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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

CALVIN'S MISSIONARY MESSAGE:
SOME REMARKS ABOUT THE RELATION
BETWEEN CALVINISM AND MISSIONS

It is a somewhat dangerous undertaking to associate a theological system, which is the spiritual property of only a part of the Church, with the great work in which all Christians take part—especially when we not only look for a historical connection, but also try to understand the meaning of Calvinism for to-day's missionary work. The danger of bringing the lofty missionary task into the often clouded sphere of theological controversy looks to be anything but imaginary.

To avoid all misunderstandings and misconceptions it is necessary to state clearly what is the meaning of the words "Calvinism" and "missions". When we rate these notions at their true value, it appears that there is a much closer connection between them than we could surmise and that Calvinism, not in spite of its main characteristics, but as a fruit of its core and essence, has given rise to a rich development of missionary activity.

It is almost impossible to give a clear and at the same time exhaustive definition of Calvinism. In a general sense we can say that Calvinism is that complex of theological thinking and Christian activity which finds its deepest roots in Calvin's rediscovery of the comprehensive meaning of the Gospel. It takes different forms according to the various circumstances in which it develops, but it always retains those characteristic elements which we already find in the works of Calvin himself—a passionate desire not only for the salvation of souls, but also for the honour of Him who saves poor sinners by His electing grace and who asks complete obedience to His sovereign Will in all spheres of life. It was not Calvin's wish to form a new school of theological thought—he only wanted to return to the pure sources of the Gospel and to show that the Lord and Saviour has His holy claims on all the complex relations in which man knows himself to be placed. We make a caricature of Calvinism if we lay too much stress on the differences between Luther and Calvin: the soteriological line, the emphasis on the

salvation of souls, is with Calvin as strong as with Luther.¹ Calvin's doctrine is not a cold and passionless system of moral codes, bound together by an abstract doctrine of predestination—on the contrary, all the works of Calvin tremble with wonder at the great mystery of God's saving grace, and the *Soli Deo Gloria*, which is indeed one of the "distinctive ideas" of Calvinism, is deeply rooted in the *Sola Gratia*. God will be honoured on the broad front of life by those who know themselves to be saved by His free grace and His eternal love.

When we now turn to the meaning of the word "missions", we have to remember that the missionary obligation has never and nowhere been more clearly expressed than by our Lord Himself in the missionary command of Matt. xxviii. 19, 20: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." This command of our Lord contains three elements: the nations must be brought to Christ and made His disciples (personal conversion), they have to be baptised in His name (formation of the Church) and they must sit at His feet to learn the meaning of His commandments for the whole of their existence (development of Christian life). All missionary work has a soteriological character: its chief end is to bring men into communion with the Saviour, it aims at personal conversion. But at the same time it is comprehensive and totalitarian: not **only the soul** of the sinner has to be saved, but his whole life **and all the relations** in which he stands have to be brought **under the command** of his Saviour, who is also his King.² So we see that the soteriological and the theological line, the notion of the salvation of the soul and that of the honour of our God and King, form an indivisible unity—not only in the thinking of Calvin, but also in the Gospel itself, as becomes clear to us when we pay attention to the missionary command of Matt. xxviii.

It is the rediscovery of that scriptural unity, which is the principal meaning of the Calvinistic Reformation. Those Christians, who call themselves *issus de Calvin*, who want to belong to the spiritual progeny of that great Reformer, know that there is a relation between their Calvinism and the missionary obligation of the Church. They are often put to shame by the

¹ Cf. G. C. Berkouwer, *Geloof en Rechtvaardiging* (1949), pp. 55-6.

² Cf. J. H. Bavinck, *The Impact of Christianity on the Non-Christian World* (1949), pp. 18-23.

zealous ardour of fellow-Christians whose theological opinions they cannot share but who nevertheless have been more fully aware of the urgency of Christ's command than they have been themselves—and because of all this they have to speak with great modesty and deep humility. But yet they know that the vision which Calvin has shown them is not alien from the spirit of the Gospel, but has sprung from the only source for theological thinking and missionary activity alike, God's holy Word. They are aware that their knowledge is partial and defective and that they have often used the light which God had given them in a wrong way, but they are also aware of the immense implications of the message which Calvin, by the grace of God, derived from the rediscovered and reopened Bible, and it is with that message that they want to serve the Church Universal in the fulfilment of its missionary task.

