

Chapter Five

CALVIN'S GOSPEL

TO ATTEMPT a complete account and criticism of the whole corpus of theology expressed in Calvin's sermons would not only be a task far beyond the scope of this essay, but would also be largely superfluous, since Calvin himself has already produced the account in the *Institutio*, and there have not been wanting men to supply the criticism. Therefore we must confine ourselves to considering in as direct and objective a manner as possible the burden of the Reformer's message to his people.

Calvin himself has given us a guide to the interpretation of his Gospel when he summarized it for his congregation in this way: "As often as we come to the sermon we are taught of the free promises of God, to show us that it is simply in His goodness and mercy that we must trust, that we must not be founded upon our merits, nor on anything that we can bring from our side, but God must stretch forth His hand, to begin and accomplish all. And that (as Scripture shows us) is applied to us by our Lord Jesus Christ, so that we must seek Him entirely . . . and we must know that Jesus Christ alone must lead us. That, I say, is shown us every day. It is also declared to us that the service of God does not consist in imagining foolish devotions . . . but we must serve God in obedience. After that, we are shown that in the first place we must make a sacrifice of our hearts and affections to Him, and that hypocrisy is detestable to Him. All that is daily declared to us. After that, we are shown how we can call upon God; we are shown to what signs we have been baptized and what is the fruit of our baptism for our whole lives, even to our death; and we are shown why it is that the Lord's Supper is administered. All that is daily declared to us."¹ Here we see, clearly and unmistakably, the notes of *kerygma*, which had been so long missing from the mediæval preaching. Instead of moralizing and advice on how to propitiate God, there is

¹ C. R. XLIX, p. 66r.

declared to us the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Yet there is more than *kerygma* here; there is also *didache* and *paraklesis*. The reason for this unapostolic mingling is that the Church's position in relation to the world has greatly changed since apostolic times.¹ Instead of the congregation consisting almost exclusively of believers, they were probably now in a minority, since it was compulsory for every citizen to attend church. Therefore it was necessary to bring *kerygma* into the Church, for the sake of unbelievers; but, since believers need to be edified, *didache* and *paraklesis* must also be present.

This Gospel is concerned, then, primarily with the relationship of God to man and of man to God. Arising from this is the life of believers in the world, and (which Calvin only hints at in the above passage) the relationship of man to man. This threefold relationship contains the whole of his teaching.

GOD AND MAN

Calvin's idea of God is fundamentally that He is the Sovereign Lord. This does not mean that He is a fickle or tyrannical despot,² but that He is the one true God, who will have no equal,³ and maintains His glory jealously. He is the incognizable and incomprehensible One before whom all must keep a humble silence. He is the Judge who observes every action of men and who takes vengeance on sin and rewards goodness with love. He is the Creator and Sustainer of all things. As righteous, His will may not be questioned; as holy, all sinners must fall before Him in confusion. For He is the enemy of man,⁴ not, indeed, of man as creature, but of man as sinner. For in the beginning God created man in His own image, as the object of His love: but man, arrogantly aspiring above his position as a dependent, obedient creature, disobeyed God. This seemingly trivial but actually Promethean act of defiance brought cataclysmic results; not only was the whole order of nature as good as defaced and all things disordered, but also man himself was cast out by God from His

¹ There are certain affinities between the sixteenth and the fourth century Churches. To-day the situation is quite different from both the sixteenth and first century Churches, and therefore may need new methods.

² Cf. C. R. xxxiv, p. 345.

³ *Ibid.* xxvi, p. 253.

⁴ See 3rd Sermon on Justification.

presence, a rebel and an enemy. Yet, amazingly, even greater than His hatred of the rebel was God's love for him. To punish was, in a way, against His nature. Not that it does not belong to God as well to condemn as to show mercy, but His loving goodness is much greater.¹

The essential relationship between God and man is therefore the paradoxical relationship of love—hatred, and Calvin never destroys the tension between these two by allowing himself to slip into an assured sentimentality in which God's love becomes unrighteous and indulgent, nor into a despairing paganism where hatred without love becomes a blind and tragic destiny. God loves because it is His nature to love; He hates because it is contrary to His nature to love sin. Thus hatred is occasioned only by the rebellion of man. Yet the attitude of God towards men is not either love or hate, but both love and hate. He both loved and hated sinful man. His love He showed by giving him material blessings to enjoy, and, most important of all, by being merciful and pitiful towards him, for the true nature of God is that He desires nothing more than to draw men to Himself by gentleness, and to use His mercy and goodness towards them. The love of God is the source of man's salvation.

