

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

while, especially, no more is known than at present concerning that once far-ruling people in anterior Asia, the Chetas or Chattis, with its peculiar culture and letters, it is well to observe the utmost caution in positive assertion upon the connections of the civilization of the nations in anterior Asia. There is a whole circle of mythological representations and traditions which is common to the Indo-germanic and Semitic nations. How this community is to be explained—whether in prehistoric times and in certain regions an interchange took place between them, or whether even a common original home of both is to be supposed—cannot, thus far, be determined.

ARTICLE III.

THE THEOLOGY OF CALVIN—IS IT WORTH SAVING?

BY REV. EDWARD A. LAWRENCE, MARBLEHEAD, MASS.

SOME say yes, and some say no. Who are right depends on the answer to another question: What is Calvin's theology? It is just what John Calvin taught; nothing more, nothing less, and nothing otherwise. It has been criticised discriminately and indiscriminately. It has been commended as essentially biblical and Christian, and reprobated as anti-biblical, unchristian and cruel. The disrepute of the "Five Points of Calvinism" has reached the outmost bounds of Christendom. As it is the type of the Puritan and New England Theology adopted by the Congregational and Presbyterian churches, the great body of the Baptists of the Old World and the New, and is imbedded in our Confession of Faith now, after almost two centuries and a half, wisely undergoing revision, anything that seems to make it as a system, more distinct, and its merits and defects more visible, may not be untimely.

It is declared by an eminent preacher "not to be a system of remedial mercy, but quite the opposite, and as unscriptural

and false as it can be A God who created the world to pour into the eternal sphere endless woes and tribulations — that is the God of Calvinism Take a chapter of Calvinism on any of the great themes of Christian experience, and you may read it a hundred times over, and you will be like a man skating on ice; it makes no impression upon you." A widely-circulated weekly represents it as "a sovereignty of power and will"; that "modern orthodoxy seats love on the throne, and leaves it white, unstained with cruelty." A popular writer says "Calvinism sets power above love as the divine instrument for controlling the hearts of men."

Another able writer who proposes a "New Consensus" for our churches, says,— "They are not Calvinistic;" that "Calvinism does not contain their faith. . . . It does not fit the age; it draws its spirit from divine sovereignty, which means power, force, and is not founded on divine righteousness. . . . It no longer represents the philosophy, the ethics, or the religious life of either clergy or laity, except in some feeble sense. . . . It proved an enthrallment of souls." Charles Kingsley calls it "a grisly chimera," and Moses Coit Tyler, "a narrow, ferocious creed;" Dr. Channing, "that cruel faith which, stripping God of mercy and man of power, has made Christianity an instrument of torture to the timid, and an object of doubt or scorn to hardier spirits." Mr. Belsham declares it "a mischievous compound of impiety and idolatry."

If this indictment is proved, there can be no doubt what to do with Calvin's theology. Down with the despotism; away with the chimera; break the enthrallment; trample on the impiety and idolatry.

But a glance at the Genevan's real teaching will show, better than these hard names can, what his theology is, and what should be done with it. As Agrippa said unto Paul, accused by certain of his nation, so every candid man will say to Calvin, "Thou art permitted to speak for thyself."

First. On the question of authority, concerning which Calvin has been accused of assuming for himself a kind of

primacy; of the fathers he says,— “ While we make use of their writings, we always remember that it is to serve us, not to have dominion over us, and that we are Christ’s alone. . . . In the kingdom of God, nothing but his eternal truth should be heard and regarded. . . . He who neglects this distinction,” he says, “ will have nothing decided in religion.” These basal teachings are found in the dedication of the “ Institutes,” which is ranked by the highest scholarship as one of the three immortal prefaces. The other two are President De Thou’s to his History, and Casaubon’s to Polybius. Of Calvin’s, M. Alexandre Moins, in his Memorial Address says, “ The excellence and beauty, the force and solidity, the purity and elegance of the composition oblige me to give it the preference.”

