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The Balance that is Calvinism*

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THIS is the second time that I have been asked to deliver a commencement address at Calvin College and Seminary. I count it an honor of which I am quite unworthy. Perhaps the reason why I have been asked a second time is that nobody remembers what I said the first time. Frankly, I do not myself recall. But it is more than likely that on that occasion I discussed some phase of Calvinism. That I wish to do now also.

I

It is a matter of common knowledge among us that Calvinism is often misrepresented and even maligned. For a few examples, Calvinism is said to assign infants to hell in wholesale fashion, and recently a nationally known preacher flung at the God of Calvinism the epithet "a dirty bully."

Perhaps the charge most frequently laid at the door of Calvinism is that it is unbalanced. Calvinists are reputed to be narrow extremists. For instance, they are said to make a hobby of the doctrine of predestination and to ride that hobby to death. And the so-called five points of Calvinism are often regarded as the sum total of Calvinistic teaching. Now it goes without saying that these points occupy a place of great prominence in the Calvinistic system, but it may never be forgotten that they constitute but a comparatively small part of that system.

The truth of the matter is that Calvinism is more insistent than is any other self-styled Christian system of thought on the recognition of *all* of revealed truth of *all* that God has made known to men both in general and special revelation. The Calvinistic system would include every truth and exclude none. It willingly receives such mysteries as the Trinity and the Incarnation, no matter how far they transcend human reason. And if unmistakably revealed, seemingly contradictory truths are gladly embraced. For that reason paradoxes abound in our system.

Now it is axiomatic that truth, taken as a whole, is a perfect sphere and as such is perfectly balanced. It follows that Calvinism, instead of being unbalanced, excels in balance. Without hesitation the assertion may be made that balance is one of its most outstanding and distinctive features. I now wish to direct your attention to a few samples of *The Balance That Is Calvinism*.

II

You have heard it said that Christianity is not a

(*) Commencement address delivered on May 29, 1952, to the graduates of Calvin Seminary and Calvin College.

doctrine, but a life. Not so many decades ago almost all Modernist preachers used to din that into our ears. Due to the influence of Josiah Royce and others, the informed Modernist today knows better; but not nearly all Modernists are well informed. And, sad to say, a great many Fundamentalists too have adopted the same trite saying. Nor is that surprising. American Fundamentalism has been influenced profoundly by continental Pietism and English Methodism, both of which have stressed the Christian life to the serious detriment of Christian doctrine and, it must be added, have thus prepared the way for Modernism.

Does the Calvinist take the position that Christianity is not a life, but a doctrine? If so, he would be as guilty of unbalance as are his opponents. True, he would be unbalanced in the opposite direction, but unbalanced just as badly, nonetheless. As a matter of fact, he insists that Christianity is not only a doctrine but also a life and, prior to both of these, a *story*. And that position excels in balance.

The Christian religion rests squarely and solidly on certain historical events. To relegate such Bible stories as that of creation, that of the fall of man, that of Jesus' virgin birth, and that of His bodily resurrection to the realm of the mythological, or, for that matter, of the supra-historical is to destroy the very foundation of Christianity. Pearl Buck was wrong when she averred that, in case Christ's bodily resurrection were disproved the spiritual values of Christianity would persist just the same. Paul the apostle was completely right when he declared: "If Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished" (I Cor. 15:14, 17, 18.) But such stories must be interpreted, and their correct interpretation contributes to Christian doctrine. For instance the interpretation of Christ's death on the cross as a substitutionary sacrifice for the expiation of sin and the satisfaction of divine justice is a doctrine which lies at the very heart of Christianity and with which the Christian religion lives or dies. And when Paul wrote: "Ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's" (I Cor. 6:20,) he not only gave a summary of the Christian life, but taught that Christianity as a life is rooted in Christianity as a story and Christianity as a doctrine.

Christianity as a story, Christianity as a doctrine, and Christianity as a life are interdependent. They

stand and fall together. Deny any one of them, and what remains is so distorted as to be unworthy of the Christian name. It is not Christianity but a caricature of it. Uphold all three, and one has a true and balanced conception of Christianity.

John Calvin accepted the stories of the Bible, those in which the miraculous looms large included, as actual history. As systematizer of Christian doctrine he has had no peer. And not only was he unbending in his insistence on Christian behavior by the individual, but the citizens of Geneva also found in him a vigorous social reformer.

