

# CALVINISM

by

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## 1. MEANING AND USES OF THE TERM

CALVINISM is an ambiguous term in so far as it is currently employed in two or three senses, closely related indeed, and passing insensibly into one another, but of varying latitudes of connotation. Sometimes it designates merely the individual teaching of John Calvin. Sometimes it designates, more broadly, the doctrinal system confessed by that body of Protestant Churches known historically, in distinction from the Lutheran Churches, as “the Reformed Churches” (see “*Protestantism*”); but also quite commonly called “the Calvinistic Churches” because the greatest scientific exposition of their faith in the Reformation age, and perhaps the most influential of any age, was given by John Calvin. Sometimes it designates, more broadly still, the entire body of conceptions, theological, ethical, philosophical, social, political, which, under the influence of the master mind of John Calvin, raised itself to dominance in the Protestant lands of the post-Reformation age, and has left a permanent mark not only upon the thought of mankind, but upon the life-history of men, the social order of civilized peoples, and even the political organization of states. In the present article, the term will be taken, for obvious reasons, in the second of these senses. Fortunately this is also its central sense; and there is little danger that its other connotations will fall out of mind while attention is concentrated upon this.

On the one hand, John Calvin, though always looked upon by the Reformed Churches as an exponent rather than as the creator of their doctrinal system, has nevertheless been both revered as one of their founders, and deferred to as that particular one of their founders to whose formative hand and systematizing talent their doctrinal system has perhaps owed most. In any exposition of the Reformed theology, therefore, the teaching of John Calvin must always take a high, and, indeed, determinative place. On the other hand, although Calvinism has dug a channel through which not merely flows a stream of theological thought, but also surges a great wave of human life — filling the heart with fresh ideals and conceptions which have revolutionized the conditions of existence — yet its fountainhead lies in its theological

system; or rather, to be perfectly exact, one step behind even that, in its religious consciousness. For the roots of Calvinism are planted in a specific religious attitude, out of which is unfolded first a particular theology, from which springs on the one hand a special church organization, and on the other a social order, involving a given political arrangement. The whole outworking of Calvinism in life is thus but the efflorescence of its fundamental religious consciousness, which finds its scientific statement in its theological system.

## 2. FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE

The exact formulation of the fundamental principle of Calvinism has indeed taxed the acumen of a long series of thinkers for the last hundred years (e.g., Ullmann, Semisch, Hagenbach, Ebrard, Herzog, Schweizer, Baur, Schneckenburger, Gilder, Schenkel, Schöberlein, Stahl, Hundeshagen; for a discussion of the several views cf. H. Voigt, "*Fundamental dogmatik*," Gotha, 1874, pp. 397-480; W. Hastie, "*The Theology of the Reformed Church in its Fundamental Principles*," Edinburgh, 1904, pp. 129-177). Perhaps the simplest statement of it is the best: that it lies in a profound apprehension of God in His majesty, with the inevitably accompanying poignant realization of the exact nature of the relation sustained to Him by the creature as such, and particularly by the sinful creature. 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. In Calvinism, then, objectively speaking, theism comes to its rights; subjectively speaking, the religious relation attains its purity; soteriologically speaking, evangelical religion finds at length its full expression and its secure stability. Theism comes to its rights only in a teleological conception of the universe, which perceives in the entire course of events the orderly outworking of the plan of God, who is the author, preserver, and governor of all things, whose will is consequently the ultimate cause of all. The religious relation attains its purity only when an attitude of absolute dependence on God is not merely temporarily assumed in the act, say, of prayer, but is sustained through all the activities of life, intellectual, emotional, executive. And evangelical religion reaches stability 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. And these things are the formative principles of Calvinism.