But as soon as all this begins to engage our attention, we are placed before a very difficult problem. One of the most remarkable and mysterious facts of church history is the—at first sight—rather negative attitude of the Reformers with regard to the missionary obligation of the Church. It looks as if the rediscovery of the Gospel did not lead to a new zeal to spread the message of Christ throughout the world. The loud call for missions which rings through the New Testament found a very weak echo in the works of the Reformers. As we shall see, the lack of missionary *activity* is easy to explain—but much more difficult is the question, why the missionary *ideal* takes such a comparatively small place in the Reformers' thought. In this respect there is more harmony than difference between the great Reformers, though of course with each of them the problem has another accent and aspect. So though we only look for the missionary element in Calvin's thinking, we often have to speak about the opinions of the Reformers in general.

It appears that with Calvin the thought that the Gospel has to spread throughout the world and has to take its course to the ends of the earth is very clear; less clearly, however, does he see in what manner this must happen; and the practical application of the missionary ideal is almost completely lacking.

A variety of explanations have been given to elucidate this difficult problem. We will consider some of them, and ask ourselves if they are sufficient to answer the questions with which we are confronted. From the Roman Catholic side a

number of reasons have been brought to the fore. In the first place it has been said, that because the Reformers abandoned the Catholic conception of the Church, there remained no one who had a right to send out missionaries.¹ This explanation, however, does not hold, since the Reformers, and especially Calvin, had a very clear notion of the Church, which proved afterwards to be of the utmost importance for the development of the cause of missions. Calvin only purified and restored the concept of the Church—and it is not to be wondered at that as a result of this purification the idea of missions had to find a new foothold. This explains the initial hesitation with regard to the ecclesiastical foundation of missions, which hesitation, however, was very soon overcome by the inherent forces of the Calvinistic conception of the Church.

It has also been remarked that the abandoning of the ascetic ideal of the Middle Ages robbed the Reformers of one of the strongest stimuli for missionary activity.² Now it is an undeniable fact that, from the times of the Iro-Scottish Missions down to the period of the missionary activity of the Jesuits, asceticism was a very important missionary motive, in connection with the doctrine of the meritoriousness of good works. But here, too, a purification was needed: the asceticism of the Roman Catholic Church had to give way to a not less heroic preparedness to make great personal sacrifices for the sake of the Redeemer, who does not ask for merits but only for gratitude. Also in this point the foundation of missions had to be laid on a deeper level.

A well-known Roman Catholic argument against the Reformation, especially with regard to the propagation of the Gospel, is that the elimination of the monastic orders left a disastrous vacuum which could not properly be filled.³ Indeed, the orders have done much for the cause of the Gospel throughout the world, and the lack of them created a real problem for a time after the Reformation. But this fact was only a practical hindrance to the fulfilment of the missionary task, and least of all a reason to have no feeling for the missionary obligation itself.

The Jesuit author H. de Lubac, who deals with the missionary attitude of the Reformers in a more understanding way than

¹ M. Galm, *Das Erwachen des Missionsgedankens im Protestantismus der Niederlande* (1915), p. 8.

² M. Galm, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9.

³ M. Galm, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

Galm does, tries to explain our problem partly from mediaeval ideas.¹ Already in the time of R. Lullus there was some opposition to missions, which sprang from a combination of eschatological and quietistic-mystical motions. But Pfisterer has already clearly shown² that Calvin was not only free from the influence of these mediaeval ideas, but even overcame these ideas by his clear insight into Scripture, and so blazed the trail for a better understanding of the missionary task.

