

# THE CALVIN FORUM

A MONTHLY

Calvin's Institutes  
1536-1936

South African Calvinism  
An Informing Letter

Applied Christianity  
Organized Labor

Calvin and Barth  
Similarities and Differences

The National Issue  
The New Deal

Our Major Political Parties  
An Evaluation



# The CALVIN FORUM

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# The CALVIN FORUM

VOLUME II

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## EDITORIALS

### The Coming Presidential Election

THE American voter is at present facing a political situation which is unique in many ways. Not the least of these is found in the fact that he is challenged to think before he casts his ballot this fall. A disappointing feature that has marked the American political scene for some decades has been the absence of real issues. True, there have been differences between the two major parties, but these were only surface differences — not grounded in any really important principle of a political, economic, or moral kind. The chief point of difference seems to have been that the one party was in power and the other wished to be. For the rest, whatever historical origins may testify to the contrary, the differences between the Republican and the Democratic party were for all practical purposes negligible.

Of late this situation has changed. Certain basic issues are inevitably coming to the fore — issues that cut deeper than matters of party patronage and political spoils. The depression and the drouth have helped to shake us out of our economic complacency and political indifference. Questions of social security, of the protection of the farmer and the laboring man in their economic struggle, of the propriety of government control in business and industry — these, and others which have arisen, are introducing a deeper note into our discussions centering around the coming presidential election. Also fascistic and collectivistic trends within our borders are raising the issue as to racial and religious liberties. The American citizen is getting a chance to do a little thinking before he casts his ballot this fall. It is sincerely to be hoped that he will not pass up this opportunity.

It is more than time to put aside that small partisan attitude, so characteristic of many traditional Republicans as well as Democrats, which prompts them to vote as party "loyalty" dictates, without consideration of the real issues involved. We should be on our guard against the sensational appeal of the demagogue and political quack, who plays the strings of passion and class hatred. We should be on our guard against the alarmist reactionary, who sees a "Red" menace in every effort of the government to face new problems and new situations in an unconventional way. We should not allow ourselves to be led astray by hollow phrases and vacuous mottoes. Liberty, security, and social justice are ultimate issues upon which we pass at the ballot box today, but those who mouth these phrases most freely today are not always the genuine

protagonists of the causes they claim to champion. We trust the articles in this issue of THE CALVIN FORUM from the hands of Professors Hockstra and Ryskamp will aid our readers in arriving at an intelligent judgment for themselves on some of the issues involved in the coming presidential election.

C. B.

### Once More Comes Labor Day

PROFESSOR PIETERS' series of articles, the last of which is run in this issue of our journal, has served to direct the attention of our readers to the significance of Christianity, both historically and ethically, for the wage earner and his struggle for existence. The point of view from which these articles were written is one which we may well cultivate. There has been too little study and consideration of the real thrust of Scriptural principles in their bearing upon the solution of our industrial ills. Despite the fact that modern industrialism with its mass production and factory system is a distinctly modern development, the divine ordinances in Scripture (even those of the Old Testament, as Dr. Pieters has pointed out) contain a wholesome and uplifting thrust for present-day industrial relations. With the approach of another holiday dedicated to the cause of Labor, Christians may well remind the world of the significance of the divine ordinances for the human relations at stake in the whirl of modern industrial life.

The Christian should set himself against every form of industrial violence and sabotage. We should recognize the right of the laboring man to organize in a peaceable manner for the assertion of his rights and for joint action in the face of any injustice on the part of those who own the tools for economic production. It should also become increasingly evident that Christian laboring people do not proceed from the same basic convictions, and hence do not pursue the same objectives, as does the worldly laboring man. The line of demarcation between those who are, and those who are not of Christ, should become apparent in the industrial struggle. In Germany, Switzerland, and Holland positively Christian labor organizations have been in existence for some time and are doing a splendid piece of work for the practical elimination of industrial ills. Also in our own country the foundations for such an organization have recently been laid. Christian laboring men should join the Christian Labor Association and help organize a unit in their own community. May the Christian Labor Association

# KARL BARTH AND JOHN CALVIN

William T. Riviere, D. D.