### 3. RELATION TO OTHER SYSTEMS

The difference between Calvinism and other forms of theistic thought, religious experience, evangelical theology is a difference not of kind but of degree. Calvinism is not a specific variety of theism, religion, evangelicalism, set over against other specific varieties, which along with it constitute these several genera, and which possess equal rights of existence with it and make similar claims to perfection, each after its own kind. It differs from them not as one species differs from other species; but as a perfectly developed representative differs from an imperfectly developed representative of the same species. There are not many kinds of theism, religion, evangelicalism, among which men are at liberty to choose to suit at will their individual taste or meet their special need, all of which may be presumed to serve each its own specific uses equally worthily. There is but one kind of theism, religion, evangelicalism; and the several constructions laying claim to these names differ from each other not as correlative species of a broader class, but as more or less perfect, or more or less defective, exemplifications of a single species. Calvinism conceives of itself as simply the more pure theism, religion, evangelicalism, superseding as such the less pure. It has no difficulty, therefore, in recognizing the theistic character of all truly theistic thought, the religious note in all actual religious activity, the evangelical quality of all really evangelical faith. It refuses to be set antagonistically over against any of these things, wherever or in whatever degree of imperfection they may be manifested; it claims them in every instance of their emergence as its own, and essays only to point out the way in which they may be given their just place in thought and life. Whoever believes in God; whoever recognizes in the recesses of his soul his utter dependence on God; whoever in all his thought of salvation hears in his heart of hearts the echo of the *solī Deo gloria* of the evangelical profession — by whatever name he may call himself, or by whatever intellectual puzzles his logical understanding may be confused — Calvinism recognizes as implicitly a Calvinist, and as only requiring to permit these fundamental principles — which underlie and give its body to all true religion — to work themselves freely and fully out in thought and feeling and action, to become explicitly a Calvinist.

#### 4. CALVINISM AND LUTHERANISM

It is unfortunate that a great body of the scientific discussion which, since Max Goebel (*“Die religiöse Eigenthümlichkeit der lutherischen und der reformirten Kirchen,”* Bonn, 1837) first clearly posited the problem, has been carried on somewhat vigorously with a view to determining the fundamental principle of Calvinism, has sought particularly to bring out its contrast with some other theological tendency, commonly with the sister Protestant tendency of Lutheranism. Undoubtedly somewhat different spirits inform Calvinism and Lutheranism. And undoubtedly the distinguishing spirit of Calvinism is rooted not in some extraneous circumstance of its antecedents or origin — as, for example, Zwingli’s tendency to intellectualism, or the superior humanistic culture and predilections of Zwingli and Calvin, or the democratic instincts of the Swiss, or the radical rationalism of the Reformed leaders as distinguished from the merely modified traditionalism of the Lutherans — but in its formative principle. But it is misleading to find the formative principle of either type of Protestantism in its difference from the other; they have infinitely more in common than in distinction. And certainly nothing could be more misleading than to represent them (as is often done) as owing their differences to their more pure embodiment respectively of the principle of predestination and that of justification by faith. The doctrine of predestination is not the formative principle of Calvinism, the root from which it springs. It is one of its logical consequences, one of the branches which it has inevitably thrown out. It has been firmly embraced and consistently proclaimed by Calvinists because it is an implicate of theism, is directly given in the religious consciousness, and is an absolutely essential element in evangelical religion, without which its central truth of complete dependence upon the free mercy of a saving God can not be maintained. And so little is it a peculiarity of the Reformed theology, 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 jealous for absolute predestination than Zwingli and Calvin. Even Zwingli could not surpass Luther in sharp and unqualified assertion of it: and it was not Calvin but Melancthon who gave it a formal place in his primary scientific statement of the elements of the

Protestant faith (cf. Schaff, "Creeds," 1:1877, p. 451; E. F. Karl Müller, "Symbolik," Erlangen and Leipzig, 1896, p. 75; C. J. Niemijer, "De Strijd over de Leer der Praedestinatie in de Ixde Eeuw," Groningen, 1889, p. 21; H. Voigt, "Fundamentaldogmatik," Gotha, 1874, pp. 469-470). Just as little can the doctrine of justification by faith be represented as specifically Lutheran. Not merely has it from the beginning been a substantial element in the Reformed faith, but it is only among the Reformed that it has retained or can retain its purity, free from the tendency to become a doctrine of justification on account of faith (cf. E. Böhl, "Von der Rechtfertigung durch den Glauben," Leipzig, 1890). Here, too, the difference between the two types of Protestantism is one of degree, not of kind (cf. C. P. Krauth, "The Conservative Reformation and its Theology," Philadelphia, 1872). Lutheranism, the product of a poignant sense of sin, born from the throes of a guilt burdened soul which can not be stilled until it finds peace in God's decree of justification, is apt to rest in this peace; while Calvinism, the product of an overwhelming vision of God, born from the reflection in the heart of man of the majesty of a God who will not give His glory to another, can not pause until it places the scheme of salvation itself in relation to a complete world-view, in which it becomes subsidiary to the glory of the Lord God Almighty. Calvinism asks with Lutheranism, indeed, that most poignant of all questions, What shall I do to be saved? And answers it as Lutheranism answers it. But the great question which presses upon it is, How shall God be glorified? It is the contemplation of God and zeal for His honor which in it draws out the emotions and absorbs endeavor; and the end of human as of all other existence, of salvation as of all other attainment, is to it the glory of the Lord of all. Full justice is done in it to the scheme of redemption and the experience of salvation, because full justice is done in it to religion itself which underlies these elements of it. It begins, it centers, 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.

