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Calvin's Doctrine of Justification

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Coates: Calvin's Doctrine of Justification

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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THOMAS COATES

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WI JO KANG

Opportunities in the Field of Bible Translating
EUGENE A. NIDA

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VOL. XXXIV

June 1963

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Calvin's Doctrine of Justification

By THOMAS COATES

Justification by faith was the great central doctrine of the Reformation, a doctrine which formed the foundation of the entire theological system of Luther and was bequeathed by him to the succeeding generations of Christendom as the great heritage of the Reformation. This doctrine, of course, did not originate with the reformers, but was restored by them to its rightful position as the pivot around which the entire Christian religion revolves—the doctrine which, in a preeminent sense, marks the great cleavage between Christianity and all heathen religions. The unique and distinctive character of Christianity, in contrast with all non-Christian religious systems, consists especially in the doctrine of justification by grace through faith.

John Calvin directed all the powers of his great intellect to the logical and systematic exposition of this fundamental Christian doctrine. While Calvin's treatment of the doctrine of the justification by faith may lack much of the warmth and intensity of feeling that characterized Luther's approach to this vital Christian doctrine, it leaves nothing to be desired in lucidity of presentation, in effectiveness of argumentation, and in the thoroughness of its application.

MEANING OF JUSTIFICATION

Calvin, good lawyer that he was, realized the importance of establishing from the very outset, beyond any possibility of misunderstanding, the correct meaning of the terms which he chose to employ. Hence

he prefaces his exhaustive treatment of the doctrine of justification with a statement of the *meaning* of the concept.

"He is said to be justified in the sight of God," Calvin states, "who in the divine judgment is reputed righteous and accepted on account of his righteousness; for as iniquity is abominable to God, so no sinner can find favor in His sight, as a sinner, or so long as he is considered as such."¹ Accordingly, justification by God the Creator and the presence of sin in man, the creature, are mutually exclusive. To be regarded, or "reputed," as just in the eyes of God, a man must be perfect—not only 99 percent perfect, but 100 percent. Nothing less will do.

How then can justification be achieved? Calvin weighs the only two possibilities which present themselves: A man can justify himself in the sight of God by keeping the Law of God in its totality, without the slightest taint of imperfection. Such a man would be said to be justified by his works. Ever since the Fall, however, man is utterly incapable of that perfection which would enable him to justify himself by his own works. The truth of this assertion is attested both by Scripture and by man's own experience. Says Calvin: "On the contrary, I shall always object that we never arrive at that perfection unless we fulfill all the branches of charity; and hence I shall infer that since all men are at an

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III, 11, 2. All the succeeding parenthetical references in this article refer to the *Institutes*.

immense distance from complete charity they are destitute of all hope of perfection." (III, 18, 9)

Only one other possibility, therefore, remains. A sinner may bedeck himself with the righteousness of Christ, which he apprehends by faith. God, in His grace, ascribes or imputes to the sinner the righteousness of His eternal Son, which is offered to men freely to atone for the sins of all mankind. Thus the sinner is *justified by faith*, through which he appropriates Christ's righteousness to himself. As Calvin states in summary: "Justification therefore is nothing else than an acquittal from guilt of him who was accursed, as though his innocence had been proved. Since God therefore justifies us through the mediation of Christ, He acquits us, not by an admission of our personal innocence but by an imputation of righteousness; so that we, who are unrighteous in ourselves, are considered as righteous in Christ" (III, 11, 3). Therefore through the substitutionary righteousness of Christ, apprehended and possessed by the sinner through faith, God no longer appears as a stern Judge but as a reconciled Father.

HOW FAITH JUSTIFIES

Whence does faith derive this surpassing power, by which it effects our reconciliation with God through the imputation of Christ's all-sufficient righteousness? Does it have intrinsic worth, and is it attributable to any special capacity of the individual in whom it is found? Indeed not, declares Calvin. That would vitiate the entire doctrine of justification, which from beginning to end is an act of divine grace. Over and over again Calvin underscores the gratuitous nature of justification. "The power

of justifying, attached to faith, consists *not in the worthiness of the act*. Our justification depends solely on the mercy of God and the merit of Christ, which when faith apprehends it is said to justify us." (III, 18, 9)

