THE CALVINISTIC ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE WORLD

What is the Calvinistic attitude towards the world outside the church? This was the subject chosen by students of Western and Calvin theological seminaries for a recent joint meeting. Besides the following paper, the program consisted of a response by Professor Henry Stob, discussion in small groups, and a question period.

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The assignment given me could be disposed of more easily if there had been a slight change in the wording. If it had read, "Calvinistic Attitudes Towards the World," or "The Attitude of Calvinists Towards the World," there would be little hazard in writing on it. In its present form, however, the subject calls for an assumption that there is a Calvinistic attitude towards the world even though not all Calvinists may have shared in it. This latter, however, assuming its reality, need not surprise us, for there are Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Baptist positions taken on this or that subject on which there is not unanimous agreement either. How frequently is unanimity achieved in the more difficult areas of Christian consideration, particularly in that thorny area called social ethics?

Nevertheless, it is our contention that there is a Calvinistic attitude towards the world which can be sketched in broad detail, and I propose to speak on it this evening. I believe that one can discern in Calvin's teaching on providence, man, general revelation, common grace, the Lordship of God and of Christ over the world as well as over the church, on politics and education, and in the doctrine of vocation distinct lines of thought which present a clear and consistent picture of his thinking. Moreover, in the tradition that stemmed from him, in spite of the variety of thought and expression that can be found therein, there is a core of theory and practice which seems to me to deserve recognition as most representative of the whole. And this is the interpretation of specialists who have written on the social ethics of this tradition which we hold dear.¹

In sketching what I believe this attitude towards the world to be, I would mention first that there is a recognition of the awesomeness of sin. There is no tradition which takes sin more seriously than ours. We see it as something disruptive and corruptive, as stemming from rebellion

against the living God, as something which, unless repented of, leads to
death and to hell. There is no pussy-footing around here, when Calvinists talk about sin, and in everything else that we shall have to say this evening this thought must be borne in mind.

Secondly, in spite of the disturbance and ruin brought about by sin, this world is still God's world. He remains its Lord; he has not abdicated or turned it over to the devil. He still preserves and governs it and apparently has as great an interest in it as he ever had. We need to remember this as we live in the world, for its evil and our frailty may so discourage us that our attitude towards the world may become negative and unwholesome.

Thirdly, the Reformed tradition, at least in Calvin himself, teaches simultaneously a renunciation of the world and a grateful use of it with all that God has put therein. This is the fascinating feature of our ethic which Calvin so unapologetically elaborates in the third book of the Institutes and refers to frequently elsewhere. On the one hand, he can speak most pessimistically about this present life, calling it a prison, a sepulcher, misery, a place of exile which is "doubtless to be at once despised and trampled under foot." On the other hand, he emphasizes the glory of this world in which God displays himself and stimulates a desire to dominate the world and use its resources as gifts of God. Along with the contemptus mundi, then, Calvin teaches that we should appreciate and use it. Moreover, his point is that only when it is compared with the heavenly life or contemplated in its sin is this life to be despised and trampled under foot. And even then we must not turn against life itself.

The truth of the matter is that, although it abounds in misery, life yet has many blessings. Unless we see God's goodness in these latter, we are ungrateful. So there is in Calvin, and in his tradition, this paradoxical attitude towards the world which allows for both renunciation, on the one hand, and acceptance and mastery, on the other.

A fourth observation that our subject requires is the redemption of the world by Jesus Christ. God has bowed the heavens and come down. In the person of the Son he has stepped into the midst of man's miserable condition as a man to set men free and to lead them in the way of blessedness, peace, and love. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit which Christ bestows on his disciples they receive a new nature enabling them to live as his ambassadors in the world which he has once redeemed and now rules. In him, God's man, humanity finds its new head and a suggestion of its own future beatitude.

3Ibid.
But salvation, as Calvin saw it, is no experience which an individual enjoys alone. Rather, it is an experience which he shares with others in the bosom of the church so that he and they can be God's agents to bring it to the world. Men exist in society and redeemed men become members of the body of Christ so that they may share fellowship and blessing with the Head and with each other. Salvation, therefore, is a social as well as an individual experience. Calvin states it well in discussing the meaning of the "communion of saints":

If truly convinced that God is the common Father of all and Christ the common Head, being united in brotherly love, they cannot but share their benefits with one another.4

Moreover, men are saved so that, by word and deed, they may influence others by the quality of the new life which they have received from God. To speak more precisely, Christ saves men and gives them the Holy Spirit so that he may use them in his purpose to save the world. Christians, then, have a responsibility to the world outside the church. This is a much emphasized theme in our day and a much needed one.

