THE REFORMED FAITH AND AMERICAN CULTURE

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We are at a point of uncomfortable disadvantage, in this paper, of being unable to define with any preciseness the two rather large realities about whose interrelationships and interplay we are attempting to speak. To take "American Culture," the second of these terms, first, can this be anything less than the totality of things American? And yet, simply to make up a list of features which have characterized American history, and to call the sum of these things "American Culture," would be somewhat like totaling up all the discrete elements of the human body, every last cell and bone accounted for, and calling the result a person. In the latter case, that which is spirit, that which gives this particular grouping of physical detail the right to be called "person" is precisely the indefinable something which cannot be fitted into the list, and yet without which there is no person. So with American Culture. The very element which unites the myriad details of America's historical existence into the cultural form we call American is always somewhere just beyond our grasp, but without it there is neither cohesive unity nor significant meaning. The understanding of this fact should help us to keep from converting a complex truth into a simple falsehood by being over-anxious about a precise definition of the term. We shall take American Culture to be the whole confusing complex of events, ideas, ideals, dreams and visions, triumphs and failures, which has made American history to be what it has been from colonial times to the present. And we are not suggesting that the Reformed Faith simply stepped into this milieu, for American Culture is, in substantial part, a product of the Reformed Faith, with its many and varied expressions, coming into fruitful interplay with a multitude of diverse historical currents and forces.

To make such a contention requires that we define the other term, "Reformed Faith," in the broadest manner possible. Such a definition will be inclusive of not only the theological and confessional denotations of the
term, but of all the political, social, and economic ramifications associated with the word "Reformed" on the American continent. In two recent books, *Democracy and the Churches* by Prof. James H. Nichols, and *Foundation of American Freedom* by A. M. Davies, this very broad usage of the term "Reformed" is made. In its inclusiveness, it is clearly something more, and often something quite other, than either a strict usage of the term "Calvinistic" will allow, or any kind of theological definitiveness will suffer. It should perhaps be noted that this comprehensive usage of the term is by no means confined to the authors just mentioned, but has had, rather, a very wide currency for some time. We are speaking here not only of the specific term "Reformed Faith," but of it and other terms which are roughly equivalent to it. The word "Puritan" has, without question, at least in this country, a considerably wider usage than such expressions as "Reformed Faith," or "Calvinistic." And though a significant body of scholarly opinion today would deny that "Puritan" on the one hand, and "Reformed" or "Calvinistic" on the other, are in any real sense equivalents, they are, nevertheless, from an historical and sociological point of view, of the same religious family. It would not be unfair to say that principles and ideas stemming from John Calvin, not in the sense of having been originated by him, but rather articulated by him in a peculiar form, have had a larger constructive power in the forming of American Culture than any other single influence.

If there were only two general types of Calvinism before us, the broad, cultural form just mentioned, and the strictly theological and confessional type, our problem would be greatly simplified. Might not one choose one or the other and discuss its relation to American Culture? A. M. Davies does exactly this in his book, contending that sufficient severance has taken place between the original Calvinistic theological ideas and the resultant social and political ideals, and that the modern man, even as a member of a Reformed community, may safely reject the former and praise God for the latter. This is not at all to the liking of Prof. John H. Gerstner, who, in a review of the volume in the *Christian Century* (Dec. 7, 1955) comments: "This is a good book while it gathers the golden eggs and a bad book when it then kills the goose that laid them." Many attempts have also been made in books, sermons, and addresses to support the other thesis, that confessional Calvinism has made a significant contribution to the formation of American Culture, and that, as Prof. Gerstner implies, no real disjunction must be allowed between the formative power of the theological idea and the resultant cultural creation.

