

# *Calvin as a Theologian*

## **Benjamin B. Warfield (1851-1921)**

THE subject of this address is “John Calvin the Theologian,” and I take it that what will be expected of me is to convey some idea of what manner of theologian John Calvin was, and of his quality as a theological thinker.

I am afraid I shall have to ask you at the outset to disabuse your minds of a very common impression, namely, that Calvin’s chief characteristics as a theologian were on the one hand, audacity—perhaps I might even say effrontery—of speculation; and on the other hand, pitilessness of logical development, cold and heartless scholasticism. We have been told, for example, that he reasons on the attributes of God precisely as he would reason on the properties of a triangle. No misconception could be more gross. The speculative theologian of the Reformation was Zwingli, not Calvin. The scholastic theologian among the early Reformers was Peter Martyr, not Calvin. This was thoroughly understood by their contemporaries. “The two most excellent theologians of our times,” remarks Joseph Scaliger, “are John Calvin and Peter Martyr, the former of whom has dealt with the Holy Scriptures as they ought to be dealt with—with sincerity, I mean, and purity and simplicity, without any scholastic subtleties. . . Peter Martyr, because it seemed to fall to him to engage the Sophists, has overcome them sophistically, and struck them down with their own weapons.”

It is not to be denied, of course, that Calvin was a speculative genius of the first order, and in the cogency of his logical analysis he possessed a weapon which made him terrible to his adversaries. But it was not on these gifts that he depended in forming and developing his theological ideas. His theological method was persistently, rigorously, some may even say exaggeratedly, *a posteriori*. All *a priori* reasoning here he not only eschewed but vigorously repelled. His instrument of research was not logical amplification, but exegetical investigation. In one word, he was distinctly a Biblical theologian, or, let us say it frankly, by way of eminence *the Biblical theologian of his age*. Whither the Bible took him, thither he went: where scriptural declarations failed him, there he stopped short.

It is this which imparts to Calvin’s theological teaching the quality which is its prime characteristic and its real offence in the eyes of his critics—I mean its positiveness. There is no mistaking the note of confidence in his teaching, and it is perhaps not surprising that this note of confidence irritates his critics. They resent the air of finality he gives to his declarations, not staying to consider that he gives them this air of finality because he

presents them, not as his teachings, but as the teachings of the Holy Spirit in His inspired Word. Calvin's positiveness of tone is thus the mark not of extravagance but of sobriety and restraint. He even speaks with impatience of speculative, and what we may call inferential theology, and he is accordingly himself spoken of with impatience by modern historians of thought as a "merely Biblical theologian," who is, therefore, without any real doctrine of God, such as Zwingli has. The reproach, if it be a reproach, is just. Calvin refused to go beyond "what is written"—written plainly in the book of nature or in the book of revelation. He insisted that we can know nothing of God, for example, except what He has chosen to make known to us in His works and Word; all beyond this is but empty fancy, which merely "flutters" in the brain. And it was just because he refused to go one step beyond what is written that he felt so sure of his steps. He could not present the dictates of the Holy Ghost as a series of debatable propositions.

Such an attitude towards the Scriptures might conceivably consist with a thoroughgoing intellectualism, and Calvin certainly is very widely thought of as an intellectualist *à outrance*. But this again is an entire misapprehension. The positiveness of Calvin's teaching has a far deeper root than merely the conviction of his understanding. When Ernest Renan characterized him as the most Christian man of his generation he did not mean it for very high praise, but he made a truer and much more profound remark than he intended. The fundamental trait of Calvin's nature was precisely—religion. It is not merely that all his thinking is coloured by a deep religious sentiment; it is that the whole substance of his thinking is determined by the religious motive. Thus his theology, if ever there was a theology of the heart, was distinctively a theology of the heart, and in him the maxim that "It is the heart that makes the theologian" finds perhaps its most eminent illustration.