The responsibility which Christians bear towards the world needs the most forceful statement possible in our time for three reasons. The first is because they are called to be agents of reconciliation in the world individually and corporately. Christians are called to serve; the church likewise exists to preach the gospel in word and deed. This runs throughout scripture and it has been the peculiar glory of the Reformed tradition to have understood that simple message and to try, however imperfectly, to relate the gospel to the world about it. Perhaps the most encouraging phenomenon in the church in our times, next to the biblical and theological revival, is the rediscovery of this fact of the church's mission. The writings of Harry R. Boer, A. A. van Ruler, Arnold B. Come, Hendrik Kraemer, Lesslie Newbigin and J. C. Hoekendijk, to mention only those that have most impressed me, are representative and, I dare to presume, among the most impressive of a great volume of literature which the Spirit of God is using to rouse the church from its lethargy and to call it to complete its unfinished task. One of the most hopeful signs in the present concern of the church to rediscover and more faithfully to discharge its responsibility is self-criticism. Examples are the writings of Harry Boer or of members of Calvin Seminary's faculty, but in order to stay a little farther from home I refer to a study-paper prepared for the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Addressing itself to the subject "The Reformed Faith and the World of Today," it states the responsibility of the church to proclaim the gospel to the world and then laments as follows:

4Ibid., IV, i, 3.
We confess with shame, however, that the Reformed witness to the world, while never completely obscured, has tended to fade and diminish both in its content and in its passion. We have been content to judge the world, to condemn it, to deny it, and thus virtually to stand aloof and remain apart from it. We have embraced a personal pietism, good in itself, but too often isolated from and insulated against the world in which we live. We have developed an ethical morality bordering on legalism which knows how to denounce and how to frown but is unskilled and inept at restoring or healing. We have so projected the Christian hope into the future as to make us other-worldly in a wrong and misguided way. We have become so fearful of secularism both outside and inside the Church that we have lost our vision of service to and in the world. The baleful result of our dimmed vision is that we no longer really know the world, and the world for its part no longer pays us heed or looks to us for help. In such a situation neither the Church’s judgment upon the world nor its message of redemption for the world can be trenchant or creative.  

The introversion of the church referred to in this statement is the second reason that Christian responsibility to the world is a needed emphasis. The church has become a refuge from the world for many, an escape from duty, and a sickly substitute for the dynamic witness in the world that it was intended to be. ”It has been tacitly understood,” says Come, “that the only really saving, redeeming, reconciling work is that of converting and holding sinners within the church.” The fact that they have been saved to serve as ambassadors in the world is neglected or forgotten. Another reason for emphasizing Christian social responsibility is the lamentable secularization of society in our time. It was not always so. There was a time when living conscious of Christian realities was common and natural. In every phase of human concourse—social, economic, political—life’s spiritual dimension was real. During the last three centuries, however, the western world has experienced a gradual lessening of Christian influence as ”the acids of modernity” have eaten away at the older foundations laid long ago. The movement began, as all new movements begin, in the thinking of men. Philosophers, scientists, moralists, and theologians rested their case with unaided reason rather than with God and repudiated certain fundamental Christian convictions. The speed with which that tendency moved in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, and its spread in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, would be incredible if the history were not there for all to read. In an essay on the foundations of culture, a leading Dutch authority speaks about the

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5 *Theology Today*, XVI, 1959, p. 309.
great process of reduction that has been going on—a *vermageringsprocess*: a thinning or watering down—resulting in Christianity and culture having become this-worldly, secularized, and humanized. The present time is often referred to in Europe as the post-Christian era, and America, despite its numerically high church membership, is little better off spiritually, as has been amply shown. The situation is undoubtedly reflective of man’s spiritual myopia and lethargy but also of the judgment of God on the church for its excessive self-concern and failure to address itself to the needs of the world in which it is called to witness.

Although Calvin and the Reformed tradition have caught the biblical emphasis on the responsibility of Christians to bring the gospel to the world in word and deed, some within that tradition seem to have felt that they could best discharge their social responsibility by isolating themselves as much as possible from the world about them. So an “absolute principial break with the world” is advocated on the basis of the “absolute antithesis.” This latter demands an “absolute break” principally and organizationally with society. In the name of Calvinism it is argued that separate organization should be achieved in every area of social intercourse. Social separation, including multiple forms of separate organizational life, becomes the ideal and one’s contacts outside his own circle of like-minded Christians are reduced to a minimum. How Christians can have any influence at all on society at large with the adoption of such a social ethic, even though they engage in occasional preaching at that society, remains an open question.