A really important check to the full unfolding of the missionary idea was the Reformers' fear of the idea of "apostolic succession". It is a great pity that by this fear, justifiable as it is in itself, the clear view on the missionary obligation was darkened. It was a strong argument of the Reformers against the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, that the office of the twelve Apostles was only a *munus extraordinarium* with a temporary character. But in the heat of the debate they were in danger of forgetting that the task of the Apostles to spread the Gospel and to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ is the task of the Church as a whole, whose Apostolate it is to go out into the world with the apostolic *kerygma*. Because of all this the missionary command of Matt. xxviii. remained in the shadow of theological discussions. Still we have to remember that the opinion of the Reformers on this point was not yet quite settled—Calvin³ as well as Zwingli⁴ and Bucer⁵ left open the possibility of a temporary renewal of the apostolic office in the Church. Calvin's view on the Apostolate was not so narrow as to leave no room at all for the missionary command, though it was certainly a hindrance in finding the right form for the fulfilment of it. I would even venture to say that if the Reformers had had a broad opportunity for missionary activity, their onesided understanding of the Apostolate, due to the fact that no missionary problems were under discussion, would certainly have been corrected by their own dominant theological conceptions. Moreover we must not mistake Calvin's opinion on this point for that of the later Lutheran orthodox divines, who went so far as to assert that the missionary command had already been

¹ H. de Lubac, *Le fondement théologique des Missions* (1940), p. 60.

² E. Pfisterer, "Der Missionsgedanke bei Calvin", *Neue Allgemeine Missionszeitschrift* (1934), p. 103.

³ *Institutio IV*, iii. 4.

⁴ Cf. P. Drews, "Die Anschauungen reformatorischer Theologen über die Heidenmission", *Zeitschrift für praktische Theologie* (1897), p. 221.

⁵ Cf. P. Drews, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

fulfilled by the Apostles themselves. Calvin never expressed this thought; he only sees a *beginning* of the spreading of God's Kingdom throughout the world during the times of the Apostles (*post Christi resurrectionem fines regni Dei longe lateque . . . prorogari coeperunt*¹). Beza was the first Reformed theologian who contended that the Apostles really had brought the *odor Evangelii* to the ends of the earth, even to America!² He uses this assertion as an argument in his controversy with Saravia about the apostolic succession. We must, however, not forget that it was Saravia who had unhappily linked the missionary command to his defence of the Anglican system of Church government; that Beza's argument has not found much approval among those Calvinistic divines who were interested in missionary questions, and that even Beza did not quite deny the duty of the Church to spread the Gospel among the Gentiles.³ So we can say that the Reformers' misunderstanding of the apostolic function of the Church sometimes hushed, but never choked, the missionary voices which we hear in their works.

It is a popular misunderstanding that Calvin's doctrine of predestination was a hindrance to the outgrowth of the missionary ideal. The reverse is true—this doctrine is not a stimulus for passivity, but calls man to high activity⁴ combined with a deep and humble feeling of dependence, as Calvin himself clearly expresses in his *Institutio* when, appealing to the works of Augustine, he vehemently denounces the caricature which even in his time was made of the doctrine of election.⁵ With great approval he quotes the words of Augustine: "Because we do not know who belong to the number of the elect and who do not belong to it, we have to be in such a mood that it would be our desire that all were saved. So it will happen that we exert ourselves to make every one whom we meet a partner of the peace [of God]." It is a noteworthy fact that many defenders of the doctrine of predestination were at the same time zealous advocates of the missionary cause—e.g. Augustine, Bucer,⁶ Carey, Kuyper and many others.⁷ They derived their doctrine

¹ Quoted from P. Drews, *op. cit.*, p. 290. Calvin says this in his commentary on Ps. cx.

² Cf. P. Drews, *op. cit.*, p. 307.

³ As even M. Galm concedes, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

⁴ Cf. E. Pfisterer, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

⁵ *Institutio III*, xxiii. 12-14.

⁶ Cf. J. N. van der Bosch, *Zendingsgedachte uit den tijd der Hervorming* (1941),

p. 29.

