

PROCEEDINGS  
OF THE  
SEVENTH GENERAL COUNCIL  
OF THE  
ALLIANCE OF REFORMED CHURCHES

HOLDING  
THE PRESBYTERIAN SYSTEM

HELD AT WASHINGTON, D.C., 1899

EDITED BY THE

REV. G. D. MATHEWS, D.D.

*General Secretary of the Alliance*

London  
OFFICE OF THE ALLIANCE  
25 CHRISTCHURCH AVENUE, BRONDESBURY, N.W.  
Washington, D.C., U.S.A.  
M'GILL AND WALLACE, 1107 E STREET,

1899

“Preachers’ Association,” and these elders preach all over the colony with great acceptance. Many a post where there would be no service is supplied by those elders, and thus, of course, their interest in all Church work and their spirituality are increased by their study in preparing themselves for this service.

NEW YORK AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,  
WASHINGTON, D.C.,  
*Thursday, 28th September 1899, 8 p.m.*

The Council met according to adjournment, and resumed its sessions—CHARLES J. GUTHRIE, Esq., Q.C., Edinburgh, in the chair.

After devotional exercises the Order of the Day was taken up, when the Rev. Principal SALMOND, Aberdeen, read the following Paper on

#### CALVINISTIC FORCES IN THE FORMATION OF NATIONAL LIFE IN GREAT BRITAIN.

I am asked to speak of the influence of Calvinism. It is a vast subject, and one of no small difficulty. I am to limit myself to the influence of Calvinism on Great Britain. America is to be separately handled. Both are subjects of extraordinary interest and importance. But the influence of Calvinism on the English people is the fundamental question. How shall one speak worthily of it?

One thing at least may be taken for granted. No one will deny that Calvinism has had an influence, and a mighty one. Nor will any one dispute the fact that this influence has worked not only in the shaping of individual lives, in multitudes of cases among the noblest lives that have given a glory and a majesty to our poor humanity, but also in the formation of the character of nations and the making of their destinies. Those who think worst of Calvinism are witnesses to this fact, not less than its friends. They have much to say of the influence of Calvinism, although what they recognize and deplore in it is the influence which they think the system ought logically to have had, not what it has actually exercised.

In respect, indeed, both of its nature and its results, Calvinism is one of the most misunderstood of all systems of Christian belief. It held the English mind at one of the critical periods of English history. It is still the religious faith of multitudes of the best men, and of Churches which yield to none in Christian reputation and

achievement. But it is often grievously misrepresented. The popular view held of it by those outside its pale is largely in caricature. Even instructed theologians are to be found, not a few, who seem incapable of doing it justice. It is not so with our brethren of the Lutheran Church. They seldom yield to the temptation to misjudge it on the points in which it differs from their own system, and they are at pains at least to inform themselves as to what it really is and what it has done. But it is very different with those of the Anglican Communion. There is a certain inveterate provincialism that clings to the English divine of the Episcopalian type in all matters of doctrine and ecclesiastical polity, which makes it difficult for him to get into the spirit of other ways of construing Christian truth. Even the most scholarly men in the great Anglican Communion have often the most extraordinary ideas of what Calvinism is and what its influence has been. And the more fondly they cling to the peculiar Anglican notions of things, the necessity of Episcopal orders, the perils of democratic forms in the Church, and the like, the more extraordinary are their ideas.

It happens, therefore, that often where we should least expect it, even in the writings of trained theologians, we find Calvinism represented as a system of belief which implies an incredible view, both of God and of man, and one which cannot but exercise a malign influence when it gets into the blood of individuals or of nations. It is exhibited as a doctrine of absolute fore-ordination, which makes the God of love an arbitrary sovereign, and reduces the Divine Nature to an absolute Will, disposing of men and things without reason. We are told that it gives a fatalistic view of the world, and makes man not the master of his fate, but a creature helpless in the iron hand of an eternal decree. It strips man, it is said to us, of his prerogative of free will, and thereby snaps the nerve of moral effort. If one starts with this view of its nature it takes him but a short time to reach the conclusion that its influence on the individual life and on the character of nations cannot but be evil.

But this is all in the teeth of fact. Neither in the nature of its teaching nor in its effects is Calvinism such a thing as it is thus too often declared to be. It is not a system of absolute fore-ordination that makes God rule all things with an arbitrary will and leaves man a helpless vessel in His hands. The doctrine of predestination is certainly an important, even an integral element in it. But it is not the primary thing in it. Calvinism looks, as no other system ventures to do, at all the dark, sad facts that make the burden and the

mystery of human life. It follows to their further issues the questions which inevitably arise regarding the relations of God and man to these facts. It has its own way of construing the doctrine of predestination, and the problems of human ability and inability. But it inherited this from Augustine, and in the essence of the question Lutheranism and Calvinism are at one. The fundamental position was never put more strongly than by Luther in his controversy with Erasmus on the freedom or bondage of the will. In any case, it is a mistake to speak as if predestination were in Calvinism for its own sake. The first thing in it is the doctrine of redemption by the grace of God and the merit of Christ. The doctrine of predestination is the fence of that. It is the expression of the entire dependence of man the sinner on God and His grace from the beginning to the end of his salvation. It is in this latter truth that the primary interest of Calvin lay. It is there, too, that the primary interest of Calvinism continues to be.