Although such social separatism is common-place in certain Christian fellowships, it is surprising that it is also found in the Reformed tradition, especially in our own which has its roots in the Netherlands. How it all began there I do not know, but I do know that it is written in my own family history, for my forebears were so fed up with nineteenth-century Europe with its rationalism and unbelief that they turned their backs on their own society and refused to allow their children to attend the public school. Since there was no other school available the children got what little training they had at home. When, in 1847, they migrated to this country and settled in Vriesland, Michigan, they were deliberate social isolationists whose lives were spent in their Dutch-American covenant communities at the center of which still stands the church.

I do not sit in judgment on those folks for I feel that there may be times when a severance of relations with the world is necessary for purposes of preservation. But such action is to be lamented and never made the norm, at least, not for Calvinistic people.

One can appreciate the spirit of social separatism. I feel most at home, most at one spiritually with my environment, in certain communities in Ottawa County, Michigan, where I have friends and relatives whose lives are built around the church. I sometimes feel that I would be happy to spend the rest of my days in Vriesland or Forest Grove! Even Holland is large for me, and as for Grand Rapids, that "worldly" place, it's best if my time there is limited to brief visits to my parents, my sisters, and their families!

That spirit, which makes one want to turn his back upon the world and which is sometimes idealized, is a violation of Calvinistic and biblical principles. Christ calls us to be his witnesses. We are salt, leaven, the light of the world, ambassadors of reconciliation, who have a job to do in the world. I have wondered when some Calvinistic brethren, who, on paper, agree that Christians have a mission in the world, do make their impact on society. This is carried to such an extreme in some areas of the Netherlands that social intercourse between Reformed people and others is reduced to as low a point as possible. The Reformed people try to associate only with their own kind. I have learned that the old story about the "Society for Goat-breeding on a Reformed Basis" is rooted in fact! Calvinistic goat-breeding is evidently principally different from any other variety! Our colleague of last year, the Rev. G. J. ten Zijthoff, has informed me that in the village of three thousand persons in which he once lived there were three societies for raising goats, one for the Roman Catholics, one religiously neutral, and one organized "on a Reformed basis." However, for reasons of economy the three societies had a billy-goat in common. It would seem to me that the kids raised under such an arrangement could hardly be considered orthodox in any of the societies!

The spirit of Calvin and of the Reformed tradition has little in common with a separatistic social philosophy, however. In times of apostasy and the persecution of believers it may be temporarily necessary for Christians to withdraw from social involvement in part but this is never the ideal or normal posture for Christians. Since the Reformed Christian knows that this is his Father's world, he feels no need to flee from it. Rather, remembering that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself," and that Christians "are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through [them],"\textsuperscript{10} the Reformed Christian feels it to be his

\textsuperscript{10} 2 Cor. 5:19f.
peculiar privilege and duty to seek to penetrate society in the name and strength of his master. The avenues of social intercourse become opportunities for him to make Christ and the Christian way of life known. He is not to make light of evil but to relate it to the devil whence it came. However, he is to fight it, evil, and him, the devil, in the world, not out of it. How can it be otherwise since Christians are still a part of society? It is obvious that underlying such a social ethic there is a spirit of strenuous activity. As Dakin points out,

Men are encouraged to live, sent out to live. They are to master the world, dominate it, bend it indeed to their supreme religious aim.  

The fact is that at certain periods in European and American history this social ethic was put to work in the life of the people and its accomplishments have made it a favorite theme in the writing of that history. It is agreed that the application of the Calvinistic social ethic to society resulted in the greatest penetration into society of Christian principles that the world has ever seen and that the benefits of this penetration are still being felt in our soul-weary age. Concluding his discussion of this subject Troeltsch makes the following judgment:

... along with the organic and patriarchal fundamental theory of the mediaeval idea of Society, Calvinism has become the second great Christian definite social ideal of European Society. ... Indeed, the great importance of the Calvinistic social theory does not consist merely in the fact that it is one great type of Christian social doctrine; its significance is due to the fact that it is one of the great types of sociological thought in general. In inner significance and historical power the types of the French optimistic equalitarian democracy, of State Socialism, of proletarian Communist Socialism, and of the mere theory of power, are, in comparison with Calvinism, far behind. 

The question that haunts me lately is whether the Reformed tradition, as a part of the church of Christ, has the dynamic to discharge its responsibility to influence society in our day. I believe that it has if it is true to itself and lives close to its Lord. Through the power of the Holy Spirit it can be the leaven which leavens the whole lump. If and when that happens men will see again that the church of Christ is a power for righteousness in the world and that the Reformed social ethic is the glory of our tradition.