CALVINISM AND OTHER ISMS

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From the title of this paper, one might assume that it would deal with the non-Christian and pseudo-Christian cults of our day. This is not the case. The word "ism" is used here to refer to those great world-views which make their claim on the ultimate loyalty of man, which profess to be of supreme value or import in human existence. We shall consider the political and cultural as well as the religious claims which man today finds vying for his loyalty. Over against these claims we shall attempt to define and evaluate the place of Calvinism in the world of our day. The task as thus defined looms up with overpowering immensity. Thoroughly to consider all of its ramifications is beyond the scope of this paper and the ability of the writer. I shall therefore seek to delineate that in Calvinism which I feel is its unique contribution and then attempt to show the need for this emphasis in the situation of modern man.

THE QUALITY OF CALVINISM

I title this section in this way because I feel that Calvinism is not truly an ism in the sense of an exclusive sectarian movement. Historically Calvinism has been an integral part of mainline Protestant Christianity. While some Calvinistic groups have evinced a sectarian attitude (an attitude unfortunately too often within our own fellowship), this is not a result of their Calvinism and in reality violates its spirit. Calvinism at its best never considers itself to be the true Christian church nor even a separate, exclusive branch of Christianity. It is rather a certain emphasis within the Body of Christ which its advocates consider to be true to the biblical witness. I am well aware that some may differ with this description in principle, while others will agree in principle but contradict that principle in practice. This, however, is the understanding of Calvinism with which I approach my subject.

The Predominant Trait: If one hundred people conversant in Christian theology were asked what is the predominant trait of Calvinism, perhaps ninety-nine would respond, "The sovereignty of God." It is true, this has been the preoccupation of many Calvinists throughout much of the past 400 years. At times it has become such a dominant concern that it has almost developed into a terrible threat held over theological inquiry and
even over human life. Truly to understand the significant contribution of
the Calvinistic emphasis, however, I suggest that we lift our gaze from this
rather restricted preoccupation with divine sovereignty.

I believe that the predominant and persistent trait of Calvinism at its
best is what we may call a stubborn theocentricity. This is a much broader
view than that of divine sovereignty alone; it is more true to the biblical
witness; and it is really the emphasis of Calvin himself. Subsequent gen-
erations of Calvinists seem to have overlooked the fact that Calvin does
not discuss the question of election and predestination until almost the end
of Book III of his Institutes, then only as an attempt to explain the oper-
ation of the Holy Spirit and after a thorough discussion of faith. At the
same time, many seem to have forgotten that Calvin begins his exposit-
ion of Christian truth with the chapter, “The Connection Between the Know-
ledge of God and the Knowledge of Ourselves,” and says that “it is evi-
dent that . . . our very existence is nothing but a subsistence in God
alone.”1 And again, “no man can arrive at the true knowledge of himself
without having first contemplated the divine character.”2 This theo-
centricity of Calvin is a perspective upon all reality, a viewpoint from
which all of life is surveyed and understood. It is the biblical perspective
and includes human responsibility as well as divine sovereignty, freedom
as well as election. It contains the balance of the biblical outlook. It
enables us to view reality in terms of the dialectic of revelation. Thus Cal-
vinsm views the acts of men in terms of the acts of God. It is more
concerned with revelation than discovery.

Unfortunately, Calvinism has not always maintained this balanced
view, the view of him from whom it takes its name. Within a century
of the great Genevan’s life, his professed followers had so lost the balance
of his views, exchanging his theocentric perspective for a one-sided empha-
sis on divine sovereignty, that the terms — justification by faith, freedom,
and love—had almost lost their meaning. In their concentration upon God,
they had almost forgotten man. This false kind of theocentricity fails to
understand the biblical message, which emphasizes the worth of man seen
in the light of God’s self-giving love and his call to a responding love on
man’s part. A truly theocentric viewpoint sees the grandeur of man in
God’s love for him. God’s gift of freedom, his call to repentance and the
biblical emphasis upon faith make this clear. Revelation, as God’s self-
disclosure, also reveals man in the misery of his estrangement, and in his
glory as a child of God.

