

THE STORY OF CALVINISM IN THE NEW WORLD: A SYNOPSIS

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Introduction

As I pondered on the enormity of my suggested topic, it occurred to me that it would be somewhat pathetic for me to attempt to add to the world's knowledge of John Calvin. I expect that hundreds of thousands of pages have been written on the subject. When it comes to a contemporary view of how he has impacted our English-speaking world, and the New World in particular, I realized that the research alone could take years. But I do feel quite capable of introducing the readers of this *Journal* to an excellent source of which they may not have previously aware. So, I decided to turn to one of the most respected authorities on Calvin extant today, John T. McNeill. McNeill's *The History and Character of Calvinism*, first published in 1954, thoroughly examines Calvin's thought and impact around the world in a scholarly and yet accessible way. My thought here is not to review the book, but to offer a synopsis of the work in the pertinent passages that have to do with Calvin's impact in the New World, and through it, in the modern era. The edition I worked with was published as a paperback in New York by Oxford University Press, Inc., in 1967. The page numbers you see sprinkled through this article are from that edition.

Beginnings

The first Calvinists in the Americas arrived in Rio de Janeiro in 1555. Gaspard de Coligny brought a French Huguenot expedition there, but its leader abandoned his Protestantism and shipped the refugees back to France as heretics. Another Huguenot refugee expedition arrived in Canada's Bay of Fundy in 1602. After a winter on the island of St. Croix the settlers moved to the mainland and established Port Royal (now Annapolis, Nova Scotia). Samuel de Champlain founded Quebec for the French in 1608. Once it was well established, the government of New France gave the Huguenots no liberty to worship or organize after about 1647 or so, and French Calvinism in the Americas dwindled away to nothing.

In 1562 another expedition went to the Florida coast, where three years later they were murdered by the Spaniards. Some Calvinists did manage to come and stay, though, establishing small churches in New Netherlands, Massachusetts, and South Carolina. From these modest beginnings the Protestant Reformation took root in America.

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The English in America

Unlike the French, who wanted their heretics back so they could put them to death, the English were quite glad to be rid of the Puritans and for the most part let them go whither they would. Many went to the Virginia colony, where the Anglican Church was established in the charter of 1606. Pilgrims (the separatists of their day) and Puritans made their way to what would become the Plymouth and the Massachusetts Bay Colonies. The Pilgrims at Plymouth listened to the preaching of John Robinson, whose ideas of a totally autonomous local church were a strange brand of Calvinism for the time, but a natural outgrowth of Calvinistic principles. The Plymouth Plantation members adhered to devout obedience to the Scripture interpreted according to Calvinistic hermeneutical principles and courageous living trusting in the sovereign providence of God.

The larger colony of Massachusetts Bay was founded in 1628-30, and by 1640 more than 20,000 Puritans had arrived. These were the flower of the Puritan movement, and they were led by such men as John Cotton, Thomas Mather, and John Davenport, all from Cambridge. Their Calvinism was not a rigid and static system, and they weren't happy with either episcopacy or Presbyterianism. Slowly congregationalism spread throughout the Puritan colonies, though retaining elements of Presbyterianism. Thomas Hooker promoted political suffrage to all free men, even if they weren't communicants in the church. In 1636 Roger Williams, who for his ideas of separation of church and state had been ousted from Massachusetts, founded at Providence the colony of Rhode Island, where he allowed just about anyone to come. 1636 also saw the founding of Harvard College. Some of the Puritans stressed the responsibility of men, others of the goodness of God; still others the entire Calvinist pattern of theology. Various synods were held to decide major issues facing the Church. The Westminster Confession was adopted bodily, except for the sections dealing with polity and discipline. Cotton Mather's writings, among others, indicate the acceptance of essentially Presbyterian views of the ministry. But the moral character of people started to slide, and revival would not come fully until Jonathan Edwards and the Great Awakening.

The Dutch in America

In 1609 a tiny Dutch colony was begun on Manhattan Island. Fourteen years afterwards groups of Walloon Calvinists settled on Manhattan and Staten Island, and also near Albany. In 1653 New Amsterdam was incorporated as a city on Manhattan Island.

“In 1640, it was formally declared that only the Reformed Church was to be permitted in New Netherlands” (p. 342). But by 1663 Peter Stuyvesant, the director of the colony, had granted liberty of conscience in the colony. The next year the English navy threatened New Amsterdam, and Stuyvesant had to surrender. In 1673 the Dutch recovered the city, but it became English again by treaty in 1674 and was renamed New York. In 1696 the Dutch Church of the City of New York was incorporated. The Dutch Reformed Church in America was to have a prominent role both in the formation of a nation and in the Great Awakening.

