

## CONTENTS

Foreword: John M. Frame ix

Acknowledgments xiii

Introduction: David Hall and Marvin Padgett xv

Abbreviations xix

1. 1929 and All That, or What Does Calvinism Say to Historians  
Searching for Meaning? 1  
**DARRYL G. HART**
2. Law, Authority, and Liberty in Early Calvinism 17  
**JOHN WITTE JR.**
3. The Arts and the Reformed Tradition 40  
**WILLIAM EDGAR**
4. Calvin's Contributions to Economic Theory and Policy 69  
**TIMOTHY D. TERRELL**
5. Calvinism and Literature 95  
**LELAND RYKEN**
6. Calvin's Legacy in Philosophy 114  
**WILLIAM C. DAVIS**
7. Calvin, Politics, and Political Science 142  
**PAUL MARSHALL**
8. Calvinism and Science 162  
**DON PETCHER**
9. John Calvin's Impact on Business 192  
**RICHARD C. CHEWNING**

*Contents*

10. Calvin and Music 217  
PAUL S. JONES
  11. Medicine: In the Biblical Tradition of John Calvin with Modern Applications 254  
FRANKLIN E. (ED) PAYNE, MD
  12. Calvin as Journalist 277  
WARREN COLE SMITH
  13. The Future of Calvinism as a Worldview 293  
DAVID W. HALL
- Index of Scripture 307  
Index of Subject and Names 311  
Contributors 327

# I

## 1929 AND ALL THAT, OR WHAT DOES CALVINISM SAY TO HISTORIANS SEARCHING FOR MEANING?

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DARRYL G. HART

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The year 1929 was a significant one in the lives of many Americans. That year, as most people know, was the time of the Great Crash on Wall Street that escalated into the Great Depression. Most historians of the United States recognize this as one of the most profound crises in the life of the nation. The most recent economic downturn has generated even greater awareness of the nation's economic history as policy makers and citizens alike look for lessons from the Depression.

In 1929 another event transpired, one usually omitted from survey textbooks on United States history, but with arguably even more significance than the decline in stock prices that hit Wall Street on October 29, 1929. This was the reorganization of Princeton Seminary and the subsequent start of Westminster Seminary to carry on Princeton's original

DARRYL G. HART

mission. The larger events surrounding Princeton's administrative adjustment are part of the fundamentalist controversy that engaged liberal and conservative Presbyterians for most of the 1920s. Although Princeton did not experience directly a liberal takeover, its new administrative structure after 1929 meant that conservatives were a minority on the board that oversaw academic and theological standards. J. Gresham Machen's decision, with support from many Presbyterian conservatives, to found a successor seminary to Princeton was arguably one of the major developments in the Presbyterian controversy. Even if the founding of Westminster did not affect as many Americans as did the crash of the stock market, the stakes for the new seminary were higher since they reflected not the price of temporal assets but the value of eternal realities—ones pertaining to the redemption purchased by Christ. From the perspective of eternity, the downfall of old Princeton and the creation of Westminster were more important than the fall of stock prices at the New York Stock Exchange.<sup>1</sup>

If this comparison is not adequate to start mental gears turning on the subject of doing history from a Calvinistic outlook, then perhaps what will do so is Machen's perspective on the meaning of 1929 for conservative Presbyterians. At his convocation address for Westminster, delivered before faculty, students, and well-wishers in center city Philadelphia, Machen admitted that he was at a loss in trying to make sense of Princeton Seminary's demise. He said:

At first it might seem to be a great calamity, and sad are the hearts of those Christian men and women throughout the world who love the gospel that the old Princeton proclaimed. We cannot fully understand the ways of God in permitting so great a wrong. Yet good may come even out of a thing so evil as that.<sup>2</sup>

As a student of Scripture, Machen knew that many times throughout redemptive history God had accomplished his purposes through events

1. On events that led to the reorganization of Princeton and the creation of Westminster, see Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates, Religion in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

2. J. Gresham Machen, "Westminster Theological Seminary: Its Purpose and Plan," in D. G. Hart, ed., *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writings* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 194.

## *What Does Calvinism Say to Historians Searching for Meaning?*

that looked as if God's people were experiencing defeat. The story of Joseph and his brothers, the selection of the diminutive David as king of Israel, and above all Christ's death on the cross all made plausible Machen's sense that good might spring from evil in the course of redemptive history. Even so, he was unsure about Princeton. And if uncertain how to interpret developments in the church, how much more reluctant would Machen have been to try to interpret the significance of the Great Depression?

