

The Theology of John Calvin

by Benjamin B. Warfield (1851-1921)

This essay appeared in a booklet published by the Presbyterian Board of Education in 1909. The electronic edition of this article was scanned and edited by Shane Rosenthal. It is in the public domain and may be freely copied and distributed. p. 1, par. 1, [THEOLOGY]

The subject of this address is the theology of John Calvin and I shall ask leave to take this subject rather broadly, that is to say, to attempt not so much to describe the personal peculiarities of John Calvin as a theologian, as to indicate in broad outlines the determining characteristics of the theology which he taught. I wish to speak, in other words, about Calvinism, that great system of religious thought which bears John Calvin's name, and which also--although of course he was not its author, but only one of its chief exponents--bears indelibly impressed upon it the marks of his formative hand and of his systematizing genius. Of all the teachers who have wrought into it their minds and hearts since its revival in that tremendous religious upheaval we call the Reformation, this system of thought owes most perhaps to John Calvin and has therefore justly borne since then his name. And of all the services which Calvin has rendered to humanity--and they are neither few nor small--the greatest was undoubtedly his gift to it afresh of this system of religious thought, quickened into new life by the forces of his genius, and it is therefore just that he should be most widely remembered by it. When we are seeking to probe to the heart of Calvinism, we are exploring also most thoroughly the heart of John Calvin. Calvinism is his greatest and most significant monument, and he who adequately understands it will best understand him. p. 1, par. 2, [THEOLOGY]

It was about a hundred years ago that Max Gobel first set the scholars at work upon the attempt clearly to formulate the formative principle of Calvinism. A long line of distinguished thinkers have exhausted themselves in the task without attaining, we must confess, altogether consistent results. The great difficulty has been that the formative and distinctive principles of Calvinism have been confused, and men have busied themselves rather in indicating the points of difference by which Calvinism is distinguished from other theological tendencies than in seeking out the germinal principle of which it itself is the unfolding. p. 1, par. 3, [THEOLOGY]

The particular theological tendency with which Calvinism has been contrasted in such discussions is, as was natural, the sister system of Lutheranism, with which it divided the heritage of the Reformation. Now undoubtedly somewhat different

spirits do inform Calvinism and Lutheranism. And equally undoubtedly, the distinguishing spirit of Calvinism is due to its formative principle and is not to be accounted for by extraneous circumstances of origin or antecedents, such as for example, the democratic instincts of the Swiss, or the superior humanistic culture of its first teachers, or their tendency to intellectualism or to radicalism. But it is gravely misleading to identify the formative principle of either type of Protestantism with its prominent points of difference from the others. They have vastly more in common than in distinction. And nothing could be more misleading than to trace all their differences, as to their roots, to the fundamental place given in the two systems respectively to the principles of predestination and justification by faith. p. 1, par. 4, [THEOLOGY]

In the first place, the doctrine of predestination is not the formative principle of Calvinism, it is only its logical implication. It is not the root from which Calvinism springs, it is one of the branches which it has inevitably thrown out. And so little is it the peculiarity of Calvinism, that it underlay and gave its form and power to the whole Reformation movement--which was, as from the spiritual point of view a great revival of religion, so from the doctrinal point of view a great revival of Augustinianism. There was, accordingly, no difference among the Reformers on this point; Luther and Melancthon and the compromising Butzer were no less zealous for absolute predestination than Zwingli and Calvin. Even Zwingli could not surpass Luther in sharp and unqualified assertion of this doctrine; and it was not Calvin but Melancthon who paused, even in his first preliminary statement of the elements of the Protestant faith, to give it formal assertion and elaboration. p. 2, par. 1, [THEOLOGY]

