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Author(s): A. Mitchell Hunter

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HAS CALVINISM A FUTURE?

REV. A. MITCHELL HUNTER

A discussion of Calvinism is particularly timely. Crises in social evolution, as in the experience of individuals, have always forced men to a renewed reliance upon God. When civilization fails to give moral direction, when human nature suddenly shows its brute inheritance, men look to God alone. That is the central message of Calvin, and Calvin learned it from Augustine, Paul, Jesus, and the prophets. Our modern world cries out again for the living God of Law and Love.

There is a widespread popular presumption that Calvinism is a discredited system, a spent force, a burnt-out star. The day of its dominance, commonly regarded as pernicious, is past. The time has come for it to be cast out neck and crop from creed and confession of an enlightened, emancipated age. The genius of Protestant mediaevalism has become the bogey-man of Protestant Modernism. This is an opinion and attitude to be reckoned with in the rapidly approaching era of creedal reconstruction. Practically all Protestant confessions are more or less saturated with Calvinism. Shall we anticipate revisions which will remorselessly extrude its every noxious germ? Is Calvinism to be consigned to the museum of antiquities among the wicked things that have ceased from troubling? Is it breathing its last? Has it no future?

Obviously such a question at once raises the previous one, What is Calvinism? The popular readiness to pronounce upon a subject is often in inverse proportion to its knowledge of it. The judicial "man in the street" is apt to base his opinion of things on his perception of some feature in them which repels or attracts him. Puritanism has suf-

fered from the obtrusive wart on Cromwell's nose. The judgment that is rooted in prejudice is apt to be stubbornly defiant of the most vigorous and indignant spade-work. Calvinism has been the victim of its identification with a doctrine abhorrent to a complacent modern humanitarianism. That which Calvin accepted because it magnified God's glory, it construes and denounces as (were it true) dishonoring to him beyond words. It does not stay to ask whether a system which has had such world-wide vogue and influence among all kinds of men, not altogether without tenderness of heart, could be synonymous with a dogma easy to state with a crudeness which pillories it as revolting at once to the sensible mind and the sensitive soul. There is much need of popular illumination as to what Calvinism actually is.

Calvinism is, of course, primarily the teaching of Calvin in its widest scope. It may seem a perverse and Chestertonian thing to say, but Calvin, accounted among the princes of systematic theology, was not primarily a theologian, one whose nature found its chief and deepest satisfaction in constructing an edifice of theological doctrine. He was

not of the race of the dry-as-dust schoolmen. What was distinctive about him was that he was first and foremost a profoundly religious man. Piety was the keynote of his character. He was a God-possessed man. Theology was of no concern to him as a study in itself; he devoted himself to it as providing a framework for the support of all that religion meant to him. It explicated and vindicated his feelings; it rationalized and articulated his experience; it gave firm foothold and handhold for what might have been evanescent emotions, or at least it made him independent of other religious support and comfort when the spring of living faith went dry. Calvin came to his work with all in his heart which gradually came out of his head. Had he not been constitutionally religious, he would never have been the kind of theologian he became. It happened that he was gifted with an intellect which made him equal to the task of giving religion, as he experienced it, embodiment in a systematized theology congenial to the logical character of a mind which believed in the divinely ordained orderliness of things and expected to find a concatenated series of propositional doctrines corresponding to a harmonious, unchaotic body of religious feelings and emotions. As evidence of what was deepest in Calvin might be adduced the fact that in the first edition of the *Institutes* dogma, *pur et simple*, plays a minor part, the emphasis being on the things which go to nourish the spiritual and moral life. It was only as he became aware of the looseness of conduct associated with libertinism of thought that in later editions he gradually elaborated and urgently

claimed assent to what was essentially dogmatic. It is notable, too, that in his children's Catechism there is no mention of predestination, and in his Church Catechism 11 sections (or one-fifth of the whole) are devoted to prayer. There spoke the real heart of the man.

