

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)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

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

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

CALVINISM IN SOUTH AFRICA

I

RIGHT from its earliest beginning and throughout its entire history Calvinism has been a vital factor in the life and activities of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, to which the writer of this article belongs. In order, therefore, to understand the situation as it exists in that Church to-day, it will be necessary to give a brief resumé of its past history.

The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa is a daughter of the mother Church of the same name in the Netherlands, and was established here in 1652, when Jan van Riebeeck founded the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope under the aegis of the Dutch East India Company. This date, be it observed, was only four years subsequent to the Treaty of Münster which brought to an end the long-drawn-out struggle of eighty years (1568-1648) between the Protestant Netherlands and Roman Catholic Spain, and which ended in the triumph of the Protestant cause. What is so remarkable is the astonishing fact that exactly in this period of "Sturm und Drang" the Netherlands developed into one of the foremost sea-powers of that period, and this in turn led to the establishment of the colony at the southern corner of Africa as a convenient halfway-house for the ships trading between the homeland and India. Thus it happened that the Reformed religion was implanted on South African soil right at the birth of the South African nation.

Not long afterwards, in 1688-9, the Reformed faith at the Cape was considerably strengthened by the arrival of the Huguenots who had fled from their homes in France to the Netherlands, and were now sent out as emigrants to swell the small civil population of the new settlement. These French Huguenots were sturdy adherents of the Reformed doctrine. They had given proof thereof, when they remained steadfast amidst the fiercest persecutions, and preferred to leave home and hearth rather than abandon the deeply-cherished tenets of their faith. Within a relatively brief period of time this new element identified itself completely with the older section of the community. The French language gradually disappeared, and the only trace we find to-day is the many French surnames of leading families in South Africa.

With such origins it is no wonder that the Reformed or Calvinistic doctrine is deeply ingrained in the minds and hearts of the Africander people. This doctrine, which is directly based on Holy Scripture as the Word of God and the infallible rule for faith and life, is contained in the three Formularies of Concord, viz. the Netherlands Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort. Up to the present day the Dutch Reformed Church has remained faithful to this strong and sure foundation-stone.

During the régime of the Dutch East India Company the bond between State and Church was a very intimate one, and this continued to be the case after the Cape had passed over into English hands in 1806. In more than one way the Church was restricted in its freedom to develop by this tutelage of the State, and friction was bound to occur on more than one occasion. At length in 1843 the Church received an Ordinance which forms its constitution up to the present day, and thereby it was enabled to frame its own rules and regulations, and to act independently in its own ecclesiastical sphere without outside interference from the State.

II

In the course of its history Calvinism became more and more inextricably intertwined with both the national and ecclesiastical life of the Africander people. Its fundamental principles have been wholeheartedly embraced and have proved to be a source of strength and stability. We think of such principles as the absolute sovereignty of God, the responsibility of man, the authority of Scripture as infallible rule for faith and life; the influence of religion extended to every sphere of human activity.

These principles have been the mainstay of our Church and people, especially in times of trial and stress which in God's providence we have been called to pass through more than once. South Africa is a land where severe drought causes its ravages on a large scale, and where the plague of locusts reminds one inevitably of the eighth plague in Egypt as recorded in the Book of Exodus. During the thirties of the nineteenth century a considerable section of the farming community left the Cape Province, and trekked into the wild, trackless interior where

they encountered numerous native races, some of whom were hostile and treacherous. If now the question be asked : What has enabled our people to survive the many trials and plagues both during the pioneer stages and on subsequent occasions ? And what has kept them from moral and religious demoralization and from miscegenation, so that we still have to-day in South Africa a white Christian civilization ?—the answer cannot be otherwise than this : under God's providence it has been due in the first place to their deep Calvinistic conviction : "The Lord reigneth, and He is the Disposer of all man's destinies. He is, too, the Hearer of prayer and saves His people in time of distress, when they call upon Him." It has been due furthermore to the fact that the Voortrekkers took with them the Bible as their spiritual guide and comfort. And where they were often deprived of secular literature and the ordinary facilities of education for their children, they clung all the more to the living Word of God.

As might be expected, this Calvinistic faith has not gone unchallenged in the course of years. During the period 1862-70 e.g., a virulent attack was made on certain tenets of the Reformed doctrine by some ministers of the Dutch Reformed Church who had been influenced by the Liberal Theology during their time of study in the Netherlands. *Inter alia* they denied the doctrines of the utter depravity of natural man and the real, essential deity of Jesus Christ. For the time being the waters of the Church were deeply agitated, but our fathers succeeded in warding off the attack. The Church weathered the storm and held fast to the faith once for all delivered unto the saints.

