



PRESENT DAY ATTITUDE TO CALVINISM

by Benjamin B. Warfield¹

The subject of this address involves the determination of a matter of fact, about which it is not easy to feel fully assured. What is the present-day attitude towards Calvinism? The answer to this question is apt to vary with the point of sight of the observer, or rather with the horizon which his eye surveys.

Our learning today is “made in Germany”, our culture comes to us largely from England. And the German learning of the day has a sadly rationalistic tendency; which is superimposed, moreover, on a Lutheran foundation that has an odd way of cropping up and protruding itself in unexpected places. Similarly, English culture is not merely shot through, but stained through and through with an Anglican colouring. Lutheranism was ever intolerant of Calvinism. Anglicanism was certainly never patient of it. Naturalism is its precise contradictory. He who breathes the atmosphere of books, therefore—whether books of erudition or books of pure literature—is apt to find it stifling to his Calvinism.

There is, of course, another side to the matter. There may very likely be more Calvinists in the world today than ever before, and even relatively, the professedly Calvinistic churches are no doubt holding their own. There are important tendencies of modern thought which play into the hands of this or that Calvinistic conception. Above all, there are to be found everywhere humble souls, who, in the quiet of retired lives, have caught a vision of God in His glory and are cherishing in their hearts that vital flame of complete dependence on Him which is the very essence of Calvinism.

On the whole, however, I think we must allow, especially when we are contemplating the trend of current thought, that the fortunes of Calvinism are certainly not at their flood. Those whose heritage it was, have in large numbers drifted away from it. Those who still formally profess it do not always illustrate it in life or proclaim it in word. Are there any “Calvinists without reserve” left among the acknowledged leaders, at least, of French-speaking Christendom, blood of whose blood and bone of whose bone Calvin himself was? Outside of the little band of followers of H. M. Kohlbrügge, are there any left throughout the broad stretches of those German lands in which Calvinism was once able to give so good an account of itself? Even in Scotland, we have been told by Dr. Hastie that, so far as the greater churches are concerned, the race of Calvinists, of strict construction at least, practically died out with William Cunningham and Thomas J.

¹ An address celebrating the 400th anniversary of John Calvin’s birth. Originally published in *Calvin Memorial Addresses* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1909), pp. 223–39. The author was professor of didactic and polemic theology at Princeton Theological Seminary from 1887 until his death in 1921.

Crawford. Happily in sturdy little Holland, amid wide-spread blight, there is still a fruitful stock, and the Free Churches of the Netherlands especially show yet a vigorous Calvinistic life: they possess to-day, in fact, in Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, a theologian of genius and a theologian of erudition worthy of the best traditions of Holland's great past. Here in America, the impulse received from the great teachers who illuminated the middle of the nineteenth century—Charles Hodge, Robert J. Breckinridge, James H. Thornwell, Henry Boynton Smith, William G. T. Shedd, Robert L. Dabney, Archibald Alexander Hodge—I enumerate them in chronological order—we are thankful to say is not yet exhausted. There remains, then, undoubtedly a remnant according to the election of grace. But the condition of a remnant, while it may well be a healthful one—bearing in it, as a fruitful seed, the promise and potency of future expansion—is little likely to be a happy one. Unfriendly faces meet it on every side; if doubt and hesitation are not engendered, at least an apologetical attitude is fostered, and an apologetical attitude is not becoming in Calvinists, whose trust is in the Lord God Almighty. In such a situation, Calvinism seems shorn of its strength and is tempted to stand fearful and half-ashamed in the marts of men. I have no wish to paint the situation in too dark colours; I fully believe that Calvinism, as it has supplied the sinew of evangelical Christianity in the past, so is it its strength in the present and its hope for the future. Meanwhile, does it not seem, in large circles at all events, to be thrown very much on the defensive? In the measure in which you feel this to be the case, in that measure you will be prepared to ask with me for the causes and significance of this state of things.

We should begin, I think, by recalling precisely what Calvinism is. It may be fairly summed up in these three propositions. Calvinism is theism come to its rights. Calvinism is religion at the height of its conception. Calvinism is evangelicalism in its purest and most stable expression.