There is, however, a third kind of Calvinism claiming a right to speak in our time, one which lies, like the orthodox Calvinistic type, clearly in the religious or theological field, but which is a kind of mortal foe of orthodox Calvinists. It has no very definite structure, it has created no systematic theology, and it assumes many quite different titles. It eschews
any confining use of the terms "Calvinistic" or "Reformed," and yet it demands for itself the whole heritage of the Reformed as its own legitimate possession. Its fundamental view is both historical and progressivistic in the sense that the dominant principles and ideals which have actually characterized the empirical history of the Reformed churches the last four centuries are the peculiarly Reformed features which may be used today to identify that which follows in its train. From this viewpoint, no special theological idea may be used as a criterion to distinguish between Reformed and non-Reformed. For example, where a particular view of predestination might once have been employed to distinguish a Calvinist from an Arminian, from this broad theological perspective a whole denomination or group of denominations may be Arminian in their conceptions of sin and grace and still be Reformed because they are, from an historical point of view, in the Reformed tradition, and because they have been conditioned by, and are expressive of, the ideology which is peculiarly Reformed. As Dean Sperry once put it, "... the permanent and still most important influence of Calvinism on American life is to be sought and found not in its theology, but in its cultural conception of the relation of religion to life. At this point even those churches which are now theologically emancipated remain Calvinistic." This same opinion was expressed by Prof. Wilhelm Pauck in an article on "The Prospects of Orthodoxy" in The Journal of Religion (January, 1947, pp. 49-50). He notes that the nature of Calvinism may be described with special emphasis on its "God-centered faith," "for the doctrines of the sovereignty of God and of divine predestination and providence have always been of special concern to all Calvinists." He underlines, also, "The Reformed insistence on the understanding of religion as obedience to the divine law. For from this special conception of the nature of Christian ethics and particularly of church order and polity have been derived. Indeed the organization of the church which Calvin prescribed in terms of his reading of the biblical law represents to this day the one feature which all Calvinist bodies have in common and by virtue of which they constitute a special church family." Churchmanship, much more than theology, has held the central place in Calvinism, and in this respect it differs from Lutheranism, which is anchored primarily in a theological tradition. Calvinism has not neglected theology, but "conformity with creedal and theological orthodoxy can hardly be regarded as the most important feature of Calvinism."

Pauck makes an important point when he says there are many Calvinist theological traditions. He finds the Reformed theologies of the Swiss, the Germans, the French, the Dutch, the Scotch, etc., "are not so uniform as the theologies of the various Lutheran bodies are." He would include the Arminians with the Reformed, just as definitely as the "Fathers of Dort." Jonathan Edwards and Abraham Kuyper are equally Calvinistic, though there are significant differences between their theological views. And so
Barth and Brunner today, along with J. Gresham Machen, stand firmly in the Calvinistic tradition. Dr. Pauck expresses high regard for the Calvinistic theologians and "system-builders" of the past, but "today Christian theological thinking can no longer be cast in this mold, simply because the modern philosophical, natural, and social sciences forbid it. It is nothing but obscurantism to base the defense of the truth of the Christian faith upon norms containing philosophical and social implications which are irreconcilable with the evidences of the modern knowledge of the world. This denial of the adequacy of orthodoxy does not mean that the anti-supernaturalistic scientific world-view and the historical conception of life stand in irreconcilable conflict with the Christian religion, as the spokesmen of orthodox churches are wont to claim. They merely render impossible the preservation of theological ways of thinking which were practiced before the rise of modern science and history."

Prof. John T. McNeill, in his recent work, The History and Character of Calvinism, also finds it unnecessary to identify theological Calvinism with a special kind of orthodox theology. He finds its center, rather, in a type of piety, one not identified with peculiar words and rites of worship. "It is characterized by a combination of God-consciousness with an urgent sense of mission. The triune God, Sovereign Creator, Redeemer, and Comforter, is an ever-present reality through both prosperity and disaster. Guilt is real, but it is submerged under grace" (p. 436). Further, "The Calvinist may not know how it happens; he may be a very simple-minded theologian; but he is conscious that God commands his will and deed as well as his thought and prayer. This is what makes him a reformer and a dangerous character to encounter on moral and political issues. He is a man with a mission to bring to realization the will of God in human society" (pp. 436-37). He is distrustful of idealistic utterances and professions, just because he knows the human heart to be desperately wicked. He is, for the same reason, cautious of taking up "causes." "Yet when he knows what is God's will, and how it is to be translated into action of the hour, he will espouse it with courage, energy, and tenacity. God has not given him the spirit of fear . . . . Calvinists . . . have often been troubleurs of Israel, assailants of the evils countenanced by the majority. We might almost say that this has been their trade and that when we find them acquiescent in a bad society they have given up working" (p. 437).