III

In our own day the Reformed doctrine has again been challenged by *Modernism*. *Inter alia* the plenary inspiration of Holy Scripture has been called in question ; Higher Criticism of the Old Testament in accordance with the Kuenen-Wellhausen School has been sponsored ; and the authority of Christ on matters of literary and historical interest has been challenged. But once again the Church withstood the attack and remained loyal to the Word of God and to the Son of God.

Another subtle underminer of the true Reformed faith at the present time is *Sectarianism* in its many forms. In one or

other way it raises the cry : " Away with dogma ! Away with doctrine ! And give us life ! Give us something emotional ! " All these sectarian movements stumble against the Calvinistic doctrine of Predestination. They also neglect the Covenant idea which is so prominent in Calvinism and so firmly based on Holy Scripture, both Old and New Testament. Of most of these sects it may safely be asserted that they err through ignorance. They have never had a clear insight into the deep Calvinistic and Scriptural truths. But this is only the more reason why these should also in our day be set forth in all their beauty and power.

Now certainly one of the most remarkable features in the religious sphere during recent years has been the *Revival of Calvinism* in so many lands all over the globe, wherever the Reformed doctrine has established itself. Among the causes which may be mentioned as leading to this phenomenon, one of the most important has undoubtedly been the reaction occasioned by the World War of 1914-18. Previously, as a result of scientific inventions in the many spheres of life, man began to fancy himself self-sufficient and independent of God. There was much glorification of man and man's achievements and little acknowledgment of God's sovereignty. Humanism was the popular creed of the hour. And then the great war came, and pandemonium broke loose among the most highly civilized and cultured nations of the earth, and like a house of cards the fondly-cherished aspirations of Humanism collapsed in the dust of bitter disappointment.

No wonder that there has come a strong reaction : " Back to God and back to the acknowledgment of His absolute sovereignty." This is one main reason why the appeal of Karl Barth and his school has gone home to so many hearts in Germany and also in other Protestant lands. But for us who have always held to Calvinism the Barthian theology has brought nothing essentially new. It has only served to emphasize the necessity of laying continual stress on this most important aspect of Calvinistic and at the same time Scriptural truth.

This oecumenical Revival of Calvinism is amidst all the disturbing and alarming signs of the times one of the most hopeful factors in the present religious situation. When one hears and reads what is being done to foster and propagate the great principles of Calvinism in the Protestant world of to-day,

he may indeed, with the apostle Paul, "thank God and take courage" (Acts xxviii. 15).

In this Revival of Calvinism South Africa is having its share. And here I think, in the first place of the Dutch Reformed Church, which as I have previously shown has always stood on the Calvinistic foundation. So e.g. several Calvinistic societies have been started in recent years, and the distinct Calvinistic note is once again clearly heard from many pulpits. And what is specially encouraging is the remarkable fact that this new movement has captured the hearts and minds of so many of our educated young men and women in the Universities and Colleges of the land. In the course of 1935 the Federal Council of Calvinistic Students has published a volume, *Koers in die Krisis*, in which a great number of Calvinistic truths are expounded and applied to different aspects of life, and to which theologians of high standing from overseas have contributed alongside of well-known men in South Africa itself.

IV

As may readily be understood, this renewed Calvinistic action has aroused reaction in certain quarters, especially where Modernism and Sectarianism in one or other form have made their influence felt. The objections that have been raised against the Revival of Calvinism may conveniently be summarized under the following *four* headings. *The first slogan* employed is: *The Dutch Reformed Church as the oldest historical Church in South Africa is a "Volkskerk"*, i.e. it is inclusive of the whole people, and as such it must offer room within its fold to all religious movements, even though they depart on important points of doctrine from the recognized Reformed or Calvinistic creed.

As a matter of fact this claim cannot be sustained in any real sense of the word, for the simple reason that even among the Afrikaans-speaking section of the people there are two other Reformed Churches besides the Dutch Reformed Church. And among the English-speaking section and among the Native population there is a very large number of Churches and Sects. If now by the term "Volkskerk" no more is meant than that the Dutch Reformed Church is inseparably connected with the Afrikaner people, and has identified itself in the course of

years with the social and educational as well as with the religious life of the nation, one may well leave it unchallenged. But if it be implied, as the special protagonists of this term *do* imply, that the Dutch Reformed Church must open its doors so wide that any and every dissenting movement may also find a place within the fold, then such a claim must be firmly set aside, and the view upheld that the said Church must at all cost remain true to its historical foundation. To yield on this fundamental issue would inevitably lead to a denial or at least a weakening of the pure Reformed or Calvinistic doctrine.

