

THE RE-EMERGENCE OF CALVINISM

IN some quarters is heard the entreaty to "go back" to some standard or other. But in the present subject there is no going back but rather a development in the forward progress of theological thought. In the re-emergence of Calvinism must be seen not a putting back of the clock but a vigorous system of theology stretching its limbs and heading away from the bunch of competitors in the theological race. The system of thought that many considered to be out of the running has emerged once again and now seems likely to lead the way.

Now what is it that is re-emerging? Not the whole of Calvinistic dogma, lock, stock, and barrel, but its emphasis on the Sovereignty of God. It is in this form that Calvinism is re-emerging. Whether all the corollaries of that central principle will follow is a matter for the future to decide. For the present purpose the re-emergence of Calvinism will be regarded as a fact; and what follows will seek to investigate not so much the forms which the revived Calvinism is taking as the causes of its re-emergence. Why should a system of dogma, four centuries old, come once again into the orbit of men's thinking? Why should that theology, the theology of "a creed outworn", reclothe itself with vitality?

I

The answer can be given in a fivefold way, and first of all in the fact that *Calvinism offers man an authority*. Never were men more ready to follow a leader than to-day. That man should be willing to follow a leader appears to be bound up in his very nature, but in times of moral decadence this natural characteristic is apt to run to excess. It is one of the distressing features of the present time that the individual and independent thinking of most people has become so weak that almost any adventurer who sets himself up as an authority can obtain a following. These are the days of the experts. Let an expert speak, and the majority will bow down. Man needs an authority. He needs it individually; he needs it politically; he needs it religiously. At heart man knows that he is not competent to rule himself. The most distinguished leaders of men have been among those to confess

their own need of authority. Solomon when taking up the reins of government confessed himself a little child. In this confession he stands as a symbol of man's sense of helplessness in the presence of great factors which he does not understand. Those who guide feel their need of guidance: those who lead acknowledge their own need of being led. Man longs for someone to govern him: he was made to be ruled by a Higher just as in turn he was given dominion over the lower. Theocracy is the Divine pattern for the government of mankind, and every grade of human government lower than that has weaknesses in it that point to the need of a Higher Power. All the experiments in human government and all the failures of those experiments proclaim the impotence of man to govern himself.

It is at this point that the re-emerging Calvinism is so strong. Calvinism affirms the Sovereignty of God as its central and fundamental doctrine. God is man's rightful Lord, and only when man recognises the sovereignty of God can he be truly at rest. Calvinism puts God where man's need requires God to be, that is, on the throne. In the doctrine of an enthroned God, Calvinism gives to man the authority needed for the guidance of his life. God is sovereign in the whole life of man, in thought, feeling and will, in things material and in things spiritual.

It is undoubtedly in the realm of the spiritual that man feels most keenly the need for authority. Nowhere so much as in religion does man display his desire for an authority to which he can yield complete obedience. Cardinal Newman said, "Dogma has been the fundamental principle of my religion: I know no other religion". In that saying he confessed his need of authority in things religious. Relativism has been the god of recent thinking, and hopeless confusion has been the result. In relativism there is no objective standard, no absolute norm by which to measure things. Criticism has undermined for many the Scriptural authority on which Protestantism was founded, and an undermined Scripture leaves all questions open. This great spiritual certainty having been taken away, refuge has been sought in the findings of religious psychology, but the psychology of religion can never get beyond the inward states. The supreme Object of worship is never reached by a process of analysing the religious consciousness.

Calvinism finds in Scripture the authoritative word of God to man. The doctrines of Revelation and Inspiration give to the

believer a norm by which he may know the truth. God has imparted the knowledge of Himself and of His will in revelation. From this position an objective standard is gained by which man may measure his thoughts and aspirations. Further, in the doctrine of the "Testimony of the Spirit" Calvinism supplies the believer with a final court of appeal. In this twofold security of objective and subjective certainty the Calvinist knows his religious experience to be firmly founded. No religion which is not a religion of absolutism can truly satisfy the need of man. It is because Calvinism offers man an authority that it is found in the ascendancy to-day.

It is not only in respect of the truth of religion, however, but also in regard to the experience of it that Calvinism introduces an authority that is satisfying. The sense of being "elect", the knowledge that he was in God's hands, the consciousness that he was being swept in the force of a current stronger than himself, and the intimate experience of being one cared for and chosen by a Heavenly Father, gave to the old-time Calvinist his personal security and strength. Here was the authority that presided over his experience. Here was a Providence that protected his way. His life was not a cork bobbing about on a choppy sea but a guided vessel being moved along the mysterious and mighty tides about him and being surely directed to the desired haven.

With the sovereignty of God plan and purpose come into life and into history.

