

Moral Responsibility and Moral Accountability

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In the theological system of John Calvin it is to be observed that there are two fundamental premises upon which, and about which, his whole moral, political, and social program, as well as his religious program, is constructed. The first of these principles is the absolute sovereignty of God, while the second one is that of moral responsibility of man. These two principles are not to be regarded as true because Calvin propounded them, but they are to be regarded as true because they are of the very nature of things. In the sermon which I preached last Sunday I was trying to present, in terms of common everyday language, the first of these two principles, the absolute sovereignty of God, and I tried to point out the fact that back of all moral living, back of all moral effort, back of all moral progress, is the essential faith of human life, once expressed in that humanly poetical expression, "The eternal God is thy dwelling place and underneath are the everlasting arms."² I care not whether it is the old Hebrew prophet, declaring with the conviction of finality, his "Thus saith the Jehovah," or Jesus in that sublime self-assertion, saying, "My Father worketh even until now and I work,"³ or John Calvin declaring to the Ambassador of Savoy, "For the sovereignty of God and the word of God we will hazard our lives,"⁴ or the immortal Puritan advice, "Trust in God and Keep your powder dry,"⁵ or the modern scientist staking his all on the reign of law in the universe and in human life. It is all of one piece of cloth. The pattern, the coloring, the finish may be changed and modified, but the warp and woof of the fabric of our moral and spiritual life are ever the same. By whatsoever name

¹ This is from the bound collection—"bundle #4"—that includes sermons from February 14, 1909 to December 26, 1909.

² See Deuteronomy 33:27.

³ See John 5:17.

⁴ See Herbert Darling Foster (1863-1927) "Calvin's Programme for a Puritan State in Geneva, 1536-1541," *Harvard Theological Review*, Volume 1, Number 4, October 1908, p. 391.

⁵ Attributed to Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658). First appeared in William Blacker's (1777-1855) 1834 poem "Oliver's Advice."

you may choose to designate this ultimate fact of life there it is, and willingly or unwillingly we must submit to its absoluteness. This idea, this truth, which is expressed by Calvin in the phrase, "The sovereignty of God," is the statement of the condition of human life; it is the universal environment in which we live and more and have our being.

If your life is ordered by the purpose to will to do the will of God, you find that all the great dynamic forces of the universe, and of human history, is behind you, and you feel the presence of what the Hebrew poet called "the everlasting arms." But I wish to call your attention this [morning] to the second and even more important truth with which this idea of the sovereignty of God is related, viz., the idea, the fact rather, of moral responsibility.

I want to point out that faith, absolute conviction in the sovereignty of the great goodwill, does not leave us in the meshes of an irresponsible fatalism, under the cover of which we may cast responsibility aside, and say that it makes no difference what we do. Whatever is, is right, may be a pat saying, but it is not true. In spite of Calvin's faith in the sovereignty of God, and in spite of the fact that he carried the premise to its cold logical conclusion in his theoretical system of thought, and declared his belief in double predestination, yet he never applied this doctrine of fatalism to practical life. In his theology he could write without flinching that,

In conformity, therefore, to the clear doctrine of Scripture we assert that, by an eternal and immutable counsel God has once for all determined both whom he would admit to salvation and whom he would condemn to destruction.⁶

But in his practical life Calvin insisted on the principle of moral responsibility. Such sentences as these in which he is dealing with concrete conditions, "Let us play the man for our

⁶ John Calvin (1509-1564), *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 3, Chapter 21, first published in 1536. A slightly different, more contemporary, translation can be found in Elsie Anne McKee (1951-), trans., John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion (The first English version of the 1541 French edition)* Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2009, p. 417.

people and for the cities of our God, and let the Lord do that which seemeth good to him."⁷

Joab, though he acknowledges the event of battle to depend on the will and power of God, yet surrenders not himself to inactivity, but vigorously executes all the duties of his office, and leaves the event to Divine decision.⁸

Certainly the Puritans trusted in God, but they also insisted upon the necessity of keeping the powder dry. The eternal will must be done? Certainly, but there is a keen recognition of that essential principle of life, not stated in their theory of determinism, but practiced in everyday life, that the eternal will expresses itself and realizes itself in human effort and human achievement.