As disquieting as historical uncertainty may be, Machen's Calvinistic instincts were exactly on target. Although many historians and theologians have claimed that the Reformed faith specifically and Christianity more generally equip historians with insights about the meaning of historical developments, a deeper reality exists: that the Reformed faith may hinder attempts to derive the ultimate meaning of historical events. As Machen's own example suggests, the Reformed faith encourages epistemological humility when trying to tell what God is doing in history. Instead of adding up to a complete narrative, with beginning, middle, transitions between chapters, and an upbeat ending, history from a Calvinist outlook is actually filled with mystery. No one knew this better than John Calvin, whose doctrine of providence and instruction on how to view the world represents one of the best starting points for Reformed Protestants who study the past and want to make sense of it.

### Providence According to Calvin

Reformed Protestants generally have raised few objections to the doctrine of providence. Because many come to the Reformed faith precisely because of the tradition's understanding of God's sovereignty, the belief—according to the Westminster Shorter Catechism—that providence involves God's “most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing his creatures and all their actions” makes perfect sense. Providence implies a created order where God is in charge and humans need not worry whether his purposes will be accomplished (WSC, Q. 11).

Calvin was no more comfortable with providence than other Reformed Protestants when he developed the doctrine in book one of the *Institutes*. This was the section of his systematic exposition of the Christian religion in

which he discussed man's knowledge of God the Creator. At the end of this section of the *Institutes*, Calvin duly discussed first God's work of creation and then his works of providence, two divine acts closely connected because of the relationship between creating out of nothing and the subsequent preservation needed to maintain the original stuff of creation. Calvin's basic definition of providence was this: God governs heaven and earth such that he "regulates all things that nothing takes place without his deliberation".<sup>3</sup> The French Reformer explained that this regulation was not simply an extension of nature, as if God had simply created the world and let it run without direct and ongoing support and government. Calvin wrote, "Those as much defraud God of his glory as themselves of a most profitable doctrine who confine God's providence to such narrow limits as though he allowed all things by a free course to be borne along according to a universal law of nature".<sup>4</sup> In other words, providence is not passive, as if God merely sits "idly" observing the universe, but "as the keeper of the keys, he governs all events".<sup>5</sup>

Under the general category of God's regulation of creation, Calvin distinguished four layers of providence. The first was the natural world, such as "the alternation of days and nights, of winter and summer." This aspect of providence included the animal world where God "gives food to the young of the ravens" and governs the flight of birds by a "definite plan".<sup>6</sup> These were works of God because the days and seasons followed according to a "certain law" established by God himself.<sup>7</sup> A second layer concerned God's providential care for man. Calvin insisted that "we know that the universe was established for the sake of mankind".<sup>8</sup> Here Calvin quoted Jeremiah (Jer. 10:23) and Solomon (Prov. 16:9) to show that God directs man's steps even to the point of Calvin's denying man control of his own affairs within the bounds of a natural order given by God. "The prophet and Solomon," Calvin wrote, "ascribe to God not only might but also choice and determination." He added that it is "an absurd folly that miserable men take it upon themselves to act without God, when they cannot even speak except as he

3. *Institutes*, 1.16.3.

4. Ibid.

5. *Institutes* 1.16.4.

6. *Institutes*, 1.16.5.

7. Ibid.

8. *Institutes*, 1.16.6.

wills." This meant that nothing happens to man by chance because nothing in the world is "undertaken without [God's] determination".<sup>9</sup>

The third level of providence extended to natural occurrences. The examples Calvin used here were the weather and human procreation. "Whenever the sea boils up with the blast of winds," these forces testify to the presence of God's power and confirm Scripture's teaching that God "commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea" (Ps. 107:25). Human fertility was also an indication of God's control of all things. As much as all men and women (with few exceptions) possessed the power to procreate, some marriages were more barren or fertile than others. The reason for the difference was God's "special favor".<sup>10</sup>

