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THE CALVINISTIC SYSTEM IN THE LIGHT OF
REASON AND THE SCRIPTURE.

CALVINISM starts from a double predestination which antedates creation and is the divine programme, as it were, of human history. This programme includes the successive stages of a universal fall, a partial redemption and salvation, and a partial reprobation and damnation ; all for the glory of God and the display of his attributes of mercy and justice. History, according to this scheme, is only the execution of the original design. There can be no failure. The beginning and the end, God's immutable plan and the world's history, must correspond.

This is, in brief outline, one of the great dogmatic systems which have dominated the Christian world. It is the most logical of all, unless we except Romanism as completed in the Vatican decrees. It is the product of the greatest theological genius that arose after Augustin and Thomas Aquinas. It is essentially the same with the Augustinian system, but more logical and severe. It has made the strongest impression upon the Anglo-Saxon mind, and is still a living force in the Puritan and Presbyterian churches of England and America. It can only be superseded by a better system, which is built upon the rock of the redeemed race rather than the ruins of the fallen race, and upon God's love in Christ rather than of God's sovereign decrees. The theological genius of Schleiermacher, starting from Calvinistic principles, constructed a system of a universal election and universal salvation, unfolding itself gradually in this, and in the next world ; but this cannot satisfy those who make the Bible the supreme rule of faith. We

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must wait for a more Scriptural system, which will come in the course of time.

We should remember at the outset that we have to deal here with nothing less than a solution of the world-problem, and should approach it with reverence and modesty. We stand as it were before a mountain whose top is lost in the clouds. Many who dared to climb its dizzy heights have lost their vision in the blinding snowdrifts. Dante, the deepest thinker among poets, deems the mystery of predestination too high even for the comprehension of the saints in Paradise, who enjoy the beatific vision, yet "do not know all the elect," and are content "to will whatsoever God wills."¹ Calvin himself says that "the predestination of God is a labyrinth, from which the mind of man can by no means extricate itself." There is no escape except by the Scripture doctrine of the saving love of God in Christ.

We find everywhere in nature and in history the traces of a revealed God and of a hidden God; revealed enough to strengthen our faith, and concealed enough to try our faith.

We are surrounded by mysteries. In the realm of nature we see the contrasts of light and darkness, day and night, heat and cold, summer and winter, life and death, blooming valleys and barren deserts, singing birds and poisonous snakes, useful animals and ravenous beasts, the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest.

Turning to human life, we find that one man is born to prosperity, the other to misery; one a king, the other a beggar; one a genius, the other an idiot; one strong and healthy, the other a helpless cripple; one a millionaire, the other a pauper; one inclined to virtue, another to vice; one the son of a saint, the other of a criminal; one in the darkness of heathenism, another in the light of Christianity.

Who can account for all these and a thousand other differences and perplexing problems? They are beyond the control of man's

¹ Paradise, XX. 130-138, Longfellow's translation:—

"O thou predestination, how remote
Thy root is from the aspect of all those
Who the First Cause do not behold entire!
And you, O mortals! hold yourselves restrained
In judging; for ourselves, who look on God,
We do not know as yet all the elect:
And sweet to us is such a deprivation,
Because our good in this good is made perfect,
That whatsoe'er God wills, we also will."

will, and must be traced to the inscrutable will of God, whose ways are past finding out.

Here, then, is predestination, and, apparently, a double predestination to good and evil, to happiness and misery. We cannot conceive of God, except as an omniscient and omnipotent Being, who from eternity foreknew, and in some way also foreordained, all things that should come to pass in his universe. He foreknew what He foreordained, and He foreordained what He foreknew; his foreknowledge and foreordination, his intelligence and will, are coeternal, and must harmonize. There is no succession of time, no before nor after, in God. The fall of the first man with its effects upon all future generations cannot have been an accident which God, as a passive or neutral spectator, simply *permitted* to take place, when He might so easily have prevented it. He must in some way have foreordained it, as a means for a higher end. So far the force of reasoning, on the basis of belief in a personal God, goes to the full length of Calvinistic supralapsarianism. If we give up the idea of a self-conscious, personal God, reason will force us into fatalism or pantheism.

