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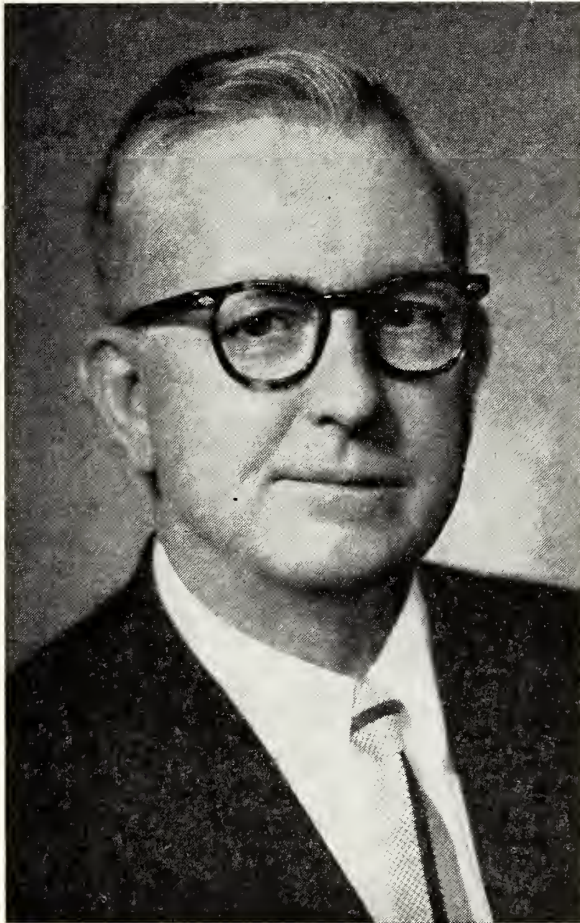


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**PHILIP F. HOWERTON**  
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See pages 6-8 for Moderator's message.



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# The Distinctive Teachings of Presbyterianism

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The word Presbyterianism is used in this connection not in its primary sense of a system of polity, but in its secondary sense of a system of doctrine. Presbyterianism in this signification is practically synonymous with Calvinism defined as the doctrinal system confessed by the Reformed churches. So that for the purposes of this address Presbyterianism and Calvinism may be and will be used interchangeably.

Now if I understand my present task, it is to show what the distinctive teachings of Presbyterianism are, without raising the question as to their truth. My business is not to argue, but to affirm; not to defend, but to define; not to pronounce a panegyric, but to undertake an exposition. So the spirit and purpose of this address are not controversial but educational.

It is generally recognized and admitted, I think, that Calvinism is the most consistently and completely developed system of Christian thought that has ever been offered for the acceptance of mankind.

In popular opinion the distinguishing teachings of the Presbyterian church are embraced in the historic Five Points of Calvinism: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible grace, Perseverance of saints. A better analysis and summary of our system of doctrine are contained in the Nine Points of Dr. Charles Hodge, which he denominates Augustinianism:

1. The highest and ultimate end of all things is the glory of God.

2. For that end God purposed the creation of the universe, and the whole plan of providence and redemption.

3. He placed man in a state of probation, making Adam, the parent of all, the head and representative of the race.

4. The fall of Adam brought all his posterity into a state of sin and misery, out of which they are utterly unable to deliver themselves.

5. From the mass of fallen men God elected some, many, to eternal life, and left the rest to the just recompense of their sins.

6. The ground of this election was the good pleasure of God, and not the foresight of anything good in the one class to distinguish them favorably from the members of the other class.

7. For the salvation of those thus chosen to eternal life, God gave His Son to become man, obey, suffer, and die to make satisfaction for sin and bring in everlasting righteousness.

8. The Holy Spirit, in His common operation, is present with every man, so long as he lives, restraining evil and exciting good, but His certainly efficacious and saving power is exercised only in behalf of the elect.

9. All those whom God has thus chosen to life, and for whom Christ especially gave Himself in the covenant of redemption, shall certainly come to Him and be eternally saved.

The thoroughgoing Presbyterian accepts both these schemes, but the ultimate principle of Presbyterianism while implied in each is expressed in neither. In our present inquiry we are looking first for the controlling point of view, the organic idea in Presbyterianism. Among the teachings that distinguish us from others is there one that is the root of the rest, one from which the others may be derived?

