

Christian Reconstruction

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Vol. XIX, No. 5

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September/October 1995

CRITICAL MASS

No. 27: Calvinist Rationalism and Cultural Surrender

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Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call. And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation. Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers (Acts 2:38-42).

Peter's first sermon was an uncompromising presentation of the gospel. It produced rapid and spectacular fruit. Some 3,000 people accepted his message. This incident proves that there is no necessary connection between doctrinal truth and shrunken, stagnant congregations.

Nevertheless, there has been an historical connection between the two in the twentieth century. For a local congregation to become known as a defender of strict theological truth is almost automatically to position itself as a permanently tiny congregation. The exceptions to this rule are few.

There are many reasons for this. Let me list only a handful. First, orthodoxy runs counter to everything taught in the public school system. It also runs counter to most of what passes for Christian education. The doctrines of election, postmillennialism, and covenant theology are anathema to both humanism and modern pietistic evangelicalism. Second, orthodoxy increases men's responsibility by increasing men's knowledge. The comprehensive nature of the Great Commission is a great personal burden compared to the "souls-only" evangelism of Protestant pietism. Most Christians avoid responsibility whenever possible. Who needs it? Third, Orthodoxy is detailed, difficult, and complex. Modern man is not prepared to master detailed statements of faith and catechisms running hundreds of questions. Fourth, those few who are attracted to such detailed confessions tend not to be equally committed to programs of evangelism based on friendship, neighborliness, and personal discipling. They believe, as Warfield said, that the essence of evangelism is logic.

The part that Apologetics has to play in the Christianizing of the world is rather a primary part, and it is a conquering part. It is the distinction of Christianity that it has come into the world clothed with the mission to reason its way to its dominion. Other religions may appeal to the sword, or seek some other way to propagate them-

selves. Christianity makes its appeal to right reason, and stands out among all religions, therefore, as distinctively "the Apologetic religion." It is solely by reasoning that it has come thus far on its way to its kingship. And it is solely by reasoning that it will put all its enemies under its feet. (Warfield, "Introduction to Francis R. Beattie's *Apologetics*" [1903], reprinted *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield—II* edited by John E. Meeter [Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1973], pp. 99-100.)

The trouble is, this statement is wrong. Not a little bit wrong, or somewhat wrong, but comprehensively wrong. Christianity puts its enemies under its feet by means of God's saving grace, which saves the whole man, a totally depraved man, in one definitive act of grace, God's sovereign imputation of Christ's comprehensive righteousness to a fallen man who is definitively dead in his trespasses. Everything about man is saved, including his reason. The agency of this salvation may be reason in a limited number of cases, but most people are saved by other means: fear of final judgment, or a personal crisis, or the realization that there is a better life available, or any of a hundred reasons, none of which is grounded on logic.

Calvinism teaches that God declares a person "Not guilty!" before that person responds in faith with a verbal profession. He does not respond in faith prior to his regeneration. He cannot, "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor 2:14). Faith is not the cause of his salvation; it is the effect. Saving faith does not initiate God's grace; God's grace initiates saving faith. So, contrary to Warfield, reason is not the primary means of extending Christ's kingdom in history; rather, the extension of the kingdom is an effect of God's extension of grace to fallen men.

The Lure of Rationalism

Rationalism is a mind-set that reduces men's decision-making to logic. But decision-making is based on more than reason. "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will" (Prov 21:1). God directs men's actions through their hearts - through love, fear, and other emotions. Anyone who would argue that most people today get married because of considerations of logic would not be taken seriously by logical people, yet the essence of salvation is God's love for His people as a man loves his wife. In earlier times, arranged marriages were based

on the logic of capital - bride prices and dowries - not the logic of textbooks.

The Calvinist tradition is highly academic, more so than any other Protestant tradition, more so than Eastern Orthodoxy, and more so than all but specialized religious orders, such as the Jesuits, in Catholicism. The close association of Calvinism and intellectualism is part of the Western tradition. It is not easy to overcome a strong tradition. In fact, such traditions are almost never overcome through institutional reform. Institutions are replaced; they are rarely reformed. Calvinism has been replaced by Arminian pietism and liberalism. Only tiny streams of Calvinist orthodoxy remain, and they are suspect theologically. For example, while the Westminster Confession of Faith is committed to the doctrine of the six-day creation (IV.1), no American Presbyterian denomination has ever enforced this doctrine in its courts. The Old Princeton theologians were outspokenly opposed to the doctrine: Charles Hodge, A. A. Hodge, and Warfield. Their commitment to the logic of academic geology had eroded their commitment to the Bible and the Confession.

