

The Relation Between the Lutheran and Calvin Reformation

Prof. Herman Hanko

When the Protestant Churches celebrate the Reformation of the 16th Century on October 31 they commemorate especially the anniversary of that one event which launched the Reformation: Luther's act of nailing on the door of the church at Wittenberg, the university's bulletin board, the 95 theses which he drew up against the sale of indulgences in the territory of Frederick the Wise. While this event indeed launched the Reformation, it was, in itself, not intended to be an act of reformation. There were countless abuses in the Romish Church of the 16th and preceding centuries; one among many was the evil of indulgences. Luther was not alone in protesting the sale of indulgences as he was not alone in protesting the many evils which were present in the Romish Church. But in the purpose of God the time for Reformation had come. The time had come for the restoration of the truth long obscured by Rome's apostasy. The time had come for a return to the true institute of the Church. Events rushed on swiftly seemingly beyond the control of the monk of Wittenberg – though he remained the central figure. Events begun with the thudding of the hammer on the chapel door could no longer be stopped. The Reformation was begun and it remains with us today.

But as important as this event is which we commemorate on Reformation Day, a large segment of the Protestant Churches trace their spiritual ancestry back, not to Wittenberg and Luther, but to Geneva and Calvin. The Lutheran Churches remain a branch of the Reformation distinct from the Calvinistic and Reformed Churches. Nor have the two yet come together. The differences are too great. The chasm is too deep!

Does all this mean that the Lutheran Reformation was a failure as far as the Calvinistic Churches of the world are concerned? Is it hypocrisy to commemorate the Lutheran Reformation when key doctrines of Luther and of the Lutheran Churches are specifically repudiated by a large branch of Reformation Churches? Should the Churches who go under the name of Calvinistic celebrate some other event more closely connected with the work of Calvin? Such an event as the publication of the "Institutes of the Christian Religion" for example? or the arrival of Calvin in Geneva? Is it

necessary, if we are to be honest, to repudiate the Lutheran Reformation and speak of it as some kind of pre-Reformation spasm which was perhaps relatively worthwhile but which did not contribute essentially to the essence of the Reformation as wrought by the Reformer of Geneva?

These questions assume a position quite different from the position of much of modern ecumenism. The thought of ecumenism which controls much of the church life today would not admit the validity of the questions and would refuse to answer them on the grounds that they are based on false assumptions. The position which today leads many churches into one ecclesiastical structure and which is intent on bringing Protestant Churches back into the bosom of mother Rome is a position which relativizes doctrine. Perhaps ecumenical leaders would admit that Rome was in need of reform and that the 16th Century Reformation was necessary to force Rome to reform. But they would hasten to add that the purpose of the Reformation has now been nearly accomplished. Rome has reformed or is in the process of reforming. The Reformation has attained its purpose. The schism of the Reformation ought to be healed. And, with respect to the questions of the divisions between various branches of Protestantism in general and between the Lutheran branch and the Calvinistic branch in particular, the answer of today's ecumenical leaders is that these differences are really unessential. At least, they are not of such import that they offer sufficient ground to indulge in the luxury of splitting the body of Christ. The differences ought to be forgotten. After all, Lutheranism and Calvinism are but two of many ways of looking at Scripture. We should, in the interests of unity, be able to see the value of each other's viewpoints and live together in peace and harmony.

The assumption behind the questions appearing above is that the differences are important. The breach between Rome and Protestantism which the Reformation defined remains. The differences between the various branches of the Reformation are differences with respect to essentials of Scripture. They cannot be ignored. Even in the interests of unity they cannot be glossed over.

An essential answer to the questions asked above is an assertion of the truth that God is the author of the Reformation. The Reformation is not a work of man. It is not the work of Luther. It is not the work of Calvin. To read the history of the Reformation and to study the works of those men who took a prominent part in it is to be forced again and again to the conclusion that events were out of the hands of these men whose names have lived on in history. They were instruments. They were used by God to accomplish the work of reform. But God moved them. God controlled events. God worked what no man could possibly work. God brought about Reformation – a Reformation needed to preserve the Church from the apostasy of Rome.