Just as little can the doctrine of justification by faith be represented as specifically Lutheran. It is as central to the Reformed as to the Lutheran system. Nay, it is only in the Reformed system that it retains the purity of its conception and resists the tendency to make it a doctrine of justification on account of; instead of by, faith. It is true that Lutheranism is prone to rest in faith as a kind of ultimate fact, while Calvinism penetrates to its causes, and places faith in its due relation to the other products of God's activity looking to the salvation of man. And this difference may, on due consideration, conduct us back to the formative principle of each type of thought. But it, too, is rather an outgrowth of the divergent formative principles than the embodiment of them. Lutheranism, sprung from the throes of a guilt-burdened soul seeking peace with God, finds peace in faith, and stops right there. It is so absorbed in rejoicing in the blessings which flow from faith that it refuses or neglects to inquire whence faith itself flows. It thus loses itself in a sort of divine euthumia, and knows, and will know nothing beyond the peace of the justified soul. Calvinism asks with the same eagerness as Lutheranism the great question,

"What shall I do to be saved?" and answers it precisely as Lutheranism answers it. But it cannot stop there. The deeper question presses upon it, "Whence this faith by which I am justified?" And the deeper response suffuses all the chambers of the soul with praise, "From the free gift of God alone, to the praise of the glory of His grace." Thus Calvinism withdraws the eye from the soul and its destiny and fixes it on God and His glory. It has zeal, no doubt, for salvation but its highest zeal is for the honour of God, and it is this that quickens its emotions and vitalizes its efforts. It begins, it centres and it ends with the vision of God in His glory and it sets itself; before all things, to render to God His rights in every sphere of life-activity. p. 2, par. 2, [THEOLOGY]

If thus the formative principle of Calvinism is not to be identified with the points of difference which it has developed with its sister type of Protestantism, Lutheranism, much less can it be identified with those heads of doctrine--severally or in sum--which have been singled out by its own rebellious daughter, Arminianism, as its specially vulnerable points. The "five points of Calvinism," we have no doubt learned to call them, and not without justice. They are, each and every one of them, essential elements in the Calvinistic system, the denial of which in any of their essential details is logically the rejection of the entirety of Calvinism; and in their sum they provide what is far from being a bad epitome of the Calvinistic system. The sovereignty of the election of God, the substitutive definiteness of the atonement of Christ, the inability of the sinful will to good, the creative energy of the saving grace of the Spirit, the safety of the redeemed soul in the keeping of its Redeemer,--are not these the distinctive teachings of Calvinism, as precious to every Calvinist's heart as they are necessary to the integrity of the system? Selected as the objects of the Arminian assault, these "five-points" have been reaffirmed, therefore, with the constancy of profound conviction by the whole Calvinistic world. It is well however to bear in mind that they owe their prominence in our minds to the Arminian debate, and however well fitted they may prove in point of fact to stand as a fair epitome of Calvinistic doctrine, they are historically at least only the Calvinistic obverse of "the five points of Arminianism." And certainly they can put in no claim, either severally or in sum, to announce the formative principle of Calvinism, whose outworking in the several departments of doctrine they rather are--though of course they may surely and directly conduct us back to that formative principle, as the only root out of which just this body of doctrine could grow. Clearly at the root of the stock which bears these branches must lie a most profound sense of God and an equally profound sense of the relation in which the creature stands to God, whether conceived merely as creature or, more specifically as sinful creature. It is the vision of God and His Majesty, in a word, which lies at the foundation of the entirety of Calvinistic thinking. p. 3, par. 1, [THEOLOGY]

The exact formulation of the formative principle of Calvinism, as I have said, has taxed the acumen of a long line of distinguished thinkers. Many modes of stating it have been proposed. Perhaps after all, however, its simplest statement is the best. It lies then, let me repeat, in a profound apprehension of God in His majesty, with the poignant realization which inevitably accompanies this apprehension, of the relation sustained to God by the creature as such, and particularly by the sinful creature. The Calvinist is the man who has seen God, and who, having seen God in His glory, is filled on the one hand, with a sense of his own unworthiness to stand in God's sight as a creature, and much more as a sinner, and on the other hand, with adoring wonder that nevertheless this God is a God who receives sinners. He who believes in God without reserve and is determined that God shall be God to him, in all his thinking, feeling, willing--in the entire compass of his life activities, intellectual, moral, spiritual--throughout all his individual, social, religious relations--is, by the force of that strictest of all logic which presides over the outworking of principles into thought and life, by the very necessity of the case, a Calvinist. p. 3, par. 2, [THEOLOGY]

