

WHAT IS TRUE RELIGION ?  
OR  
THE PHILOSOPHY OF CALVINISM

IN the year 1536, John Calvin published a treatise in Latin entitled, roughly translated, "The Institution of the Christian Religion," really "A setting forth in order of the Christian Religion." It is a first attempt at a logical and complete definition of Protestantism, a confession of faith, the answer of a man possessed with love of God and souls to the question, "What is true religion ?" Plato, the great philosopher, says : "A philosopher is one who apprehends the essence and reality of things in opposition to the man that deals in appearances only." "Philosophers", he says, "are those who are able to grasp the eternal and immutable. They are those who set their affections on that which, in each case, really exists" (*Rep.* 480). Calvin's methods and aims, though in the religious sphere, could not have been more exactly described. This complete outline of the Calvinistic theological system and practice exercised a prodigious influence on both contemporaries and posterity. The austerity both of its ritual and living was deeply resented, e.g. Rabelais, Book IV, 32, speaks of the "Imposters of Geneva", but Renan, no prejudiced judge, calls Calvin "the most Christian man of his time." A recent Roman Catholic author says, "This man was undoubtedly the greatest of Protestant divines, and perhaps after Augustine, of any Western writer the most perseveringly followed by disciples."

The philosophy of Calvinism as set out in this wonderful book, carefully based as it is on Holy Scripture, has for its distinguishing principle not predestination and similar features, as often alleged, but (as the base of the entire reasoning from beginning to end) the outstanding principle of the Sovereignty of God. Of Calvin's theology it has been truly said that over it might be inscribed the words of the eighth Psalm, "What is man that Thou art mindful of him and the son of man that Thou visitest him ?" The honour of God as an absolute Sovereign is the point of view which dominates everything. God is for Calvin the Almighty Will at the back of all that takes place.

Further, what He wills is just for that reason, because He wills it, always right. Nor need the question be raised why God has acted thus and thus and not otherwise, for in any case there is only one answer: "Because He has willed it thus." What happens in the world does so indeed in the interest of man, the Church, etc. But man, the Church, salvation, general welfare, etc., are not the final objects, but the manifestation of the honour and glory of God in and through them that is the final object. God founded the entire world as a place for the display of His glory, though its highest manifestation takes place in and through a people that love Him and serve Him for His own sake.

Calvin's really prominent thought thus was the transcendent Sovereignty of God as made known to man by the Scriptures whose writers according to Calvin were sure and authentic amanuenses of the Holy Spirit. To know this God and to serve Him is declared to be man's supreme end. Thus the first commandment has an important sentence preceding it—"I am the Lord thy God", words often omitted before that commandment in denominational creeds and statements, because their real force and connection is not clearly apprehended. It is this. Because I am the Lord thy God and the Sovereign God, thou shalt love Me the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, etc., etc. The great "God over all blessed for ever" claims absolute power and right of dominion over all His creatures and His claim implies a right to dispose concerning them as it seems best to Him. Similarly Calvin implies that God is the One Omnipotent, the One Supreme. There can be but one first cause, and He, God Almighty, is that cause. And it is thus that Calvin reaches "the absolute" to which all schools of philosophy point.

Another special feature which Calvinism brings out as required in connection with the truth of the Sovereignty of God, and that above all things, is, that it should come to be possessed and professed by human beings as a matter of personal experience imparted by the Holy Ghost to the individual soul. Without this experience, i.e. if the Sovereignty of God is not admitted in the individual heart, and the life conformed to the divine behests, God's Sovereignty will not have attained its final objective. Without such experience this great truth has not really been apprehended at all, and where this has not been

the case other relative truths of the divine revelation will not be admitted and embraced as required. The whole circumference of divine truth radiates from this centre of sovereignty. It is in this way alone, e.g. that man can go on to realize that "All things work together for good to them that love God *and are the called according to His purpose*"—a very relevant and significant addition.

There is next an outstanding fact of another sort concerning God, which permeates Calvinistic philosophy. Though not so much stated as implied, it lies at the back of all Calvinistic reasoning, but because it is not so much stated and argued out as some other points, it is even by professed Calvinists, at times lost sight of. This truth is that God is *the Eternal*—in other words, God must be thought of not only as the Infinite, the Omnipotent, the Omniscient, and not only as immanent and transcendent, but also over and above these things there must be allowance made for the fact that He moves in the eternal order of things. This means that He is not subject to time and sense or their limitations. With God, for example, there is no past and there is no future. Man is subject to these limitations of time and sense, and so in his reasonings concerning God and His doings, forgetting that God is not man, he frequently yields to false impressions. He is led away to judge and speak of God under human limits. The outstanding instance of this limited insight into God's being is that of the great Arian controversy which in the early centuries of Christianity nearly swept the whole Church into an abyss of heretical misconception that would, if carried to its ultimate development, have destroyed vital Christianity. "Gentlemen," said a lecturer to theological students, "when you come to think of it there must have been a time when the Son was not, because a father must exist before his son if the son is to be at all begotten by his father." "Time was when He was not" was destined to be sung throughout the empire till even Constantine the Emperor embraced the heresy. What the lecturer did was to overlook that God is not limited by the past or future. Truth was ultimately enshrined in the words "The Eternally-Begotten". While God recognizes fully what faces man in time and sense, there is on the divine side really no such thing as predestination in a sense that involves the past or future, as these limit the human being. By remembrance of this fact many difficulties that present

themselves to the human mind as regards the right and wrong of God's dealings with men in their spiritual responsibilities and experiences are got rid of, or are shown to be clearly open to some future explanation which for the present is hidden from human capacity limited as it is by time and sense.