The Dedication is a key to Calvin’s theology. Those who take this to enter by will find access easy, and light and warmth in apartments that to others may seem dark and cold and full of Molochs and monsters.

Second. The root of this theology is the knowledge of God — *γνώσις θεοῦ* — “ a knowledge that gives life. . . . That only is true knowledge of God which regenerates and conforms us to God.”¹ In this view Milton was a clear Calvinist. “ The end of learning,” he says, “ is to know God, and out of knowledge, to love him and imitate him.”

Third. The central force and soul of this theology is love. “ God is love, that is, it is his very nature to love men.” It should be held in mind that the love by which the heavenly Father hath embraced us in him, in the mystery of redemption, because it flows from his eternal purpose, is superior to all other causes. It holds the first place as the supreme and original cause. “ It is not possible that faith should be separated from love. . . . No one can show himself a child of God unless he has love for his neighbor” (1 John v. 1). “ There is no knowledge of God where love does not flourish” (1 John iv. 7). “ The first principle of piety is love to God” (Matt. xxii. 37),

¹ Commentary on 1 John iv. 7.

Fourth. The outflow of this love is, through Christ, in a provision of remedial mercy adequate to the needs of a whole lost world. "Love gives all," says Calvin, "in giving one For, although nothing in the world appeared worthy of God's favor, yet he shows himself propitious to the whole world when, without exception, he calls all to faith in Christ" (John iii. 16). "He suffered sufficiently for the whole world. . . . God shows himself a propitious father to all; — there is in Christ one redemption in common for all" (1 Tim. ii. 6). "The Lord delayeth his coming, that he may invite the whole human race to repentance. . . . He does not hasten the end of the world, that he may give space for repentance to all, 'not willing that any should perish.' This is wonderful love towards the human race, and he is prepared to gather the perishing even to the uttermost unto salvation. . . . God here stretches out his hand promiscuously to all; but he takes hold, that he may lead to himself, of only those whom he chose before the foundation of the world" (2 Pet. i. 3, 4). "To remove every obstacle in the way of his love, God appointed a method of reconciliation in Christ." The impression that Calvin held that Christ died for only the elect does not seem warranted by his language. The *efficacy* of the atonement, its application is limited by the work of the Spirit in regeneration, and this, by election; but its sufficiency for all, as a provision, is clearly taught.

Fifth. "The mission of the Spirit is, that the effusion of that sacred blood may not be in vain." "It is for "regenerating us, so that we become new creatures, and purifying us from profane impurities, consecrating us holy temples to God."¹ "The Holy Spirit is the key with which the treasures of the heavenly kingdom are unlocked; the bond by which Christ efficaciously unites us to himself, illuminating our minds and forming our hearts to love and the cultivation of righteousness."²

These are the real "Five Points" of Calvinism; God, love, light, Christ, and the Spirit. Are these worth saving?

¹ Institutes, Book iii. chap. 1. sec. 1, 4.

² iii. 1. 1, 4.

Let us look further at some of the doctrinal and practical harmonies in this theology.

I. *Repentance*. — In this term is included “a seeking after and following God, a conversion of our life to God — a life which in every action will discover and testify a transformation not only in the external actions, but in the soul itself.”¹

II. *Faith*. — It “consists in a knowledge of Christ, and accepts him as he is offered to us by the Father, not only for forgiveness of sins and peace, but also for sanctification. . . . It is absolutely inseparable from pious affections.”²

III. *Justification*. — “It consists in the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. . . . and is inseparable from regeneration.”³ “They are accounted righteous who are reconciled to God. . . . God justifies by pardoning Nothing satisfies the conscience of the pardoned but being unexceptionably righteous before him.” Justification is “a security which makes the conscience calm and serene before the divine tribunal.” Touching imputation, Calvin does not teach a literal transfer of sin and holiness in redemption. “Our guilt and punishment being, as it were, transferred to him. . . . he assumed the disgrace and ignominy of” our “iniquities, and arrayed us in his purity. . . . We acknowledge ourselves naked of all virtue, that we may be clothed by God; empty of all good, that we may be filled by him; slaves to sin, that we may be liberated by him; blind, that we may be enlightened by him; lame, that we may be led by him; weak, that we may be supported by him; divest ourselves of all ground of glorying that he alone may be eminently glorious, and that we may glory in him.”⁴ If one can “read a hundred times over,” such passages “on Christian experience,” and be “like a man skating on ice” it must be because the ice is in the skater and not in the writer.