The Balancing Power: The theocentric perspective on life is a necessary
balancing power in our world. It alone can provide the necessary correc-

1Institutes, Book I, Chapter I, Paragraph I.
2Ibid., paragraph II.
tive to the omnipresent anthropocentricity evident in contemporary political, cultural and even in much religious concern. Humanism unchallenged makes man the measure of all things. The end result is the loss of any transcendent values as the basis of human life. The human good becomes many conflicting human goods and we move from anarchy to chaos. The basic danger in all man-centered viewpoints is that they end up denying that which they affirm. Man finds it impossible to be consistently man-centered without the perspective and drawing power of a loyalty above himself. Man cannot be man-centered because he is self-centered man. To be truly man-centered he must be freed from self-centeredness so that he can stand above himself.

We see that the need for the balancing power of the theocentric outlook is closely related to the problem of human self-transcendence. This is undeniably a distinctively human capacity, but the theocentric understanding through revelation shows us that this capacity has become lost through sin — mankind has lost its true humanity. The self-transcending capacity can only be restored by the transforming power of God effective through faith. This faith and the grace which is its other side, are the correlates of the theocentric perspective on human existence.

The theocentricity of Calvinism produces a true view of man as a child of God. Equality, morality, value — all grow out of this viewpoint. The humanist says that man must live for mankind. The Calvinist insists that man must live for God. His true vocation is to glorify God. Humanists must be placed among all those who "worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator." This is the essence of idolatry and leads to the deterioration of human culture. The theocentric perspective, on the other hand, gives mankind many vital and precious things: truth—in an absolute sense, meaning—within the scope of existence, purpose, direction, value—for self and life, and true personality. The implications of these claims in specific cases will be considered in the next section. Let this suffice for a broad outline of the need for the balancing power of the theocentric perspective on life.

**CALVINISM AND MAN TODAY**

With these tools in hand, let us attempt to structure the importance of the Calvinistic emphasis in the world of modern man. Perhaps it should be noted at the outset that we are not imposing something new when we speak of the Calvinistic emphasis. Indeed the western world has grown up with the theocentricity of Calvinism, if not always in its hand, at least at its elbow. The importance of the Calvinistic attitude in the development of western culture comes into focus when one considers the place of strong Calvinists in the settling and growth of our own country.
Indeed, we present nothing new. But perhaps we do need to present it anew, in renewed form. The church has too long been content to speak to the world in the categories of the past. Those categories had gradually lost their meaning for the man of today. This has resulted in many serious and sincere doubts as to the meaningfulness of Christian truth for our modern age. Many have set aside the claims of religion in favor of the political and cultural claims which appear more relevant to the contemporary situation. It is time for the church to awake; not to change its message, as some seem to think, but rather to present the eternal truth of religion in the garb of today; to make clear the supreme relevance of Christian faith to the crisis of modern man; and to reveal the inadequacy of the other claims on his loyalty.

Political Claims — Totalitarianism: Among those forces which seek to claim the supreme loyalty of modern man is the political. The danger of this claim upon man today is its totalitarian quality. It seeks not to arouse interest in the political realm as one aspect of human concern, but makes its claim upon his absolute loyalty and exalts the political realm to the status of ultimate concern. It seeks man's complete dedication and subjection to the goals of the cause. The totalitarianism which is uppermost in our generation is communism, though some maintain with some cogency that fascism is a greater threat within our own country.