But to assert that God is the author of the whole Reformation is to assert also that there was a proper place for Luther in the Reformation and a proper place for Calvin. Both, although they themselves could not attain unity in their own life times, and although the two branches of the Reformation which followed from them have not been able to join hands up until the present, were needed for the work that had to be done. Both had a place. Luther could not have done what Calvin did. Calvin could not have done what Luther did. The Reformation would not have happened without both of them.

To understand this it is necessary to go back briefly to the history of the Church beginning with Augustine who lived from 354 to 430. At the time of Augustine a man arose in the Church by the name of Pelagius who taught in Rome doctrines contrary to Scripture. Without going into detail as to his views, it is sufficient for our purposes to note that he taught that a man was free at birth from original guilt and original pollution; that, in other words, man came into the world sinless. If a man sinned in the course of his life, he did so because he learned from others the bad habit of sin. Sin was a habit. Sin is not rooted in a depraved nature; sin is only in the deed. Sin is not first of all a corruption inherited which infects the whole nature. Only an act can be sinful.

The view which Pelagius held of salvation was adjusted to fit this view of sin. Salvation was the work of man himself. It might be, on occasion, that a man needed the assistance of divine grace to help him overcome deeply rooted habits even as a man may need the help of a doctor to overcome the habit of alcoholism. But for the most part, since to do the will of God required only the breaking of a habit, man was capable of doing this himself if only he had the will to do it. Through strenuous and daily effort, man could do God's will and thus be saved.

It is interesting to note that, under the influence of Augustine, this view was condemned by the Church of that time. Augustine strongly opposed it on the basis of Scripture, and, in so doing, developed the doctrines of original sin, predestination and sovereign grace. The Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D. condemned Pelagianism.

Yet, during the lifetime of Augustine the error of what became known as Semi-pelagianism raised its ugly head. Especially such men as Cassianus and Faustus developed these views. These men attempted to take a position, so to speak, halfway between outright Pelagianism and strict Augustinianism. In brief, the view of Semi-pelagianism was that salvation was a cooperative work of God and man with man generally taking the initiative. Man, through the fall, was not dead in sin, only seriously sick. Grace, though infused, can be resisted and only supplements man's own power. Predestination is based on foreseen faith and the cross of Christ is of universal value.

This position was approved by two regional synods: Arles in 472 A.D. and Lyons in 475 A.D. On a church-wide level, however, the issue was not resolved until the Synod of Orange in 529 A.D.

While also the Synod of Orange was a local Synod, the decisions of it were approved by Pope Boniface II and were generally accepted throughout the Western branch of Christendom.

The Synod of Orange was in reality a victory for Semi-pelagianism. Although Semi-pelagianism was condemned and Augustinianism approved, the Synod made compromise decisions. And, as is always the case with questions of the truth, a compromise is a victory for the lie. Specifically, Orange spoke of sin as injuring man in both body and soul and bringing death to all men. It spoke further of grace as being the origin of all good – even of prayers. It described grace as being the effectual power of the disposition towards faith, of all good as being a gift of God, of the need which all saints have for God's help. It insisted that God loves only His own gift in us and spoke of the will as being restored only through baptism. It accepted the position that unmerited grace precedes meritorious works and that even unfallen man needed such grace.

