

The Presbyterian GUARDIAN

J. GRESHAM MACHEN • EDITOR 1936-1937

Crescent Park Chapel

Robert W. Eckardt

•

Calvinism and Art

C. Van Til

•

Biblical Theology

John Murray

•

**Glory of the
Christian Church**

R. B. Kuiper

•

**Unbelief in the Presby-
terian Church U. S. A.**

Leslie W. Sloat

•

**Orthodox Presbyterian
Church News**

•

**Guardian News
Commentator**



According to the New Testament our Lord even in the days of His flesh presented Himself not merely as Teacher and Example and Leader but also, and primarily, as Saviour; He offered Himself to sinful men as One who alone could give them entrance into the Kingdom of God. . . . He invited men not merely to have faith in God like the faith which He had in God, but He invited them to have faith in Him.

—J. Gresham Machen



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Calvinism and Art

Common Grace Does Not Solve All the Problems

By C. VAN TIL

RECENTLY it was my privilege to be invited, with a few others, to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Rene D. Grove for a discussion of the relation of Calvinism to art. At the request of Mr. Grove, Dr. Leon Wencelius favored the group with a general introduction to the subject.

In the course of the afternoon Mr. Grove graciously permitted us to view a number of his paintings, among them the one pictured here. He said he was anxious to express his Protestant, and more particularly his Calvinistic convictions in his paintings. In the picture of the mother and child, for example, he had made the child rather than the mother the center of attraction. Moreover, he had placed a cross in the hand of the child, as though there were already a self-conscious awareness of the great mission before him.

Had he been at all successful, Mr. Grove asked, in conveying the Protestant rather than the Romanist view of the mother and child? And how could he bring out the specifically Reformed conception of life, in his future paintings?

A dreadful hush fell upon our little group. Here we were, Calvinists all of us, theologians some of us, anew reminded of Calvin's general view of art, furtively recalling Abraham Kuyper's famous lecture on Calvinism and Art, and yet apparently unable to answer a simple little question such as the one now proposed.

Mr. Grove assured us that he was not asking for help on the technique of painting. That was his business as an artist. Even this reassurance, however, did not help a great deal. In fact, it took away our last mask. None of us could now excuse ourselves by protesting absence of artistic gift. When we finally left, I felt that we had not been of much help to Mr. Grove. If the others who were there feel differently about this, they may, of course, express themselves. Will not some reader enlighten Mr. Grove?

Of course we told him *something*. We tried to save face. We told him

about Common Grace. But his face did not light up at this. He seemed to know the phrase as well as we, and we seemed to know the proper meaning of the phrase as little as he.

Did "common grace" stand for the idea of an area of neutrality as between believer and unbeliever? If so, how should the Calvinist proclaim the message in this area. A neutral area would act like static to the messenger of God, as well as to the messenger of Satan. And was not Kuyper right when he claimed that it was the doctrine of predestination that really furnished the foundation for the liberation of art? The doctrine of predestination is but a specialized point of the general teaching that God by His plan controls whatsoever comes to pass. And this general principle of the all-comprehensive plan of God is required if any human effort is to have meaning at all. Moreover, the doctrine of predestination as based upon the idea of the all inclusive plan of God, implies that man is saved by grace and grace alone, and that when he is saved he is saved in the whole of his being and with the whole of his world. Is it not this doctrine, the doctrine that forms the heart of saving rather than of common grace, that enables the believer, if he be an artist, to feel justified in giving full vent to the spontaneity of expression that is his gift from God?

Still further, to think of common grace as furnishing a sort of museum where the unbeliever and the believer may alike exhibit their wares to one another without at the same time dashing for one another's throats would be to deny the doctrine of total depravity. The unbeliever is not merely sometimes, but always and in his every endeavor a covenant breaker.

In flat contradiction to Kuyper's claim referred to above, we are told in an article in *Life* (Nov. 22, 1948, p. 105) that it was Romanticism that unshackled modern art. There we are informed, in effect, that it is modern irrationalism that has brought to light artistic spontaneity. This article agrees

generally with the point of view adopted by several other interpreters of modern art and life in general. We mention F. T. C. Northrop in *The Meeting of East and West*, P. A. Sorokin in *The Crisis of Our Age*, and Paul Tillich in *The Protestant Era*, as examples.