The Scots in America

In 1651 Cromwell sent some of his Scottish prisoners to New England; six years later they established the Scots Charitable Society of Boston to aid one another or any other Scot that might happen by. About 1710 large numbers of Scots from Ulster, who had suffered under Queen Anne's government, began to arrive in New England and Pennsylvania. They became the backbone of the early pioneers, founding settlements and churches all over the wilderness. Some of the eminent Scots-Irish leaders of this period were Francis Makemie, an able and fearless Presbyterian preacher; William Tennent, who founded the first Presbyterian educational institution in America in 1727; and the Scot John Witherspoon, who was to be the only clergyman among the signers of the Declaration of Independence.

The Germans in America

The decades that brought the Scots-Irish migration saw also the arrival of thousands of Germans, many of them Palatinate Calvinists. A congregation of both Dutch and German Reformed in Philadelphia (1710) soon became Presbyterian. Through the efforts of travelling ministers John Philip Boehm, George Michael Weiss, and Michael Schlatter, the German Reformed Church spread through much of Pennsylvania and New York and came to "vigorous life" (p. 349).

Political Influences

John Witherspoon was not the only Presbyterian who favored freedom. In Calvinism itself there was a desire for church autonomy from the state, and there was a "distinctly congenial" (p. 347) attitude to republicanism, which was brought to fruition in the Revolution. On the whole, Presbyterians vigorously opposed the monarchy. Gradually they developed a greater toleration of other religious groups. In 1776 Virginia's Bill of Rights guaranteed all men the free exercise of religious beliefs. After many years of dissent, "Presbyterianism had ceased to demand a position of establishment and, without losing its religious character, had become committed to the principle of religious freedom" (p. 348).

Wedges

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries most of the Calvinistic churches were rent through a series of controversies. Primarily four elements characterized this period of Calvinism: Erastianism (the philosophy of the supremacy of the state in ecclesiastical matters), rationalism (which encouraged acquiescence to Erastianism for ecclesiastical "safety"), new evangelical forces, and the ensuing tensions and secessions.

Dissension among the Scots

Scottish Presbyterians were the hardest hit by this pattern of events, but every place where Reformed Churches had been politically established suffered similarly. Even in America revivals brought with them the tormented breath of rationalism and strife. The Enlightenment threatened Christianity on all fronts.

Though the Scottish church was reunited in the 1690s, the reign of Queen Anne saw it split again over the issue of patronage, which took the call of the ministers out of the hands of the congregation, and placed it in the hands of patrons who had donated the land for the church. The seceders went to Ireland, Canada, and the United States. A movement was begun early in the nineteenth century to reunite the fragments of the church, and in 1820 the United Secession Church gathered together most of the seceders.

The majority of the Church remained intact in Scotland, and it was during this period that the ministers of the Scottish Kirk led the world in the sciences, literature, and history—but not in theology. Some of the Evangelicals did not secede, however, and they remained behind to give the General Assembly grief. This was also a period of great Evangelical revivals, the beginning of the Great Awakening. The Evangelicals had their effect. The Church of Scotland in 1829 was the first national church to authorize and maintain foreign missions. Scotland's theology was little affected by evangelical Arminianism, even though Wesley was well-received. The Scottish Baptists were on their feet in the early 1800s, as Calvinistic in theology as the Presbyterians.

The patronage issue would not stay down, and in 1843 about half of the General Assembly walked out when the government tried to force patronage on them. They began the Free Church of Scotland which embraced “the majority of the most zealous and active among both clergy and laity” (p. 361).

America's Great Awakening and the “Fallout”

“The stages of Evangelical revival were ... attended by strife” (p. 361). The Evangelicals' aggressive pietism stirred up opposition, which fortunately was overcome. The Great Awakening was led by Jonathan Edwards, who must be regarded as the most eminent of American Calvinists. In the eighteenth century Presbyterians still had a numerical advantage over the Congregationalists, as well as the ecclesiastical control of the American colonies. The Presbyterians had much to do with the formation and support of the American republic, and the expansion of it also. They had a large part in missions to the American Indians, and were joined by other churches in reaching out to the frontiers of the new nation. “The life of all churches of Calvinist origin in America at that period present two notable pluses, revivalism and concern for education” (p. 365). Camp meetings began to be held in 1800, and from 1782 to 1850 twenty-eight colleges were founded in frontier states alone, joined by others in the original colonies.