But this system is charged as “a sovereignty of power and will,” that “draws its spirit from force,” and “is not founded

¹ Institutes, iii. 3. 5, 6.

² ii. 2. 3.

³ iii. 11. 2.

⁴ Dedication.

on divine righteousness." Is this true? God is counted omnipotent, "because he governs heaven and earth by his providence, and holds the helm of the universe."¹ And could it be in better hands? "He does not force men by external impulse, but leads them by an effectual movement of the Holy Spirit (Acts i. 8), drawing them by their wills."² "God's will is not only pure from every fault, but is the highest standard of perfection — even the law of laws, the only name for the highest rule of justice."³ Should not the highest standard of perfection be the supreme rule?

"Righteousness in the kingdom of God consists in spiritual newness of life" (Matt. vi. 23). "God is the foundation of righteousness, and cannot love iniquity."⁴ "Nor is it without cause that he requires such consummate rectitude."⁵ "Two things are taught in the Scriptures" — one, "a rule of righteousness is prescribed to us"; the other, "a law of righteousness is instilled into the heart."⁶ "Religion is not only the heart of righteousness, but the very soul of it."⁷ "The tendency of the whole law and teaching is to form the life of man after the example of the divine purity."⁸

Besides this drift of doctrinal teaching, the careful student finds certain ethical and practical maxims as side-lights to illumine the way: "To be ignorant of what it is impossible to know is to be learned; to remain ignorant of what God has revealed, and call it modesty, is neither modesty nor learning." "The Scripture is the school of the Spirit." "The foundation of philosophy is humility," and "power arises from humility." "Cleanness of heart is the mother-virtue of all." "If you would be one of the flock, you must become a sheep." "There is nothing in which God wishes to be glorified more than in his goodness." "We are never more like God than when doing good." "From the mere goodness of God as from a fountain Christ flows to us with all the blessings of salvation." "Besides Christ, there is nothing useful to be known." "Spiritual participation is the bond of union in the Lord."

¹ Institutes, i. 3.² iii. 23. 14.³ i. 18. 3.⁴ ii. 16. 2.⁵ ii. 8. 50.⁶ iii. 21. 2.⁷ ii. 8. 5.⁸ ii. 16. 2.

If this theology does not fit the age, — is not suited to the state of the worldly and wicked in the church and out, — what other redeeming forces than it presents — light, love, Christ, the Spirit — can be relied on as fitting it? If it does not contain for substance of doctrine the faith of our churches — sin, repentance, punishment, pardon, justification, sanctification, — will the churches find for the new consensus anywhere a better faith? If it does “not represent the philosophy, the ethics, or religious life of either the clergy or laity,” — righteousness, humility, cleanness of heart, doing good, spiritual participation, — except in some feeble sense, should not the so-called advanced thought be lamented as a regress in spiritual life, rather than lauded as progress?

But there are other phases of Calvin’s theology, against which have been alleged fatalism, Molochism, demonism. We will glance at some of these.