It is quite patent that totalitarianism is anthropocentrically oriented. Each such cause claims to have the good of mankind at the heart of its concern. However, while claiming a humanistic basis, a man-centered concern, totalitarianism inevitably ends up denying human rights. Here we see concretely the basic danger of all anthropocentricity: its inability to be consistently man-centered. While some totalitarian movements ostensibly champion human equality (e.g. communism), in practice they are guilty of the most violent persecution of all who do not conform to the prescribed goals. The humorless farce of totalitarianism is seen in its inhumanity in the name of humanity, its sacrifice of man for the sake of mankind. Closely related to this is the fact that, in spite of its claims to be man-centered, the totalitarian cause quickly reveals its lack of respect for the value of the individual. How can it claim to respect man in general when it does not respect him in particular? How can it claim to save mankind when it destroys men? These questions put in bold relief the practical impossibility of a true and consistent anthropocentricity in any human institution.

Communism provides an excellent specimen with which we are all familiar to a large degree. We must admit that the evil against which Marx and Engels rebelled was real and amenable to correction. However, communism today reveals that all it accomplishes is the substitution of the totalitarianism of the proletariat for the totalitarianism of the econom-
ically privileged class. Proclaiming a classless society, it succeeds only in producing another class. An interesting parallel may be noted in the growth of unionism in America. While we imply no essential relationship to communism, it must be recognized that many of the professed goals of unionism are very similar to those of communism. At their best, unions have a balancing influence on the economy of our nation and have blessed our land. At their worst, unions have made totalitarian claims upon their members. Denouncing the dictatorship of the capitalists, unions have often produced an equally diabolical dictatorship of their own. Invading against the tactics of management, they have proceeded to use the same tactics for their own purposes. Here again is evident the evil extremes to which all uncorrected anthropocentricity extends. The monster into which communism (and unionism) has grown is not an accident precipitated by disloyalty to the true communist cause. It is the logical and inevitable outcome of the man-centered quality of the totalitarian view of life.

Over against the extremes of totalitarianism, the Calvinistic theocentric perspective gives a true understanding of man, individually and in community. As an individual, man has infinite worth because God values him. He is a potential child of God. Calvinism is not optimistic about unregenerate human nature, but it reflects the deeper optimism based upon the love of God. “God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” This is the basis of the theocentric evaluation of man.

This perspective also gives a true understanding of man in community. God is the source and ground of all fellowship. Our relationship to him (Love God) is the basis of our relationship to all others (Love neighbor). Man’s vocation is to glorify God by reflecting his love and justice in true community. Christian communism is the ideal, bearing many external similarities to totalitarian communism, but fundamentally different in that its source is theocentric. It arises spontaneously out of the heart of man’s relationship to God. It is not imposed from below but infused from above, not required by human aspiration but inspired by the indwelling Spirit of God. Far from being the “opiate of the people,” the theocentric life has a progressive vitality unmatched by any other ideology.

Finally, the Calvinistic theocentric outlook must categorically reject totalitarianism because it recognizes that no one and no thing but God has the right to make an absolute claim upon the life of man. God is the source, meaning and end of man’s existence. To make anything else one’s ultimate concern is to lose one’s humanity in the hell of idolatry.

Cultural Claims — Scientism: Another area in which the man of today is confronted with a claim upon his ultimate loyalty is that of culture. Outstanding among these is the claim of scientism. Note that the ism is not science but scientism. Science, rightly understood, makes no such
claim upon mankind. It does not seek to capture the central place of man's concern. We are not, therefore, inveighing against science or denying the truth which true science has opened to human view. Our concern here is rather with those who have made science their religion and with the danger of this movement in our day. Scientism thus defined has turned its back on true science. It has become science run wild, science turned unscientific. In making supposed science its ultimate concern, scientism misapplies the principles of science to areas in which true science must admit ignorance. Where science ends, scientism takes over.

The insidious quality of this claim on man today lies in the fact that converts to scientism may become so gradually and almost unconsciously. They may be almost unaware of the presuppositions on which their view of life is based. Reverence for the scientific method has become so pervasive in our society that many seem to forget its limitations and consciously or unconsciously make it the foundation of their world-view. This subtlety means that the threat of scientism is on our very doorstep, it has a strong hold even within our churches. For some within the church, the fortress of faith has been surrendered and, while they continue in the external observance of religion, it has lost all relevance to their existence. Others are consciously struggling with the questions which scientism presents. How does Christian faith relate to the new-found knowledge of science or is it antiquated and inadequate? One of the many disturbing facets of this claim on human life today is the open insistence in our society that we must give our best minds, the “cream” of the coming generation to science. This is our hope, we seem to be saying. One hears this voice even within the Church. This is deeply disturbing and reveals to what extent we have deserted true science and are entertaining the presuppositions of scientism.