Now because of this primary characteristic of Calvin, it is quite conceivable that his doctrinal system might have taken a very different shape and content, had it not been for the axiom assumed on all hands at that time—the indisputable authority of Holy Scripture as providing all the theology (taking the word in its widest sense) that need be or could be surely known. What was there, was bound to be believed. Experience must attest it and it must illuminate experience. Anything asserted that was not there was vain speculation, unnecessary, probably perilous, an impious or irreverent trespass, it may be, on ground on which it was the mind of God that foot of man should not with his consent tread. A contradiction within the Bible was unthinkable—an assumption which results in not a little expository juggling in his *Commentaries*. Calvin was not more in love with the doctrine of reprobation than his critics. But he found it in his sacred referendum, and his scrupulous honesty of mind would not let him discreetly cover it up. It was his duty as a faithful expounder of the Word to declare the whole counsel of God. If it were not somehow to his honor and glory, it would not be there. Reprobation therefore was no erratic boulder in the sacred quarry of doctrine, intrusively alien. It must be of a piece with the whole. But for Calvin, with

his estimate of man as a hell-deserving sinner and his thought of God as ever seeking his own glory, the surprising thing would have been that there should be no hint in Scripture of the rejection of men who thoroughly deserve that fate. He indeed regarded election as much more to be wondered at than rejection. For God might most justly have left mankind to its merited fate of self-incurred doom.

It is to be remembered that these doctrines with which Calvinism is popularly identified did not originate with Calvin at all. He inherited them, and much else, from Augustine, just as Luther's theology owed much to Occam. But he was not the man to take them over from Augustine, however much he revered him, did he not find them in Scripture for himself. That they are there was no gradual discovery, even so late as Augustine. Controversy had busily concerned itself with them since the dawning of the day of dogmatic thought. In the second century, e.g., the letters of Octavius prove that the same perplexities were felt and the same vehement objections made to them as in later ages when in the cyclic revolution of emphasis they came once and again over controversy's underlining stroke.

So then one may properly decline to find in these doctrines the characteristic product or feature of Calvinism. They were in it as they were in all other contemporary theological systems, because the axioms of the faith left no other alternative either to loyalty or to logic. Calvin made use of them after his own characteristic fashion as supports, inspirations, or admonitions. But had they

not been there, it would have made no difference in the clearness and determination with which he perceived and pursued the aims and objects to which he gave his life. Calvinism in fact is not essentially a systematic body of doctrine. Its essence is revealed in that which Calvin consistently strove to effect and actually succeeded in effecting in no small degree—the moralization of all life by religion. His lifelong aim and business were to re-wed religion and morality and establish them in indissoluble union as directors of human activity in all its spheres. He was the apostle of the rehabilitation of the ideal of primitive evangelical Christianity. Religion to Calvin was not a matter of pious emotion, consequent on the assurance of being in a state of grace. It was the acceptance of the rule of God over one's whole life. It included dependence upon the will of God and obedience to the will of God—not more the one than the other. A man's conduct in all his relationships must be governed by regard to God's will along with the ever-active sense of responsibility to him directly. In the provinces of home life, social life, political life, religion must be energetically operating to procure the dominance of truth, justice, purity, integrity. This world was meant to be the kingdom of God. It was the business of the elect to make it so. That was why they were called. Predestination was the appointment of the few good to rule over the many bad in the interests of righteousness. It was not for God's chosen to sit down idly and complacently at the feast of privilege. He had chosen them for his glory; he had chosen them for his honor, too; and the honor he sought

was the establishment through them of his rule over all people that on earth do dwell. Nothing but their active participation in that work could give assurance of their election. While Calvin laid great stress on the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, he did not allow assurance to fluctuate with emotion. That was the weakness of Luther's teaching. Satan assailed him on the side of his assurance, and it took more than hard-flung inkbottles to repel his cunning assaults. Calvin suffered from no such neuralgias of doubt as to his standing with God. With far shrewder judgment, he recognized that emotion was no trustworthy criterion. To allow one's self to be troubled by its coming and going, to agonize in the fierce struggle to recover shaken certainty, was to dissipate energy which might be better employed. Was your heart steadily set to do the will of God? That was the main thing. Were you sincerely on the side of God? Did the trend of your life prove it? Then that was sufficient.

