

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

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

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

THE INDIVIDUALITY OF CALVINISM

THIS subject is not at all a new one. It is remarkable that in the last few years a couple of books on the individuality of Calvinism should just have been published in the English language. Wm. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, U.S.A., provided a new edition of my great teacher, Dr. A. Kuyper's masterwork, namely his *Stone Lectures on Calvinism*, with a preface by the well-known Dr. Henry Beets. The same firm published a book from the hand of H. H. Meeter, Doctor of Divinity of the Free University of Amsterdam, under the title, *The Fundamental Principles of Calvinism*. And in the series of works of the late Professor Warfield, the fifth volume is dedicated to Calvin and Calvinism.

We talk about Calvinism. But in what sense do we understand it? The above-named Dr. Warfield discerns a threefold use of the word Calvinism. He writes: "Sometimes it designates merely the individual teaching of John Calvin. Sometimes it designates more broadly, the doctrinal system confessed by that body of Protestant Churches known historically in distinction from the Lutheran Churches, as "the Reformed Churches"; but also quite commonly called "the Calvinistic Churches" because the greatest scientific exposition of their faith in the Reformation age, and perhaps the most influential of any age, was given by John Calvin. Sometimes it designates, more broadly still, the entire body of conceptions, theological, ethical, philosophical, social, political, which under the influence of the master mind of John Calvin, raised itself to dominance in the Protestant lands of the post-Reformation age, and has left a permanent mark not only upon the thought of mankind, but upon the life-history of men, the social order of civilized peoples, and even the political organization of states" (O.C., p. 353). We take Calvinism in the last, the broadest sense.

I

Calvinism thus described has its individuality. History teaches it. The present state of things teaches it. Calvinism has set its mark upon whole nations. We notice it even in our days of apostasy and wickedness. It reveals the unbroken

strength of Calvinism. Germany and the Scandinavian lands are Lutheran. There we have the great Lutheran churches. But no Lutheran science or policy is to be found anywhere. I do not say that the system of Luther has no consequences for the dominion of public life. But Luther himself only partly deduced these consequences and there has been no further development of his principles by his followers. So there has never been a people that demonstrated the final consequences of Lutheranism. With the Roman Catholics things are different. There we find not alone a Roman theology, but also a Roman science. Here, however all is brought under the power of the church. If the church loses its influence, as we see it happening in France and Spain, nothing remains of Romanism. There is no energy independent of the priests. Calvinism alone is a religious system containing those forces within itself by which it is able to imbue life in all its phases.

We wish to discover the cause, which gives rise to this extraordinary power of Calvinism. It is its individuality. Briefly, we define it as follows: Calvinism acknowledges without any reservation that God is God, and reckons with this fact in the entire practice of life.

It is by no means difficult to demonstrate that just this constitutes the individuality and strength of Calvinism. I cannot now deal with the special doctrines of Calvinism. I must confine myself therefore to mentioning that Calvinistic theologians have always stood firm for the absolute sovereignty of God, for the glory of the Lord, for the reign of the law of God in all dominions.

But it may be objected that the Lutheran have also pleaded for the sovereignty of God. Not less the Roman church. To a certain extent that is true. That makes it necessary to add a correlate sentence to the first one. Calvinism maintains that God is God, but it also holds man to be such as he is revealed by the Word of God.

We are obliged to take good note of the importance of this addition. In our days we have the Barthian theology, that claims to be Calvinistic. But of man it makes a "Hohlraum", a mere cavity, an empty capacity. It calls to mind the old Lutheran theory of the *lapis ac truncus*. But it is by no means Calvinistic. The Roman church confesses the absolute sovereignty of God. But in anthropology and soteriology it is semi-Pelagian,

and Arminian too. If one takes in earnest the fact that God is God, one has to see man, not as he wishes to see himself, not as the heart desires it, but as God has revealed him. This is our correlate addition.

II

Now I shall try to show you what it means to see God as God and man such as God revealed him to be. This principle indeed has its significance for the whole of life.