Orthodox, confessional Calvinism has, of course, a very different view of what constitutes genuine Calvinism. For it the term "Reformed Faith" designates a rather specific body of theological propositions, and only those accepting these propositions, or something very nearly like them, deserve the name of Calvinist. They not only accept for themselves all the fine things Pauck and McNeill associate with the name of Calvin, but they also make it quite clear that the broader variety of theological Calvinism
is not really Calvinism at all. Actually it is fraud and betrayal, for like the
cultural type of Calvinism we spoke of first, this broad kind of Calvinism
despises its origins. It is most interesting, in the light of these facts, that
orthodox Calvinism, which in this country at the present time can boast
so small a following, is repeatedly claiming that a "Calvinistic revival"
is taking place, when actually every perceptible revival feature is occurring
in the much larger movements of the broader Calvinists. Barth, for exam­
ple, is blasted as a Kantian wolf masquerading as a Calvinist sheep, but
the salutary results of his dynamic ideas in the religious world are ac­
cepted as evidences of a return to Calvin. This much is certain, there is no
significant return in our times to the basic and required theological struc­
ture of orthodox Calvinism, though there is a return to the very realistic
views of man, in his nature and destiny, that characterized primitive Cal­
vinism, yes, Calvin himself.

II

Thus far we have been trying to identify and define three general
kinds of Calvinism on the American scene. For purposes of convenience,
we shall refer to them hereafter as cultural Calvinism, broad Calvinism,
and orthodox Calvinism. We have noted that the first, cultural Calvinism,
is not too much concerned about the other two. Broad Calvinism accepts
the fruits of cultural Calvinism and bemoans the anachronistic character
of orthodox theology, wishing that it had given up long ago. Orthodox
Calvinism likewise accepts the fruits of cultural Calvinism and denies that
the second type is Calvinism at all. We shall now attempt to relate these
three types of Calvinism to American Culture and to one another, not in
the narrow sense of trying to discover what each contributed to make
America what she is. That would apply almost exclusively to the first type,
and, as we noted before, American Culture is in good part derived from
the cultural aspects of Calvinism. Rather, we are seeking to estimate the
fortunes, good and bad, of Calvinism in the American environment. We
are really asking two questions here: What was Calvinism able to con­
tribute to the formation of American Culture? and What happened to
Calvinism in the historical process we call American history?

Puritan Protestantism had Calvinism as its most basic component, but
just because there were other significant elements in the admixture, Purri­
tanism can not be regarded as being Calvinism pure and simple. Nichols
calls it "neo-Calvinism," and finds it a fusion of Calvinism, Spiritualism,
and the Baptist sect movement. He contrasts it with the aristocratic and
authoritarian Calvinism of the sixteenth century. New England Puritanism
operated from a Calvinistic creedal basis, at least through the 17th cen­

1 Sperry, W., Religion in America, pp. 145f.
2 Nichols, J. H., Democracy and the Churches, p. 10.
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tury. In 1648 the Cambridge Platform was adopted by a Massachusetts synod. It sanctioned the Westminster Confession "for the substance thereof." The Savoy Confession, adopted by the English Congregationalists in 1658, was essentially the same in doctrine as the Westminster creed. It was adopted, with slight changes, by the Boston Synod of 1680, and this in turn was approved by the Saybrook Synod in Connecticut in 1708.