Calvinism, I say, is theism come to its rights. For in what does theism come to its rights but in a teleological view of the universe? For, though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or on earth—as there are gods many and lords conceived by men—yet to the Theist there can be but one God, of whom are all things and unto whom are all things. You see, we have already slipped into the Calvinistic formula, “The will of God is the cause of things.” I do not say, you will observe, that Theism and Calvinism have points of affinity, lie close to one another; I say they are identical. I say that the Theism which is truly Theism, consistently Theism, all that Theism to be really Theism must be, is already in principle Calvinism; that Calvinism in its cosmological aspect is nothing more than Theism in its purity. To fall away from Calvinism is to fall away, by just so much, from a truly theistic conception of the universe. Of course then, to fall away in any degree from a pure Theism in our conception of things is just by that much to fall away from Calvinism. Wherever in our view of the world an imperfect Theism has crept in, there Calvinism has become impossible.

Calvinism, I have said, is religion at the height of its conception, for, whatever else may enter into the conscious religious relation,—a vague feeling of mystery, a struggling reaching out towards the infinite, a deep sentiment of reverence and awe, a keen recognition or dull apprehension of responsibility,—certainly its substance lies in a sense of absolute dependence upon a Supreme Being. I do not say, you will observe, an absolute feeling of dependence, which, in the Schleiermacherian meaning at least of a feeling without intellectual content, were an absurdity. What I say is, that religion in its substance is a sense of absolute dependence on God and reaches the height of its conception only when this sense of absolute dependence is complete

and all-pervasive, in the thought and feeling and life. But when this stage is reached we have just Calvinism.

For what is Calvinism but the theistical expression of religion, conceived as absolute dependence on God? Wherever we find religion in its purity, therefore, there Calvinism is implicit. I do not say, observe again, that an approach to Calvinism is traceable there, in less or greater measure. I say, there Calvinism is—implicit indeed, but really present. Religion in its purity is Calvinism in life, and you can fall away from Calvinism only by just in that measure falling away from religion; and you do fall away from Calvinism just in proportion as you fall away from religion in its purity. It is, however, dreadfully easy to fall away from religion at the height of its conception. We may assume the truly religious attitude of heart and mind for a moment; it is hard to maintain it and give it unbroken dominance in our thought, feeling, and action. Our soul's attitude in prayer—that is the religious attitude at its height. But do we preserve the attitude we assume in prayer towards God, when we rise from our knees? Or does our Amen! cut it off at once, and do we go on about our affairs in an entirely different mood? Now, Calvinism means just the preservation, in all our thinking and feeling and action, of the attitude of utter dependence on God which we assume in prayer. It is the mood of religion made determinative of all our thinking and feeling and willing. It is therefore conterminous with religion in the height of its conception. Wherever religion in any measure loses hold of the reins of life and our immanent thought has slipped away from its control,—there Calvinism has become impossible.

I have said too, that Calvinism is evangelicalism in its pure and only stable expression. When we say evangelicalism we say sin and salvation. Evangelicalism is a soteriological conception, it implies sin, and salvation from sin. There may be religion without evangelicalism. We may go further: religion might conceivably exist at the height of its conception and evangelicalism be lacking. But not in sinners. Evangelicalism is religion at the height of its conception as it forms itself in the hearts of sinners. It means utter dependence on God for salvation. It implies, therefore, need of salvation and a profound sense of this need, along with an equally profound sense of helplessness in the presence of this need, *and* utter dependence on God for its satisfaction. Its type is found in the publican who smote his breast and cried, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" No question there of saving himself, or of helping God to save him, or of opening the way to God to save him. No question of anything but, "I am a sinner, and all my hope is in God my Saviour!" Now this is Calvinism; not, note once more, something like Calvinism or an approach to Calvinism, but just Calvinism in its vital manifestation. Wherever this attitude of heart is found and is given expression in direct and unambiguous terms, there is Calvinism. Wherever this attitude of mind and heart is fallen away from, in however small a measure, there Calvinism has become impossible.

For Calvinism, in this soteriological aspect of it, is just the perception and expression and defence of the utter dependence of the soul on the free grace of God for salvation. All its so-called hard features—its doctrine of original sin, yes, speak it right out, its doctrine of total depravity and the entire inability of the sinful will to good; its doctrine of election, or, to put it in the words everywhere spoken against, its doctrine of predestination and preterition, of reprobation itself—mean just this and nothing more. Calvinism will not play fast and loose with the free grace of God. It is set upon giving to God, and to God alone, the glory and all the glory of salvation. There are others than Calvinists, no doubt, who would fain make the same great confession. But they make it with reserves, or they painfully justify the making of it by some tenuous theory which

