

THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY.

VOL. III.

FEBRUARY, 1923.

No. 2.

The Common Denominator of Calvinism and Liberalism.

JOHN THEODORE MUELLER, St. Louis, Mo.

That modern rationalism can be opposed only from the viewpoint of the Reformed theology is a statement which has been repeatedly made in the course of the present struggle between the Fundamentalists and the Modernists. Prof. C. W. Hodge endeavors to prove this assertion in three popular essays on "The Significance of the Reformed Theology To-day," which appeared in the *Presbyterian* during the spring of this year. The doctrinal position of the Hodges is too well known to require elucidation. Their testimonies in behalf of the fundamental truths of Scripture, especially their dauntless stand against rationalism, constitute a gratifying chapter in the history of the American Protestant Church, which, particularly during the past decades, has fallen so lamentably from Christian truth. To all conservative Bible-students, the attitude of the Hodges towards the Word of God and the essential doctrines of the Christian faith has been both an inspiration and a power. Princeton theology has stood out predominantly as a shining light in the ever-thickening darkness of doctrinal disintegration, and even its opponents must concede that its advocates have been sincere Christian men who love the truth, as truth is given them, and are not afraid to confess and defend it. This is the impression which the reader of Professor Hodge's essays on "The Significance of the Reformed Theology" receives.

The impression is wonderfully favorable. The essays are written with much conviction. What Professor Hodge says is manifestly the message of his heart, from the superabundance of which the mouth speaks. Moreover, his statements are characterized by a sound objectivity. The writer appeals to men beyond the confines of his own pale with that larger aim in view to discover something

definite, something firm, something fundamental, as a means by which to counteract the ravages of modern naturalism. He points out the fact that the naturalistic conceptions of Ritschl, Troeltsch, Hermann, Lemme, Schulze, Stephan, etc., intrinsically destructive as they are, must of necessity deprive the Christian of every hope and comfort, leaving room only for the baldest kind of paganism. The Reformed theology, on the other hand, satisfies, so he avers, every claim of true religion, every postulate of Christianity, and every problem of metaphysical speculation, and affords its followers a safe and immovable rock on which to build their Christian faith. In conclusion the writer says: "We must take the standpoint of the Reformed faith, and say with the Psalmist: 'My soul, wait thou only upon God; for my expectation is from Him. He only is my Rock and my Salvation; He is my Defense; I shall not be moved. In God is my salvation and glory; the rock of my strength and my refuge is in God.'"

The grounds upon which Professor Hodge bases these claims are as follows: 1. Reformed theology is pure theism, for theism is merely the interpretation of the universe from the standpoint of God's purpose. Pure theism consists in constructing all that happens in the physical and mental spheres as the unfolding of the eternal purpose of God and refusing to limit God either by the world of nature or the human will. And this is precisely the view of the Reformed theology. 2. The Reformed theology is pure religion as absolute dependence on God and not on the human will, using God only as a Helper in our struggle against the world. Take this attitude of pure religion; let it have its way in all your thought, in all your feeling, and in all your life, and you have taken just the position of the Reformed faith and are in a position to defend yourself against naturalism in religion. 3. The Reformed theology is the conception of pure grace or the absolute dependence of the sinner upon God for salvation. All the power in our salvation it ascribes to God; all the glory to Him alone; all to His wondrous grace. Only in this consistent form can evangelicalism be adequately defended against naturalism in soteriology. We must conclude, therefore, that since the essence of the New Theology is naturalism, it can be opposed adequately only from that view-point which gives us the opposite principle of supernaturalism in its purity and thoroughly grounded on an adequate basis, *i. e.*, from the point of view of the Reformed theology.

We have quoted these arguments mainly for the sake of representing to the reader Professor Hodge's conception of the Reformed

theology. Whether they adequately characterize Calvinism or not does not lie within the scope of the present discussion. In the main, however, the statements are correct. Calvinism embodies in its basic ideas all the features here enumerated. However, what may not be clear to the reader in perusing them is the fact that the system of the Reformed faith, although seemingly an impregnable fortress, bears in itself a lamentable weakness, which ultimately leaves Calvinism utterly deficient in accomplishing what has been claimed for it. It is this weakness and defect, indeed, this paramount fault to which we desire to call attention in this discussion.

