

# Progressive Calvinism

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VOLUME I

AUGUST, 1955

NUMBER 8

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## The Problem of the Real Meaning of Neo-Orthodoxy

### Two Different Meanings of the Term, Neo-Orthodox

The word *orthodox* is a word frequently used in religious and especially Christian circles. To be *orthodox* means that you hold to the traditional views, that you are faithful to long-accepted ideas, and that consequently you are to be trusted in that regard. If you *are* orthodox, the only question about your reliability in religious ideas is not whether you hold to the traditional ideas, but whether the traditional ideas are true.

To be *neo-orthodox* (newly orthodox) means that you are a participant in a revival of orthodoxy, or that you return to an abandoned orthodoxy but with some new features not inconsistent with the basic ideas of the old orthodoxy.

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Published each month by the Progressive Calvinism League. Founders of the League: Frederick Nymeyer, John Van Mouwerik and Martin B. Nymeyer. Subscription price: \$2.00 per year (for students \$1.00 per year); single copies, 50 cents. Address all subscriptions and communications to Progressive Calvinism League, 366 East 166th Street, South Holland, Illinois, U. S. A.

If it is not true that you are orthodox or neo-orthodox, you may still *claim* that you are orthodox or neo-orthodox, in order to quiet people's suspicions and to make them receptive to your ideas. To have the name, orthodox, or neo-orthodox, promotes good public relations for you among the devout; it is a valuable reputation in some quarters.

The word, neo-orthodox, can have another meaning. There may be an accepted orthodox position, and also a deviationist, nonorthodox position, but a third person may come along and retreat some from the nonorthodox position, or may *seem* to retreat from it. Such a retreat may be very great and practically may make a man orthodox, or it may be only a minor retreat or only a seeming retreat. Casual or inexperienced observers, merely seeing some retreat from certain nonorthodox positions, may then declare or imply that the retreat has been far enough to justify the term *neo-orthodox*, whereas as a matter of fact there has been no real return to orthodoxy. When the term, neo-orthodox, is applied to such a situation, it is not descriptive of fact.

The term, neo-orthodox, should be used only when it is descriptive of a genuine return to a traditional position.

### **Two Famous Modern Theologians Whose Ideas Are Described as Neo-Orthodox**

The ideas of Karl Barth and of Emil Brunner, two Swiss theologians, are called neo-orthodox. Both men were reared in the Reformed tradition in the churches of Switzerland, the land where Calvin spent most of his adult life. Their ideas which are described as neo-orthodox would, therefore, naturally appeal to Calvinists throughout the world, wherever neo-orthodoxy is assumed to be a revival of genuine Calvinist orthodoxy.

Barth and Brunner are world famous. Their ideas have had a great impact on the clergy in the various denominations. This is also true in part for the Christian Reformed church. There are preachers and educators who have devoted much time to reading the books of Barth and Brunner and who quote them extensively. Some preachers in the denomination have been sufficiently influenced toward Barthian ideas through certain intellectuals in

the field of education to declare that the writings of Karl Barth are a source of "inspiration" when preparing sermons.

There are, it should be noted, few *bold* and *conspicuous* and *intransigent* anti-Barthians in the Christian Reformed church. It is possible to be anti-anti-Barthian and be in good standing in this denomination.

It is possible to be in good standing in the sister church in the Netherlands (*De Gereformeerde Kerken*, Synodicals) and be not-unsympathetic to the ideas of Barth and Brunner. A fairly general position is that Barth and Brunner are both orthodox and not-orthodox, an equivocal position which paralyzes resistance to their ideas.

There is an outspoken anti-Barthian, Reformed theologian in this country, Dr. Cornelius Van Til, professor of Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary, and a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian church. But Van Til's criticism of Barth's ideas has not increased Van Til's acceptance among some of the "orthodox." The sentiment for Barth is strong enough to make some religious leaders reluctant to impair their public relations by being plainly critical of Barthian ideas.

### **The Bastardizing of Terms**

Barth uses traditional religious terms. But he gives the terms new meanings. The average reader tends to read what is written with the same old meaning in mind for the various terms although he knows new definitions have been given. Even a reader who intends to be a careful reader cannot readily understand what is really being said.

In this connection we are reminded of an infamous modern economist, John Maynard Keynes. Keynes developed a set of terms all his own. Generally those terms were new even for economists, and were still less easily grasped and used as mental tools by lay readers. But whoever loved new terms, as if they represented new ideas or useful tools for sound thinking, would certainly be beguiled by Keynes' repertoire of new expressions. But one inevitable consequence was that it became difficult to realize fully what Keynes was alleging.

Actually, Keynes was able to cloak his presentation of long-exploded fallacies with a new plausibility by means of his new nomenclature and terminology. Keynes was able by that means to appear original, profound and sound. Actually he was befuddling his readers and followers by words, and submitting notorious old economic fallacies as great new truths.

Redefinition of terms is the best disguise for perpetrating personal self-deception and an intellectual hoax on readers that is available to an ingenious mind.

What any man writes can be interpreted variously by others. But it is especially interesting to note that Barth has many admirers among both orthodox and nonorthodox theologians. This may be a phenomenon which indicates that Barth has made the non-orthodox to be orthodox, or the orthodox to be nonorthodox, or both the orthodox and the nonorthodox to be something different from what either were before, namely, just Barthian. Or, this phenomenon may indicate nothing more than confusion on the part of one or everybody. Surely, the lion and lamb are lying down together in an idyllic peace in the Barthian field.

### **Barth and Brunner In Regard to Economic and Political Problems**

PROGRESSIVE CALVINISM believes that it cannot ignore the ideas of Barth and of Brunner. But we have no intention of trailing after them in their various writings in the field of theology and philosophy. Barth and Brunner have both revealed their views on practical social, economic and political problems. Those happen to be fields in which PROGRESSIVE CALVINISM has definite convictions. And in those fields there is only one conclusion possible: either Barth and Brunner do not have real understanding regarding what they are talking about, or we do not. What they teach in the social sciences not only is mythological science and intellectual twaddle, but is, we believe, unscriptural and very bad ethics. This is especially true of Barth.

