

Foreword to the English Edition

Among the great figures in the history of Christian theology Calvin stands out as above all a 'Biblical Theologian'. With the publication of his *Institutes* as a guide to the study of Holy Scripture, scientific theology was given a radically new turn in sharp contrast to the philosophical *Summae* and the *Common Places* of the Mediaeval Schoolmen. Instead of working out into a logical system our understanding of God and creation, grace and human nature, in terms of the divine Being and creaturely effect, theology came to be concerned above all with the Word made flesh. Its supreme task was to listen to God speaking in person in Christ and to give consistent expression to the response of the church in faith and understanding to His Word. Thus the basic discipline of theology was the exegetical study of the Bible through which it sought, in rational worship and obedience, to be renewed in the spirit of its mind in conformity to the mind of Christ. Then on that ground it sought to give articulation in the language of the day to the church's understanding of Revelation, in order to aid it in the preaching and teaching of the Gospel, and in building up its members in the Body of Christ.

That is the kind of theology to which the church everywhere is turning to-day, after the centuries of scholasticism, pietism, and humanism. Once again the theologian and the exegete are working together and *dogma* and *kerygma* are being knit together in the rise of a new 'Biblical Theology'. Our danger recently has been to allow exegetical work to replace the discipline of hard theological thinking altogether, with the result that exegetes too often work with an uncritical and sometimes with a very poor theology, much to the detriment of their Biblical research. In this situation it is to our great advantage to listen again to the voice of John Calvin, the father of modern theology – and how very modern it sounds to-day! His theology was grounded from beginning to end on the hard exegetical work revealed in his Commentaries, to which he gave consistent articulation unfortunately this theological in doctrine. It was that combination which endowed his theology with such great strength and made it so relevant to the life and work of the church that it is still widely used after hundreds of years.

Perhaps at no point do we need to listen to the teaching of Calvin to-day more than in our understanding of “the last things”. We need Calvin’s Biblical sanity and his doctrinal consistency to deliver us from the one-sidedness of so much modern literature. Calvin’s main teaching about eschatology can be formulated by saying that eschatology is the application of Christology to the work of the church in history. It is the understanding of the church and all creation – in terms of the *Regnum Christi*. Calvin’s teaching here pivots upon the doctrine of union with Christ. Because we are united to Christ and participate in His risen humanity, eschatology is essential to our faith.

This stress of Calvin upon the risen humanity of Christ has a double significance for eschatology. On the one hand, union with Christ means that we are already in the new creation, and are so joined to the new humanity that our whole life reaches upward and forward in eager hope and joy to the renewal of creation; but on the other hand, union with Christ and participation in His new humanity means that we must live out that humanity from day to day in the midst of history. “Thy kingdom come, *and* thy will be done on earth, as it is done in heaven.” The church that engages in that prayer must continually meditate upon Christ and on its new life in Him which waits to be revealed, so that here and now the new life may be known and lived out among men. Through the church, in Word and Sacrament, the new humanity in Christ is already operative among men, and it is only through the operation of that new humanity that this wild and inhuman world of ours can be saved from its own savagery and be called into the Kingdom of Christ in peace and love.

Dr. Heinrich Quistorp has done us a great service in presenting us with this lucid and carefully documented account of Calvin’s teaching in all its breadth and relevance. We hear the authentic voice of Calvin the Biblical theologian, who sends us back to our study of the Holy Scriptures with deepened insight and a firmer grasp of their teaching. This is altogether an admirable work, for the publication of which in a clear and fine translation we are indebted to Dr. Harold Knight. It is safe to say that all who read it will be immensely grateful.

T. F. Torrance

Edinburgh, 1955.

Author's Preface

The revival of evangelical theology in the last three decades has proceeded from the discovery of the fundamental eschatological character of the Gospel. This led to a new and serious acceptance of the eschatology of the Bible itself. It is not sufficient to entertain a general eschatological point of view and to place theology within the framework of “the last things”, but the latter must also be appreciated in their full and proper significance: not just as an appendix to Christian doctrine but as its crown and culmination, without which it remains a torso, or, as it were, a cathedral without its tower pointing towards heaven.

This new orientation of theology in the reformed churches implies at the same time a new consideration of its origin in the doctrine of the reformers themselves; above all in that of Luther and Calvin and in the church confessions which they shaped. The witness of the reformation, which is a witness to the truth of the Word of God in Holy Scripture, helped us and still helps us to hear afresh the message of the Bible in the obedience of faith. This applies also to the reconstruction of an evangelical eschatology which is above all necessary today. In the storms which have beaten upon the church and the world in the present era Christianity is summoned by its Lord to bear witness to the hope which He has given it in His word. Thus it is the task of an evangelical theology which truly understands its vocation – that of furthering the proclamation of the Gospel in the church of Jesus Christ – to sketch the outlines which this witness, if it is to be faithful to Holy Scripture, must follow. It is my hope that the present work may make a modest contribution to the fulfilment of this task, in that it gives a hearing to the eschatological witness of Calvin and attempts to show what we may learn from him both positively and negatively. My hope is too that it will at the same time fill a gap in our critical knowledge of Calvin.