1. *Original Sin and Free-will.* — “Original sin is the hereditary pravity or corruption of our nature previously good and pure. . . . To find the origin of this depravity, we must ascend to the first parent of us all.”¹ “Adam could have stood if he would, since he fell by his own choice; yet his choice of good and evil was free.”² “The will could not become evil were it unwilling to become so. . . . Man is such a willing slave that his will is held in bondage by the fetters of sin.”³

2. *Punishment and Pardon.* — “The cause of death is sin. . . . We are dead in Adam, — not by his personal guilt as an individual, which pertains not to us, but because he infected all his descendants with the corruption into which he fell.”⁴ “It is inconsistent with the divine justice to inflict upon an innocent person the punishment due to the offence of another. . . . Pardon is ready for all sinners who sincerely seek it. . . . Repentance will always be met with mercy.”⁵

3. *Decrees and Predestination.* — “Predestination is that

¹ Institutes, i. 6. 11.

² i. 15. 8.

³ ii. 2. 7.

⁴ ii. 1. 6.

⁵ iii. 24. 15, 16.

eternal counsel by which God adopts some to the bpe eternal life, and adjudges others to eternal death.”¹ At the door of this doctrine of predestination to eternal death lies the charge of cruelty. This is not Calvin's doctrine but Paul's and Christ's also. If this decree of eternal punishment to those who will not repent and seek pardon is cruel, not Calvin alone, but God also is cruel; and Christ is the cruellest of all teachers, for his judgment is clear and irreversible. And if this be the stain on love, it is placed there by righteousness and goodness — yea, by love itself; for God is love, and metes out in love eternal justice to eternal offenders against law and love. “Predestination is no other than a dispensation of divine justice”;² and it is as impossible to set aside this dispensation of justice towards the persistently unjust as to discard the idea of God himself. “The destruction thus incurred is not caused by predestination. . . . The cause and manner of it are found in sinners themselves. . . . Let them not accuse God of injustice if his eternal decree has determined them to the death to which they feel freely led forward by their own nature.”³ “He wills not their death, inasmuch as he wills their repentance, . . . and does not will things at variance with each other.”⁴ “God's ordaining sin is only a wise use of it for a benevolent purpose. . . . Man follows his sinful purposes in sinning, and God his holy ones in punishing him.”⁵

But there is that “horrible decree” which dooms infants to eternal death for the sin of Adam. Does it? “I ask again,” says Calvin, “how it happened that the fall of Adam involved so many nations, together with their infant children, in eternal death without remedy, except that it seemed good to God?”⁶ What does he mean here? That eternal death was the object for which God brought men into the world? No; for when he asks “What was the end of our creation?” he answers, “That from which we have wholly departed.” Did he mean that for the many nations involved in the fall

¹ Institutes, iii. 21. 5.² I. 16. 8.³ iii. 23. 3.⁴ iii. 24. 15, 17.⁵ ii. 11.⁶ iii. 23. 7.

to the
path.
mind
die

Adam, together with their infant children, there is no remedy? No. That those who die in infancy are punished eternally for the personal blameworthiness of Adam's sin? No; to do this would be "inconsistent with divine justice" and "remote from common sense."

The point on which Calvin's eye seems to have rested was the covenant or constitution which Adam broke, and which contained no provision for pardon, as violated law never does. It was a constitution according to which the progeny was to follow the faith of the progenitor. The ruin of the one involved the ruin of the whole, as righteousness in the whole would have followed continued uprightness in the first; just as in the vegetable kingdom a rot in the root of a tree sends death through the trunk and branches to the farthest twig, and all fruit fails. Sad havoc of one defection! Calvin says: "I confess it is a terrible decree." But what better could he say of the indubitable fact that "in Adam all die," "by one man sin entered into the world," than that "it seemed good to God," since He himself pronounced this constitution and "everything that he had made very good"?