The surest hallmark of a wise man is that he knows *when* he does not know. The social science ideas of Barth and Brunner are obviously pronouncements of men who are speaking outside

of their field. It is a sad illusion to believe that you are a great surgeon *because* you are a great mathematician!

In fact, when a theologian sets himself up as a great social scientist just because he is a theologian, and when he reveals that he has no real knowledge of the social sciences, we suspect that he is not a good theologian either. (However, that conclusion is not a safe deduction. Einstein was a great mathematician and physicist but a wretched social scientist, although he commented doctrinairely on problems in the latter field.)

Barth and Brunner have not always agreed. The one is not to be held accountable for what the other wrote or said. Their ideas must be considered separately.

*Neo-orthodoxy* in its pronouncements in the social science fields will be given a critical examination by us. We do not in PROGRESSIVE CALVINISM accept *words* at their face value. There is too much humbug in religion which is nothing more than a play on words.

F. N.

## Barth versus Brunner, on Communism

Barth is "soft" on communism. Brunner has disagreed with Barth on that.

Some of the shorter post-war writings of Barth have been translated and published under the title, *Against the Stream*.

In that book there is a reprint of some *Correspondence* between Brunner and Barth. It consists of (a) *An Open Letter from Emil Brunner to Karl Barth*, in which Brunner asks "how come" that you were outspoken against Hitler but are soft on communism; and of (b) *Karl Barth's Reply*. In this controversy between Brunner and Barth our views are similar to Brunner's views.

We shall in later issues of PROGRESSIVE CALVINISM challenge various ideas of Barth as they are outlined in *Against the Stream*.

We consider Barth to have the most dangerous social science ideas of any present-day famous theologian.

We have received permission of *The Freeman*, the outstanding monthly publication in the field of libertarian social science, to reprint its book review of *Against the Stream*, by Rev. Edmund O. Opitz, a Unitarian minister.

Note in the following reprint the quotation by Opitz from Barth: "It would be absurd . . . to mention a man of the stature of Joseph Stalin in the same breath as such charlatans as Hitler . . ." PROGRESSIVE CALVINISM does not consider Stalin to have been a "man of stature" nor in any way better than Hitler. Stalin is properly described as the greatest butcher in the history of mankind, in comparison with whom Hitler was only a second-rate butcher, and in comparison with whom Genghis Khan and Nero are not to be mentioned. And Barth calls the most infamous butcher of all time a "man of stature!" Our readers will begin to understand how strongly our values differ from those of Barth.

The Opitz review (from *The Freeman*, page 579, July 1955) follows:

#### Man Belittled

What Keynes is among economists, so is Karl Barth among theologians. The list of orthodox Barthians who go right down the line for the master is small, but almost all contemporary theologians acknowledge an indebtedness to him. It was Barth who made the sharpest break with the optimistic and shallow liberal theology which collapsed in the debacle of our age. Western civilization suffered most in Europe as a result of two world wars, and consequently it was there that men were in deepest reaction against the thinking that had prevailed in the era preceding the first great war. Barthianism took hold during the twenties and received the label Continental or Crisis Theology.

Barth's massive output is volcanic and somewhat chaotic. He himself warns us against any canonizing of his results up to date, but the general drift and tendency of his thought is reasonably clear. There is in it repeated

stress on the illimitable gulf between God and man; there is disparagement of human righteousness if it thinks by moral effort to accomplish anything significant; there is a general devaluation of the earth and its concerns. Natural theology—the effort to trace the workings of the Creator in the order, harmony, balance and goodness in the universe—is discarded; and so is mystical theology—the effort of persons to discover “the Beyond that is Within” and to live by the laws they find written in the deepest part of the soul.

The practical consequences of this kind of teaching outweigh the theoretical, but one theoretical observation is pertinent. If man is as impotent and reason as dubious as some modern philosophies declare them to be, how can we know this? To say, in effect, that reason is competent to declare itself incompetent is an absurdity, and raises questions about any philosophy that so concludes.

On its practical side, an ideology which belittles man will make every man small who accepts it as applying to himself. Some men will stagger under its weight and affirm their own weakness and incompetence. They will be just the sort of raw material the men who long to rule are looking for. We live in an era of big government, but before you can have big government you must have little men. Many modern ideologies have tended to make men little, and have in that way been pressed into the service of the omnipotent State. Barth's has been one of these. Barth himself has favored socialism, but while he opposes communism he still refuses to utter against it the unequivocal negative which he opposed to Nazism. “It would be absurd,” he writes in the present volume, “. . . to mention a man of the stature of Joseph Stalin in the same breath as such charlatans as Hitler.”

*Against the Stream* is a collection of Barth's postwar writings on social questions, and in particular on the political issue between East and West. Those who take that issue seriously will be advised not to ignore this portentous book.

It will be very, very hard for PROGRESSIVE CALVINISM to develop enthusiasm for the ideas of any man, especially any theologian who describes Stalin as a "man of stature."

F. N.

### "The End Justifies the Means!"

In his essay, "The Church between East and West" (*Die Kirche zwischen Ost und West*, 1949) Barth writes (page 139, *Against the Stream*; Philosophical Library, New York, 1954):

. . . But if we have learned to discriminate by taking a glance at the French Revolution and at our so-called 'Christian era', if, as I hope, we do not condemn the Asiatic world outright simply because some form or other of despotism has always been, and very largely still is, the accepted form of public life, then it is pertinent not to omit to discriminate in our view of contemporary Communism between its totalitarian atrocities as such and the positive intention behind them. And if one tries to do that, one cannot say of Communism what one was forced to say of Nazism ten years ago—that what it means and intends is pure unreason, the product of madness and crime. It would be quite absurd to mention in the same breath the philosophy of Marxism and the 'ideology' of the Third Reich, to mention a man of the stature of Joseph Stalin in the same breath as such charlatans as Hitler, Göring, Hess, Goebbels, Himmler, Ribbentrop, Rosenberg, Streicher, etc. What has been tackled in Soviet Russia—albeit with very dirty and bloody hands and in a way that rightly shocks us—is, after all, a constructive idea, the solution of a problem which is a serious and burning problem for us as well, and which we with our clean hands have not yet tackled anything like energetically enough: the social problem.