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FOUR hundred and nineteen years ago Martin Luther, monk and theological professor, shook the Word of God loose from its shackles. It was shackled by tradition, by hierarchy, by the vested interests of a celibate clergy, and by certain fetters of church administration and money raising. Four hundred years ago at Basel a young Frenchman named John Calvin published an elementary textbook, the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Today in that same Basel a Swiss professor named Karl Barth is proclaiming an inspiring theology of the Word.

Barth has many followers in Europe, many interested readers in the United States. Today few authors dare to publish a book on theology unless Barth's name appears in the index. They call him a neo-supernaturalist. The real import of all supernaturalism is that God, Who is greater than we are and Who differs from us in kind and not merely in size, says something and does something. Barth asserts very clearly and emphatically that God does for us something which we cannot do: see page 16 of his recent book, "God in Action." Barth also asserts that God does speak to us. Furthermore they call Barth a neo-Calvinist.

## Sam Houston and Karl Barth

"Write an essay," quoth the teacher, "on the military genius of Hannibal and Sam Houston." So the schoolboy, who had studied his ancient history diligently and had once made a little speech about the enigmatic triumph of the jumping-jack genius whose magnificent leadership from Gonzales to San Jacinto freed Texas to Anglo-Saxon Protestantism, sharpened his pencil. But he felt as some stray mosquito would feel, after flying around the Washington Monument and then buzzing over a newspaper picture of the proposed San Jacinto Monument, puzzling his wits to decide which shaft would be the taller. "Write an article," asks the Editor, "for THE CALVIN FORUM on Karl Barth and John Calvin." Let me see. "So Mr. Ant took his thumb-rule, his pencil, and his notebook, and proceeded to measure the Eiffel Tower."

The impression that Karl Barth makes on an old-fashioned Calvinist is something like that which Sam Houston makes on the student of history. Or indeed like that which Houston made on his contemporaries. Brilliant young veteran of the Creek War, successful in politics, he became Governor of Tennessee as well as Major-General of Militia. Then he made what seemed a brilliant marriage. Suddenly he leaves his young bride, taking all the blame upon himself. He resigns all office and hides himself among the Indians and rum. In Texas he pops up again, in convention and in camp, and turns a campaign of unbroken disaster into decisive victory. His later political career, with ups and downs, is similar. So is his church life: refused Presbyterian baptism in Nashville by Hume after the break with Mrs. Houston; baptized a Roman-

ist to acquire citizenship in Mexican Texas; later converted and immersed into the Baptist Church.

Conservative Reformed opinion of Barth has peaks of admiration, but also depths of disagreement. In fact, some of Barth's admirers seem unable to understand why instructed Calvinists in Holland and America have not swallowed the great Swiss preacher and teacher at a gulp.

## A Few Contrasts

Fortunately Barth does not want to be swallowed at a gulp. John Calvin published edition after edition of his famous *Institutes* as a textbook of Christian belief and behavior. Karl Barth tries to flavor Christian preaching with something that modern thought was leaving out, or with something from God for which modern thought offers a man-made substitute. Calvin wrote for those who did not know enough about the Bible and what it says. Barth writes for those who know so much about the Bible that they cannot hear the word it speaks. Calvin wrote for those who had been fed sectarianism, legalism, and priestcraft, which deafen the ear to the voice of God. Perhaps the medieval synthesis did the same. Barth writes for a generation nourished on false optimism, a generation either self-confident in human strength or disappointed with humanity and despairing, a generation whose Bible has been mutilated or even deprived of its backbone by criticism, cramped by elaborate creeds, and entangled in mere philosophy that masquerades as theology. Calvin's revision of his great textbook was by enlargement, not by retraction. Barth has completely re-written two weighty tomes; and his clearest statements crop out unexpectedly in his controversial pamphlets. Calvin, one of the clearest and most definite writers in the world, abounds in precise statement. Barth's struggle with the incomprehensible and the inexpressible causes him to take refuge in paradox. Barth's wonderful thought is too vague to become a creed.

