

Calvinism as a Moral Revolution¹

by

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The Proceedings have recently appeared of the Fourth International Congress of Calvinists², which met at Edinburgh last July. They have a somewhat wider interest than those of the three earlier Congresses; for, while the earlier gatherings discussed more abstract theological topics such as Predestination, that of last year considered “The Ethical Consequences” of the Reformed Faith. It was certainly worth while for at least one of these two-yearly assemblies of world Calvinism to be devoted to such a study; for it should never be forgotten that the Reformation was not merely a revolution in ideas, but a moral revolution as well. On this “moral revolution”, these new Proceedings throw light from many different angles. “The Reformed Faith and its Ethical Consequences in the State”, for example, is discussed by Dr. V.H. Rutgers³, himself a distinguished Dutch statesman who has represented his country at the League of Nations. Other notable papers are those of Professors J.H.S. Burleigh⁴ and W.R. Forrester⁵ on the relations between Calvinism and Capitalism, and the concluding one on “The Significance of the Old Testament for the Christian Life” by Dr. W. Vischer⁶, Karl Barth’s colleague at Basle and fellow-exile from Germany.

Professor W. Childs Robinson⁷ of America, in a paper on “The Law of God as the Touchstone of a Calvinistic Ethics”⁸, makes it clear that this “moral revolution” which Calvin and

¹ Edited by David Jakobsen. The original is kept in the Prior Collection at The Bodleian Library in Oxford, Box 7 in a folder containing some of Priors papers on theology. The first page of the MS is a titelpage which in the right corner has written: Submitted by: Arthur N. Prior, Esq., M.A., C/o New Zealand House, 415 The Strand, London, W.C.2. Since we know from Kenny (1970) that Prior at that time was attached to The New Zealand House in London, the article can with great certainty be dated to 1938-39.

² Or: “Edinburgh Calvinistic Congress”. The first conference was in London in 1932, the second in Amsterdam in 1934, the third at Geneva in 1936. It has not been possible to trace any further conference in 1940, and they were most likely cancelled by the outbreak of second world war.

³ Dr. V.H. Rutgers (1877 – 1945) LL.D. and Theol.D. (h.c. Paris), Professor of Law at the Free University of Amsterdam, late Member of Parliament, late Minister of Instruction, Arts and Sciences, sometimes Dutch Delegate at League of Nations meetings, President of the “Nederlandsche Bond van Gereformeerden (Calvinisten),” de Lairessestraat 117, Amsterdam, Member Reformed Church (Gereformeerde Kerk) of Amsterdam. (Burleigh, Hamilton, & Hunt, 1938)

⁴ “Burleigh (Rev.) John H. S. D.D.Min. (1924) Church of Scotland., Prof. (1931) Eccl. History, Edinburgh Univ.” (Burleigh, Hamilton, & Hunt, 1938)

⁵ “Forrester (Rev.) W.R., B.D., Min. (1922) Church of Scotland. Professor (1935) Christian Ethics, Univ. St. Andrews.” (Burleigh, Hamilton, & Hunt, 1938)

⁶ “Vischer (Rev.) Wilhelm, Lic. Theol. (Hon. Causa), 1928 (Basel), Pastor, ten years, Refd. State Ch. ; Tutor (1928-34) Heb. and O.T. Theol. Bethel. Germany ; Now Min., St. James Parish Congn., Basel ; Privat Docent in O.T. Univ., Basel.” (Burleigh, Hamilton, & Hunt, 1938)

⁷ “Robinson (Rev.) Stewart M., M.A., D.D., Min. Presb. Ch., N. America. Editor The Presbyterian (founded 1831), Philadelphia, Pa., U.S.A., B.M.” (Burleigh, Hamilton, & Hunt, 1938)

his fellow Reformers sought to bring about was fundamentally a subjection of our whole life and thought to God's revealed Will, and to nothing else. The Scriptures, for Calvin, were the sole supreme rule of life as well as of faith. He objected not only to the Papacy's attempt to bind our faith to religious "traditions" beside and above the Word of God, but also to its attempt to subject our practical life to laws derived from these non-Scriptural sources.

Nor did Calvin select this supreme moral standard in any arbitrary way. He believed that the Word of God alone could bind our conscience because the Word of God alone could deliver it. The Christianity that he found in Scripture was not just "another religion" but was a deliverance from all "religions", from all attempts to win God's favour by our own strivings. The Law that was given to him there was a Law grounded in a Gospel, in the "Good News" that we are "justified by faith", that God Himself has come to us and made us His own when we could not come to Him. The earlier documents of the Reformation are full of this note of "deliverance" from the strained "religious" moralities of heathenism and of the mixture of heathenism and Christianity that made up the faith of the Papacy; and they express it in many ways.

The early Scottish Protestant martyr Patrick Hamilton⁹, for instance, expresses it by saying that the man who lives by the Word of God no longer does good works in order to "get to heaven", but does them out of gratitude and obedience to the God Who has already given us everything of His pure mercy. "He that thinkith to be saved be his werkis", he says bluntly, "calleth him selve Christ. For he calleth him self a Saviour, which aparteaneth to Christ onlie ... Thow wilt say, Shall we then do no good werkis? I say not so, but I say, We should do no good werkis for that intent to gett the kingdome of heavin, or remissioun of synnes. For yf we beleve to gett the inheritance of heavin throw good werkis, then we beleve nott to get it throw the promesse of God. Or, yf we think to get remissioun of our synnes, as said is, we bel eve nott that thei ar forgevin us by Christ, and so we compt God a liar."(Quoted in the Works of John Knox, Laing's Edition, Vol.I., pp. 34-5.)

