

## WHY SHOULD EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY BE CALVINISTIC ?<sup>1</sup>

### I

THERE is such a thing nowadays as a revival of Calvinism. When we examined some of the objections urged against it, we took the fact for granted. But in case some of you doubt the fact, I think that it will be perhaps not altogether out of place to call attention to two or three unmistakable symptoms of its reality.

On the Continent, let us say roughly half a century ago, Calvinism passed for a matter of no scientific importance whatever. Of course there were Calvinists, few insignificant congregations of peasants and obscure ministers, carefully kept away from influential centres, and especially from academic chairs. Why, they did not themselves dream of such a thing as re-asserting their faith in any university. They felt that the time had come when orthodoxy must be content with protecting itself against the spirit of the world and leave the battlefield of science to the undisputed possession of a proud and self-confident adversary. That self-confidence was first somewhat shaken when scientifically trained men, like Wichelhaus, began to force their way to academical degrees, or, like Abraham Kuyper, having already conquered these degrees, were won by the old discredited creed. And now, in Holland, in Hungary, in Switzerland, in France, even in Germany, the home of rationalism and modernist theology, Calvinism has found its way into influential pulpits in the Church, and to professorships in the Schools. Why, last year you could see, here in Edinburgh, an international congress of Calvinists, where young theologians constituted by far the majority of members. We feel that there is a demand for Calvinism from the side of students in secular branches of science. It is beginning to assert itself even in England. Why, I received myself a pressing invitation to deliver lectures in London on the crisis of thought

<sup>1</sup> A lecture delivered in the Free Church College, Edinburgh, March, 1939.

and the general outlook, by a medical group of students, where Calvinism is gaining ground rapidly. Think of that in England, in Arminian and Anglo-Catholic England!

There is a re-assertion of Calvinism in scientific circles and in a scientific form. That is an indisputable fact. Parallel with that, you have the Barthian movement, causing also much concern to modernism. This revival of Calvinism is not denied, and cannot be, on the Continent, by opponents. At first they tried to explain it away, by saying that the fact that a man trained in modern methods, and acquainted with critical research, could teach Calvinism was to be accounted for by personal eccentricity. When I began to lecture on Calvinistic dogmatics in the theological Faculty of Paris, I was styled the last Calvinist in the world, and regarded as an intellectual piece of curiosity.

The only way I could devise to break that stick put into my wheels was to entice two or three distinguished students from America and Holland, well-confirmed Calvinists, to come and register themselves for a term in the Faculty. As they were preparing for the degree of doctor in divinity or professorship, I knew they had nothing to fear from the danger of being trapped into modernism by my very distinguished colleagues and friends. The presence of these Calvinists caused a great stir, and an end was put for good to the pretence that I was a kind of atavistic curiosum in the world of present theological thought. And now, for many years, by the grace of God, a good proportion of trained students leaves the Faculty in the faith in the authority of Scripture, in sovereign grace and in the free and eternal election to the faith they are going to preach and the salvation they hope for. How can we account for that fact? I heard that when the question was submitted to Karl Barth, he declined to answer by anything but by an appeal to the liberty of the grace of God.

I quite agree with him when he believes and proclaims that sovereign grace is the deep and final cause of such a quite unexpected success. Why, for years, we had laboured almost to no avail. Our arguments were the same as we use now. They seemed to be quite ineffective. And now, suddenly, we see young men, brought up under modernist teaching, come to the faith that was sneered at. We know that we are not more clever than we were. Our own personality cannot

account for that. The cause must be the constraining grace of God. Quite so.

But as we are Calvinists we believe that in the ordinary course of things, even in religious movements, God makes use of natural means. There is, as a rule, a psychical and an intellectual preparation to effectual call. These elements fall into the grounds of historical investigation. These I shall call the causes of the revival of Calvinism.

## II

What are they? As far as I can see, being no historian, no psychologist, but just a dogmatist, there are psychical and intellectual causes.