There is, however, another covenant through the second Adam, which provides a remedy for the ruin that came by the first. This covenant, Calvin teaches, is as sufficient for infants who cannot repent and believe as for adult transgressors who do both. He thinks Augustine mistaken when in fixing the danger he "cuts off the hope of infants, whom the Lord declares his own;" as when he says, "He cannot have eternal life who is not baptized." "To shut out from the fold of Christ those whom he holds in his bosom, verily, it is audacious sacrilege." Calvin, however, does not teach that Christ holds all in his bosom who die in infancy, but that some of this class are lost. "Inasmuch as the conditions of birth and death are alike to infants which died in Sodom and those which died in Jerusalem, and there was no difference in their works, why will Christ in the last day separate some to stand at his right hand, and others at his

left?"¹ In his reply to Castalio he says: "Put forth your virulence against God, who precipitates into eternal death the harmless infant taken from the mother's breast."²

Yet Calvin allows a larger sweep to the grace of the covenant than Augustine did, or the church generally. "I do not at all doubt but that the offspring of holy and pious ancestors, although their parents and grandparents were apostate, do still pertain to the body of the church God diffuses his promise to a thousand generations of those who spring from Abraham and the other patriarchs, and does not regard them as strangers because they were neither begotten of a holy father, or born of a holy mother."³ The general sentiment of the church to-day is as far in advance of Calvin, as he was in his time of Augustine.

4. *Inconsistencies and Contradictions.* — Certain phases of Calvin's teachings taken apart from his explanations, qualifications, and later comments, convey ideas contrary to the generally accepted Christian doctrine and contradictory to his own teaching. "The first man fell because the Lord determined that it should happen."⁴ This seems to lay the responsibility of the first sin upon God, and it has been so construed. The ground of this apparent absurdity Calvin gives in the language of Augustine. "We confess that the God and Lord of all things, who created everything very good, and foreknew that evil would arise out of good, and knew that it was more suitable to his almighty goodness to bring good out of evil than not to suffer evil to exist, ordained the life of angels and men in such a manner as to exhibit in it, first what free-will is capable of doing, and afterwards what could be effected by the blessings of his grace and the sentence of his justice."⁵

It was a question what kind of system to introduce by the creation of moral beings. Three were open: the purely evil, the purely good, and the blending of the two with the triumph of good. God chose the last, which made the fall a

¹ De Eterna Dei Predestinatione.

² Tract. Theol. Art. 14.

³ *Letters.*

⁴ *Institutes*, iii. 23. 8.

⁵ iii. 23. 7.

moral certainty, yet which man might have shunned, but would not. He speaks of man as predestined to death "because created for it." But he also says — "Notwithstanding we have brought death upon ourselves, yet God had created us for life — for an end from which we have wholly departed."¹

Again he says — "Those who are appointed unto death, he causes to reach their end, sometimes by depriving them of the opportunity of hearing the word, and sometimes through the hearing of it increases their blindness. He delivers his doctrine to them involved in enigmatical obscurities that its only effect may be to increase their stupidity." On the other hand, he says — "Consider whence the fault arises, for, whatever obscurity there is in the word, yet there is always light enough to convince the consciences of the wicked. . . . Christ teaches that God does not work in us anything but what he requires and wishes us to do. . . . The Jews are reprobate and strangers in the church, because they are destitute of docility. . . . Christ reproaches them because nothing hinders them from obtaining the life offered in the Scriptures but their own malice."² "God has not closed the way of salvation against any order of men, but has diffused his mercy in such a manner that he would have no rank to be destitute"; and that "the impious may not plead the want of an asylum to flee to from the bondage of sin while they ungratefully reject that which is offered to them."³

But man is "under a necessity of sinning." If this be true, he is not free and not in fault. The explanation is "he who sins necessarily, sins no less freely. . . . The will is itself the author of the necessity to which it is subject, so that, necessity being voluntary, cannot excuse the will. . . . The soul is enslaved and free, enslaved by necessity, that is, the bias of its own passions, and free by its own will, and guilty because free. . . . The necessity of doing well does not impair the liberty of the divine will in doing well."⁴ Moral necessity, therefore, seems to be the fixity of the will

¹ Institutes, ii. 16. 3.² I. 18. 2.³ iii. 24. 14, 16, 17.⁴ ii. 3. 5.

in choice, whether good or evil; a certainty, leaving God and sinful man as free as possible in their chosen way.