II

A second point for consideration in the subject under discussion is that *Calvinism meets man's reaction from himself*. Man is a failure towards himself. Optimistic views concerning the powers of man and his progressive virtue are a disappointment. Man is revealing his real self to himself. The strife and confusion of the world are the reflection of the heart of man. The advance that has been made by man in his mastery of the material world has not been matched by an equal progress in ethical development. The brightness of humanism is darkened by the heavy clouds of sin. The fair hypothesis of human goodness is shattered on the ugly rock of man's desperate wickedness. The Calvinistic doctrines of the Fall and Human Depravity are being vindicated by the facts. Calvinism tells a man that his

secret doubts about himself are only too true: it unmask a man before himself and so starts him on the road to reality.

For many generations now the thinking of man has been centred in man. Everything has been studied in relation to man. The worlds of nature, of science, and of invention have been harnessed to man's desire and regarded as having their end in man's attainments. The Scripture which reads, "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth His handiwork", has been re-written to mean "The heavens declare the greatness of man, and the firmament showeth his possibilities". Everything has been for man, until man in his self-estimated bigness bestrides the world like a colossus. Nietzsche is but the climax of a long period of thinking of this type. The doctrine of the "superman", however, is being put to a very severe test to-day and is revealing its basic ugliness and its inner hollowness. The anthropocentric way of thinking is philosophically unsound. Man is not the measure of all things. Man is not big enough to sustain the universe of thought and experience.

This tendency to value everything by man has not been confined to philosophy: it has found its way into religion. Religion has been subjected to an exhausting analysis and has been dissected beyond all recognition. But the examination of religion has been carried out largely on the assumption that religion was made for man and in order simply to meet man's needs. Man thus becomes the measure of religion: and in the sphere of the spiritual and eternal the useful has become the test of the true. But religion based on conceptions of this kind can provide no peace for the soul. It is from such religion that men are turning away.

Here Calvinism lifts up its voice with strength. Calvinism demands that it be recognised that religion exists not for man but for God. It denies that the subjective side of the religious experience is the essence and purpose of religion. It will admit no such thing as a utilitarian religion: the life of man in relation to God is not a dull pragmatism that uses God. Calvinism will not have God degraded into the category of useful functions. All things exist for God, and religion must be a religion of God. Religion is by God and for God: it has God as its beginning and God as its end. It is the heart-sickness of men and women to-day that makes them turn away from the optimistic humanism on which they have been fed and long for the health-giving tonic

that is found in Calvinism. Calvinism keeps the relations right: it places God over man, not man over God. It meets man in his man-weariness and confronts him with God, the God Who is all-sustaining and all-satisfying. It meets him with the God Who is man's chief end.

III

These last thoughts lead quite naturally to a third reason for the re-emergence of Calvinism. *Calvinism presents a lofty conception of God.* It has been the vogue to stress the immanence of God, and man's kinship with the Divine. The fashion has been to explain away as much miracle as possible and to banish the supernatural beyond the bounds of theology. But the attempt to put together a cohesive Christian system on a naturalistic basis is perpetually being frustrated by the persistent re-appearance of the supernatural. It is no longer scientifically possible to regard the world as a closed system. It is a very thin veil that divides the supernatural from the natural, and it is repeatedly bursting in upon experience. Turning in quite another direction it is pleasing to observe that among evangelical Christians there is found on all hands a longing for revival. Yet in what terms do men pray for that revival? It is that God would "break in" upon human life, that by His Spirit He would sweep through the world in mighty blessing, breaking down the hearts of men in penitence and faith. What is this but a longing for a God Who is above and beyond?

Calvinism speaks plainly here: it affirms the Transcendent God. It proclaims God as Isaiah saw Him "on a throne, high and lifted up". It avoids the cold lifelessness of Deism but also keeps away from the stifling oppressiveness of Pantheism. Holding in their proper relations the doctrines of the Divine Immanence and the Divine Transcendence Calvinism sets before man a God Whom he can worship, and before Whom he must bow down. Benjamin B. Warfield has written that the fundamental principle of Calvinism "lies in a profound apprehension of God in His majesty, with the accompanying realisation of the exact nature of the relation sustained to Him by the creature as such, and particularly by the sinful creature". Calvinism confronts man with the "inscrutable" God Whose ways are past finding out, with the "high and lofty One Who inhabiteth eternity, Whose name is Holy". Here is the God "Other than

ourselves " Whom Karl Barth seeks to present. In contrast with the over-familiarity which has characterised modern Christianity Calvinism warns, " Draw not nigh hither for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground ". God is not reducible to man; and, despite His having come near to us in the mystery of the Incarnation, He is still described in the New Testament as " dwelling in light which no man can approach unto ".