You may cut a cross-section anywhere in human history, and you may say with Browning, "God's in his heaven,"⁹ but you cannot say that all is right with the world. We are in a constantly changing life of progress, and this day's achievement is but the preparation for tomorrow's work. It is a necessity of human life that we should lie down and rest, that we should relax from the strain of work, and take our hour of play. But rest must not grow into permanent inactivity, or relaxation into lassitude, or play into a round of perpetual pleasure-seeking. We rest, relax and play that we may the more effectively enter into the work and responsibility of human life. When human life is impregnated with the conviction that somehow we are the agents of the universal will, all its functions and activities take their proper place in the cosmic arrangements of life's active moral development. God is in his heaven and in his world, and all will be right so long as men realize, with the keenest appreciation, their moral responsibility.

Let us see just how this principle comes home to us today. To the Catholic of old, God's will was disclosed in the teachings

⁷ See 2 Samuel 10:12.

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. John Allen, London: Thomas Tegg, 1844, Book 1, Chapter 17, p. 175. Curiously, the Google Scholar edition of this book that I found was incomplete, not including Book 3 Chapter 21.

⁹ Robert Browning (1812-1889) British poet. This is part of a line from his 1841 poem "Pippa Passes," "God's in His heaven; All's right with the world!" Verse 718.

of the Church. All else was of the earth. In the teaching of the Church was the immutable will of God. That will was to be fulfilled by implicit obedience to the authority of the Church, as demanded in the priesthood. To Calvin the *Bible* was the infallible word, in which the will of God is revealed to men. Obey the commands of the *Bible*. Take that with you as authority in your eternal conflict with a lost and depraved world. But in these more modern days we have gone a step beyond either of them. We still hold to the sovereignty of the eternal will of the universe, and we see the natural and moral necessity of obeying that will, but we have added to our task the incomprehensible greater task of not only recognizing and obeying the will of the infinite, but also the necessity of searching for that will. It is [a] comparatively easy thing to take some artificial thing, like the teachings of a church such as the Catholic Church, or some book, or some writer, and say that is the truth of life I will follow that in implicit obedience. It is altogether another matter to say, "I will follow truth wherever I find it, and search with it [sic. Perhaps better "for it"] with my whole heart, and mind and soul." That is just the position in which this modern world has placed itself. It accepts no authority but truth, no will but the will of God, and finds its highest life in willing to do the will of God.

Consider just our point of view. The spirit of the infinite manifests itself in all things, in nature, in human nature, in all that is best and in all that is worst in life and in history. Even in that which we call moral evil there is the soul or kernel of goodness. There is no devil with which the infinite may divide the overlordship of the universe, or no devil upon whose shoulders he may cast the burden of responsibility. He lives and moves and has his being in us, and we live and move and have our being in him. All's law, and yet all's love. We escape the snares of a deathly and fatal pantheism, by our insistence upon the truth of the unrealized dynamic in human life, by the truth of the unexpended energy, the unexpended residuum of the divine will as disclosed in the far-reaching and illimitable ideals of human life.

Herein is the ultimate significance of our moral responsibility. There is a certain spontaneity in the human personality, a certain originality, a certain power in which there is present that which in the universe we call the creative

power. Within the limits of modifying conditions, we feel ourselves to be the agents of the universal will, and agents in whom there that power which, when the balances hang even before us in the scales of life, enables us to tip the scales as we will. At any given moment of our life, it is demanded of us as the condition of life that we shall not only obey the divine will as we know it, but that we shall make every effort to test our knowledge, and to keep our powder dry. I revert again to Calvin for a statement of what I have mind,