## 5. SOTERIOLOGY OF CALVINISM

One of the consequences flowing from this fundamental attitude of Calvinistic feeling and thought is the high supernaturalism which informs alike its religious consciousness and its doctrinal construction. Calvinism would not be badly defined, indeed, as the tendency which is determined to do justice to the immediately supernatural, as in the first, so also in the

second creation. The strength and purity of its belief in the supernatural Fact (which is God) saves it from all embarrassment in the face of the supernatural act (which is miracle). In everything which enters into the process of redemption it is impelled by the force of its first principle to place the initiative in God. A supernatural revelation, in which God makes known to man His will and His purposes of grace; a supernatural record of this revelation in a supernaturally given book, in which God gives His revelation permanency and extension — such things are to the Calvinist almost matters of course. And, above all, he can but insist with the utmost strenuousness on the immediate supernaturalness of the actual work of redemption itself, and that no less in its application than in its impetration. Thus it comes about that the doctrine of monergistic regeneration — or as it was phrased by the older theologians, of “irresistible grace” or “effectual calling” — is the hinge of the Calvinistic soteriology, and lies much more deeply embedded in the system than the doctrine of predestination itself which is popularly looked upon as its hall-mark. Indeed, the soteriological significance of predestination to the Calvinist consists in the safeguard it affords to monergistic regeneration — to purely supernatural salvation. What lies at the heart of his soteriology is the absolute exclusion of the creaturely element in the initiation of the saving process, that so the pure grace of God may be magnified. Only so could he express his sense of man’s complete dependence as sinner on the free mercy of a saving God; or extrude the evil leaven of Synergism (*q.v.*) by which, as he clearly sees, God is robbed of His glory and man is encouraged to think that he owes to some power, some act of choice, some initiative of his own, his participation in that salvation which is in reality all of grace. There is accordingly nothing against which Calvinism sets its face with more firmness than every form and degree of autosoterism. Above everything else, it is determined that God, in His Son Jesus Christ, acting through the Holy Spirit whom He has sent, shall be recognized as our veritable Saviour. To it sinful man stands in need not of inducements or assistance to save himself, but of actual saving; and Jesus Christ has come not to advise, or urge, or induce, or aid him to save himself, but to save him. This is the root of 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 to it the doctrine of election becomes 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 his entire salvation in all its processes and in every one of its stages to this choice of God, would be an ingrate indeed if he gave not the glory of his salvation solely to the inexplicable elective love of God.

## 6. CONSISTENT DEVELOPMENT OF CALVINISM

Historically the Reformed theology finds its origin in the reforming movement begun in Switzerland under the leadership of Zwingli (1516). Its fundamental principles are already present in Zwingli's teaching, though it was not until Calvin's profound and penetrating genius was called to their exposition that they took their ultimate form or received systematic development. From Switzerland Calvinism spread outward to France, and along the Rhine through Germany to Holland, eastward to Bohemia and Hungary, and westward, across the Channel, to Great Britain. In this broad expansion through so many lands its voice was raised in a multitude of confessions; and in the course of the four hundred years which have elapsed since its first formulation, it has been expounded in a vast body of dogmatic treatises. Its development has naturally been much richer and far more many-sided than that of the sister system of Lutheranism in its more confined and homogeneous environment; and yet it has retained its distinctive character and preserved its fundamental features with marvelous consistency throughout its entire history. It may be possible to distinguish among the Reformed confessions, between those which bear more and those which bear less strongly the stamp of Calvin's personal influence; and they part into two broad classes, according as they were composed before or after the Arminian defection (*ca.* 1618) and demanded sharper definitions on the points of controversy raised by that movement (see "Arminius, Jacobus, and Arminianism"; "*Remonstrants*"). A few of them written on German soil also bear traces of the influence of Lutheran conceptions. And, of course, no more among the Reformed than elsewhere have all the professed expounders of the system of doctrine been true to the faith they professed to expound. Nevertheless, it is precisely the same system of truth which is embodied in all the great historic Reformed confessions; it matters not whether the document emanates from Zurich or Bern or Basel or Geneva, whether it sums up the Swiss development as in the second *Helvetic Confession*, or publishes the faith of the National Reformed Churches of France, or Scotland, or Holland, or the Palatinate, or Hungary, Poland, Bohemia, or England; or republishes

the established Reformed doctrine in opposition to new contradictions, as in the *Canons of Dort* (in which the entire Reformed world concurred), or the Westminster Confession (to which the whole of Puritan Britain gave its assent), or the Swiss Form of Consent (which represents the mature judgment of Switzerland upon the recently proposed novelties of doctrine). And despite the inevitable variety of individual points of view, as well as the unavoidable differences in ability, learning, grasp, in the multitude of writers who have sought to expound the Reformed faith through these four centuries — and the grave departures from that faith made here and there among them — the great stream of Reformed dogmatics has flowed essentially unsullied, straight from its origin in Zwingli and Calvin to its debouchure, say, in Chalmers and Cunningham and Crawford, in Hodge and Thornwell and Shedd.