Such writers frequently do not trouble to discuss in detail the relation of Calvinism to art. But the logic of their position would require them to say that Calvinism is—or was—art's chiefest foe. For Calvinism, in their minds, stands for determinism, for system hard and fast, for the dominance of abstract intellectualism, for the killing of all freedom, freedom of the human person in any field of his endeavor. It was not till modern times, these men would contend, when man finally had the courage to cut loose from all system, that art could give forth its witness unrepressed.

So then the covenant-breaker certainly seeks to preach his gospel, the gospel of liberation from God, through the medium of art. If we could have some *Screwtape Letters* written according to Reformed principles we would, no doubt, be forewarned of this. Even so, we know it well enough. Mr. Grove also knows it.

My guess then is that if you want to see his face light up, you will have to begin with special rather than with common grace. Of course, we did that, too, I suppose, by our assumptions. But we were far from clear on the matter.

I suppose that when you write your answer to Mr. Grove's question, you will start by pointing out (a) that man is saved by grace alone and (b) that when he is saved man is saved in the whole of his life and in the whole of his world. I suppose you will write him that only he who believes this can discover true spontaneity. Only he who believes will sense the facts of the universe for what they really are. Only he can portray sin as guilt against God and as pollution of His gifts. Only he knows redemption and what it does, may do, and will do to the face of a man, of society and of the world. Only he can safely engage in "abstraction" for his abstraction need not be false—false to true art as well as false to true religion.

I wonder if it is not after you have thus stressed the fact of the believer's responsibility to present his message

everywhere and always, and the fact that the non-believer's hatred of God is expressed in art as well as in religion, that you will begin speaking of common grace. Perhaps you will use it then to help explain how even unbelievers in spite of their basic covenantal allegiance to Satan, do produce marvelous works of art. Is it because of common grace that unbelievers are not always fully conscious of their own basic principle? Is it because they are not fully conscious of their own principles that they least express their hostility to ours? And is it when they seem least hostile to our principle of covenant obedience that they do their best work
(See "Calvinism", p. 274)

Is There a Calvinistic Art?

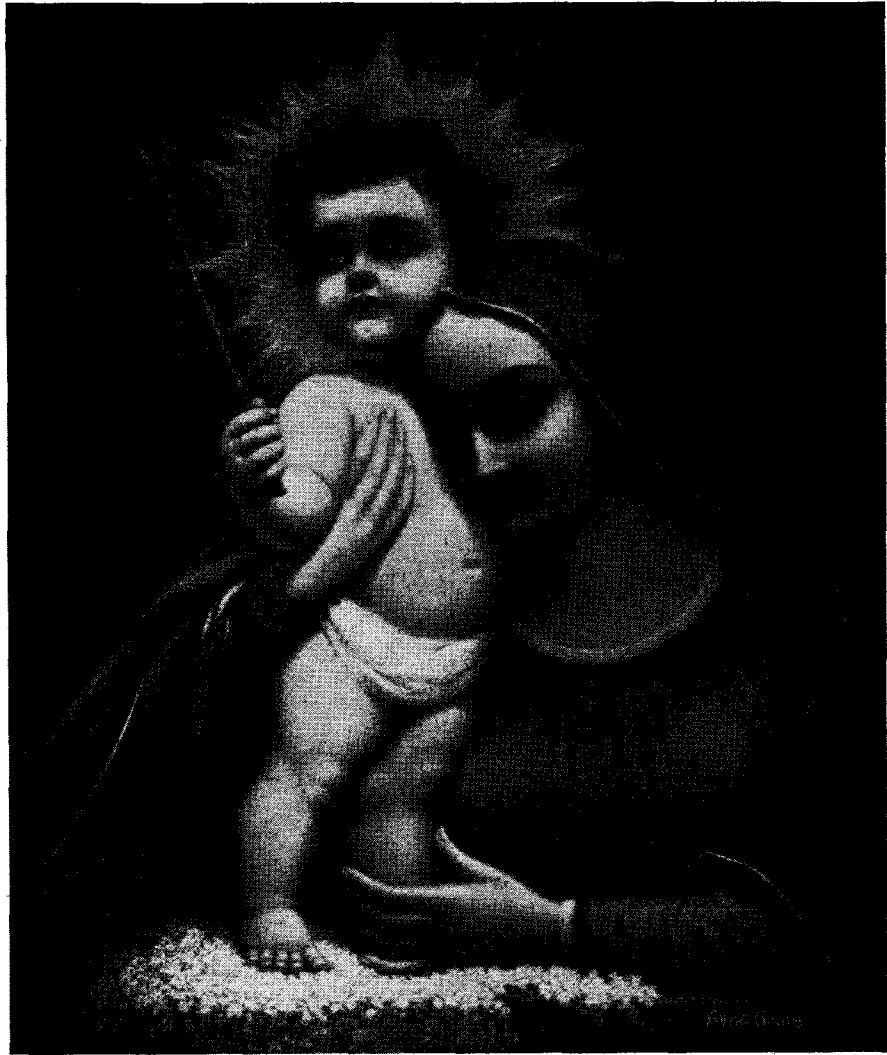
IT is claimed, and we think properly so, that Calvinism is a world and life view. Hence it should dominate the thinking and action of Christian individuals in every sphere of human endeavor.