Sin and death are universal facts, which no sane man can deny. They constitute the problem of problems. And the only practical solution of the problem is the fact of redemption. "Where sin has abounded, grace did abound more exceedingly: that, as sin reigned in death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. v. 20, 21).

If redemption were as universal in its operation as sin, this solution would be most satisfactory and most glorious. But the fact of redemption is only partially revealed in the present life, and the question remains, What becomes of the vast mass of those who live and die without God and without hope in this world? Is this terrible fact to be traced to the eternal counsel of God, or to the free agency of man who rejects the offer of salvation?

Here is the point where Augustinianism and Calvinism take issue with Pelagianism, Semi-Pelagianism, and Synergism.

The Calvinistic system involves a positive truth, the election to eternal life by free grace; and a negative inference, the reprobation to eternal death by arbitrary justice. The former is the strength, the latter is the weakness, of the system. The former is practically accepted by all true Christians; the latter has always been and always will be repelled by the great majority of Christians.

The doctrine of a gracious election is as clearly taught in the

New Testament as any other doctrine. Consult such passages as Matt. xxv. 34; John vi. 37, 44-65; x. 28; xv. 16; xvii. 12; xviii. 9; Acts xiii. 48; Rom. viii. 28-39; Gal. i. 4; Eph. i. 4-11; ii. 8-10; 1 Thess. i. 4; 2 Thess. ii. 13-14; 2 Tim. i. 9; 1 Pet. i. 2. It is confirmed by daily experience. Christians trace all their temporal and spiritual blessings, their life, health, and strength, their regeneration and conversion, every good thought and deed, to the undeserved mercy of God, and hope to be saved solely by the merits of Christ, "by grace through faith," not by works of their own. The more they advance in spiritual life, the more grateful they feel to God and the less inclined to claim any merit. The greatest saints are the humblest. Their theology reflects the spirit and attitude of prayer which rests on the conviction that God is the free giver of every good and perfect gift, and that without God we are nothing. Before the throne of grace all Christians may be called Augustinians or Calvinists.

Salvation by free grace is the effective theme and the secret of success of the great Calvinistic preachers and writers, such as Howe, Owen, Baxter, Bunyan, South, Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, Chalmers, Robert Hall, Spurgeon, — men who had no superior in pulpit power and influence. It should be remembered, however, that they ignored or practically neutralized, by their appeals to men's responsibility, the absolute decree of reprobation.

⁴We are not saved mechanically or by force, but through faith, by freely accepting the gift of God, and this implies the contrary power of rejecting the gift. To accept constitutes no merit, to reject is ingratitude and guilt. While we pray as if everything depended on God, we must preach and work as if everything depended on men, and offer the gospel sincerely to every creature. We pray for the salvation of all men, but we never pray for the perdition of a single human being.

This fact points to a serious defect of the system under consideration. Reprobation is a judicial act for sins committed and for the persistent refusal of the gospel salvation by the sinner; but there is no eternal decree of reprobation and preterition irrespective of moral desert. Such a decree would be contrary both to the justice and mercy of God, and change Him into an arbitrary despot. Such a decree, involving innocent children as well as ignorant adults, would indeed be "horrible," according to Calvin's own admission. This expression does great credit to his head and heart, and virtually condemns his system; for God can-

not do what is directly contrary to our best moral feelings and instincts which He himself has planted in our hearts.

How, then, did he come to believe and teach the *decretum horribile*? By logic, and by the Scripture. Let us examine his arguments.