So it should be. God is the Creator of all things. He made them, that they might proclaim the glory of the Lord. If Calvinism adores God as the Creator of the universe, it is its duty, its task, to seek the praise of the Lord by all means and in every sphere. All things are of God. Man is of God. There is no thing, not even the least, that may be withdrawn from his imperium.

Now we see it is the duty of Calvinism to fulfil its special task in our days. We live in a world which is withdrawing itself from God. The French revolution gave the watchword: *ni Dieu, ni maitre*, and the nineteenth century followed this token. The church lost its hold on the people. The Word of God was no longer known and esteemed. There was no place for God in public life any longer. In the twentieth century things are growing even worse. Much courage is required to confess that the Lord is God and that it is He who reigns supreme over the world and its inhabitants. The powers of the world have turned their backs upon the Lord.

But at the present time, too, the Lord has preserved a remnant of faithful ones according to the election of grace. He raises unto himself his chosen people that it may lift up the ensign for all peoples. It is the holy task of Calvinism to proclaim in our times, even in our times, that the Lord is God and that there is no God save the Lord.

Perhaps there are a few small indications, pointing out that there is a people ready to accept this proclamation. Here and there the need of the times is driving men to Christ. Sometimes we hear of men and women, who have learned no longer to depend on human experience, but to seek the Lord so that He may help them. Be that as it may, it is the duty of Calvinism not only to have, to keep its individuality, its strength, but also to set to work with it.

How should this be done? I shall try to indicate some ways in which it may happen; they at once demonstrate the individuality and the strength of Calvinism.

Firstly Calvinism alone can in the right manner maintain the absolute sovereignty of the Lord. Calvinism is a unity by virtue of its principle. Perhaps it may be objected that Calvinism is dualism, because it professes an absolute disparity between God and man. It is true. But this very disparity shows that Calvinism is no real dualism. The two parties God and man are not of equal range. God is the Creator and man is His creature. Therefore we may hold Calvinism to be a unity. It is the most consequent theological system. It stands opposed to all monism, and all pantheism, and all deism. But in itself it is a unity, because it sees God as the only origin and preserver of all things. As such a unity Calvinism reveals its individuality and strength in the present as it did in the past.

Secondly, I wish to point out the fact that all this also has its negative significance. As a unity, as a consequent system, it was obliged by its individuality to break with all that was not Calvinism. The Calvinistic churches, more consistently than any others, rejected Roman theology and hierarchy; they were obliged to break with the Lutherans, they condemned the Arminians. In our days too the Calvinistic churches prove themselves to have the greatest power of resisting the errors of this century. In Holland, in America, in South Africa, Calvinistic churches condemned theological thoughts which were in conflict with the Word of God. This proves the individuality of Calvinism.

III

Now I come to my second part. We have noted the individuality of Calvinism in general; but you, of course, realize that there is also a particular side to the question. I cannot write about the peculiar doctrines of Calvinism now, but it may be allowable to demonstrate its individuality in some points.

Firstly, I shall refer to the Holy Scripture. If Calvinism makes earnest with the fact, that God is God, it must tremble before His Word. It may be said in honour of the old Calvinistic dogmatics that they give a very full *locus de Sacra Scriptura*. Even Calvin himself treats of the Holy Scripture, and his disciples followed in his footsteps. In this way we have received this

beautiful exposition, which even now rouses the admiration of all theologians, and forms a firm foundation for further studies.

But time brought changes. The nineteenth century brought the Biblical critic. A great number of learned men assailed the Holy Scriptures with their theories, and their success was immense. Their endeavours especially contributed towards undermining belief in the authority of Scripture. In this respect their appearance, too, amongst others, was an utterance of the spirit of the time.

Now, it is remarkable to see the difference in the attitude of Lutherans, Romanists and Calvinists. The Lutherans show no power of resistance. There are many pious men and women among the simple Lutherans, who abhor the Biblical criticism and believe in the unshaken authority of the Word of God. Yet there is no fresh Lutheran theory, which at once rejects modern systems and satisfies the needs of our time. All the Lutheran theologians in principle accept Biblical criticism, and among them it is only a matter of degree. The Roman church, it is true, has done something. She condemned and excommunicated a number of priests, who accepted Biblical criticism. She gave some verdicts on Biblical subjects. But she has not developed a theory, which meets the difficulties of to-day. She maintains the old mediaeval viewpoint of Thomas, and holds that so long as science does not come into conflict with what the Church decrees, science is free.