What does Barth do in this quotation? He does the following:

1. Barth advances in the foregoing quotation the principle that the *end justifies the means*. Some branches of Christ-



endom have tarnished their otherwise great names by succumbing to the temptation to teach the idea of compromise by the use of that dangerous principle. But Christianity finally has always rejected that infamous rule. That Barth appeals to this rule to defend communism is clear if his statements, separated by other material, are pieced together as Barth actually put them together although at fairly widely separated points. He writes:

I hope we do not condemn the Asiatic world [Russia] outright because some form or other of despotism has always been . . . the accepted form of public life [there] . . . It is . . . pertinent . . . to discriminate . . . between its totalitarian atrocities as such and the positive intention behind them: . . . [Communism is not] pure unreason, the product of madness and crime, [but the tackling of a] constructive problem, [namely] the solution of . . . : the social problem.

Barth declares that communism is not "madness and crime" and that the monstrous deeds of communism are to be judged more leniently than Nazism because the communists are working *constructively* on the solution of "the social problem." God help us all if that is true. And it is in that connection that he looks on Stalin as a man of stature and on Hitler *et al* as charlatans (quacks, deceivers)! A more unalloyed defense of the immoral idea, the end justifies the means, we have never read.

Barth is not in this a teacher of morality but of immorality. He is not a teacher of wisdom but of folly. It amazes us that any man expects the good to come from the evil as a natural fruit of the evil—in this case, "social justice" as the product of violation of the law of God! This doctrine of Barth appears to be a variation of the Marxian doctrine that when the communist society is established brotherly love finally will exist everywhere and the state (coercion) will wither away; but in the meanwhile coercion (synonymous with complete violation of the Second Table of the Law) will be the means by which the good end may be attained!

2. Barth *excuses* one evil (Eastern despotism) by another alleged evil (Western misgovernment). A practical politician might

reason in that manner, but is that the Christian religion? In fact, it is a regular feature in Barth's thinking to deny a general principle and to declare each instance should be judged uniquely. An easy shift from principles to opportunism is not for us a hallmark of true religion or true ethics. Barth, of that one may be certain, is no genuinely enlightened prophet in moral and ethical affairs. (His stand against Hitler is unqualifiedly to his credit. He is also right that those, at a safe distance from Iron Curtain countries, are not realistic advisers to Christians in dire danger.)

There is nothing original in Barth's social thinking. He is a plagiarist. He is merely a preacher who stands at a baptismal font and piously baptizes unmitigated evil with the toleration of neo-orthodoxy because that evil is assumed to have a good purpose. It is a phony baptism and a disgrace to Christendom.

F. N.

## "The Powers That Be Are Ordained of God"

### Obey A Good Government, But What About A Bad Government

The statement used as a title to this analysis is quoted from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans. The full quotation reads:

*Romans 13:1-7.* Let every soul be in subjection to the higher powers: for there is no power but of God; and the *powers* that be are ordained of God. Therefore he that resisteth the power, withstandeth the ordinance of God: and they that withstand shall receive to themselves judgment. For rulers are not a terror to the good work, but to the evil. And wouldest thou have no fear of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise from the same: for he is a minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is a minister of God, an

avenger for wrath to him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be in subjection, not only because of the wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For for this cause ye pay tribute also, for they are ministers of God's service, attending continually upon this very thing. Render to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is *due*; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

We rank this text from Scripture higher as a cause of immoral confusion among so-called Christians (and Calvinists) than any other text. This text has given rise, we believe, to more foolish interpretations of man's relation to government than any other text. We shall give two examples just to make clear what the problem is.

1. In World War II Hitler overran the Netherlands (as Stalin later overran the Balkan countries including Hungary). What should the Netherlanders do, including the Calvinist Netherlanders? Should they "obey" Hitler and thereby cooperate with him? Here we have an acute practical problem on the relation between men and government.

We have been told that a well-known man at that time connected with the Free University of Amsterdam reasoned as follows and recommended a corresponding course of action.

- A. All the powers that be are of God.
- B. The powers that be of God should be obeyed.
- C. Hitler is certainly one of the "powers that be."
- D. Consequently, Hitler should be obeyed.

We are told that this reasoning had some of our Netherlands' brethren confused and undecided for some time. Finally, they decided to reject that reasoning. The man (I think) was removed or retired from the Free University staff. It was too much for the Netherlands' brethren to develop any enthusiasm on religious grounds for cooperating with the second-greatest butcher of the age, Hitler. We think the Netherlands' brethren concluded correctly, although we do not admire any delay or lack of firmness in their reaching their conclusion. It is not necessary to have a Scripture text to justify refusal to cooperate with a base scoundrel as Hitler.

2. In a Christian Reformed church a minister recently preached on "insubordination." He chose his text from the rebellion of Korah, Dathan and Abiram against Moses (Numbers 16). These three men, it will be remembered, are reported to have perished with their families in a chasm in the earth's surface. Their "insubordination" was *summarily* punished.

The speaker developed the idea that any dissent against those in authority is a heinous sin. The moral was: *always* concur; *always* agree; *always* obey; the powers that be are ordained of God; if you do not obey, the terrible punishment of God may soon afflict you. Further, the speaker developed the idea that such dissent, that is, insubordination, is a disguised manifestation of envy and pride. If you disagree with a church board or those in "authority over you" you are manifesting a wish to have their authority and to supersede them.

Not once was mention made in the sermon to the fundamental question regarding who had *right* or *justice* or the *law of God* on his side. That apparently was irrelevant. The theme was that any insubordination is sin. "The powers that be are ordained of God," and Christianity requires universal obedience.

We aim to show in this and the next following issue that the two interpretations just summarized of the Apostle Paul's statement, the powers that be are ordained of God, are patently contrary to the meaning of the Apostle. We aim, further, to show that great damage is done by those who misinterpret Scripture as has been described. The worst damage is that it makes those who profess the Christian religion aiders and abettors of iniquity in high places and, of course, also makes them look foolish as moralists.