The fourth and final dimension of providence outlined by Calvin is the one most relevant for considering God's control of history and what a Reformed perspective on historical scholarship might involve. Calvin rejected adamantly the Stoic doctrine of fate, although he knew his teaching on providence might sound as if he were saying God's activity in controlling all things left man in a passive state, only to be acted upon rather than acting in space and time with purpose. Calvin could deny Stoicism because of his rejection of the necessity of causes. The created order did not unfold in a mechanical way, but according to God's eternal decree and attributes. Accordingly, God ruled and governed all things according to his being, wisdom, power, holiness, goodness, and truth. Rather than an abstract law or a distant force being at the center of all things, creation developed according to a personal God, and providence embodied that personality. This meant for Calvin that "not only heaven and earth and the inanimate creatures, but also the plans and intentions of men, are so governed by his providence that they are borne by it straight to their appointed end".<sup>11</sup> Such an execution of God's decree eliminated any room for fortune or chance. "Nothing is more absurd," Calvin wrote, "than that anything should happen without God's ordaining it, because it would then happen without any cause".<sup>12</sup>

A number of questions naturally follow from Calvin's discussion of providence. What is the relationship between divine sovereignty and

9. Ibid.

10. *Institutes*, 1.16.7.

11. *Institutes*, 1.16.8.

12. Ibid.

DARRYL G. HART

human freedom? Does man have a free will? What is the difference between secondary causes—those ways in which God carries out his purposes through the actions of man or circumstances of the created order (such as the rising of the sun or gravitational pull)—and God's primary causes, such as his powerful and direct intervention with the created order in the form of miracles, special revelation, and the incarnation? As important as these questions are for understanding the Reformed doctrine of providence, they are somewhat beside the point in assessing a Calvinistic outlook on history that stems from Calvin's teaching on providence.

Calvin did not stop to entertain such questions but moved directly in the *Institutes* from an exposition of providence to an aspect of God's control that bears directly on historical inquiry and is crucial for its work. He said that no matter how much God was in control of all events, and no matter how much Christians believed in divine sovereignty so that nothing occurs in history by chance or fortune, to us the unfoldings of providence "are fortuitous".<sup>13</sup> Christians know that everything is "ordained by God's plan" and unfolds according to "a sure dispensation," yet in his experience of human existence, natural circumstances, and social development, man cannot discern meaning or direction sufficient to counter the impression that life is marked by accidents or fortunes. Calvin insisted he was not arguing that fortune "rules the world and men, tumbling all things at random up and down." Such was a foolish outlook and had no place in "the Christian's breast." Even so, because "the order, reason, end, and necessity" of everyday life "for the most part lie hidden in God's purpose, and are not apprehended by human opinion," those things that happen according to God's will and sovereign plan "are in a sense fortuitous".<sup>14</sup>

Calvin used the following example to make his point:

Let us imagine, for example, a merchant who, entering a wood with a company of faithful men, unwisely wanders away from his companions, and in his wandering comes upon a robber's den, falls among thieves and is slain. His death was not only foreseen by God's eye, but also determined by his decree. For it is not said that he foresaw how long the life of each

13. *Institutes*, 1.16.9.

14. Ibid.

*What Does Calvinism Say to Historians Searching for Meaning?*

man would extend, but that he determined and fixed the bounds that men cannot pass. (Job 14:5) Yet as far as the capacity of our mind is concerned, all things therein seem fortuitous.<sup>15</sup>

Most human occurrences, whether considered “in their own nature or weighted according to our knowledge and judgment,” on the surface appear to have no intrinsic meaning other than occurring according to God’s eternal purpose. In the case of the merchant’s death, a Christian will regard it “as fortuitous by nature” but will not doubt “that God’s providence exercised authority over fortune in directing its end”.<sup>16</sup>

Finding some proximate meanings in the world’s affairs was not, however, impossible for Calvin. He cautioned against thinking that God made “sport of men by throwing them around like balls.” He also counseled that if man had a “quiet and composed” mind he would always see that God had the best reasons for the way events turn out, such as to encourage patience, correct “wicked affections,” encourage self-denial, or arouse from “sluggishness”.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, Calvin taught that although God revealed the meaning of certain mysteries, not all parts of history are transparent. Here he appealed to Moses’ instruction in Deuteronomy 29:29, i.e., that the secret things belong to God but the revealed things could be seen and understood. In this way Calvin was recognizing that Scripture unlocked the ultimate meaning of history by revealing God, his plan of redemption, and his will for believers.<sup>18</sup> Man could take encouragement from the revealed truth that God took “especial care” of his people.<sup>19</sup> But beyond the general disclosure found in Scripture Calvin was unprepared to go. Man had to be content with a general sense of divine providence—that God worked all things according to his plan and for the good of his children. Since that ultimately good plan also involved hardships and sufferings, interpreting events according to whether they pleased or comforted man was folly. Because the most revealing moment in history involved the death of God’s only

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. *Institutes*, 1.17.1.