But what of Calvinism? Calvinism has developed a new theory on the old foundations. I cannot say that Calvinism is quite ready with its theory. But there is in it not only a gradual but an essential difference from the teachings of the critics. Calvinism tries to meet the difficulties in its own way, that is, in addition to maintaining the authority of the Word of God. Calvinism does not fear the attacks of science. Neither does it presume to solve all problems, but it reckons with them. It is attempting to erect a complete edifice of its own fashion and through the blessing of the Lord it has achieved something. It proceeds according to a well fixed method, not suffering itself to be led by others, but going its own way. Here we see the individuality and the strength of Calvinism.

But other things have to be mentioned. In our days Calvinism alone has pleaded for the absolute authority of the Scriptures, together with all its consequences. A well-known

theory holds, that the Bible has authority only in the sphere of religion and ethics. Others say, the Bible has authority for me in so far as I accept or believe this authority. Calvinism rejects all such theories and confesses the Bible to have authority because it is the Word of God, and therefore to have authority over the whole of life. All things written in the Bible are true because they stand in the Bible. Calvinism accepts without any exception all that Scripture contains, history and prophecies, the teaching of Jesus and of his apostles. And if the Scriptures speak about matters relating to science and geography, Calvinism readily accepts such statements. Indeed, to Calvinists, the Bible in the fullest sense of the word is a lamp unto their feet and a light unto their path. They find support in the Scriptures for every occasion of life. Not only in matters of the spirit, but also in everyday life, in handicraft and in study. This is the individuality and the strength of Calvinism.

All this has its consequences too. It is quite well known that Calvinists have ever insisted on searching the Scriptures. Calvin himself was the greatest student in this respect of the Reformation period. He had his own method of explaining the Bible. So it is in our days. The Calvinistic expositors do not agree with the expositions of others. Their principle that the whole Bible is the inspired Word of God dictates to them their own characteristic method of expounding the Bible.

And now we come to a consequence relating to all who are children of God. In our Calvinistic families the Bible is faithfully read. We have always preached the exhortation of Paul to Timothy : give heed to reading. Just this is the blessing which results from the acceptance of the authority of the Word of God, namely that the Bible is known in our family circles.

IV

This brings me to a second respect in which the individuality and strength of Calvinism even in our days become clear. As in the former respect, so here also, it follows as a direct consequence from the acknowledgment that God is God. I mean the confession of free and sovereign grace. In the Netherlands things are somewhat different. During the last fifty years there has been a great struggle about the authority of the Scriptures. But on making his entrance in the lists, the famous Calvinistic theologian, Dr. A. Kuyper, wrote a series of articles defending the doctrine

of particular grace. We see, therefore, that not only in England and Scotland free and sovereign grace is regarded as constituting one of the most individual elements of Calvinism.

Allow us to examine this individuality a little closer. God is God and man is his creature. But man has forsaken his position. He obeyed the devil so that his eyes were opened and he came to know good and evil. But he is a sinner, incapable of any good work and inclined to all evil, as the apostle says : we are of ourselves foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. We cannot work out our own salvation.

Such is the condition of man. And yet man in his pride will not acknowledge it. He fancies himself capable of doing something of his own, at least of catching hold of the hand, which is stretched out to him. The natural man is unwilling to confess his damnable and execrable state. The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him, and he cannot know them, because they are spiritually judged.

