

Kuyper on Calvin¹

. . . Yet, given this reality,² however serious we take our calling to march together with other Christian parties, that impulse towards a coalition must never lead to a blurring of the boundaries, and the independence of our own group must always be defended by us as spiritual children of Calvin. We rose up as Calvinists, we received our political christening in Groen van Prinsterer's phrase "*issus de Calvin*," and we persist in calling ourselves Calvinists because we think it is an honor to be the continuation of a distinctive chapter in our national history—nor the worst. The great phases of our national history are still spread out over three layers. The oldest phase of our history, which is still active, is the Roman Catholic; the youngest is the Revolutionary, which began toward the end of the eighteenth century; and between these two lies the middle phase of our *Calvinist* past, great in 1550–1650, declining in 1650–1750, seemingly extinct in 1850, but since then coming back to life with increasing vigor. As Calvinists we are not a theological club or apostles of a new political doctrine. We are a distinct current in the life of our country, a current that once rushed forth with power and pushed its waters with glory, then silted up, but now is digging itself a fresh channel

¹ Extract from Abraham Kuyper's address to the 17th national assembly of delegates of the Antirevolutionary Party, gathered at Utrecht, 24 April 1909, in preparation for the upcoming general election campaign. The address was published under the title *Wij, Calvinisten . . .* (Kampen: Kok, 1909) and reprinted in *Geen vergeefs woord; verzamelde deputaten-redevoeringen* (Kampen: Kok, 1951), pp. 139–53. This translation of pp. 149–52 is by Harry Van Dyke, who also supplied the annotation.

² Earlier in the address, Kuyper had argued that honoring the "antithesis between belief and unbelief" was the cement of the political coalition of Catholics and Protestants

through the sandy bottom, fed anew by what flows down from the heights. Remove that Calvinist phase from our history, and we would still be a Spanish colony and the Dutch flag would never have symbolized our world power on the seven seas. Every historian of name, to whatever party he belongs—take Groen or Fruin, rank Motley next to Bancroft and Campbell³—each testifies in virtually the same wording that the penetration of Calvin’s spirit made Holland free, made Holland great and gave it a century of never fading glory. It came to nought after that: the later Calvinists did not turn out to be up to their task. Dire need once bound our fathers to the Lord Sabaoth, but riches soon loosed that bond among their offspring.

Yet men are mistaken if they think our past speaks to us only from the pages of history. Far from it. The children of those fathers multiplied to thousands and thousands of families; what once fired up the hearts of the fathers still throbs in the hearts of thousands upon thousands. Calvinism was ever alive among our people, it never died out completely, and once again it has caused a strong, fresh bud to shoot from our national trunk. We are not a miniature copy of what Calvin once was; we even broke forever with his state-church; yet, sprung from his spirit, we always remained *issus de Calvin*, to use Groen’s pithy phrase again. We are pulled by blood, by spiritual family ties that bring about the recurrence of a character trait. The heart of the fathers has returned to the children, and when we once again join them in singing

Gij toch, Gij zijt hun roem, de kracht van hunne kracht.

in his country.

³ Historians in the 19th century who wrote on the rise of the Dutch Republic.

*Uw vrije gunst alleen wordt d'eere toegebracht.*⁴

then something scintillates in our hearts that once scintillated so gloriously in the hearts of our fathers. And although we feel like dwarfs compared to their gigantic stature, the same holy impulse inspires us that once transformed them into heroes.

I point this out with more than usual emphasis this time because the ballot box, which once again calls us to a show of strength, coincides this time with the 400th commemoration of the man of Geneva. For four long centuries Calvin was dragged through the mud. And what do we witness today? Calvin, ever reviled, scorned, slandered, has all of a sudden become the hero of the hour among men from every land, and in Geneva a magnificent monument will be erected in his honor, prepared by men from every party and school of thought.⁵ They simply could no longer avoid the impression that Calvin was one of the greatest of our race. They sense that it was unjust, and ungrateful, the way narrow-minded bitterness still denied him that honor. And now they skip over everything, to weave him lavish laurels. It does our heart good, and it is as if some of the glow in which Calvin's memory is made to shine today also reflects on us.

⁴ *"Thou art their boast, O Lord, the strength of their strength. / Thy free favor alone is given honor,"* opening lines of stanza 8 of Psalm 89 in the Dutch versified psalter sung to Genevan tunes. Along with stanza 7, it was often sung at these delegate meetings.

⁵ From 1907 to 1917 an International Monument to the Reformation was erected on the grounds of the University of Geneva. It features a wall with statues of ten leaders from the time of the Protestant Reformation, including six statesmen. The middle and tallest group of four includes Farel, Calvin, Beza and Knox, while either end of the wall has memorials to Luther and Zwingli. The design of the monument resulted from a contest for which entries were received from more than 70 architects around the world.