The theocentric perspective obviously precludes the viewpoint of scientism, but my concern here is not to defend theism against atheism or supernaturalism against naturalism. Rather I wish to show how inadequate is the anthropocentrism of scientism.

First let it be seen that scientism is bound to anthropocentricity because of its naturalism. Only the universe exists. Man is the highest being in the universe, he is the one who views the universe through the scientific method, therefore man is supreme. Man is not even viewed as a creature since there is no creator. The universe is everything and the highest product of the universe, man, is the preoccupation and concern of the devotee of scientism. But in its great concern for man, scientism reduces man to something less than human. The scientistic outlook seeks to reduce all to uniformity through organization. The end result would be the flat-
tening of all life into the single dimension of natural, necessary process. Man thus becomes a thing, a product of a universe ruled by necessity.

Such a view of human existence is intolerable. The uplifted voice of the existentialist cries out against the inadequacy of the scientistic outlook. While existentialism itself is equally inadequate in its anthropocentric extremes, it reveals the failure of objective scientism to satisfy the subjective reality of human existence.

The fallacy of scientism is that it thinks that science can reveal the whole of things (like the ants inside the ping pong ball). Its failure to do this is seen in its utter inability to answer the deepest question of human existence, which is not "what?" but "why?", not knowledge but meaning.

The realm of morality is also crucial. The presupposition of the scientistic viewpoint is progress. Progress is the salvation of man. Man will progress onward and upward to the ideal state. This optimism of the scientistic outlook was terribly jolted by the two world wars and the subsequent developments. What must be seen now is that these were not just a temporary setback in the inevitable progress of mankind. Instead it must be seen that they reveal the basic fallacy of the concept of progress. These catastrophies came after a period of tremendous progress in every field of scientific endeavor. Thus they stand as mute testimony to man's lack of progress in morality, the ability to live together. And the advocate of scientism who has his eyes open today, can see that it is not over yet. Never before in human history has morality been so obviously lacking in international relations as it is today. The outlook is that progress will not be man's salvation but rather his destruction. Anthropocentrism always fails at the point of morality for it lacks the transcendent standard on which morality must be based. Its ethical standards are avowedly relative, subject to opinion and change. Such standards are bound to collapse of their own weight.

Another failure of scientism is its inability to account for freedom or even to acknowledge its existence. The logical consequence of the scientistic outlook is absolute determinism. Thus in the deepest sense, the man-centeredness of scientism robs man of his true humanity. Man becomes just another thing produced by an impersonal universe.

The theocentric viewpoint of Calvinism speaks loud and clear at this point. It sees man's freedom as the concomitant of the love of God. God has made man a moral being, free even to hate his creator. This God-givenness is the true foundation of human freedom. The theocentric perspective also sees the true personality of man in the light of the personality of God. Personality belongs supremely to God. Man is personal as a creature of God, created for fellowship with God. The Calvinistic empha-
sis enables us to see how estrangement from God has deprived man of true personality and how restored fellowship with his creator makes man truly personal again.

The theocentricity of Calvinism is badly needed today to correct the extremes of incipient scientism. And it can fill the void which scientism, logically concluded, leaves in the soul of man.