If we wish to reduce this statement to a more formal theoretical form, we may say perhaps, that Calvinism in its fundamental idea implies three things. In it, (i) objectively speaking, theism comes to its rights; (ii) subjectively speaking, the religious relation attains its purity; (iii) soteriologically speaking, evangelical religion finds at length its full expression and its secure stability. Theism comes to its rights only in a teleological view of the universe, which recognizes in the whole course of events the orderly working out of the plan of God, whose will is consequently conceived as the ultimate cause of all things. The religious relation attains its purity only when an attitude of absolute dependence on God is not merely assumed, as in the act, say, of prayer, but is sustained through all the activities of life, intellectual, emotional, executive. And evangelical religion reaches its full manifestation and its stable form only when the sinful soul rests in humble, self-emptying trust purely on the God of grace as the immediate and sole source of all the efficiency which enters into its salvation. From these things shine out upon us the formative principle of Calvinism. The Calvinist is the man who sees God behind all phenomena, and in all that occurs recognizes the hand of God, working out His will; who makes the attitude of the soul to God in prayer the permanent attitude in all its life activities; and who casts himself on the grace of God alone, excluding every trace of dependence on self from the whole work of his salvation. p. 4, par. 1, [THEOLOGY]

I think it important to insist here that Calvinism is not a specific variety of theistic thought, religious experience, evangelical faith, but the perfect expression of these

things. The difference between it and other forms of theism, religion, evangelicalism, is a difference not of kind but of degree. There are not many kinds of theism, religion, evangelicalism, each with its own special characteristics, among which men are at liberty to choose, as may suit their individual tastes. There is but one kind of theism, religion, evangelicalism, and if there are several constructions laying claim to these names they differ from one another, not as correlative species of a more inclusive genus, but only as more or less good or bad specimens of the same thing differ from one another. p. 4, par. 2, [THEOLOGY]

Calvinism comes forward simply as pure theism, religion, evangelicalism, as over against less pure theism, religion, evangelicalism. It does not take its position then by the side of other types of these things; it takes its place over them, as what they too ought to be. It has no difficulty thus, in recognizing the theistic character of all truly theistic thought, the religious note in all really religious manifestations, the evangelical quality of all actual evangelical faith. It refuses to be set antagonistically over against these where they really exist in any degree. It claims them in every instance of their emergence as its own, and seeks only to give them their due place in thought and life. Whoever believes in God, whoever recognizes his dependence on God, whoever hears in his heart the echo of the *Soli Deo gloria* of the evangelical profession--by whatever name he may call himself; by whatever logical puzzles his understanding may be confused--Calvinism recognizes such as its own, and as only requiring to give full validity to those fundamental principles which underlie and give its body to all true religion to become explicitly a Calvinist. p. 5, par. 1, [THEOLOGY]

Calvinism is born, we perceive, of the sense of God. God fills the whole horizon of the Calvinist's feeling and thought. One of the consequences which flow from this is the high supernaturalism which informs at once his religious consciousness and his doctrinal construction. Calvinism indeed would not be badly defined as the tendency which is determined to do justice to the immediately supernatural, as in the first so in the second creation. The strength and purity of its apprehension of the supernatural Fact (which is God) removes all embarrassment from it in the presence of the supernatural act (which is miracle). In everything which enters into the process of the recovery of sinful man to good and to God, it is impelled by the force of its first principle to assign the initiative to God. A supernatural revelation in which God makes known to man His will and His purposes of grace; a supernatural record of the revelation in a supernaturally given Book, in which God gives His revelation permanence and extension,--such things are to the Calvinist matters of course. And above all things, he can but insist with the utmost strenuousness on the immediate supernaturalness of the actual work of redemption; this of course, in

its impetration. It is no strain to his faith to believe in a supernatural Redeemer, breaking His way to earth through a Virgin's womb, bursting the bonds of death and returning to His Father's side to share the glory which He had with the Father before the world was. Nor can he doubt that this supernaturally purchased redemption is applied to the soul in an equally supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. p. 5, par. 2, [THEOLOGY]