1. The logical argument is that there can be no positive without a negative, no election without reprobation. This is true deductive logic, but not by inductive logic. All are "elect" who accept the gospel and persevere in faith (1 Pet. i. 1; ii. 9); reprobate are only those who refuse the call or fall away by their own guilt. Some are called at the ninth, others at the tenth, others at the eleventh hour. We cannot know or measure the secret operations of the Spirit, who works "when, where, and how He pleases." Logic, moreover, is a two-edged sword. It leads from predestinarian premises inevitably to the conclusion that God is the author of sin, which Calvin himself rejected and abhorred as a blasphemy. Logic, we should remember, only deals with finite categories, and cannot grasp infinite truths. God's logic is above man's logic. Christianity is not a logical or mathematical problem, and cannot be reduced to the limitations of a system, but is above logic and mathematics, and comprehends the truths of all systems. The most rigid believer in divine sovereignty cannot get rid of the sense of personal responsibility, though he may be unable to reconcile the two. The harmony lies in God, and in the moral constitution of man. Paul unites them in one sentence: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to work, for his good pleasure" (Phil. ii. 13). The problem, however, comes within the reach of possible solution if we distinguish between sovereignty, as an inherent power, and the *exercise* of sovereignty. God may limit the exercise of his sovereignty to make room for the free action of his creatures. Without such limitation, He could not admonish them to repent and believe. Here, again, Calvinistic logic must either bend or break. Strictly carried out, it would turn the exhortations of God to the sinner into a solemn mockery and cruel irony.

There is a point, then, where human logic must acknowledge its limitations and bow before truth which is, indeed, not illogical, but supra-logical; just as revelation is not against reason, but above reason.

2. Calvin, though one of the most logical minds, cared less for logic than for the Bible, and it is his obedience to the Word of

God, as the infallible rule of faith, that induced him to accept the *decretum horribile*, against his wish and will. His judgment is of the greatest weight; for he had no superior, and scarcely an equal, for thorough and systematic Bible knowledge and exegetical insight.

And here we must freely admit that not a few passages, especially in the Old Testament, favor a double decree to the extent of supreme supralapsarianism; yea, they go beyond it, and seem to make God himself the author of sin and evil. See Ex. iv. 21; vii. 13 (repeatedly of God's hardening Pharaoh's heart); Isa. vi. 9, 10; xlv. 18; Jer. vi. 21; Amos iii. 6 ("Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?"); Prov. xvi. 4; Matt. xi. 25; xiii. 14, 15; John xii. 40; Rom. ix. 10-23; xi. 7, 8; 1 Cor. xiv. 3; 2 Thess. ii. 11; 1 Pet. ii. 8; Jude 4 ("who were of old set forth in this condemnation").

The rock of reprobation is the ninth chapter of Romans. It is not accidental that Calvin elaborated and published the second edition of his "Institutes" simultaneously with his Commentary on the Romans, at Strassburg, in 1539.

There are especially three passages in the ninth chapter, which in their strict literal sense favor extreme Calvinism, and are so explained by some of the severest grammatical commentators of modern times (as Meyer and Weiss).

(a.) ix. 13: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated," quoted from Mal. i. 2, 3. But there are certain literal interpretations which would contradict the general teaching of Scripture. It is impossible that a God of love who commands us to love all men, even our enemies, should positively hate any of his creatures, made in his own image, even a child before his birth. Such a God would be a monster. "Can a woman forget her sucking child," says the Lord, "that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, these may forget, yet will I not forget thee" (Isa. xlix. 15). The word must therefore be understood as a strong Hebraistic expression for loving less or putting back; as in Gen. xxix. 31, where the original text says, "Leah was hated" by Jacob, that is, loved less than Rachel (comp. verse 30), and in Luke xiv. 26: "If any man hateth not his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." In the parallel passage, Matt. x. 37, we read instead, "loveth more." Our Saviour requires us to prefer Him above all things, even life itself, but certainly not to break the fifth commandment. Moreover, the pas-

sage quoted from Malachi has no reference to eternal salvation and perdition, but to the relative position which Jacob and Esau and their posterity were to occupy in the history of the theocracy. This removes the main difficulty. Esau received a temporal blessing from Isaac (Gen. xxvii. 39, 40), behaved kindly and generously towards Jacob, who did not deserve it (xxxiii. 4 *sqq.*), and notwithstanding his inferior position on earth may be among the saved in heaven. Adam and Eve, the first in the fall, were the first among the saved. This was the belief of the Christian fathers and schoolmen, based upon Wisdom x. 2. Dante assigns them a high place in Paradise.