To the Lutheran Bible-student it is clear from the start that something unmistakably essential has been omitted from Professor Hodge's representation of the means by which to overcome naturalism. According to the Lutheran view, a statement of the kind should have stressed the two basic principles of the Reformation, the material and the formal. In other words, a Lutheran reader should have expected a sentence somewhat like this: The Reformed theology must be adopted as a means of opposing Modernism because it, on the one hand, accepts the Bible as the only source, rule, and standard of faith, and because it, on the other hand, acknowledges, teaches, and confesses salvation by grace through faith in Christ Jesus. A theology constructed upon these two principles must certainly confute every form of false religion, because such a theology is God's Word, the efficient means of grace. To the Lutheran theologian these two principles seem essential in opposing naturalism as well as every other noxious "ism" that sprouts from the unbelieving heart of man. Therefore no deviation from these two principles can be permitted. Deny even an iota of them, and you make a breach which is ruinous to the entire structure of Christian theology. Now, the question arises: Why, then, should these principles not be stressed in a series of essays that illustrate the fundamental thoughts of Christian theology? Why should the author mention every other advantage of his type of theology and fail to state that his theology rests upon, and is irremovably founded upon, God's infallible Word? The Reformed theology, it has been shown, satisfies every postulate of pure theism, of pure religion, of absolute dependence on God for salvation, but does it satisfy the demands which Scripture itself sets forth and which are embodied in the two principles just named?

Here, it appears to us, lies the fundamental weakness of the Reformed theology. Reformed theology is in itself *rationalistic*.

It bears in its essence the tendencies which, if fully developed, must needs end in naturalism. Fortunately, orthodox Reformed theologians have encysted this virus of rationalism and by a happy inconsistency do not draw the inferences which the intrinsic rationalism of their theology suggests. This point has been made clear time and again. It is stressed very much by Dr. Karl Graul in his *Distinctive Doctrines*. On page 167 ff. he says: "The general character of Reformed doctrine and practise is: 1. spiritualistic; 2. diffusive and separatistic; 3. legalistic; 4. *rationalizing* and yet again emotional; 5. unhistorical." That the Reformed theology is indeed rationalizing has been admitted even by Reformed theologians. Nor was this rationalizing tendency inoculated into the system of Calvinism at some later time, when rationalism became the vogue in the Christian world. The rationalistic character of Calvinism is noticed from the beginning in the works of its very founders. Already Zwingli maintained that nothing must be believed that cannot be comprehended by reason, because God does not propound anything incomprehensible to us ("*nihil esse credendum, quod ratione comprehendi nequeat, quia Deus nobis non proponat incomprehensibilia*"). (*Baieri Comp., ed. Walther, Prolegomena, cap. II, pp. 82. 83.*) This proposition, basically rationalistic, suffices to lead the Reformed thought ultimately to the very position which modern naturalists maintain, a position of utter denial of all divine truth that is at variance with reason. If God does not propound to us anything which reason cannot comprehend, then naturalism is the only true religion worthy to be propagated by men. That goes without saying.

Modern naturalism has attacked and denied especially the doctrines concerning the infallibility and authority of the Bible as God's Word and the Christian doctrine concerning the divine-human person of Christ and His work of redemption. It is precisely these two doctrines with regard to which Calvinism *rationalizes*; hence both Calvinism and Modernism have a common denominator. This we shall try to show.

The views of modern rationalists concerning the inspiration, authority, and infallibility of the Bible have been stated with almost brazen clearness and emphasis. Prof. Walter Rauschenbusch, in *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, writes: "In the New Testament it is our business to sift out what is distinctively Christian in origin and spirit. (p. 216.) Prof. Shailer Mathews, in *The Church and the Changing Order*, avers: "Because we find difficulty in accepting as strictly historical the accounts of the so-called

nature miracles, such as walking upon water, and turning water into wine. . . . Suppose we should find that the accounts of such matters *must be rejected for good and sufficient reasons. . . .*" (p. 67.) Prof. William F. Bade, in *The Old Testament in the Light of To-day*, claims: "The voice of the garden, the divine visitors at Mamre, the burning bush, the physical manifestations and thunderous deliverances on Mount Sinai, the tables of stone themselves, belong to the poetry, to the religious psychology of Israel's religion, *not to the historical facts of its history.*" (p. 15.)