### 7. VARIETIES OF CALVINISM

It is true an attempt has been made to distinguish two types of Reformed teaching from the beginning; a more radical type developed under the influence of the peculiar teachings of Calvin, and a (so-called) more moderate type, chiefly propagating itself in Germany, which exhibits rather the influence, as was at first said (Hofstede de Groot, Ebrard, Heppe), of Melancthon, or, in its more recent statement (Gooszen), of Bullinger. In all that concerns the essence of Calvinism, however, there was no difference between Bullinger and Calvin, German and Swiss: the Heidelberg Catechism is no doubt a catechism and not a confession, but in its presuppositions and inculcations it is as purely Calvinistic as the *Genevan Catechism* or the catechisms of the *Westminster Assembly*. Nor was the substance of doctrine touched by the peculiarities of method which marked such schools as the so-called Scholastics (showing themselves already in Zanchius, d. 1590, and culminating in theologians like Alsted, d. 1638, and Voetius, d. 1676); or by the special modes of statement which were developed by such schools as the so-called Federalists (e.g., Cocceius, d. 1669, Burman, d. 1679, Wittsius, d. 1708; cf. Diestel, “*Studien zur Föderaltheologie*,” in *Jahrbücher für deutsche Theologie*, 10:1865, pp. 209-276; G. Vos, “*De Verbondsleer in de Gereformeerde Theologie*,” Grand Rapids, 1891; W. Hastie, “*The Theology of the Reformed Church*,” Edinburgh, 1904, pp. 189-210). The first serious defection from the fundamental conceptions of the Reformed system came with the rise of Arminianism in the early years of the seventeenth century (Arminius, Uytenbogaert, Episcopius, Limborch, Curcellæus); and the



Arminian party was quickly sloughed off under the condemnation of the whole Reformed world. The five points of its “Remonstrance” against the Calvinistic system (see “*Remonstrants*”) were met by the reassertion of the fundamental doctrines of absolute predestination, particular redemption, total depravity, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints (*Canons of the Synod of Dort*). The first, important modification of the Calvinistic system which has retained a position within its limits was made in the middle of the seventeenth century by the professors of the French school at Saumur, and is hence called Salmurianism; otherwise Amyraldism, or hypothetical universalism (Cameron, d. 1625, Amyraut, d. 1664, Plaemus, d. 1655, Testardus, d. ca.1650; see “Amyraut, Moise”). This modification also received the condemnation of the contemporary Reformed world, which reasserted with emphasis the importance of the doctrine that Christ actually saves by His spirit all for whom He offers the sacrifice of His blood (e.g., Westminster Confession, Swiss Form of Consent).

## 8. SUPRALAPSARIANISM AND INFRALAPSARIANISM

If “varieties of Calvinism” are to be spoken of with reference to anything more than details, of importance in themselves no doubt, but of little significance for the systematic development of the type of doctrine, there seem not more than three which require mention: supralapsarianism, infralapsarianism, and what may perhaps be called in this reference, postredemptionism; all of which (as indeed their very names import) take their start from a fundamental agreement in the principles which govern the system. The difference between these various tendencies of thought within the limits of the system turns on the place given by each to the decree of election, in the logical ordering of the “decrees of God.” The supralapsarians suppose that election underlies the decree of the fall itself; and conceive the decree of the fall as a means for carrying out the decree of election. The infralapsarians, on the other hand, consider that election presupposes the decree of the fall, and hold, therefore, that in electing some to life God has mankind as a *massa perditionis* in mind. The extent of the difference between these parties is often, indeed usually, grossly exaggerated: and even historians of repute are found representing infralapsarianism as involving, or at least permitting, denial that the fall has a place in the decree of God at all: as if election could be postposed in the *ordo decretorum* to the de-decree of the fall, while it was doubted whether there were any decree of the fall; or as if

indeed God could be held to conceive men, in His electing decree, as fallen, without by that very act fixing the presupposed fall in His eternal decree. In point of fact there is and can be no difference among Calvinists as to the inclusion of the fall in the decree of God: to doubt this inclusion is to place oneself at once at variance with the fundamental Calvinistic principle which conceives all that comes to pass teleologically and ascribes everything that actually occurs ultimately to the will of God.