First: psychical causes in which spiritual factors must be included. During the Great War, the New Testament had been read and pondered upon with more attention than in more happy days, and the New Testament is a very dangerous weapon against modernism. Oh! it is very true that criticism had done its best, and does still much to undermine its authority. But it is no less certain that when read in some dangerous circumstances and not by scraps, but a whole Gospel or an Epistle at a time, as it had been done in the trenches and on the front, the spiritual dynamism, the majesty it radiates were more easily sealed by the testimony of the Spirit than in other circumstances. Souls were thus prepared to receive the message of the Sovereignty of God. And we saw that, avowedly, it is not by means of exegesis that doctrines held by Calvin and sanctioned by the Synod of Dort can be overthrown. Furthermore, the need of a divine authority grew in the proportion with which purely subjective authority had proved fallible and even deceptive.

Modern religious conductors had committed themselves somewhat unguardedly while they stirred great expectations of an era of peace and concord among nations. To many their eyes were opened. When Protestantism has once lost the authority of Scripture, it is doomed to give itself over to illusive will o' the wisps. There are but two alternatives for Protestantism: Scripture, or nothing. And when, in one way or another, the authority of Scripture is restored and at the same time the futility of the power and sovereignty of man, of free-will

and human automatic progress is experimentally made manifest, then the believer can understand the necessity for him to take refuge in the Sovereignty of God. Blind destiny or divine Predestination! Complete secularization or absolute surrender to the mystery of God's all ruling Providence!

Here again, we see no other alternatives. We have rough weather still ahead of us. We need a strong backbone. The Church is awakening to the consciousness of its need. And Calvinism, the faith of the Covenanters, of the Huguenots, and of the Geuzen of Holland, is the only system in Protestantism that can supply with the requisite energy the Church in danger on the deep waters. At least I was told so by one of the Lutheran and modernist divines, whose son is discovering John Calvin. Were I to dwell upon the pragmatism side of the question, pragmatism in the sense of William James, I would point to the necessity for our Reformed Church of returning to Calvinism, if they wish to stop the drift to Roman Catholicism, in its Thomist form. Thomism is very attractive to many a Protestant, because it believes in the sovereignty of God, in Predestination, and free election to glory. That is its inward strength. I know a young woman, a student in philosophy, Protestant born, who told her minister she threw herself into the arms of the Thomists, because she saw clearly that with the God of Henri Bois, the great modern adversary of Calvin, she was at the brink of the abyss. And later on she expressed some irresolution, after the irretrievable step she had taken, when she heard of the revival of Calvinism. And I know of many other cases of the kind. But I will not allow myself to dwell on the subject, because I believe that acceptance of a system of theology is a matter not of utility, but of truth.

Now for the intellectual factors that play into the hands of Calvinism.

As time is measured we shall not stop to consider now scientific theories or philosophical systems recently either devised or revived that are favourable to religious ideas in general. Of course, Calvinism being the most consistent form of religion, religion comes to its right, as Dr. Warfield used to say, everything that tends to help religion profits Calvinism. But some real revolutions have taken place in the world of thought that directly remove obstacles, particularly in the way of Calvinism. On the other side some philosophical

systems are gaining ground that are positively favourable to a Calvinistic *Weltanschauung*, to a Calvinistic conception of the world. These I shall briefly mention.

First of all, the decline of the philosophy of Kant. Secondly, the revival of realistic theories, amongst which, the quite unexpected renewal of the Thomist theories of knowledge and action. Thirdly, the very extremes to which anti-Calvinistic theories have been carried.

### III

First: The decline of Kant's philosophy.

On the Continent, especially in Germany and in French speaking countries, the neo-Protestant theology had been enthralled by Kantism. Emmanuel Kant was styled the philosopher of Protestantism. Now Baader<sup>1</sup> has rightly said: "The fundamental error of his philosophy is that man is autonomous and spontaneous, as if he possessed reason of himself. For it transforms man to a God and so becomes pantheistic." I should add, with an eye on historical development, "or rather Deistic."

Such being the fact, we can easily understand that neo-Protestantism, if consistently Kantian, could not but stand in flat contradiction to Calvinism. And it was very consistently Kantian. That was a deadly obstacle in the way of Calvinism.