18. *Institutes*, 1.17.2.

19. *Institutes*, 1.17.6.

DARRYL G. HART

begotten Son, Christians need to remember that adversity or suffering was “sent by God’s just dispensation”.<sup>20</sup>

The lesson that Calvin’s understanding of providence would seem to hold for historians is the rather sobering one that history is generally indecipherable apart from Christ. History lacks meaning unless Scripture is true in declaring the glory of God as revealed in the life and work of the incarnate Son of God. But the truth of God’s revelation in Christ does not lead where many Reformed scholars think it does. The gospel explains why people exist and where history is going. But beyond the Sunday-school-like answer to every historical question—“Christ”—historians have no real access to interpreting the ultimate meaning of historical events and actors. For instance, to the question, “Why did Andrew Jackson win the 1828 election for president of the United States?” the answer, “Christ” or “the gospel” or “the glory of God” hardly satisfies. Historians are much more likely to talk about changes in the demographics of the United States, Jackson’s reputation as a war hero, granting voting rights to citizens previously excluded from the electoral process. Any number of these proximate or temporal explanations make sense of what changed with Jackson’s victory. But these are not exactly Christian answers. They are not at odds with the Christian truth that God controls all things, including secondary causes such as those that explain Jackson’s success. They simply have no direct relationship to Christ’s work on behalf of God’s people.<sup>21</sup>

Efforts to connect events in history to the person and work of Christ can be downright disastrous, not only by historical standards but according to Christian orthodoxy. If someone argued that Jesus Christ accomplished salvation so that Andrew Jackson would be elected the seventh president of the United States, the case would be a difficult one if based solely on what Scripture reveals. Christ does rule over the nations and he did providentially govern the election of 1828, but saying that Christ was fulfilling his redemptive work through the Jackson administration does not do justice to any number

20. *Institutes*, 1.17.8

21. Recent books on Andrew Jackson include Sean Wilentz, *Andrew Jackson* (New York: Times Books, 2005), and Jon Meacham, *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House* (New York: Random House, 2008).

### *What Does Calvinism Say to Historians Searching for Meaning?*

of policies or initiatives that Jackson conducted that were contrary to God's revealed will.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, to say that Jackson was carrying out Christ's intentions is equally absurd and patently untrue. Reformed Christians may debate the proper function of the magistrate and the degree to which he may be responsible for true religion in his realm, but rare has been the Reformed historian who argued—as Eusebius did with Constantine—that a particular ruler was supplying meaning to history because he was carrying out Christ's redemptive work and purpose.

But just because historians—even Reformed ones—do not hold the interpretive key that unlocks the significance of events or actors that lack a direct bearing on the outcome of redemptive history, their work is not in vain. This is the place at which Calvin's teaching on providence is especially helpful. Because God governs all things and because everything happens according to his eternal purpose, historians do not study accidents even if the events they attempt to explain do not possess an inevitable quality. Historians not only study a meaningful order (and are created in such a way to perceive order as opposed to chaos in the movement of history), but they also can see the connections between secondary causes such that historians are capable of giving wise and learned explanations for why certain things happen, according to the host of circumstances in which man lives by virtue of God's creation and providence. In other words, historians can tell the difference that tyranny, justice, scarcity, creativity, virtue, and productivity make for the history of people, nations, and societies. But they cannot link these attributes and factors to the direction and meaning of history from an eternal perspective; that is, historians cannot definitively tell how such circumstances contribute to the advance of Christ's kingdom.

Calvin's doctrine of providence, then, was a reiteration of Augustine's thoughtful and biblical understanding of history and its meaning. In *The City of God*, the Bishop of Hippo wrote:

22. For instance, Jackson's treatment of Native Americans—removing them to the Western territories—and unresponsiveness to abolitionism, as well as his personal conduct, are generally regarded as blemishes on his character. For some perspective on Jackson the man, see Meacham, *American Lion*, 25–32.