We consider interpretations as outlined in the foregoing to be immoral.

### **The Meaning Required By The Context**

The *context* of the statement, the powers that be are ordained of God, clearly reveals what the obvious and only interpretation is which can be given to the text.

The whole quotation clearly refers to a *good* government and a good government only. The Apostle Paul recommends that we obey only a government promoting the good.

Paul was a Roman citizen, who prized his citizenship, and who had generally found the Roman government to be a rather satisfactory government. The Romans, after all, were famous for their attempts to promote justice. Paul's work as a missionary had undoubtedly been promoted by the wide domain of Roman government and the *general* attitude of that government. (Obviously there were local exceptions.) Paul identified the current Roman government with a government ordained and favored by God. But note that his unqualified restriction obviously is this: that Roman government must and would operate on the *principle of rewarding the good and restraining the evil*. Consider what he writes:

For rulers are not a terror to the good work, but to the evil. And wouldest thou have no fear of the power? do that which is good and thou shalt have praise from the same; for he is a minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is a minister of God, an avenger for wrath to him that doeth evil.

About twice as much space is used by Paul to make clear that he is talking about a *good* government *only* than he gives to the admonition to obey that government.

If men insist on reading Paul's rule out of its context an obvious and grievous error of interpretation will result. Anyone reading the rule *must* read the reason for the rule. Paul says: Obey the powers that be *because* they reward the good and restrain the evil.

If the basic instruction of Paul is to be correctly understood without the use and aid of the accompanying elaboration which he gives, then the text must read:

Let every soul be in subjection to the higher powers *that are good*; for there is no *good* power but of God; and the *good* powers that be are ordained of God. Therefore

he that resisteth the *good* power, withstandeth the ordinance of God.

The words italicized have been added to replace the qualification by Paul himself appearing in verses three through five previously quoted.

Other references in Scripture to obeying the "powers that be" have the same *assumption* underlying the requirement of obedience, namely, that the government is essentially *good*. There are no exceptions to this.

There are two other notes sounded in Scripture. One is by the Apostle John in the last book in Scripture, Revelation. The other is by Solomon who gives some *practical* advice.

The Apostle John had experienced less favorable treatment of the Roman government than the Apostle Paul had. John, near the end of his life had been banished to a lonely Mediterranean island, the island of Patmos. There, with a vision of the future, he considered the eventual and final government of the world to be the greatest possible organized evil, or as he called it, the Great Beast (Chapter 13). Nowhere does John recommend cooperating with such an evil government, and nowhere does he say that God requires us to cooperate (by obedience) with such an evil government.

These two contrary notes, one by Paul and the other by John—one to obey a government and the other that it is a monstrous beast—cannot be reconciled unless they describe different circumstances, a *good* government in the first instance and an *evil* government in the second instance. These statements by the two apostles clearly do not state principles which are universal regardless of facts and circumstances. They both state principles only as they apply to the assumed circumstances, or more correctly, not the *assumed* circumstances but the circumstances which the surrounding contexts indicate are the *specific and only circumstances which the writer, whether Paul or John, is taking into account*.

Solomon, as was also mentioned, refers in his wisdom books to the problem of obedience to a government. His approach to the problem is wholly practical. He warns against rash rebellion

against a government by admonishing against joining yourself with firebrands who cause social and political disturbance. Solomon merely counsels prudence and advises against the dangers of participating in political rebellion. Undoubtedly he remembered what he had done to those who had been rebellious against him. The founders of the United States in their great Declaration of Independence said that in their rebellion against England they pledged about everything—"their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor." They knew what risks they were taking! But they took them.

#### Power versus Authority

It will be helpful at this point to make a distinction between *power* and *authority*.

To a man who believes in a Supreme Being who is the Creator and the Sustainer of all things it will appear indisputable that all *power* as mere *power* is from God. The most sainted of men gets his *power* from God; and the most wicked of men gets his *power* from God. On this basis we are all obviously completely dependent on God. This definition of *power* refers merely to strength and ability to act. It has nothing to do with the idea of rightness or wrongness, or the favor or disfavor of God. In the sense outlined *power* merely designates some kind of force, but has nothing to do with morality.

If the word *powers* in the expression, the powers that be are ordained of God, is interpreted to mean mere might or ability to impose a will, then all devout theists will immediately agree that, the powers that be are ordained of God. But such an expression does not help in any way to solve the problem of what to do about what is right and what is wrong. *Power* and *powers* as defined refer merely to physical or mental strength and capability of action. Morally it has no meaning.

Further, unquestionably in the inscrutable plan of God there is a place for evil in the world. In that sense, God permitted the evil as well as the good. It can also be said then that the evil powers that be are *ordained* by God. But that certainly cannot mean to a devout Christian that they are *approved* by God and should receive cooperation in the form of obedience.

Instead of the word *power* there is another word which we consider useful in this connection, namely, the word *authority*. For us *authority* is limited to the idea of *proper* power, *legitimate* exercise of power, and *responsible* exercise of power. To have authority means to have a good title to what you are doing. (*Authority* can, of course, be interpreted to mean mere power or the original *derivation* of power from a legitimate source, but we are giving *authority* a specific definition for our purposes.) *Authority* for us, is power obtained from an acknowledged source, accountable to that source, and exercised according to the right rules set by the source.

We submit the following as sound ideas and principles:

1. The ultimate source of authority is always God;
2. The responsibility for the exercise of that authority is also to God;
3. The right rules for exercising authority must be clearly stated in what is declared to be and accepted to be the special revelation of God *or otherwise there is no practical significance to the statement that God is the source of authority.*
4. Therefore, unless authority (whoever exercises it and whatever it is) is based on the rules set by God that authority need not be obeyed.

*Authority*, then, is something quite different from *power*. *Authority* involves the idea of rightness, and justice, and of being workable, and useful to all, and suitable to obtain the end sought. Now, if Scripture authorizes an *authority* which violates those ideas, then Scripture gives a stamp of approval to an evil government, a thought repulsive to every responsible and well-intentioned man. Scripture, of course, does nothing of the sort.

