

DOES CALVINISM HAVE A FUTURE?

The Basic Ideas of Calvinism

by H. Henry Meeter. Revised by Paul A. Marshall.

Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Mich.

First edition 1939. Sixth edition 1990. Second Printing 1997.

Soft cover, pp. 221. Price: \$ 12.99 U.S.

reviewed by Johan D. Tangelder.

Our Western culture, which formerly could be considered Christian, no longer seeks to live by the light of the Gospel, which is the health of the nations. And as I see it, our own Canadian culture is being seduced into a systematic denial of the living God. God's laws are mocked. Christians are maligned or called bigots. Does it, therefore, still make any sense to read a book on Calvinism? Perhaps I should ask, "Does Calvinism have a future in the Third Millennium?" In the Netherlands, the country of origin of most Reformed Perspective readers, Calvinism is waning. Some even say that it is in dire straits. The Dutch theologian Dr. M. Brinkman claims that for many reformed theologians in the Netherlands their own reformed theology is no longer a self-evident frame of reference; it is sometimes even completely forgotten.

The question I want focus on is: "Should we continue to propagate the basic ideas of Calvinism in Canada?" When Dutch Calvinists came to Canada after World War II, they built churches, founded Christian schools and social-political organizations. What motivated them? Was their aim self-serving, the establishment of a Dutch Christian enclave to protect themselves and their children from their new country's powerful secular influences? Today, the older generation often wonders whether their efforts for Kingdom causes have been worth it. They feel bewildered by the various trends among youth in Reformed churches. On the one hand, they witness the influence of individualistic/evangelical spirituality and the loss of enthusiasm for the Reformed faith. On the other, they see youth drift away from the church all together, captured by America's materialistic consumer McWorld culture.

Calvin's New Audience

Why should we reflect on Calvinism? Because the time is ripe for it. People are groping for something that will make sense of life. Fundamentalist Christians and much of evangelicalism still do not see the connection between God's redemptive purposes and the task of cultural engagement. But thankfully, some evangelical leaders have become enthralled with the teachings of the Geneva Reformer John Calvin. They are influencing their non-Dutch constituencies with their "newly" discovered spiritual treasure. Charles Colson's powerful *How Now Shall We Live?* is one the latest popular works promoting the teachings of John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper and Francis Schaeffer. Because of this renewed interest in Calvinism by believers outside our own Dutch Reformed communities, I am pleased with the publication of the 6th edition of Dr. Henry Meeter's book. The author (1886-1963) taught for a number of years a course in Calvinism at Calvin College, which he developed into a book. In the foreword of the second edition Dr. Louis Berkhof (1873-1957) wrote, "We know of no other work in the English language, which offers us such a concise, and yet complete and thoroughly reliable resume of the teachings of Calvinism." What Berkhof said then is still true today. Although the sixth edition of *The Basic Ideas of Calvinism* is slightly modernized for today's reader, it has preserved Meeter's distinctive, clear and precise style. A new bibliography on Calvinism by Peter De Klerk, and an index have been added to this new edition. The book is divided into two parts: 1. Theological Ideas of Calvinism. 2. Political Ideas of Calvinism. Although Marshall has left most of the original content untouched, he did add three chapters in order to deal with new questions since Meeter wrote his book. Chapter 22 deals with war in an age of nuclear and biological weapons. Chapter 24 provides a balanced discussion of "political" or "liberation" theology. And the concluding chapter points to our Christian hope. What we do for the Lord here on earth will last. We can bring real changes that bring fruits of justice and peace into our lives and into the lives of our neighbors, while we wait with hope and joy for the return of our Lord.

What is Calvinism?

What is Calvinism? It provides a coherent blueprint for living out a biblical worldview in whichever area of life God has placed us. It demonstrates that Christianity is more than a private belief, more than exercising a wholesome "personal" influence derived from an inner experience with Christ, while the so-called secular life unreformed by the POWER of the Word of God is permitted to go its own way. The Biblical worldview provides an "all-round" perspective on reality. It is the only real basis for living in this world. The unbeliever is a rebel against the Truth. The believer testifies that God's revelation is the source of all truth. In other words, what we are facing as Christians is a battle of worldview against worldview, a clash between the Kingdom of God and the realm of Satan and his cohorts.