But Calvinism faces next a fact that cannot be ignored, namely that God's claim of absolute Sovereignty is not met by the required voluntary service of His creature man. There is such a thing in the world as sin, and amidst the gloom and despair of man's utter helplessness, on account of sin, the word "Grace" appears, and the God of Sovereign Grace becomes manifest.

While God is the source of all good, man is guilty and corrupt. The first man was made in the image of God which not only implies man's superiority to other creatures but indicates his original purity, integrity and sanctity. But through Adam's fall, depravity and corruption are attached to all men. On account of such corruption all are deservedly condemned by God, by Whom, let this carefully be noted, nothing is accepted save righteousness, innocence and purity. When it is said that we, through Adam's sin, have become obnoxious to the divine judgment, it is not to be taken as if we, being ourselves innocent and blameless, have to bear the fault of Adam's offence, but that, we having been brought under a curse through his transgression, Adam is said to have bound us. From him, however, not only has overtaken us punishment but a pestilence, instilled from him, resides in us to which punishment is justly due.

In this way a further fact is reached and has to be faced in actual experience, as also it is set out in Holy Scripture, that man, as he is, is completely disabled from achieving his own salvation from that sin. He is also unable to do good absolutely and this inability is part of and the outcome of his sin and guilt. Man's conversion must therefore be the work altogether of Divine Grace and so in this connection a further truth presents itself that conversion or non-conversion is dependent on the Divine Will! And through this the question of total depravity as well as salvation by grace and election are reached.

It is in this connection that the inner meaning and force of the much disputed and strongly controverted phrase "the total depravity of man" has to be gone into. This phrase is at first sight misunderstood by critics because it brings with it the

impression that what is intended to be conveyed is that every human being is, humanly speaking, in itself as bad as can be, but, of course, from the merely human point of view this is contrary to fact, and is not taught by the Scriptures, nor is it sound philosophy. What the expression is intended to embody, to begin with, is that by reason of the existence of sin, even one sin, or even a sinful nature, no human being, as it naturally is, can be acceptable to God, and further that man is excluded by reason of sin or a sinful nature from God's presence as Adam was from Paradise. Also that sin or a sinful tendency render a human being spiritually blind and dead concerning God, and more particularly that a sinful man, as he is naturally, does not love God with all his heart and for God's own sake, as is required by the Sovereign God, Who asks for just that love in every creature which is totally lacking in the natural man. The smallest offence merits God's disfavour because He demands whole-hearted, perfect obedience and that only. In its deepest essence this truth is never grasped by the natural man except by the enlightenment of the individual, by the Holy Ghost. Even the consciousness of this requirement in its real significance is not present naturally.

It will be urged again that it is the word "total", in its connection with depravity, that is objected to, and that it is not in accordance with the fact that all human beings have at least some good qualifications. But what is intended to be conveyed by the words "total depravity" can be illustrated from practical life. A tradesman behind his counter has a device for testing coins. A customer enters, makes a heavy purchase, and lays down a coin of considerable value on the counter in payment. A faint suspicion passes over the mind of the tradesman. He takes the coin and rings it on the counter. The ring of that coin confirms his suspicion. He breaks it in the device behind the counter and brings it back in fragments. He thus fulfils the law of his country—he has destroyed a coin that is not genuine. It has many good qualities, an appearance of genuineness, a correct inscription, its value is clearly marked. It displays evidence of skill in its manufacture, but by the law of the country it is destroyed as being totally depraved. To take another aspect, a few weeks ago a lecturer to a class of students on chemistry became very thirsty; seizing while he was speaking a glass of what he believed to be water, he paused and drank it

and fell dead, killed by a virulent poison he had consumed. Need we wonder at the phrase "Dead in trespasses and sin" ? A glass of water may be of the purest and best quality, but one drop of poison put into water makes it totally depraved, dealing death. It is thus seen what is meant and in what sense it is true that "the wages of sin is death". Another sense in which total depravity holds good is that if there is not the love of God in a man for God's own sake, nothing which that man does, be it as good in itself as may be, is acceptable to God. This is strikingly illustrated in the 1st Corinthians, the thirteenth chapter. That chapter is often quoted by modernists as being an apt summary of the religion they profess, the religion of human love by men for men. The very argument of the chapter is that such love avails nothing, if the love of God for His own sake is absent, and if the human love exhibited after a fashion is not inspired by that divine love. Preaching like an angel wondrous truths, leaves a man a babbler before God. Without divine love, let him work miracles through a kind of faith, "he is nothing" in himself apart from divine love. Let him give his body to be burnt in martyrdom or to be branded as a slave for the rest of his life, apart from the divine love "it will profit him nothing". No words more drastically can bring out the meaning of total depravity than this language. Apart from the love which with faith and hope will abide for ever, when all things else have passed away, the man is, notwithstanding all he says and does, nothing profited, he is nothing, an exact picture of total depravity, and he is nothing because of the absence of the love of God shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Ghost.

