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THE REVIVAL OF CALVINISM¹

I

LIKE any other similar factor in the life of the Church or of the world, Calvinism has at least two equally important aspects, namely a theoretical and a practical one. Calvinism was, and is, a doctrine as well as also a movement of life, i.e. a historical phenomenon of great significance in the past and, as we hope, also in the future of the nations. We might add, of course, a third aspect, and we might even say that it is the most important of all: there was something at the centre, which is more than intellectual convictions which can be formulated in a creed, and which is deeper than practical attitudes and endeavours which can be described well enough by an observer of history. I mean the living faith at the heart of Calvinism which finds its fullest expression in worship. But since we cannot grasp the soul's "rejoicing with trembling" in its prostration before God—except by noting the thoughts which it harbours and which impel it in its approach to the Unseen, and registering, on the other hand, its visible acts of worship in which the inward mystery is being mirrored—it will suffice to speak only of the two mentioned aspects, namely of what Calvinism says and of how it works out in practice.

Our present subject imposes upon us a further limitation. If our enquiry were one of a historical nature we could not neglect, without most serious loss, the consideration of Calvinism from both of these points of view. Its achievements in practical life would serve us as the best illustrations and vindications of its teachings. Since we are concerned, however, with present-day matters, it would be rather awkward to take into our purview anything besides the theoretical aspect of Calvinism. If there is a renewal of Calvinistic teaching in our days, there will follow, necessarily, important practical results as well. Of these, however, we, the contemporaries and the most interested party, are not competent either to judge or to prophesy.

What, then, do we mean by Calvinism in this onesided, doctrinal sense of the word? Without needing any discussion, the answer may be given thus: Calvinism—like other types of

¹ An address prepared for the Continental Conference of the Presbyterian Alliance at Pödebrady (Sept. 1935).

Protestant schools of doctrine—is a comprehensive body of Christian convictions based exclusively on the Bible as God’s revelation, its distinguishing feature being a special emphasis upon the idea of divine sovereignty. Only two qualifications and a word of explanation need to be added. Any system of teaching corresponding to the description just given would be Calvinistic essentially. But in order to be termed thus properly, it would have to stand also in some conscious connection with the Calvinism of the past, i.e. it would have to cultivate a sense of continuity with, if not a sense of dependence on, the teaching of Calvin and his followers. Secondly, as a consequence of its emphasis upon the sovereignty of God, such a type of teaching will not limit itself to what are called religious problems, in the strictest sense ; it will not be satisfied with giving a system of theology proper ; but it will widen out into a general view of the world and of life, drawing into its field of vision all theoretical and practical problems that are exercising the soul of a generation, and placing them all under the light of God’s self-revelation.

As a word of explanation, in order to prevent frequent misjudgments, let this be said. We do not mean to suggest by any means that other types of Christian teaching ignore or even deny the truth of God’s sovereignty. Thereby they would place themselves outside the pale of Christian theism in general. We merely wish to say that Calvinism holds to this truth more firmly and faithfully, even where the temptations are greatest to compromise it or to neglect it. Whatever it predicates of God, its nature is always to remember that God in His absolute sovereignty is the subject of the predicate. It does not obscure man’s freedom and responsibility, but it does not allow this fact to obscure the paradoxically opposite, and primary, fact of the Creator’s unlimited rule over His creatures. It does not silence the tender accents of the Gospel of God’s compassionate love for the sinner, but it tries to keep vividly aware of the wonder, for ever surpassing man’s understanding, as to Who it is that stoops down to man’s need in Christ to the very depths of the passion on Calvary. And so on.

II

Now, as reports from various parts of the world convince us, we are witnessing in our days a rejuvenescence and a rising

tendency of such a type of Christian teaching. It seems to be useful to draw attention to the existing variety in the phenomena in question, even though they converge unmistakably toward a common goal. There are different senses in which one may speak of a renewal of Calvinism in these days. As an attempt at a very rough classification, let me describe three different types.