(b.) ix. 17: Paul traces the hardening of Pharaoh's heart to the agency of God, and so far makes God responsible for sin. But this hardening was a judicial act of punishing sin with sin; for Pharaoh had first hardened his own heart (Ex. viii. 15, 32; ix. 34). This passage likewise has no reference to his future fate, but to his place in the history of Israel. ♣

(c.) In ix. 22 and 23, the apostle speaks of "vessels of wrath fitted unto destruction" (*κατηρτισμένα εἰς ἀπώλειαν*) and "vessels of mercy which he [God] prepared unto glory" (*ἃ προητοίμασεν εἰς δόξαν*). But the difference of the verbs and between the passive (or middle) and the active is most significant, and shows that God has no direct agency in the destruction of the vessels of wrath independently of their own previous moral conduct. Calvin is too good an exegete to overlook this difference, and virtually admits its force, although he tries to weaken it. "They observe," he says of his opponents, "that it is not said without meaning, that the vessels of wrath are fitted for destruction, but that God prepared the vessels of mercy; since by this mode of expression, Paul ascribes and challenges to God the praise of salvation, and throws the blame of perdition on those who by their choice procure it to themselves. But though I concede to them that Paul softens the asperity of the former clause by the difference of phraseology; yet it is not at all consistent to transfer the preparation for destruction to any other than the secret counsel of God; which is also asserted just before in the context, 'that God raised up Pharaoh, and whom he will he hardeneth.' Whence it follows, that the cause of the hardening is the secret counsel of God. This, however, I maintain, which is observed by Augustin, that when God turns wolves into sheep, he renovates them by more powerful grace to conquer their obstinacy; and therefore the obstinate are not converted, because God exerts not that mightier grace, of which He is not destitute, if He chose to display it."

(d.) But whatever view we may take of these hard passages, we should remember that the ninth chapter is only a part of Paul's philosophy of history, unfolded in chapters ix. to xi. While the ninth chapter sets forth the divine sovereignty, the tenth chapter asserts the human responsibility, and the eleventh looks forward to the future solution of the dark problem, namely, the conversion of the fullness of the Gentiles and the salvation of all Israel (xi. 25). And he winds up the whole discussion with the glorious sentence: "God hath shut up *all* unto disobedience, that he might have mercy upon *all*" (ix. 32). Comp. Gal. iii. 22. This is the key for the understanding not only of this section, but of the whole Epistle to the Romans.

(e.) And this is in harmony with the whole spirit and aim of this epistle. It is easier to make it prove a system of conditional universalism than a system of dualistic particularism. The very theme, i. 16, declares that the gospel is a power of God for the salvation, — not of a particular class, — but of "every one" that believeth. In drawing a parallel between the first and the second Adam (v. 12–21), he represents the effect of the latter as equal in extent and greater in intensity than the effect of the former; while in the Calvinistic system, it would be less. We have no right to limit "the many" (οἱ πολλοί) and "the all" (πάντες) in one clause and to take it literally in the other. "If, by the trespass of the one [Adam], death reigned through the one; much more shall they that receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one, even Jesus Christ. So, then, as through one trespass the judgment came unto *all men* to condemnation; even so through one act of righteousness the free gift came unto *all men* to justification of life. For as through the one man's disobedience *the many* [that is, *all*] were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the one shall *the many* be made righteous" (v. 17–19). The same parallel without any restriction is more briefly expressed in the passage (1 Cor. xv. 21): "As in Adam *all* die, so also in Christ shall *all* be made alive;" and in a different form in Rom. xi. 32 and Gal. iii. 22, already quoted.