Faith, says Calvin, is like a vessel, "for unless we come empty with the mouth of our soul open to implore the grace of Christ, we cannot receive Christ. . . . For faith, although intrinsically it is of no dignity or value, justifies us by an application of Christ, just as a vessel full of money constitutes a man rich." (III, 11, 7)

IMPUTATION OF CHRIST'S RIGHTEOUSNESS

Calvin cites 2 Cor. 5:21 as a key passage in the doctrine of justification by faith through the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the sinner. "He hath made Him to be sin *for us* who knew no sin that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him." This is the cardinal Christian principle, restored and exalted by the Reformation, that is, *Christus pro nobis*, Christ dying in our stead, for our sake, on our behalf, assuming the guilt and bearing the punishment as our Substitute.

Calvin further elucidates this doctrine by stating: "For the Lord Christ so communicates His righteousness to us that, with reference to the divine judgment, He transfuses its virtue into us in a most wonderful manner. That the apostle intended no other, abundantly appears from another declaration which he had made just before: 'As by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous' (Rom. 5: 19). What is placing our righteousness in the obedience of Christ but asserting

that we are accounted righteous only because His obedience is accepted for us *as if it were our own*. Wherefore Ambrose appears to me to have very beautifully exemplified this righteousness in the benediction of Jacob; that as he, who had on his own account no claim to the privileges of primogeniture, being concealed in his brother's habit and invested in his garment, which diffused a most excellent odor, insinuated himself into the favor of his father, that he might receive the benediction to his own advantage, under the character of another; so we shelter ourselves under the precious purity of Christ our elder brother that we may obtain the testimony of righteousness in the sight of God." (III, 11, 23)

THE EFFICACY OF JUSTIFICATION THROUGH CHRIST

The doctrine of justification, as held by Calvin, is based on the fact that the atonement of Jesus Christ has eternal and universal validity, that it is fully competent to appease the offended justice of God and to satisfy His demands, and that it is efficacious for *every* sinner who seeks therein his refuge. Calvin argues that the redemptive work of Christ would not possess this power if He were only a man. Christ is able to redeem and to justify only because He is God as well as man, the divine nature having been combined with the human in His incarnation. At the same time this work cannot be ascribed solely to His divine nature, for in Christ the divine and human attributes are mutually communicated. If Christ had been only God, He could not have died. If He had been only man, His work could not have rendered satisfaction *for us*. He had to be both God and man to be our Savior.

THE CHRISTIAN'S UNION WITH CHRIST

Calvin, in his cold, abstract, systematic approach to doctrine, has little room for the Pauline *Christus in nobis* that is so prominent in, and so characteristic of, Luther's theology. It is especially interesting, however, that he cannot avoid this idea in his discussion of justification and of the sinner's appropriation of the righteousness of Christ. In a unique and very significant passage (III, 11, 10) he argues that the atonement of Christ is of no benefit to the individual sinner until it is personally appropriated by faith, until Christ "inhabits the heart." "I attribute, therefore," writes Calvin, "the highest importance to the connection between the Head and members; to the inhabitation of Christ in our hearts; in a word, to the mystical union by which we enjoy Him, so that, being made ours, He makes us partakers of the blessings with which He is furnished." He goes on to say that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us when we "put Him on," when we are "ingrafted into His body," so as to become united with Him, and thus participate in His righteousness. — Nowhere, perhaps, does Calvin's dependence on Luther appear more clearly, and perhaps by the same token, nowhere does Calvin's theology come so close to genuine warmth.

FORENSIC JUSTIFICATION

The dominant emphasis in Calvin's exposition of the doctrine of justification is its *forensic* character. In this his affinity with Melancthon is very evident. A sinner is justified, Calvin holds, by being *declared* just. This is attributable, not to anything within himself but to a force

outside himself (hence the term *forensic*, from *forum*). This force, of course, is the expiatory work and sacrifice of Christ, which is the ground of the sinner's justification. "This is a wonderful method of justification," says Calvin, "that sinners, being invested with the righteousness of Christ, dread not the judgment which they have deserved and that, while they justly condemn themselves, they are accounted righteous *outside themselves*" (III, 11, 11). Here, with especial clarity, appears Calvin's stress on the legal aspect of justification—a judicial act by which God, as Judge, absolves the accused.