Still more often the same thought is expressed by these old writers in the context of an attack on the Mass. The Roman Catholic Mass is an attempt to placate God by a sacrifice which we offer Him; the true Communion Service is a thankful receiving of God's own gift to us. In the words of John Knox, "The Super of the Lord is the gift of Jesus Chryst, in whilk we suld laude the infinite mercie of God. The Masse is a Sacrifice whilk we offer unto God, for doing whair of we alledge that God suld love and commend us. . . . In the Supper of the Lord, we grant our selves eternall dettouries to God, and unabill any way to mak satisfacioun for his infinit benefittis whilk we haif ressavit. But in he Masse, alledge we God to be a dettour unto us for oblatioun of that Scarifice, whilk we thair presentlie offer, and dar affirme that we thair mak satisfacioun by doing thair of, for the synnis of oure self and of othis. "(Ibid, Vol. III. Pp. 65-66.)

This note is something in which contemporary Protestantism seems often sadly lacking. May we not be in danger of turning Protestantism into "just another religion", a new method of "working our way into God's favour"? The papers in these Proceedings should help considerably to counteract such dangers. Dr. Vischer, for example, speaking of Israel as the pattern of the Church,

⁸ Burleigh, Hamilton, & Hunt, 1938, s. 41 – 57. See <http://www.ianpaisley.org/article.asp?ArtKey=law1>

⁹ Patrick Hamilton (1504-1528). Was burned at the stake in St. Andrew after having been tried for herecy.

observes that “The sacrificial precepts attest: You can only live as those who have been reprieved. It is therefore the grossest misunderstanding when Israel thought the sacrifices were her own performances through which she could justify herself before God. Offered with such a disposition and purpose sacrifice is the worst sin of witchcraft. The Holy One of Israel repudiates such sacrifice through the Word of His prophets. Israel may not wish to set herself with a religion of her own in the place of the banned cults and religions. If she does do this she herself may succumb to the ban. The more she wishes to save herself and to ensure herself against judgment, the more certainly and terribly will she fall into the hands of the Living God.” (Proceedings, pp. 243-244.) It is a natural corollary of all this that when Calvinism or Protestantism generally is true to itself it renounces every notion that the “religious” calling, the vocation of a “minster of religion”, has something “sacred” about it which does not attach to all vocations. Such ideas can only find a place in religions in which the goal of life is to win divine favour by our own efforts, and in which the function of priests is to make up for the deficient strivings of men whose “lower” callings divert their attention from what is considered to be the main business of existence.

Among earlier writings, Henry Balnaves’ “Treatise on Justification”¹⁰, much valued by Knox, contains a particularly lively condemnation of what Professor Forrester, in the Congress Proceedings, describes as “the Roman doctrine of two standards of morality, which degrade the vast majority of believers to a second-rate kind of life.”(Ibid., p.149.) Speaking to housewives, for example, Balnaves says, “It is but but idleness to you, to passe in pilgrimage to this or that sainte, to sit the halfe of the daye in the church, babbling upon a paire of beades, speaking to stocks or stones the thing which neither thou nor they knowe; and neglecteth the good worke of God, the which thou art bound to doe.”(Quoted in the Works of John Know, Laing’s Edition, Vol. III., p. 537.)

And to children on their duties to their parents, “This obedience and honour consisteth not in wordes onely, nor in salutations, but also in ministering all thinges necessarie unto them. Remembring, as they ministred unto you in your tender, feeble, and poore youthheade, even so do yee unto them in their feeble, impotent, and poore age. . . . There is no colour of godliness may excuse you from this good worke: howbeit your wicked and ungodly pastors have taught you to found a soule masse with your substance, and suffer father and mother to begge their bread. This is a devilish doctrine, to convert the good worke of God into idolatry. The Scribes and Pharisies, their forefathers, taught the same, as testifie the wordes of Christ.” (Ibid., p. 541.)

As is pointed out in the Congress Proceedings in the papers on the relation between Calvinism and Capitalism, one of the most striking historical results of this extension of the idea of “vacation” was the liberation of merchants and townsmen from the atmosphere of suspicion which had surrounded their activities in the Middle Ages. The economic progress which extending trade and the growth of cities alone could bring about, could hardly occur in a society which aimed simply at keeping body and soul together while the most honourable effort was devoted to earning one’s place in heaven by special “religious” activities. In such a society the peasant and the warrior had a necessary place as well as the priest, but not the large-scale merchant or financier (nor, one may add, the scientist). Professor Burleigh points out that while Luther abolished invidious distinctions

¹⁰ Henry Balnaves (ca. 1512 – 1579). Was a religious reformer from Scotland and a politician.

between priests and soldiers and peasants, he retained the basic medieval suspicion of commerce, which Calvin's more radical Protestantism alone was able to overcome. (Proceedings, p. 141.)

No doubt one of the reasons why these Calvinistic Congresses have come into being is that today the battles of the Reformation are having to be fought over again --- this time not only against the Papacy but against nationalistic cults which are giving a new false "sacredness" to the life of the warrior-priest, and putting new difficulties in the way of that sober following of one's ordinary vocation which Calvinism has always sought to foster. It is worth adding that this battle of Calvinism cannot but be in part a battle on behalf of the Jews. For Calvinism has not only to maintain against these new idolatries its traditional reverence for the Old Testament, as it is so clearly reflected in Dr. Vishcer's paper; but, over and above that, it has always been part of its historic function to undermine the prejudice against commerce and finance --- and science --- which is bred in cults of the warrior-priests and which is undoubtedly part of the basis of contemporary anti-Semitism.