⁷ With most of these men the doctrine of free grace was only a barrier against a too human conception of the missionary task and methods.

of predestination from the great Apostle to the Gentiles, as Carey already remarked in his *Form of Agreement*: "Nevertheless we cannot but observe with admiration that Paul, the great champion of the glorious doctrines of free and sovereign grace, was the most conspicuous for his personal zeal in the work of persuading men to be reconciled to God."¹

So it appears that we can only very partially explain from theological motives the lack of missionary fervour with Calvin and the other Reformers. These motives are found on the margin of the Reformers' thinking and would therefore never have been able to darken the clear view of the missionary obligation which one could expect to have resulted from the rediscovery of the Gospel, if there had not been a hindrance on quite another level. Not the inward attitude of the Reformers, but the outward circumstances were the most serious obstacle in the way of missionary thinking. The Reformers had no contact with the heathen world. Almost all the lands where missionary work was possible were under the control of Roman Catholic countries. Moreover the hands of the Reformers were tied by the heavy struggle with the Roman Catholic Church, in which the existence of the Reformation was at stake. Is it any wonder those Churches which were always in danger of being persecuted and destroyed, which had to build up their ecclesiastical life from the ground and which, moreover, had no contact whatever with the world outside, dominated as it was by the Roman Catholic powers, had no clear vision of the missionary exigencies and possibilities? I am convinced, that the main cause of the alleged lack of missionary zeal with Calvin and the other Reformers lies in the outward circumstances: the missionary ideal remained as it were a subterranean stream, unable to reach the sea of the Gentile world, and hindered in its speed by theological objections, which were according to Kenneth Scott Latourette perhaps partly an unconscious outgrowth of the external difficulties.²

But all this must not lead us to close our eyes to the fact that the stream of missionary zeal never quite disappeared from the Reformers' thought. With Calvin this stream is much greater than one is superficially inclined to suppose. Not only does the universal meaning of the Gospel take a dominant place

¹ A. H. Oussoren, *William Carey, especially his missionary principles* (1945), p. 274; see also p. 127.

² K. S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, III (1939), p. 25.

in his works, especially in his commentaries on the prophets and in his exposition of the Lord's Prayer¹—he also insists that the Christian community has to pray for the conversion of the heathen and to draw all nations of the earth to God.² It is true that his thoughts on this subject were rather dim—but that they were not merely theoretical speculations is proved by his part in the undertaking of De Villegaignon, which we have to see as a really missionary enterprise, of which the Genevan Reformer was the spiritual father.³ It is moving to read how the emigrants, even after the treason of De Villegaignon, tried to go on with their missionary work on the inhospitable coast of Brazil, and it shows how true it is what Latourette says: "Protestantism proved missionary wherever it had close contact with non-Christians."⁴

Summarising we may say that we find in the works of Calvin the latent presence of a strong missionary zeal, which was sometimes dimmed by theological misunderstandings, but which was mainly prevented from reaching full development by the very difficult circumstances of the Calvinistic Reformation during Calvin's lifetime. That Calvin's fundamental recognition of the missionary duty of the Church did not lead him to a plea for organised missionary work⁵ is no wonder—such a plea could only find a hearing in a later period under more favourable circumstances. We may yet add that Calvin's missionary ideal, of which we see faint and sometimes even clear glimpses in all his works, circles around the two main poles of his thinking: the theological one of the glory and praise of God and the soteriological one of the Christian compassion to save souls from hell and to lead them on the path of salvation.⁶

Only if the theological and the soteriological line are equally emphasised and form a harmonious unity, does the missionary idea find a sphere in which it can come to full growth when the time has become ripe for it. This becomes clear, if we focus our attention on the development of missionary zeal and thought in the history of Calvinism. The first Calvinist whom we meet

¹ Cf. the quotations from Calvin given by C. E. Edwards, "Calvin and Missions", THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY, viii (1936), pp. 48-9.

² Cf. a sermon on Deut. xxxiii. 18-19, quoted by E. Pfisterer, *op. cit.*, p. 101, and the commentary on Isa. xii. 4-5, quoted by W. Schlatter, "Calvin und die Mission", *Evangelisches Missions-Magazin* (1909), pp. 48-9.

³ Cf. W. Schlatter, *op. cit.*, pp. 333-8.

⁴ K. S. Latourette, *op. cit.*, III, p. 27.

⁵ At least as far as we know: his letters to the Brazilian emigrants are lost!

