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Is there a Future for Calvinism?

IF there is no future for *Calvinism* then there is no future for anything that is of any value or worth. Every system of religious thought, based upon the Scriptures, and all theology that is worthy of the Christian Church, are marked by that which is derived directly or indirectly from Calvinistic doctrine. Theology is strong or weak, virile or feeble, deep or shallow, in proportion to its Calvinistic spirit. Calvinism, in the truest interpretation of that word, puts iron into the blood, and gives muscle and fibre to conviction and Christian experience; and the people who receive it because they believe it, and then prove it in heart and life, are such as possess gumptious inflexibility with grace, in what they conceive to be the truth of God. *I believe that the Church's great need at the present hour is a strong grip of what this particular form of theology stands for.*

When we speak of Calvinism it is not that we pin our faith to John Calvin or the system with which his name is associated, but because, on the whole, it expresses more fully what we wish to convey. I agree that everything depends upon what is meant by Calvinism; the term needs to be rightly interpreted in the light of what Calvin taught *as a whole*. There is much teaching abroad to-day that bears this label which is but a travesty and a burlesque of the real thing, and there are those who profess to be Calvinistic preachers and followers whom Calvin would not own or look at if he met them. To arrive at a sober and true conclusion as to what this particular system of thought really represents, we should in some degree, at all events, gauge the **WHOLE** doctrinal position of John Calvin; it is not just, as many do, to take one or two fragments, and judge the whole by them. There are many who speak of Calvinism represented by the doctrine of "eternal election" and "reprobation," and nothing more, without for one moment considering the setting of these truths in the whole fabric of thought.

It would be a great exercise for all the students in the theological colleges of our land if their professors would take them through *Institutio Christianæ Religionis*, by John Calvin, in the same proportion as they deal with other writers. It is not a dry catalogue of doctrines, but a great treatise on the fundamental facts of the Christian religion, in the light of the Character and Attributes of God. The late Dr. Jowett once said that "Calvin was the greatest commentator of the Scriptures that Europe had ever known."

It may help us for a moment to waive the consideration of

Calvinism's future and to call to mind what it has been in the past. It is really too big a subject for me to attempt here, but there have been periods when art, literature, politics, were all influenced by the mighty impact of this vibrating system of theology. It moved not only in the circles of ecclesiasticism, but in every phase of life. It sought

To vindicate Eternal Providence,
And justify the ways of God to man.

When we remember that the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* was translated from the Latin into nearly twelve languages in comparatively a few years after it was written, we at once see the wide area to which it made its appeal. A Roman Catholic dignitary thirty years after Calvin's death wrote somewhat satirically of the use Protestants made of the writings of Calvin, and among other things wrote, "*They decorate them with gold, purple, and every costly ornament, as the most precious jewel of the Gospel, as if they were a treasure fallen from heaven; and from these books they decide and determine every controversy.*" In modern times no less a person than Dr. Fairbairn, to its praise, said, "*In modern times no system has had a more potent, practical influence than Calvinism. It is a system of splendid daring, of courageous consistency in all its parts, in premiss, process, and conclusion. It was a reasoned system, reason could understand it, and it could control the reason that understood it. The men who held it felt as if they had their feet upon the last and highest reality, not simply a way of salvation, or a path of peace in death, but a system of absolute truth; and a faith so strong and comprehensive made strong and commanding men. It entered like iron into the blood of nascent Protestantism, and braced it to the most heroic endurances and endeavours. It made the men who in France fought the noble battles of the Huguenots: the soldiers and citizens who in the swamps of Holland resisted and broke the cruel and tyrannical power of Spain: the Puritans who in England and the forests of the Far West formed all that was and is bravest, bravest, manliest in our religious life: the Covenanters who in Scotland, through years of persecution, held aloft and nobly followed the blue banner that proclaimed the sovereign rights of Christ.*" Let men in the present, who do not understand, say what they will of Calvinism, it has a great past, and its literature, power, and influence with God, has achieved great things through all Christian countries. Has it a future? Before we reply to this question it may be well to endeavour briefly to state what Calvinism really witnesses to; what are its outstanding doctrines.

First and primarily, it insists on the *Absolute Sovereignty of God*. This is its alpha and omega; it is the basis of all its

doctrines and the canopy of the whole system. Like the Book of Genesis it begins with "God," and in the light of what *He* is everything else is determined. But we must recognise that it never views God as some capricious Being Who acts as a necessitarian, without the consideration of great principles as they pertain to God and man. Equity and Righteousness in God are insisted upon, but Love has its full and unlimited exercise within the realm of holiness. Calvinism presents God as Sovereign Lord of all, everywhere, and in everything; it does this without making Him the Author or Abettor of evil, but distinguishes between His decretive and permissive will.

Sovereignty is always exercised with at least a two-fold objective, the glory of God and the good of man; but God will never sacrifice or compromise in one of His attributes whether it be holiness or love, either for His own honour or for man's welfare. The will of God is the unalterable rule of His conduct in every sphere, and that will is governed by infinite wisdom, and everything He wills He has power to execute, and none can stay His Hand; yet He never deviates for one moment from the highest and supreme standard of Eternal Righteousness. God is always fair and just in His dealings with angels, men, or devils. When this revealed truth is apprehended in some measure by the human heart and mind, we are not only awed and solemnised, but are likely, first and foremost, to seek the rights of God, believing that therein the rights of man will find their true adjustment.