But the weakness of this position is obvious. For one thing, the Synod condemned (although such a view had never been a part of the Augustinian system) predestination to sin. The Synod condemned a caricature of Augustine's views created by his enemies. The Synod never mentioned the doctrines of irresistible grace and of sovereign predestination. In fact, the impression was left that the Synod carefully and deliberately avoided mentioning these key points in the theology of Augustine. The Synod left room for the idea of sin as being only a sickness, spoke of grace as being the source of a disposition to faith, left room for the meritorious value of good works, and failed to condemn the Pelagian conception of free will. Semi-pelagianism therefore became official Romish doctrine. While we cannot trace this in any kind of detail here, it is not difficult to show that the entire erroneous structure of Roman Catholic sacerdotalism especially as it emphasized the meritorious character of good works as necessary to justification was a direct outgrowth of Semi-pelagianism. Many evils in the Church arose specifically from this erroneous position. The whole system of penance of masses for the dead, of works of supererogation, of indulgences – all these and others were developed within the framework of fundamental doctrinal apostasy which began with Orange.

What is of importance to us is to notice that the evils in the Church against which so many raised their voices were evils which had a doctrinal origin. This is, in part, why many efforts towards reform which preceded the Reformation were doomed from the outset to failure. The doctrine of the Church (with the exception of some of the pre-Reformers) was never called into question.(1) But the evils which sapped the spiritual life of the Church could not be rooted out without doctrinal renewal. Reform movements which tried reformation without a return to the truth of Scripture failed.

But not only were the evils in the Church the direct result of doctrinal error in a general way; but specifically, the evils in the Church were rooted in errors of soteriology. At bottom the errors of Rome were errors which dealt with the truth concerning the work of salvation. While the Romish Church in the centuries preceding the Reformation stood firmly in the tradition of Nicea and Chalcedon, this same Church strayed grievously from the doctrines of sovereign grace and the unmerited character of works. It was into this Church with these corruptions that Martin Luther was born. Born to God-fearing parents who were pious and faithful sons of the Church, Luther was brought up in the tradition of the Romish faith as it had developed up until his day. Yet Luther was brought to face all these important questions of soteriology. He was brought to face them not first of all in the arena of theological debate but he was forced to face them in the depths of his own soul. The church historian Philip Schaff writes:

In order to understand the genius and history of the German Reformation we must trace its origin in the personal experience of the monk who shook the world from his lonely study in Wittenberg, and made pope and emperor tremble at the power of his word. (2)

God began the work of reformation in Luther's soul. This very matter of salvation, not as an abstract theological truth, but as a question of the personal assurance of salvation, was for many years the main problem which Luther faced. He could arrive at no peace in his heart, no assurance

of the love and favor of God. His days were as the darkness of night and his thoughts were filled with fear and turmoil as he contemplated the just severity of God against sin and strove to bring his storm-tossed soul into the quiet haven of God's peace.

Yet as true as all this was, we must not suppose that the whole work of the Reformation was the result of a spiritual crisis in Luther. It was not, as some have asserted, a movement launched because some monk from the Augustinian Order thought he had received a divine insight into a problem which particularly bothered him. It was not the imposition of a highly gifted man of a subjective experience upon a band of followers. This is the gist of the position taken by the Roman Catholic historian Philip Hughes. He writes in his book, *A Popular History of the Reformation*:

He was now on the verge of his thirtieth year, and next year, taking up his work as professor in the faculty of theology in the university, he would, all unconsciously, begin the movement we have learned to call the Reformation.

What that movement will chiefly be, in Luther's intention, is not a crusade to reform the moral lives of Catholics, clerics as well as layfolk, but rather a crusade against Catholicism itself, observant, conscientious, dutiful Catholicism, now considered to be a corruption of the Gospel of Christ. And on his own showing, according to his own account, the origins of his stupendous conviction he in his own personal experience of the ineffectiveness and the mischievousness of Catholicism as a solution offered him for his spiritual troubles, and in his own divinely guided discovery of the true meaning of the religion of Christ. It is Luther, and not his opponents, who brings into court, as an important consideration, the experiences, the spiritual crisis which he experienced in his life as a monk. (3)

This is a misinterpretation of the life of Luther and of his writings. It was not a mere subjective experience which launched the Reformation. It must

be remembered, on the one hand, that God wrought the Reformation in Luther's soul by creating this intense struggle which consumed so much of his time in his earlier years. But, on the other hand, God led him through this deep and profound struggle in order to lead Luther away from the errors of the Church of which he was a part and to bring him at last to the truth of Scripture.