Well, very fortunately, that obstacle has been removed. "In our days", says a contemporary philosopher, himself an idealist,<sup>2</sup> "the most superficial observer of philosophical ideas cannot but be struck by the decline, in all countries without exception, of the idealistic and rationalistic ideas issued from Cartesius and developed by Kant. ". . . In Germany"—the author was writing in 1934—"the neo-Hegelian and neo-Kantian schools have been definitively supplanted by *phenomenology*." That is a fact the consequences of which, as regards evangelical theology, cannot be exaggerated.

On the other side, the revival of realism, and curiously enough of the realistic theories of knowledge held by Thomists, have done a great deal of good to our cause. Understand me: Calvinism is not bound to any scholastic philosophy, and

<sup>1</sup> As quoted by Abraham Kuyper in *Pantheism's Destruction of Boundaries*.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Gex, *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie*, Lausanne, no. supplémentaire 95 bis, juillet 1934, pp. 144 et 179.

Thomism, as regards its doctrine of sin, is as semi-Pelagian as any other Roman-Catholic system of dogmatics. But the fact is that Thomists hold firmly the reality of time and space, as creations of God, and teach divine physical premotion of the created free will. And another fact is that some of our greatest Calvinistic theologians, Jerome Zanchius for instance, were Thomists in that respect. And for a great part, the birth of the Calvinistic society in France was due to this double fact. Some years ago, Protestant students in philosophy, disciples of a professor in the Sorbonne, came to me and stated that the only way they could see to reconcile their scholastic philosophy with their evangelical faith was to become Calvinists.

I mentioned lastly the extremes to which were carried the consequences of modern theology as causes of Calvinistic reaction. The negation concerning their objective reality of a personal God, the weakness of Arminian theodicy leading to Manicheism, were seen to be logical consequences of principles from which Arminians and Wesley started to assault Calvinism. These principles brought also biblical criticism to a crisis, hastened by archaeological discoveries.

But these extremes were to many so manifestly contrary to their religious sense of dependence upon God and to the first elements of Christianity that they were all of necessity obliged to recoil, and they returned to the living and true God of Scripture, with all the implications given with a consistent faith in that God.

And so it came to pass that the supreme authority of Scripture, the spirituality of the sacraments, and the eternal decree were again received with eagerness by hungry souls.

I think I have said enough to show that a revision of evangelical theology is intellectually possible and desirable.

#### IV

I must now try to make clear why that revision should eventually take place.

My answer is, first, for the sake of coherency in thought.

First of all, evangelical theology professes to be prepared to follow truth at all costs, whithersoever truth will lead. Then, it must not begin with subverting one of the first principles

of reason. Of course we do not believe in independent autonomous reason in "ratio ratiocinans". Reason must be subordinate to revelation and in fact, ratio ratiocinata. But you cannot give up reason altogether and pretend to build up a system of theology. Well, reason states that a proposition is either true or false, there is no other alternative. Aristotle tried to make an exception in regard to the prediction of events depending on the free-will, for practical and ethical purposes. Revelation shows clearly that certainty attaches to free actions as well as to any others. Certainty, in this regard, has as many witnesses as there are prophets, said Tertullian. And reason sees clearly that a future event due to freewill is as certain in its futurity as it is free in its nature. Thomas Reid speaks excellently to that effect.

"It must be granted that whatever was, certainly was, and whatever is, certainly is, so whatever shall be, certainly shall be. These are identical propositions, and cannot be doubted by those who conceive them distinctly. But I know no rule of reasoning by which it can be inferred that because an event *certainly shall be*, therefore its production must be necessary. The manner of its production, whether free or necessary, cannot be concluded from the time of its production, whether it be past, present or future. . . . I grant therefore that from events being foreseen they are certainly future but from their being certainly future it does not follow that they are necessary."<sup>1</sup>

If we only bear in mind that by moral necessity nothing more than certainty is understood by Calvinism, this is granting all any Calvinist needs demand. Certainty of an event is truth of that event, but God being the source of all truth, or still better truth being an equation of created belief to revealed thoughts of God, and God being truth itself, the Sovereign of all reality, nothing can be true, no event can be certain, that has not been pre-ordained by His sovereign will. So at the very outset of his work, the evangelical theologian is confronted with the necessity of accepting the constructive principle of Calvinism. And he ought to be a Calvinist, if he is resolved to be consistent with himself. As Dr. Warfield said, Calvinism is, first, religion come to its right. I have shown that religion's first and last word is belief in God's absolute independence of His creatures, and His sovereign dominion over the creatures.