The present-day Calvinist follows suit. Even his enemies being his judges, his is the selfsame balance. For he is ridiculed for his "unscientific" acceptance of Bible history, and he is accused in one breath of dead orthodoxism and legalistic Puritanism. Only he who puts a great emphasis on each of the aforesaid aspects of Christianity is likely to elicit such condemnation.

III

Calvinism has sometimes been associated with nationalism of a kind. If a speaker is introduced as a rock-ribbed Calvinist, some in the audience will almost certainly jump to the conclusion that he must be either of Dutch descent or of Scotch. If he proves to be of neither, they are surprised. Now it likely can be shown that Calvinism has come to be more fully developed, and therefore has flourished more, in Holland and Scotland than in any other country, but it does not follow by any manner of means that the people of those two lands have an option — to say nothing of a monopoly — on Calvinism.

Calvin did not have the good fortune of being born in either of those countries. He was a native of France and spent his most fruitful years in Switzerland. True, there is no telling how great a Calvinist he might have become, had he been born and reared in Holland or Scotland, but even as it was he did not do too badly.

Has your attention ever been called to the fact that in the Reformation era, while Lutheranism remained confined in the main to Germany and the Scandinavian countries, Calvinism spread from Switzerland to France, from there to the Low Countries, then crossed the channel to Great Britain, and at the same time made its way eastward through Germany to such countries as Hungary and Bohemia? From the very beginning Calvinism excelled in cosmopolitanism.

The charge has often been brought against Calvinists that they are indifferent to evangelism and are lacking in missionary zeal. Hardly any accusation could be more unfair. In recent decades two German scholars, Schlatter of Tübingen and Pfisterer of Bochum, have shown convincingly that Calvin took a profound interest in Christian missions. Not only were the churches of the Reformation exceedingly zealous for home missions in Europe, but Dutch Cal-

vinists brought the gospel also to Formosa already in 1624, to Ceylon in 1636, and to Brazil in 1637. Two of the greatest evangelistic preachers of history were Whitefield and Spurgeon. Although the latter never saw the light on infant baptism, both of them were ardent advocates of the five points of Calvinism. But why should I name these lesser lights? If you will permit an anachronism, the greatest Calvinist the Christian church has ever had was the apostle Paul. He was also its greatest missionary. And he was its greatest missionary precisely because he was its greatest Calvinist. By reason of his Calvinism the love of Christ constrained him the more powerfully.

In short, instead of being narrow and one-sided, Calvinism is broad and well balanced. Without ever sacrificing truth or principle it is able and willing to adjust itself to the soul of every nation under the sun. As Paul was made "all things to all men," so Calvinism is all things to all kindreds and tongues and peoples and nations. To it belongs the universalism of Christianity itself.

IV

Present-day Modernism and Fundamentalism are sharply at odds as to whether the Christian minister should preach on social problems. Ever since the days of Walter Rauschenbusch, Modernism has proclaimed aloud the so-called social gospel. It stresses the *Diesseitigkeit* of the gospel at the expense of its *Jenseitigkeit*. To quote Alfred E. Garvie: "Christ saves, not for safety hereafter, but for service here." And it aims at the regeneration of society by such natural means as education and civilization, to the exclusion of the regeneration of the individual by the supernatural grace of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, Fundamentalism, more particularly Modern Dispensationalism, proclaims only the gospel of individual salvation and bars social problems from the pulpit. A representative of that school of thought once said in my hearing: "Society is on fire, but I am not interested in putting the fire out; my sole concern is to rescue as many individuals as I may from the fire." Another concluded a sermon with the sentence: "God will save society when His King comes back," which most certainly is true, but it was meant to imply that we need not bother now to try to save society.

What position does the Calvinist take on this issue? By refusing to take an either-or position he avoids the unbalance of both Modernism and Dispensationalism. By insisting on both the individual and the social aspect of the gospel he achieves a highly commendable balance.

