THE APPROACH TO CALVIN

THE author of a history of the Church from the earliest times to William Temple is said to have presented his manuscript to the Archbishop for criticism. He, returning it, first remarked on it generally, and then observed, "But I did not notice anything about the Reformation in your work". "Good gracious", cried the historian, "I clean forgot all about the Reformation!" This is indicative of the way in which the Reformation has been treated in England during the past two or three generations. Although some Churches in England have looked back to this event as the most important theological and religious movement in the Church since its infancy, the Church of England itself, with the exception of a minority which ardently desired reformed ecclesiastical polity while largely ignoring reformed theology, has felt that, because it did not originate in the sixteenth century as did the Calvinist and Lutheran Churches, it could safely neglect the alarming phenomena of this period for practical purposes, or, if forced to take action, attack it as an innovation. On the Continent, however, the situation was altogether different; "Reformed" and Lutheran theologians could not neglect Luther, Calvin and Zwingli in the way that Cranmer and Ridley have been neglected. They may have lacked a true understanding of the Reformers' theology, but they were obliged to take notice, even when disagreeing, of what these men had taught. Luther and Calvin were too great figures and pressed too insistently upon the national, ecclesiastical and theological consciousness to be ignored. The usual way in which this heed for the Reformation was practised lay in regarding it, not as complete in itself, but as the beginning of a movement which progressed through the succeeding centuries and was now coming to maturity. Dr. H. R. Mackintosh put this clearly when he said:

> "Modernist writers have long been wont to urge that by their radical criticism of all received dogmas they are only carrying to its logical conclusion the basal principle of Reformation thought. . . . The Reformers left their work half done, and the neglected portions must now be overtaken" (*Types of Modern Theology*, p. 6).

The outstanding example of this return to the Reformation was Albrecht Ritschl, whose

> " lifelong aim was to re-interpret the Reformation understanding of the Gospel in opposition to the different versions made current by Romanism and Mysticism, Pietism and Romanticism. Back to the New Testament, by way of the Reformation—this is the motto that guides him steadily " (*op. cit.*, p. 139).

But it is well-known that, just as the New Testament can be interpreted diversely, so also can the Reformers. In proof of this we need only think of the modern dissension over Luther:

> " Professor Holl at the University of Berlin, for example, certainly inaugurated a new understanding of Luther; but the interpretation of the present generation has already attacked it as being too subjective and too greatly influenced by the ideals of modernism and cultural Protestantism " (A. Keller, *Religion and the European Mind*, p. 50).

Or, to come right into our subject, we see the divergences between scholars upon Calvin; between, say, Doumergue and Wernle, between Troeltsch and Reinhold Seeberg. Some of the many interpretations must certainly be erroneous. Yet even more important is the error which underlies nearly all these interpretations. This " return to the Reformation " led to a disastrous over-simplification, the endeavour to find the lowest common factor of the Protestant doctrines. It was hoped that if this was discovered, then the Reformation and its theology would be easily comprehended.

Emil Doumergue (*Jean Calvin*, vol. IV, book 1, ch. 1) and, more fully, W. Hastie (*The Theology of the Reformed Church*) have given an historical sketch of this search for " the distinctive characteristic Protestant principle ". Doumergue summarises the work of the pioneers (Goebel, 1827; Lange, 1841; and Ullmann, 1843) thus:

> " The principal ideas expressed were these: The Lutherans fought especially against the false sanctity of Judaistic works; the ' Reformed ' Church especially against the deification of creation—paganism. The Lutherans pursued a specifically religious interest; the ' Reformed ' Church a moral interest. The Lutheran Reformation created a theology; the ' Reformed ' Reformation created a Church. Lutheran theology is more objective; ' Reformed ' theology is more subjective " (*op. cit.*, p. 30).

It was, however, Alexander Schweizer of Zürich who in his important book, *Die Protestantischen Centraldogmen* (1854), worked out " with his own unrivalled clearness and completeness " an idea already suggested by Herzog. This was that

> "the material principle of the 'Reformed' Reformation is the sovereignty of God, and not justification by faith" (Doumergue);

or, as Hastie expresses it:

> "The theological principle of the 'Reformed' Church is, then, according to Schweizer, the consciousness or feeling of the absolute dependence of man upon God alone in all that pertains to his religious life or to the salvation of his soul" (*op. cit.*, p. 144).

Baur, the great Tübingen critic, contradicting Schweizer, formulates the essential principle of the "Reformed" Theology as

> "the idea of the absolute causality of God as the one and only principle that determines and causes all things absolutely and unconditionally, by and of itself" (Hastie, *op. cit.*, p. 147).