The second and next great truth that marks Calvinism is the *Purposeful Character of the Redemptive Sacrifice of Christ at the Cross of Calvary*. The exercise of Divine Sovereignty reaches its culminating point in the wondrous transaction that was enacted at Calvary, so much of which is beyond our human ken, and into which the angels are for ever gazing. Christ's mediatorial work was not an experiment, but the execution of a Divine purpose. He was born into this world on purpose to die, and His death was predestined to have far-reaching effects even to the uttermost ends of the earth; yes, and beyond this, for the death of Christ related to the world of fallen spirits, and also affected heaven itself. Dr. Forsyth has rightly said, "*The most poignant and potent event that ever happened or can happen in the world is the death of Christ. The whole issue of warring history is condensed there. Good and evil meet there for good and for all, and to evil that death is the last word of the Holy Omnipotence of God. There is nothing hidden from His grace there, and nothing outside its service, its ethic, and its final mystery. The whole world is reconstituted at the Cross as its final moral principle, its key, and its adjustment. The Cross is at once*

creation's fatal jar and final recovery." Jesus Christ "shall see of the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied." The ultimate of the Cross is the establishment of righteousness and truth in every governed realm. Love and justice had a purpose in this death of all deaths which must and shall be realised. Calvinism insists that the mediatorial work of Christ cannot and shall not know any defeat, but it shall accomplish the purpose for which it was designed, and Jesus Christ "is the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world." Here we stand on sure ground. We see at once that the death of Christ cannot end in a fiasco, but shall be for evermore a demonstration of the immaculate holiness of God, and of the everlasting love of Jehovah. There is an almighty power in the atoning sacrifice, a sufficiency and efficiency to meet the requirements of God, and to meet the needs of sinful men as they are brought to the once-crucified, but now risen and glorified, Emmanuel.

Thirdly, and lastly, Calvinism insists most strongly upon the *Effectiveness of the Work of the Holy Spirit*. It views the love of God, and the blood of Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit, as being counterparts, but Calvary demonstrates the love and creates the means whereby it may flow honourably and justly to the worst of men, and the power is present in the Third Person of the Trinity to make real to the human heart the power of the Redeeming Sacrifice. The Holy Spirit is in the world to gather the trophies of the Redemer's conquest, to bring home the Word of the Cross to the consciences of men, to make effective the God-given work of the redeemed Church. Calvinism teaches that our God is marching on in righteousness, in love, and in truth; that His gifts and callings are without repentance; and that He is "the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever." He will brook no unbelief that stands in His way; He will both condemn and scatter it; and if men stand in the way of His triumphal march rather than fall in line with Him, then He declares that they will have to put up with the consequences. God has displayed His infinite grace to a world of sin, and His Gospel announced the fact that whosoever believeth in His Son will have everlasting life. It must never be supposed that to believe in the Sovereignty of God you must at the same time entertain a fatalistic spirit, and say, "What is to be will be." God has revealed His will and made it known and "he that willeth to do His will shall know of the teaching whether it is of God or man." The Spirit of God is stronger than the will of man, and the blood of Jesus Christ mightier in its cleansing than human guilt, and the love of God deeper and stronger and of greater power than the sinfulness and stubbornness of the human heart, and unless God does something with sin in the abstract, and in the

individual, and in human experience, nothing can be done to it.

Now, the question is asked, is there a future for this Calvinism? It is my own deep and personal conviction that there is, and, moreover, I believe that already there is a trend amongst spiritually-minded and thoughtful people towards it. THERE IS A GREAT NATIONAL NEED FOR THE ASSERTION OF THE TRUTH OF THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD, for man has been and is seeking to-day that which is right in his own eyes, and matters have got to such a pass that governments and communities have admitted that they are baffled by them. There is a great need to bring home to the minds of men and to the consciences of people generally the great fact of the Supremacy and Sovereignty of Almighty God. The nations need to learn, and especially our own loved nation, that God is the Lord, and He will not have His position or authority challenged, and that as soon as the people of this nation bow before His sovereignty, He will flood them with further light and understanding as to what His Own purpose and plan is for this particular part of the world which has been so favoured in the centuries past and gone. Industrial and political centres will change in their bias and in their outlook, when once they acknowledge this truth. I fear we have belittled God. He has been lowered in the estimation of the world because of our neglect of the attributes of the Divine Being. There is not sufficient awe among the people that will make them not afraid of God, but afraid of doing the things that displease Him.

But if the future of Calvinism lies particularly in the need, the pressing and urgent need, of the nation, what shall we say of the visible Church and our Lord Jesus Christ in the world? Is there not at the present moment the need for a mighty sweep towards the Lord God Almighty? The recognition of His Sovereignty in Jesus Christ as the Hope of the Body, that the only law for the redeemed Church is that of the Law-giver through the Redeemer. Have we not more sufficiently to learn that our power and authority in the world does not lie in our great organizations, or in the capitalisation of our funds, or in the perfectness of our Church order, or even in a proposed ecclesiastical union between all Christendom, but in the Almighty Sovereignty of God as manifested in the atoning sacrifice of Calvary, followed by the resurrection and enthronement of the Man of Galilee?

Yes, there is a future for Calvinism. People are inarticulately longing for a strong centre of authority, a dictatorship, if you will, which they will find in the Sovereignty of God when it is brought home to them by the power of the inspired Bible in which it is so clearly revealed.

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