The gospel of the Calvinist is first and foremost a message of individual salvation. For him it is a truism that apart from the salvation of the individuals that constitute society every attempt to save society must prove futile. Therefore, however needful it may be to take men out of the slums, it is incomparably more important that the slums be taken

out of men. And he knows full well that, whatever influence a man's surroundings may have on his behavior, only the almighty grace of God can give him a new heart and radically transform his life. Spurgeon was right when he said that, that if a thief should be put in the perfect environment of heaven, sooner or later he would pick the pockets of the angels.

But the gospel of the Calvinist is by no means exclusively individual. He has a social message too. As the prophet Amos condemned the rich of his day for selling the poor for a pair of shoes, as John the Baptist told the soldiers that consulted him to be content with their wages and the tax collectors to quit robbing the public, as Jesus dealt with the perennial problem of divorce, and as Paul dealt with the relationship of employer and employee, the citizen and the civil ruler, so the Reformed preacher will bring into the pulpit the urgent social problems of his times and publish the solutions proffered by the Word of God.

The Reformed preacher will proclaim Christ as Saviour, to be sure, but also as King. He will most assuredly plead with men to receive Christ as their personal Saviour, but will also command them to honor Christ as Lord and King. In fact, he will exalt Christ as the King universal, to whom has been assigned all authority on earth and in heaven and who has been given by God to the church to be the Head, not only over the church, but over all things. Specifically, in these days of industrial strife, he will tell both capital and labor that the one and only solution for the problem of their relationship to each other is that offered by the inspired apostle—that each of them acknowledge Christ as Master (Eph. 6:5-9). And in view of the present ascendancy of statism he will boldly enjoin the princes and presidents and potentates of the nations to bow humbly before Him who is the Prince of the kings of the earth, the sovereign and totalitarian Ruler of the universe.

V

One of the most vexing problems that has confronted the Christian church throughout its history concerns the relationship, one to the other, of the natural and spiritual. In fact, that problem is common to all religions.

Rome teaches that the natural is of lower order than the spiritual and that the natural is sure to become sinful unless it is held in check by the spiritual as a super-added gift of God. The Anabaptists of the Reformation age went Rome one better and taught that the natural as such is sinful. That notion is by no means foreign to twentieth century Fundamentalism. Certain pagan religions hold that evil is inherent in matter, and, strange to say, there are Christians who share that view in one form or another. A bottle of whiskey, say they, is a bad thing, and the human body with its blood and glands is something to get rid of as soon as convenient. Enough has been

said to make it clear that the question of the relationship of the natural and the spiritual there is confusion worse confounded.

Far be it from me to assert that every Calvinist keeps the natural and the spiritual in proper balance with each other. Not one of us does that consistently. But I do affirm without hesitation that Calvinism does that very thing more successfully than does any other religious system. To put the matter pointedly, Calvinism insists as does no other system, that on the one hand men must be natural in the spiritual and that on the other hand they must be spiritual in the natural. Permit me to present that position in concrete fashion.

We all know ministers who in ordinary conversation act and speak as men of like passions with others but, as soon as they enter the pulpit, put on airs. In conducting worship they are pretentious and pompous; their preaching is characterized by a "holy whine." They have not learned to be natural in the spiritual. A certain minister boasted that he never took a vacation because Satan takes no vacation either. After one or two nervous breakdowns he died at the age of forty-five. I have a sneaking suspicion that the reason why he did not die at thirty-five was that occasionally he did take a little vacation on the sly. Incidentally, after his departure there was no noticeable increase in the activities of the evil one. That minister too failed to be natural in the spiritual. How well I recall my first summer of preaching as a theological student. I was to serve a rural church on two successive Sundays, and I was to spend the intervening week in that community. As all four of my sermons were prepared before my arrival and the farmers were busy about their work, I had considerable spare time during that week. So it came about that I inquired whether there was not in the vicinity some body of water where I might go fishing. I was told that not far away there was a stream in which fish had occasionally been caught, but it was also hinted that the parishioners might disapprove of a preacher's wasting his precious time at fishing. Being a mere student, I yielded to public opinion. Today it seems to me that in doing so I may have blundered. Of this I am certain: If I were the pastor of that church today, I would consider myself in sacred duty bound to go fishing every once in a while. For the people of that church needed to be taught that men must be natural in the spiritual.

If it is important for the Christian to be natural in the spiritual, it is supremely important that he be spiritual in the natural. Precisely that is the meaning of the Pauline injunction: "Whether, therefore, ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God" (I Cor. 10:31).