These statements are important, not only because they delineate the position of modern Liberals, but mainly because they point out the view-point from which they judge Scripture. This view-point is *pure reason*. Wherever Scripture is in accord with what reason is able to comprehend, it is received "as Christian in origin and spirit"; whatever is at variance with the arguments of reason is rejected "for good and sufficient reasons." Now, let us compare this with the view-point of the Reformed theology. Of course, it would be folly to seek precise parallel statements in the confessions of the Reformed churches. Rather the contrary is there asserted in clear and forcible words. Thus Calvin, in the *Consensus Tigurinus*, declares: "Since Christ is the end of the Law and the knowledge of Him comprehends in itself the entire sum of the Gospel, . . . so *whoever departs in the least from this truth will never speak rightly or fitly respecting any of the ordinances of God.*" The *Formula Consensus Helvetica*, directed against Amyraut, states the matter still more lucidly. It says: "In particular the Hebrew original of the Old Testament . . . is not only in its matter, but in *its words* inspired of God, thus forming, together with the original of the New Testament, *the sole and complete rule of our faith and life.*" (Canon II. *Outlines of Theology*. Hodge, p. 657.)

Any one who reads these statements must receive the impression that the Reformed theology unqualifiedly accepts the Scriptural doctrine of the inspiration, authority, and infallibility of the Bible. However, as we study the Reformed theology, we shall find that the same rationalistic criterion is as rigidly applied in orthodox Calvinism as in heterodox naturalism. If the Bible is "the sole and complete rule of our faith and life," then it must needs be accepted in every demand, doctrine, and tenet. Orthodox Calvinism, however, fails to do this. Wherever Scriptural statements clash with the decisions of pure reason, Reformed theologians have rationalized, that is, made the Scriptural truths accord with reason.

This was "*der andere Geist*" which Luther criticized in Zwingli and his colaborers. Lutheran theology accepts the words of Scripture at their face value. Reformed theology has tampered with the words of Scripture, interpreting them in the light of reason. This is apparent in every main issue that arose between Lutheranism and Calvinism. Thus Lutheran theology frankly acknowledged the mystery involved in the question: *Cur alii prae aliis?* The Lutheran reformers never tried to solve the mystery, but unqualifiedly accepted both the Scriptural truths of universal grace and of universal and equal guilt. Calvinism bridged the gap and solved the mystery by placing the cause of man's condemnation in God. The reason why some are saved and others are not the Reformed theologian found in God's twofold decrees of predestination. Again, to the Lutheran theologian the *unio personalis*, with its kindred doctrines of the *communio naturarum* and the *communicatio idiomatum*, presents problems which can never be explained by reason. Nevertheless, while acknowledging these mysteries, Lutherans have conscientiously taught every Scriptural truth concerning the personal union. Not so Calvinism. Here, too, the Reformed theology has applied reason to solve the mysteries of faith. In order to satisfy the postulate of reason that *the finite is not capable of the infinite (finitum non est capax infiniti)*, Calvinistic theologians have revived Nestorianism and severed the two natures in the person of Christ. Lastly, the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper is a fact clearly asserted in Scripture, yet a fact to which reason raises objections. Accordingly, Calvinism denies the real presence "for good and sufficient reasons." In fine, the Reformed theology has consistently maintained the proposition of Zwingli: "*nihil esse credendum, quod ratione comprehendendi nequeat, quia Deus nobis non proponat incomprehensibilia.*" The modern rationalist could not state his position more clearly, nor desire a better formula by which to defend his "good and sufficient reasons."

Thus it is apparent that the fundamental difference between the rationalizing Calvinist and the rationalizing Modernist is one only in degree. Orthodox Reformed theologians, it is true, stop short in drawing the final inference, while Modernists, not troubled by any qualms of conscience, simply go to the extreme limit and draw the final conclusion. Thus Zwingli declares: "*Deus nobis non proponit incomprehensibilia.*" Dean Mathews declares: "In the New Testament there are concepts which the modern world under the domination of science finds it *impossible to understand,*

