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# Calvin versus Calvinism Revisited

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Tony Lane

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*Review article commenting on:*

*Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*

RT Kendall

Paternoster, 1997 (2nd edition), xii + 263pp., £19.99

*Calvinus. Authentic Calvinism: A Clarification*

Alan C Clifford

Charenton Reformed Publishing, 1996, 99pp., £5.95

*The Extent of the Atonement. A Dilemma for Reformed Theology from Calvin to the Consensus (1536-1675)*

G Michael Thomas

Paternoster, 1997, ix + 277pp., £19.99

It has been said that the ultimate failure for an academic work is not to be attacked but to be ignored. By this criterion RT Kendall's *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* has been hugely successful. Kendall argued that the English Puritan tradition that led to the Westminster Confession departs from the teaching of Calvin at important points. His thesis was not as pioneering a work as he implies, William Chalker and Homes Rolston III having argued for a similar (not identical) contrast in the 1960s and '70s. So why did Kendall's thesis arouse such controversy? One contributory factor was that Kendall was not just another American research student but Martyn Lloyd-Jones' (not immediate) successor at the Westminster Chapel. I understand that his thesis had received the seal of approval from the Doctor himself. This was never a purely academic debate. The real point at issue is, what is the legitimate Reformed heritage today?

So what is Kendall's thesis? It is perhaps best known for the provocative statement which opens the first chapter of his book: "Fundamental to the doctrine of faith in John Calvin (1509-64) is his belief that Christ died indiscriminately for all men." Kendall was not the first to affirm this, but he did succeed in stimulating a substantial debate on the topic and in generating a considerable bulk of literature. I personally have sixteen books, articles and papers that have been written on Calvin's view of the extent of the atonement since Kendall's thesis – and that does not include many shorter discussions in books and articles.

The question of the extent of the atonement is not, however, the prime focus of Kendall's thesis, which was originally entitled *The Nature of Saving Faith, from William Perkins (d. 1602) to the Westminster Assembly (1643-1649)*. He paints a sharp contrast between Calvin and the "experimental predestinarians" of the seventeenth century. For the former the seat of faith is the understanding; for the latter the will. For the former faith precedes repentance; for the latter it follows it. For the former

assurance of salvation is enjoyed by a “direct” act of faith; for the latter it requires a “reflex” act. They also differ as to the ground of assurance and the concept of the “temporary faith” of those who will not persevere.

Kendall’s thesis has been subjected to intense scrutiny and there are undoubtedly points at which it needs modification. The contrast between Calvin and the Calvinists is exaggerated in places. But the value of his thesis is not dependent upon his complete accuracy. That there is *some* contrast between Calvin and English Calvinism is very widely accepted. It is also in large measure due to Kendall that the matter has received so much attention in the intervening years.

Some will be disappointed to hear that Kendall’s book has been republished with no changes. Realistically the only alternative would have been a massive revision, taking into account a decade and a half of analysis and debate. In the light of his current calling and its demands the author cannot be blamed for drawing back from this option. But while the book may be unaltered it is enhanced by three additions. First there is a new, largely autobiographical, preface in which Kendall helpfully outlines the way in which he reached his conclusions. Secondly there is an appendix which contains many of the relevant passages from Calvin, especially from his commentaries, also from his sermons and treatises. Finally there is a second appendix which discusses the one passage where Calvin appears explicitly to deny that Christ died for all, thus remedying one of the blemishes of the original book, for which it was chided by reviewers – its failure to mention that passage. This appendix is an extract from Curt Daniel’s substantial and widely respected treatment of the topic.

Those who appreciate the passages given in the first appendix will be glad to have Alan Clifford’s *Calvinus*. Here ninety extracts from Calvin are given, on the universality of the atonement. These extracts overlap with Kendall’s appendix but each includes material not found in the other. The extracts are preceded by a useful introduction which argues that the key to Calvin’s view of the extent and efficacy of Christ’s death is his twofold approach to the will of God. We have to distinguish between God’s revealed will, which includes the gospel, and his secret will, which includes his decree of predestination. According to God’s revealed will or intention the death of Christ is universal in its scope, but conditional upon human response; according to his secret will or decree it is restricted in its scope but absolute and unconditional. Thus Calvin affirms *both* a conditional salvation made available to all *and* an efficacious, unconditional salvation given to the elect alone. It is this antinomy, the author claims, that makes sense of the diverse statements that Calvin makes on the subject.

The early history of the Reformed tradition is a complex matter. Partisan polemics, on either side, have tended to distort this. Some have been determined to prove that Calvin was a thoroughgoing Calvinist, by the criteria of the Synod of Dort. Others have been equally determined to prove that the Westminster Confession, say, was a betrayal of Calvin’s teaching. Underlying both approaches in their crude forms is a fundamental fallacy. The assumption is that there is a pure form of Reformed teaching (Calvin’s) and that all later Reformed teaching is either a legitimate development or a betrayal of it, against which at least two objections can be raised. First of all, the seventeenth-century Calvinists were more concerned to be faithful to Scripture than to Calvin or any other sixteenth-century figure. But leaving aside that objection, Calvin never enjoyed such a

unique position in the Reformed tradition. This tradition began with Zwingli and was further developed by other Reformers like Bucer. Calvin was one of a number of second-generation Reformed theologians. He was more prolific than the others and also considerably more gifted in expressing his ideas concisely and lucidly. For these and other reasons he was ultimately more successful in spreading his views, though others, such as Bullinger, also enjoyed considerable success at the time, especially in England. Eventually the Reformed tradition came to be known as “Calvinism”. But this should not cause us to forget that there was from the beginning diversity in the tradition and that at no point was conformity to the views of Calvin regarded as the test of orthodoxy. Those who, on this point or that, followed the position of Bucer or Bullinger rather than Calvin would have been surprised and annoyed to have been told that they were “betraying” the teaching of Calvin.