*Religious Claims — Fundamentalism:* In the realm of the religious claims upon the life of man, we must obviously use our tools in a different manner. Flagrant and obvious man-centeredness is, of course, not involved. The same issues, however, are at stake. I have chosen Fundamentalism here, *not* because it represents a position directly opposed to the Calvinistic outlook, but rather for two other reasons. First, it is a strong element in the American religious scene and the application of the theocentric principle to its emphasis characterizes the contribution of Calvinism in the contemporary religious situation. Secondly, I feel that Fundamentalism has often become an issue within our own fellowship and still is today. I believe we must take a long, hard and candid look at its foundations. I do not set forth Fundamentalism as a claim on ultimate loyalty in conflict with the Christian faith. I view it as a movement within the Church which to some degree presents an approach differing from that of Calvinism. Let it be understood then, that the fundamentals of Fundamentalism are not here in question. We hold these truths in common. It is rather the attitude and approach which Fundamentalism takes to the human dilemma which I wish to scrutinize.

Not all who are called Fundamentalists are alike in their approach to the crisis of modern man. Some close their eyes to the issues and thus desert the arena of faith. Others strive to deal intelligently and feelingly with the issues involved. The group, however, with which I am here concerned are those militant Fundamentalists whose characteristics will become clear and recognizable as we analyze their position.

Fundamentalism, characterized by this group, is essentially a defensive movement. It arose in the face of biblical criticism and scientific knowledge which it found intolerable because incompatible with its tradition. In the face of these threats, the reaction of Fundamentalism is neither retreat, nor attack, but entrenchment. The immediate cause on the Fundamentalist side is an extreme biblicism, approaching bibliolatry. The issue is not the question of biblical authority, as some still seem to think, but rather of biblical interpretation. The Fundamentalist entrenchment is not a defense of the Word of God but rather of a particular tradition of biblical interpretation. It is not a defense of divine revelation but of human understanding. It reflects not so much a high view of Scripture as a rigid and limited one.

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Thus, I feel that while Fundamentalism is opposing an obvious form of humanism, it is itself guilty of a subtle form of the same thing. I speak of the anthropocentricity of bibliolatry, the worshipping of a particular tradition of biblical interpretation instead of the Living Word whom the Book proclaims. Being closed to the illumination made available by science and biblical criticism, Fundamentalism departs from a theocentric perspective and becomes guilty of the anthropocentricity of maintaining its own position in spite of evidence to the contrary.

Even this subtle kind of man-centeredness leads to legalism. A rigid standard takes the place of the living struggle of faith — the divine-human encounter. Faith becomes a list rather than a living reality. Its lack of the theocentric outlook often leads Fundamentalism astray into exclusiveness and into passing judgments not commensurate with the data of revelation. Thus we find the movement frequently lacking in the seeking humility of those who depend upon the divine self-disclosure.

Fundamentalism's five points are in many respects too little rather than too large. They reduce the height and depth of God’s revelation into a legalistic rigidity. The fulness of revelation can never be fully captured by a dogmatic statement. Such must always be a finger pointing to the more.

Fundamentalism has done American Christianity a real service. It has helped to stem the tide of extreme conclusions riding on the wave of scientific discovery and biblical criticism. For this we owe it a debt of gratitude. Our gratitude must not, however, blind us to the fact that underneath the surface the Fundamentalist is close kin to the scientist. Both are literalists, seeking truth largely by descriptive and analytical methods. This is, of course, a man-centered approach to truth and is foreign to that found in the Bible. Applicable to this point are Paul's words, "the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life." One fears that the Fundamentalist has lost the ability to stand with mouth-open awe before the mystery of revelation. To lose this capacity is dangerous if not disastrous.

A proper application of the theocentric principle will enable us to avoid the pitfall of Fundamentalism. We shall maintain the vitality of a living faith, an appreciation for the mystery of revelation and an openness to truth from whatever source it may come. This abiding contribution of Calvinism is our spiritual heritage.

The theocentric perspective on human existence is not to be evaluated only on the basis of its pragmatic value as a balance to the destructive

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extremes of man-centered ideologies. Its value at depth is that it relates man to reality. This is our Father's world. God is the Creator and Redeemer. We are his children through faith. Calvinism's theocentric view of existence relates man meaningfully to the reality which is now shrouded in mystery but will one day be fully known.