If we speak, again, of the root principle of Calvinism as distinguished from its primary interest, we must say again that it is not what it is often asserted to be, and that its influence has not been what it is often declared inevitably to be. Its peculiar principle may be said to be its doctrine of the Divine Sovereignty. But the sovereignty which it affirms is not one applying to a single attribute of God, such as His justice, but to all, and it is first and foremost the sovereignty of a God of grace. It means that the history of things is a great whole in which the Divine Will fulfils itself in its wisdom and righteousness and goodness, all things coming from God and returning to Him in the majesty of an eternal plan. What it does is to assert God Himself as the One great Reality over against all that is creaturely in the world and in the Church, in creation, in providence, and in grace. A great and ennobling conception which takes us behind all that is phenomenal, and bids us look at the eternities before and after our little day!

Is this a form of faith that is likely to produce a life or a character that will be poor or mean, base or selfish or timid? What has its influence been? We say it has been both supremely great and supremely good. And we do not affirm that alone. We say that the greatness and the goodness of the influence have not been in spite of the characteristic teaching, but in virtue of it. It is because of its doctrine of God and man, it is because it teaches that God is sovereign and man dependent, it is because it sees a plan in the world and refers all that takes place in human life as well as in the general system of



things to the purpose and control of a God who is "infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth"—it is because of this that Calvinism has been the mighty, healthsome, and inspiring force which history shows it to have been.

Men speak of what the influence of Calvinism logically must be. They tell us that its doctrine of man's inability strikes at the roots of moral endeavour, and strips us of all reason for striving to live righteously and nobly. That may be the pronouncement of logic. It is not the verdict of history. These high intellects of ours on which we pride ourselves cut a poor figure when they apply their logic to the things of the Spirit, and tell us that this thing and the other must be the result of a certain doctrine or a certain way of dealing with grave problems of belief. God mocks our logic. In His providence things have a way of not turning out as our reasoning would have them. One swift shaft out of the quiver of history puts to flight a whole army of logic choppers. And history makes it clear that Calvinism, instead of weakening moral effort and lowering moral character, has gone to produce a type of life full of seriousness, strength, energy, probity, and steadiness which has done great things for nations.

In proof of this, I appeal to two great and indisputable facts in the history of the British people. Time permits me to do no more. I point *first* to the fact that it was Calvinism that made Scotland a nationality—one capable of great deeds, and able to hold her head nobly among the European peoples. I stand here this evening a Scot, proud of my native land, magnifying the God of the nations in that by the fire of religious faith, and by the sharpness of trial, He made the Scottish people at the turning-point in their career the strong, sturdy, steadfast, God-fearing people that they have proved themselves to be, "the most indomitable race,"—as historians have called them, in Europe, influencing the world far beyond what their numbers or the size of their country entitles them to do, standing always for freedom and for faith, for the curbing of clerical pretension in the Church, and of absolutism in the State. The representatives of the many great nationalities and churches brought together here this evening will not grudge me what I say. Least of all will those of the vast brotherhood of American Presbyterianism be either so undiscerning or so ungenerous as not to pardon me, a son of the dear land of the heather, for speaking of my country, the little one among the thousands of Israel, with the voice of passionate love, or of

her work among the nations in terms of what may seem fond and exaggerated laudation. Forgive me all this, and discount it in the coolness of a judgment unaffected for the time being by the patriotic flame, and it will still be confessed that Scotland has been something to Europe and to the world. And what but her Calvinism has made her what she is? If she has done any service to humanity in the cause of liberty and godliness, in the interest of free institutions and popular government, in the fight for the rights of men in State and Church, in the pioneer work that has opened up vast unknown spaces of earth, and carried to their teeming millions the boon of civilization and the greater blessing of the light of the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ, it is in virtue of her Calvinism that she has done it. The great men who shaped her course at the critical points of her career, who hurled her despots from their thrones, and snapped her fetters of enslavement that the hands of kings and priests tried to forge for her, were Calvinists if ever Calvinists existed. And the heroism that has made some glorious chapters in the great volume of European history—the heroism of the martyred reformers and the hunted Covenanters, the heroism of Old Greyfriars and the Grass-market, of the moss bog and the moor—was the heroism of Calvinism.