Thus it comes about that monergistic regeneration--"irresistible grace," "effectual calling," our older theologians called it,--becomes the hinge of the Calvinistic soteriology, and lies much more deeply imbedded in the system than many a doctrine more closely connected with it in the popular mind. Indeed, the soteriological significance of predestination itself consists to the Calvinist largely in the safeguard it affords to the immediate supernaturalness of salvation. What lies at the heart of his soteriology is absolute exclusion of creaturely efficiency in the induction of the saving process, that the pure grace of God in salvation may be magnified. Only so could he express his sense of men's complete dependence as sinners on the free mercy of a saving God; or extrude the evil leaven of synergism, by which God is robbed of His glory and man is encouraged to attribute to some power, some act, some initiative of his own, his participation in that salvation which in reality has come to him from pure grace. p. 6, par. 1, [THEOLOGY]

There is nothing therefore, against which Calvinism sets its face with more firmness than every form and degree of auto-soterism. Above everything else, it is determined to recognize God, in His son Jesus Christ, acting through the Holy Spirit whom He has sent, as our veritable Saviour. To Calvinism, sinful man stands in need, not of inducements or assistance to save himself; but precisely of saving; and Jesus Christ has come not to advise, or urge, or woo, or help him to save himself; but to save him; to save him through the prevalent working on him of the Holy Spirit. This is the root of the Calvinistic soteriology, and it is because this deep sense of human helplessness and this profound consciousness of indebtedness for all that enters into salvation to the free grace of God is the root of its soteriology, that election becomes to Calvinism the *cor cordis* of the Gospel. He who knows that it is God who has chosen him, and not he who has chosen God, and that he owes every step and stage of his salvation to the working out of this choice of God, would be an ingrate indeed if he gave not the whole glory of his salvation to the inexplicable election of the Divine love. p. 6, par. 2, [THEOLOGY]

Calvinism however, is not merely a soteriology. Deep as its interest is in salvation, it cannot escape the question--"Why should God thus intervene in the lives of sinners to rescue them from the consequences of their sin?" And it cannot miss the an-

swer--"Because it is to the praise of the glory of His grace." Thus it cannot pause until it places the scheme of salvation itself in relation with a complete world-view in which it becomes subsidiary to the glory of the Lord God Almighty. If all things are from God, so to Calvinism all things are also unto God, and to it God will be all in all. It is born of the reflection in the heart of man of the glory of a God who will not give His honour to another, and draws its life from constant gaze upon this great image. And let us not fail punctually to note, that "it is the only system in which the whole order of the world is thus brought into a rational unity with the doctrine of grace, and in which the glorification of God is carried out with absolute completeness." Therefore the future of Christianity--as its past has done--lies in its hands. For, it is certainly true, as has been said by a profound thinker of our own time, that "it is only with such a universal conception of God, established in a living way, that we can face with hope of complete conquest all the spiritual dangers and terrors of our times." "It, however," as the same thinker continues, "is deep enough and large enough and divine enough, rightly understood, to confront them and do battle with them all in vindication of the Creator, Preserver and Governor of the world, and of the Justice and Love of the divine Personality." p. 6, par. 3, [THEOLOGY]

This is the system of doctrine to the elaboration and defence of which John Calvin gave all his powers nearly four hundred years ago. And it is chiefly because he gave all his powers to commending to us this system of doctrine, that we are here today to thank God for giving to the world the man who has given to the world this precious gift. p. 7, par. 1, [THEOLOGY]

A Remembrance of Warfield

When I returned from Germany in 1906, I entered, as instructor in the New Testament department, into the teaching staff of Princeton Theological Seminary.... Warfield was Professor of Systematic Theology (or "Professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology," as the chair was then more sonorously and vigorously called). And what a wonderful man he was! His learning was prodigious. No adequate notion of its breadth can be obtained even from his voluminous collected works. Consult him on the most out-of-the-way subjects, and you would find him with the "literature" of each subject at his tongue's end and able to give you just the guidance of which you had need. Now and then, in wonderfully generous fashion, he would go out of his way to give a word of encouragement to a younger man. The old Princeton was an environment in which a man felt encouraged to do his very best.
J. Gresham Machen

p. 7, par. 2, [THEOLOGY]