This was the sin of the Jews, especially of the Pharisees. For being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. The same thing caused the conflict between Augustine and Pelagius. History reports Pelagius to have been a pious man, but unfortunately he sought to establish that righteousness which is out of himself. The Roman church is semi-Pelagian, although, as you know, many internal differences exist ; the Augustinians and Dominicans hold a more correct view than the Jesuits. But on the whole the Roman church has departed from the right path ; Romanism has become synergism and as such rejects free and sovereign grace. Within the Calvinistic churches the Arminians sprang up, and, I presume, you all are acquainted with the five articles, drawn up by the illustrious Synod of Dordrecht, by which the Remonstrants were condemned. In these articles we find mentioned both the total depravity of the sinner and the irresistibility of grace. Another article states the relation of both these to predestination. So the doctrine of free and sovereign grace is a corner-stone of Calvinism. I should add, that this too is one of the essential elements of its individuality in the present time. For, what is the situation ? In the old as well as in the new world Arminianism occupies the first place in

prominence. At first the Lutheran church was not Arminian and maintained the doctrine of predestination. But somehow matters changed and one may say that since the second half of the sixteenth century the Lutheran theology grew synergistic. The Calvinistic churches resisted longer. I have already mentioned the Synod of Dordrecht. Also the Westminster confession defends the true standpoint. But at present practically all Calvinistic churches have given way to Arminianism. Only a small remaining group still holds high the old truth of free and sovereign grace.

And this small group is in the right, for Scripture clearly teaches this doctrine and history confirms it. Therefore we proclaim free and sovereign grace to be a characteristic element of the individuality of Calvinism.

At the same time this is its strength. People have often calumniated the doctrine of predestination, calling it a *decretum horribile*, or at least regarding it to be pure determinism, a doctrine of a fatum, as that held by Mohammedanism. But Paul gives us a totally different idea. He writes to the Thessalonians: remembering without ceasing your work of faith and labour of love and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, before our God and Father; knowing brethren beloved of God, your election. Here the election, the free and sovereign grace is pointed out to be the ultimate foundation of faith, of the spiritual life. For every Christian the fruits of faith come first. But he knows well enough that of his own accord he is unable to do any good. The grace of God, however, teaches him that whatever good he does, is done because the Spirit of God is given to him. Then he becomes aware of what God has done, and he believes that God, who called him and who has enabled him to do good works, has also elected him. He is assured of his spiritual welfare, because he knows that God has wrought it in Christ. The strength of Calvinism lies therein, that it gives certainty in life to its followers. Yes, I know that not all believers come to such a height. Even Paul himself writes: not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect, but I press on, if so be that I may apprehend that for which also I was apprehended by Christ Jesus. But true Calvinism, Calvinism at its best, calls into being a firm and sturdy people, which rejoices in the Lord. Therefore Calvinism gives character to those, who have adopted it. The Calvinistic churches, even the Calvinistic peoples have their own type. But

if Calvinism, because it takes in earnest the fact that God is God, has its significance for the whole of human life, it should also be possible to point out the effects of its individuality and strength in Calvinistic life. That is to say, certain consequences of the leading principle should be perceptible not only in the domain of church and theology, but in every department of life. So it is indeed. It is, however, not at present possible to illustrate fully the individuality and strength of Calvinism in this respect. Allow me to make a selection.

V

Firstly I would mention science. A Lutheran science does not exist, but there is a Roman Catholic science as well as a Calvinistic science. There are no Lutheran universities, but there are Roman and Calvinistic universities. This shows that Lutheranism lacks the power of constructing an edifice of science. The Lutheran system of the *duo hemispheria* is well known to you. The Lutherans accept a very superficial connection between faith and science. At the utmost it may have some influence, that the scientific investigators are pious men. The Roman system is, as I have already demonstrated above, a negative one. Their motto is: do not harm the Church. Allow science to have a free run, as long as it does not clash with the interests of the church. But Calvinism, and this constitutes its individuality and strength, puts forth a positive system. I am professor at a university, which has chosen as its device: Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth. It is its aim to build up a Calvinistic system of science, not only theology, but also physics, philology, law. Calvinism has the power to accomplish this.

Secondly, I would mention the school—both elementary and secondary education. I think you may have heard something about the struggle for Christian schools in Holland. The law banished the Bible and religious instruction in whatever form, from the public schools. It was the Calvinists who opposed this system. Later the Roman Catholics joined them. But especially Calvinists demanded a school in which the whole education was founded on the Word of God, and finally they obtained it too. Not a school in which a few hours of religious instruction was allowed, but a school in which every branch of tuition is an offshoot of the only good tree. The result was that a large

number of Christian schools were erected all over Holland, to a large extent independent of the state, but supported by it financially.