Calvin, though Warfield shows how he filled out one empty sector of the doctrine of the Trinity, derives all the statements that he makes from careful exegesis of Scripture, and refrains from going into all the details that some of his theological predecessors considered. Calvin carefully reminds us of the limitation of our knowledge. He warns us against speculation and tries not to go beyond the clear statements of the Word.

## A Tinge of Agnosticism

Barth goes still further. He warns us that since God is so different in kind, nature, quality (Kierkegaard) from us, we must be reverently careful about making even a definite mental symbol for Him, for the symbol may become our home-made idol. Feuerbach announced a century ago that the notion of God is just the mental creation of our wish; Barth warns us that in trying to think of the True God we may substitute the mental creation of our wish.

Let me illustrate. A crucifix is a touching reminder of the Saviour dying on the cross for us. But how easy for reverence to pass over into superstition and for worship to stop at the sacred symbol which was meant to be a stepping-stone toward God! Beads may help some people to pray, but if the beads require a priestly blessing, they become a hindrance.

Now Barth seems to think that our very phrasing of truth, being a human product, may get between us and God, as a crucifix may. Our official theologies and creeds, being blessed by the Church, may become so important in our eyes that we fail to see God beyond them. That fine old philosopher Qoheleth, with the penetrating psychological insight of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, had a similar thought when he wrote: "God is in heaven and thou upon earth; therefore let thy words be few."

But Calvin follows the Word in his modest willingness to make positive assertions where God has spoken, and in firmly standing by what God has said. Our knowledge is incomplete, but what we know by the revealed Word is both true and adequate. On the other hand, Barth is afraid that our satisfaction with what we know will grow into proud ignorance. What we see may become an idol to blind our eyes.

#### Calvin Found Predestination in Scripture

In *The Christian Century* a writer tells of a candidate for church membership who was asked, out of a Calvinist catechism, "Are you willing to be damned for the glory of God?" "No," he replied to the examining committee, "but I am willing for the committee to be." My sympathies are with the candidate, of course. Such a question may be in some Calvinist catechism, but it is not in any that has been read by the Southern Presbyterian who is writing these words. Moreover, Dean Karl Heim, great admirer of Luther, in his Sprunt lectures reminds us that it was Martin Luther who laid that burden on the human heart. I do not think that Calvin was so exacting, for Paul was not. Paul said he could wish himself accursed for the sake of his Hebrew brethren. That peak of human self-sacrificial desire was Paul's own, not ours, not for example nor from law but simply an expression of active love. The glory of God in the wished-for salvation of the Jews and in the fulfilment of God's promise was in the background of Paul's heart; but the motive he specified was blood-kinship, race, patriotism of the noblest kind, the desire that his fellow-Israelites might share the love of God in Christ Jesus, the love from which nothing can separate.

It is customary to think of Calvinism primarily in terms of the decrees, of sovereignty, of election, of predestination or even of double predestination. There are better ways of describing the true emphasis of the system of thought which John Calvin rescued for the Church. But all will agree that Calvin began with the Word of God. He undertook to find out and bring out what the Bible says. We need this Word because sin has not only depraved our hearts but also blinded our minds. Calvin follows Scripture in reminding us that our sins have come between us and God. Calvin was primarily an exegete, an expounder of Scripture. What he taught about predestination

and election he taught for one simple reason: he found it in the Bible. Courageously and honestly he accepted the statements of the Written Word as inspired truth.