First, there is that kind of Calvinism which had never lost its continuity with the past. Undisturbedly it had gone on cultivating its traditional heritage, scarcely taking recognition of the momentous changes happening in the intellectual world around it. Having lost its contact with the movements of thought in the changing world, it became antiquated. Consequently it produced no spokesmen who might have represented it in the midst of the tumult of other voices. It became—so to speak—an underground sort of Calvinism. It was a great force in the lives of multitudes of simple believers, but an ignored quantity as far as theological learning is concerned. It was tolerated by inimical powers in the theological world, because it was expected to die in course of time of itself. Now the situation seems to change and we can witness theologians of high learning, as it were, sitting down at the feet of such old-fashioned simple folk, as the learned Apollos of old was sitting at the feet of the tent-maker of Pontus and his wife, acknowledging that a deeper source of divine wisdom is theirs. Thus the underground forces come to the surface, and Calvinism, silent for generations, is becoming an influential factor again.

Secondly, there is that type of Calvinism which did not lack by any means an intellectual leadership fully abreast of the times. It was fully aware of all the changing currents around it, and took up a well-reasoned attitude over against them. It was not merely the weight of an inherited tradition that kept it faithful, but scholarly thought of a high grade as well. But the times seem to have been unfavourable for its representatives to make a deeper impression upon religious thought beyond their own circumscribed sphere. Consequently their labours did not amount to more than a defensive fight for the maintenance of the faith of their fathers. Now their voices are beginning to win the ear of wider circles. These forces of Calvinism seem to leave their dug-in trenches behind and to be advancing towards a more expanding influence.

A third type of the renewal of Calvinism is to be seen in those who had lost, long ago perhaps, any serious contact with the heritage of the sixteenth century, and have made their journey through all the varied fields of so-called "modern theology". Now they are coming home again. They may be grateful for all they have learned and gained in the course of their wanderings, but they have come to recognize that, after all, the structure in which their sires had lived is their home. And they are even able, so it seems, to bring along some of their fellow-travellers hailing from other homes, to visit the old place and to enjoy whatever it may offer to them.

III

What does all this mean ?

Of course, we must not lose sight of the fact that such signs of changes in relation with Calvinism might be paralleled with exactly similar ones in relation with Lutheranism. So the renewal of Calvinism appears to be but a part of a larger phenomenon, i.e. of a general return to the teaching of the Reformation. The reasons which brought this about are not far to seek. To state the case quite briefly, there are two main reasons. On the one hand there is the far-gone disintegration of Protestant theological thinking during recent generations. And on the other hand there are the tragic experiences through which our generation had to pass. And these two reasons worked hand in hand.

The theological situation of late years was such as to demand imperatively a synthesis on a grand scale. The various theological schools and currents we have seen rising successively and supplanting one another, may all have had valuable elements. Their common weakness, however, lay in their rendering homage to the scientific and philosophical fashions of their day. While endeavouring to make their testimony acceptable to the schools of thought that ruled the world, they were led to hold forth important Christian truths which it was a gain to have re-emphasized. But the price of such gain was costly. Other equally important truths were neglected, or even sacrificed. Theology cannot afford to be conditioned by external forces. Instead of being led hither and thither by other powers, it is her queenly

prerogative to sound forth a leading voice, as interpreting the ultimate truth, the Word of God. The Church cannot survive very long if her teachers resemble a debating society, even if every participant in it stands for some very precious partial truth. A clear and definite message is needed, in which the rank and file of the believers may recognize the Truth vouchsafed of God, and by which the outside world may be challenged in the name of God. The times were thus ripening for a type of theology which could lean with a good conscience, or rather which would be under constraint to lean, on the authority of God's own Word, liberating thereby the Church from a confusion of competing human opinions.

The sufferings and the shocks which our modern generation experienced ever since the outbreak of the Great War, rendered this need absolutely urgent. The testing question arose with an awfully serious imminence: What has Christianity to say to man, disillusioned after his pre-war complacency and optimism, shaken to the very foundations of his spiritual existence?