This work was inspired by a lecture of Prof. D. Althaus at

Erlangen on the theme of the last things and by the meetings of a Society for Dogmatics held in the house of Prof. D. Karl Barth in Bonn during the winter term of 1934 – 5, which took as the subject for its consideration Calvin's eschatological writing *Psychopannychia*; unfortunately this theological seminary in the home of my revered teacher had to be broken up on account of the untimely suspension of his Bonn professorship by the National Socialist régime. It was just the immediate impact of the German church struggle at that time and in the following years when I worked illicitly as a curate of the Confessional Church, which brought home to me with particular force and clearness the full implications of the Biblical message concerning the last things for the life and preaching of the Christian Church in the urgencies of the present. The "stipendium Bernardinum" of Utrecht facilitated my execution of the task. I would also take this opportunity of thanking the theological faculty of Utrecht for their encouragement and request that this work may be considered as a token of abiding fellowship in the faith. I wish to express particular thanks to Prof. D. Ernst Wolf (then of Halle, now of Göttingen) who helped me in this undertaking and was always ready to give me advice in its performance.

Heinrich Quistorp

Cleves, 1955

Postscript

It is a source of great pleasure and gratitude to me that an English translation and edition of my book has been made available through the friendly sponsorship of Prof. Torrance of Edinburgh and the co-operation of the Lutterworth Press.

I hope that the widespread Anglo-Saxon peoples, in whose religious development Calvin and the reformation which he influenced have meant so much and still mean so much, will also pay renewed attention to his doctrine of the last things and will see it as a witness to the Biblical message concerning the future coming of our Lord Jesus Christ – a message calculated to inspire real hope and confidence especially in the apprehensive minds of men living in an apocalyptic era.

Introduction

The Attitude of the Reformers towards Eschatology

The theology of the reformers is not primarily concerned with questions of eschatology (we are thinking especially of Luther and Calvin). Their chief concern is with the problem of justification and the matters immediately relevant to it. The reformers were somewhat afraid of the doctrine of last things because they saw that in the hands of the Catholics it was misused in a speculative sense, while in the hands of the fanatics it was misused for apocalyptic purposes. They on the contrary showed a marked distrust with regard to eschatological questions. Yet their whole theology is eschatologically orientated in so far as it is, in the Biblical-Pauline sense, a *theologia crucis* demanding sheer faith in the hidden glory of Christ and His kingdom and also at the same time a lively hope of its future manifestation. Thus it stands in sharp contrast to the falsely anticipatory eschatology of the *theologiae gloriae* of Rome and of the fanatics which imperils both pure faith and pure hope. The eschatological orientation of reformed theology is especially clear from the conscious coordination of faith and hope which it discloses.

This fundamental attitude makes eschatology for the reformers as it were self-explanatory. But in consequence they neglect the special content of the Christian hope. Too preoccupied with their own peculiar theme and too much afraid of distortions, they never succeeded in attaining any conclusive and independent formulation of Christian eschatology. This had disastrous consequences for subsequent Protestant theology. It became more and more de-eschatologized, or rather subjected to a perverse spiritualization and individualization of eschatology – a process whose beginnings are to be found with the reformers themselves, who in this respect are not original but are following mediaeval Catholic and humanist prototypes.

It is characteristic of the eschatology of the reformers that

they do not originate new doctrines but present and emphasize aspects of traditional doctrine, confining themselves to a partial purification and renewal. We do not find in Luther and Calvin any coherent system of eschatology, but rather they treat the last things from time to time at relevant points in their scriptural exegesis and preaching and in their exposition of the creed (apart from the special polemical work of Calvin, the *Psychopannychia*). In this connexion Luther and Calvin have in part different views. Their differences in the matter of eschatology which are also significant for the divergence in their theologies as a whole will be discussed at appropriate points.

Our chief concern at the moment is to expound what the reformers have in common in their testimony to the last things. Both have a strong though not identical expectation of the return of Christ. In regard to this central eschatological doctrine both emphasize their sharp opposition to the Romish falsification which sees in the coming Christ only the menacing Judge and not the Saviour of the elect. For the reformers the doctrine of the end is primarily a Gospel, a teaching about the joyful Day of Judgment (Luther) or about the day of our salvation and blessed resurrection (Calvin). For them too it is of course a day of judgment, but of the judgment of Jesus Christ and His grace. Both reject the Catholic doctrine of the fire of purgatory because it is unbiblical and derogates from the saving work of Christ. For this reason death as the eschatological boundary of our personal life gains enhanced significance. The hour of death becomes utterly decisive for our eternal future. Both reformers hold fast to a two-fold issue – either acceptance to an eternity of bliss or rejection to eternal damnation, and are opposed to any neutralizing tendency which would dissolve the decisive significance of the gospel and of faith.

But the eschatology of Luther and Calvin lacks very largely the cosmic breadth which is characteristic of the Biblical expectation of the end. They fail to do justice to the ideas of the perfection of the new humanity as a whole, of the church in the coming kingdom of God and of the new creation in a new

heaven and earth. It was not without reason that both Luther and Calvin were unable to deal with the Revelation of John. Luther's mind could not, as he said, adapt itself to the book because he failed to find in it Christ – i.e. justification by grace through faith, even though in his later prefaces to Holy Scripture he appraised it more highly. Calvin did not indeed reject it, he frequently and respectfully quoted it even, but passed it over in silence in his otherwise complete exposition of the New Testament.

Thus the eschatology of the reformers offers us the occasion to sketch out and complete a scriptural doctrine of the last things. In the following pages we must base our investigations on Calvin as the reformer whose theology has a special eschatological orientation. In particular Calvin himself must be quoted.