His active and powerful intelligence, of course, penetrated to the depths of every subject which he touched, but he was incapable of dealing with any religious subject after a fashion which would minister only to what would seem to him the idle curiosity of the mind. It was not that he restrained himself from such merely intellectual exercises upon the themes of religion, the force of his religious interest itself instinctively inhibited them.

Calvin marked an epoch in the history of the doctrine of the Trinity, but of all great theologians who have occupied themselves with this soaring topic, none has been more determined than he not to lose themselves in the intellectual subtleties to which it invites the inquiring mind; and he marked an epoch in the development of the doctrine precisely because his interest in it was vital and not merely or mainly speculative. Or take the great doctrine of predestination which has become identified with his name, and with respect to which he is perhaps, most commonly of all things, supposed to have given the reins to speculative construction and to have pushed logical development to unwarrantable

extremes. Calvin, of course, in the pellucid clearness and incorruptible honesty of his thought and in the faithfulness of his reflection of the biblical teaching, fully grasped and strongly held the doctrine of the will of God as the *prima causa rerum*, and this too was a religious conception with him and was constantly affirmed just because it was a religious conception—yes, in a high and true sense, the most fundamental of all religious conceptions. But even so, it was not to this cosmical predestination that Calvin's thought most persistently turned, but rather to that soteriological predestination on which, as a helpless sinner needing salvation from the free grace of God, he must rest. And therefore Ebrard is so far quite right when he says that predestination appears in Calvin's system not as the *decretum Dei* but as the *electio Dei*.

It is not merely controversial skill which leads Calvin to pass predestination by when he is speaking of the doctrine of God and providence, and to reserve it for the point where he is speaking of salvation. This is where his deepest interest lay. What was suffusing his heart and flowing in full flood into all the chambers of his soul was a profound sense of his indebtedness as a lost sinner to the free grace of God his Saviour. His zeal in asserting the doctrine of two-fold predestination is grounded in the clearness with which he perceived—as was indeed perceived with him by all the Reformers—that only so can the evil leaven of “synergism” be eliminated and the free grace of God be preserved in its purity in the saving process. The roots of his zeal are planted, in a word, in his consciousness of absolute dependence as a sinner on the free mercy of a saving God. The sovereignty of God in grace was an essential constituent of his deepest religious consciousness. Like his great master, Augustine—like Luther, Zwingli, and Bucer, and all the rest of those high spirits who brought about that great revival of religion which we call the Reformation—he could not endure that the grace of God should not receive all the glory of the glory of the rescue of sinners from the destruction in which they are involved, and from which, just because they are involved in it, they are unable to do anything towards their own recovery.

The fundamental interest of Calvin as a theologian lay, it is clear, in the region broadly designated soteriological. Perhaps we may go further and add that, within this broad field, his interest was most intense in the application to the sinful soul of the salvation wrought out by Christ,—in a word, in what is technically known as the *ordo salutis*. This has even been made his reproach in some quarters, and we have been told that the main fault of the *Institutes* as a treatise in theological science, lies in its too subjective character. Its effect, at all events, has been to constitute Calvin pre-eminently *the theologian of the Holy Spirit*.

Calvin has made contributions of the first importance to other departments of theological thought. It has already been observed that he marks an epoch in the history of the doctrine of the Trinity. He also marks an epoch in the mode of presenting the work of

Christ. The presentation of Christ's work under the rubrics of the three-fold office of Prophet, Priest and King was introduced by him: and from him it was taken over by the entirety of Christendom, not always, it is true, in his spirit or with his completeness of development, but yet with large advantage. In Christian ethics, too, his impulse proved epoch-making, and this great science was for a generation cultivated only by his followers.