confuses nature and grace. They leave logical pitfalls on this side or that, and the difference between logical pitfalls and other pitfalls is that the wayfarer may fall into the others, but the plain man, just because his is a simple mind, must fall into those. Calvinism will leave no logical pitfalls and will make no reserves. It will have nothing to do with theories whose function it is to explain away facts. It confesses, with a heart full of adoring gratitude, that to God, and to God alone, belongs salvation and the whole of salvation; that He it is, and He alone, who works salvation in its whole reach. Any falling away in the slightest measure from this great confession is to fall away from Calvinism. Any intrusion of any human merit, or act, or disposition, or power, as ground or cause or occasion, into the process of divine salvation,—whether in the way of power to resist or of ability to improve grace, of the opening of the soul to the reception of grace, or of the employment of grace already received—is a breach with Calvinism.

Calvinism is the casting of the soul wholly on the free grace of God alone, to whom alone belongs salvation. And, such being the nature of Calvinism, it seems scarcely necessary to inquire why its fortunes appear from time to time, and now again in our own time, to suffer some depression. It can no more perish out of the earth than the sense of sin can pass out of the heart of sinful humanity—than the sense of God can fade out of the minds of dependent creatures—than God Himself can perish out of the heavens. Its fortunes are bound up with the fortunes of Theism, religion, evangelicalism; for it is just Theism, religion, evangelicalism in the purity of their conception and manifestation. In the *purity* of their conception and manifestation—there is the seat of the difficulty. It is proverbially hard to retain, much more to maintain, perfection. And how can precisely these things be maintained at their height? Consider the currents of thought flowing up and down in the world, tending—I do not now say to obliterate the perception of the God of all; atheistic naturalism, materialistic or pantheistic evolutionism—but to blunt or obscure our perception of the divine hand in the sequence of events and the issues of things. Consider the pride of man, his assertion of freedom, his boast of power, his refusal to acknowledge the sway of another's will. Consider the ingrained confidence of the sinner in his own fundamentally good nature and his full ability to perform all that can be justly demanded of him.

Is it strange that in this world, in this particular age of this world, it should prove difficult to preserve not only active, but vivid and dominant, the perception of the everywhere determining hand of God, the sense of absolute dependence on Him, the conviction of utter inability to do even the least thing to rescue ourselves from sin—at the height of their conceptions? Is it not enough to account for whatever depression Calvinism may be suffering in the world today, to point to the natural difficulty—in this materialistic age, conscious of its newly realized powers over against the forces of nature and filled with the pride of achievement and of material well-being—of guarding our perception of the governing hand of God in all things, in its perfection; of maintaining our sense of dependence on a higher power in full force; of preserving our feeling of sin, unworthiness, and helplessness in its profundity? Is not the depression of Calvinism, so far as it is real, significant merely of this, that to our age the vision of God has become somewhat obscured in the midst of abounding material triumphs, that the religious emotion has in some measure ceased to be the determining force in life, and that the evangelical attitude of complete dependence on God for salvation does not readily commend itself to men who are accustomed to lay forceful hands on everything else they wish, and who do not quite see why they may not take heaven also by storm?

Such suggestions may seem to you rather general, perhaps even somewhat indefinite. They nevertheless appear to me to embody the true, and the whole, account of whatever depression of fortunes Calvinism may be suffering today. In our current philosophies, whether monistic evolutionism or pluralistic pragmatism, Theism is far from coming to its rights. In the strenuous activities of our materialized life, religion has little opportunity to assert itself in its purity. In our restless assertion of our personal power and worth, evangelicalism easily falls back into the background. In an atmosphere created by such a state of things, how could Calvinism thrive?

We may, of course, press on to a more specific account of its depressed fortunes. But in attempting to be more specific, what can we do but single out particular aspects of the general situation for special remark? It is possible, indeed, that the singling out of one of these aspects may give clearness and point to the general fact, and it may be worth-while, therefore, to attend to one of these special aspects for a moment.