These passages contain, as in a nutshell, the theodicy of Paul. They dispel the darkness of the ninth chapter of Romans. They exclude all limitations of God's plan and intention to a particular class; they teach not, indeed, that all men will be actually saved, — for many reject the divine offer, and die in impenitence, — but that God sincerely *desires* and *provides* salvation for all. Who-

soever is saved, is saved by grace; whosoever is lost, is lost by his own guilt of unbelief.

There remains, it is true, the great difficulty that the *offer* of salvation is limited in this world to a part of the human race, and that the great majority pass into the other world without any knowledge of the historical Christ. But God has given to every man the light of reason and conscience (Rom. i. 19; ii. 14, 15). The divine Logos "lighteth every man" that cometh into the world (John i. 9). God has never left himself "without witness" (Acts xiv. 17). He deals with his creatures according to the measure of their ability and opportunity, whether they have received one or five or ten talents (Matt. xxv. 15 *sqq.*). He is "no respecter of persons, but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to him" (Acts x. 35).

May we not, then, cherish at least a charitable hope, if not a certain belief, that a God of infinite love and justice will receive into his heavenly kingdom all those who die innocently ignorant of the Christian revelation, yet in a state of preparedness or disposition for the gospel, so that they would thankfully accept it if offered to them; as Cornelius did when Peter entered his house? Surely, here is a point where the rigor of the old orthodoxy, whether Roman Catholic, or Lutheran, or Calvinistic, must be moderated.

3. The doctrine of a divine will and divine provision for a universal salvation, on the sole condition of faith, is taught in many passages which admit of no other interpretation, and which must, therefore, decide this whole question. For it is a settled rule in hermeneutics that dark passages must be explained by clear passages, and not *vice versa*. "I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord our God; wherefore turn yourselves, and live" (Ezek. xviii. 32, 23; xxxiii. 11). "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw *all men* unto myself" (John xii. 32). "God so loved the *world* [that is, all mankind] that he gave his only-begotten Son, that *whosoever* believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John iii. 16). "God our Saviour *willeth* that *all men* should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. ii. 4). "The grace of God hath appeared, bringing salvation to *all men*" (Tit. ii. 11). "The Lord is long-suffering to you-ward, *not wishing* that *any* should perish, but that *all* should come to repentance" (2 Pet. iii. 9). "Jesus Christ is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but *also for* (the sins of) *the whole world*" (1 John ii. 2).

To these passages should be added the innumerable exhortations to repentance, and the lament of Christ over the inhabitants of Jerusalem who "would not" come to Him (Matt. xxiii. 37). These exhortations are insincere or unmeaning if God does not wish all men to be saved, and if men have not the ability to obey or disobey the voice. The same is implied in the command of Christ to preach the gospel to the whole creation (Mark xvi. 15), and to disciple all nations (Matt. xxviii. 19). It is impossible to restrict these passages to a particular class without doing violence to the grammar and the context.

The only way of escape for Calvinists from the force of these passages is by the distinction between a *revealed* will of God which declares his willingness to save *all* men, and a *secret* will of God which means to save only *some* men. Augustin and Luther made this distinction. Calvin uses it in explaining 2 Peter iii. 9, and those passages of the Old Testament which ascribe repentance and changes to the immutable God. But a contradiction between intention and expression is fatal to veracity, which is a part of common honesty, and must be one of the essential attributes of the Deity. A man who says the reverse of what he means is called a hypocrite and a liar. It does not help the matter when Calvin says repeatedly that there are not two wills in God, but only two ways of speaking adapted to our weakness. Nor does it remove the difficulty when he warns us to rely on the revealed will of God rather than brood over his secret will.

The greatest, the deepest, the most comforting word in the Bible is the word, "God is love," and the greatest fact in the world's history is the manifestation of that love in the person and work of Christ. That word and this fact are the sum and substance of the gospel, and the only solid foundation of Christian theology. The sovereignty of God we hold in common with Jews and Mohammedans. The love of God is revealed only in the Christian religion. It is the inmost essence of God and the key to all his ways and works. It is the central truth which sheds light upon all other truths.

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