It is no wonder at all if Protestant theology, in trying to rediscover her own self, reaches back to the Reformers of the sixteenth century. All great renewals find their sources of inspiration in old wells dug out from below the stone-heaps of neglect and forgetfulness. Especially if the task is to integrate diverging tendencies, the solution usually lies in going back to the point from which the roads parted. The needed synthesis is most naturally found by raising to a higher, up-to-date level the original ideas, the rich contents of which had been taken to pieces in the successive steps of differentiation, and by the purity of which the falsifying influences of later times can be detected easily.

So we see the Reformation becoming an up-to-date matter. The Reformers are being invited to descend from the pillars on which they stood as silent figures, objects of grateful memory. They are being asked to resume their teaching activities. And many of us are learning again from them what it means to listen in absolute obedience to the Word of God, to cast away all "reasoning with flesh and blood", when He Himself deigns to open His heart and mind to us. At the same time not only this "formal principle" of the Reformation, this exclusive and sufficient authority of the revelation given to us in the Bible, but the "material principle" of the Reformation, too, shines

forth with new light. The justification of the sinner by faith, of which many felt it rather awkward not so long ago, that it could have been regarded in Reformation days as the article by which the Church stands or falls—is being understood again as the key to all our hopes in this world and the one to come. Frustrated in our childish expectations to organize, to educate, and to ennoble this world into a very heaven on earth ; shocked to our deepest soul by what we have come to see of the reality of evil, both in the world at large and in ourselves ; and not only sickened by the sights of the ugliness and the demonic power of sin, but also touched—though perhaps not sufficiently yet—by a sense of our personal and collective guilt : it means everything to us to be assured again of it, and even to be commissioned to proclaim it, that *we*, these very same miserable sinners, are not sinners any more in God's sight, but sons of His bounteous grace, as indeed we are. The question as to how much or how little of God's love is being worked out in our practical life, though losing nothing of its urgency, yet becomes a matter of a secondary order. The primary fact remains the wonder that there is a love of God assured for us at all and that in spite of all uncleanness of our past and present, and even in spite of all threatening failures of our future, we may safely rest in such assurance.

Our space forbids us to dwell on the fact that even on these issues on which otherwise there is such a unanimous agreement among the various voices of the Reformation, Calvinism has a specially emphatic word to say. It certainly teaches its followers to bow before the sovereign self-manifestation of God in His Word with a specially humble self-surrender, with a jealous solicitude that His Word may be perceived and proclaimed in its fullest purity. And it underlines the promises of grace to the sinner with a particular sense of their ultimateness, knowing that if they are given us of the Lord God, Almighty and Eternal, who or what could separate us from His love ? All this helps us to understand why in a general renewal of the teaching of the Reformers the renewal of Calvinism is bound to play a distinguished part.

But in order to find a fuller explanation of this renewal of Calvinism we must proceed to point out some of its features in which it surpasses other types of Reformation teaching, and owing to which it seems to have a special contribution to make to the spiritual life of our days.

IV

Calvinism was always characterized by—what may be an imprint of the French genius on the work of its founder—a striving after clear intellectual formulation. This brought it even under the shadow of the reproach of having been a reformation of the head rather than that of the heart. It certainly took very seriously the cognitive aspect of man's religious relationship. "The Knowledge of God and ourselves" was the sum total of all that Calvin had to expound in his *Institutio* four hundred years ago. This is something our age needs. Our generation is getting dissatisfied with subjective emotional religious experiences and with hypothetical "as if's" concerning God. It hungers after a God who may be known as an objective reality with full and clear assurance. There are, of course, dangers, grave ones, besetting this road towards religious objectivism. There is no need to point them out in detail, the dangers of a false authoritarianism, rigid ritualism, sacerdotalism, and all the other well known aberrations, the germs of which, quite naturally, find a fruitful soil also in our objectively-inclined generation. Let us simply state that Calvinism may certainly be trusted to be a safe guide to follow along the road. If true to its own self, it is immune against such temptations of mistaken objectivism, and yet it speaks whereof it knows and it knows whereof it speaks.