All this proves how far doctrine was from being central to essential Calvinism. Calvin himself may have thought it was; but a system-monger is not always the best judge of what is essential to his system and most valuable in it. The theory of natural selection might go to the wall without the real worth of Darwinism suffering eclipse. Calvin's doctrine of predestination might well have issued in a fatalism which induced a paralysis of ethical endeavor. It actually did the very reverse. It braced men's wills. It saturated them with aspiration. It inspired them to a strenuous and heroic activity which brought

about a very miracle of moral revolution in all spheres of life and all quarters of the world. So much more was it the spirit of Calvinism which counted than its letter.

Calvinism indeed worked as a moral purgative and stimulant wherever it gained any influence at all—and that is its greatest glory. It cleansed the Augean stables of Geneva. It entered licentious courts and touched reckless cheeks there to a strange, unwonted shame. Everywhere it awakened and made sensitive lethargic consciences. It created a refined, if vehement, piety, which blossomed into a strength and frequent beauty of high character that has since been the world's most valuable asset. Calvin's religion was reflected in his crest—a hand with a burning heart in it, and the words, "I give Thee all." That is what it meant to him, and what it meant to him he taught to others. Calvinism in a word stood for consecration, the consecration that found its ideal and example in the Christ whose tired feet climbed Mount Olivet to pray and the hill Calvary to die.

It is this fundamental and ultimate aim of Calvinism to moralize life by religion which interprets and explains the character of Calvin's own activities. It instructed his legislation. It determined his views of the relation between church and state. The church should be the conscience of the state, the state the organ of an evangelized conscience. As a reminder of the spirit that should infuse all life, private and public, Calvin got the letters I H S carved or stamped on all public buildings, coins, and standards in Geneva. In Scotland the same spirit fruited in projects of educa-

tion (unfortunately abortive in their enlightened completeness) whose aim was to promote learning and virtue to the profit of church and commonwealth, as also in the endeavor to suffuse home life and social life with an ethical religion, an endeavor which found expression in the enactment of the Kirk Session of St. Andrews permitting no one to marry who could not repeat the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments, a summary combination of the essential elements of piety, theology, and morality. It is a notable thing how closely Calvin keeps to life in his *Commentaries*. The application was the main thing with him. That is largely the reason why these expositions still retain their value. They are instinct with a constant concern for the attunement of life to the divine precepts. This fundamental principle, too, explicates his attitude to heresy. He was wonderfully patient for those days and for one in his position with all kinds of creedal vagaries around him. It was only when these threatened (in his view) the foundations of morality and orderly government and therefore of society that he became severe. But (excepting in the case of Servetus) his severity limited itself to expulsion of the offender from Geneva as a disturber of the public peace, as a discordant element in the community whose continuance there might be fraught with insidious and perilous potencies of evil. Calvin in this respect accepted and applied the principle of the Justinian code, "Cujus regio, ejus religio," though from a different motive, the motive not of the right of the powers-that-be to command the belief of subjects, but of expediency in the interests

of the public welfare, based as it was in his view on what he jealously regarded as the true religion.

Now all this, which may have seemed preliminary to our real investigation, has in reality given a large part of the answer to the question of our inquiry. Were Calvinism rightly to be identified with its body of doctrines, did the elimination of these mean the excision of its soul, then indeed it has but a slender hold on life. Already it is as a ghost peeping timidly out of the dark rooms of neglected confessions. As a system of doctrine compactly built together, it is now consigned to the attentions of vivisectionary historians. Querulous impatience clamors for the decision of the High Courts of the churches to assign it to the custody of the Committee on Ancient Buildings and Ruins, accounted worthy of preservation as an interesting and curious memorial of a dead heroic past, whose mind moved in mysterious ways.