The fruits of the Christian high and low schools are conspicuous. A large number of men and women, who received their education in these schools, are now ardent combatants for the sake of the Lord. But, of course, this may not be regarded as the fruit of the Christian schools only. There is also a Christian education in the family, by the Church. This brings me to mention a further fruit. By degrees a series of books are being published, proving the possibility of building up a system of Calvinistic educational science. Here are the ripe fruits of the seed.

In politics also Calvinism has given proof of its individuality and strength.

VI

Finally a word about the future of Calvinism in connection with its individuality. Has Calvinism a promising future? I believe it has. Naturally I have not received the gift of prophecy. I do not know God's purpose with our world. There are many Christians, who, judging from the signs of times, declare the end of all things to be close at hand. We, however, have no certainty about that day. Christ said: But of that day and hour knoweth no one, not even the angels of heaven, neither the Son, but the Father only. But if there is yet to be a further development of the world, of human life, I venture to say that only Calvinism by its strength will be able to save the human race. Calvinism alone has the force to resist the spirit of revolution and unbelief.

Let us look around us. In all Roman countries properly speaking, the Church has lost her influence over the mass of the population. We see it in France, in Spain, in Mexico, even in Italy, where the Fascists hold the reins. It is true that the Roman church is gaining ground in some Protestant countries, as for instance in the Scandinavian lands, perhaps also in the United States of America. But as a rule only isolated individuals are gained by Rome. As a whole the Roman Church is on the decline. It is a remarkable fact, that when the Roman church loses a member, it loses him entirely. It is not as in the case of Protestant churches, where even large groups of people, who have lost all real interest in the church, refuse to break away from it.

That explains why in a country like Spain priests are persecuted as soon as they are deprived of their power. It is the result of the Roman negative system. Rome has its church, its well-founded and consequent theology, but Rome has failed to provide a positive system for life as a whole. I do not know what to say of the Lutherans. There certainly are many pious and industrious Lutherans to-day. Hitherto there has never been an endeavour from Lutheran side to propagating their principles in science or politics. At present there seem to be signs of a coming change, at least as far as politics are concerned. Lately we found in Germany a Christian political party under the leadership of pious Lutherans. This, however, I do not hold to be a result of Lutheranism as such, but rather of Calvinistic influence on Lutheranism. That explains why only just to-day such a Lutheran Christian political trend came into being.

I cannot contend that in Calvinistic countries all questions have been settled, all problems solved. On the contrary, in these countries great apostasy is also to be found. Yet there is a notable difference. In these countries there have always been and now still are greater or smaller groups of believers, who strive after subjecting all departments of life to the power of the Word of God.

And this is exactly what we desire. Our time demands a system. It is sick of the disharmony between theory and life. Now Calvinism has its chance. And already we notice that by the grace of the Lord there are men in several countries, who realize the significance of Calvinism and are urging their fellowmen to acknowledge God in all spheres of life. By saying this I do not in the first place aim at Great Britain, America, South Africa or the Netherlands, but I am thinking of the Calvinistic movements in France, in Germany, in Austria and in Hungary—and for this we thank the Lord. These movements are only small, with very few leading men, and practically no power. But they are there, and they are active. In a far wider circle interest has now awakened for the system and the history of Calvinism. Many outstanding men, though they were not Calvinists themselves, have taken much trouble to make a study of Calvinism, and it is to a certain extent by their efforts that Calvinism has now become known to many, who formerly did not care for it.

All this is from the Lord and it is marvellous in our eyes.

Again, just this is our task too. If by the grace of the Lord we are Calvinists, we have a special calling. It is our duty to live as true Calvinists and to allow its individuality and strength to be manifested in our lives. That is no easy matter. For we all are sinners and easily slip. But we must not neglect our task, least of all in these days. The Lord calls us and He gives strength. Do we beseech Him that He may make us faithful! Faithful ourselves and faithful in handing over the blessings of Calvinism to others. In this way its individuality and strength will become apparent also in our days.

F. W. GROSHEIDE.

Amsterdam.