It is probable, however, that Calvin's greatest contribution to theological science lies in the rich development which he gives—and which he was the first to give—to the doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit. No doubt, from the origin of Christianity, everyone who has been even slightly imbued with the Christian spirit has believed in the Holy Spirit as the author and giver of life, and has attributed all that is good in the world, and particularly in himself, to His holy offices. And, of course, in treating of grace, Augustine worked out the doctrine of salvation as a subjective experience with great vividness and in great detail, and the whole course of this salvation was fully understood, no doubt, to be the work of the Holy Spirit. But in the same sense in which we may say that the doctrine of sin and grace dates from Augustine, the doctrine of satisfaction from Anselm, the doctrine of justification by faith from Luther,—we must say that the doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit is a gift from Calvin to the Church. It was he who first related the whole experience of salvation specifically to the working of the Holy Spirit, worked it out into its details, and contemplated its several steps and stages in orderly progress as the product of the Holy Spirit's specific work in applying salvation to the soul. Thus he gave systematic and adequate expression to the whole doctrine of the Holy Spirit and made it the assured possession of the Church of God.

It has been common to say that Calvin's entire theological work may be summed up in this—that he emancipated the soul from the tyranny of human authority and delivered it from the uncertainties of human intermediation in religious things: that he brought the soul into the immediate presence of God and cast it for its spiritual health upon the free grace of God alone. Where the Romanist placed the Church, it is said, Calvin set the Deity. The saying is true, and perhaps, when rightly understood and filled with its appropriate content, it may sufficiently characterize the effect of his theological teaching. But it is expressed too generally to be adequate. What Calvin did was, specifically, to replace the doctrine of the Church as sole source of assured knowledge of God and sole institute of salvation, by the Holy Spirit. Previously, men had looked to the Church for all the trustworthy knowledge of God obtainable, and as well for all the communications of grace accessible. Calvin taught them that neither function has been committed to the Church, but God the Holy Spirit has retained both in His own hands and confers both knowledge of God and communion with God on whom He will.

The *Institutes* is, accordingly, just a treatise on the work of God the Holy Spirit in making God savingly known to sinful man, and bringing sinful man into holy communion with God. Therefore it opens with the great doctrine of the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti*—another of the fruitful doctrines which the Church owes to Calvin—in which he teaches that the only vital and vitalizing knowledge

of God which a sinner can attain, is communicated to him through the inner working of the Spirit of God in his heart, without which there is spread in vain before his eyes the revelation of God's glory in the heavens, and the revelation of His grace in the perspicuous pages of the Word. And therefore, it centres in the great doctrine of Regeneration,—the term is broad enough in Calvin to cover the whole process of the subjective *recovery* of man to God— in which he teaches that the only power which can ever awake in a sinful heart the motions of a living faith, is the power of this same Spirit of God moving with a truly creative operation on the deadened soul. When these great ideas are developed in their full expression—with explication of all their presuppositions in the love of God and the redemption of Christ, and of all their relations and consequents—we have Calvin's theology.

Now of course, a theology which commits everything to the operations of that Spirit of God who “worketh when and where and how He pleases,” hangs everything on the sovereign good-pleasure of God. Calvin's theology is therefore, predestination to the core, and he does not fail, in faithfulness to the teachings of Scripture and with clear-eyed systematizing genius, to develop its predestinarianism with fullness and with emphasis; to see in all that comes to pass the will of God fulfilling itself, and to vindicate to God the glory that is His due as the Lord and disposer of all things. But this is not the peculiarity of his theology. Augustine had taught all this a thousand years before him. Luther and Zwingli and Martin Bucer, his own teacher in these high mysteries, were teaching it all while he was learning it. The whole body of the leaders of the Reformation movement were teaching it along with him. What is special to himself is the clearness and emphasis of his reference of all that God brings to pass, especially in the processes of the new creation, to God the Holy Spirit, and the development from this point of view of a rich and full doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit.

Here then is probably Calvin's greatest contribution to theological development. In his hands, for the first time in the history of the Church, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit comes to its rights. Into the heart of none more than into his did the vision of the glory of God shine, and no one has been more determined than he not to give the glory of God to another. Who has been more devoted than he to the Saviour, by whose blood he has been bought? But, above everything else, it is the sense of the sovereign working of salvation by the almighty power of the Holy Spirit which characterizes all Calvin's thought of God. And above everything else he deserves, therefore, the great name of *the theologian of the Holy Spirit*.



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