⁶ Both elements we find in a striking juxtaposition in a passage quoted by E. Pfisterer, *op. cit.*, p. 101, from a sermon on Deut. xxxiii. 18-19, which we have already mentioned.

as an ardent champion of the Church's obligation to obey the missionary command of our Lord is the Canterbury Canon A. Saravia, from whom had appeared in 1590 a treatise about the diverse grades of the ministers of the Gospel. Already from the full title¹ of the book it appears that Saravia did not aim in the very first place at a defence of the missionary command; as we have already seen above, the chief object of his work was to defend the episcopal system of Church government against the attacks of the Presbyterian Calvinists, to whom he had once belonged during his ministry and his professorship in Holland.² So his plea for missions was neutralised by the fact that it was embedded in a plea for a system against which the majority of Calvinists had a strong antipathy.

Of much more importance for the awakening of a practical missionary interest was the work of J. Heurnius: *De legatione evangelica ad Indos capessenda admonitio*, which appeared in 1618. This treatise is not so much a systematic exposition as a *cri de cœur*, in which the latent missionary current bursts out with great vigour. The main hindrances had disappeared: no longer were the hands of the Reformed tied by heavy persecutions, no longer was the way to other parts of the world barred by the Roman Catholic powers, it could no longer be said that there was no contact whatever between the Calvinistic part of Western Europe and the Gentile world. By the relations between Holland and the East Indies the floodgates for the missionary stream were opened—now the pure water of the Gospel could flow through them, driven forward by a Calvinism which had escaped the dangers of orthodoxy and scholasticism in consequence of its full emphasis on personal piety and salvation. It is worth while to note that just those theologians who were strongly interested in soteriological questions and in whom the tender piety of the Canons of Dordt had become flesh and blood, were at the same time the most enthusiastic advocates of the Church's missionary obligation. The cry of Heurnius was not a solitary voice: W. Teellinck wrote his *Ecce Homo* and J. van Lodensteyn his *Beschouwinge van Zion*,³ A. Walaeus gave solid missionary instruction in his Seminary at Leiden, J. Hoornbeek proved himself a scholarly advocate for the cause of missions in several

¹ *De diversis ministrorum Evangelii gradibus, sicut a Domino fuerunt instituti, et traditi ab Apostolis, ac perpetuo omnium ecclesiarum usu confirmati.*

² Cf. M. Galm, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

³ "Contemplation of Zion." Both works are a defence of the missionary cause.

of his works, and the great theologian of that time, G. Voetius,¹ paid very much attention to missionary questions in his *Disputationes* as well as in his *Politica Ecclesiastica*. How unjust it is to denounce the missionary zeal of these Dutch theologians as mere "propaganda", as nothing but a desire to increase the influence of the Reformed Church, appears already from the fact that next to the plantation of Churches Voetius sees the conversion of the heathen as an independent missionary purpose. Here again we find the soteriological line, though Voetius, as a good Calvinist, does not neglect the theological line: "*causa finalis ultima et suprema est gloria et manifestatio gratiae divinae*",²

Galm has rightly observed the relation between the stress on personal piety, which we find with the above-mentioned theologians, and their plea for missionary activity.³ But quite wrongly he reduces their theological attitude, from which their missionary zeal resulted, to catholicising tendencies. It cannot be denied that in the elaboration of their missionary ideas they underwent the influence of Roman Catholic authors; but their missionary attitude itself was quite definitely not a result of Roman Catholic influences.⁴ The elements in their thought which Galm ascribes to catholicising tendencies, among which what he calls the ascetic element takes the first place, can easily be traced to the influence of Calvin and the other Reformers, who knew themselves to be the heirs apparent of the rich treasures of the old Christian Church.

That the stream of Dutch missionary activity silted up at last is due to internal and external circumstances which prevented the progress of the newly awakened missionary enthusiasm in Church and State. The missionary stream was stopped at its source by the decay of Dutch Calvinism, which fell into scholasticism on the one hand and mysticism on the other by a one-sided emphasising of the theological or the soteriological line. And the stream which could still flow on in spite of those hindrances could not reach its goal because of the counter-currents of indifference and even hostility with which the East India Company met the missionary work during the second half

¹ Cf. for a list of Voetius' missionary treatises, H. A. van Andel, *De Zendingsleer van G. Voetius* (1912), pp. 21-37.