#### Barth and Calvin as Exegetes

Harry Emerson Fosdick is a man who has struggled for a genuine religious faith, though he has been impeded by a low view of inspiration. In fact his view seems to have bent still lower since my college and seminary days, when his little volumes used to feed our orthodox Presbyterian souls and help them grow. Fosdick's Yale lectures of a dozen years ago tell what use he, as preacher and teacher of preaching, has been able to make of the Bible. After describing the allegorical method of interpreting Scripture, this quite non-Calvinistic contemporary of ours says that the old allegorical method of interpreting Scripture is largely discredited among intelligent Protestants, and "we probably owe that fact to John Calvin more than to any other man. 'For the first time in a thousand years,' writes Gilbert, 'he gave a conspicuous example of *non-allegorical exposition*.' His attitude toward the ancient method is indicated at the very beginning of his treatment of Genesis. 'We must . . . entirely reject the allegories of Origen, and of others like him,' we read, 'which Satan, with deepest subtlety, has endeavored to introduce into the Church, for the purpose of rendering the doctrine of Scripture ambiguous and destitute of all certainty and firmness.' Calvin, in a word, was a stern and exact literalist. He hated the vague and insecure renderings of Scripture which allegory made possible."

Of Barth so acute a critic as J. Gresham Machen wrote eight years ago: "The 'Epistle to the Romans' of Karl Barth is certainly a very strange book, and the Apostle Paul would probably be amazed if he could know that it purports to be an exposition of what he wrote regarding the way of salvation to the Roman Church. But as ever against his critics Barth has undoubtedly a certain measure of right on his side. . . . Only the man who comes to the Bible with the despairing question of his own soul . . . can really understand the Word of God."

Calvin was trying, with "a plain briefness," "to show forth the mind of the writer." Barth states his own object somewhat as follows: (1) Calvin made masterly use of a kind of criticism which out of utter loyalty expands or abbreviates the text in order to get the correct emphasis and meaning. Barth aims to be thinking and writing *with* Paul rather than *merely about* Paul. Paul addressed his contemporaries and was speaking of Jesus Christ. (2) Now Barth takes the lofty deity of God very seriously, accepting Kierkegaard's infinite qualitative distinction between time and eternity, and so between man and God. Consequently the theme which Barth finds in the Bible is the relation between such a God and such a man. (3) "Paul knows what most of us do not know about God; and his epistles enable us to know what he knew. It is this conviction that Paul *knows* which my critics choose to label my 'system'." Not only the direct quotation, but nearly every clause in that summary, is in Barth's own words.

### The Transcendence of God

This great gulf between man and God is an old theological commonplace which much brilliant modernity tends to forget. To some of our learned contemporaries any notion of divine transcendence is so startling that they call orthodox theists "Barthians." Fifteen centuries ago John Chrysostom, eloquent preacher in Constantinople, was proclaiming that our God is beyond the reach of angels, unimaginable to cherubim, incomprehensible to seraphim, above the understanding of the highest powers; in His presence how may we earthworms lift our thoughts to Him? We may soon be told that Chrysostom and the Isaiah who saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, were Barthians born out of due time! The holiness of God has been forgotten.

Barth is trying to expound and underline what Paul tells us about this holy, indescribable, and incomprehensible God. With marvelous command of a flexible language, with a studied effort to keep his fluid thought from solidifying into set forms of words, and with an intensification of Kierkegaard's use of paradox, Barth tries to direct his reader's attention to that which transcends both description and comprehension.

Calvin and Barth have the same basic position about human knowledge of God. "Those dote," wrote Calvin, "whosoever they may be, who insist that they know what God is. . . . The demonstration of God, whereby He maketh His glory apparent to His creatures, in respect of the brightness thereof, is clear enough; but in respect of our blindness is not so sufficient. Yet we are not so blind that we can pretend ignorance, to relieve us from the blame of naughtiness or perversity." Barth, however, found himself called to proclaim God to a generation which in pride of human achievements had made God too comprehensible. Men were so sure of knowing God. Jesus Christ was so thoroughly understood by modern criticism, that men undertook to correct Him, to re-shape Him, and to psychoanalyze Him. Therefore Barth stresses the inability of the human to grasp the divine. Barth goes so far in this direction that his very conception of revelation is rather vague and elusive.