Calvinistic interpreters of their own scheme are generally agreed that the fontal idea of Calvinism is the God-concept. Open the Bible, the Book of God, and behold, God is the frontispiece. "In the beginning God." Open our Standards, and, lo, God is on the doorsill. In the forefront of the Confession is a chapter on the word and will of God. Why? Because the Bible is the source book of Calvinism. Calvinism professes to begin where the Bible begins, to go where it leads, and to stop where it stops.

The master thought of Presbyterianism is not any particular truth about God, but God Himself, the grand Original and Originator; He is the primary and productive principle of Calvinistic Presbyterianism. But when a Presbyterian becomes analytical and begins to specify and arrange particular truths about God, which does he single out for emphasis and exaltation above the rest? The answer is nigh thee, even in thy mouth: not Divine predestination but Divine sovereignty, under which predestination is subsumed.

Sovereignty, as defined by Presbyterians, is not an attribute of God. It is a truth which roots in, rises out of, His attributes. God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His being and attributes — in His self-existence and self-sufficiency, and in His wisdom, power,

holiness, justice, goodness and truth. Being all that and more, sovereignty is His by eternal and inalienable right. God's sovereignty I define as His right and power to do as He pleases with His own. And all things are His own. "The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof; the world and they that dwell therein." He brought the universe into existence in all its elements, potencies and processes. He made it and continues to make it. His right of sovereignty rests on His ownership, and His ownership rests on His creatorship. God's sovereignty inheres in and is the consequence of His constitutive attributes and creative activities.

His sovereignty is marked by two grand characteristics. One is universality. It is all inclusive, nothing lies outside of it. Everything in His creation and providence is subject and subservient to, contingent upon and consistent with, His sovereign will. The second grand characteristic of divine sovereignty is morality. His sovereignty is the result of His attributes, and is exercised according to His attributes. His sovereignty is His right and power to do as He pleases with His own, and He always pleases to do right. There is nothing arbitrary or capricious about the formation and execution of His sovereign purpose. Every choice and every activity is infinitely rational and moral.

So the Calvinist will not allow anyone to get God's sovereignty in opposition to His justice, or His love, or His fatherhood. The Presbyterian doctrine of divine sovereignty is not in contrast to, but in accord with divine justice, love and fatherhood. To the Presbyterian, God is the sovereign Father or the fatherly Sovereign.

This sovereign God works by decree. "Decree" is almost as characteristic a term in the vocabulary of Presbyterians as sovereignty. The term is unfortunate though not inaccurate. If we should speak of God's purpose and plan rather than of His decree, our doctrine would be less contested and detested.

The God of Presbyterians has a purpose. The purpose He now has He has always had. It is as perfect as He, being the expression of His character. He could not change it for the better, He will not change it for the worse.

The goal toward which everything moves, upon which all things converge, is the glory of God. God's glory is His perfections. The manifestation of His glory consists in His showing and sharing His perfections.

The master thought of Presbyterianism, then is its thought of God. As a world and life view it is theocentric. It is theism and supernaturalism in their highest expression.

The second major distinctive teaching of Presbyterianism is its doctrine of man. The interest of Calvinism in man is only second to its in-

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terest in God. Calvin in beginning his Institutes of the Christian Religion says that wisdom consists principally of the knowledge of God and the knowledge of man, and that these kinds of knowledge are so intimately related that one can scarcely tell which precedes and produces the other. They may almost be said to condition each other.

Our doctrine of man depicts him in three estates, namely, the estate of innocence, the estate of sin, and the estate of grace and glory. The fundamental truth about man in his every estate is the truth of his dependence. The man Christ Jesus, man at his best, in the days of his flesh said, "I can of myself do nothing" (John 5:30). How absolute the dependence thus expressed! Human dependence answers to divine sovereignty. They are complementary truths, each is necessary to the other. Either both are true or neither is true. They stand or fall together.

Man in his primitive state bore the image of God. Calvinism has its peculiar account of that image. It is broader and more inclusive than any other. Other views of the divine similitude in man are partial; they err by defect. The excellence of the Calvinistic view is its fulness, completeness.

The image of God in man consists not in his rational nature alone, as the Pelagians aver; nor in his spiritual attributes alone, as the Lutherans affirm; nor alone in his dominion over the lower creation, as the Socinians teach: but in all three. As elements of the divine image in man we recognize the essential attributes of personality, intelligence, sensibility, and will; the accidental attributes of morality, knowledge, righteousness, holiness; and the consequential attribute of office and dignity, the right to rule. Man's image consisted (1) in his nature — personal, spiritual, (2) in his character — upright; (3) in his dignity — with dominion over the creatures.

