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The Closing of the Calvinistic Mind

by James B. Jordan

Once upon a time there was such a thing as Calvinistic thought. It existed when I was younger, but seems to have largely disappeared in recent years. But let me elaborate.

When I became a Calvinist, back in 1970, I bought a bunch of books. Over the next few years, I bought some more. Let me list some of the titles. Just read them over:

C. Gregg Singer (Presbyterian), *A Theological Interpretation of American History* (1964), 300 pages.

E. L. Hebden Taylor (Calvinistic Episcopalian), *The Christian Philosophy of Law, Politics, and the State* (1969), 650 pages.

Taylor, *Evolution and the Reformation of Biology* (1967).

Taylor, *Reformation or Revolution* (1970) 630 pages.

Herman Dooyeweerd (Dutch Reformed), *In the Twilight of Western Thought* (1968).

Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (4 volumes, 1953), about 2000 pages.

Dooyeweerd, *The Christian Idea of the State* (1968)

J. M. Spier, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy* (1966)

Spier, *Christianity and Existentialism* (1953)

David H. Freeman, *A Philosophical Study of Religion* (1964), 270 pages.

H. van Riessen, *The Society of the Future* (1952), 320 pages

Francis N. Lee, *Communist Eschatology* (1974), 1200 pages

Rousas J. Rushdoony, *The Messianic Character of American Education* (1968), 400 pages

Rushdoony, *The Mythology of Science* (1967)

Rushdoony, *The Nature of the American System* (1965)

Rushdoony, *The Myth of Over-Population* (1969)

Rushdoony, *The One and the Many: Studies in the Philosophy of Order and Ultimacy* (1971), 390 pages.

Rushdoony, *Politics of Guilt and Pity* (1970), 370 pages.

Rushdoony, *The Foundations of Social Order* (1968).

Now, this is only a representative sampling. I could have listed more titles by each of the above men, and books by others as well. I've included the pages of

the larger books, to show that big heavy books were being published. In hardcover! And they were being read!

This list is interesting because all these books have something in common: All were published by the Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company. Some were published in a series called *University Series: Historical Studies*. Others in a series called *University Series: Philosophical Studies*. There was also a series called *Modern Thinkers* that published books of about 50 pages each on Paul Tillich, Rudolph Bultmann, Søren Kierkegaard, Charles Dewey, Friedrich Nietzsche, Arnold Toynbee, Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Sartre, Cornelius Van Til, Sigmund Freud, and William James. Authors included R. J. Rushdoony, Herman Ridderbos, Gordon Clark, S. U. Zuidema, H. van Riessen, Gregg Singer, and others.

And I have not even mentioned the many heavy-duty works of Cornelius Van Til that P&R published during those years, nor the similar kinds of works from other publishers, such as Henry Van Til's *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, works by Klaas Schilder and Evan Runner, and others.

Not all of these books were of equal value, of course. But all were engaged with the world. They were books about the kingdom of Jesus the Christ, who claims all of life and culture.

So, where is this kind of stuff today? From Calvinistic publishers we get Bible commentaries, usually fluffy stuff that reads like someone's daily devotional thoughts, or else questionable scholarship that is compromised with critical thinking. And we get all kinds of pastoral and psychological and family books and helps. All fine and dandy, I suppose, though in the nature of the case, this kind of literature tends to be "me-centered."

But, you see, once upon a time, there were people who wrote, people who published, and people who read deep and thoughtful books about the kinds of things the titles above describe. And these books were not the kind of light-weight "we need a Christian worldview!" fluff written by evangelicals. These weren't movie-guides. They weren't warmed-over Roman Catholic natural-law stuff written by evangelicals steeped in reading *First Things*. These were books written by serious Bible-believing Calvinists who were engaged with the Reformation but also with the whole history of Christian thought. They were

written by men who sought to think presuppositionally, and who did not mind saying so, even if they differed with each other a bit over how to do so. They were written by men who took seriously the depravity of the mind, and were not fooled by the majority opinions in society, academy, and church.

These men, and those like them, were aware that the Reformation was only the beginning of a restoration of Biblical thought. Works like the Belgic and Westminster Confessions were steps along the way, but not the last words. Presuppositionalists like Cornelius Van Til and others did not hesitate to criticize John Calvin and the Westminster Divines for employing flawed philosophical notions. Nor did they mind pointing out places where theological formulations needed improvement as a result of the exorcism of bad presuppositions. And, wonder of wonder, nobody minded.

Because back in those days, Calvinists were still able to think.

It seems no longer so. The controversies over the so-called “federal vision” and “new perspective on Paul” are but two examples of the closing of the Calvinistic mind, at least in many parts of the Reformed world. Men with little knowledge of history, evidently incapable of thinking presuppositionally, and sometimes (not always) rather obviously motivated by political concerns (if not by sheer envy), have not hesitated to distort and even lie about this thing called “federal vision” (which, as they discuss it, is largely a product of their own minds).

With minds like steel traps, these critics insist that “shibboleth” be pronounced their way, on pain of expulsion. Indeed, those who try to reason within the great Reformed tradition – the tradition reflected by the list of books above – have been called “heretics” because they don’t say “shibboleth” rightly.