Man's proud, wilful rebellion, far from having the glorious result of making him like God, as he desired, had precisely the opposite effect of plunging him into misery. The image of God in which he had been created was irreparably destroyed, and he became an abyss of all evil, rebellion, and disobedience. "What, then, is the human soul?" asks Calvin. "It is a shop, stocked with all wickedness."² This is true, not only of notorious sinners but also of the respectable; all who are born into the world have an infection of sin in their desires, intentions, thoughts and deeds. Even his religiousness, the altar he builds to his God, only provokes God's wrath against him. Thus, there is nothing at all of goodness in man: "We must know that in our natural state we are such enemies of God, that everything that we conceive is contrary to Him, and we cannot in all our life think, speak or do anything which does not amass more grievous condemnation on our heads."³

¹ See 32nd Sermon on Deuteronomy.

² C. R. L., p. 547.

³ *Ibid.* xxiii, p. 699.

Because of his sin, which is like a thick darkness suffocating and smothering him so that he cannot see God, man is cut off from God's favour, and is unable to turn to God in repentance, faith and love.

It is this condition of man which encounters the love and hatred of God. His rebellion earns just condemnation, so that "we are all accursed, condemned and lost."¹ His misery, however, incites the compassion of God, and out of His goodness He looks upon man in pity and mercy. There is here no question of reward for goodness or worthiness, for these are totally lacking in man. Salvation springs simply and solely from God's love—"de la pure bonté de Dieu"—and has no other source or foundation. Any attempt on man's part to bring forward something to help in his salvation, whether it be inherent goodness, good works or even faith, meets with God's rejection. Grace means that God was not forced or obliged to show mercy, but was kind to man merely because He wished to be. Grace means furthermore, that God displayed His love actively to man to restore him to his former position of fellowship and obedience.

Here we meet with Calvin's doctrine of predestination, which is intimately connected with his doctrine of grace. He was not afraid to declare predestination in an extreme form in the pulpit,² but he gave it a religious and practical rather than an academic significance. It must be remembered, he warned the people when he treated this doctrine, that this is "*un secret incompréhensible*," "*une matière haute et profonde*." He urged the people to accept the doctrine because it was taught in Scripture, but they were not to let it disturb their faith, for it should be comfort and assurance to them.

The ultimate cause of election is the secret will of God. The final answer to the question, "why did God love Jacob and hate Esau?" is simply "il lui plaist ainsi." Beyond this we

¹ C. R. xxiii, p. 697.

² E. Brunner is utterly mistaken in his rash statement that Calvin "never preached the doctrine of double predestination." (*The Divine—Human Encounter*, p. 91.) We find reprobation taught in his series on Jacob and Esau, for example (see C. R. i.viii). The best criticism of Calvin's doctrine is that of Karl Barth. Instead of denying the Scripturalness of reprobation, as Peter Barth and Brunner do, he affirms it, but attacks the *decretum absolutum* as being natural theology. (See F. W. Camfield's review of *Dogmatik* II, 2 in *Theology*, xlvii, No. 271, pp. 3 ff.)

cannot go, for we must not seek "to make an anatomy of God, and go even into His heart, and sound all His secrets,"¹ but ignoring extravagant speculations, we must acknowledge that the mind and ways of God are impenetrable to us, and praise Him in humility.² This is Calvin's reply to the problem of why God chooses one and casts off another. But when we come to the question of why God should choose anyone, the answer is that God had pity upon the misery of sinners and in His loving grace and mercy chose them to be His children. He was not moved to do so because of their merits, nor even because He foresaw that they would merit His love. Indeed, He foresaw only corruption in every man, and therefore His electing was entirely of grace.

It would seem from what has been said so far, that Calvin's concept of predestination, and even of salvation, is simply a matter of God's will, and that Christ is unnecessary, or only necessary as the instrument by whom God accomplishes His Will. There is here a most serious difficulty in Calvin's theology, and it is fortunate that he did not work out his idea to its logical end, but was restrained by his subordination to Scripture. Although he continually affirms that election is "in Christ" and must not be contemplated apart from Him, Calvin never succeeds in reconciling entirely satisfactorily these two lines of thought (the electing will of God and salvation in Christ) which run through his theology in a decidedly uneasy companionship. It is necessary for us, therefore, to follow Calvin in making a desperate leap over this ugly gap on to the safe ground of his Christology.

Reinhold Seeberg says that in his teaching on Christ Calvin reproduced the orthodox doctrine of the Church and connected it closely with the idea of redemption.³ This is plainly seen in the sermons. Jesus Christ is as truly man as any other man; yet He is also God as literally as the Father is God. He is the Son of God not by grace, creation or adoption, like other men, but in His own right. The basic difference between Him and all other men is that He was conceived by the Holy Ghost.

¹ C. R. LVIII, p. 50.

² Cf. the fine words of Dr. G. Oorthuys' at the 1936 International Calvinist Congress: "Calvin finit en adoration." (*De l'Élection Éternelle de Dieu*, p. 213.)

³ *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, 4, 2, p. 582.