Calvin says, "The will of God is the cause of everything," and also that "man's will and not God's is the cause of sin." His idea is that God's will is the cause of man's, which sins, and without which, there would have been neither sin nor man. "The fetid smell of a carcase is called out by the sun, but its rays are not fetid."

Bible language in some places, very like this of the Geneva teacher, is in apparent contradiction. It says that God "hardened Pharaoh's heart;" that he "loved Jacob and hated Esau, the children not having done good or evil;" that he "hath blinded their eyes that they should not see with their eyes, lest at any time they should understand and be converted;" that "Herod and Pilate, with the Gentiles and people of Israel, were gathered together, to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done against thy holy child Jesus;" "I am the Lord, I make peace, and I create evil."

How do exegetes treat these passages so as not to make God guilty of *hating* unborn children; of cruelly hardening sinners into a wickeder obstinacy, of blinding their eyes so that they *cannot* see and be converted, and their sins be forgiven; of being the creator of evil, and of criminally counseling the death of his own Son, — imputations that have been freely cast upon the Scriptures, and held as intuitive proof against their divine origin? How avoid this, which would, indeed, be cruel, diabolic? By placing alongside what the Scriptures themselves say in explanation. This is the scholarly, common-sense method. By this the Bible interprets itself, and, studied as a whole, gives out its true, full doctrine.

By the same method, Calvin, in the later Commentaries and Letters and Discourses, explains much in the earlier Institutes, and makes both more consistent and clear. By a careful study of all he wrote and did one finds the genuine Calvinism, which can be obtained with certainty in no other

way. The Scriptures are inspired and infallible. Calvin was not. Their language is wise and the best. His was sometimes otherwise, and not the best, and he was not always consistent with himself nor in harmony with the word. How much of his theology is true, can be ascertained in historical accuracy not by referring to Miss Hannah Adams for a knowledge of Calvinism, as Dr. Channing, in his controversy with Dr. Worcester, says he did, or to the Encyclopedias, or to Calvin's antagonists, but by a careful study of what he teaches, and trying it by "the law and the testimony."

The theology of Calvin differs from Arminianism, chiefly in its doctrines of election and the persistence of saving grace in the regenerate; from Pelagianism, in the doctrine of original sin and the necessity of regeneration; and from Romanism, by what Luther calls the article of a standing or falling church—justification by faith, not works, yet a faith that is full of life and love and labor.

"It is much to be regretted," says an eminent theologian, "that preachers and writers who have thought it their duty to oppose Calvinism, have so generally fallen into the error of not taking proper pains to understand what it is, or else, have not possessed candor enough to do it justice." One's own intellectual integrity requires this pains-taking before pronouncing it an "enthralment of souls, as false as it can be."

Historical and moral fairness to one's neighbor requires it, especially to that self-denying student and teacher who Dorner says "was equally great in intellect and character," and whom Renan pronounces "the most Christian man of his generation." A due regard to the public also, who are deceived by misrepresentations into hurtful prejudices against his theology and led to spurn it as a "compound of impiety and idolatry," requires study and candor enough to understand and do it justice.

Could Maurice, the leader of the Broad-church party, affirm of Calvin's theology, "it begins from *man* instead of

God," except for lack of information, when by a glance at the table of contents to the Institutes, he would have seen that just the opposite is the truth, and further, that "it takes account only of man's depravity" when from the same table he would have found that, of the eighty-seven chapters only three treat specifically of that subject, and eighty-four are occupied in the explication of God and his method of redemption?

It is better for the advanced thinkers of to-day, and all students in theology, always to examine for themselves rather than take their knowledge on such important subjects at second-hand from any teacher, whether of the Broad church or the Narrow, of the New theology or the Old, since it is truth they need. "The knowledge of truth," says Bacon, "which is the presence of it, and the belief of truth, which is the enjoyment of it—this is the sovereign good of human nature." Simple candor is the most fundamental orthodoxy. One who lacks this cannot be sure of anything, either of truth or of good.