The doctrine of the Sovereignty of God which lies at the heart of Calvinism declares not only that God's will ought to be done but triumphantly affirms that it is being done. Calvinism glories in the conviction " that the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men ", and exults with the psalmist that " The Lord hath prepared His throne in the heavens; and His kingdom ruleth over all ". Calvinism sees a great and omnipotent God, standing up over the world's affairs to-day, having made bare His mighty arm to work. It sees the Lord Jesus Christ on the white horse riding forth " conquering and to conquer ", and it even hears the ringing praise of heaven in the acclamation, " The Lord God Omnipotent reigneth ".

IV

The foregoing sections may be thought enough to account for the re-emergence of Calvinism, but another line of thought is not out of place. *Calvinism offers man a life-system*. What is the meaning of life? Whither does it tend? Why do we live at all? What is the prize for which men run? What are life's ultimate values? These and a hundred more questions persist in rising to the surface of the mind, and they press for an answer. Every man has his own philosophy of life, whether it be explicit in his consciousness or implicit in his habit and outlook. It is according to the nature of the prevalent philosophy of life that is held that history is shaped. The life-system of the philosophers and politicians of ancient Rome was reflected in the social and political structure of that day. The value of the life-system of Roman Catholicism may be judged from the history of the Middle Ages.

The present moment in history finds the world in a mortal conflict over different ideologies, over different life-systems. Dr. Abraham Kuyper has pointed out that any philosophy or religion claiming to be a life-system must possess insight into the

three fundamental relations of human life, namely, man's relation to *God*, man's relation to *man*, and man's relation to the *world*. He also argues that Calvinism presents a conspicuously adequate life-system based on these relations. He maintains further that the democracy which followed in the wake of the French Revolution was an atheistic imitation of the life-system of Calvinism. Most of the modern social theories of the rights and duties of man are the outgrowth of that revolution; but it is not so generally recognised that whatever of real worth there is in these theories is owed to Calvinism. If modern sociological ideas are to be re-invigorated and vitalised it must be by the impact on them of the Calvinistic insistence upon man's fundamental creaturely relationship to God, before Whom all men stand utterly equal. Herein lies the true foundation for any conception of the personal equality of all men: and herein, too, lies the strength of such a conception. In the present ideological conflict both sides are sharpening their weapons: it is therefore not to be wondered at that the defenders of personal liberty are turning to the armoury of Calvinism with its doctrine of the equal personal worth of every man in the sight of God.

In Calvinism is a view of life such as is needed to-day as a corrective against the weak and one-sided systems which are struggling for the mastery. The Christian man cannot stand aside in monastic indifference to the world in which God has placed him. He must act: but he also desires to act according to knowledge. The life-system of Calvinism gives him that guiding light without which he would grope and stumble in the darkness of human contrivings.

V

A fifth good reason why the re-emergence of Calvinism need cause no surprise is that *Calvinism has room for the contradictions of life*. Life is a paradox, and Calvinism does not seek to impose an unreal unity upon it. Life is confronting many people to-day with its terrible contradictions. For the sake of liberty men put themselves in bondage. Civilisation is rising up in vigour to defend itself, yet in the very act it is negating itself. The scientific progress of the last four decades has been phenomenal, yet man seems to be going backwards.

In spiritual things the paradox of life is acute. Man feels he

is bound by the great invisible forces that are at work in the world; he feels he is a creature of circumstance in the iron chains of environment, upbringing and habit, but for all that he cannot bring himself to deny that he is free. The eternal contradiction of free-will and determinism is ever present. Man feels that he counts for nothing, and yet he cannot deny his own personal worth for that would mean the shattering of every noble purpose.

Because of these contradictions in life's deepest places man despises the facile solutions that are offered to him. They are suspected because they are too easy. Man's thoughts, therefore, are again turned towards Calvinism despite, nay, because of, its self-confessed antinomies and its unresolved problem of grace and free-will. Men look to it because of its power to hold resolutely to the dual truth. The strength of Calvinism is just the room that it has for the contradictions of life. Its own great doctrines contain within them this profound Yes and No, in which every affirmation is a denial and every denial carries with it an affirmation. To say this is not to mean that Calvinism is equivocal, but it is to say that it sees the truth and sees its depths.

In conclusion, it must be acknowledged that the causes of the re-emergence of Calvinism are undeniably deep, and just because they are deep they are strong and likely to prevail. In a series of lectures delivered at Edinburgh in March 1939, Dr. Lecerf, Professor of Dogmatics in the University of Paris, enumerated some of the causes which had contributed to the undoubted revival of Calvinism. He placed spiritual causes in the foremost position, and among them the influence of the New Testament. It is to these deep places of human need and Divine truth that the re-emergence of Calvinism is to be traced.

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