But the nineteenth century saw also many divisions. Many of the colleges founded were begun by seceders from the established Presbyterian Church, and the Congregationalists had

their problems as well. The cause of the divisions was rooted in pietism and the revivals—disagreement over methods or theology or both caused a lot of controversy in all branches of the Reformed churches, some of which has never been settled.

Reunion Efforts in the English-speaking World

Through the nineteenth century Scottish cries for Christian unity were incessant. No instant changes were to take place, however; the restoration of unity in the Church of Scotland was a cumulative process. The first stage began in 1820, and was not brought to completion until 2 October 1929, when the United Free Church and the Church of Scotland were reunited in a church “as one established and free” (p. 376).

In England, the English Presbyteries, shaking off Unitarian influences and affirming the Westminster Standards, joined with Scottish Presbyterians in England to form the Presbyterian Church of England in June 1876.

In America, the Civil War caused Northern Presbyterians to unite into the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., and the Southern Presbyterians to join in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. This breach was not healed until 1983.

In Canada, the four Presbyterian churches there united to form the Presbyterian Church of Canada in 1875. Discussion of union with the Anglicans was begun about 1889, and in the next decade union with the Methodists was considered as well. As the negotiations went on, the Anglicans and Baptists declined to participate, with the minority of Presbyterian groups joined in the United Church of Canada on June 10, 1925. Affirming the Westminster Standards, its polity is basically Reformed, and it maintains “a strong ecumenical consciousness.”

Australia saw the final union of Presbyterian elements in 1901 in the Presbyterian Church of Australia. There are hopes for union with the Methodists and Congregationalists. New Zealand’s Presbyterianism of the Southern and Northern Island joined in 1901. Negotiations for union with Methodists and Congregationalists “have reached an advanced stage” (p. 381).

Finally, in South Africa the Reformed Free Church of South Africa (growing out of Dutch Reformed influences) was formed in 1859. “The four territorially separated branches of the Dutch Reformed... were associated in a Federal Council in 1906” (p. 382).

Expansion through Missions

With the rise of British and Dutch sea power, missions became a compelling vision of Protestant hearts. The Baptist Missionary Society was founded in 1792, and was soon followed by other missionary societies in England, and also in Scotland, America, Switzerland, France, Holland, and Germany. The leadership in almost all of these was Calvinist, under whatever denominational flag they labored. Denominationalism on the whole “shrank out of sight in the foundation and support of the missionary societies” (p. 385). The first world missions

conference was held in New York in May 1854. Thirty-one years later in London, the “Century Conference” adopted the principles of comity, or, not proselytizing another group’s converts while working together for common edification. The Far East and Africa saw the working of this system primarily, and the most conspicuous result of the system was the founding of the United Church of South India in 1947.

Ecumenicity

The modern Ecumenical Movement had its beginnings around 1846, with the founding of the Evangelical Alliance in London. “The Alliance was concerned with spiritual and not organic unity; but where the former is enjoyed, the obstacles to the latter disappear” (p. 387). The year 1875 saw the founding of the Alliance of Reformed Churches, which organization has been more consistently favorable to ecumenical co-operation and unity than perhaps any other denominational family. A further step was made at Edinburgh in 1910 with the World Missionary Conference, sometimes thought of as originating the present Ecumenical movement. “Calvin’s words to Cranmer that he would not hesitate to cross ten seas if he might help in uniting the severed members of the Church’s body express an attitude that has been revived in the churches of the Calvinist family” (p. 388).

Calvinism in a Changing World of Thought

Calvinism and Philosophy

“Calvinism and Puritanism never said an emphatic *NO* to the current forces of secular culture” (p. 390). Peter Ramas, a sixteenth century philosopher, whose anti-Aristotelian logic held syllogisms in contempt, proposed dealing with evidence by argumentative rhetoric instead. The seventeenth century saw Descartes with his method of doubt. These appeals to logic did not fail to lure Calvinistic minds, and though decried by some, they were championed by many of influence—John Cocceius, for example. The teaching of mathematics and the sciences grew more popular—1614 was the year that logarithms were invented by Calvinist John Napier of Scotland; and this period saw, also, the development of algebra by Descartes. The sciences were mostly the natural sciences, with a fair sprinkling of chemistry. At this time science was not considered to be the enemy of religion, but rather religion’s handmaiden.

The eighteenth century saw theology of all types, and Calvinism especially, assailed from many sides. Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant, while claiming to further science and better religion, secularized the first and shook the second.

In America of the nineteenth century some of the leading theologians included John Williamson Nevin, who stressed the centrality of the person of Christ in salvation, using the new German thought to do it; Philip Schaff, who hoped for reunion with the Roman Catholic Church; Charles Hodge, whose *Systematic Theology* is a reaffirmation of Calvin’s own teachings; Benjamin B. Warfield, who championed classical Calvinism from the halls of Princeton; and

Horace Bushnell, a Congregationalist preacher and author, who was severely critical of Calvinism's contemporary expression.