The only thing that makes us shrink from mingling in this chorus of praise is the hero worship that comes to expression in this homage to Calvin. Hero worship is the trait of our age which looks for the root of all spiritual greatness *in man*. For us, by contrast, Calvin is not a hero but our spiritual father to whom we dedicate the love of our hearts, and for this reason *our* homage to Calvin must remain a homage accorded him by his spiritual family. For us it is unassailable that Calvin's power resided in the fact that as a human being he felt small and insignificant and bowed down, deeply earnest, before the Majesty of God. For us, the root and the fruit of Calvin's blessed labors remain indissolubly one, and when the Fruins, the Campbells, the Bancrofts and so many others frankly testified that it was Calvin's spirit which on the battlefields of Europe won the liberty of the peoples on two continents, we on our part do not separate that outcome from the root but continue to carry Calvin's spirit in our hearts, to be inspired by the same spirit for waging the struggle also in our day for the liberties of the people.

Next to *issus de Calvin*, Groen therefore posited a second proposition, namely that in Calvinism lie "the source and safeguard of our constitutional liberties,"⁶ and it is again as spiritual children of Calvin that we too defend those constitutional liberties. Hence we are not ashamed of the name Calvin but as faithful children hold Calvinism high, even though it commits us to the Antithesis. For what is at stake in the Antithesis? What else but the great issue of Calvin's life: that the King of kings receive the

⁶ Kuyper expanded on this statement (taken from Groen, *Nederlandsche Gedachten*, 22 Oct. 1873) in a lecture given to student clubs in Utrecht and elsewhere, published under the title *Het Calvinisme, oorsprong en waarborg onzer constitutioneele vrijheden* (Amsterdam, 1874). For an English translation, see James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 279–322.

honor due to Him in politics, and that the peoples will be governed according to His will. In response to that question, all who live by 1789⁷ will isolate state and politics from the living God, refuse to mix religion and politics, will let you practice your piety in the privacy of your home and will tolerate a reference to Divine blessing in the Speech from the Throne; but for the rest you and your religious convictions must stay out of the field of politics. The State arises from the will of the people or from its own root, and it has nothing, absolutely nothing to do with Almighty God and His holy will. Religion and politics are two distinct spheres which touch at not a single point. Though there may be a God, they tell us, and though you may receive inspiration for your inner life from that God, in the public domain you shall keep silent about that God. The state shall be *without God*.

And this is exactly what Calvin opposed with all his heart and all his soul. It was Calvin who, like no other statesman, sharply and vigorously condemned and detested this wresting of the State from God's almighty ordinance. For him, God's omnipotence is all-comprehensive. There is nothing on earth, from the monarch butterfly that flits over the flower bed to the mightiest monarch that sits on the throne, but God Almighty controls all life, called all life and all vitality into being, has ordained His will for all of life and has the life of all at His sovereign disposal according to His ordinance. All creaturely life, all personal life, and thus also all action in society and state must serve His glory, must obey Him; and in order that all men might know His will He has revealed that will not only in nature, history and conscience, but also in his Holy Word.

⁷ "1789": Kuyper's shorthand for the principles of the French Revolution as summarized in the slogan "*Ni Dieu, ni maître!*" and carried forward by means of the

So then, how can they demand of us—of us who earnestly confess this with Calvin—that we separate religion and politics? With what right would they put our conviction into a straitjacket and call it “sowing discord” when we defend what is most sacred to our hearts?

They accuse Calvin of Servitus’ death at the stake, but what does this prove except that Calvin had not yet fully shaken off the tradition that prevailed in his time.⁸ To eradicate a heretic had been standard practice for centuries, and as late as 1601 the Calvinist Krell was beheaded in Leipzig on orders of the Lutheran prince-electors.⁹ How many burnings at the stake are not mentioned in our martyr’s books? Whose ears do not still ring with the thunder of the horses’ hoofs of the dragonnades?¹⁰ And did men ever murder more cruelly than the men of 1789 during the September Massacres in Paris?¹¹ But all that is never mentioned, and only the burning of Servitus is always played out against Calvin. All the more unjust and

privatization of religion.

⁸ Michael Servitus (1511–1553) was condemned a heretic for teaching aggressively that infant baptism and the doctrines of the Trinity, predestination and eternal perdition were gross errors. When he chanced to visit Geneva, Calvin approved of his arrest, but when Servitus’ trial sentenced him to death he advised beheading rather than burning at the stake. When news of the execution in Geneva reached Rome, the pope ordered a *Te Deum* to be sung.

⁹ Nikolaus Krell (1551–1601) was arrested in 1591 on charges of having tried to introduce Calvinism to Saxony when he was chancellor under the previous ruler. After languishing in prison for ten years, Krell was beheaded at the command of the new Elector.

¹⁰ In 1685 King Louis XIV of France revoked the toleration edict of Nantes. In preparation for this drastic act, he had dragoons billeted in the homes of Huguenots in order to persuade them to return to the Church of Rome or else leave the country. These cavalry soldiers were notorious for their licentious conduct, and much harm was done to the persons and property of the French Protestants.