Another of its features investing it with a special significance for our days is its keen sense of the Church's independence over against the world. This is a natural fruit, growing out of its emphasis on God's sovereignty. The Church, above all, lives under His rule, as exercised through the King He appointed to be her head—and that not only "*sub specie aeternitatis*", but in the midst of the turmoil of this world as well, i.e. the Church in her visible capacity, too, is His undisputed realm. In other words, according to the spirit of Calvinism even the earthly form and the external relationships of the Church must be shaped as dictated by the demands of her innermost essential nature, irrespective of any claims or demands of earthly powers that be. We are stating a principle, not appraising historical achievements. Spiritual descendants of Calvinism have often failed to live up to this ideal, just as Calvin himself failed to give

the world a good object-lesson in this matter through the practice of his own church in Geneva. Anyway, we are witnessing in our days more than one instance in which the Church has to suffer sorely for having neglected this important principle of her own independence. The relationship between the Church and other factors of life (the nation, the state, economic powers, civilization, etc.) has become, therefore, one of the most burning problems of our day. And in her attempts to extricate herself from all hindering fetters, and in her aspirations that even her earthly vessel may be fully adapted to the heavenly treasure contained within, the Church is becoming increasingly appreciative of those age-long convictions which were held by Calvinism concerning this matter, through its understanding of God's Word.

One of the greatest merits of Calvinism, however, lies in the fact that such convictions as just mentioned did not drive it into a onesided attitude. While professing emphatically the "*sui generis*" nature of the Church as opposed to any society of this world, it did not do so at the price of withdrawing from the affairs of this world. The same note of the sovereignty of God counteracted any such temptations. For although He rules in His Church in a different way from that in which He rules in the world, yet He rules in the world as well. Thus the secular realm, too, is rendered sacred, as a field for ceaseless struggles whereby God's name may be glorified and His law obeyed. This involves that the genius of Calvinism lays a great weight not only on individual ethics (so much as to risk even the appearance of relapsing into legalism), but on social ethics as well. Its ideal is to shape the life of man in all its dimensions, social life, national life, international life, in spite of man's sinfulness, so as to fulfil the demands of eternal laws ordained of God and enforced by His rule under penalty of decay and death.

This again is something after which the Church of our times is groping instinctively and impatiently. Consider the earnest attempts to absorb the social, inter-racial, international problems into the scope of Christian endeavour and service. We hear of a "social Gospel", a "Gospel of world-brotherhood" etc., which shows a quickened sense of responsibility with respect to these great problems as well as also a confusion of Christian thinking. For "Gospel" can have only one meaning for ever, i.e. the Glad Tidings of God's gifts to us. While in these matters

the real issue concerns what man in answer to God's gifts owes to His rule, in obedience to His unchanging ordinances, it is His "law", as a matter of fact, that has to be proclaimed and applied amidst the complexities of our modern world unless doom is to follow. Training a type of leadership for public life and raising a type of citizenship in every land, which will undertake the burden of such Christian responsibility, is a task congenial to Calvinism. Its nature is to inspire a spirit that will gladly launch out upon stormy seas in pursuance of goods set before man by God's "law", while retaining, of course, and clinging ever gratefully to, its warm house on the safe shores of the "Gospel" of God.