Quite naturally and upon the advice of others, Luther sought the cure for his spiritual maladies in the prescriptions of the Church. He tried them all. He entered the Augustinian convent in Erfurt and sought peace in a life of monkish self-denial. He committed himself body and soul to the Church and placed his salvation entirely in the hands of those who had promised to bring him to heaven. He walked the way of self-denial and imposed on himself all the rigorous exercises which his order required. He was faithful in penance and confession in the hopes that this would solve his problems. He himself tells us:

I was indeed a pious monk and kept the rules of my order so strictly that I can say: If ever a monk gained heaven through monkery, it should have been I. All my monastic brethren who knew me will testify to this. I would have martyred myself to death with fasting, praying, reading, and other good works had I remained a monk much longer. (4)

As a monk I led an irreproachable life. Nevertheless I felt that I was a sinner before God.

My conscience was restless, and I could not depend on God being propitiated by my satisfactions. Not only did I not love, but I actually hated the righteous God who punishes sinners . . . Thus a furious battle raged within my perplexed conscience, but meanwhile I was knocking at the door of this particular Pauline passage, earnestly seeking to know the mind of the great Apostle. (5)

But it was all to no avail. Every good work which the Church prescribed he

undertook to do. Every method laid down by the clergy as the sure way to God was tried again and again. But the ways in which the Church led him went deeper into darkness and farther from the light of God's love and mercy. He found no peace.

It was from the Scriptures that he finally learned the truth. This knowledge did not come in a flash of insight, but only by way of long and arduous study. In 1508 Luther was appointed professor in the University of Wittenberg established but a few years before by Frederick the Wise. In 1512 he began to lecture in theology and studied especially the Psalms and the epistles of Paul. It was the phrase "the righteousness of God" which constantly attracted his attention. He had always thought that this phrase (found especially in Romans 1:17 and 3:22) referred to God's essential righteousness and His consequent hatred of sin.

Meanwhile, that same year I had again turned to the exposition of the Psalter, confident that after academic treatment of the Epistles of St. Paul to the Romans and Galatians, and the Epistle of the Hebrews I was better trained. Certainly I had been possessed by an unusually ardent desire to understand Paul in his Epistle to the Romans. Nevertheless, in spite of the ardour of my heart I was hindered by the unique word in the first chapter: "The righteousness of God is revealed in it." I hated that word "righteousness of God" because in accordance with the usage and custom of the doctors I had been taught to understand it philosophically as meaning, as they put it, the formal or active righteousness according to, which God is righteous and punishes sinners and the unjust. (6)

But gradually Luther came to see that the phrase "The righteousness of God" referred to imputed righteousness which God gives to His people on the basis of the cross. He describes this insight as follows:

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "in it the righteousness of God is

revealed, as it is written, He who through faith is righteous shall live.” There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness God with which a merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as, the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.

And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I hated the word “righteousness of God”. Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise. Later I read Augustine’s “The Spirit and the Letter”, where contrary to hope I found that he, too, interpreted God’s righteousness in a similar way, as the righteousness with which God clothes us when He justifies us. Although this was heretofore said imperfectly and he did not explain all things concerning imputation clearly, it nevertheless was pleasing that God’s righteousness with which we are justified was taught.

Armed more fully with these thoughts, I began a second time to interpret the Psalter. (7)

Luther later said quoted in his Table Talk:

The words “righteous” and “righteousness” of God struck my conscience like lightning. When I heard them I was exceedingly terrified. If God is righteous (I thought), he must punish. But when by God’s grace I pondered in the tower and heated room of this building, over the words, “He who through faith is righteous shall live” (Rom.