¹¹ In September, 1792, mobs stormed the prisons of Paris and after mock trials butchered those held there: priests, aristocrats, and other “traitors of the Revolution.”

less deserved while no one more than Calvin fought fervently for the liberties of the people, and in Calvinist Holland, Calvinist Scotland and soon in Calvinist America a form of spiritual freedom flourished that turned the policy of suppression into a policy of liberation and gave birth to our constitutional liberties. It was a struggle for freedom which in Calvin was not at variance with his flaring up for the honor of God but was rather a result of it and flowed directly from it. The peoples were not the creation of their princes, and therefore the peoples were not allowed to be the princes' milch-cows. Both princes and peoples owed their origin to the same God. The princes received their authority from His divine sovereignty, but next to the sovereign authority of the rulers stood the "sphere-sovereignty" of every family, every social circle, and thus also of the entire people in its own particular activities. Calvin even called the nation of Israel happy in the years that it could choose its own rulers.

Not least in that noble love of liberty did our fathers, did Groen van Prinsterer and the Antirevolutionary Party, feel and prove themselves to be spiritual children of Calvin. What was banned elsewhere because of deviating ideas found refuge here. When even Thorbecke¹² condoned the suppression of the Seceders,¹³ Groen van Prinsterer took up their defense. And the long and anxious struggle for our free schools, what was it other

¹² Johan Rudolf Thorbecke (1798–1872), leader of the liberals, professor of law in the University of Leyden, head of three cabinets during the reign of King William III.

¹³ The 1834 secession from the Dutch Reformed Church was motivated by discontent with the inroads of theological modernism in the state-supervised denomination, a development that was shielded by the authorities who prosecuted those who began meeting in separate worship services. Groen van Prinsterer composed a long brief in their defense under the title *De maatregelen tegen de Afscheidenen aan het staatsrecht getoetst* [The Measures against the Seceders tested against constitutional law]. His vigorous exchange with Thorbecke, who held the opposite view, is found in the *Journal de la Haye*, fall 1837.

than a struggle for parental rights, a struggle for allowing the people to develop in their own way in spiritual freedom?¹⁴ Indeed, where was a struggle for popular liberties ever fought and we Calvinists were not among those who rallied in support? I am not denying that we often failed to measure up to our ideal and that dissonances frequently rose among us too. We were always haunted by a sense of guilt. But as Antirevolutionary Party, as a continuation of what was once in our past the energy of our fathers, as Calvinists assembled here as a national rally, those two jewels in Calvin's crown—his battle for both the honor of God and the liberties of the people—have always been our lodestar. Those two things—the honor of God, also in politics, and popular liberties—are in our blood, they are our heritage from our nation's past, they are the golden cord that binds us together as a party. You can recognize a principled Antirevolutionary if on these two points he is a full-blooded Calvinist.

Calvin was a sworn enemy of all Conservatism; he rebuffed anyone who wanted to join hands with the Libertines for the sake of warding off the anarchists of those days. To check the goal of turning everything upside down he would rather have joined forces with the best in the Church of Rome. His heart was on fire for civil liberty; he used the power of the word to preach public morality. High were his ideals and profound was the system he devised for human life. This explains why his spirit spread far beyond Geneva, to become a blessing for entire nations, for all Europe. Calvin understood *that all of life hangs together in organic coherence*; that this coherence arises from growing on a single root; and that the

¹⁴ By 1909, when Kuyper gave this speech, the so-called Eighty Years' Schools Struggle (1840–1920) had in principle been decided in favor of a pluralist system of primary education by the Education Acts of 1889 and 1905 which provided for partial funding for private Christian schools. Funding on a parity basis would follow in 1920.

solidity both for the political order and the people's happiness can only be established on the solid godliness that God himself imprints on human hearts.

Our position as Calvinists unquestionably is on the rise today, when from all countries and among all intellectual and cultural circles incense is being brought to Geneva to be lit for Calvin this July, and nothing would please us more if we, spiritual children of the Reformer, were able to be present at that homage. The reason why we are not able is that among these laudators there are so many antipodes of Calvin's spirit who, abhorring what was most sacred to him, are only going to honor what was *human* greatness in him. But that is precisely why I summon you, before I close, to a totally different homage that you can bring to Calvin's memory today. For those others, Calvin is a fossil from history, but for us his spirit is still alive. *We* still feel the old pull of blood which binds us as his spiritual children to him as our spiritual father. And therefore, let *us* give Calvin a living testimony, a national testimony at the ballot box. Let us work during the coming campaign as Calvin worked, nobly, without fear and without letup. And like Calvin, let us wage the political battle not for our own power but for the honor of God and the good of our nation.

In the struggle that will soon be upon us, may we again look for strength in prayer and in our choicest weapons. Let not one good Calvinist be absent from the roll-call. This time, thanks to the memory of Calvin, may a zeal flare up among us as has never burned before. And whether we are defeated or triumph again, let it be recorded in the history books that in the Calvin Commemoration Year we Calvinists in the Netherlands deployed a courage, an energy, a perseverance as has never, not even in our best years, been vouchsafed to us by our God.

THANK YOU.