This has nothing to do with liberalism. Indeed, the men accused of heresy are by and large more conservative, and far more consistently Reformational, than their semi-Baptist critics. But that’s not the main issue I’m getting at in this essay.

My burden here is to point out, to all the younger people reading this essay, that once upon a time it was not so. Once upon a time, a man being examined for presbytery could take issue with Calvin or the Westminster Standards, defend himself from the Bible and Reformed theology, and have a conversation. He could say that a flawed epistemology was found in some parts of these early works. He could say that pitting good works against grace was not true to the genius of the Reformed faith, or to the Bible. He could point out that there is no “merit theology” in the Bible. He could say that he preferred to speak of being united to the whole risen Christ rather than speak in the abstract about an imputed righteousness separated from that union. He could argue that the book of Romans is not after all a kind of proto-Berkhof systematic theology, but a book that is to a considerable extent about how Jew and Gentile, torn apart and dead to each other, were now reunited through resurrection in the kingdom of the Resurrected One.

In many places such conversations are no longer possible. Pastors have been cast out of or rejected by

PCA presbyteries for believing what the Westminster Confession says about baptism. In others, the bullies who run the presbytery or classis have so cowed all the licentiates that they dare not raise any questions about anything. Here and there things are better, but from what I see, I’m not encouraged. The Calvinistic mind, if it has not closed already, appears to be closing fast.

But, that’s to be expected. As I maintained in *Crisis, Opportunity, and the Christian Future*, the Protestant age is coming to an end. That means that the Reformed faith and Presbyterianism are also coming to an end. The paradigm is exhausted, and the world in which it was worked out no longer exists. We must take all the great gains of the Calvinistic heritage and apply them with an open Bible to the new world in which we are now living. We must be aware that there is far more in the Bible than the Reformation dealt with, and that many of our problems today are addressed by those hitherto unnoticed or undeveloped aspects of the Bible. Those who want to bang the drum for a 450-year old tradition are dooming themselves to irrelevance. Our only concern is to avoid being beat up by them as they thrash about in their death-throes.

FV, NPP, PCA, AAPC, ETC.

by James B. Jordan

Not all readers of this essayletter may be aware of it, but a tempest has been brewing in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), a tempest created by the liberal party in that denomination. It came about this way.

In January 2002, a Pastor’s Conference on covenant theology was held at the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church (AAPC). The lectures presented at this conference were calls to return to historic Reformational teachings on the covenant. The men who presented lectures did not agree with one another on all points, including some significant ones (such as admission to the Lord’s Table by baptism alone: “paedocommunion”). The conference was entitled “The Federal Vision” (FV) to indicate that the topic was the covenant.

This Conference was a conversation.

A conversation for grown-ups.

Shortly after this Conference was held, a condemnation of it was issued by a small group of self-proclaimed “Southern Presbyterians” headed up by Joseph Morecraft of Dunwoody, Georgia. This condemnation linked the AAPC discussion of the covenant with the so-called New Perspective on Paul (NPP) and its best-known evangelical advocate, the Anglican N. Thomas Wright. I gather that this was an attempt at guilt-by-association, since a palpable hatred of “liturgical” (i.e., Reformation-style) worship seems to characterize the group that is gathered around Morecraft.

For some reason mysterious to me, the association of the FV speakers with the NPP has stuck, even though there are no grounds for it. Those of us being called FV have been discussing these issues for 25

years, long before any of us had ever heard of Tom Wright. Almost all the issues that are being shrieked about were set out in writings published by me and my associates at Geneva Ministries during the 1980s in issues of the journal *Christianity and Civilization*.

Although Joseph Morecraft is not in the PCA, his claim to represent some kind of pure Southern Presbyterianism seems to have resonated with others who claim the same thing. At any rate, linking the FV with the NPP and attacking both together in stentorian and intemperate tones has become a hobby for other ostensible “Southern Presbyterians.” (I’m not sure these people are really being true to the best thinkers of the Southern Presbyterian tradition. I think they are being true only to their own ignorance.)

To be sure, people interested in renewing covenant theology have read N. T. Wright, James Dunn, Jakob van Bruggen, and others who write in the NPP vein. We have also read David Yaego and Tuomo Mannermaa and the other Finnish writers who have been reinvestigating Martin Luther. But that does not put us into the pocket of the New Finnish School, any more than reading Alexander Schmemmann makes us Russian Orthodox, or reading *The Banner of Truth* or *Modern Reformation* makes us Baptists, or reading *First Things* makes us Roman Catholics.

This brings us, though, to one of the main problems in the current brouhaha, and that is childishness. The infantile behavior of a whole lot of people who have attacked the FV Conversation is rather marked. Sharp barks of “Heresy!,” crackpot attempts at guilt-by-association, and the belief in a conspiracy or “movement” are all too characteristic of the noises belching forth from certain quarters.