## 9. POSTREDEMPTIONISM

Accordingly even the postredemptionists (that is to say the Salmurians or Amyraldians) find no difficulty at this point. Their peculiarity consists in insisting that election succeeds, in the order of thought, not merely the decree of the fall but that of redemption as well, taking the term redemption here in the narrower sense of the impetration of redemption by Christ. They thus suppose that in His electing decree God conceived man not merely as fallen but as already redeemed. This involves a modified doctrine of the atonement from which the party has received the name of Hypothetical Universalism, holding as it does that Christ died to make satisfaction for the sins of all men without exception if — if, that is, they believe: but that, foreseeing that none would believe, God elected some to be granted faith through the effectual operation of the Holy Spirit. The indifferent standing of the postredemptionists in historical Calvinism is indicated by the treatment accorded it in the historical confessions. It alone of the” varieties of Calvinism” here mentioned has been made the object of formal confessional condemnation; and it received condemnation in every important Reformed confession written after its development. There are, it is true, no supralapsarian confessions: many, however, leave the questions which divide supralapsarian and infralapsarian wholly to one side and thus avoid pronouncing for either; and none is polemically directed against supralapsarianism. On the other hand, not only does no confession close the door to infralapsarianism, but a considerable number explicitly teach infralapsarianism which thus emerges as the typical form of Calvinism. That, despite its confessional condemnation, postredemptionism has remained a recognized form of Calvinism and has worked out a history for itself in the Calvinistic Churches (especially in America) may be taken as evidence that its advocates, while departing, in some important particulars, from typical Calvinism, have nevertheless remained, in the main, true to the fundamental

postulates of the system. There is another variety of postredemptionism, however, of which this can scarcely be said. This variety, which became dominant among the New England Congregationalist Churches about the second third of the nineteenth century (e.g., N. W. Taylor, d. 1858; C. G. Finney, d. 1875; E. A. Park, d. 1900; see “*New England Theology*”), attempted, much after the manner of the “Congruists” of the Church of Rome, to unite a Pelagian doctrine of the will with the Calvinistic doctrine of absolute predestination. The result was, of course, to destroy the Calvinistic doctrine of “irresistible grace,” and as the Calvinistic doctrine of the “satisfaction of Christ” was also set aside in favor of the Grotian or governmental theory of atonement, little was left of Calvinism except the bare doctrine of predestination. Perhaps it is not strange, therefore, that this “improved Calvinism” has crumbled away and given place to newer and explicitly anti-Calvinistic constructions of doctrine (cf. Williston Walker, in *AJT*, April, 1906, pp. 204 sqq.).

#### 10. PRESENT FORTUNES OF CALVINISM

It must be confessed that the fortunes of Calvinism in general are not at present at their flood. In America, to be sure, the controversies of the earlier half of the nineteenth century compacted a body of Calvinistic thought which gives way but slowly: and the influence of the great theologians who adorned the Churches during that period is still felt (especially Charles Hodge, 1797-1878, Robert J. Breckinridge, 1800-1871, James H. Thornwell, 1812-1862, Henry B. Smith, 1815-1877, W. G. T. Shedd, 1820-1894, Robert L. Dabney, 1820-1898, Archibald Alexander Hodge, 1823-1886). And in Holland recent years have seen a notable revival of the Reformed consciousness, especially among the adherents of the Free Churches, which has been felt as widely as Dutch influence extends, and which is at present represented in Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, by a theologian of genius and a theologian of erudition worthy of the best Reformed traditions. But it is probable that few “Calvinists without reserve” exist at the moment in Frenchspeaking lands: and those who exist in lands of German speech and Eastern Europe appear to owe their inspiration directly to the teaching of Kohlbrügge. Even in Scotland there has been a remarkable decline in strictness of construction ever since the days of William Cunningham and Thomas J. Crawford (cf. W. Hastie, “*The Theology of the Reformed Church*,” Edinburgh, 1904, p. 228). Nevertheless, it may be contended that the future, as the past, of Christianity

itself is bound up with the fortunes of Calvinism. The system of doctrine founded on the idea of God which has been explicated by Calvinism, strikingly remarks W. Hastie (*Theology as Science*,” Glasgow, 1899, pp. 97-98), “is the only system in which the whole order of the world is brought into a rational unity with the doctrine of grace . . . 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 time . . . But it 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.” See *“Five Points of Calvinism.”*

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