RIGHTEOUSNESS AND RECONCILIATION

Calvin goes on to identify the righteousness of faith with the reconciliation with God, "which consists solely in remission of sins." He declares: "It appears, then, that those whom God receives are made righteous in no other wise than as they are purified by being cleansed from all their defilements by the remission of their sins, so that such a righteousness may, in one word, be denominated a remission of sins" (III, 11, 21). Righteousness and reconciliation are mutually comprehended in each other, and justification and forgiveness of sins are really interchangeable terms. To support this contention Calvin quotes Augustine, who said: "The righteousness of the saints, in this world, consists rather in the remission of their sins than in the perfection of their virtues." He further records the observation of Bernard: "Not to sin at all is the righteousness of God, but the righteousness of man is the divine grace and mercy. . . . Christ is Righteousness to us in absolution, and therefore they alone are righteous who have obtained pardon through His mercy."

LAW AND GOSPEL

The righteousness of Christ is offered through the medium of the Gospel, and it is by receiving and embracing this righteousness that the sinner is accounted just. The fact that this is offered by the Gospel totally excludes all consideration of works as a condition of justification. A righteousness of works would be a righteousness of the Law. But it is necessary to distinguish between Law and Gospel, says Calvin, and he adduces Rom. 10:5-9 to prove this difference and to give evidence of the fact that these two are mutually exclusive with reference to justification.

The Law is fulfilled only by love. Love, however, is at best imperfect in man's present sinful state and therefore merits no reward and cannot be the ground of justification. The righteousness of faith is the essence of the Gospel promise. The righteousness of the Law requires works; the righteousness of faith does not require works. Since righteousness cannot at once be merited and gratuitous, one of these must be excluded. And Calvin proceeds to discuss, in exhaustive detail, the exclusion of works in the justification of the sinner. For, he says, "Whoever fabricates a twofold righteousness that wretched souls may not rely wholly and exclusively on the divine mercy makes Christ an object of contempt and crowns Him with platted thorns." (III, 11, 12)

WORKS ARE EXCLUDED

Calvin cannot emphasize too strongly or with sufficiently uncompromising vigor the total exclusion of human merit in the justification of the sinner, which, he reiterates, *is attributed to faith through grace*. He writes: "That there is no other cause for God's reception of man into His love than

His knowledge that man, if abandoned by Him, would be utterly lost; and because it is not His will to abandon him to perdition, He displays His mercy in his deliverance. Now, we see that this acceptance is irrespective of the righteousness of man, but is an unequivocal proof of the divine goodness toward miserable sinners, who are infinitely unworthy of so great a favor" (III, 17, 4). He points out that the apostle excludes boasting (Rom. 3:27). However, as long as our works retain the least particle of righteousness, to that extent some cause for boasting remains. But if faith excludes all boasting, it follows that the Scripture leaves no room whatsoever for any righteousness of works, however insignificant. One can readily imagine how Calvin reveled in the pure logic of this aspect of justification, and so it is not surprising that he piles proof upon proof, on the basis of Paul's reasoning in the Epistle to the Romans. If Abraham had been justified by works, he would have had cause to glory. But Scripture says that Abraham had nothing of which to glory before God. Hence it follows that Abraham could not have been justified by works, but by faith. The syllogism is irrefragable. But more: if a man is justified by works, then his reward is not one of grace, but of debt. But Scripture declares righteousness to be a gift of God's grace. Hence it cannot be of works. No wonder that Calvin, at the conclusion of this ironclad system of argumentation, can exclaim: "Adieu, therefore, to the fanciful notion of those who imagine a righteousness compounded of faith and works" (III, 11, 13). Such people are not only deficient in Christianity; they are deficient in elementary logic.

What is more, trust in our own works

as the basis of justification leads to terrible uncertainty—the kind of uncertainty that the young Luther in the monastery experienced when he sought to find the surety of salvation in his own meritorious works—and failed. But what is worse, in Calvin's view, is the indisputable fact that trust in our own works is *subversive of the glory of God*.

