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CALVINISM AND NEO-CALVINISM

I

To write anything deserving the name of originality concerning the great Genevan reformer would call for the inexhaustible mental supplies of the genius; yet new thoughts will ceaselessly rise within the mind of the theologian whenever he takes up his well-thumbed copy of the Institutes. It is, indeed, the insistence of these obtrusive thoughts that has prompted the writer to put into words certain considerations about Calvinism, while breathing the prayer that these vagrant thoughts may prove stimulative to some and provocative to others in the interests of that setting of evangelical truth which we have most at heart. There is much in the recent trend of theological discussion which leads us to seek anew some explanation of the fact that the thoughtful and believing are gravitating towards a strong and reasoned presentation of the faith. Probably, however, one will be accused of stating mere commonplace in insisting upon the evidences of the recrudescence of Calvinism, while seeking to explain it from both external and internal consideration, with a view to determining what form of Calvinism will be most congenial to this twentieth century.

It is impossible to deny the fact that interest in Calvinism has been greatly enhanced and very widely spread during recent years. No feature of the contemporary religious world is more evident; and this must be reckoned with, whether we will or not. Four centuries of ceaseless change and remarkable progress in the academic and theological world have not rendered the works of Calvin antiquated: "He, being dead, yet speaketh." This fact has of late been borne in upon the writer by the extraordinary tributes of admiration for the Genevan reformer which were evoked in response to an unobtrusive brochure which the writer penned upon the influence of Calvin in 1937 and which was circulated at the time of the gatherings of the Alliance of the Reformed Churches in Montreal last June. These tributes came from leaders of theological thought in almost every country

of Europe and North America,—from the Governor-General and the Prime Minister of Canada, from an amazing number of ministers, students, editors, laymen, who speak of Calvin in such terms as—“ my dear saint and scholar ”, “ One of the greatest of theological thinkers ”, “ an unfailing inspiration and a gifted interpreter of the faith ” . . . though it must be admitted that one writer, and he a Scotchman and a minister, writes “ I always thought Calvin was a Scotchman, although I have read thoroughly D'Aubigny's *History of the Reformation* ”! And these tributes to the mental and spiritual force of Calvin have come from Hungarian Protestants, French Huguenots, heirs of the Covenanters and the Puritans, pioneers of the Far West and missionaries in the foreign field. They serve to underscore the assertion that Calvinism is as great a vital force to-day as it was in the sixteenth century, and is on the crest of a new wave of popularity and influence in the modern religious world.

Certain reasons may be advanced as an explanation of this strong modern appeal in Calvinism; certain features of religious life serve as parallels to the progress of its popularity. Recent years have witnessed a marked decline in the so-called “ popular evangelism ” of the masses. The great organised evangelistic missions, elaborately planned and widely advertised, which once crowded our halls and swept the crowds with emotionalism have had their day. The kind of appeal which proved so potent under Moody and his successors has lost its attractiveness. After leading hundreds into the “ Inquiry Room ” and galvanising the pulpit into fresh evangelical fervour, it has given place to other forms of Christian service. In passing away, this phase of religious activity has left the impression that it may have been over emotional. Some years ago a Welsh divine, speaking of the highly emotional missions of Evan Roberts, expressed the conviction that its abiding value was practically nil. Such a criticism may have been too scathing; but it clearly indicates the judgment that emotional evangelism rarely digs deep enough to produce character and influence the soul. Salvation is not synonymous with a rise in surface temperature, nor does mere lip-confession save a soul; and a calmer consideration of spiritual things seems to lead to the conclusion that a real work of grace must come from above, calm and strong with the eternal reason and mighty with the eternal will. Naturally, then, that type of Arminianism which reduced “ pre-ordinance and first decree

unto the law of children"—rising into popularity along with the advance of democratic principles and making its strongest appeal along the line of personal liberty,—has ceased to exercise its old influence. Thoughtful observers, marking the tendency of ultra-democracy to degenerate into a lawless form of Communism tinged with anarchy, have called a halt and have been induced to assign more correct values to principles of law and order, dignity and authority; and within certain limits they lay a juster stress upon the sovereignty of God, without thereby prejudicing the responsibility of the individual soul. As Arminianism has lost ground, so Calvinism has gained. While, then, we all express the yearning of our hearts to-day in the prayer of the prophet-psalmist, "Revive thy work, O LORD", we lay greater stress upon the personal pronoun than was formerly the case, confident that when the divine response comes it will be by no frothy type of evangelism, but by a forceful, reasoned presentation to men of the Pauline evangel, thrilling with experimental fervour and rich in reasoned conviction.

Are not the times ripe for just such a setting forth of the Gospel?

The rising popularity—or should we say the enhanced dignity—of the Calvinistic theology cannot be accounted for merely as the swing of the pendulum in academic and religious life. Yet there is something in such a way of regarding it. We trust we shall not be misunderstood if we attempt to point a parallel in the civic and political realm. To-day the civilised world is cleft to its very foundations by the clash of rival movements, which are penetrating into the sphere of religion. The extreme left and the extreme right wings are degenerating in the political world into Communism and Fascism—the one swaying the irresponsible mob, the other displaying the irresponsible individual. But the majority of observers seem to be convinced that modern Communism, with its landslide towards anarchy, is nothing less than democracy run mad, while modern Fascism is only Czarism under another name. But in the religious sphere we may trace a movement not unlike the less worthy form of Communism, when salvation is represented as a kind of do-as-you-please religion, depending wholly upon the unaccountable vagaries of the individual choice. Precisely as a well-balanced democracy may degenerate into lawlessness, so may the undue insistence upon personal freedom of choice in relation to the

things of God degrade a vital religious experience into a game of chance. Against this tendency, so unmistakable in much of the contemporary attitude towards religion, there appears to be a revolt of the more thoughtful religious public, with its protest against a representation of divine mercy so contrary to reason. If it be asserted that the alternative to Communism is Fascism, yet the fact remains that even the states of Europe are not shut up to the acceptance of the red terrorism of a Stalin—the Fascism which often springs from the heart of Communism. The *via media* lies open for adoption, with its demand for calm, strong leadership, together with a due regard for the dignity of the commonwealth. All of which, if it be transferred to the religious sphere, means Calvinism.