What is it then that gives a government genuine authority? And when is a person obligated to obey and when obligated to disobey a government? Is there anything in Scripture which unqualifiedly gives the answer to such questions? We believe that there is, but the statement does not appear in any of the writings of either Paul or John. The only simple and comprehen-



sive statement regarding what is legitimate power, that is, what is *authority*, was stated by the Apostle Peter. His great principle, which we consider fundamental, was expressed when Peter was in a dangerous situation before the high priest and his party. That great principle is:

*Acts 5:29b.* We must obey God rather than men.

When, then, preachers in various Reformed churches speaking in the pulpits of their denomination, or a member of the staff of a university which has the word "free" in its title, or a religious leader whose ideas are called neo-orthodox—whether they or anyone else declares that it is required of Christians to obey a government regardless of whether it is right or wrong, and regardless whether it observes what is declared to be the revealed will of God, there can be only one conclusion, namely, those teachers are declaring a doctrine which sets human power above divine authority. Consequently, we hold that no government should be obeyed which does not operate according to the revealed will of God; the corollary is: every government should be disobeyed which does not operate according to the revealed will of God. We consider it to be as great a sin to obey an evil government as to disobey a good government.

We are not at this time considering the *serious* practical problem on how to disobey, that is, how to go about it in order not to make a futile gesture against an evil power and end up on the scaffold, or before a firing squad, or in a concentration camp, or in exile. That is the problem with which Solomon concerned himself as has already been mentioned. That large and difficult problem is reserved for future consideration. We have no hesitancy, however, in saying that we shall be as practical as Solomon.

### The Reputation of Calvinists Regarding Loyalty to Government

Various Calvinists throughout the years have expressed some of the most sonorous ideas regarding loyalty to a government that have ever been expressed. They have outdone all other

branches of Christendom in the *profession* of loyalty. This is probably because they are in the tradition of the Apostle Paul whose statement in Romans (previously quoted) demands obedience to government (but as we have shown the statement is restricted to *good* government). But such talk about obedience to "the powers that be" has been somewhat inappropriate. The talk about obedience was in part contradicted by the record. Instead of being especially loyal subjects, the Calvinists have an actual record of being bold rebels.

Some of their declarations about their loyalty were inspired by their known reputation of not being loyal. One of the *standards* of the Christian Reformed church is the "Belgic Confession" written by Guido de Brès. One of the reasons why this Confession was prepared by De Brès was "to prove to the persecutors that the adherents of the Reformed faith were no rebels, as was laid to their charge, but law abiding citizens . . ." (The words are quoted from the official Introduction to the "Belgic Confession" on page two of the *Psalter Hymnal* used by the Christian Reformed church.) The fact is that when Guido de Brès wrote his "Belgic Confession" the Low Countries had for decades been disturbed by rebellion stirred up by Calvinists—and properly so.

The Swiss, the English, the Scotch, the Netherlanders, the Americans—all in past history with a large Calvinist population—have been famous for their love of independence and have been notorious for their preparedness to rebel against a government.

The record of deeds is the finest feather in the Calvinist hat.

In regard to *words* about obedience to government, Calvinists have cooed as harmless doves, but their *action* has been uninhibited and courageous.

But that record has not been all courage or prudence. There is also evidence of basic confusion. There are some absurd and uncomfortable contradictions in the generally accepted *doctrines* of Calvinists on the relation of men to government. It is these confusions and contradictions which we shall now set out to explore. What are those contradictions and how remove them? To accomplish that should result in sounder action by Calvinists and a more consistent record.

## There is no Direct Authority From God

Set before yourself two propositions and select the one and reject the other:

*Proposition 1:* Those who have power have a *direct* authority from God.

*Proposition 2:* Those who have power have *only an indirect* authority from God.

Proposition Number One is usually accepted by members of the Christian Reformed church. We consider Proposition Number One to be erroneous. We accept Proposition Number Two only.

The ambiguity and confusion that exists can be made clear by considering what the denomination teaches about the Fifth Commandment, which commandment is the source used to justify the exercise of power or alleged authority. The "Heidelberg Catechism," one of the three standards of the Christian Reformed church, in Lord's Day XXXIX declares the following:

*Question:* What does God require in the Fifth Commandment?

*Answer:* That I show all honor, love and fidelity to my father and mother, and to all in authority over me; submit myself with due obedience to their good instruction and correction; and also bear patiently with their weaknesses and shortcomings, since it pleases God to govern us by their hand.

Let us consider the ideas which the foregoing quotation presents:

1. Note that the position of a government is equated with that of parents. That is a very large extension and generalization.

2. Note that the word *authority* is used without being defined as *proper* power (as we defined it) but *implying* proper power. By not defining authority a later ambiguity is hid; see point five following.

3. Note how carefully the word *good* is slipped in ahead of the words, *instruction and correction*. Of course, no one can take exception to *good* instruction and correction; who can argue against that? But the problem is, what is *good*? Nobody, not even the authors of a church standard, can prove anything by the use of an adjective.

4. Note, next, the smooth transition to bearing "patiently with . . . the weaknesses and shortcomings" of parents and governments. This forbearance is hardly arguable; *forebearance*, we have admitted, is fundamental to all brotherly relations. But what about *sins* of governments?

5. Note, finally, what appears to be an entirely different proposition: "It pleases God to govern us by their [parents *and* governments'] hand." This is a proposition concerning *power* and not concerning *authority*. According to this it *pleased* God to put Hitler and Stalin over their respective nations! This proposition indicates that parents and governments are *direct* agents of God, and not that they are agents only when they are *good* governors. There is no plain statement here whatever about obeying God more than men.

The answer in the Catechism to the question asked clearly indicates the authors of the Confession were defective reasoners in this instance. It will be helpful to be more detailed.

The reasoning in Lord's Day XXXIX is *by analogy* (by a comparison). Everything in this Lord's Day in regard to government is based on an analogy (comparison) of the relation of children to parents. The government has authority over everybody as a parent has over children.