Calvin never argues to better effect than when he contrasts the glory of the Creator with the wretchedness of the creature. What insufferable pride, what presumptuous arrogance, therefore, for miserable, puny man to vaunt his paltry little deeds—even the best of them corroded by sin—before the awful majesty of God as if they merited a reward! Calvin therefore summons the full force of his superb eloquence to shatter, with one devastating oratorical blow, the pitiful self-delusion of human pride: "Let us place that Judge before our eyes, not according to the spontaneous imaginations of our minds but according to the descriptions given of Him in the Scripture, which represents Him as One whose refulgence eclipses the stars, whose power melts the mountains, whose anger shakes the earth, whose wisdom takes the subtle in their own craftiness, whose purity makes all things appear polluted, whose righteousness even the angels are unable to bear, who does not acquit the guilty, whose vengeance, when once it is kindled, penetrates even to the abyss of hell." God's glory and sovereignty thus established, Calvin relentlessly drives home his conclusion: "Let Him seat Himself, I say, on the tribunal, to examine the actions of men: who will present himself fearless before His throne? 'Who shall dwell with the devouring fire?' says the prophet. 'Who shall

dwell with everlasting burnings? He that walketh righteously and speaketh uprightly' (Is. 33:14, 15). Now let him come forward, whoever he is. But this answer causes not one to appear. For, on the contrary, we hear this fearful speech, 'If Thou, Lord, shouldst mark iniquity, O Lord, who shall stand?' (Ps. 130:3)." (III, 11, 13)

Before the celestial tribunal man will be stripped of all his imagined righteousness. His merits will appear as filthy rags. His pride will be completely shattered. Even if it were possible that man were guilty of but a single sin or misstep, this alone would render him incapable of justifying or exculpating himself. He would be unfit to stand before the pure and holy God and would be subject to eternal punishment. No deed, however good, has any intrinsic worth so as to merit a reward. Therefore, declares Calvin, in his peroration: "The Scriptures everywhere drive us from all confidence when they declare that all our righteousnesses are odious in the divine view unless they are perfumed with the holiness of Christ and that they can only excite the vengeance of God unless they are supported by His merciful pardon." (III, 14, 16)

Humility must be the inevitable concomitant of that faith whereby a man can be accounted righteous before God. This is attested, not only by Scripture but by the best fathers—Chrysostom, Augustine, and Bernard. Calvin inveighs with particular bitterness against the sin of pride, which is an especially grievous affront to the sovereignty of God, which he is so exceptionally jealous to preserve. To humble one's self before God means to confess one's complete unworthiness, to renounce every last vestige of pride. Calvin therefore

concludes: "Prepared for a participation of the benefits of divine mercy is he who has wholly divested himself, I will not say of his righteousness, which is a mere nullity, but of the vain and airy phantom of righteousness; for as far as any man is satisfied with himself, so far he raises an impediment to the exercise of the grace of God." (III, 12, 8)

GOOD WORKS AS THE FRUITS OF FAITH

Now, the fact that justification is in no wise attributable to any works of our own does not imply that good works are not desirable or necessary in the life of him who is justified. Calvin declares that the works of the Christian are to be regarded as "the gifts of God, in which they acknowledge His goodness, and as marks of their calling, whence they infer their election" (III, 14, 20). This does not mean, of course, that any merit is ascribed to them or that they detract an iota from the gratuitous righteousness obtained in and through Christ. They are rather the inevitable consequence of the faith that "worketh by love," and their absence in the life of a professed Christian would be *prima facie* evidence that he does not possess true faith, that he has not really been "ingrafted into Christ." A good tree is bound to bring forth good fruit, and only that tree is good which is rooted in Christ. The relationship of faith and works is that of cause and effect.

Calvin is very insistent, however, that the works of the Christian should be regarded in their proper light. The Christian's works are accepted by God only through and on account of Christ. Since they are the fruit of faith, He graciously overlooks their intrinsic deficiencies, par-

dons their imperfections, and exalts them to a place in His favor—but only for the sake of Christ. "For," writes Calvin, "the Lord cannot but love and accept those good effects which are produced in them by His Spirit. But it must always be remembered that they are accepted by God in consequence of their works only because, for their sakes and the favor which He bears to them, He deigns to accept whatever goodness He has liberally communicated to their works. For whence proceeds the goodness of their works but from the Lord's determination to adorn with true purity those whom He has chosen as vessels of honor?" (III, 17, 5)