Those few people who have been lured into Calvinism have been lured by a one-sided academic version of Calvinism that has become traditional. It has been rationalistic. Those attracted to it have almost always come out of other Christian traditions. For well over two centuries, Calvinists have not made most of their converts from the general population but from other churches. Those who have switched to Calvinism from other traditions have been a minority: Christians who indulge in detailed theological studies, who respond to formal theological discourse, and who believe that rationalism is what motivates people. The success of Calvinist churches has been based on a program of evangelism that self-consciously positions Calvinism as a minority influence within Protestant Christianity in general. They are committed to this program; they are afraid to change.

Calvinist churches remain small. They have emphasized theology, since this has become their unique service proposition, but very few people are interested in theology. This has led Calvinists to associate orthodoxy with small congregations. Those inside small congregations distrust large congregations. They assume that something must be theologically lax inside large congregations. Traditionally, this has been true. This is because Calvinism surrendered the United States to Arminianism, beginning two centuries ago.

Surrendering America to the Arminians

Calvinism lost America in just one century." 1800 to 1900. Most Calvinists have never looked at the statistics. Church historian Winthrop S. Hudson has estimated that in 1776, at least 90 percent of the churches in the colonies were in the Puritan-Calvinist-Reformed tradition (Winthrop S. Hudson, *The Great Tradition of the American Churches* [New York: Harper & Bros., 1953], p. 47.) A century later, this was no longer even remotely the case. Edwin Scott Gaustad's detailed study of the geography of American denominationalism, *Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), reveals just how overwhelming this transition was. In 1780, in the middle of the Revolutionary War, there were slightly under 495 Presbyterian congregations in the United States. In that year, there were 457 Baptist congregations. There were also 749 Congregational churches and 406 Anglican congregations (Figure 17, p. 21). There were so few Methodist congregations that Gaustad does not list them.

The nation was predominately Calvinist in 1760, especially since most Baptists accepted the Philadelphia Confession of Faith, a version of the Westminster Confession. The Philadelphia Association of Baptists had adopted it in 1742. This was the most important Baptist association in the colonies prior to the Revolution. But after the Revolution, more and more Baptists adopted Arminianism.

In 1820, there were 2,700 Baptist congregations, 2,700 Methodist congregations, 1,110 Congregational, 600 Episcopal, and 1,700 Presbyterian (Figure 31, p. 43). Many of these Presbyterian congregations were Cumberland Presbyterians, a denomination founded in 1811, far more Arminian in perspective. By 1860, there were 12,150 Baptist congregations, 19,883 Methodist congregations, 6,406 Presbyterian, 2,145 Episcopal, and 2,234 Congregational. To this must be added 2,100 Disciples of Christ congregations, the Arminian Campbellites (Figure 32, p. 43). The nation had become Arminian. By 1900, there were almost 50,000 Baptist congregations, almost 54,000 Methodist congregations, 15,452 Presbyterian, 5,604 Congregational (now liberal), 6,264 Episcopal (now liberal). There were over 10,298 Disciples congregations, two-thirds of the number of Presbyterians (Figure 33, p. 44).

By 1900, Calvinism was a minority religion in America. Then things got worse. Liberals took over the Northern Presbyterian Church: over two million members in the 1930's. Liberals had captured the Church's bureaucracies by 1920; in 1936, they suspended J. Gresham Machen and a half dozen other pastors, and 4,200 people left: a tiny fraction of one percent. The mind set of a besieged remnant took over.

What went wrong? Calvinist denominations after 1776 could not supply enough ministers, since their ministers had to learn Latin and graduate from college. In the seven years before the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, the College of New Jersey had sent 75 men into the ministry. Over the next eighteen years, it sent only 39, an average of two men per year. At the same time, the population of the middle and southern states, where Presbyterianism was strongest, rose from 1.75 million in 1783 to 2.75 million in 1790. Two new pastors per year could hardly be expected to keep pace with this population growth, let alone carry the gospel to other regions, especially the Western territories, which were growing even faster. As members moved west or south, older congregations gradually died off. Calvinism died with them.

Conclusion

The fusion of doctrine, fellowship, and growth is the ideal for the Church, and has been since the beginning. What has been missing in doctrinal churches has been a commitment to Church growth. Fellowship has been understood as a kind of besieged fortress fellowship: "Us four, no more." This fortress mentality has stripped the Church growth movement of all but the faintest traces of theology. Its proponents have left behind to others what they regard as the growth-hampering details of theology; they prefer the visible success of growing churches. This did not begin in the 1970's. It began in the 1770's. The Second Great Awakening (1800 to 1840) began when a group of young, experiential, and not particularly Calvinistic Presbyterian ministers began to spread out through Virginia and the Western territories in 1787. The result: modern evangelicalism: the surrender of the ideal of Christendom and the internalization of the kingdom of God.