DARRYL G. HART

We do not know by what judgment of God this good man is poor and that bad man right; why he who, in our opinion, ought to suffer acutely for his abandoned life enjoys himself, while sorrow pursues him whose praiseworthy life leads us to suppose he should be happy; why the innocent man is dismissed from the bar not only unavenged, but even condemned, being either wronged by the iniquity of the judge, or overwhelmed by false evidence, while his guilty adversary, on the other hand, is not only discharged with impunity, but even has his claims admitted; why the ungodly enjoys good health, while the godly pines in sickness. . . . But who can collect or enumerate all the contrasts of this kind? But if this anomalous state of things were uniform in this life, in which, as the sacred Psalmist says, "Man is like to vanity, his days as a shadow that passeth away" (Ps. 144:4)—so uniform that none but wicked men won the transitory prosperity of earth, while only the good suffered its ills—this could be referred to the just and even benign judgment of God. . . . But now, as it is, since we not only see good men involved in the ills of life, and bad men enjoying the good of it, which seem unjust, but also that evil often overtakes evil men, and good surprises the good, the rather on this account are God's judgments unsearchable, and His ways past finding out (Rom. 11:33). Although, therefore, we do not know by what judgment these things are done or permitted to be done by God, with whom is the highest virtue, the highest wisdom, the highest justice, no infirmity, no rashness, no unrighteousness, yet is salutary for us to learn to hold cheap such things, be they good or evil, as attach indifferently to good men and bad, and to covet those things which belong only to good men, and flee those evils which belong only to evil men. (20.2)<sup>23</sup>

### Handicapped Historians?

As clear as Calvin was about the nature of providence, Christian historians have been reluctant to obey the stop sign that he placed on historical explanations of events lacking a scriptural interpretation. Since the rise of a self-consciously Christian association of scholars, not only in academic history, various evangelical and Reformed academics have advanced arguments about the value of Christian historians performing

23. Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, trans. and ed. R. W. Dyson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

*What Does Calvinism Say to Historians Searching for Meaning?*

their scholarship with explicitly religious motivations or perspectives. These arguments have often included the idea that Christian historiography should be in some way noticeably different from the work of their secular peers. Of course, the difference between Christian and secular interpretations stems precisely from the different beliefs and convictions that believing academics possess by virtue of their faith. Nevertheless, appealing to Calvin on this point is anachronistic since a secular academy would have been inconceivable to him. But his teaching on providence is relevant to many of the recent arguments made on behalf of the difference that Christianity makes for historical scholarship.

C. Gregg Singer, professor of history at Catawba College, represented the outlook of an older set of Christian academics who were teaching and writing before American evangelicals started to go to graduate school in the normal course of training. He believed that secular historians rejected "the possibility of meaning and ultimate purpose in history." The task of Christian historians was consequently to "confront the unbelieving world with an interpretation of history which is both true to Scripture on the one hand, and relevant to the intellectual climate" of the times.<sup>24</sup> The doctrine of providence was key. For Singer, it ensured that "history has both meaning and purpose because it is real." He had a point when it came to a believer's sense of living in space and time and wondering where history is going. But when Singer applied this truth to historical judgments he sounded less certain. For instance, the decay of Western culture in the latter half of the twentieth century "was part of the sovereign purpose of God to bring to naught the pagan philosophies of the ancient world."<sup>25</sup> Singer took it a step further in calling the Christian historian to demonstrate that "the decline of Western culture itself is the direct result of the triumph of the Renaissance over the Reformation in Western life." He added that the French and American revolutions were the result of "resurgent paganism" in the eighteenth century. To make these judgments was the "historian's task," he said.<sup>26</sup>