A nobler, more scriptural view of man in his original state has never been conceived. He was neither too low to fall nor too high to rise, being perfect in endowment and adjustment, with possibilities of endless progress and development; yet liable to fall.

And fall he did. The fall was fatal. In Calvinistic terminology there are three words which describe man's condition in the state of sin. These words are much spoken against outside of Calvinistic circles, but let us speak them out here, not softly and shamefacedly, but firmly. These words are depravity, death, inability. The depravity is total, the death is actual — a fact not a figure — and the inability is entire in the sphere of the spiritual.

Fallen man cannot by any means revivify his soul, recover his lost position, or reestablish his broken connection. Down in the dust of spiritual death he cannot get up. Out in the dark and cold of alienation he cannot get back into the light and warmth of God's favor and fellowship. Yet though thus disabled he is responsible. He ought, must, but he cannot. Here the distinction of Calvinistic teaching comes sharply out. Presbyterianism is distinguished by its apparent contradictions: by its combination of seeming incompatibles, by its union of logical opposites and moral irreconcilables. I refer first to the doctrines of absolute predestination and human freedom, and secondly, to the doctrines of human inability and human responsibility. Others say that the human mind cannot accept these opposites and hold them together, for they conflict, they fight. If the mind take one, it must reject the other. The Calvinistic mind accepts both, and does so not in contradiction of its fundamental principle of divine sovereignty, but under compulsion of it; not in despite of it, but because of it.

So the Calvinist grasps with one hand the truths of divine sovereignty and human freedom and with the other hand the truths of human dependence and responsibility, and holds them up with equal firmness as the two sides of the roof of a house, which meet, he must believe, at a ridgepole above the clouds. And, as one of the Alexanders has said, he who accepts only one side has only a half a roof over his head.

The Calvinistic account of man in sin is dark, very dark. Is there no light? The consequences of sin in Calvinistic theology seem intolerable even to thought. Is there no escape? Yes, thank God. Turn a page, and there is light and an open road. Over against the Calvinistic doctrine of man in sin I hasten to set the Calvinistic doctrine of man in grace. Here we enter the field of soteriology. The Presbyterian doctrine of salvation stands out in strong distinction to that of other schools of interpretation.

In the effectuating of salvation two wills are involved — the will of God and the will of man. The relation of these two wills to regeneration, which is the initiation of the process, is a matter of disagreement and debate between Calvinists and others. All others ascribe to the human will a part, some a large part, in

determining the question whether a given soul is to be saved or not. All, except Pelagians, will readily admit that God's action is first, that His grace is precedaneous and necessary, but man by his assent or dissent, assistance or resistance, decides the issue.

Thus in other types of theology man is represented as assisting at his own birth, or as offering effective opposition thereto. So in the final analysis the success or failure, victory or defeat of the grace of God is referred to the will of man. Consequently regeneration, which is the origination of divine life and salvation in a lost soul, is a joint work, and the credit of it is divided between the two agents. God the Saviour shares the glory of salvation with man the saved.

In the Calvinistic doctrine of salvation the relation of the wills in regeneration is very differently conceived. The action of the human will is not concurrent with that of the divine but consequent, not simultaneous but subsequent; and is therefore not in any sense or measure the cause of regeneration but is itself caused by regeneration: is not at all decisive of the event but is itself determined by the event. God inaugurates salvation in the human soul without the aid of the human will. The human will becomes active after the deed, not before it. The credit and the praise for salvation Calvinism gives without division to God.

As has often been remarked, the adherents of all types of theology are Calvinists in their worship. In their devotions they heartily, gratefully, and unanimously acknowledge God as the author of their salvation. Presbyterians are Calvinists in their preaching as well as in their praying, on their feet before men as well as on their knees before God. The theology of their prayers and hymns and the theology of their sermons and dissertations are not two theologies but one theology. Before their salvation their cry is, Woe is me, I am undone; God be merciful to me the sinner. After their salvation they make mention of God's righteousness and Christ's merit, of these only.