1:17) and “the righteousness of God” (Rom. 3:21), I soon came to the conclusion that if we as righteous men, ought to live from faith and if the righteousness of God should contribute to the salvation of all who believe, then salvation will not be our merit but God’s mercy. My spirit was thereby cheered. For it is by the righteousness of God that we are justified and saved through Christ. These words (which had before terrified me) now became more pleasing to me. The Holy Spirit unveiled the Scriptures for me in this tower. (8)

And so, after a long and difficult struggle, Luther saw the glorious truth of Scripture that by the works of the law is no man justified before God, for the just shall live by faith.

God led the troubled monk away from himself, away from his monk’s cell, away from penance and indulgences, away from all works, away from the Church itself, to the foot of the cross of Calvary. The cross is the rock of justification. And it is by faith alone that the righteousness of God manifested in the cross becomes the portion of God’s people.

Thus the fundamental principle of Luther’s life and of the whole Lutheran Reformation was the truth of justification by faith. There is no student of the Reformation who denies this. Schaff writes:

Henceforth the doctrine of justification by faith alone was for him to the end of life the sum and substance of the gospel, the heart of theology, the central truth of Christianity, the article of the standing or falling Church. (9)

Luther himself said:

One article, the only solid rock, rules in my heart, namely, faith in Christ: out of which, through which, and to which, all my theological opinions ebb and flow, day and night. (10)

This principle of justification by faith was the tool in Luther’s hand to

attack the entire towering structure of Roman Catholicism. It was the weapon with which the stronghold of the pope was challenged. It was the banner that led the forces of the Reformation into victorious battle with the strongest powers which Rome could summon to her aid. The whole corrupt institution of Roman Catholicism was shaken to its foundations by this fundamental principle of the truth. So it had to be. The doctrinal apostasy of Rome was particularly in the field of soteriology. The attack had to come at this point. All the evils in the Church to a greater or lesser degree resulted from this cardinal doctrinal error; the Reformation had to begin with a reaffirmation of the truth at this point.

Yet it soon became evident that the Reformation could not stop with Luther; i.e., the Reformation could not stop with the establishment of the truth of justification by faith. The structure of Biblical and Reformed truth cannot be erected on the foundation of this principle of soteriology. This is not to say that the principle itself is not entirely Scriptural; there is no doubt that it is. Nor is this to say that Luther was wrong in emphasizing this principle. It was necessary to destroy the error of Rome. But the truth of justification by faith is a stone in the structure of the truth and not the foundation. It is a block in the wall but not the cornerstone. It is an integral part of the system of the truth, but it is not the heart which gives life to all.

That this was true also historically soon became evident even in the history of the Reformation. While Lutheranism made rapid progress in Germany and other countries, it never produced the Reformed faith. That is, it never became a system of beliefs which was in full harmony with the Word of God.

There was good reason for this. Lutheranism, in spite of Luther, became essentially synergistic. Although Luther himself was not in any sense of the word a synergist, Philip Melancthon, his close friend and co-worker was. Under the influence of Melancthon synergism was officially incorporated into the confessional standards of the Lutheran Churches

and continues to the present as an integral part of Lutheran theology. But synergism is not essentially different from Semi-pelagianism. There is difference of emphasis, but not of principle. Synergism too speaks of salvation as a cooperative venture in which God and man both participate in the work of salvation. These synergistic ideas appeared early in the Lutheran Reformation. No doubt Luther himself was free of them but his colleague was not.

There is something inevitable about this. If the truth of justification is taken as the foundation of the whole structure of the truth it is all but inevitable that synergism should appear in some form. This does not mean that the seeds of synergism are present in the truth of justification. But it does mean that it is impossible to maintain the principle of justification by faith alone in all its implications unless one sees it as a part only of the whole structure of the truth dependent itself upon other principles. The truth of soteriology, as important as it is, is not the most basic principle of the truth. It is not fundamental, It is not the cornerstone. It cannot stand if it is made such a principle.