Schneckenburger of Berne then entered the controversy against both Schweizer and Baur. His opinion was that

> "the feelings of the misery of sin, and the feeling of redemption carried out by Christ are also at the foundation of 'Reformed' piety; and the doctrinal expression of this double sentiment is also the fundamental interest of 'Reformed' dogmatics" (quoted by Doumergue, IV, p. 33).

The interest of these writers for us lies in their common assumption that Calvinism was a system of theology starting out from one particular dogma or concept. Although this has too often been true of Calvinism in general, it was certainly not true of Calvin himself, who is, after all, the only authentic Calvinist. Therefore the work of these early students of Calvin must be viewed with disfavour, a disfavour that is increased by the fact that later scholars have followed them in this search for a definite principle, a central dogma in Calvin's theology. Most writers have found this, in one form or another, in Calvin's "concept of God". Thus Doumergue, Holl, and in a general manner Otto Ritschl, look to the idea of the sovereignty of God as the central dogma; Troeltsch, Warfield and (cautiously) R. Seeberg find the central dogma in predestination, and M. Schulze (*Meditatio futurae vitae*) in eschatology. Even those who have not defined their views, clearly have in mind the "concept of God" and its corollaries. The common reconstruction of Calvin's method has been that, starting out from this concept (which Troeltsch baldly calls the product of his own mind), he worked out the other doctrines in his system; that, having posited this concept, he was logically compelled

in his treatment of the doctrines of the Creed to give them a certain form, so that they were determined by his " concept of God ". Thus, according to this view, Calvin might be compared with a matnematician with his " Because " and " Therefore ". To illustrate this we may quote Troeltsch (*The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, ii, pp. 581ff.):

> " It [predestination] is the expression—gradually formulated and finally strongly emphasized—of Calvin's peculiar idea of God . . . Behind his doctrine of predestination there lay also that idea of God which was the peculiar element in his own personal piety. In the idea of predestination Calvin is not merely trying to discover and formulate the absolute miracle of salvation, its supernatural character, and the fact that it is a pure gift of free grace (its 'givenness'); he is also trying to express the character of God as absolute sovereign will . . . A further result of this conception of God is the practical and ethical intention which it gives to the idea of justification."

Not all writers treat Calvin so cavalierly as Troeltsch, but even where they understand him better (as, for example, Doumergue) they are still vitiated by this outlook.

There is, however, an outstanding exception in Peter Barth, by whose recent death Calvin-study lost one of its foremost modern scholars. He is not well-known in England, and nothing of his work has been translated; yet the *Calvini Opera Selecta* which he edited with Wilhelm Niesel is alone sufficient to place him in the front rank, if not in the first place. In a very fine essay entitled " Calvin ", in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (2nd ed.), he has declared roundly that the old approach to Calvin's theology which I have expressed above, is wrong:

> " Every attempt to derive Calvin's theology from one single concept contained in it, whether predestination or the sovereignty of God, declares itself to be erroneous. Calvin did not construct outward from one point; but he harnessed his immense systematizing faculty to the task of bringing into prominence (*zur Geltung zu bringen*) the Word of God, learned from Holy Scripture, both in the multiplicity of its relations and in its hidden unity " (p. 1430).

In other words, Calvin's work was, according to Barth, rather one of arranging systematically the doctrines that are taught unsystematically in the Bible, and by skilful grouping and ordering, for example, showing their relations to one another, and bringing out the underlying meaning common to all. In this sense, and in this sense only, may we speak of Calvin's " system of theology ".

Barth's protest (which, as far as I know, neither he nor anyone else has worked out in detail) thus sets us two tasks:

first, to state why the old approach was wrong: and second, to examine more fully what method Calvin did follow—and in both these we must, of course, listen to what Calvin himself has to say.

The old approach was wrong because it made Calvin a philosopher rather than a theologian. That is to say, that, working rationally and speculatively, he built an ideological system. In this way he might be called a descendant of the more extreme Schoolmen. From this standpoint N. P. Williams can write of predestination:

> "the philosophical framework which has been inserted into the doctrine has deprived it of all flexibility and life" (in *The Study of Theology*, ed. K. E. Kirk, p. 78).

By his opponents Calvin has been regarded as a cold thinker pushing his thought with ruthless logic to its frigid, abstract conclusion. And even his followers have made little better work of it. Doumergue, who certainly does not remain this side idolatry, regards him as a warm, religious, practical thinker working out logically ideas which he takes from the Bible (and here he is nearer the truth than most writers). What is common to friend and foe is the idea that he is deliberately working out rationally a certain set of ideas. But to hold this view of Calvin is to be entirely mistaken as to his purpose, and largely mistaken as to his achievement. Such a method was abhorrent to his mind. Let it be remembered how in treating of the knowledge of God, for instance, he condemns those who worship, not the one true God, "but a figment of their own brains in his stead" (*Inst.* I. iv. 1), and insists (in ch. vi) that God can only be known effectually through the Scriptures. This particular is a true indication of Calvin's general attitude. In the pulpit one of his most frequent themes was the necessity for preaching the Word of God and not replacing it by, or mingling with it, human ideas. Thus, in a sermon on Deuteronomy he said:

> "So when we enter the pulpit, it is not so that we may introduce our own ideas and dreams"[1] (*Corpus Reformatorum* XXV, p. 646).