The difference between Presbyterians and others in soteriology is not confined to the first stage of salvation but extends to all the stages of the final issue. All who hold that man's entrance into the state of grace depends in the last analysis on man's will must hold and do hold that man's continuance in that state depends on his will. If a man enters that state by his own choice, by his own choice he may leave it. Having begun, he may not finish, having risen out of the sickness of sin, he may suffer a relapse and perish in sin. From the day of his new birth, to the day of his natural death his salvation is in jeopardy every hour.

But the Presbyterian who is a true Calvinist holds that once in grace always in grace. Since

by the election of God man enters the state of salvation, by the election of God he will remain in that state. The Calvinist believes in the perseverance of saints because he believes in the perseverance of God. He challenges all enemies of the saved soul whether actual or possible, real or imaginary, present or future, to separate it from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. There is a triumphant note of certainty in the music of Calvinism which belongs not to the song of any other confession.

Another distinctive emphasis of Calvinism is its insistence on the conformity of character and conduct to creed and Christian profession — its demand that the believer bring forth fruits worthy of faith and repentance. It is commonly objected to the Presbyterian doctrines of divine decrees, of divine predestination and human perseverance that they logically lead to anti-nomianism, to carelessness in living, to indifference to moral claims and requirements. So far is this from being true that one of the distinguishing features of Presbyterianism is its superior moral imperatives and achievements.

For confirmation I appeal to history. What has been the effect of Calvinistic teaching and influence on the morals of men? Philip Schaff the church historian, none too partial to Calvinism, testifies that the strictest Calvinists have been the severest moralists. Where in history can be found a sterner disciplinarian than John Calvin? He was as much horrified at unsoundness in life as in belief. He insisted that those who assumed the name of Christ should live according to Christ, by choice, if they would; by compulsion, if necessary. The Puritans of Old England and of New England, for what did they stand with uncompromising firmness? For two things, the imperialism of the divine will, and the imperialism of their own conscience. The will of God above, the moral conscience within — the lordship of these they acknowledged, and none other. The sovereignty of morality in their conduct answered to the sovereignty of God in their creed.

So that if Calvinism's picture of man in sin is painted in darkest colors, its portraiture of man in grace is drawn in colors correspondingly bright and glorious. In Calvinism height answers to deep. Over the deep of man's sin, inability, and lostness shines the solid summit of salvation, confidence and peace. *De profundis, gloria in excelsis*. And from the height above into depth below drops the plummet of the cross.

This leads me to speak in the third and last place of our distinctive teachings about Christ.

Our differences from others in Christology relate mainly to the mission of Jesus Christ: first, to its nature; then to its design and effect. Among evangelicals there is general agreement

touching the constitution of Christ's person, and touching the relation of His person so constituted to the work He came to do. The nature of His mission determined the constitution of the person of the Redeemer.

And what was the nature of His mission? All, evangelicals and others — all are agreed that Jesus Christ came into the world on a mission of mercy and peace. Calvinists differ from others in their insistence that His mission was a mission of justice not less than of love. He came to reconcile God and man on the basis of truth and justice *done*. Write it with capitals.

Calvinists say that God may be generous, but that He must be just; that He may not be generous until He has been just. Mercy is optional, justice is necessary. Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne. Holiness is His name, His nature. The adoring speech of the seraphim surrounding His throne is not loving, loving, loving is Jehovah of hosts, but holy, holy, holy. And holiness is not self-impacting love, but self-affirming righteousness.

Everywhere else than in Calvinism the primary emphasis is on the love-side of the cross. In Calvinism the emphasis on the law-side precedes the emphasis on the love-side. Holiness limits and conditions love. "Christ executeth the office of a priest, in his once offering up of himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, and (thereby) reconcile us to God . . ." It is at Calvary that men learn that God is Love. Yes, thrice yes; and Calvinism is never weary in lifting up its voice to declare that it is at Calvary that men should learn also that God is Righteousness. In the mission and ministry of His Son God has made it forever clear not only how far He will go to manifest His love, but how far He will go to produce and maintain holiness in the earth. God set forth His Son to show the righteousness of His forbearance and forgiveness. Justification is an act of justice as well as of grace. And the emphasis of Calvinism is on the ethical side of that great transaction.

God sent His only begotten Son into the world not only to offer mercy to a race of rebels, but to execute justice, not upon them, but for them. Jesus Christ died for God and man: for God first, for man second. For God, that His compassions might be righteously released; for man, that his sins might be righteously remitted. "In him mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other." At Calvary was done a deed of justice as well as of love, and God was the doer. God is a God of conscience. He must be just while justifying the unjust. His justice is the very stability of the moral order, the very security of heaven itself.