Calvinism and Criticism

The nineteenth century was a period of innovation in outward forms of worship in Reformed churches. The singing of hymns, the use of an organ, fresh architectural styles, and new liturgies all came into being gradually, in the face of sometimes rather stiff opposition.

But something deeper was afoot. High criticism, that "science" that calls into doubt the inerrancy, authority, and accuracy of the Scriptures, was beginning to make itself felt in pulpits everywhere. Union Theological Seminary in New York, until 1892 tied to the Presbyterian Church, was the center of the new thought. Along with doubting Scriptural authority came the doubt of the Westminster Confession of Faith; whereas in previous years the Confession had never been viewed as perfect, there had always been a reluctance to alter it. The twentieth century, especially, has seen it altered many times, and finally replaced by a liberal Confession that is more in line with new theological thought.

Calvinism and Liberalism

While Higher Criticism questions the physical Scriptures, liberalism encompasses and reaches beyond the higher critics to question the doctrines of Scripture. The eighteenth century was the seedbed of deism, rationalism, and naturalism. Theology was hard hit, and being a theologian came to mean that what one did was to reconcile logic with Scripture. The "founder of modern theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher, was the theologian of the Romantic Movement" (p. 406). To him, Scripture yielded authority to religious emotion, and theology relied on psychology. His teachings had a very moderating influence on Calvinistic minds, and others followed his example of emphasis on emotion and psychology. Anthropology became the guideline of theology.

Nineteenth century America also witnessed the rise of the Social Gospel, nurtured and spread through Union Theological Seminary. "Only some of the smaller members of the Reformed family of churches remained immune to the liberal leaven" (p. 409). Within the Fundamentalist movement, begun in 1909, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (1936) and the Bible Presbyterian Church (1937) became prominent among the small number of Presbyterian groups that seek to uphold the Word of God and classical, or Dortian, Calvinism.

Calvinism and Public Affairs

Calvinism and Politics

Calvinists have always been active in political affairs. As a group they have favored and fought for representative government and rejected tyranny in any form. Oliver Cromwell was a

notable exception; benevolent dictator that he was, he was still a dictator. A younger contemporary of Cromwell, John de Witt, “was a staunch advocate of a free republic” (p. 412). During the Revolution in America, Calvinism asserted principles of the authority of the people, divinely bestowed. And one of the primary advocates of religious liberty in the early years of the colonies was Roger Williams, founder of Rhode Island.

In the Netherlands also both Calvinists and Arminians made their contributions to political thought. Calvinist Johannes Althusius (pub. 1603), emphasized the co-operation of all citizens under two contracts, social and governmental, in a society where the rulers are “delegates of the people” (p. 416) and where both “rulers and people acknowledge that they hold their power from God” (p. 416). Arminian Hugo Grotius, though outside the Calvinist tradition, was the chief exponent of international law, which he put forth in his book *The Rights of War and Peace*, published in 1625.

Calvinism and Economics

“Ideas that have been brought to expression by late Calvinists have been read back into Calvin to the confusion of history” (p. 418). One example is the idea that Calvin affirmed that wealth is a sign of the favor of God, when actually Calvin condemned this manner of thinking. It is not that this idea is never true, only that it is not *necessarily* true, and to say that it is, is beyond the pale of Scripture.

Concerning usury, or interest, Calvin was not totally opposed to it, as later Calvinists have come to hold in some areas. Rather there was given “cautious permission of moderate interest, under the strict rule of love and for the good of the borrower” (p. 418).

Calvinism and Humanitarianism

The Industrial Revolution brought much poverty with its prosperity. One of the first to realize the Church’s obligation to the poor was Thomas Chalmers, a leader of Scottish Evangelicalism. He adopted Adam Smith’s *laissez-faire* theories, which led him to the belief that relief for the poor should not come from government, but from the Church and other private institutions. His work was quite successful as far as it extended.

The 1850’s also saw the rise of the Social Gospel movement, which was a polite way of hiding socialism in a religious cloak. It gained formal recognition by the Federal Council of Churches (later, the National Council) in 1912 by the Social Creed of the Churches, with a revision in 1932. Presbyterian and Reformed churches had a large part in this creed. The movement has paid a minimum of attention to theology and doctrine.

Concerning racial issues, Calvinists have largely opposed slavery, but during the American Civil War, most churches of whatever denomination supported the position of the states where they were located. Calvinists were prominent, however, in the small group of anti-slavery men in the South.