So the only thing that could be done, Sovereign Grace did enact. The Son of God came, God in the person of His Son became incarnate here on earth. He took on Him humanity and the offices of Prophet, Priest and King. And by His humiliation, obedience and suffering and death, followed by His resurrection and ascension to heaven He perfected redemption and fulfilled all that was required to merit for men the grace of salvation, fulfilling the covenant eternally made, He died for the elect. He could do this because He was God, not merely divine or the divinest of men, but God Himself. God, very God, united with man, Emmanuel, God with us. The Deity of our Lord is one of the corner-stones of Calvinism, for if He had been man only and not God Himself He would have

owed the human life He lived to God as an obligation and duty to God on the part of Himself as man, one of God's creatures, and in that case there would not have been any special meaning when He pronounced the phrase, "Lo, I come to do Thy Will, O God" which meant that He was about to make a voluntary offering of His life on behalf of His chosen people.

Calvinism notes next that until he is united to Christ, these benefits provided by Christ's work cannot be enjoyed by man. This union is achieved by a special operation of the Holy Ghost in the faithful, which faithful souls thus become partakers of His death and resurrection so that the old man is "crucified with Him" and they are raised from death to a life of righteousness and holiness. Thus joined to Christ the believer has life in Him by the Spirit, he is a child of God and has the promises, the certitude of which had never before impressed him, sealed by the Spirit on his heart. Faith brings with it repentance proceeding from the sincere fear of God and consists of the mortification of the flesh and the old man within us through being made alive by the Spirit. And though faith is not the ground of a man's forgiveness, it is by faith that the believer receives justification. By faith only his sins are forgiven and he is accepted of God and is held by Him as righteous. The righteousness of Christ is imputed to him. This imputed righteousness, however, is not disjoined from real personal righteousness, for regeneration and sanctification come to the believer from Christ no less than justification. Through the sacrifice of Christ, righteousness is imparted as justification is imputed, and these two blessings are not to be confounded, neither are they to be disjoined.

The manifest fact that not all men are thus converted and saved must by reason of this very fact have its cause in the exercise of the eternal Will of God Himself. God has indeed in His eternal unchangeable counsel destined one part of the human race to everlasting life and the other part to eternal condemnation, so that in both His name is glorified. For this reason all human feelings and conceptions, such as justice and sympathy and mercy, must be silent, as God's majesty and honour are concerned and neither can those lost or dead complain of injustice done. This free predestination is God's voluntary deed and in the first instance independent of all human doing or failure to do. There are only believers because there are the elect. Complaint

is often made in this connection of injustice. It is contended that God, if He did not save all men, would perpetrate an injustice or other wrong against those who are left out. But even an earthly employer who has one hundred candidates for an appointment is surely not committing an injustice to ninety-nine applicants if he chooses one out of the hundred. If a woman is courted by twenty applicants for her hand, surely she is not acting unjustly if she chooses one out of the twenty and rejects the other nineteen. If a man knew there were one hundred beggars all equally needy on a certain road, would it be considered unjust if he gave one of them a shilling unless he gave a shilling each to all ? It is, of course, only when we view this question from the standpoint of the absolute Sovereignty of God which implies that He is not bound to save any man or woman, that a correct perspective is obtained.

God's Sovereignty also implies that the great and wonderful work that God begins in the experience of His elect He is able to carry through and never fails to complete. All His saints who know Him best would voice this blessed assurance as follows :

Did Jesus once upon me shine,  
Then Jesus is for ever mine.

With the deep sense of responsibility which Calvinism begets in the saved man, there runs a sense of wonder and gratitude unspeakably profound that he should thus be honoured and assured of the highest possible destiny.

It is in this way that Calvinism draws for us a surpassingly glorious picture of what this world really is, its scheme and object. An infinitely blessed and holy Sovereign, God, in wondrous love, desires to associate with Himself, as the Father of a spiritual family in heaven and earth, a body of human beings elect, redeemed, called, justified and sanctified, and He brings this to pass by the gift of a dearly loved Son Who comes on earth to live and die for them. God the Holy Ghost accomplishes in them all that is necessary, imparts to them, His elect, by the death of the Son and the glorious obedience of His life here on earth, the right to heaven, the beauty of holiness, and so brings them to the most glorious destiny even His love could conceive, an everlasting life of infinite happiness, delightful fellowship of an all-absorbent love and wondrous achievement.



Alas that it should be necessary to add to this that by reason of sin committed, persisted in and not repented of, there will be a great mass of human beings that have missed that greatest destiny, and to which they will never hereafter be able to attain, and that this fact will be to them “ the worm that never dieth ” and “ the fire that is not quenched ”.

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