much less to believe." (*The Church and the Changing Order*, p. 16.) Orthodox Calvinism asserts that "*Praedicatio humanorum de Deo et divinorum de homine, quantum ad naturas, tantum est verbalis*" (*Neostadienses Admonitiones*, p. 70; Baier, P. III, cap. II, *De Persona Christi*, p. 41), thus denying that the suffering and death of Jesus Christ were the suffering and death of the Son of God. Prof. J. H. P. Smith takes the final leap, gives reason its full due, and denies the divinity of Christ altogether, for he says: "To read the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah as a literal prediction of the career of Jesus of Nazareth is grossly to misunderstand the prophet who penned that noble ideal." (*The Prophet and His Problems*, p. 106.) Zanchius taught: "*Christum sua obedientia sibi promeruisse vitam aeternam.*" (Baier, P. III, *De Officio Christi*, p. 120.) Prof. Henry C. Vedder claims: "Jesus never taught and never authorized anybody to teach in His name that He suffered *in our stead* and bore the penalty of our sins." (*Chester Times*, March 27, 1920.) Calvin, Beza, Piscator, and other orthodox Reformed theologians maintained: "*Christum non pro omnibus hominibus atque adeo etiam pro reprobis, sed pro solis electis merito suo satisfecisse,*" thus denying the universal redemption of Christ. Prof. G. B. Smith, in *A Guide to the Study of the Christian Religion*, denies Christ's vicarious atonement altogether and avers: "To insist dogmatically as on a *a priori* principle that 'without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin,' is both foolish and futile in an age which has abandoned the conception of blood sacrifice, and which loudly demands the abolition of capital punishment." (p. 519.)

But enough! Of course, Calvin, Beza, Piscator, and other Reformed theologians were better men than the liberalists of their own time, and so to-day men like Professors Hodge, Warfield, and others are better men than Smith, Vedder, Mathews, and their colleagues of the Modernistic faith. The former stopped short at the brink and refused to leap into the abyss of unbelief, asserting, though inconsistently, the Gospel-truth in its essential features. The latter go to the extreme limit, enthrone reason, and reject the entire Gospel as utter folly. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that orthodox Calvinism exhibits the same tendencies as modern rationalism, though differing in degree. Nor can it be said that this rationalizing tendency is foreign to the original type. It is rather deeply rooted in the original system as propounded by its founders. In this respect Calvinism differs vitally from true Lutheranism. Lutheran theologians, too, have at times departed from Scriptural

truth and have rationalized. However, in that case, something foreign, something heterogeneous, something altogether new was introduced into Lutheranism, while modern naturalism has merely developed the rationalistic germs found in the original Calvinistic system. Modern naturalists have simply carried the rationalistic ideas of Calvinistic thought to greater lengths. To employ an illustration: When the Reformed patient developed tuberculosis, it was from germs that were in his blood. The Lutheran patient suffering from the tuberculosis of rationalism had caught the infection from without. This difference, we believe, the history of Christian doctrine will bear out.

Now, if that is true, then the claims made by Professor Hodge cannot be maintained. Reformed theology is not the Marne of naturalism. The *Presbyterian* (March 16, 1922), in a very able essay on "The Down-Grade of Rationalism," points out how rationalism must of necessity follow a downward course. That is true. Equally true are the words quoted in the same article: "Rationalism appears in various forms and in divers degrees. It begins with the denial of the divine nature and infallible authority of the Scripture, with the claim that the seat of authority in morals and religion is found in the individual man." However, we think that rationalism begins with something much farther back than the denial of the divine nature and the infallible authority of Scripture. It begins with the least tampering with the doctrines of Scripture for the purpose of making intelligible to reason what is a mystery of faith. The Reformed theology from the very outset has tampered with the fundamental doctrines of universal grace and redemption, the person of Christ and His work as Prophet, Priest, and King, trying to construe them in harmony with reason. This rationalizing tendency is the weakness of Calvinism. This is the breach in its walls which has ever been widened. Hence we must deny the claims made by Professor Hodge. Not from the point of view of the Reformed theology, but from the point of view of sound Lutheranism, which stands four-square on the material and formal principles of the Reformation, can modern rationalism be opposed. Only as the Church of Christ believes, teaches, and confesses that the Holy Scriptures are the only source, rule, and norm of faith, and boldly and indefatigably asserts that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ, without the least attempt to rationalize in these or in other doctrines of Scripture, will she be sufficiently strong to combat the follies and perversions of that demon of destruction — Modernism.