

The Fundamental Principle of Calvinism

by

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CALVINISM A UNIFIED, ALL-COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEM OF THOUGHT

The significance of John Calvin for the modern era is vividly described in these words: “The sixteenth was a great century. It was the century of Raphael and Michelangelo, of Spenser and Shakespeare, of Erasmus and Rabelais, of Copernicus and Galileo, of Luther and Calvin. Of all the figures that gave greatness to this century, none left a more lasting heritage than Calvin.[1] To the investigation of the heritage of Calvin, the following pages are devoted.

Calvinism is the name applied to the system of thought which has come down to us from John Calvin. He is recognized as the chief exponent of that system, although he is not the originator of the ideas set forth in it. The theological views of Calvin, together with those of the other great leaders of the Protestant Reformation, are known to be a revival of Augustinianism, which in its turn was only a revival of the teachings of St. Paul centuries previous. But it was Calvin who, for modern times, first gave the presentation of these views in systematic form and with the specific application which since his day has become known to us as Calvinism.

These teachings constitute a unity. Calvinism is not the mere aggregate of opinions, the sum total of ideas, held by Calvin and Calvinists, but it is an organic whole with one fundamental principle as the common root. It is not always or necessarily the case that the views of a group constitute a unity. The views of the Roman Catholic Church prior to the time of their great organizer, Thomas Aquinas (1227-1274), or officially prior to the Council of Trent (1545-1563), did not form a unity but lay scattered among the declarations of church councils and papal decrees, and contained numerous conflicting elements. Likewise, the political views of the Republican Party or of the Democratic Party do not comprise a unity. However, the system derived from John Calvin can claim such distinction.

Calvinism does not restrict itself to theology; but it is an all-comprehensive system of thought, including within its scope views on politics, society,

science, and art as well as theology. It presents a view of life and of the universe as a whole, a world-and life-view. In fact, it has even been described as one of the few basic systems of thought that have ever been offered to man. James Orr limits the basic philosophic systems of the world to the low number of twelve, and considers all other philosophic systems to be modifications of these. Abraham Kuyper reduces the number of basic systems of thought to only four, of which Calvinism is accounted as one.

THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE OF CALVINISM

Each unified system of thought is governed by an inherent fundamental principle or principles. This is also true of Calvinism. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, scholars, representing various schools of opinion, made a study to determine the genius of the Calvinistic movement.^[2] Among these were scholars who had no eye for the organic unity within the system itself. They satisfied themselves with discovering some dominant trait which, in their estimation, set off Calvinism from other systems of thought. Thus, some characterized Calvinism as a religious system in which the spirit of democracy and the passion for liberty was the distinguishing trait. This spirit was thought to have been derived from the liberty-loving Swiss among whom Calvinism arose. Others who had an eye for the legal aspects of the movement and the note of authority, found in these the cardinal trait, and attributed it to the legal training of Calvin. Others considered the dominating characteristic to be the marvelous order and system which is peculiar to Calvinism. This was supposed to be due to Calvin's French temper of mind. Like the noted French military generals, he possessed the singular ability to marshal a stupendous array of facts, to organize and to mold them into one vast system. Others thought the prime factor of Calvinism to be its thorough break with the Scholasticism of the Middle Ages, thus considering Calvin an advanced religious liberal. This trait was attributed to the humanistic training of his youth.

While these suggestions do contain grains of truth and do point to some marked feature in the system, none of them merits the distinction to be designated the dominant characteristic of Calvinism, much less its fundamental principle. William Hastie calls such suggestions "conjectures of ingenious thinkers inadequately acquainted with the conditions of the problem, rather than scientific conclusions derived from a full and exhaustive examination of the available material."^[3] Those who have made exhaustive

study of the problem will agree with R. Seeberg that “this humanistically trained Frenchman was above all an evangelical Christian, and his whole world-view in the end was determined by his evangelical spirit.”^[4]

The fundamental principle, if anywhere, lies precisely in the field of the evangelical doctrines of the Calvinists and in these doctrines conceived not as mere abstractions, but as living, vital truths which motivated and dominated the whole of their lives. We may safely say that the fundamental principle concerns the doctrine of God. However scientific investigators may describe the fundamental principle of Calvinism, they are quite agreed with the philosopher W. Dilthey that the theological viewpoint is characteristic of the entire Calvinistic movement for the first one hundred and fifty years, that the Calvinist of that time was always placing God at the center of his thoughts.^[5] An examination of the Calvinistic Confessions, especially those of early Reformation times, or of the works of Calvin will supply ample evidence of this.^[6]