All reasoning by analogy is exceptionally treacherous. There is no more dangerous way of reasoning. And the analogy in this case is, we believe, completely invalid. Children are minors, are irresponsible, are helpless, are dependent. Of course, the parents *must* decide for such children. When could an infant be held accountable! And what is implied? This, that we are all wards of a government, as we were wards as children of our parents!

What, in fact, does Scripture teach to the contrary? This, that when a person is grown-up he is "on his own." He is no longer a ward of his parents; he leaves his father and mother, picks himself a wife, and sets up entirely for himself.

Behind this clumsy analogy in Lord's Day XXXIX there is a dangerous implication; that implication is that the necessary *authority* of a parent over a minor has genuine significance for the power of one adult over another. Under the cover of this plausible analogy we here have a specific case of confusion of *power* with *authority*. An *authority* over a minor based on physical necessity is extended to an *authority* over an adult not based on a physical necessity whatever. And when the transition is made to an adult there is no clear indication that the exercise of *authority* over an adult is something different from the exercise of *power* over an adult.

*Power* and *authority* are not even comingled when dealing with minors, because the Apostle Peter declared: "Children obey your parents, *in the Lord*"; and, *in the Lord* here means this: children obey your parents when their government is according to the law of God. But what is true between parents and children must be if anything more true between a government and adults. In our thinking, the authority of government is in no way derived from nor derivable from the authority of parents.

To show how important for the impression created by the answer in Lord's Day XXXIX its use of the word *authority* is, note how different the answer would sound if we substitute *power* for *authority*:

That I show all honor, love and fidelity to my father and mother, and to all who have [power] over me;

"All who have [power] over me" are to be grouped with my parents who have a natural affection for me and who felt responsible for me as a minor! Stalin or Hitler or any other tyrannical government mentioned in the same breath and to the same conclusion with my parents! The analogy is certainly as unfortunate as any imagination could develop.

Begin with the requirement to love father and mother, pass to all powers that be whether good or evil but use the word *authority* to imply a good power, slip in the adjective *good* in regard to their activities, concede they have weaknesses or shortcomings but do not refer to their sins, and then declare finally that they have proper title to rule over us regardless whether they are good or evil (*because*) "since it *pleases* God to govern us by their hand." (Does the *please* refer to good government or bad government?)

The authors of the "Heidelberg Catechism" have, it is obvious, really reversed their position before completing their answer. They began with authority and they end with *power*. They do not meet up with the problem of *authority*, as *proper* power, at all. They confused themselves and they confuse their readers. The *only* practical question between men and government is *proper* power. But when the "Heidelberg Catechism" teaches that authority is as direct for a government over me as an adult, as the authority of my fond parents over me as a newborn babe, it is necessary to remonstrate. Parents (except when obviously unfit) are always expected to be a beneficent factor in a child's life. But the same expectation cannot apply to the relations between men and governments. Governments are not *natural* benefactors; governments are *natural* enemies, and will continue to be so until men are no longer deprived.

Yes, of course, we agree with the "Heidelberg Catechism"; we believe in honoring, loving and showing fidelity to parents. And, of course, we are pleased to obey *good* governments. But what about obeying *bad* governments? What is the answer to *that*? There is no answer to *that* question in the "Heidelberg Catechism," but it *appears* that you are to show honor, love and fidelity—note it, *honor, love* and *fidelity*—to a Stalin, a Hitler, and every tyrannical, unjust, cruel, destructive government in the world!

We return to the alternative propositions which appear at the beginning of this section, the two propositions which are really contradictory propositions: those who have power have a *direct* authority from God; and those who have power have *only* an *indirect* authority from God. We shall explain what we mean

by the second proposition which is the only proposition that is sound.

### The Path of Indirect Authority From God

Calvinists appear to have two ways to "elevate" their thoughts to God.

One way is to go out on a cloudless night, away from a smoky city, and to look at the heavens. Calvinists consider the mighty universe within the range of the eye of man, and humble themselves before the Creator.

But there is a second way for some Calvinists to get a similar inspiration. In this case they go out in broad daylight, and they again cast their eyes to the heavens. This time they see the most magnificent pipe line system ever devised. From out in space, from the throne of God, they see a myriad of pipe lines. Every line carries "power" direct from God! The idea is that if a man has power, and if power is from God, it must be piped somehow directly from God to man.

But this second source of inspiration has always eluded us, or maybe it has been denied us. Instead of such a pipe line system for the transmission of authority from God to men, we have been constrained to accept a far simpler scheme. Our idea of that transmission system is as follows.

1. Every king, potentate, congress, parliament, dictator, church, prelate, synod or general assembly which has claimed *direct* authority from God for its (or his) exercise of power has erred; no man or group of men can or may properly claim direct authority from God. It is a piece of over-weening arrogance, a hubris.

2. Every proper exercise of *authority* consists, not in appealing to a divine *origin* of that power, but in appealing to a valid *exercise* of authority.

3. The so-called "authority from God" is neither a manifestation of bald power to act nor an automatic blessing from God because that power to act exists, *but is based on obeying the*

*revealed will of God*, in short, obeying the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. The authority of any government rests on its establishing laws based on and in conformity with the Decalogue, specifically the Second Table of the Decalogue (Commandments V through X).

4. The authority of government does not rest on the Fifth Commandment, honor thy father and thy mother, but on the submission of its conduct by government to the general provisions of the Decalogue, especially the Second Table of the Law, namely: honor thy father and thy mother, and thou shalt not kill, commit adultery, steal, lie, nor covet. (The exact position of the commandments in the First Table of the Law needs separate consideration for which space is now lacking.) In other words, the authority of government is validated or invalidated by its obedience or disobedience to the Decalogue. The writers of the "Heidelberg Catechism" should have founded their requirement to obey government not on the Fifth Commandment but on the Fifth to Tenth (especially six through nine) commandments.

5. The title to authority over *ordinary* people does not finally rest on some *source*, such as a president of a corporation, or a king, or a parliament, or a dictator, or a synod. Authority in such cases depends finally on whether it does good to the people over which rule is held. If it does not do those ordinary people any good, why should they submit? But how can those people expect to be benefited by some rule over them unless that rule is in accordance with some undoubted, universally beneficent law, in this case, the best one known, the Decalogue. People will always benefit from a government operating according to the Decalogue.