² Quoted from H. A. van Andel, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

³ M. Galm, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

⁴ Cf. H. Kraemer, "De plaats van den Zending", in *De Kerk in Beweging* (1947), pp. 213, 214.

of its existence.¹ But the voices of the seventeenth-century Dutch advocates of the cause of missions had not sounded in vain: the effects of the stimuli which they gave can still be seen in the remains of the old Dutch mission-work in the East, and the echo of their words awakened later generations—was not Carey most probably influenced by Heurnius's *Admonitio*, when he wrote his *Inquiry*?²

Meantime there were other entirely or partly Calvinistic countries for which the gates to the heathen world opened themselves: when the missionary stream in Holland silted up, a brook began to trickle from England and Scotland to the Thirteen Colonies, which became the forerunner of a mighty stream of missionary activity, expanding itself from Great Britain to all parts of the world. Already in the *Larger Catechism of Westminster*, that ripe fruit of Calvinistic thinking, we see something of that broad vision, when we are taught to pray that the fullness of the Gentiles be brought in.³ And according to the *Directory for the Public Worship of God*, given by the Westminster Assembly, the minister has "to pray for the propagation of the Gospel and Kingdom of Christ to all nations, for the conversion of the Jews, the fullness of the Gentiles, the fall of Antichrist and the hastening of the second coming of our Lord".⁴

These prayers found their echo in many hearts. As a century before in Holland, voices were now raised in England and Scotland advocating the cause of missions. In 1723 a book by a Scottish minister, Robert Millar of Paisley,⁵ appeared: *The History of the Propagation of Christianity and Overthrow of Paganism*. With him we find the same characteristic element as with the Dutch theologians of the former century: he asks for a reformation at home, "that a holy warmth of sincere piety may so burn in our hearts, as would prompt us to spend and be spent for promoting the Kingdom of Christ in every part of the world". Missionary zeal always springs up in those circles where a deep piety prevails; God's honour can only be sought by souls who have tasted the sweetness of His saving grace. About twenty

¹ Cf. C. W. Th. Baron van Boetzelaer van Asperen en Dubbeldam, *De Protestantische Kerk in Nederlandsch-Indië* (1947), passim.

² M. Galm, *op. cit.*, p. 49, quoting from J. R. Callenbach, *Justus Heurnius* (1897), pp. 85 ff. See for the influence of Heurnius' work in Denmark and Germany M. Galm, *op. cit.*, pp. 38, 49, 77, 80.

³ Answer 191.

⁴ From the "Publick Prayer before the Sermon".

⁵ Cf. J. Foster, "A Scottish Contributor to the Missionary Awakening", *International Review of Missions* (1948), pp. 138 ff.

years later, under the influence of the Cambuslang Revival, a number of Scottish ministers came together to form a "Concert of Prayer",¹ which helped to blaze the trail for the great missionary awakening at the end of the eighteenth century. It pleased God to kindle the fire of missionary zeal in Calvinistic Scotland, when in Calvinistic Holland it had almost been extinguished.

Now the question remains: was this missionary awakening, seen from a human point of view, a fruit of Calvinism, or was it quite other factors which called it into life? It is impossible to give a clear answer to this question because of the utter complexity of the religious situation in the eighteenth century. In addition to the influence of Methodism, which was in its turn strongly influenced by German Pietism and Moravianism, there was also the influence of the "Great Awakening" in America, a revivalist movement "which had its deepest roots in Calvinistic theology".² The Moravian Zinzendorf, the Methodist Wesley, the Calvinist Edwards—they all stand at the cradle of the great missionary awakening. But that their stimuli found such an eager response on Calvinistic soil proves once again that missionary zeal was present in Calvinism, ready to spring forward when a broadening of the horizon coincided with a deepening of the spiritual life. The co-operation between a deep sense of God's free and sovereign grace and a fervent desire to glorify God all over the earth yielded rich fruits for the cause of missions, as we see in England and in Scotland: Carey and his partners as well as Duff and his fellow-workers may be called Calvinists in a broad and yet very deep sense.

From Great Britain the missionary ideals were brought to new life in Holland: the tree of missions flowered again, richer than ever before, on the old Calvinistic soil. We cannot say that all branches of Dutch missionary activity are equally rooted in Calvinism—but on the whole Dutch missions have never been able to disavow their Calvinistic origin. A splendid effort to combine Calvinistic and missionary thinking we find in a lecture which A. Kuyper gave at the first missionary Congress of the Reformed Churches³ at Amsterdam in 1890, in which lecture⁴ he tried to find a Calvinistic foundation for the missionary

¹ Cf. J. Foster, "The Bicentenary of Jonathan Edwards' Humble Attempt" *International Review of Missions* (1948), pp. 375 ff.