24. C. Gregg Singer, *Christian Approaches: To Philosophy, To History* (Memphis: Craig Press, 1978), 35.

25. Ibid., 36.

26. Ibid., 37.

A younger group of historians has emerged to take over the case for a Christian approach to history. Their assessment of the West and its decline, perhaps reflecting the difference between America's "Greatest Generation" and the baby-boomer generation, was not as dire as Singer's. But like Singer they argued that religious convictions separated their understanding of history from secular scholars and enabled them to see the meaning or divine pattern in historical development. The most comprehensive and judicious assessment was that of David Bebbington, an English evangelical historian whose book *Patterns in History* (1979), contrasted Christian conceptions of history with the ancients, moderns, Marxists, and historicists. Bebbington's points about Christianity involving a linear view of history, an end or *telos*, and a God who intervened in space and time that distinguished Christianity from other intellectual outlooks, was clearly welcome. It even showed how much modern Western academic history—while often rejecting God—has borrowed heavily on Christianity's triumph over pagan philosophy.<sup>27</sup> But when Bebbington took the truth that God intervenes in history and gave Christian historians a measure of access to the meaning of history, thanks to their belief in a God who is active in the world, he seemed to go past where Calvin's doctrine of providence allowed. For instance, Bebbington wrote that "when good surprisingly emerges from evil, God is evidently at work."<sup>28</sup> He also suggested that, aided as they were with a divinely revealed morality, Christian scholars should be able to make moral judgments about the past. Bebbington did caution against Christians interpreting the past in a providential way when their readers or audiences were interested simply in "technical history." Yet, "the Christian historian can discern God at work in the past without necessarily writing of him."<sup>29</sup>

George M. Marsden argued in a fashion similar to Bebbington, although showing directly the influence of Kuyperian (or neo-Calvinist) arguments on his thinking. Christian faith influenced historical scholarship, according to Marsden, in three important ways. The first was the

27. David Bebbington, *Patterns in History: A Christian Perspective on Historical Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), chap. 3.

28. Ibid., 184.

29. Ibid., 186–87.

*What Does Calvinism Say to Historians Searching for Meaning?*

selection of a subject, Christians would invariably value some aspects of historical research as more worthwhile than others because of their beliefs. The second was the type of question a Christian historian would ask about a subject. "Christian scholars are likely to be interested in a different set of issues than are other scholars and to see different things."<sup>30</sup> The third influence on Christian historiography came in the selection of theories by which to approach a topic and set of questions. For instance, "scholars who accept the authority of ancient texts are unlikely to accept radical postmodern deconstruction of the authority of all texts or that humans are, in effect, the only creators of reality."<sup>31</sup> The particular contribution that Christian historians could make, Marsden added, was in displaying moral standards in their work, and resisting cultural and historical relativism.<sup>32</sup> Although Marsden interacted less directly with ideas of purpose or meaning in history, his argument did suggest that believing historians could make judgments about the past that were unavailable to their peers, by virtue of their understanding of God's revealed truth.

One last example of reflection on the nature of Christian history comes from Ronald A. Wells, who taught at Calvin College for much of his career and wrote the book devoted to history for the Christian College Coalition, *History Through the Eyes of Faith* (1989). Wells was writing with something of a different purpose from Singer, Bebbington, or Marsden, since his book was supposed to supplement textbook surveys of Western civilization. Even so, he argued that Christian college students need to understand their place in the coming of God's kingdom, and this will lead to certain evaluations of the West's history. It would, for instance, show that the "secular-scientific humanism of the Enlightenment" had led humankind down a "blind alley."<sup>33</sup> Wells argued that believers could see a pattern of moral and spiritual bleakness in the history of the West. He added that since "the rationalism of the Enlightenment is incompatible with Christian belief, and since America was to be a testing ground for

30. George M. Marsden, "What Difference Might Christian Perspectives Make," in Ronald A. Wells, ed., *History and the Christian Historian* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 15.

31. Ibid., 16.

32. Ibid., 17–18.

33. Ronald A. Wells, *History Through the Eyes of Faith*, Christian College Coalition Series (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 234.

DARRYL G. HART

the progressive beliefs of the Enlightenment, it was always clear—on [the Christian's] terms—that such a test would be a failure.”<sup>34</sup> Wells may have disagreed with Singer on the nature of the American experiment, but like him, Wells, along with Marsden and Bebbington (to a lesser extent), felt comfortable making moral evaluations of history. This moral outlook was both a gift and responsibility for the believing historian.

Undoubtedly, Calvin would not have denied the validity of divinely revealed moral standards and that all historical actors will be judged according to God’s law. But whether this is properly the historian’s task is another question. Nor does a moral perspective on history necessarily resonate with the doctrine of providence as Calvin explained it. Surely moral judgments are present in the work of secular historians, perhaps on the different side of an issue, but moral judgments are not the sole domain of believing professional historians. Subjects such as slavery, Nazism, patriarchy, and capitalism are especially revealing since historians even without faith have had little trouble condemning these features of the past. At the same time, appreciating the variety, complexity, and mystery of the past—whether from an appeal to providence or not—rarely results from the moral certainty that Christians and unbelieving historians have exhibited. Such certainty is at odds with the interpretive humility that Calvin encouraged in his doctrine of providence.