II

The same tendencies which we observe in the political world are operative in the academic and the scientific sphere. A certain support to Calvinistic principles is certainly found in the unanimity with which modern science insists upon the recognition of a mysterious force behind and within all things, gentle as the zephyrs, though mighty as the hurricane, moving through the ages towards some far off goal. Even when they speak in terms of evolution they pay a tribute to the religious conception of the divine resistless will which clothes itself in the beauty of tenderness. And at the same time the renewed prominence of a determinist philosophy, challenging the crude theories of the naturalism and behaviourism of modern tyros, leads in the same direction. If, then, we endeavour to appreciate the trend of the multiple movements in contemporary life and thought, we seem driven to admit that there is a providential control within the mentality of our age causing these varied movements in politics, science and philosophy to converge upon the very point at which stands the Calvinistic presentation of the Gospel. Conditions in external life all appear to be congenial to a setting forth of the doctrine of the sovereignty of God.

Whether these wandering reflections are wholly justified must be left to the specialist to decide; but they certainly strengthen the belief that the times are ripe, as they have never been since the great days of the reformation, for a reasoned statement of the Pauline evangel. Modern conditions are not so unlike the days in which Paul and Augustine and Calvin

laboured—all of whom saw the value of authority at the helm of the State and valued the strength of law in the community. Hence we are persuaded that this generation will respond with increasing readiness to the preaching of a gospel which blends the authority of God with the offer of the eternal mercy. Calvinism has naturally come into its own in such an age as ours.

We have, then, professed to see certain reasons, wholly of an external nature, which go to account for the peculiar susceptibility and the remarkable responsiveness in the modern theological world towards the doctrinal position of the Institutes. Were Calvinism not broad-based upon reason itself, it would soon be summarily rejected by a thoughtful and educated generation; but amongst beliefs that are based upon reasonable argument Calvinism is admittedly pre-eminent. It always strikes the note which became audible for the first time in the evangelical utterances of Isaiah of Jerusalem—"Come now, let us reason together, said the LORD." Moreover from first to last the Institutes are a clear, logical presentation of the evangel as it appears in the authentic letters of St. Paul, more especially in his profound and devout letter to the Romans.

We are frequently hearing demands in certain quarters for a revised form of Calvinism—a Calvinism robbed of its harshness, more thoroughly up-to-date, less abhorrent to the freedom-loving Arminian. But, surely, this quest for a Neo-Calvinism is carried too far. We admit that Calvin could claim no unique inspiration—no super-human authority to speak words, which the widening knowledge and deepening insight of the centuries might not surpass. We admit that the fundamental principles enunciated by the master of the sixteenth century must be co-ordinated with modern thought, set in line with twentieth century philosophy and considered in the light of contemporary science; otherwise they would not be wholly intelligible to our day and generation. Yet in so far as Calvinism is Paulinism are not its main theses unchangeable? Surely that is the case. But Calvinism is Paulinism in the light of the sixteenth century; and we need to have it in the light of the twentieth century. In that sense Neo-Calvinism is desirable. And there are those theologians amongst us who believe that this recasting of Calvinism has been accomplished by Karl Barth in his writings and lectures, which stirred to its depths the religious life of our persecuted German brethren and exerted

a profound influence over the entire Protestant world. Debate still rages as to the correct evaluation of the dynamic within Barth's interpretation of evangelical doctrine; but many who admit the strength of the impulse he has given to theological thought, hesitate to accept him as a reliable exponent of Paulinism. And as I listen to the discussions carried on by occupants of Chairs in Dogmatics in our colleges, I, who am merely entrusted with the exposition of the inspired Scriptures of the Old Testament, feel forced to stand aside with the simple assertion that I am still a Calvinist.

But we still need to inquire what is the assumption that prompts others to demand this re-setting of the doctrines of the Institutes. Why should there still be in some minds, ill-informed as we hold them to be, a haunting idea that Calvinism in itself is harsh, tyrannical, repulsive—whereas it is in perfect harmony with that conception of the divine Being which Keble expressed in his luring verse:—

There's a wideness in God's mercy,
Like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in his justice
Which is more than liberty.

What we need is not a Neo-Calvinism, but a fresh appreciation of Calvinism. The question is whether we can, whether we dare, restate the Calvinistic theology in such terms as may cease to repel and continue to attract the modern mind, with its leaning to a determinist philosophy and an evolutionist science, with its readiness to accept a moderated Fascism in politics and its tenacious grasp of liberty in personal life? Let those who are better qualified give answer to this challenging query!—Let them assay such a task, remembering the needs of the exuberant intelligence of our youth in College and University, and above all keeping in view the inalienable needs of the human soul as it comes under spiritual influences and seeks to enter upon a close walk with God. We are persuaded that alike for the young, the thoughtful and the devout there is no truth that should prove more luring and satisfying than that which sets forth a God, not of whims and variations, but of unchanging wisdom, and authority, a God who is at once just, holy, merciful and mighty. I, for one, fail to conceive of any presentation of the relation of God to man which is so well calculated to appeal to the cravings

of mankind as is the Calvinist setting of the evangel of love divine. It would be no cause for surprise if, as this century grows older, men should come more and more to discern in the author of our salvation none other than the supreme Ruler of the universe, the sovereign Lord whose will is unchangeable and whose love is boundless.

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