The reward which God in His Word promises to His people is by no means to be construed as implying that the works of the believers are invested with special merit. Calvin proves that the promise of the reward indicates the *order* of events, not the *cause* of them. "Here, then," he exclaims, "it appears beyond all doubt, that the Lord rewards the works of believers with those blessings which He had already given them before their works were thought of and while He had no reason for His beneficence but His own mercy" (III, 18, 2). He shatters the idea of any reciprocal relationship between merit and reward, stating: "Nothing is clearer than that the promise of a reward to good works is designed to afford some consolation to the weakness of our flesh, but not to inflate our minds with vainglory. Whoever therefore infers from this that there is any merit in works, or balances the work against the reward, errs very widely from the true design of God" (III, 18, 4). And again: "Let us not suppose that works, subsequent to gratuitous justifi-

fication, are so highly esteemed that they succeed to the office of justifying men or divide that office with faith. For unless justification by faith always remains unimpaired, the impurity of their works will be detected." (III, 17, 9)

In fine, concludes Calvin, driving home his summation with the hammer blows of irresistible logic: "The kingdom of heaven is not the stipend of servants but the inheritance of children." (III, 18, 2)

JUSTIFICATION AND SANCTIFICATION

Calvin recognized a very direct relationship between justification and sanctification. He maintained that the life of the true Christian is a life of progressive sanctification. The emphasis upon this aspect of the Christian life played a very prominent part in his theology. Like Thomas Aquinas and Ignatius Loyola, he laid much stress upon personal holiness and the Christian's separation from a world that, in his view, was intrinsically evil. Perhaps the most characteristic aspect of his approach to the doctrine of the vicarious atonement is that he sets it forth as the means whereby a man becomes holy.

At the same time Calvin was not a perfectionist; he clearly taught that the Christian's perfection is eschatological. He viewed the Christian's life as a progress toward perfection. This is the goal toward which we should direct all our endeavors; this goal, however, cannot be attained on this side of the grave. Nevertheless, the unattainability of the goal should not cause us to slacken our efforts to reach it.

Calvin held with Luther that a Christian is *simul iustus et peccator*. We are justified in the eyes of God through faith in His Son, yet at the same time we are sinful.

This does not mean—and Calvin is very insistent on this point—that we are half Christian and half unbeliever. We are at once totally perfect in the eyes of God, through the possession of the imputed righteousness of Christ, and totally imperfect in our own eyes. This is the amazing paradox of the Christian life.

In discussing the matter of Christian perfection Calvin writes: "I do not so rigorously require evangelical perfection as not to acknowledge as a Christian one who has not yet attained to it, for then all would be excluded from the Church, since no man can be found who is not still at a great distance from it. . . . What then? let us set before our eyes that mark to which alone our pursuit must be directed. . . . But since no man in this terrestrial and corporeal prison has strength sufficient to press forward in his course with a due degree of alacrity, and the majority are oppressed with such great debility that they stagger and halt, and even creep on the ground, and so make very inconsiderable advances—let every one proceed according to our small ability and prosecute the journey we have begun." (III, 6, 5)

Perfection therefore, eschatologically understood, is the ethical objective of the Christian life. Toward it we must constantly strive, and to it we shall someday attain—not on earth, however, but in heaven.

EFFECTS OF JUSTIFICATION

Calvin avers, in summary, that two considerations are preeminent with regard to the doctrine of free justification. The first is that this doctrine, and this alone, maintains the *glory* of God unimpaired and inviolate. Any idea of human cooperation or human merit subverts and diminishes the

glory of God. To glorify God means that we must first renounce all glory in ourselves. It is not surprising therefore that Calvin, with his extreme concern for the preservation of God's glory, should be uncompromising in his insistence on free justification, which alone ascribes all glory to God.

The second factor is that gratuitous justification alone can give peace of conscience, comfort, and security to poor sinners. Reliance on our own merit and achievement and on the adequacy of our own works can ultimately produce only despair and end in spiritual disaster. Justification by faith alone is the only source of true happiness, the only sure foundation for our eternal hope.

JUSTIFICATION AND PREDESTINATION

It would be impossible, in any discussion of Calvin's doctrine of justification, to fail to discuss the relationship of justification to predestination in Calvin's thought. Beyond the special aspect of the sinners' reconciliation to God in the doctrine of justification, Calvin related it to the still more comprehensive and inscrutable aspect of the doctrine of predestination.