V

In view of these last two points we might say that Calvinism, owing to its strong emphasis of God's sovereignty, excels in holding together in its grasp the two poles of "grace" and "nature". It is zealous to guard the sphere of "grace" as unadulterated by any smuggled import of the corrupt goods of "nature". But, on the other hand, it sees "nature" in travail awaiting the appearance of the sons of "grace". It knows of Salvation only under the Cross, the shadow of which falls like a dark cloud of judgment over the whole human world. This means: having done with the world, having been freed from its entanglements, having risen above its affairs by being crucified to it and rising for ever to a life of another, a higher sphere. And yet it knows of Salvation as not a mere privilege to be enjoyed while the rest of the world goes down to hell, but as the unspeakable privilege of being joined to God, having communion with Him and being lifted up into participation of His affairs. And what are not His affairs if His sway embraces every creature of His, and His government extends over all happenings in this world of His? This synthesis of freedom from the world and at the same time service of God in the world, is, of course, found as a living reality wherever there is genuine Christianity. But we may say without doing injustice to anyone that nowhere is it professed with such clearness and balanced conviction as in Calvinism. And such teaching, it seems to me, is the deepest religious need of our times.

We understand the soul of man, typical of our times, most intimately, I believe, if we recognize as latent in its depths the contrast of a would-be hermit and of a would-be revolutionary. He fain would escape from the world, for it has dealt cruelly with him. He had to learn one bitter lesson about it after another. He has become pessimistic about its future. The best for him would be—so he feels often—to turn his back upon it for ever. This is no new mentality. The modern thing about it is that side by side with it there exists in the same soul an agonizing cry that after all it should be possible to have a different world around us. Although the utopian dreams of man's glorious possibilities have become but a sad memory, nevertheless modern man can never become a peaceful hermit. He has been endowed with such a wonderful wealth of gifts in the natural sphere of his life that he instinctively clings to it as something which must have some high meaning for him. Therefore he claims to master it and make it subservient to his ideals. He is revolutionary as well in his attitude to life. You see, he needs Calvinism. Or rather, lest we forget the solemnity of the case, he needs God as Calvinism has learned to know Him through His Word, God who both liberates us in Christ from this evil world and who commissions us in Christ to serve as His instruments in subduing the world to His will.

Just to mention one last point briefly: men of our times are not easily kept within narrow confines of traditional, denominational bigotry. Types of Christianity hampered in their outlook by partisan prejudices, whether they rest on ritual, or dogma, or whatever institution or tradition, will scarcely be able to correspond to the great needs of our day. In consequence, the Christian Church is on a march, though it be a slow one, along the road of œcumenism. Here again Calvinism is in a position to render valuable services. Looking, as it does, not only upwards from man's "*de profundis*" towards God the Saviour of man, but (owing to its deep sense of God's sovereignty) also the other way, i.e. looking out upon man's world from the heights of God's exalted throne (as far as it is given to man to see things in this light)—Calvinism is by its nature œcumenic in its outlook, broadminded and largehearted in its attitude, seeing parts of the Church as merely parts of the whole, and reaching out beyond all barriers towards the widest possible fellowship.

VI

These appear to me as some of the values of Calvinism which inspire its followers with an increasing sense of their mission and even enable it to win new recruits to its ranks, resulting in what may be termed a revival of Calvinism in our time.

There are risks and dangers connected with such a revival of which we must be aware. A reactionary worship of the past ; a cheap appropriation of a magnificent heritage as ready for us without very serious labours on our own part ; dogmatism, i.e. the proud enjoyment of the excellence of doctrine as if it would be spiritual life itself and not merely a testimony to guide us ; uncharitable impatience with those who are not sharing with us our happy possessions ; etc. It would be easy, however, to show that all such unsightly by-products are contrary to the very thing by which they might wish to justify themselves. They cannot claim by any means to be congenial with Calvinism. In other words, Calvinism has a remedy in its very self against such sins which easily beset its imperfect spokesmen. And certainly it cannot be judged on their merits. The dangers have to be faced, their risk has to be accepted—and the work has to be continued. Evidently this is the order of the day for all who stand in the spiritual lineage of the Calvinism of bygone centuries : to help renew the Church of Christ by reviving our own historic heritage. Not for the glory of any one of our spiritual ancestors, but because they have taught us to give all glory to God alone, who is the Lord Everlasting.

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