As Schaff notes:

The Lutheran system is a compromise between Augustinianism and Semi-Pelagianism. Luther himself was fully agreed with Augustine on total depravity and predestination, and stated the doctrine of the slavery of the human will even more forcibly and paradoxically than Augustine or Calvin. But the Lutheran Church followed him only half way. The Formula of Concord (1577) adopted his doctrine of total depravity in the strongest possible terms, but disclaimed the doctrine of reprobation; it represents the natural man as spiritually dead like "a stone" or "a block", and teaches a particular and unconditional election, but also an universal vocation. (11)

For this reason, the Reformation, if it was to be successful, could not stop here. It had to move on. It had to develop, and in another direction.

Justification by faith had been necessary to overthrow the false and evil structure of Romanism. But the Reformation had to take a different tack if it was to face the future. It was the weapon to destroy the enemy, the only weapon which could successfully do this. But, it could not be the principle of further development.

It was because of this that God prepared a man in France, Calvin, to continue the cause of the Reformation. He occupied his own place in the struggle and an important place it was. Schaff takes note of this:

Revolution is followed by reconstruction and consolidation. For this task Calvin was providentially foreordained and equipped by genius, education, and circumstances... Calvin, the Frenchman, would have been as much out of place in Zurich or Wittenberg, as the Swiss Zwingli and the German Luther would have been out of place and without a popular constituency in French-speaking Geneva. Each stands first and unrivalled in his particular mission and field of labor... Calvin was twenty-five years younger than Luther and Zwingli, and had the great advantage of building on their foundation.

He had less genius, but more talent. He was inferior to them as a man of action, but superior as a thinker and organizer. They cut the stones in the quarries, he polished them in the workshop. They produced the new ideas, he constructed them into a system. His was the work of Apollos rather than of Paul: to water rather than to plant, God giving the increase. Calvin's character is less attractive, and his life less dramatic than Luther's or Zwingli's, but he left his Church in a much better condition.

He lacked the genial element of humor and pleasantry; he was a Christian stoic: stern, severe, unbending, yet with fires of passion and affection glowing beneath the marble surface. His name will never arouse popular enthusiasm... But he surpassed them in consistency of self-discipline, and by his exegetical, doctrinal, and polemical

writings, he has exerted and still exerts more influence than any other Reformer upon the Protestant Churches of Latin and Anglo-Saxon races... History furnishes no more striking example of a man of so little personal popularity, and yet such great influence upon the people; of such natural timidity and bashfulness combined with such strength of intellect and character, and such control over his and future generations. He was by nature and taste a retiring scholar, but Providence made him an organizer and ruler of churches.

Widely as these Reformers differed in talent, temperament, and sundry points of doctrine and discipline, they were great and good men, equally honest and earnest, unselfish and unworldly, brave and fearless, ready at any moment to go to the stake for their conviction. They labored for the same end: the renovation of the Catholic Church by leading it back to the pure and perennial fountain of the perfect teaching and example of Christ. (12)

Calvin never met Luther, but knew of Luther and of Luther's teachings. While he was still a student in Paris, the shock waves of the Reformation were rolling over France. He had studied the principles of the Lutheran Reformation and had done this in the light of his own intimate knowledge of Roman Catholicism. He did this while still a member of the Romish Church and only committed himself to the cause of the Reformation after careful consideration. He repeatedly acknowledged his debt to Luther and, in one of his most striking phrases, after the controversies with Lutheran theologians concerning the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, he wrote to Bullinger:

Often have I been wont to declare, that even though he were to call me a devil, I should still not the less esteem and acknowledge him as an illustrious servant of God. (13)

But the point is here that Calvin saw immediately that the Reformation, while it had to begin with questions in the field of soteriology, specifically

with the truth of justification by faith, could not possibly end there. If the gains of the Reformation and the cause of the truth were to be consolidated and moved forward, this had to be on a different principle than the principle of justification by faith. For, as important as that Principle was, it could not serve as the real foundation for the Reformed faith which was to be true to the Word of God.