The religion of the New England Puritans was certainly not strictly Calvinistic at every point, in spite of the Calvinistic theological framework within which it moved. By this we mean that there were significant departures from first and second generation Calvinism in Geneva, both theologically and with respect to polity. However, since the world has never really known for any considerable period any other kind of Calvinism than "modified Calvinism," this fact should not lead us to disavow New England religion for the Reformed Faith. Accepting the core as Reformed, the fruitful question will refer to the extent and nature of the modification. The intellectual cast of New England theology and philosophy was clearly Ramian, from Peter Ramus and from the English Puritan divines who espoused his methodology. A scholastic form of the federal theology of the covenant, derived from Cocceius and English federalists, was also assumed as the normative explanation of the relationship between God and his people. Students of the period have found this covenant idea put the whole dealing of God and man on a very legalistic basis, much more so than primitive Calvinism would have been able to countenance. And Calvin himself would hardly be able to approve the oligarchical form of government in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, with its insistence upon the "elect" only having the right to vote and hold office. This demand had developed along with the Puritan dissenters' insistence that it was possible to distinguish accurately between the elect and the non-elect. Calvin was not so sure. Like Calvin, on the other hand, the New Englanders stood for a Bible commonwealth. The Scriptures were all-sufficient and the final authority in all matters of faith and life. They often used the Bible as a code or law book for purely civil affairs.

It can not be our purpose here, in so brief an essay, to identify the Reformed element in each of the colonial communities. Certain generalizations will have to stand for the whole early period of the development of an American culture, especially with respect to the growth of political norms of a democratic nature. Of this Nichols says, "For a century and a half, ... from 1640 to 1790, only one Christian tradition, that of Anglo-American Puritanism and Nonconformity, had nurtured a mature democratic political ethic. This orientation stood out in sharp contrast to the traditionalist authoritarianism of High Church Anglicanism and early Methodism, the conservative patriarchalism of German Lutheranism, and the divine right absolutism of Roman Catholicism" (p. 41). We shall have to confine ourselves to a listing of some of the significant ingredients
of the American political ethic which, though modified by Puritanism, were nevertheless peculiarly Calvinistic:

(1) The principle of separation of church and state. Though the 17th century Puritan society in New England was anti-democratic, by the end of that century serious modifications in the direction of democracy were taking place, making for a clearer differentiation of the functions of state and church. Roger Williams had been more truly Calvinistic at this point than John Cotton. Calvin in Geneva had insisted upon the right of the church to make her own decisions in some matters, especially with respect to the discipline of the membership.

(2) The principle of pulpit freedom. Here Calvin had demanded the untrammeled privilege for the preacher of declaring with authority the Word of God, even in criticism of kings and magistrates. Puritan preachers did much in defense of the liberties of the people through the sermon. It was a safeguard against the despot's use of the "divine-right" theory. The pulpit kept reminding the throne that no human being could exercise absolute power. That belonged to God alone, and all men, including kings, were subject to His law. As J. W. Thornton put it, in *The Pulpit of the American Revolution* (p. xix): "To the pulpit, the Puritan pulpit, we owe the moral force which won our independence." Natural corollaries to follow were freedom of speech and press.

(3) Rulers rule by the consent of the governed. The basis of this is to be found in the presbyterial form of church government espoused by Calvin. Ministers are elected by the church membership. Laymen serve as elders on an equal basis with the clergy. "Thus," says Davies, "the great principle that a government derives its just powers from the consent of the governed was firmly implanted in the heart of Calvinism from its very birth. By natural and direct descent it became, first, the guiding principle of English Puritan thought and, then, in the fullness of time, the idea that sparked the American Revolution" (p. 60).

(4) Right of rebellion against civil powers. This was by inferior magistrates representing the people. Later this right was exercised by elective parliaments.

(5) Right of private judgment. This right had been inculcated by Calvin's doctrine of the correlation of Word and Spirit. The Holy Spirit's internal witness in the human heart was the final arbiter for all religious judgments. Later, the guidance of the Spirit became isolated, for many, from the Word, and became a kind of voice of conscience, an internal decision which could not be gainsaid. This principle was highly significant in the development of American culture. In the development of governmental forms on the democratic ideal, government by debate and discussion became imperative, with every participant speaking out of personal conviction. Thus comes what Nichols calls "new truth through the group."