One of the most prevalent evils of our day is secularism. It is also a rapidly growing evil. Increasingly religion is being divorced from the common life and God is being banished from it. All too well have we in these United States succeeded in keeping God out

of politics. That accounts for the fact that our politics by and large are so thoroughly rotten. Some of our leading industrialists and labor leaders hold positions of prominence in the Christian church but make no attempt to apply the principles of Christianity to their mutual obligations. And by this time the public schools of our land have been dechristianized about as thoroughly as any institution can be. Collectively, modern men are not spiritual in the natural. Worse than that, they do not care to be, And that applies to a great many who call themselves Christians. But the Calvinist prays without ceasing:

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things Thee to see,
And what I do in anything,
To do it as for Thee.

Not merely praying, also playing; not merely the reading of Scripture, also the scanning of the daily paper; not merely the contemplation of special revelation, also the investigation of general revelation; not merely the pursuit of theology, also the study of trigonometry; not merely the labors of the clergyman, also those of the physician and the attorney, the cobbler, and the ash-collector—yea, literally all things are to be done to the glory of God.

To be natural in the spiritual and at once spiritual in the natural—that spells a beautiful balance. It is a phase of the balance that is Calvinism.

VI

Calvinism is often held up to scorn because of its conservatism. That it is conservative cannot be denied. It is built upon the objective and unchangeable Word of God. It maintains that general revelation too can be properly understood only in the light of that abiding Word. It firmly refuses to add a jot to that Word or to subtract a tittle from it. And, although it rejects the doctrine of an infallible church, it does believe that throughout the centuries the Spirit of truth has illuminated the church in its interpretation of the Word. Therefore it sets far greater store than does either Modernism or Fundamentalism by the historic creeds of Christendom. It pledges fidelity unto death to the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

However, let no one suppose that Calvinism is not progressive. Precisely because of its high regard for the Word of God it is genuinely progressive. It regards the Sacred Scriptures as a treasure that cannot be exhausted, as a gold mine that will never be depleted. Therefore it deems it the solemn duty of every scribe instructed unto the kingdom of heaven to bring forth out of this treasure new things as well as old. It believes that the Holy Spirit has led, and keeps leading, the church progressively into the truth. The greatest theologians of the past had drunk but a few drops out of the river of Holy Scripture. Neither Augustin nor Calvin, nor yet Abraham Kuyper, has said the last word on any problem of theology. And the greatest scientists and philosophers and

artists that the human race has known had taken only a few sips at the spring of general revelation.

Let me be more specific. Calvin had a clearer insight into proper relation of the church and state than did Augustin; and Roger Williams, extremist though he was, progressed beyond Calvin on that score. But who dares to assert that the last word has been spoken on that subject? In the Christian Reformed Church, Article 36 of the Belgic Confession is still very much under discussion. In the field of eschatology many questions remain unanswered. I feel sure that my premillenarian and postmillenarian friends are in for many surprises as the day of Christ's return draws nearer, but I must confess to a premonition that we amillenarians too may be in for one or two. As for the social implications of the gospel for this day and age, we have hardly begun to scratch their surface. In the field of general revelation vast areas remain unexplored. And how colossal a task confronts those who would teach the various branches of general revelation from a definitely Christian viewpoint. Such is indeed the solemn duty of all who teach at Calvin College, and to that task they must apply themselves with might and main. But if they do so apply themselves for a whole century, I surmise that much land will still remain to be possessed. While I am not an authority on philosophy, it does seem to me that such men as Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd of the Free Reformed University of Amsterdam deserve much credit for their concerted efforts to elaborate a distinctively Christian philosophy. But that task too is far from finished.

How clear that Calvinism is characterized at once by an unwavering conservatism and by a zealous progressivism! In that respect too it excels in balance.

VII

I have called attention to just a few samples of the balance that is Calvinism. They could easily be multiplied tenfold. Balance is indeed one of Calvinism's most distinctive features.

At this juncture I must issue a warning against a serious misunderstanding. Let no one carry away the impression that Calvinism is forever compromising, that it everlastingly soft-pedals the truth, that it is a middle-of-the-road philosophy. Nothing could be farther removed from the truth. Calvinism is not that way at all. Rather is the opposite the case.