But that is not to dispose of Calvinism. Declare its doctrinal foundations unsound and therefore to be condemned; cast away predestination and reprobation with loathing; regard the Bible as a tract of country wherein may be found many wellsprings of truth of varying strength and sweetness amid much sandy soil and sterile country rather than as a big reservoir whose every drop has been carefully distilled from heaven. Do these things, and you may indeed have some reason to think you have consigned the body of Calvinism to lie moldering in a grave, but the prime part has escaped you; its soul, like John Brown's, goes marching on. For Calvinism, as I have

sought to show, is essentially not identical with its system of doctrine. You may discard the bulk of it (though all of it you cannot without consigning Christianity itself to the ash-heap of things done with) but still it lives on. It must and will live on so long as religion itself endures. Its dogmas were but the clothing and nourishment of a spirit which is of the ultimate essence of religion, the spirit of which Calvin himself was the very incarnation, the spirit of humble dependence upon God, of patient submission to his holy will, of whole-hearted consecration to his service, of perfect trust in his sleepless care and unchanging love. Calvinism lives in every religion which teaches and fosters these things and in every man that practices them. Where the sense of a divine providential government is deep and strong, where the eye of faith sees God sitting at the loom of time weaving with wise thought, though it may be with inscrutable purpose, the web of individual lives, where piety waves aside all would-be intermediaries, seeking and finding immediate fellowship with God, where the mystical in human nature is given proper recognition and due rights, restrained from extravagances by the firm rein of a cool common-sense, where men with a high gravity live life under a profound sense of responsibility and a keen realization of its incalculable issues in eternity, where a community, a society, a people bow to the imperious claims of a Christianized conscience and seek to order their affairs under its direction, there Calvinism lives.

But in more ways than in these is it perpetuated. It initiated a new epoch

in the spirit of communal life. The kingdom of God, which it is given to the elect to realize, is a brotherhood, and through the mutual services of brotherhood alone can it be realized. Now it is the special distinction of Calvin that, while he raised the worth of the individual to its highest power, each man having a line to himself in the Book of Life, he demanded that that worth should prove itself in the faithful and diligent discharge of social duties and responsibilities. Every man was in his degree directly responsible for the welfare of the body politic. He was his brother's keeper. This was the principle he carried into all his work as legislator, and he has been pronounced greater as a legislator than as a theologian. It issued in Presbyterianism, whose genius is the participation of each and every member by right in the direction of the affairs of the church. It issued in the constitution given to Geneva largely at his dictation, based on the rule of states by representative elected assemblies. It accounted for the grandmotherly legislation of which he has been accused as being the inspirer if not the actual author, which did not scruple or hesitate to invade the sanctuary of the home where independence claims to practice anarchism if it likes. More than anything does that which goes on within house-doors defile and poison the stream of life without. Calvin sought to deepen and vivify the sense of responsibility of the individual to society for what he was in whatever relationship, as father as well as citizen, in play as well as in work. Indeed he may be said to have brought to life the germ of that spirit which has now

taken shape in socialism, only his was a socialism of mutual responsibility, of communal duties based on reciprocal rights, an idealistic socialism of the spirit. It might be held that the era of social reform, springing from the mutual concern of the members of a community in one another's welfare, began with Calvin. Certainly it was then that the care of the social welfare first became the conscious concern and business of the united community.