There are doubtless other important factors of a Calvinistic type which played upon American Culture in the formative years of our history, but these will suffice to indicate how significant Reformed principles were. There were principles of a somewhat different kind, too, which aided in the development of a culture which is basically Protestant, and more than

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3 Cited in Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
that, peculiarly Calvinistic. Dr. Paul Tillich calls the American ethical point of view a "secularized Puritan ethic." Its original orientation was religious, and deeply so, just as our hospitals and institutions of mercy were also originally religious. But just as the latter fell into secular hands, so the American ethic has become the generalized ethical mood and mind of the great majority of the American people. The majority of schools and colleges in early America were founded under Calvinistic auspices, directly or indirectly, and these, too, have for the most part become "secularized." By that term we do not mean "non-religious," but rather the religious and the purely civil becoming so nearly united, the specifically religious quality, or at least the ecclesiastical, is completely submerged by the civil, the religious remaining only as a very vague, indefinable something. To speak of America as a "Christian nation" is to do so only in this same vague manner.

Theological or confessional Calvinism passed through many vicissitudes from colonial times to the present. New England Puritanism was hardly a half-century old when the old Calvinism was beginning to become seriously undermined. The acceptance of the half-way covenant in the second half of the seventeenth century in most of New England was one of the more significant elements in this story of decline. Where Calvin, the Calvinistic creeds, and most of the older Calvinists had insisted that the baptized children of Christian parents could be presumed to be regenerated, by virtue of their membership in the household of faith (not by virtue of the baptismal act), the half-way covenant allowed baptism of infants in cases in which the genuine faith of the parents was in serious doubt. Calvin's view was quite essential to his conception of the covenantal relation, for by this view children of Christian parents could be regarded as the children of God and could be nurtured as such. This profound meaning was lost by the half-way covenant, for in the case of the latter, the child's place in the covenant was tenuous indeed. It was not a far step from this to the notion that children, all children, were to be regarded as being in Satan's hands until evidences of conversion could be displayed. This occurred throughout the great period of American revivalism, from the days of Jonathan Edwards through the first half of the 19th century. This view is still held by quite a few denominations. At times children from Christian homes were tortured almost beyond belief by reflections of the terrors of hell, from which they scarcely believed they would escape.

"Stoddardianism" or the employment of the sacraments of the church as converting ordinances, begun by the Rev. Solomon Stoddard and accepted by many others, contributed its share to the decline. Sacraments became means to an end, a dubious end, and thus lost something of their former dignity and religious depth. In the colonial period earnest discussions were
held as to the division of the covenant into an external covenant and an internal covenant, an arrangement which opened the way for a less-than-strict view of church membership, since even the unconverted might share the full blessings of the church along with the sincere. Other factors involving a wholly new outlook on life and reality were creeping in. After Jonathan Edwards the battle against an anthropocentric moralism steadily became more and more ineffectual, even though the mighty warriors who followed in the train of Jonathan Edwards fought valiantly. The typical Calvinism of the old school was so theocentric that some were willing to declare that they were quite willing to descend into hell upon death, if so the greater glory of God were achieved. But the growing mood in the 18th century was for individualism, moralism, and with them the placing of man at the center of his universe. The comfort of man, the happiness of man, the conviction that man was essentially good, was the regnant opinion, and by and by the New England theology (by the beginning of the 19th century) was saying with conviction what would have horrified Jonathan Edwards. The New Haven Divinity under Taylor and others was calling itself Calvinistic, and was quite Arminian, perhaps somewhat Pelagian. What took place here became a commonplace by the close of the 19th century. At the opening of the 20th century, the Presbyterian Church, U. S. A., once the very stronghold of Calvinistic orthodoxy under Hodge and Warfield, had become, practically and creedally, Arminian. The old Calvinism can be found today in a few minority groups, like the Christian Reformed Church, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, in some areas of the Reformed Church in America, and here and there.