Calvin recognized in justification an act of divine sovereignty. God, in His sovereign will, has determined from all eternity who is to be justified. We fully appreciate the grandeur and munificence of His free grace only when we recognize it to be the eternal election of God, conceived in His will alone, without the least reference to anything in man.

But that is not all. Calvin holds that the divine decree of election can only be appreciated fully in the light of its counterpart, the divine act of reprobation, as eternally consummated in certain individ-

uals, also without any reference to their conduct.

"The divine is apprehended not only on its positive but on its negative side; as working out not only a progressive kingdom of righteousness but also a retrogressive kingdom of evil, and in each case equally for its own glory. And this moral dualism is applied with a fearless and un-trembling hand. It is in no sense a mere theory—but a living principle, which he (Calvin) brings to bear without flinching upon all the mysteries of human existence. He confesses, indeed, that it is a 'horrible decree'; but its clear and undeniable proof seems to lie in the simple statement which follows upon this confession: 'God must have foreseen the special destiny of each individual before He created him, and He only foresaw this as having ordained it.' This was the highest triumph of his system. Even a logic such as Calvin's could go no farther than this."²

It is this aspect of Calvin's theology that has always seemed most repulsive to non-Calvinists and which has resulted in the chasm which yawns between the Calvinists and the Arminians, on the one hand, and between the Calvinists and the Lutherans on the other hand. It seems only fair, however, to state that the "horrible decree" remained for Calvin largely in the realm of theory and did not affect his practical attitude toward others. He did not deal with a man as with a reprobate but rather as with one of the elect. He emphasized the fact that the consolatory and inspiring side of the doctrine of predestination should be presented rather than the sinister

and repellent side. "It is strictly forbidden us," he said, "to exclude anyone from the number of the elect or to despair of him as if he were already lost, unless it be a matter of certainty that he is condemned by the Word of God."

CALVIN AND LUTHER

From the foregoing it will be evident that a very close relationship exists between Calvin and Luther in regard to the doctrine of justification. By and large, it can be said that in his treatment of justification Calvin was "Lutheran." Both stressed the paramount idea of gratuitous justification. Both taught the vicarious death of Christ for the forgiveness of sin, the satisfaction that He rendered for man's guilt, and the imputation of His righteousness to the believer. Both insisted vigorously on the complete exclusion of all human work and merit. Both held that only this distinctive Christian doctrine gives all glory to God and certain hope and security to the believer. Both taught that sanctification is an outgrowth of justification, that the Christian life is a continual progress toward the goal of perfection, which, however, can be attained only in heaven. Both taught that the believer is *simul iustus et peccator*. Both rejected the heresies of the scholastics and papists with regard to this doctrine, not to mention the aberrations of the Anabaptists and other heretics.

What difference existed between Luther and Calvin on the doctrine of justification was one of degree rather than of kind. Calvin stressed the forensic aspect of justification even more prominently than did Luther, and in this he was closely akin to Melancthon. Calvin's treatment of the doctrine of justification seems cold, ab-

² John Tulloch, *Luther and Other Leaders of the Reformation* (Edinburgh and London: W. Blackwood & Sons, 1883), pp. 219, 220.

stract, logical, and judicial; Luther's was warm, concrete, and spontaneous. Calvin's approach was intellectual, while Luther's was more cordial.

Moreover, Calvin cannot fully divorce his presentation from the strain of legalism. Calvin lays particular stress upon the idea that the atonement of Christ is that whereby man becomes *holy*. Whereas Luther constantly reiterates God's love for the *sinner* as constituting the very essence of Christianity, there is just a note in Calvin's presentation of the idea that God loves the *holy man*. It is only an undertone, however, and does no violence to the in-

tegrity of the doctrine as presented by Calvin. Nevertheless, it was this note that sowed the seed of Puritanism and, indeed, of the entire rigid, cold, legalistic theological system that we have come to know as *Calvinism*. It is significant that such a note is not even remotely traceable in Luther's theology. This shows, perhaps more clearly than anything else, the fundamentally different orientation of Lutheranism and Calvinism and serves to explain the divergent courses which these two systems have followed ever since the Reformation.

Fort Wayne, Indiana