The second slogan that is put up is the well-known one of *Life versus Doctrine*. "Away with dry-as-dust dogma and give us warm-hearted, emotional life"—such is the popular cry. The protagonists of this movement have a relish for what is sensational in religion, and it is here that the different sects find a fertile soil for their propaganda. But this lopsided exaltation of life above doctrine is in the first place entirely *unscriptural*. For what do we find in the New Testament was the practice of our Lord Jesus and His apostles? That they laid equal stress on life and doctrine. Nay more, we see in the epistles of St. Paul that he invariably sets forth the doctrine clearly in the first place, and then he proceeds on the strength thereof to press home his claims for a holy life.

And secondly this misguided slogan is totally *unpsychological*. For experience has proved up to the hilt that in the long run true life can only proceed from sound doctrine. On the contrary, the past history of the Church shows conclusively how departure from the sound doctrine has usually led to erring ways and wrong behaviour. Over and over again the proof has also been furnished that where sound doctrine has been preached in a congregation, the sects have not succeeded so easily in inculcating their dissenting and erroneous views.

For this reason the implied contrast between Life and Doctrine is a false one. They rather supplement one another. And true Calvinists will continue to present the necessity of both sound doctrine and godly life as incumbent on the true believer and follower of Jesus Christ.

The third slogan that is heard stands in close connection with the previous one. *The contrast is then made between Evangelical versus Dogmatic Preaching*; and the implication is that if a preacher lays stress on doctrine, and in this case the

Calvinistic doctrine, his preaching is bound to be dry-as-dust and unfruitful in its results. On the other hand it is represented that if a preacher wishes to be evangelical and gain results, he must necessarily eschew all doctrinal preaching.

It need hardly be pointed out that this implied contrast between a so-called Evangelical preaching and a so-called Dogmatic preaching is entirely gratuitous. The truth is rather that lasting results in the conversion of souls and the upbuilding of believers will only be attained, where the preaching is at the same time dogmatic and evangelical. This fact emerges very clearly from the life-history of Calvin himself. His preaching in Geneva was certainly dogmatic in the best sense of the word and at the same time truly evangelical. And no wonder that such rich results attended his labours! We have numerous testimonies that whereas morality stood on a low scale in Geneva before Calvin commenced his work there, the city afterwards became in more than one respect a model for sobriety and good citizenship. We of the twentieth century can do no better than follow in the footsteps of the great Reformer of the sixteenth century.

The *fourth* slogan that we mention is *Christ versus Calvin*. The insinuation then is that Calvinists of the present day in accentuating the fundamental doctrines as taught by the Genevan Reformer commit the fatal error of extolling Calvin above our Lord Jesus Christ. It is by no means difficult to confute this false accusation. But it is extremely painful to notice to what lengths of absurdity people will go, when they lack sound arguments against the truth.

For as a matter of fact, where do we find a more loyal soul towards Christ than that of Calvin? It was exactly one of the reasons for his break-away from the Roman Catholic Church, that viz. this denomination by its exaltation of the Virgin Mary subtracted from the glory that was due to Christ. Calvin's entire preaching as well as his voluminous exegetical labours were emphatically Christocentric.

V

Furthermore, when we of the twentieth century espouse the Calvinistic doctrine, we do not follow a human being in any slavish manner. On the contrary, we recognize fully that he

was but a chosen instrument in God's hands to work out His divine pleasure. And we realize that he was in more than one respect a child of his own age, so that we have to continue building on the sure foundation which he laid, even as he in his turn simply built on Holy Scripture and especially on the writings of the apostle Paul. We espouse the Calvinistic doctrine, because we are fully convinced that it rests on the infallible Word of God, and because we find in Calvinism the purest exposition of Scriptural truth of which we have knowledge.

Thus we take up our task with courage and hope for the future. Although the powers against us are strong and active, we may rely on *divine omnipotence*. He who spoke: "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth" (Matt. xxviii. 18) is with us. And with St. Paul we rejoice: "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. viii. 31). From the southern corner of the erstwhile Dark Continent we send warm Calvinistic greetings to our brethren of the Calvinistic persuasion in all the lands of the globe in the name of Him "of Whom and through Whom and to Whom are all things: to Whom be glory for ever" (Rom. xi. 36).

D. G. MALAN.

Stellenbosch, South Africa.