When we say that the “old Calvinism” can be found occasionally today, we are speaking, of course, of a modified form of original Calvinism. After the first generation or so in Geneva, this is the only kind which has appeared. And most of these types of Calvinism, in this country and abroad, have been considerably more rationalistic, abstract, and non-existential than the original. Nevertheless, the core has been true enough to the original to warrant calling the whole Calvinistic, or Reformed. That which survives in American culture today as “old Calvinism” is rather completely out-of-step with the dominant cultural forces in the American scene. It has never come to proper terms with any school of philosophy, and it is “pre-scientific” in its rejection of the basic presuppositions underlying the contemporary view of reality. It clings to a more or less literalistic biblical view of reality, at cost of, say the critics, a genuine sacrificium intellectus. That means that reality is peopled with demons and angels, as well as with the human species. History will come to dramatic end; the time process will spend itself, and Christ will appear physically and visibly to consummate all things. The Bible is the trusted revelation of all this. The question of truth is not raised to the Bible; the Calvinist accepts it as truth because it is biblical. God is sovereign Creator and Redeemer; to
him must all glory go. Man is but the humble servant of the Almighty. And these are but a few of the many truths by which the Calvinist stands. There is a peculiar view of sin and grace, of each of the sacraments, of the relation between the two natures of Christ, and many others. Most members of so-called Calvinistic churches today have little or no knowledge or understanding of what these things are about. It is a fair question to ask whether "old Calvinism" can ever be revived in the midst of a cultural conditioning which militates at every point against an understanding of reality in the centuries-old framework just indicated. It can be said fairly that the greater part of the laity of Calvinistic churches is not even interested in such a revival, and it is a question whether the greater part of the clergy is any more concerned.

We may close on a speculative note and ask whether there is any possibility of a real revival of confessional Calvinism, even though there is nothing at the present time to indicate its probability. In essence this is asking whether it is possible to create, or for there to be created, a dynamic force in a cultural matrix which is basically inimical to it. It must be affirmed, first of all, that genuine revival is not dependent upon a sizable body of participants, though there would be likely more than in a non-revivalistic phase. Thus revival of confessional Calvinism might take place only within the bounds of churches claiming to be of Calvinistic origin or spirit, even though the total number of persons or churches involved would represent only a small minority of the religious forces in contemporary American culture. The conditions of such revivalism would, perhaps, be too strenuous for the typical American today. A strong-mindedness and a stout-heartedness that characterized the old Calvinist is hardly to be found anywhere today. Submission to doctrinal preaching and to regular catechizing are likewise the rara avis in our times, and yet one can hardly imagine a revival of old Calvinism apart from careful and regular instruction in the specific theological ideas which ruled minds and hearts for several centuries. But the alternatives are "broad Calvinism," which is Calvinism in spirit but not in body, or "cultural Calvinism," which is not religion at all, but a curious mixture of an old idea giving its substance to a much later need.

This much is also true. It will not be possible to go scouring among the Calvinisms of the past, whether that of Jonathan Edwards, or of Abraham Kuyper, or of Charles Hodge, or of any other, and select one of them to become the Calvinism of our generation. With all their excellences, they were all laden with faults, the chief one being a proneness to cast biblical theology into an abstract, metaphysical framework. Calvinism in our times must be much more thoroughly biblical, and like Calvin himself, much more existential. Where comprehensive unities in theological thought can not be secured, both because of the non-philosophic character of the biblical revelation, and because of our finite inability to pierce the divine mys-
teries, we must bow both mind and heart before him who made us, in reverence and praise. Neither can contemporary Calvinism afford to cultivate its own little self-satisfied groups; it must in our times take its precious insights into the meaning of God’s revelation into the great ecumenical discussion. Its truth must not be allowed to become the divisive thing it has often been in the past, but a gracious, helping, and healing thing for all peoples.