Let us observe then, that Calvinism is only another name for consistent supernaturalism in religion. The central fact of Calvinism is the vision of God. Its determining principle is zeal for the divine honour. What it sets itself to do is to render to God His rights in every sphere of life-activity. In this it begins, and centres, and ends. It is this that is said, when it is said that it is Theism come to its rights, since in that case everything that comes to pass is viewed as the direct outworking of the divine purpose—when it is said that it is religion at the height of its conception, since in that case God is consciously felt as Him in whom we live and move and have our being—when it is said that it is evangelicalism in its purity, since in that case we cast ourselves as sinners, without reserve, wholly on the mercy of the divine grace. It is this sense of God, of God's presence, of God's power, of God's all-pervading activity—most of all in the process of salvation—which constitutes Calvinism. When the Calvinist gazes into the mirror of the world, whether the world of nature or the, world of events, his attention is held not by the mirror itself (with. the cunning construction of which scientific investigations may no doubt very properly busy themselves), but by the Face of God which he sees reflected therein. When the Calvinist contemplates the religious life, he is less concerned with the psychological nature and relations of the emotions which surge through the soul (with which the votaries of the new science of the psychology of religion are perhaps not quite unfruitfully engaging themselves), than with the divine Source from which they spring, the divine Object on which they take hold. When the Calvinist considers the state of his soul and the possibility of its rescue from death and sin, he may not indeed be blind to the responses which it may by the grace of God be enabled to make to the divine grace, but he absorbs himself not in them but in it, and sees in every step of his recovery to good and to God the almighty working of God's grace.

The Calvinist, in a word, is the man who sees God. He has caught sight of the ineffable Vision, and he will not let it fade for a moment from his eyes—God in nature, God in history, God in grace. Everywhere he sees God in His mighty stepping, everywhere he feels the working of His mighty arm, the throbbing of His mighty heart. The Calvinist is therefore, by way of eminence, the supernaturalist in the world of thought. The world itself is to him a supernatural product. not merely in the sense that somewhere, away back before all time, God made it, but that God is making it now, and in every event that falls out. In every modification of what is, that takes place, His hand is visible, as through all occurrences His "one increasing purpose runs". Man himself is His— created for His glory, and having as the one supreme end of his existence to glorify his Maker, and haply also to enjoy Him for ever. And salvation, in every step and stage of

it, is of God. Conceived in God's love, wrought out by God's own Son in a supernatural life and death in this world of sin, and applied by God's Spirit in a series of acts as supernatural as the virgin birth and the resurrection of the Son of God themselves—it is a supernatural work through and through. To the Calvinist, thus, the Church of God is as direct a creation of God as the first creation itself. In this supernaturalism, the whole thought and feeling and life of the Calvinist is steeped. Without it there can be no Calvinism, for it is just this that is Calvinism.

Now the age in which we live is anything but supernaturalistic; it is distinctly hostile to supernaturalism. Its most striking characteristic is precisely its deeply rooted and widereaching rationalism of thought and sentiment. We know the origin of this modern naturalism; we can trace its history. What it is of more importance to observe, however, is that we cannot escape its influence. On its rise in the latter part of the seventeenth century a new era began, an era in which men have had little thought for the rights of God in their absorption in the rights of man. English Deism, French Encyclopaedism, German Illuminism—these are some of the fruits it has borne in the progress of its development. And now it has at length run to seed in our own day in what arrogates to itself the name of the New Protestantism—that New Protestantism which repudiates Luther and all his fervid ways, and turns rather for its spiritual parentage to the religious indifferentism of Erasmus. It has invaded with its solvent every form of thought and every activity of life. It has given us a naturalistic philosophy (in which all “being” is evaporated into “becoming”), a naturalistic science (the single-minded zeal of which is to eliminate design from the universe); a naturalistic politics (whose first fruits was the French Revolution, and whose last may well be an atheistic socialism); a naturalistic history (which can scarcely find place for even human personality among the causes of events); and a naturalistic religion, which says, “Hands off” to God— if indeed it troubles itself to consider whether there be a God, if there be a God, whether He be a person, or if He be a person, whether He can or will concern Himself with men.