This, however, is but part, and the smaller part, of the influence of Calvinism for good in Great Britain. There is a *second* fact, and one of larger moment, to which I appeal. Calvinism not only made a nation, and a free nation, of Scotland. It created Puritanism, and in giving the impulse to the Movement connected with that name it changed the current of English history, and laid the strong foundations of British liberties. The Reformation of religion in England as in Scotland was essentially Calvinistic. Calvin was for long the most honored name in the universities of England, and with the mass of the reforming clergy. Calvinism was the spirit of the Reformation under Edward VI. In Mary's time it declared itself more definitely and distinctly as the commanding force. The Thirty-nine Articles bear its imprint deep and unmistakable. Calvinism was at the heart of the English Reformation, and Puritanism was its finest breath, its most pronounced form. Not that all Puritans were Calvinists. There were others among them. But the soul of the movement was the Reformed faith in its Calvinistic form. The object of Puritanism was to complete the work of the Reformation in England, and the struggle to which it committed itself with that object brought it into collision with king and priest, from which much has resulted for the English people. The services rendered by the Puritan conflict

inspired by the Calvinistic faith were of inestimable value. What should England have been without it? It is mainly to the Puritan movement that we owe our English freedom. It is by reason of the Puritan struggle that the English people at the close of this nineteenth century have the place which distinguishes them among the nations of Europe.

Suppose for a moment that things had gone otherwise. Suppose that the despots in Church and State had been left unchallenged, that Charles and Strafford and Laud had had their way, what would it have meant for us? It would have meant the triumph of absolutism and sacerdotalism for an indefinite length of time. It would have meant the arrest of the Reformation and the victory of Popery, the loss of the liberties which had been gained for the English people by the great Charter, the unchecked oppression of the Star Chamber and the Court of High Commission. What England might have been under these conditions may be surmised if we look at the case of the once proud empire of Spain. Puritanism came at the proper time to drive the Jesuit onset back from England and to prevent it from touching Scotland.

This is work imperishable which Calvinism in its Puritan form has done for Great Britain. And that this honor belongs to Calvinism is not the judgment only of so many prejudiced theologians. It is the calm verdict of historians and philosophic thinkers, of men like Marsden and Freeman, like John Morley and James Anthony Froude, like Samuel Gardiner and John Richard Green. "To what quarter in the bright historic firmament," asks John Morley, surely an unprejudiced witness in such matters, "can we turn our eyes with such certainty of being stirred and elevated, of thinking better of human life and the worth of those who have been most deeply penetrated by its seriousness, as to those intrepid spirits whom the Protestant doctrine of indefeasible personal responsibility brought to the front in Germany in the sixteenth century, and in England and Scotland in the seventeenth?"

The influence of Calvinism, therefore, on Great Britain has been profound. It has been among the strongest of all the formative forces that have acted on our country, and its influence has been on the side of all that is lofty, free, moral, godly in national life. It was a chief instrument in winning for England free Parliamentary Government. In the most trying periods of our history, it has been the greatest power on the side of righteousness. It has been the nurse of heroic souls, and has never allied itself with



ease, self-indulgence, or compromise. It broke the back of priestly domination in England, and it may do that again. For it has always been the faith required for serious times.

We owe it much. Let no one think poorly of it, or be ashamed to preach it. Let no man speak lightly of it in your presence. Be true to it. It has done great things for us in the past. In all the changes of thought and circumstance its vigorous spirit will live, and it may have much to do for us yet.

The Rev. WILLIAM HENRY ROBERTS, D.D., LL.D., now read the following Paper on

#### CALVINISTIC FORCES IN THE FORMATION OF NATIONAL LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES.

The controlling power resident in ideas finds notable illustration in the Protestant Reformation, which began its work both in Church and State in the first part of the sixteenth century. Chief among the cardinal truths of that movement were the sovereignty of God ; the responsibility of every human being to God ; the fact that in his dealings with men God is no respecter of persons ; and the sovereignty over faith and conduct of the Holy Scriptures as the Law of God. These fundamental principles of the Reformation became, in the course of human events, political as well as religious forces. For truth, when accepted, affects all the interests of man, material, mental and political, as well as spiritual.

The formative principles of the Reformation bear in general the name of Calvin, because he above all other men gave them clear and cogent expression in speech. Many are the assaults which have been made both upon Calvin and Calvinism ; but the great Genevan, and the system of truth to which he gave expression, receive unwilling tributes even from opponents. An American writer who confessedly has no love for the mightiest of the Reformers, and who is bitterly opposed to his theological principles, says, "It would be hard to overrate the debt which mankind owe to Calvin."

Calvinism is declared by Froude to have been the chief source of the political progress of the last three centuries ; and Leopold Von Ranke gives his weighty judgment as to the relation of Calvinism to the United States in the words, "John Calvin was the virtual founder of America." These opinions indicate that Calvinism is clearly apprehended as a great political force by strong and deep thinkers, and form an appropriate introduction to the subject,