This is olde hatte for me. During the 1980s, when I was involved with Geneva Ministries in Tyler, Texas, we used to recommend Alexander Schmemmann’s remarkable book *For the Life of the World*. Since, being Calvinists, we differed with a few things in the book, we included a short reader’s guide with the copies we sold. But predictably it was not long before certain churlish voices were raised around the country accusing me and others of being “on the road to Eastern Orthodoxy.” Similarly, when it became known that we were singing the ancient hymns of the Church in our worship in Tyler, the same infantile voices accused us of being “on the road to Rome.” Curiously (duh!) it’s the same people who led the attack on the AAPC Conversation.

It’s time for certain people to grow up.

Having said that, I’m going to take the gloves off and point out that those critics who accused us of being Eastern Orthodox, etc., knew full well that we were not anything of the sort. They knew that they were lying about us. They were motivated by evil desires, often envy, and for that reason sought to tear us down. It was not ignorance. It was not really juvenile thinking. It was just envy and evil. Why should I sugar-coat it and pretend that this is not so, when everyone involved knows that it is?

A second large problem connected with the current noise is deceptiveness. The Mississippi Valley presbytery of the PCA has issued a report on FV and related issues, again erroneously lumping the NPP

with the FV. In addition to numerous miscastings of what particular people have written and said, the report is deceptive in that it presents itself as the product of an actual committee and in that it claims that this committee “held a face to face meeting with representatives of the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church of Monroe, Louisiana.” These two claims are deceptive, because in fact the committee only met one time, many months before the report was issued. The committee did not meet and discuss these issues. The report was apparently written by one man and perhaps edited by a second. Additionally, no one on the committee made any attempt to meet with anyone from AAPC. It was only after the first version of the report was issued and published on the internet that the elders of AAPC themselves asked for and got a meeting. Over half of the study committee did not attend this meeting.

But the main problem that is generating controversy is actually fairly well put by the Mississippi Valley report: “Proponents of the FV identify themselves as Reformed. Most appeal to the writings of the sixteenth century Reformers in support of their views. Many regard the Reformed thought of the British Puritan and American Presbyterian traditions to have capitulated to the Enlightenment, what is termed revivalism, and what is termed baptistic theology.”

Well, that’s about right. The Protestant Reformation in all its branches was a sacramental, liturgical, musical, and bibliocratic movement. Prior to the Reformation, people attended the Lord’s Supper once a year, if that. For Calvin and the other reformers, Jesus had promised to meet objectively with His people at His table, and so all the reformers believed very strongly in weekly communion, and they strove to implement it.

They believed in baptismal regeneration. They understood by “regeneration” a new life in the kingdom of God, in the church, not a kind of permanent internal change in the heart (which is how “regeneration” later came to be understood). For Calvin, “regeneration” is pretty much a synonym for sanctification.

They all believed in congregational participation in worship, which meant liturgies that were the same every week, and also meant much attention to singing the worship service. Calvin’s attitude seems to have been “Why say it when you can sing it?”

Finally, the Calvinistic wing of the Reformation believed in national discipleship using the Bible as standard. They had no fear of the so-called “Mosaic law” as part of the Biblical revelation about Jesus’ rule over all of life. Calvin, Bucer, and the other Reformers called for the reformation of the state along Biblical lines of justice.

What can be seen from this is that the Reformation had a very “objective” view of Church life and grace. They did not think of transformation as coming from inside a person, but as coming from outside: from preaching – exposure to the Word, from encountering Jesus in the sacraments, from being discipled by liturgy and singing. They did not reject all religious experience, but they knew from the Bible that the human heart is exceedingly deceptive, so that trusting

in one's own decisions and experiences was not a safe way to proceed. We should trust the objective promises of God.

About a century later, however, came what those who liked it called the "Second Reformation" in Scottish, English, and Dutch Calvinism. Supposedly this reformation completed what was lacking in the original one. In fact it was to a considerable extent a Medieval reaction against the Reformation. To be sure, the Puritans and others did not go back to the idolatries of the Middle Ages, but they did reject musical and liturgical worship, seeking to restore the almost complete passivity of the Medieval worshiper. And within a generation or so, those in these movements had settled into a kind of church-only pietism that ignored bibliocratic national reform. And later on, these same movements wound up in the kind of anti-sacramentalism that came to characterize 18th, 19th, and 20th century Calvinism.

So, **Wow!** These FV guys are seeking to go back to the Reformation! And that is some new idea that suddenly popped up at the AAPC conference in 2002? No, all of what I just wrote about, including the charge of Baptist revivalism, is found in the journals *Christianity and Civilization No. 1: The Failure of the American Baptist Culture* (1982) and *No. 4: The Reconstruction of the Church* (1985), as supplemented by my own collection of essays, *The Sociology of the Church*.

The 2002 AAPC conference was nothing new. The Reformational ideas presented had been discussed in Presbyterian circles for many years. To be sure, each of the speakers at the conference had something to contribute to the discussion, but the overall set of issues discussed was nothing new.

This is worth pointing out, because many people who are new to these ideas are thinking that they sprang up very recently. As the previous essay showed, there once was a tradition of Calvinistic thought. It was out of that tradition that the call to return to Reformation worship and ecclesiology was made in the 1980s. The FV is simply a continuation of that tradition.

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