If our calling is indeed of the Lord, as we firmly believe that it is, the Lord himself will bestow his blessing, although the whole universe may be opposed to us. Let us, therefore, try every remedy, while, if such is not to be found, let us notwithstanding, persevere to the last gasp.¹⁰

Let anyone consider the life that he finds himself living at any given time. He inherits from all the ages of the past certain developments, and is born into certain conditions over which he has no power. They have been created for him. He is what he is amid conditions such as he finds them. It may be that the overpowering influence of conditions will be so great that he will not arrive even to a consciousness of them. They crush him beneath the remorseless weight of their power. Or perhaps, conditions will be favorable to him. They will not crush, but will rather stimulate, and nourish and nurture, and in the fullness of time he will rise to a full sense of his opportunity and his responsibility. Where is the overruling Goodwill there, you say? It seems almost cruel to state it, but it is a statement of [a] fact of human life, that those who have the least of opportunity, have the greatest spirit and courage, and in the dying gasp of those who are crushed beneath the pressure of conditions, too mighty for them to battle with successfully, there comes the stinging rebuke and the mighty appeal to the human soul to grasp its responsibility, and fulfill its task. In the ??? words of Jesus, as he fell crushed by the pressure of religious Pharisee-ism, there is at once the stinging rebuke and the divine appeal. He was not responsible for the conditions under which he was born and into which he grew up, but he faced them with supreme courage, and, although their pressure crushed

¹⁰ Letter from John Calvin To William Farel (1489-1565), March 1539, in Jules Bonnet, *Project Gutenberg's Letters of John Calvin*, Volume I, p. 131.

his life out, yet in his death, they also died, for his death aroused the forces that crushed the conditions that killed.

We, who are here this morning, are of those who have the conditions under which we live somewhat under the control of our will. We are not entirely impotent. We know something of the truth of life. We have some mental capacity. We have some moral dynamic. We know something of the sovereignty of the universal will. We realize that it falls upon us to search out the truth of life. We know that we are accountable to the infinitely fine acting laws of human life for every secret thought and every act of life. Nature and human nature are so adjusted to each other and the infinite that every thought and every deed receives its irrevocable compensation in the eternal economy of things. What then does this eternal and immutable principle of moral responsibility mean to you and to me? It means just what is apparent on the surface of it. As we go out of this church today, we face a certain definite concrete situation in our city life. For a large part of it, of course, we cannot be so presuming as to claim responsibility. In that situation there are many things that are good, and in that situation there are many things that are bad. Into the totality of that situation, we have each contributed our part. If our contribution has been on the whole for the good, so much the more does the imperfection of today call us to our responsibility for the betterment of tomorrow. We have no right to say that the city is not properly managed, or is in the hands of politicians, unless we are willing to go the full length of our ability in righting the things that seem to us wrong. In our whole social order we have arrived at a definite point in development. There are in the situation many things that are reassuring, and there are many things that look black and ugly. Back of it all, we say is the power of a sovereign God. Yes, but in the affairs of human society, the voice of God speaks in the voice of man and the will of God is manifested in the will of man. It is doubtless true that the moral and the intellectual dynamic which shall bring cosmos out of chaos, is already forcing its way to crystallization. But we must remember that there is no royal road to righteousness. The appeal of our times, sounding deep and clear, through the harsh noises of the day, is for us to reaffirm our deeper convictions of moral responsibility to respond yet more nobly and yet more simply to that sublime self-assertion that we are the agents of the living God in the affairs of men. There is a right way for men to live together.

That way we must find, and to the realization of that, we must commit ourselves. This appeal is to each individual human being. Society, we are told must be regenerated. Very well. And so must individuals. The individual human being must see the vision of human life, and must [commit] the whole strength of his personality into the realization of that vision. We have no authority to which we may submit ourselves. We must search after the way of life, and in finding it, let it be to us the will of the universe, and our own.

This is the second great principle of human life. In the words of Jesus it is expressed thus, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."¹¹

¹¹ Matthew 22:39.