Or again, preaching on 1 Timothy, he declared that

> "St. Paul shows that all profane knowledge ought to be rejected, and that men must not introduce what they have constructed (*forgé*) in their head, nor put forward their subtleties to make themselves important; no, not at all!" (*C.R.* LIII, p. 263).

[1] Fr., *songes et resveries*, a favourite expression with him.

Indeed, so important was this matter to him that he stressed time and time again that the Gospel must be preserved in its original simplicity without any adulteration of human ideas. Therefore pastors must not

> " put forward their *songes et resveries*, but must pass on faithfully what they have received without adding anything to it " (*C.R.* LIV, p. 8).

And again, in the same sermon he says:

> " all those who wish to be recognised as pastors in the Church of God ought to hold themselves to this rule: to declare the Gospel in such a manner that there is no mingling nor corruption from their part " (*C.R.* LIV, p. 9).

From these quotations (which could be greatly multiplied) we see that Calvin had a horror of human ideas being preached as the Gospel. This sprang from the fundamental belief, common to all the Reformers, that Christianity was a religion of revelation, that Jesus was the one Word spoken by God to the world, and that the Bible was the sole authority for the life, teaching and interpretation of Jesus; that it was, in fact, by virtue of its teaching the one supernatural book:

> " since it is only in the Scriptures that the Lord hath been pleased to preserve his truth in perpetual remembrance, it obtains the same complete credit and authority with believers, when they are satisfied of its divine origin (*e coelo fluxisse*), as if they heard the very words pronounced by God himself " (*Inst.* I. vii. 1).

Therefore it would be sheer arrogance for any man, however learned or pious, to set himself up as a judge upon Scripture, able to add or excise at will. While allowing some measure of both higher and lower criticism, Calvin held that there was only one attitude for man to take over against the Bible; acceptance of its teaching, obedience to its commands, and (for the pastor) faithful exposition of its doctrines.

It is, therefore, clear that Peter Barth was right in asserting that Calvin " did not construct outward from one point ". We must now inquire what method he followed, and also whether he was always loyal to his purpose. Already we have seen how he held himself steadfastly to Scripture. In his teaching on Scripture in the *Institutio* (as, for example, when he speaks of *scriptura duce et magistra*), in his system of preaching right through book after book of the Bible, and in his ceaseless flow of commentaries, he shows himself to us, and wishes to be

known by us, as a doctor of the Holy Scriptures. In the 1559 edition of the *Institutio* (which Whitney would have us believe " embodied the relentless growth of his very logical mind and rigid system "!), Calvin wrote a Preface to the Reader, in which he declared his purpose:

> " Now, my design in this work has been to prepare and qualify students of theology for the reading of the divine word, that they may have an easy introduction to it, and be able to proceed in it without any obstruction. For I think I have given such a comprehensive summary and orderly arrangement of all the branches of religion, that with proper attention no person will find any difficulty in determining what ought to be the principal objects of his research in Scripture, and to what end he ought to refer anything it contains."

To give " a comprehensive summary and orderly arrangement of all the branches of religion " is a very different matter from building a system of theology starting from one foundation concept. It means that he regarded his work as a systematisation of the teaching of the Bible. The analogy of an architect would be permissible, if it were always remembered that his materials are not his own, and that he remains from beginning to end in subordination to the Scriptures. A good example of Calvin's method is afforded by *Inst.* II. xv, where he treats of Christ as prophet, king and priest. According to Dr. A. Dakin (*Calvinism*, p. 53) he was the originator of this approach. Assuming that this is so (and Dr. Dakin himself seems a little doubtful) we may notice three points. First; although his treatment is original, he shows that he derives it from the Bible; and throughout the chapter he subjects himself to Scripture (an indication of this is that there are about forty quotations from the Old and New Testaments in the ten pages). Second; that Christ was prophet, king and priest is not taught explicitly in Scripture; but Calvin gathers together passages and declares that their underlying thought is that Christ is prophet or king or priest: these offices are thus the quintessence of Biblical teaching. And third; he relates the three offices to one another and binds them together into one thought—that we may know " the end of his mission from the Father, and the benefits which he confers upon us ".

Whether Calvin was loyal to his aim always is another matter, and since it would entail too detailed an investigation into the theology of the *Institutio* and particularly into the development of at least the presentation of the doctrines through