What is primarily needed today is not polemical works which set out to show who was faithful to Calvin and who betrayed him but works of careful scholarship which trace the intricate development of the Reformed tradition in the first century or so of its history. When it comes to the question of saving faith and assurance this has been done competently by Robert Letham whose 1979 thesis *Saving Faith and Assurance in Reformed Theology: Zwingli to Dort* is hopefully soon to be published and by Joel Beeke whose thesis has been published as *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism and the Dutch Second Reformation*.

On the question of the extent and efficacy of Christ’s death Michael Thomas’ *The Extent of the Atonement* (his London Bible College PhD thesis) is the most thorough attempt to date to trace the doctrine from Calvin to the late seventeenth century. Having examined the views of a range of Reformed theologians and having discerned unresolved tensions in their theology he concludes that there never was “such a thing as a coherent and agreed “Reformed position” on the extent of the atonement.” Why then the lack of agreement and the unresolved tensions? He attributes this to the inner conflict between two distinct elements in the tradition. On the one hand all wished to affirm “the free promise, the unrestricted preaching of grace and the summons to all to believe”. But on the other hand they were all also committed to “a doctrine of the eternal predestination of certain individuals, as opposed to others” (pp. 249f.).

With Calvin the tension between the universal promise and unconditional election leads him to speak of redemption in two different ways. Thomas does not deny the strong thrust in Calvin’s teaching that the death of Christ was for all, but he detects other passages where the contrary is taught. “From the perspective of election, Christ died for ‘all sorts’ but not all individuals. From the perspective of the promise of the gospel, he died for all the world, even for those who do not participate in the purchased benefit” (p. 33). The tension between these two he relates to Calvin’s teaching of the two wills of God, his revealed and his hidden will. He notes that of these two wills it is the absolute will of predestination that is the more basic. “It is impossible to doubt [Calvin’s] concern to maintain a genuine universal promise. However, it continually becomes apparent that his concern to safeguard the eternal, hidden will of God is even greater” (p. 24).

Thomas is right to point to the ambivalence in Calvin’s thought and right to argue that the “particularism” of Beza and his followers could trace its roots to Calvin’s theology. But he exaggerates, giving the impression that Calvin was balanced between

“universalism” and “particularism” *when speaking of the cross*, while there can be little doubt that the overwhelming emphasis in Calvin is that Christ died for all. The particularist passages to which Thomas points all come in Calvin’s exegetical works where he is discussing the meaning of “all” in one or other specific biblical passage. The universalist teaching, by contrast, is also found in wider contexts, the most compelling being the very structure of the *Institutes* (barely mentioned by Thomas). Having in Book II expounded the work of Christ on the cross Calvin begins Book III by stating that what Christ has achieved for the human race is of no use unless it is applied to us by the Holy Spirit. Atonement is for all; the application of its benefits is for the elect. What Thomas shows is not that Calvin teaches a particular atonement but that there are other aspects of his teaching which Calvin could have allowed and Beza later did allow to point to particular atonement.

One of Thomas’ recurring complaints against the Reformed theologians is that they failed to relate election adequately to Christ, that the election of certain persons lies behind Christ, and so, in election, we have to do with a hidden God. There is an undeclared assumption at work here: the Barthian principle that God is revealed only in Christ. The early Reformed doctrines of predestination are indeed, as Barth complained, guilty of transgressing this principle. But do they transgress it only because it has already been transgressed by the New Testament writers, indeed by the teaching of Jesus as recorded in John’s Gospel for example?

Thomas’ portrayal of the unresolved tensions within the Reformed tradition is persuasive. But what should we conclude from this? Should we assume that a good theology will have resolved all tensions into a logically consistent whole? Could it be that the Bible itself leaves us with tensions that we are called to maintain faithfully rather than resolve into logical coherence? Doctrines like the Trinity, the person of Christ and the relation between justification and sanctification all involve holding together in tension truths which it is hard to resolve logically without losing the biblical balance.

For Thomas the resolution of the problem is, in the last page and a half, to produce Karl Barth’s approach as a pointer to the way forward. I have problems with this. In the first place, Barth is produced like a “rabbit from a hat” without any discussion of the problems that might flow from his approach. Has Barth been any more successful at resolving these tensions than the earlier Reformed theologians? This question is not raised or answered. In my own view Barth does not resolve the question of predestination but simply evades it by applying the vocabulary of election to the doctrine of the atonement. This “concluding unscientific postscript” does not cohere well with the rest of the book.

These points of criticism do not alter the fact that here is a competent and insightful analysis of the early development of the Reformed doctrine of election. All who own some measure of loyalty to this tradition are strongly recommended to read this book and to ponder the issues that it raises.

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