If this is true in other spheres, it should also be true in the field of art. Should there not be a Christian—and hence Calvinistic art? There has been considerable discussion of the application of Calvinism to art, but as far as we know there has been little effort in this country actually to use art forms and media under the governing influence of the Calvinist world view.

Mr. Rene Grove, a member of the Calvary Orthodox Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia, is an artist who has attempted to do just this. On this page we reproduce a picture on which he has been working for several years. It is not intended to be a picture of Christ and Mary, a Madonna in the ordinary sense of that term. We do not have any information concerning the appearance of either Christ or Mary. And there are many sincere Christians who doubt the propriety of attempting to portray Christ, in any case.

Rather what Mr. Grove has given us is an imaginative picture of a mother and her child, in which through the forms and symbolism permitted the artist he has sought to set forth certain Christian truths. As a writer may express his ideas through words, so here the artist has sought to express ideas through artistic media.

The first thing that stands out is the centrality of the child. Roman Cath-



Mother and Child

Rene Grove

olicism in its art has sought ever to glorify the mother, in accordance with its doctrine of Mary. In this picture, however, the mother is deliberately played down. The child is both the central figure of a general pyramidal type of composition, and the source of the light which streams from the picture.

The child is shown holding a small cross. This again is admittedly symbolism, but is intended to illustrate the fact that even from His birth Christ had the cross in view. He had come into this world to be the Saviour of sinners, and apart from the Cross there could be no atonement. Any attempt to interpret Jesus, without recognizing this fact, must fail.

The child is also pictured standing on a piece of lamb's skin. The connection with the idea of Jesus as the

Lamb of God, slain from the foundation of the world, immediately suggests itself. There are numerous other minor features of significance which characterize this work. The artist has sought to use his artistic talent to speak concerning the Christ.

We should be happy to receive letters expressing your reaction to this picture, viewed as an attempt to use art forms in accordance with the Christian and Calvinistic world and life view. If the letters merit it, we plan to publish a few of the best ones as a sort of symposium on the subject of Calvinism and Art, in the February issue of the GUARDIAN. Letters intended for publication should be limited to 500 words, and must reach us by January 20th. Mr. Grove will, of course, be permitted to see all correspondence we receive on this subject.

Calvinism

(Continued from p. 273)

as artists? I suppose that you will add that in any case, even when unbelievers are most expressive in their hostility to God, their work may still be exceedingly beautiful, so completely self-frustrative are all the efforts of Satan and his servants in this world. The unbeliever must borrow, or rather steal, his capital from the believer. Thus do all the works of unbelieving artists

always testify against the unbelief of their creators, in lesser or in greater degree. My guess is that if you could show Mr. Grove that only the Calvinist knows the true principle of spontaneity or freedom in any field, that any other spontaneity or freedom is the liberty of flapping one's wings in a void, the freedom of painting disorder without the background of order, the freedom of painting order without spontaneity, then his face would at least begin to light up.

has been available for some years has before him a treasure that will open up to him a new perspective in dealing with the most precious of all deposits, the Word of the living God.