You cannot profess you believe that and, at the same time go on teaching that future free actions must be as uncertain to Him as to us and that every moment He must be dependent

<sup>1</sup>. *Native Powers*, Essay IV, Ch. 10. Works. Edinburgh, 1849, p. 629.

upon us to receive vast accession of knowledge and so become much more perfect in learning and in power than He was before we acted.

Evangelical theology must at least be evangelical. It must of all necessity teach the Gospel of salvation as a sovereign and free gift of the grace of God.

Now, in order to counteract the Calvinistic revival, Victor Monod, in the last months of his life, tried to set up John Wesley over against John Calvin. So it seems that he had given up his idea of a poor ignorant but well meaning God, trying to mend his own blunders, and that he bowed to the God of the English revivalist. We cannot but rejoice at that. There is an undeniable progress here. But that will not do. Wesley was a very great Christian character. He was also an incomparable revivalist. But he was neither a real theologian nor a Reformer. His thought was still engaged in the humanitarian philosophy of the eighteenth century that has gone now to pieces. That he was still a humanitarian thinker, appears in his attempt to submit the ways of God to the judgment seat of human reason. This is no more intellectually possible nowadays. People who believe they are degenerated apes, by descent, cannot but see that it would be ludicrous for them attempting to call God at the bar of their reason. And even if they have given up that old dream of the nineteenth century, they think too much of the limits of speculative reason to do that. Rationalism, dogmatic rationalism, has been killed by Emmanuel Kant, and Kant in his turn is dead.

But let Wesley's theories go. What of the consistency of his evangelicalism?

He professes to believe that there is no other saviour than God through Christ and the Spirit of Christ; that the sinner is lost, utterly lost, otherwise he would have no need of salvation. And at the same time he teaches that freewill of man co-operates in the salvation of the same. So there we have not one saviour but two: God and the sinner. All glory for that salvation must not be ascribed to God, but a good part of it, nay, the decisive part, must be ascribed to man. Man says the last word. God cannot save him without the gracious *fiat* of the man. Man is not really lost, dead in sin, he is just wounded. Indeed he does not need a saviour. All that he needs is a life-belt thrown to him by a sailor. You



would search in vain in the whole Scriptures for such a description of the work of salvation, which is salvation, not salvage.

But after all, we have to choose not between Calvin and Wesley in such an earnest conflict. God and God alone, speaking in His Word, is the supreme judge in all controversies of religion.

We are not to measure the men God has given to His Church according to our own measures, which, being human, will always remain measures of dwarfs. We are to bow before the majesty of God speaking in His Word. He alone is great. Men are nothing. John Calvin is not, as Thomas Aquinas, in the Church of Rome, our *doctor angelicus*. We are not bound to his words. His opinions are very important to us, because he was a very extraordinary interpreter of the word that was written, and a devoted soldier of the Word that was made flesh. But that is all. So the important thing is that we believe that evangelical theology must be Calvinistic because it must be consistent with itself, and reconciled with Scripture.

I was told that English people do not trouble themselves much with logic, that they are first of all practical people. I do not know if this is quite so true when you come to speak of Scottish people. But whatever be the case, I would say: beware of inconsistency in religious matters. The human soul, be it English, Scottish or French, begins to suspect there is something wrong in a theology when it discovers flat contradictions in it. Beware, Beware! Thomism is a very consistent system. The theology of the least effort is suicide for Protestantism.

Liberty of conscience and thought, together with humble submission to the authority of God, can be found only in Calvinism. We should take care not to lose the freedom into which we were called by our God. He alone, according to the words of the Confession of Westminster, is the Lord of conscience, and to him alone, not to a Pope, not to a Church, not to freewill, but to Him alone, I say, must be ascribed all praise and glory. That is why, in my opinion, evangelical theology ought to be Calvinistic.

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