

**CALVINISM: AN ADDRESS
DELIVERED
AT ST. ANDREW'S
MARCH 17, 1871**

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Calvinism: an address delivered at St. Andrew's March 17, 1871 by James Anthony Froude

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JAMES ANTHONY FROUDE

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BY

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CALVINISM.

GENTLEMEN, — While I am unwilling to allow the temporary connection between us to come to an end without once more addressing you, I find it difficult to select a subject on which it may be worth your while to listen to what I have to say. You know yourselves better than I can tell you the purposes for which you are assembled in this place. Many of you will have formed honorable resolutions to acquit yourselves bravely and manfully, both in your term of preparation here, and in the life which you are about to enter, — resolutions which would make exhortations of mine to you to persevere appear unmeaning and almost impertinent. You are conscious in detail of the aims which you have set before yourselves, — you have, perhaps, already chosen the professions which you mean to follow, and are better aware than I can be of the subjects which you have to master if you mean to pursue them successfully. I should show myself unworthy of the honor which you conferred on me in my election as your Rector were I to waste your time with profitless generalities. I have decided, after due consideration, to speak to you of things which, though not immediately connected with the University of St. Andrew's, or any other University, yet concern us all more nearly than any other matter in the world; and though I am not vain enough to suppose that I can throw new material light upon them, yet where there is so much division and uncertainty, the sincere convictions of any man, if openly expressed, may be of value as factors in the

problem. At all events, I shall hope that the hour for which I shall ask you to attend to me will not have passed away without leaving some definite trace behind it.

I may say at once that I am about to travel over serious ground. I shall not trespass on theology, though I must go near the frontiers of it. I shall give you the conclusions which I have been led to form upon a series of spiritual phenomena which have appeared successively in different ages of the world,— which have exercised the most remarkable influence on the character and history of mankind, and have left their traces nowhere more distinctly than in this Scotland where we now stand.

Every one here present must have become familiar in late years with the change of tone throughout Europe and America on the subject of Calvinism. After being accepted for two centuries in all Protestant countries as the final account of the relations between man and his Maker, it has come to be regarded by liberal thinkers as a system of belief incredible in itself, dishonoring to its object, and as intolerable as it has been itself intolerant. The Catholics whom it overthrew take courage from the philosophers, and assail it on the same ground. To represent man as sent into the world under a curse, as incurably wicked,— wicked by the constitution of his flesh, and wicked by eternal decree,— as doomed, unless exempted by special grace which he cannot merit, or by any effort of his own obtain, to live in sin while he remains on earth, and to be eternally miserable when he leaves it,— to represent him as born unable to keep the commandments, yet as justly liable to everlasting punishment for breaking them, is alike repugnant to reason and to conscience, and turns existence into a hideous nightmare. To deny the freedom of the will is to make morality impossible. To tell men that they cannot help themselves is to fling them into recklessness and despair. To what purpose the effort to be virtuous when it is an effort which is foredoomed to fail,— when those that are

saved are saved by no effort of their own, and confess themselves the worst of sinners, even when rescued from the penalties of sin; and those that are lost are lost by an everlasting sentence decreed against them before they were born? How are we to call the Ruler who laid us under this iron code by the name of Wise, or Just, or Merciful, when we ascribe principles of action to Him which in a human father we should call preposterous and monstrous?

The discussion of these strange questions has been pursued at all times with inevitable passion, and the crisis uniformly has been a drawn battle. The Arminian has entangled the Calvinist, the Calvinist has entangled the Arminian, in a labyrinth of contradictions. The advocate of free will appeals to conscience and instinct, — to an *à priori* sense of what ought in equity to be. The necessitarian falls back upon the experienced reality of facts. It is true, and no argument can gainsay it, that men are placed in the world unequally favored, both in inward disposition and outward circumstances. Some children are born with temperaments which make a life of innocence and purity natural and easy to them; others are born with violent passions, or even with distinct tendencies to evil, inherited from their ancestors, and seemingly unconquerable, — some are constitutionally brave, others are constitutionally cowards, — some are born in religious families, and are carefully educated and watched over; others draw their first breath in an atmosphere of crime, and cease to inhale it only when they pass into their graves. Only a fourth part of mankind are born Christians. The remainder never hear the name of Christ except as a reproach. The Chinese and the Japanese — we may almost say every weaker race with whom we have come in contact — connect it only with the forced intrusion of strangers whose behavior among them has served ill to recommend their creed. These are facts which no casuistry can explain away. And if we believe at all that the world is governed by a conscious and intelligent Being, we must

believe also, however we can reconcile it with our own ideas, that these anomalies have not arisen by accident, but have been ordered of purpose and design.

No less noticeable is it that the materialistic and the metaphysical philosophers deny as completely as Calvinism what is popularly called *Free Will*. Every effect has its cause. In every action the will is determined by the motive which at the moment is operating most powerfully upon it. When we do wrong, we are led away by temptation. If we overcome our temptation, we overcome it either because we foresee inconvenient consequences, and the certainty of future pains is stronger than the present pleasure; or else because we prefer right to wrong, and our desire for good is greater than our desire for indulgence. It is impossible to conceive a man, when two courses are open to him, choosing that which he least desires. He may say that he can do what he dislikes because it is his duty. Precisely so. His desire to do his duty is a stronger motive with him than the attraction of present pleasure.

Spinoza, from entirely different premises, came to the same conclusion as Mr. Mill or Mr. Buckle, and can find no better account of the situation of man than in the illustration of St. Paul, "Hath not the potter power over the clay, to make one vessel to honor and another to dishonor?"

If Arminianism most commends itself to our feelings, Calvinism is nearer to the facts, however harsh and forbidding those facts may seem.

I have no intention, however, of entangling myself or you in these controversies. As little shall I consider whether men have done wisely in attempting a doctrinal solution of problems, the conditions of which are so imperfectly known. The moral system of the universe is like a document written in alternate ciphers, which change from line to line. We read a sentence, but at the next our key falls us; we see that there is something written there, but

if we guess at it we are guessing in the dark. It seems more faithful, more becoming, in beings such as we are, to rest in the conviction of our own inadequacy, and confine ourselves to those moral rules for our lives and actions on which, so far as they concern ourselves, we are left in no uncertainty at all.

At present, at any rate, we are concerned with an aspect of the matter entirely different. I am going to ask you to consider how it came to pass that if Calvinism is indeed the hard and unreasonable creed which modern enlightenment declares it to be, it has possessed such singular attractions in past times for some of the greatest men that ever lived; and how — being, as we are told, fatal to morality, because it denies free will — the first symptom of its operation, wherever it established itself, was to obliterate the distinction between sins and crimes, and to make the moral law the rule of life for States as well as persons. I shall ask you, again, why, if it be a creed of intellectual servitude, it was able to inspire and sustain the bravest efforts ever made by man to break the yoke of unjust authority. When all else has failed, — when patriotism has covered its face, and human courage has broken down, — when intellect has yielded, as Gibbon says, “with a smile or a sigh,” content to philosophize in the closet, and abroad worship with the vulgar, — when emotion, and sentiment, and tender imaginative piety have become the handmaids of superstition, and have dreamt themselves into forgetfulness that there is any difference between lies and truth, — the slavish form of belief called Calvinism, in one or other of its many forms, has borne ever an inflexible front to illusion and mendacity, and has preferred rather to be ground to powder like flint than to bend before violence or melt under enervating temptation.

It is enough to mention the name of William the Silent, of Luther, — for on the points of which I am speaking Luther was one with Calvin, — of your own Knox and