Calvin was, above all, a Biblical theologian. And with his intimate knowledge of Scripture Calvin saw immediately that the most fundamental principle of all Scripture is the principle of theology. God stands on the foreground. The Scriptures are, above all else, the revelation of God. And God reveals Himself for His own glory. Hence, it is the knowledge of God which is basic. On this principle only could the Reformation be secured. Rome's imposing structure was dashed to pieces by Luther's thunderings from Wittenberg; but upon these crumbled ruins could a new edifice, faithful to Scripture be reared, which was built upon the fundamental truth of God's glory.

Not soteriology but theology lies at the heart of all Scripture., In Vol. I of the Courtenay Studies of Reformation Theology (The volume of John Calvin) J.I. Packer writes on "Calvin the Theologian". In his lecture he makes these comments:

The layout of the 1559 Institution shows us at once its scope and range. As the opening chapter, dating from 1539, explains, it is a treatise on the knowledge of God, and the knowledge of ourselves which is bound up with it.

As in Scripture, so in Calvin, "knowledge of God" is a concept which unifies belief, experience, and conduct. It embraces both the knowing of God, which is religion, and what is known of, or about God, which is theology. It denotes an apprehension of God, not merely as existing but as being "for us"; in grace, and of ourselves as being "for Him" in worship and service.

In making the knowledge of God his central theme, and presenting the reformed faith as a recovery of this knowledge – a truly religious theology, and a truly theological religion – Calvin was picking up Luther’s early polemic against the scholastics, mystics, and merit-mongers, who thought to know God without knowing Jesus Christ. (14)

James Atkinson in his book “The Great Light” essentially agrees:

From the structure of the book (The Institutes) as well as from Calvin’s other writings, it is crystal-clear that Calvin’s theology began from the conviction of the absolute transcendence of God and therefore of His total otherness in relation to the creature man. If Luther found his liberation in the doctrine of justification by faith alone, Calvin found that same liberation in a passionate theocentrism, in a terrifying certainty of being mastered by God. Calvin, if not God-intoxicated, was certainly God-possessed.

This doctrine of the unqualified sovereignty of God related to the consequent equally unqualified creatureliness of man, lies at the heart of Calvin’s experience and theology. It further dominates all of Calvin’s exposition and is the stumbling block his critics never negotiated. (15)

Anyone who has read Calvin knows that this is true. Calvin saw that Scripture is theocentric in the highest sense of the word. God reveals Himself. Hence the knowledge of God is all-important. But the knowledge of God through His revelation is for the purpose of the glory of His own name. Soli Deo Gloria was the theme of Calvin’s life and his deepest theological principle. And from this it follows that God is sovereign in all that He does, for He does all things for Himself that “of him, and to him, and through him may be all things.” God is above all, glorious and majestic. He reigns supreme in the heavens to accomplish His own purpose and realize His own glory. Hence, God’s sovereign determination in the counsel of His will is of primary consideration. God determined

to glorify Himself through His only begotten Son Jesus Christ Whom He would raise to power and glory in heaven through the way of the cross and the resurrection. On this principle rests the truth of predestination. And from this follows the sovereign character of the work of salvation as God performs it in Christ on behalf of His people. It is here that the truth of justification by faith must find its proper place and contribute its own part to the whole of the truth. Even this truth must, in the broad and sweeping scope of the revelation of God, be subservient to God's own glory. All things are for God's sake. God's glory stands at the heart of all Scripture. To it must all be subjected. for its sake all things are done in heaven and on earth. Not man and his salvation; not even man justified by faith is the most important thing that happens in history. God is glorified in His own works. What is not for the glory of God will never take place. What God determines to do in all His works is actually wrought that God may receive all glory forever and ever.