Let me try to drive home this point by reference to that great paradox which not only pervades the Word of God but constitutes one of the most basic problems of all philosophy. I am thinking of the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. All of human thought and all of human history revolve about those two poles. And they present a paradox that the greatest thinkers of mankind have proved unable to solve.

That Calvinism puts great emphasis on divine sovereignty is a matter of common knowledge. Does

it in consequence deny, or at least belittle, human responsibility? That opinion is widely held. I once heard a Presbyterian preacher affirm that truth consists of the two hemispheres of divine sovereignty and human responsibility, and that Calvinism upholds the former, Arminianism the latter. But what a caricature of Calvinism that was! The truth of the matter is that Calvinism puts, not less emphasis on human responsibility than does Arminianism, but much more. The Reformed theology demands unqualified obedience to the law of God; Arminianism is content with what it calls "evangelical obedience," which is something less exacting. Arminianism teaches that God adjusts His demands to the enfeebled powers of man and requires no more of man than he can do; Calvinism holds that human inability in no way limits human obligation. What else could be expected? Human responsibility is nothing but a corollary of divine sovereignty. Man is responsible to God because God is sovereign. By all the rules of sound logic, the more one stresses the sovereignty of God, the more one is bound to stress the responsibility of man. Calvinism puts a truly tremendous emphasis on both.

And that amounts to saying that the balance that is Calvinism is not a balance of indecision and compromise and weakness, but a balance of certitude and conviction and strength. It is the direct result of the ready acceptance of *all* of revealed truth.

Imagine a target with the usual bull's eye surrounded by concentric circles. That target, let us say, represents truth as made known by God in the Bible and general revelation. All systems of Christian thought rightly so called aim at that target. But it cannot be said that any one of them hits the exact center. We dare not claim that even for Calvinism as we know it, for after all it is a human and therefore imperfect interpretation of divine revelation. But we do assert, and emphatically, that Calvinism comes closer to the very center of the target than does any other system. For it is the most concerted and also the most successful, effort made by man to do justice to the *whole* of revealed truth. The Calvinist accepts unreservedly *all* that proceeds from the mouth of God. He willingly subjects his own logic to the divine *logos*. To do that is the very essence of Calvinism.

This accounts for the balance that is Calvinism. And such is the glory that is Calvinism.

Special Revelation and the Problem of World Community

By Carl F. H. Henry

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THE volume which Professor Floyd H. Ross of University of Southern California has recently authored under a Harper and Brothers imprint, *Addressed to Christians: Isolationism vs. World Community*, is among the most vigorous recent attacks upon the appeal by any religion, and specifically by the Hebrew-Christian movement, to special divine revelation. The work comes from the sprightly pen of the University's professor of world religion.

I

Professor Ross' thesis is that "the problem of community is the acute problem of our era" (p.9), that it "cannot be divorced from the problem of theology" (p.14), and that its solution is to be found only by renunciation of all claims to special religious revelation, in the interest of an exploratory empirical approach to world fellowship. He classifies along with "childish notions" the "only way" technique, stressing that "the chosen people complex is an obstacle to genuine appreciations and to world community" (p.140). The opposition to all notions of "special chosenness" runs unyieldingly throughout the volume; not only Christian theism, but Marxist

communism, and every variety of claim to a special or absolutistic role or viewpoint in human history, is disparaged as an obstacle. The critique falls most heavily upon the Hebrew-Christian movement, since this is the inherited tradition of the West, and perhaps even more because of a true instinct that if the death-blow can be delivered to this most persuasive claim to special divine disclosure, the master stroke will have been dealt.

Dr. Ross' volume is not without much to gain the approval even of a spirited adversary of his views. The numerous competing revelation-claims require some explanation by any exclusively revelational viewpoint. It should be remembered also that the bold proclamation of the Catholic hierarchy's speculations as if they were divine revelation was already criticized by the Protestant Reformers with a vigor seldom approached in our era. Especially pointed is Dr. Ross' critique of contemporary liberalism. More clearly than the liberals he sees that the denial of the essential uniqueness of Christianity in terms of special miraculous revelation means the doom of the dogma of ecumenical liberal churchmen that in Jesus Christ alone will come a union of