6. Governments not based on the Decalogue should be disobeyed in specific cases. If a government *generally* disobeys the Decalogue that government should be destroyed and replaced.

7. It is not necessary to be hesitant for *reasons of principle* about overthrowing a government generally violating the Decalogue. It may be desirable to be cautious for *practical reasons* to overthrow a government generally violating the Decalogue.



8. The form of a government, whether monarchy, aristocracy or democracy, is unimportant relative to the basic question whether that government is based, not on alleged power piped directly from God but instead, on authority derived from obeying the revealed will of God. No government which exercises authority based on the revealed will of God will be found burdensome.

9. The reason for preferring representative government to dictatorship is that representative government permits those who are ruled, for the promotion of their own welfare, to insist on a government in accordance with or closer to the principles of the Decalogue than that government would be if the people did not have that means of protecting their self-interest, namely, the means which consists in representative government. If a government based on a representative system becomes oppressive by deviating from the Decalogue (which is the only way for a government to become oppressive), then a representative government permits the election of a government which will adhere more closely to the requirements of the Decalogue.

10. If the institution of representative government is lacking then bloody rebellion is the only agency left to accomplish relief.

11. "Authority from God," then, to us does not mean a pipe line of power from God permitting arbitrary and evil conduct based on such power, but instead: conformity to the revealed will of God. All *authority* is indirect; the *channel* is the revealed will of God in his Decalogue. When authority (so-called) deviates from the Law of God it is no longer authority and it no longer needs to be obeyed; it should be resisted. It has become mere power. It has lost its stamp of validity and genuine authority.

We summarize our views of Lord's Day XXXIX of the "Heidelberg Catechism."

1. There is no legitimate analogy whatever between parental authority over minors and governmental authority over adults.

2. Bad governments should not receive "honor, love and fidelity" from their victims.

3. Title to authority is not based on a power pipe line but is based on an intermediate requirement, namely, that authority must conform to the revealed will of God (especially the Second Table of the Law).

4. The conclusion of the Heidelberg Catechism regarding government may be considered to be correct for good governments, but evades the problem caused by bad governments.

5. The reason given for the conclusion about obeying a good government is an erroneous reason.

6. Calvinism can become progressive by improving this part of the "Heidelberg Catechism" so that it does touch the real problem and so gives an important answer as well as a trite, commonplace answer, and so that the right reason is given for both the trite answer and the important answer. (By trite answer we refer to the admonition to obey a *good* government. Everybody knows *that*.)

In the next issue we plan to show the erroneous doctrines on government of men such as Hugo Grotius, Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper, and their attempts to solve their self-initiated errors. We shall look at the ideas of Rousseau and the encyclopedists. We shall also consider the ideas of the Founders of the United States. We shall give attention to the ideas of Frederic Bastiat, a devout Catholic. And we shall also take a look at the ideas of a Christian and a secular American thinker.

Men first accept an erroneous principle which undermines liberty, and then they become inventive to find corrective principles. These corrective principles are feeble substitutes to restore the foundation under liberty. Some of these substitutes are (1) ancient privileges, (2) sphere sovereignty, (3) the consent of the governed, (4) the right of resistance, and (5) natural law.

If you begin with a general proposition which subscribes to the same basic principle as does the "divine right of kings," which is what historical Calvinism has often done, it is then necessary to appeal to one or another item in the foregoing list, such as sphere sovereignty (which happens to be an erroneous and

unnecessary doctrine). The "divine right of kings," it should be carefully noted, is nothing more than a specific case of the *general* idea that power is piped *directly* from God to men. We do not believe in that power pipe line system.

**What Kind of Power Is  
Piped Through the Pipelines  
From God to Men**

In the foregoing analysis we have expressed an unfavorable opinion of an analogy, namely, the analogy that governments have power over adults because parents must have care for their children in their minority.

Every illustration and every metaphor is also an analogy. We have ourselves been using a metaphor of a huge power pipeline system from the throne of God to governments. It may be argued that we have used as objectionable an analogy as that against which we have protested.

Although we have no intention to endeavor to substantiate any allegation we make by the mere use of a metaphor, we nevertheless consider our metaphor helpful and generally valid. That will become evident in the September issue of PROGRESSIVE CALVINISM.

At this point we turn to the problem regarding what kind of power is piped through the myriad of pipe lines of power from God to governments and sphere sovereignties. That inquiry—what kind of power is being talked about—will be corroborating evidence in itself that we have been talking about a genuinely unsound idea widely accepted among Calvinists.

In the July issue we analyzed a statement of the Rev. Mr. Gerrit Hoeksema, that it had not been shown that a specific form of coercion (the closed shop) is sin. Power, as power, is of course coercion. And so we are here considering what we previously considered, namely, *what* coercion, or power, is proper and *what* coercion or power is sinful.

In earlier issues of PROGRESSIVE CALVINISM we have carefully delimited the coercion which we believe Scripture teaches as Biblical and valid coercion, namely, the coercion which is restricted to restraining evil, all other coercion being a form of violence and

forbidden by the Sixth Commandment which reads, thou shalt not kill. As we explained, a lengthy way of saying, thou shalt not kill, is to say, thou shalt not engage in violence or coercion, except to restrain evil as evil is defined in the Decalogue, especially the evils listed in the Sixth through Ninth Commandments which are overt evils of action.

A man, as an individual, may and should employ violence and coercion to restrain improper acts (especially those forbidden in the Sixth to Ninth Commandments). I may resist bodily harm, and adultery, and theft, and falsehood attempted on me and on others by a neighbor. But in regard to everything else I must leave my neighbor free and he must leave me free. That is an essential characteristic of brotherly and neighborly love. All this, we believe, is very clear from Scripture. Now what *other* power or coercion does a government have? Is a *government* bound by the limitations set by the law of neighborly love, or does a government get some extra rights through alleged direct power lines from God? What statements in Scripture indicate such an extra portion of power, or right of coercion, is made available by God to governments?