This is the genius of the Reformer of Geneva. This is the work to which he was called and appointed. This is the divinely-ordained role he played in the Reformation.

To fail to put the truths of soteriology in this perspective is to run the grave risk of repeating the error of Rome and of falling into the heresies of some kind of Semi-pelagianism. Only when the deepest principle of God's glory is firmly maintained can its corollary be preserved: God's absolute sovereignty in the work of salvation.

The importance of this has been largely forgotten today. It is not our purpose in this essay to point this out in detail. It is sufficient to note the fact that, even in churches which parade their Calvinism with pride, this important emphasis which Calvin insisted upon was the key to the Scriptures is lost. The emphasis today in many different forms falls upon man and his salvation. Hence even revelation is spoken of in terms of the kerygma. Those who maintain this (and they occupy a broad scope in the theological spectrum from liberals to conservatives within the

Reformed Churches) maintain that the Scriptures cannot and do not give to us any knowledge of God as He is in Himself. This, these men insist, is not the purpose of Scripture. The purpose is rather to bring man to some confrontation, through the kerygma, with God.

This is, quite understandably, characteristic of those who deny the infallibility of the sacred Scriptures, who speak of the fact that the Word of God is in the Scriptures while denying that the Scriptures are the Word of God.

But it all leads to a certain relativizing of doctrine. Even such a theological conservative as Dr. Hendrik Hart, assistant professor of philosophy at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, Canada, who himself professes to believe in the infallibility of Scripture can write at length of this. In a footnote to a discussion of this point he says:

Theories of truth that speak of absolute objectivity make truth to be a conceptual matter of doubtful origin. Intellectualistic doctrines of truth cannot possibly account for the biblical notion of truth as something to be done and lived. Truth primarily concerns man's relation to the Word of God and not his first of all having correct ideas or beliefs. (16)

This is not in the tradition of the Reformation. Especially is it not in the tradition of the Calvin Reformation. Nor is it the emphasis of Scripture. Scripture is the objective and infallibly inspired record of the revelation of God. It is through the Scriptures that God is known. He reveals Himself in order that through the knowledge of Himself He may have all the glory. This knowledge of God is itself eternal life. "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." John 17:3. And this knowledge of God as the principle of eternal life results in God's glory because God is the sovereign Author of it in all the work of salvation.

FOOTNOTES

- 1.) Cf. e.g., the Council of Constance which met specifically to initiate reform in the Church but which burnt Hus at the stake for doctrinal deviation.
- 2.) *History of the Christian Church*, Philip Schaff; Eerdmans, 1955; VII p. 105.
- 3.) *A Popular History of the Reformation*, Philip Hughes Image Books Edition, 1960, pp. 93 & 94
- 4.) Quoted from *The Reformation*, Hans J. Hildebrand; Harper & Row, 1964; p.24
- 5.) *Ibid.* p. 27
- 6.) *Ibid.*
- 7.) Quoted from *Captive to the Word*, A Skevington Wood; Eerdmans, 1969; pp. 51, 52.
- 8.) *Ibid.* p. 53.
- 9.) *Op. cit.*, VII, p. 124.
- 10.) Quoted from *The Great Light*. James Atkinson; Eerdmans, 1968; p. 109.
- 11.) Schaff, *Op. cit.*, VIII, p. 541.
- 12.) *Ibid.*, VIII, pp. 257, 258, 260.
- 13.) *Ibid.*, VII, p. 661.
- 14.) *John Calvin, A Collection of Essays*, Edited by G.E. Duffield, translated by G. S. R. Cox & P. G. Rix; Eerdmans, 1966; p. 155.
- 15.) *Op. cit.*, pp. 173, 174.
- 16.) *The Challenge of Our Age*, Hendrik Hart, Christian Perspective Series, 1967/1968, p. 62, footnote 19.