The central thought of Calvinism is, therefore, the great thought of God. Someone has remarked: “Just as the Methodist places in the foreground the idea of the salvation of sinners, the Baptist — the mystery of regeneration, the Lutheran — justification by faith, the Moravian — the wounds of Christ, the Greek Catholic — the mysticism of the Holy Spirit, and the Romanist — the catholicity of the church, so the Calvinist is always placing in the foreground the thought of God.”^[7] The Calvinist does not start out with some interest of man; for example, his conversion or his justification, but has as his informing thought always: How will God come to His rights! He seeks to realize as his ruling concept in life the truth of Scripture: “Of Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things. To whom be glory forever.”^[8]

On this point there is widespread unanimity among the investigators. It is only when they proceed to express this idea in a definite formula that disagreements arise. Some have suggested that the attribute of God’s self-existence (*aseitas*), as the most basic attribute we know in God, should be considered the fundamental principle of Calvinism. It is questionable whether the fundamental principle can be so stated; for it is not something in God, some specific attribute, that is basic to the system, but God Himself. Moreover, the term “self-existence” does not express God’s relation to the world outside of Him, at least not directly; and, therefore, can hardly be

designated as the formative principle of a world-view which is to express this relation. God would be self-existent even if there were no world. Some term is needed which will express the relationship in which God stands to His created universe. The term which seems to indicate this relationship best and is adopted by many, is “the absolute sovereignty of God”, or more specifically stated “the absolute sovereignty of God in the natural and the moral spheres.”

The sense in which the term “sovereignty of God” is used needs to be well understood if it is to be safeguarded against gross misunderstanding. To the popular mind the term is likely to suggest that the Calvinist views God as a mere royal Ruler or Master who lays down the law to His creatures, and that the spirit of love in God and His grace and similar attributes are to be dissociated from the idea of His sovereignty. It is not a surprise that some scholars like A. Ritschl who have so interpreted the Calvinistic idea of the sovereignty of God suggest that the sovereignty of God is an inadequate fundamental principle for religion and that it ought to be superseded by the idea of the love of God. But certainly no good Calvinist would ever subscribe to such a limited view of God’s sovereignty. Sovereignty is not even considered an attribute in God but a prerogative. What the Calvinist has in mind when he speaks of the sovereignty of God is something far broader than the idea that God is the Promulgator and Defender of the moral and physical laws of the universe. According to the Calvinist, God is not only the supreme Lawgiver and Ruler; but God is supreme also in the realm of truth, in science, and in art quite as much as in the realm of morals, in the dissemination of His love and grace and all His gifts as well as in the administration of the laws which men are to live by or which operate in nature. The Calvinist believes that God does not act arbitrarily either in the dissemination of His gifts or in His providential control of man and nature. Order is heaven’s first law. The realm of truth and of love, the scientific and the moral world, as well as the world of nature, is subject to law and order. The Calvinist observes in the universe created by God and maintained by His Providence a beautiful system of law, order and harmony, apparent in the realm of nature and that of grace, in the intellectual and moral life of men, in the distribution of all good — an all-pervasive system, all of God’s making. In this distribution and administration of all things, God remains supreme. “Of Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things.”

When the term “sovereignty of God” is, accordingly, Understood, not as a mere legalistic phrase indicative of God as the supreme Legislator and the One who has created the laws of nature, but in the more pregnant sense just described, there is nothing against the usage of the term to indicate thereby the fundamental principle of Calvinism. On the contrary, it would seem that it is then precisely the term to designate the absolute supremacy of God in all things, and is, therefore, exactly the term to be used when we wish to construct a system with God at the center. This is precisely what the Calvinist has in mind when he employs the term. As the great Calvinist B. B. Warfield has expressed it: “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 its 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.”^[9] The same author in another place asserts that the fundamental principle of Calvinism “lies in a profound apprehension of God in His majesty, with the inevitably accompanying poignant realization of the exact relation sustained to Him 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 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 the strictest of all logic which presides over the outworking of principles into thought and life, by the very necessity of the case, a Calvinist”^[10]

FALLACIOUS STATEMENTS OF THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE

With this description in mind it is easy to detect the fallacies in certain formulations of the fundamental principle of Calvinism. No statement of it is adequate which limits the supremacy of God in any way to certain spheres or to certain activities. It is a notable error to make of the doctrine of election or predestination the fundamental principle. A popular notion that a Calvinist is

a man who believes that God in a fatalistic way has decreed where man is to live in eternity must be dismissed immediately. As Charles Hodge has pointed out, the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination and fatalism agree in only one point: “Both assume absolute certainty in the sequence of all events. But they differ in the ground of this certainty, the *nature of the influence* by which it is secured, the *ends* contemplated, and the *effects* on the reason and the conscience of men.”^[11]

But even if we properly interpret predestination as the Calvinist would have us understand it, even so predestination could not be the fundamental principle of Calvinism. This is true for a variety of reasons. Predestination always concerns itself with man, with what is to become of him. It is not anything that may or may not happen to man that is fundamental to the Calvinist; but it is the thought of the divine Being, His majesty, His greatness that primarily interests him. Furthermore, predestination treats only of God’s activities with fallen man, and leaves out of consideration God’s dealings with original man in the state of rectitude. It also limits God’s activities to the world of moral beings, to men, and says nothing, at least not directly, about God’s relationship to the world of nature. The Calvinist can know of no such limitation of the thought of God. He must place the idea of God in the foreground everywhere. From a theoretical point of view it is evident, therefore, that predestination cannot be considered the fundamental principle of Calvinism.

If we examine the Calvinistic Confessions, especially the earlier ones, those drafted by Calvin or under his influence, or *The Institutes of Calvin*, we shall soon discover that predestination is not the fundamental principle. In some of these Confessions the thought of predestination is not even as much as mentioned, in others it is only cited in passing. In *The Institutes* the doctrine of predestination is treated not as the basis of the system, but as a conclusion rather than as a premise, in the soteriological section. It was only when the Biblical doctrine of predestination was attacked by Pighuis that Calvin felt constrained to come to its defense in his treatises on “A Defense of the Secret Providence of God” and “The Eternal Predestination of God.” Rather than call predestination the fundamental principle, it is more accurate to assert that predestination is a logical conclusion of Calvinism, or as E. Doumergue phrases it, the keystone rather than the foundation of the system.^[12] When once you have adopted the view that God shall be God in the full sweep of

His many relationships to His creatures, you will arrive at predestination as a very logical conclusion. All limitations of God's decree regarding man restrict God's supremacy and infringe upon His majesty.

The glory of God is another definition of the fundamental principle which has been proposed. It is a definition which is popular with the masses in Calvinistic circles. Calvinism has been defined as that system in which God is most highly glorified and man is most deeply abased. There is a very vital truth in this assertion. The Calvinist does make it an all-embracing purpose to glorify God in all walks of life. Nevertheless, as a definition that statement places too great limitation upon the activity of God. The Calvinist is not only interested in including God in the purposes of life — living for His glory but God is his first thought also when he thinks of the origin and providential control of all things. The purposive statement, the glory of God, is not sufficiently inclusive to be denominated the fundamental principle of Calvinism.

Some who have manifested deep concern for the *responsibility of man* and have feared that the emphasis on God's activity would crowd out the responsibility of man have proposed as the fundamental principle the combined thought of God's sovereign decree and the responsibility of man, since they saw in Calvinism an emphasis upon both factors. It is undoubtedly true that Calvinism does stress human responsibility to a very high degree. But again it would not be according to the genius of the Calvinist to place God's sovereign decree and man's responsibility, or any other aspect of man, on a level. God is to the Calvinist the first and last word, the primary thought always. God's sovereign decree and man's responsibility do present themselves to the human mind as an apparent contradiction, an antinomy, a paradox, something which the mind of man fails to solve. This paradox, like the one of God's transcendence and His immanence, or spirit and matter, the Calvinist readily adopts, even though he cannot solve it. However, he adopts this paradox, not because he holds to two coequal fundamental principles, God's sovereignty and the freedom and responsibility of man, but just because he wants to let God be God. He discovers that God in His written Word has stressed the responsibility of man, and that He is in no wise accountable for the sin of man, even though He is Ruler of all. It is just because the Calvinist would let God be God, that is, the final Authority for his thinking, even when his own logic fails to give an adequate account of

things, that he accepts the full responsibility of man, as God has informed him in His Word. The sovereignty of God, it will then be seen, is a prior thought to the responsibility of man.