Now Calvin was by conviction and temperament an aristocrat. The doctrine of predestination was indeed to him the divine sanction of aristocratic rule, that is the rule of the worst by the best. Yet no one has done more than he to infuse into all the veins of the world the spirit of democracy. He built other and better than he knew, like most great men. It was inevitable that that should be the outcome of his work. It could not but so fruit from his insistence upon even-handed justice that has no respect of persons and from the strong, self-assertive consciousness of individuality which he, more than any other, sowed in receptive hearts by his doctrine and by the practical demand he made upon men. The sense of personal worth, of human dignity, demanded expression, claimed its rights in institutions specifically democratic. Calvin rang the knell of autocracies. He laid the foundation stone of modern republics, as Bancroft, the historian of the United States of America, has cordially recognized in the case of that country. He paved the way for all manner of popular assemblies in all lands. Their roots creep at last to Geneva. It was principally because

Calvin was such an outright uncompromising exponent of essential democracy in church and state that his influence so quickly eclipsed that of Luther in the extent of its spread and the constructive and directive idealisms he infused into the political systems of modern civilization. Calvinism in fact became the most powerful ferment of civic liberty which has ever worked in the world's heart. It is significant of what it has done that in the monument erected at Geneva to commemorate Calvin's tercentenary there appear statues of statesmen who at once represented Calvinism in the ages when it was fighting for existence and stood for the rights of citizenship over against aristocratic and autocratic power: William of Orange, Oliver Cromwell, Admiral Coligny, Bocksay of Hungary, Williams of America. The principle of the sovereignty of the people is the gift of Calvinism to the modern world. Calvinism no future! Why, it has laid the foundation of the future. It has cast the molds into which the future is being poured. It struck off the last fetters which shackled the hands of civilization and made possible that progress which has brought it farther on its way toward whatever be its goal than all the centuries that have gone before.

Calvin was a man of ideals, unrealizable if you will. Among the noblest of them was his ideal of the unity of the true Christian church in all lands. Let me say here that he was not thirled to Presbyterianism as the only Scripturally valid system of ecclesiastical government. He was not so strait-jacketed. His candor and clearness of

exegetic acumen forbade him to pronounce one constitution as alone divinely authorized. He approved of episcopacy meanwhile in other lands, where he recognized it to be more congenial to native tastes and affinities and inherited traditions. But he held the church to be one under whatever form, so long as it was evangelically Protestant. He never hesitated to intervene in its affairs wherever the need appeared or if appeal was made to him. By that means as well as by seeking to originate a common council of the churches, he industriously sought to promote what would have expanded into a world-embracing union of the Protestant churches. His attempt could scarcely help but fail. But is his spirit not in possession again today? Does his ideal not hover before large and generous minds in all lands? In them the spirit of Calvin lives again and, unrecognized it may be, bodes to work yet more mightily.

One other claim I venture to make. Essential Calvinism will be the frontier fortress against the inroads of any philosophy which posits a God incapable of foreseeing the future, subject to mistakes, fighting a hard and not always winning battle against heavy odds of uncompromisingly hostile evil, trameled in his endeavors by an unmanageable universe for which he is not responsible. With such a finite helper, likely to be overpowered, thwarted, outmaneuvered, in whom shall we trust? A modern

Rabshakeh is given ample reason to mock. The future is left uncertain. Providence is a hallucination. Life is like a drop of water trickling down a window-pane—not even God knows where it will run next. Such a philosophy offers no guaranties for any worthy upshot of the whole perplexing business. It draws its pencil through such unauthorized and groundless anticipations as that of a great divine event to which the whole creation moves. All it can say is, Wait and see! That is the reverse of encouraging. It is crippling to high endeavor. It sets an *angina pectoris* of doubt in the breast of hope. It takes the inspiring vision from faith. It strikes intercessory prayer dumb. The surest protection against the paralyzing touch of such a philosophy is the victorious assurance of Calvinism that God is supreme, indisputably sovereign over all, that his will is done, that his Kingdom will come. That faith may set up mysteries; but mysteries we can live with if so be that we believe with our whole heart that behind them are the mercy, wisdom, and love of a Father-God to whom the isles of the sea and the stars of dreadful space are as the dust of the balance. But doubt of God's absolute power to help, to save, to perform, to carry out his will—with those we cannot live if we would be of good courage, if we would greet the unseen with a cheer. Upon the God of Calvinism rests the hope of the world.