#### Paradox and Vagueness

This vagueness is the chief distinction between him and Calvin. Calvin recognized the paradoxical character of much Christian truth. Calvin was one of the most perspicuous writers that ever lived. His Latin is generally admitted to be precise and accurate; his French contributed to form the clear and unambiguous prose which delights the reader of all great French literature. Calvin had such a mastery of paradox that his paradoxes are in chaste, simple, and easy prose, so that the reader is hardly conscious of any strain. For instance, "we stand when by faith we lean upon God," "man was rich before he was born;" "the life of the Law when it slays us;" "more comeliness in a dead animal than in a living man." To Calvin a paradox is a cord tied into a firm knot; to Kierkegaard paradox was like Will Rogers' famous rope, to be turned and whirled and shown off; to Barth the numerous paradoxes which fill his pages are like many turns of packthread wrapped round and round two heavy bricks in hope of tying them together. Erich Schaefer remarks that Barth's weakness is also found where

his strength is, every time. Trying not to say too much, he says too little. He is so cautiously paradoxical that his meaning seems blurred and tangled. But as Zerbe says, "Karl Barth is a genius, and no genius was ever consistent with himself."

Calvin and Barth both tell us that God above has revealed a Word to us. Both are theologians of the Word of God. Both honor the Word, though defining it differently. But where Calvin excels in clarity and precision, Barth prefers to speak and write all around his theme.

Yet in his proper context, Barth is easy to understand and as definite as may be. For a century, who has said anything better than Barth's, "You cannot say *God* by shouting *man* in a loud voice?" And what better summary of new theology for the last century and a quarter can be given than that sentence?

\* \* \* \* \*

NOTE — Readers who desire to get more of Karl Barth are advised to read and re-read Barth's own books. Among translated volumes, "God in Action" and the two volumes of sermons by Barth and Thurneysen (Round Table Press), and "The Word of God and the Word of Man" (Pilgrim Press), are the best places to begin. For serious students, "Romans" and "Church Dogmatics" are now available in English, but at high prices. Of books about Barth, try McConnachie's enthusiastic "The Significance of Karl Barth" (not his later volume on the Barthian theology), Rolston's exuberant "A Conservative Looks to Barth and Brunner," for its appreciation and connections Lowrie's "Our Concern with the Theology of Crisis," and for its quotations in German perhaps Zerbe's "The Karl Barth Theology." For orientation, see Aubrey, "Present Theological Tendencies."

To get Barth's background, read his teacher, W. Herrmann's "Systematic Theology" or "The Communion of the Christian with God." Or try "The Interpretation of Religion," by Herrmann's other pupil John Baillie, who follows the same general line instead of veering off as Barth did. Then take a good dose of Kierkegaard. Readily available are my honored friend Professor Hollander's University of Texas Bulletin No. 2326, "Selections from Kierkegaard;" also Allen's book, "Kierkegaard," published by Harpers, which over-schematizes the remarkable Dane and tries to explain him away. A new book by Dr. Lowrie will probably appear soon. Unlike Hollander, Lowrie is interested in theology; unlike Allen, he appreciates Kierkegaard.

### AS CALVIN

Make of me no Calvinist,  
God of Calvin and of me,  
Cause me not to follow him  
Who would follow only Thee.

Make of me no Calvinist,  
Swallowing each word he penned,  
Make of me a thinker, God,  
As was he, Thy intimate friend!

Make me, God, as Calvin was,  
Now, while yet in days of youth,  
Delving from the Depths of Thine,  
Sovereign, soul-exalting truth.

Make me like the Christ, O God,  
Give me not a Calvin's ire,  
But withhold from me the spark  
For a new Servetus-fire.

Make me like a Calvin, God,  
Just as humble, just as brave,  
Like a Calvin who refused  
E'en a stone upon his grave.

— ALBERT PIERSMA.