Several other proposals have been made to designate the fundamental principle of Calvinism which need not be given special consideration here. No statement of the fundamental principle will be adequate which does not do full justice to the thought of God as the basic and central thought of Calvinism, since such a thought is by common consent its essence.

THE SYSTEM BASED UPON THIS FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE

With the sovereignty of God in the natural and the moral spheres as fundamental principle the Calvinist has built up his whole system. It involves widespread implications for the views which the Calvinist entertains regarding theology, politics, sociology, science and art, in fact the whole of life, as succeeding chapters will disclose.

Besides the fundamental principle there are corollary principles which should be mentioned here, because they are for the Calvinist *axiomatic-principia*, first principles which underlie the whole system. Of special prominence is the one, which is familiarly known to us as the formal principle of the Protestant Reformation; namely, that God has given to fallen man, besides the general revelation in nature, a special revelation of Himself and of His works in the Bible as the Word of God. Because this Bible, or rather God in the Bible, presents to us a specific interpretation of God's works in nature and a special revelation of His redemptive works, it becomes for the Calvinist the ultimate and binding source of information concerning God and the world. This objective revelation man accepts through a God-given faith.

The Bible, as revelation of God, teaches the following facts of basic significance to the Calvinistic system: that God, Who has revealed Himself in His Word, is Sovereign over all things, and that God differs essentially from all things created by Him; that as regards religion, or the relation of God to His image-bearer, man, it holds this to be of the nature of a covenant, and as such was already specially revealed to original man in the state of righteousness; that the world today does not exist in a pure state but is fallen in sin. Furthermore, regarding the fallen world, the Bible maintains: that man is totally depraved and that the world, over which God placed him as ruler,

exists today in a corrupt state as a result of sin; that Death has come into the world as a punishment for sin; and that the sovereign God has revealed his grace, which affects both individual and social conditions, in the divinely given Mediator, Jesus Christ.^[13] What hypotheses are to a philosophic system, these facts derived from Scripture are to the Calvinistic system; they underlie and control that system in its many ramifications.

FOOTNOTES:

- [1] Harkness, Georgia, *John Calvin, the Man and His Ethics*, p. 258 (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1931).
- [2] For a survey of the literature on this subject, consult: Hastie, W. *The Theology of the Reformed Church in its Fundamental Principles* (Edinburgh, 1904); Voigt, H., *Fundamental Dogmatik* (Gothal 1874); Bauke, H., *Die Probleme der Theologie Calvins* (Alfred Topelmann, Giessen, 1910); Meeter, H. H., *The Fundamental Principle of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1930).
- [3] Hastie, W., *The Theology of the Reformed Church in its Fundamental Principles*, p. 142 (Edinburgh, 1904).
- [4] Seeberg, Reinhold, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* Band IV 2 Halfte, pp. 558, 659.
- [5] Dilthey, W., *Die Glaubenslehre der Reformation in Preuss.* Jahrb. 1894, p. 80, quoted by H. Bauke, op. cit., p 25.
- [6] Meeter, H.H., *The Fundamental Principle of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., pp. 51-55, 1930).
- [7] Pressly, Mason W., *Calvinism and Science*, Article in Ev. Repertoire, 1891, p. 662.
- [8] Romans 11:36.
- [9] Warfield, B. B, *Calvin as a Theologian and Calvinism Today*, pp. 23, 24, Presbyterian Board of Publication, Phila., 1909.
- [10] *Ibid*, pp. 22, 23.
- [11] Hodge, Chas., *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I, p. 548 (London and Edinburgh, Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1872).
- [12] Doumergue, B., *Jean Calvin*, Vol. IV, p. 857, quoted by Bauke, H., *Die Problem. der Theologie Calvins*, p. 84 (Alfred Topelmann, Giessen, 1910).
- [13] Bavinck, H. *Christelijke Wetenschap* (Kainpen, Netherlands, L H. Kok, 1913) *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, Vol. I, pp. 237, 309-310 (Kampen, Netherlands, J. H. Bos, 1911); Vollenhoven, D. H., Th., *Het Calvinisme en de Reformatie van de Wijsbegeerte*, pp. 20, 21 (Amsterdam, Netherlands, H. 3. Paris, 1933).

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