The work has been edited by the Rev. Johannes G. Vos, the esteemed son of the author. He has also added a most valuable index of subjects and names and of Scripture references.

It is to be regretted that the part devoted to the New Testament is not complete. The volume closes with the chapter on "The Revelation of Jesus' Public Ministry." It is a pleasure to be able to relate, however, that a great deal of the material which would have been incorporated in such a continuation is available to us in Dr. Vos's other books and in numerous articles.

Although Dr. Vos, because of his advanced years, is not now able to enrich us with the fruits of his theological erudition, we rejoice that we now have this new memorial to the graces and gifts with which God has so singularly endowed him. Those of us who have been privileged to sit at his feet wish with all the depth and warmth of esteem and affection that in his declining years the candle of the Lord may shine upon his head and the secret of God abide upon his tabernacle.

(This book may be purchased from THE PRESBYTERIAN GUARDIAN, 1505 Race Street, Philadelphia 2, Pa.)

Biblical Theology

A Book Review

Geerhardus Vos: BIBLICAL THEOLOGY—OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS. Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 1948. 453 pp. \$5.00

"BIBLICAL THEOLOGY" is a distinct branch of theological study. Too many students of the Bible and of theology are unaware of this fact and oftentimes those who are aware of its distinctiveness have a rather hazy notion of its distinctive character. In the publication of this volume the Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company has performed a great service, for it has made available a book which, if perused and digested, will correct this widespread deficiency.

There is no better definition of Biblical Theology known to the present writer than that given by Dr. Vos: "Biblical Theology is that branch of Exegetical Theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible" (p. 13). The key word in this definition is the word "process". The special revelation which God has given of Himself and of His will was not given all at once. It was given rather in a process of progressive and accumulating self-disclosure until it reached its culmination in the redemptive revelation embodied in and associated with the manifestation of the Son of God in the flesh. And this progressive revelation that reached its culmination in the New Testament is not to be conceived of as a series of sporadic and unrelated or disconnected oracles, but as a perfectly unified and articulated organic development. The figure that serves to illustrate is that of the progress from

By JOHN MURRAY

seed to fully developed organism. Biblical Theology deals with this material of revelation and seeks "to exhibit the organic growth or development of the truths of Special Revelation from the primitive preremptive Special Revelation given in Eden to the close of the New Testament canon" (p. 5). A more suitable name would therefore be the "History of Special Revelation" (*ibid.*).

It is this governing conception that provides the principle in terms of which Dr. Vos's *Biblical Theology* is written. We are convinced that, to date, no one has been the peer of Dr. Vos in this department of Biblical study. This volume is therefore unique.

The concept of progressive revelation is subject to great abuse. It is no wonder that devoted students of the Bible should sometimes recoil from the use of it. But the abuse of a concept is never a reason for the rejection of the concept as such. The abuse and distortion place the student under greater obligation to frame a true conception and to apply it properly. This is the great service performed by Dr. Vos. He recognizes that God's revelation has been progressive. But there are two corollaries of this recognition upon which he is equally insistent—first, that the content available to us is deposited in its entirety in the Scriptures and, second, that this process of revelation closed with the completion of the New Testament canon.

Space will not permit any further evaluation of this work. The student who has not had access to this work in the mimeographed form in which it

Lutherans to Withdraw China Missionaries

THE leading Lutheran denominations in this country with the exception of the Missouri Synod have decided to withdraw their missionaries from areas of China overrun or threatened by the Communists.

The decision was reached following reports on conditions in various areas served by Lutheranism. It is probable that the withdrawn missionaries will work in south or southwest China. However, apparently all the groups withdrawing from the north are relocating their people in that area, which is becoming overloaded with missionaries awaiting assignment.

The consensus seems to be that the church in Communist-controlled areas will do better without the presence of 'foreigners'. However, the Communists in some sections have actually invited the missionaries to return.