You, who are ministers of the gospel, have been greatly clogged by this naturalism of current thought in the prosecution of your calling. How many of those to whom you would carry the message of grace do you find preoccupied with a naturalistic prejudice? Who of your acquaintance really posits God as a factor in the development of the world? How often have you been exhorted to seek a “natural” progress for the course of events in history? Yes, even for the history of redemption. So, even in the region of your own theological science a new Bible has been given to you—not offered to you merely, but violently thrust upon you, as the only Bible a rational man can receive—a new Bible reconstructed on the principle of natural development, torn to pieces and rearranged under the overmastering impulse to find a “natural” order of sequence for its books, and a “natural” course of development for the religion whose records it preserves. But why stop with the Bible? Your divine Redeemer Himself has been reconstructed, on the same naturalistic lines. For a century and a half now—from Reimarus to Wrede—all of the resolves of an age pre-eminent for scholarship have been bent to the task of giving you a “natural” Jesus. Why talk here of the miracles of the Old Testament or of the New? It is *the* Miracle of the Old Testament and of the New which is really brought into the question. Why dispute as to the virgin birth and the resurrection of Jesus? It is the elimination of Jesus Himself, as aught but a simple man of His day—in nothing, except perhaps an unusually vivid religious experience, differentiated from other Galilean peasants of His time—that the naturalistic frenzy of our age is set upon. And so furiously has the task been driven on, that the choice that is set before us at the end of the day is, practically, between no Jesus at all or a fanatic, not to say a paranoiac Jesus.

In this anti-supernaturalistic atmosphere, is it strange that men find the pure supernaturalism of the Calvinistic confession difficult—that they waver in their firm confidence that it is God who reigns in heaven and on earth, that in Him we all live and move and have our being—that it is He, and not ourselves, who creates in us every impulse to good—and that it is His almighty arm alone that can rescue us from sin and bring to our helpless souls salvation? Is it strange that here, too, men travel the broad road beaten smooth by many feet—that the Calvinistic gate seems narrow so that few there be that find it, and the Calvinistic way so straitened that few there be who go in thereat?

But let us make no mistake here. For here, too, Calvinism is just Christianity. The supernaturalism for which Calvinism stands is the very breath of the nostrils of Christianity; without it Christianity cannot exist. And let us not imagine that we can pick and choose with respect to the aspects of this supernaturalism which we acknowledge—that we may, for example, retain supernaturalism in the origination of Christianity, and forego the supernaturalism with which Calvinism is more immediately concerned, the supernaturalism of the application of Christianity. Men will not believe that a religion, the actual working of which in the world is natural, can have required to be ushered into the world with supernatural pomp and display. These supernaturals stand or fall together.

A supernatural Redeemer is not needed for a natural salvation. If we can, and do, save ourselves; it were grossly incongruous that God should come down from heaven to save us, trailing clouds of glory with Him as He came. The logic of the Socinian system gave us at once a human Christ and an auto-soteric religion.. The same logic will work today, and, every day till the end of time. It is only for a truly supernatural salvation that a truly supernatural redemption, or a truly supernatural Redeemer, is demanded,—or can be believed in. And this reveals to us the real place which Calvinism holds in the controversies of today, and the service it is to render in the preservation of Christianity for the future. Only the Calvinist is the consistent supernaturalist, and only consistent supernaturalism can save supernatural religion for the world.

The supernatural fact, which is God; the supernatural act, which is miracle; the supernatural work, which is the revealed will of God; the supernatural redemption, which is the divine deed of the divine Christ; the supernatural salvation which is the divine work of the divine Spirit,—these things form a system, and you cannot draw one item out without shaking the whole. What Calvinism particularly asserts is the supernaturalism of salvation, as the immediate work of God the Holy Spirit in the soul, by virtue of which we are made new creatures in Christ our Redeemer, and framed into the sons of God the Father. And it is only he who heartily believes in the supernaturalism of salvation who is not fatally handicapped in meeting the assaults of that anti-supernaturalistic worldview which flaunts itself so triumphantly about us. Conceal it from ourselves as we may, defeat here lies athwart the path of all half-hearted schemes and compromising constructions. This is what was meant by the late Dr. Henry Boynton Smith, when he declared roundly: “One thing is certain,—that Infidel Science will rout everything excepting thoroughgoing Christian orthodoxy. The fight will be between a stiff thoroughgoing orthodoxy and a stiff thoroughgoing infidelity. It will be, for example, Augustine or Comte, Athanasius or Hegel, Luther or Schopenhauer, J. S. Mill or John Calvin.” This witness is true.

We cannot be supernaturalistic in patches of our thinking and naturalistic in substance. We cannot be supernaturalistic with regard to the remote facts of history, and naturalistic with regard to the intimate events of experience. We cannot be supernaturalistic with regard to what

occurred two thousand years ago in Palestine, and simply naturalistic with regard to what occurs today in our hearts. No form of Christian supernaturalism can be ultimately maintained in any department of life or thought, except it carry with it the supernaturalism of salvation. And a consistent supernaturalism of salvation is only another name for Calvinism. Calvinism thus emerges to our sight as nothing more or less than the hope of the world.