### Accepting the Limits of Meaning

Calvinism has nurtured intellectual creativity, traditions of scholarly accomplishment, and strong institutions of higher learning. These attainments have not always cultivated intellectual modesty among Reformed Protestants. Because of a prowess for interpreting the Bible and reflecting on its truths in systematic ways, Calvinists have generally taken pride in their tradition as one of the most intellectually advanced among Protestants. Whether or not this pride is becoming, historians who work within a Reformed outlook may have the ingredients for supplying the intellectual modesty necessary to keep Reformed scholars from hubris.

34. Ibid., 230.

### *What Does Calvinism Say to Historians Searching for Meaning?*

The doctrine of providence is a good place to start. Although this truth, especially as Calvin expounded it, would appear to encourage Christian scholars to find meaning everywhere—because God is in control of all things—it does precisely the opposite. Because God created and sustains all things according to his infinite wisdom, goodness, and justice, everything in the created order has meaning and purpose. Furthermore, because this meaning and purpose reside squarely in God's eternal decree, no ambiguity exists in creation's significance, at least in the mind of God. This comprehensive outlook on God's relationship to creation has tempted believing academics to think they can know the mind of God and hence the meaning and purpose of the objects they study.

The problem with which Christian scholars must wrestle is that God has revealed only part of his mind, will, and purpose. Reformed Protestants believe that God reveals himself in the two books, the book of nature and the book of Scripture. But only one of those books reveals Christ, whose life, ministry, and redemption constitute the meaning of creation. The other book, general revelation, does indeed reveal its author but only in a way sufficient to condemn unbelief and wickedness. The book of nature does not reveal Christ. For that reason, Christian efforts to find meaning in the pages of history, the natural world, social development, or human nature run into the wall of Scripture's limits. To go beyond that wall is to engage in speculation.

This is as true for history as it is for other spheres of human inquiry. Christian biologists have no better idea about the meaning of microbes than Christian mathematicians do about algebraic equations or English professors do about *Hamlet*. Believing historians may be tempted more than other Christian scholars to speculate about the significance of their studies because Christianity is bound up with history. The Bible itself begins with human origins and ends with a vision of the end of time. Scripture would seem to invite those who believe its truths to understand intervening human developments in the light of the Bible's narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. Although Scripture is clear about the meaning of several high points in the historical drama it reveals, it has next to nothing to say about the historical circumstances

DARRYL G. HART

that made places such as Athens, Rome, London, and Philadelphia, for instance, such important sites in the history of the West.

Accepting the limits that Christianity places on finding meaning in history runs against the knowledge that Christians do know the ultimate meaning of history. The trick is to accept another truth, namely, that a difference exists between finding the ultimate meaning of human history (which is Christ) and the proximate meaning of wars, presidential elections, laws, and mass movements (which is uncertain). With this distinction in mind, Christian historians can assert with confidence that the meaning of redemptive history is clearly revealed, while in the realm of secular history they can work within an interpretive framework that stems from the people, institutions, and ideas they adopt and explore (such as the value of republicanism and liberty, or the advantages of constitutional monarchy, or the need for strong nation-states, or the worth of local institutions and culture). This is not a position of relativism or skepticism. It is the necessary result of not knowing all God's hidden purposes in the warp and woof of his creation. The distinction between God's hidden and revealed secrets is no less true for church history. With the closing of the canon of Scripture and the loss of access to divinely revealed interpretations of events in redemptive history, believing church historians are just as much at a loss in determining why the Reformation, for instance, started in Germany as Christian historians who study the history of politics are unable to explain ultimately the causes of the French Revolution.<sup>35</sup>

Although Machen had not trained as a historian, he certainly seemed to understand the limits that Christianity placed on his powers of discerning meaning in history. While more animated by the significance of developments in the Presbyterian world than by the declining fortunes of Wall Street, Machen was no more willing to identify the meaning of developments at Princeton Seminary than he was to attach divine significance to America's failing economy. That kind of interpretive restraint may be rare for Calvinists, but if Reformed historians can learn its discipline they may provide a crucial service as models of the kind of intellectual humility that should characterize Christian discernment.

35. These paragraphs summarize the argument made in D. G. Hart, "History in Search of Meaning: The Conference on Faith and History," in Wells, ed., *History and the Christian Historian*, 68–87.