Commonly, a state or government is said to be sovereign, that is, exercising power in its own right. Then Abraham Kuyper came along and wrote of *sphere sovereignty*; each sphere of activity, such as a ball league or a theater guild, has some kind of sovereignty, or claim on power in its own right. And then the unions came along and, as operating under *sphere sovereignty*, decree a closed shop, which is clearly an exercise of coercive power. And then the Rev. Mr. Gerrit Hoeksema makes a specific application of that *sphere sovereignty* idea and says that the sovereignty of the closed shop has not been shown to be sin.

Clearly, through all those power lines to governments and to "spheres of sovereignty" there is apparently some additional right to coercion, beyond the right which an individual has, which individual right is limited to the resistance of evil and which right may not go further without violating the law of brotherly love.

In other words, these power lines of power from God to men seem to give to those to whom the power lines run a special power, namely, the power to coerce and to bend *A* to the will of *B*, and

C to the will of D, etc. Where shall we end up under such a Calvinistic system, if it is Calvinistic?

Maybe we have failed. Maybe we are incompetent readers of Scripture. But we have searched the Scriptures in vain for any indication that any government or "sphere of sovereignty" has any authority whatever to do more than an individual may do. If any government or "sphere of sovereignty" has any such power, where is the text that supports that proposition?

In fact, if there were any text in Scripture of such a kind then the definition of brotherly love would be different for a group than for an individual. That, we believe, would be a damnable situation and an outrageous inconsistency.

Who can find anything in Scripture which declares that any government, or any "sphere sovereignty" (a labor union, a ball league, a theater guild) has any power or right of coercion beyond the restraint of evil *as defined in the Decalogue*. Will any reader please supply the text or texts?

Or, will any reader please explain how any such right to coercion may be *inferred* from what is expressly taught in Scripture?

We are confident that nothing in Scripture can be quoted as giving broad coercive power to any government over men, *unless the definition of brotherly love has previously been improperly extended as by Nygren and by various sanctimonious and confused theologians*, inside and outside the ranks of nominal Calvinists. By that device, namely an *extended* definition of brotherly love, a government or a sphere of sovereignty can *appear* to have a proper range of authority beyond what Scripture really has set.

One way to destroy the mythical power pipe lines from God to governments and sphere sovereignties is:

1. To insist that brotherly love does not go beyond the exact definition given in Scripture. (See our summary in earlier issues of PROGRESSIVE CALVINISM.)

2. To insist that no group, political or nonpolitical (government or sphere sovereignty), has any more power than an individual has. Proper group action then becomes brotherly love

exercised collectively rather than individually (for economy of effort's sake).

If those two ideas are accepted then there is no inconsistency between the rules of Scripture for individuals and for groups (governments or sphere sovereignties).

\* \* \*

We hope to continue the preliminary presentation of ideas on the proper position of government in the September issue. We have in this issue directed attention to the failure of the "Heidelberg Catechism" to meet up plainly with the issue of bad government. We have also showed the only sound basis for any human authority, namely not a *direct* pipe line from God to men, but an *indirect* channel, namely conformity to the revealed will of God in the Decalogue. The Law of God is the channel, the intermediate means, for properly exercising authority. The interjection of that intermediate requirement binds governments, and all those who exercise authority, to a good and obvious standard. All such authority may be and will be obeyed by good citizens because it is a beneficent authority. All contrary authority may and should be resisted legally and illegally; we say legally *and* illegally because it is necessary to obey that basic requirement of the Christian religion, towit: "We must obey God rather than men." What is mere *human legality* versus *scriptural morality*!

But we lacked space to refute the many secular theories and the allegedly scriptural theories of the authority of government and the relations of government to men. We plan such refutation in the September issue.

Then we plan to devote an issue or two to ideas on *justice*.

Thereafter we shall turn to specific nonscriptural ideas taught in trusted places in Calvinist circles.

F. N.

## Machiavelli, on Property and Women

Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), the Italian political philosopher, famous for his realism, has always appeared to us to have been a worthy candidate for conversion to Calvinism. Machiavelli accepted various ideas based on observation and objective reasoning which are taught in Scripture as divinely revealed. When he does that, he gives his rationalistic reasons for his conclusions and those reasons generally appear sound.

We have outlined in the foregoing that a government is valid only if it operates on principles stated in the Decalogue. Machiavelli expressed himself differently but said essentially the same thing. This is what Machiavelli wrote in Chapter XIX in his *The Prince*; the title to this chapter is "That We Must Avoid Being Despised and Hated":

. . . The prince [Machiavelli refers to any ruler] must, as already stated, avoid those things which will make him hated and despised; and whenever he succeeds in this, he will have done his part, and will find no danger in other vices. He will chiefly become hated, as I said, *by being rapacious, and usurping the property and women of his subjects*, which he must abstain from doing, and whenever one does not attack the property or honour of the generality of men, they will live contented; . . . [Emphasis supplied.]

Two things, Machiavelli declares, will cause a prince to be hated, namely, rapacity of a prince consisting in "usurping the property and women of his subjects." Note, now, how Machiavelli agrees with Scripture on what should be the foundation for a stable government:

### The Second Table of the Law

1. Honor father and mother.
2. Shalt not kill.

### Machiavelli

1. (Not covered.)
2. Be not rapacious, which involves violence forbidden by commandment forbidding killing.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 3. Shalt not commit adultery.           | 3. Abstain from usurping women of subjects.   |
| 4. Shalt not steal.                     | 4. Abstain from usurping property of subjects.  |
| 5. Shalt not lie.                       | 5. (Not mentioned, but the principal purpose of lying pertains to property and women and so is indirectly covered.) |
| 6. Shalt not covet property, wife, etc. | 6. Same as 3 and 4.   |

In order to survive as a ruler, according to Machiavelli, a ruler must neither be hated nor despised. To avoid being hated you should, says Machiavelli in his own way, obey the commandments in the Second Table of the Law.

Machiavelli, the most astute of all political philosophers, really endorses the idea that a government should basically be founded on the Second Table of the Law.

This, of course, does not involve us in any way with any other ideas Machiavelli may have written.

F. N.

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