In conclusion, “most Calvinists have always associated with their faith in the sovereignty of God a feeling for the cause of human liberty and public justice and a strong preference for representative and responsible government” (p. 425).

The Spirit of Calvinism in the World Today

The “body” of Calvinism, obviously, is the physical make-up of the Church, with its sessions, presbyteries, synods, confessions, officers, building, congregations, and so on. Reformed polity as a whole has not changed much; though there are as many liturgies almost as there are churches, the basic form and goals in worship remain the same. But “the body without the spirit is dead” (p. 427), and the spirit of Calvinism is not easy to define and catalogue.

Post-War Development

When World War I became a reality in 1914, it became obvious that the widely hailed liberalism did not have the answers needed to subdue the evils of the world. Into the theological arena stepped Karl Barth, one of the most influential philosophers and theologians of the twentieth century. He declared his own war “against the presuppositions of the old complacent liberalism and every element of natural theology” (p. 428). Though he refused to submit himself to absolute truth, his deferential treatment of both Luther and Calvin had “the effect of leading friend and foe to their company” (p. 429). The crisis of the war led many to a spiritual quest and a desire to restore a Calvinistic awareness of God as well as its “moral tonic” (p. 430). Conservative exponents of a return to Calvinism included Abraham Kuyper, whose work influenced theology on both sides of the Atlantic; L. Berkhof, who reflected the views of Kuyper and Bavinck in refuting the views of Barth; Cornelius Van Til, who gave a “cautious reinterpretation” (p. 430) of the doctrine of grace; Auguste Lecerf, a French theologian whose works reflect the belief that Calvinism is the remedy for the twentieth century; Paul T. Fuhrmann, the title of whose book *God Centered Religion* (1942) speaks for itself; and many others.

Revival of Calvinism

The Calvinism being “restored” today is not a replica of any brand of Calvinism that has preceded it. For one thing, it would be necessary to restore the society and manner of thinking of the sixteenth century to accurately rebuild original Calvinism. But to recover the spirit of Calvinism, this is not necessary. The spirit of Calvinism is to respond to God appropriately as He has revealed himself in Scripture.

Some shudder at the thought of returning to Calvinism. They would rather stay in a place of intellectual neutrality and detachment than to commit themselves to the mission Calvinism demands. Calvinism, it is supposed, breeds personality disorders, guilt, unhappiness, sobriety, pride, pretention, and a sour disposition, among other things. And perhaps there is some

substance to these charges among those that pervert it to one degree or another. But the true spirit of Calvinism, rightly understood, does nothing of the sort. “A sense of security in God may be accompanied by a disturbing compassion for men: there is always a Jerusalem to weep over. *Happiness is little related to decibels of laughter*” (p. 436, emphasis added).

The Extent of the Calvinistic Spirit

The spirit of Calvinism is making itself known to all of Christianity, and it “characterized by a combination of God-consciousness with an urgent sense of mission” (p. 436). It is not a rich man’s religion primarily; its most faithful adherents, historically, have been among the less prosperous. Capitalists who really reflect Calvinistic ethics are concerned chiefly not with amassing wealth, but with using it to benefit others. The spirit can no longer be claimed by only Reformed churches; it has gone beyond ecclesiastical bounds seeking union and intercommunion. Calvin’s message is to all. And that message is, in every circumstance, every man has to do with God (*Institutes* 3.7.2).

Conclusion

Since McNeill’s book was first published, much has occurred in the Americas from the viewpoint of a vital Calvinism continuing to impact culture, theology, missiology, and the Church at large. Calvin’s teachings continue to satisfy the thirst of hungry souls and drive an evangelism that goes far deeper than outward response. To conclude, I present the testimony of an acquaintance who had this to say:

I want to comment on Calvin’s teaching on Western civilization and the church and me in particular. I was raised in a church that did not stress most of the doctrines of Calvinism. I made a profession of faith at an early age since I felt and was told I was able to understand the gospel and make a decision to follow Christ. I thought I was OK and accepted by God since I said the sinner’s prayer and believed the right stuff. Then something amazing happened to my family. My older sister became born again in her late teens and said I was given a wrong theology and a false sense of security and challenged me to repent of my sins and really believe in Jesus so much that it would change my life. My sister started teaching me the doctrines of grace. Seven years later, when I was 16 years old, I became convicted of my sin and believed in Jesus as my only hope of his selective grace. His sovereign selection of me in particular strangely warmed my heart and I was born again.

This is the power of the biblical doctrines that Calvin taught, and why they continue to impact our world today.