substantial than a general optimism based on the immanent movement of world-history. Indeed, from the immanentist standpoint, Calvin's outlook is one of pessimism. He has no hope for the present world-order in itself and as such. He has no extravagant expectations of an improvement in human relationships or environment. If he looks forward to a "repairing of this world" in accordance with Romans 8. 22,² his hope is grounded entirely in the eschatological work of Jesus Christ. This work of reparation has already begun. It can be entered into in faith. Therefore the hope of its consummation is not a desire that it should be, but a solid expectation that it will be.

But again, this hope is not presumption. It is not the hope that at some future date God will add the reward of a future blessedness for the use now made of present grace. Rather strangely, Lombard had argued that "if you presume to hope for anything without merit, it should not be called hope, but presumption".³ This inversion is an inevitable result of a failure to understand the Scriptural doctrine of justification and therefore the true relationship between faith and hope. But as Calvin sees, it is an inversion. The real presumption is to think that we can in any way hope for the gracious work of God on our own merits. The confidence of hope is not in itself, but in the promised grace of God already revealed and declared in Jesus Christ and sealed by the Holy Spirit. Is it "rashness and presumption to confide in the truth of God? The Lord desires us to expect everything from His goodness, and yet these men tell us it is presumption to rest in it. . . . Seeing that, by the oracles of God, sinners are enjoined to entertain the hope of salvation, let us willingly presume so far on His truth as to cast away all confidence in our works, and trusting in His mercy, venture to hope. He who hath said, 'According to your faith be it unto you' (Matt. 9. 29) will never deceive".⁴

III

Finally, the hope of the Christian is not simply the despairing hope of apocalyptic. In the tragic ages of history there is often a resurgence

¹ Ibid. 2, 42

² Ibid. xx. 2, 43.

³ Instit. III, 25, 11.

⁴ Loc. cit.

of the hope that at some point God will dramatically intervene. Human affairs are so bad that no human agency seems competent to provide a solution. Despair itself gives birth to a wild and perhaps an extravagant hope. Now superficially this general hope of apocalyptic has many resemblances to evangelical hope. There is the same realistic appraisal of the present order. There is the same conviction that a divine irruption is the only hope of redemption. But there are two decisive differences.

The first is that the Christian hope derives from faith. Faith perceives that God has already intervened, that the age of God has come already. The denouement which is its fulfilment is therefore certain. For that reason there is nothing titanic or despairing about Christian hope. It is a quiet expectation that what is now present in faith will one day be fulfilled in sight. And it has its task to move forward to that fulfilment. Second, the intervention of God is not an intervention in the abstract, but the concrete work of redemption which has been done and will be consumed in and by Jesus Christ. The Christian hope is not a snatching at wild general possibilities. It is rooted in the historical work already accomplished by Jesus Christ. It is a concrete and personal hope in Christ Himself.

Surveying the teaching of Calvin, we may be surprised at the richness of a doctrine to which he devoted so little explicit attention. It cannot be pretended, of course, that he worked out all the implications of his statements. Yet he surely went to the heart of the matter when he related hope so plainly to faith and to the eschatological work of God in Jesus Christ. Understood in this way, hope can be safeguarded against both aimless generality and a disruptive apocalypticism. It can assume its true character as the patient but positive and well-grounded expectation which is the gift of the Holy Spirit. It can also exercise its true office in relation to the outlook and aims and the daily life and warfare of the Christian.

Praying in the Spirit

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SURELY Romans viii. 14-27 constitutes one of the most remarkable passages in the whole of the New Testament. Within the space of a few verses the Apostle reaches out in imagination to embrace the entire cosmic process and proceeds thereupon to link it to the activity of the Spirit in the life of the Church. There is a connection, he affirms, between the travail of the created order and that of the weakest individual Christian. It is one and the self-same Spirit Who is groaning both in the struggles which belong to the history of the natural order and in those which belong to the history of the human soul. Let us seek to examine the passage in more detail.