² A. Keller, *Amerikanisches Christentum Heute* (1943), p. 44.

³ Separated from the Dutch Reformed Church in 1886.

⁴ Edited by Prof. Bavinck under the title *Historisch Document* (1940).

task of the Church. The same Calvinistic foundation was sought in the missionary Report of the Synod of the Reformed Churches, held at Middelburg in 1896. It is a pity that in the Report the soteriological line sometimes disappears behind the theological one, which gives to some turns of phrase a rather chilly effect¹—but by the missionary work itself this one-sidedness soon was corrected, and on the whole the thoughts, expressed in lecture and Report, have been of the utmost importance for the cause of missions not only in the Netherlands, but also in the American Churches of Dutch origin.

We have come to the end of our historical survey, in which only some crucial points in the development of Calvinistic missionary thinking could be mentioned. If we venture to draw a conclusion from it we would say that Calvinistic missionary activity was at its height when there was perfect harmony and unity between the theological and the soteriological line in Calvinism. Where the theological line is emphasised at the expense of the soteriological, there looms a secularised Calvinism, which in its desire to fight “the wars of the Lord” on the broad front of life² loses its passion for souls, but on the other hand a one-sided stress on soteriology leads to a sterile mysticism which is quite passive with regard to the missionary task. The unity of these two lines can only be realised, if we remember and apply the wise words of Solomon: “in the multitude of people is the king’s honour” (Prov. xiv. 28).

So it appears that a living Calvinism has a message for the missionary work of to-day. It derives that message from the Word of God: our charter of salvation, the programme for the task of our life. On a mural painting³ in the missionary centre of the Reformed Churches at Baarn we see the old Calvin standing behind a young, modern missionary. Ages lie between them, but still they are one: for over the young man’s shoulder Calvin’s old hand points to the open book which the missionary holds in his hand: the Bible, the only medicine which can cure us from our self-made ideas and our arbitrary conceptions by showing us something of our Lord’s holy Will and Plan. If missions threaten to become secularised, that Bible calls them back to the core of its message: the free grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, of which they have to give a joyful testimony.

¹ Cf. H. A. van Andel, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

² Cf. J. H. Bavinck, *Onze Werk Zendingskerk*, passim.

³ A work of the Dutch painter Marius Richters, made in 1947.

But if they are in danger of losing sight of their task on the broad front of life, it reminds them of the totalitarian character of the message of Christ: "teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you". The man of the comprehensive approach is warned against the great danger of forgetting the essential task of the Church: to bring the people, the heathen, the lost sheep into the fold of Jesus—but the Pietist who thinks that he is ready if man's soul has been saved has to be reminded of the fact that a good shepherd not only brings his sheep into the fold, but also tries to cure its wounds with tender care. The Calvinistic missionary does not ask the nations to throw away their cultural heritage, because he knows of God's common grace—but much less will he try to preserve it as if it were an order of creation, because he knows that the Word of God is an aggressive and revolutionary power in this world, for Christ has come to make all things new. He is on his guard against an airy optimism with regard to the results of his work, because he knows that it is God who works both to will and to do *of His good pleasure* (Phil. ii. 13), but at the same time the doctrine of God's electing love protects him against despondency and pessimism: it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of *God that showeth mercy*.

Lastly, the doctrine which Calvin drew from the pure fountain of God's holy Word must bring us to deep humility and to great activity alike. Humility: Calvin's soteriology is one confession of our own impotence to do any good, to bring any soul to conversion, and one hymn of praise on God's sovereign grace. The conversion of the nations is never our work; it is only the work of God. But—and this is the other line, which runs through all the works of Calvin—God wants to use us as His instruments, He calls us, He sends us, we are under His command, His name must be glorified by our poor words and our still poorer deeds. And this is the scriptural summary of all that Calvin teaches us: "faithful is He that calleth you, who also will do it" (1 Thess. v. 24).

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