The central thought of Calvinism, its dominating principle, is the absolute sovereignty of the triune God over the whole cosmos, in all its spheres visible and invisible. The Calvinist believes that redemption means more than saving "souls" from everlasting damnation. Salvation means the restoration and fulfillment of God's original purposes. This view of salvation accounts for the emphasis on the Biblical doctrine of the covenant of grace. And Meeter rightly says, "The covenant of grace stresses especially two facts: Salvation is all by grace; and it demands a well ordered covenantal life." When God saves, He saves the whole man for time and eternity. Therefore, the Christian must be devoted to God's cause not only in church on Sunday, but also when he is transacting business or engaging in political activities of any sort. All of life must be God directed. Meeter also argues of sphere sovereignty. Each sphere of life - family, science, art, industry, church - has been authorized and commissioned by God to carry out its specific task and has therefore sovereign rights within its own domain. Consequently, Calvinism argues against an all powerful "nanny" state with its grandiose dehumanizing dreams of social engineering. Marshall notes that God places great power in the hands of the state. God calls on the state to correct injustice. But no state can or should try to correct everything that is wrong.

How do we come to know God? The whole natural order reveals God, though only as Creator, not as Redeemer. As far as general revelation is concerned, man may have an inkling that there is something or Someone, but he cannot "see" God revealed in creation until he has put on the "spectacles" of the Holy Scripture (John Calvin's illustration). Calvin taught that we owe to the Scriptures the same reverence and obedience which we owe to God, because it proceeded from Him alone. The verbally as well as factually inspired Word of God, besides teaching us the way of salvation, is our Light and directing Principle for all of life. As Meeter put it: "We cannot have a proper view of God, the universe, man, or history without the Bible."

How does the Bible view man? Adam disobeyed God and was driven from paradise. We too are fallen human beings, totally depraved, unable to do any good and inclined to all wickedness. I wonder how many of our younger generation still understand this Biblical vocabulary about sin.

But if man is depraved, why do we see goodness in this world? Meeter points out that sinful man is led by God's common grace to do things which his evil-inclined heart would not otherwise want to do. He notes that "whatever good you see anywhere in the world, in society, art, science, political life, even in pagan lands, the Calvinist ascribes directly to God as its source, not to the sinful heart of man."

How does a sinner become saved? He is a moral agent, responsible to God for his actions. No one can earn salvation. The plan of salvation didn't originate in the mind of man. The entire work of salvation is the essential work of the Triune God. "God the Father planned it. God the Son earned it. And God the Holy Spirit applied it, regenerating heart and life." God did it all and all to Him we owe. We ascribe to Him all the glory!

Calvin's Politics?

Why should Christians get involved in politics? Because all of life is devoted to the service of God. Meeter recognized that already in his time the English world was unsympathetic to political views based on the sovereignty of God and scriptural principles, but he still devoted a large section of his book to the development of a Christian political theory. And he commented that if Christian political views are again to become popular, the Calvinists will have to popularize them. He is right on the mark! Meeter does not advocate a theocracy, but a principled democracy.

He examines the origin, the function, and the best form of State. He also discusses the form, the task, and the authority of the government, the principle of civil liberty, the sovereignty of the social spheres, the relation of church and state, internationalism, the United Nations, and war.

Who then is a Calvinist? The American Presbyterian Princeton theologian Dr. Benjamin Warfield (1851-1921) described him as one "who believes 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... who makes the attitude of the soul to God in prayer the permanent attitude... and who casts himself on the grace of God alone, excluding every trace of dependence on self from the whole of his salvation." As a student of Warfield, Meeter would agree with this description. Calvinists are not triumphalists. They serve the Lord in the shadow of the cross. It is not difficult to serve the Lord when the sailing is smooth. I pray that Meeter's book will encourage young and old to be unashamedly Calvinists (Biblical Christians) and to be faithful in the Lord's service in our times of adversity, in the battle against the idolatrous spirits of our age. It shows that the Biblical worldview is relevant because it makes sense, leads to the Triune God, the working out of redemption, of renewal, of reformation in a derailed world which cannot recover the meaning and purpose of life on its own.