A second emphasis of Calvinism in Christology is on the design and effect of the mission

of Christ. What did God intend in the incarnation and sacrifice of His Son? In the thought of Calvinists the effect of the work of Christ is in kind and amount according to the design of it. God is accomplishing through Christ all He intended. In the purpose and providence of God intention determines execution, and execution fulfills and reveals intention.

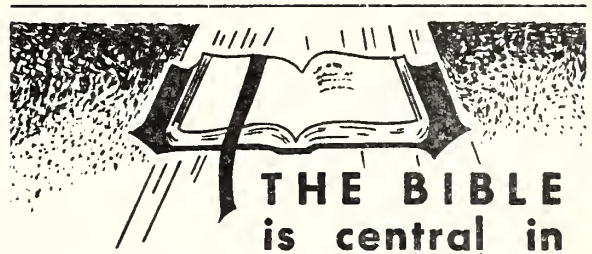
The effect of Christ's mediatorial ministry is in some respects universal. All men benefit by it. All men are subjects of common grace. Since the extent of Christ's mediation is universal, we must hold that the intent of it was universal. So Calvinists are in a sense universalists in their interpretation of Christ's mission. But these general blessings do not amount to salvation. Calvinists believe in common grace, but not in common sufficient grace. We agree with Pascal who said, "Common sufficient grace, which suffices not."

In the matter of actual salvation Calvinistic Presbyterians are particularists, limitationists, while all others are universalists. But universalists are of two classes. There are those who hold and teach universalism of fact. That is, that God intended by His Son to purchase salvation for all men alike, and by His Spirit to apply salvation to all men alike. So that in the end all men without exception will be saved. Then there are those who believe and teach universalism of purpose and possibility. They hold that Christ came to live and die for all men equally, and that the design and effect of Christ's vicarious service were to make the salvation of all men possible.

Now Presbyterians do not deny that the atonement of Christ is suitable and sufficient for all, but since it does not prove efficient for all, they cannot believe that it was meant to be efficient for all. They measure the intention by the execution.

Presbyterians do not object that others open wide to men the door to the divine favor. Their objection is that they offer men nothing certain after they have entered; nay, offer no assurance that any will ever enter. For according to them not only is all grace amissible; that is, capable of being lost after regeneration and conversion; but all grace is resistible, and therefore may fail in every case to produce regeneration and conversion. So that while the invitation is to all alike, all alike may decline the invitation. In that case, the life and death of Christ would fail of fruitage, and the whole vast scheme of God in the incarnation and sacrifice of His Son would come to naught. For the mere possibility of the salvation of all, means the possibility of the salvation of none.

This logical implicate of other systems of doctrine surely reveals their error and weakness. Calvinists cannot believe that Christ Jesus assumed human flesh to live and suffer and die



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for an uncertainty. He came for a definite purpose, and that purpose will be accomplished *in toto*. Dabney speaks for all Calvinists when he says that God intends all He effectuates, and effectuates all He intends. Christ came into the world to save a people, given Him of God, an election of grace, and that people shall certainly come to Him and be saved. What He came to do is as certain of accomplishment as if already done, for it was settled in the councils of eternity. For He Himself said, "This is the will of him that sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day." John 6:39.

It thus appears that a grand distinctive mark of Presbyterianism is its note of certainty, while a distinguishing feature of other systems of doctrine is contingency, uncertainty. In other schools of thought and schemes of salvation the final result is conditioned by the will of man — the fallible will of fallen man. In Presbyterianism everything is referred to the will of God, the wise, righteous, sovereign will of the Eternal. Presbyterianism thus provides a solid basis for faith and hope. It places beneath creation and redemption, providence and history, the solidity of the divine decree. It thus offers to men a refuge from fatalistic despair in a world of disorder and confusion, and yet affords no excuse for fatalistic security.

For while the God of Presbyterianism is working all things according to the counsel of His own will, He works not by magic but mostly by means and motives. And what He works in He requires that men shall work out, conforming their will and character to His. The God of Presbyterianism is working according to a pre-determined plan toward a predestined end — a moral end, namely, a restored world wherein dwelleth righteousness; and He worketh all things *together with* them that love Him, the called according to His purpose.

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