

# Calvin and Calvinism

## The Anatomy of a Controversy

Paul Helm

Senior Lecturer in Philosophy, University of Liverpool

*'However the term Calvinist is in these days, among most, a term of greater reproach than the term Arminian, yet I should not take it at all amiss to be called a Calvinist for distinction's sake; though I utterly disclaim a dependence on Calvin, or believing the doctrines which I hold because he believed and taught them; and cannot justly be charged with believing just as he taught.'*

When Jonathan Edwards wrote these words (in 1754, in the preface to *The Freedom of the Will*) he was affirming a theological identity which was usual, if not commonplace. Certain churches were 'Calvinistic', others not. Those that were believed themselves to be in basic confessional agreement with Calvin, particularly over the doctrine of salvation. According to such churches, human salvation is by grace alone, grace which has its origin in the eternal decree of God to save an innumerable number, the elect, who have fallen in Adam. Christ the second Adam procured such salvation by his mediatorial work on the cross, and the Holy Spirit brings individuals with an experience of and an enjoyment of salvation through conviction of sin, faith in Christ and repentance, and a desire to follow Christ in imitation and obedience.

Such doctrinal agreement was coupled with a similar spirituality which focussed on the believer's union with Christ, his personal experience of God's grace, an ardent eschatological hope, and a frugal, industrious attitude to life.

Historic Calvinism, in this sense, was international and interdenominational. It took in the immediate followers of Calvin on the one hand and the Victorian Baptist Spurgeon on the other; Anglicans such as Whitefield and Toplady; and Congregationalists in New (and Old) England such as Jonathan Edwards and John Owen. It found confessional expression in such assorted documents as the Canons of Dort (1619), the 39 Articles of the Church of England, and the Baptist Confession in 1689.

I. In recent years this view of Calvinism and its confessional and ecclesiastical expression has come under widespread suspicion, if not under frontal attack. It has come to be held by many, and heralded as a new discovery, that the intellectual and religious climate of Calvin's thought was strongly different from that of his immediate successor, Theodore Beza (1519-1605) and of later Calvinists such as those we have mentioned. Calvin was warm, personal, evangelical and Bible-centred in his thinking and ministry. He believed that Christ died for all men, and that the Christian was characterised by an exuberant, assured faith. By contrast Beza and the covenant theologians were cold, intellectual and relationistic system-builders. For them the whole Christian theology was based upon and dominated by the doctrine of double predestination, according to which some are destined from all eternity to salvation, and others to damnation. Christ died only for the elect, and the Christian life is one consumed by a concern to discover whether or not one was of the elect, a discovery that could only be made by remorseless and doubt-plagued exercises of introspection.

These charges have been made increasingly in recent years by various theologians, historians and preachers, and with all the apparatus of serious scholarship. In the welter of books and articles it is possible to discern two basic approaches, that of those who start from a study of Calvin, and those who start from the side of Puritanism.

### From the side of Calvin

Although there is a considerable history of scholarship on John Calvin much of the modern impetus has come from Karl Barth. Students of Barth such as Professors T.F. and J.B. Torrance have held that Calvin's great achievement was to break with the presuppositions of mediaeval theology, according to which redemptive grace presupposes and brings to perfection the natural endowments of mankind.

When creation is alternatively interpreted 'in the light of nature' it leads too readily to the arbitrary God or the contract God according to one's interpretation of 'nature' and 'natural law'. It obscures the clear teaching of the Bible that the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit in his innermost Being created all men for sonship, love and communion. But we only have that understanding of creation when creation is seen in the light of its fulfilment in Christ 'by whom and for whom all things were created.'<sup>1</sup>

The separation between Nature and Grace amounts to reversion to the pre-Reformation mediaeval view that *grace presupposes nature* and *grace perfects nature* — a departure from the emphasis of Calvin that nothing is prior to grace.<sup>2</sup>

What happened, according to Professor J.B. Torrance (particularly in Scotland but also elsewhere), is that the mediaeval outlook returned to haunt the Reformed churches — the spectre of covenant theology arose to obscure the Reformation gains and to bring people back to a position of legalistic bondage.

The basic problem with such charges is that they are too sweeping and indiscriminate. There is a sense in which Calvin departs — and departs sharply — from the mediaeval tradition, but also a sense in which he is happy with it. For example, Calvin understands the Fall of Adam in terms of disobedience within a framework of natural law.<sup>3</sup> Like the mediaevals Calvin draws a 3-fold distinction between natural, ceremonial and judicial law.<sup>4</sup> But *unlike* the mediaevals Calvin was emphatic that the natural man cannot now properly understand the natural law of God, but needs special revelation to inform him and regenerating grace to enlighten and move him properly to keep it.

Because men are unteachable the Lord has provided us with a written law to give us a clearer witness of what was too obscure in the natural law, shake off our listlessness, and strike more vigorously our mind and our memory.<sup>5</sup>

So while grace does not perfect nature in the mediaeval sense,

it does presuppose nature, and the moral character of divine grace, as seen in the Incarnation and the obedience of the Christian man, are wholly congruous with it.

It is interesting to note that while the Torrances argue that the Calvinism of the *Westminster Confession* is not true to Calvin, Karl Barth argued that Calvin was not true to himself. Barth saw Calvin through his own position according to which all the basic *loci* of theology are to be understood Christologically. Thus election is to be understood not in terms of the eternal decree but in terms of Christ's election, the righteousness of God is to be understood in terms of Christ's righteousness, and so forth. Seen from this perspective Barth saw in Calvin the doctrine of double predestination, limited atonement and other theological horrors.

In Luther's *De Servo arbitrio*, in Zwingli's *De providentia* and in the writings of Calvin, predestination means quite unequivocally double predestination: double in the sense that election and rejection are now two species within the one genus designated by the term predestination.<sup>6</sup>

What does this show? That if Barth is right the Torrances are wrong and that the traditional self-understanding of the Calvinist tradition is accurate.

#### From the side of the Puritans

Others, such as Dr. R.T. Kendall, the minister of Westminster Chapel, in his monograph *Calvin and the English Calvinism to 1649*, have approached the question of the relationship between John Calvin and the Calvinists from an examination of the Puritan writers. On the basis of an examination of numerous Puritan writings Dr. Kendall makes the startling claim that mainstream Puritanism in fact proclaimed a message that was opposed to Calvin's. 'Calvin's thought, save for the decrees of pre-destination, is hardly to be found in Westminster theology.'<sup>8</sup> Two major departures from Calvin by the Puritans (following Beza) ushered in numerous others. The first is the doctrine of limited atonement, the idea that Christ did not die for all, but only for the elect. Dr. Kendall claims that Calvin taught that Christ died for all men, but intercedes only for the elect. The second alleged departure is that Calvin's view of faith as a passive persuasion of the mind is replaced by the view that faith is an act of the will. In Dr. Kendall's view from these two charges sprang the idea that it is possible to have saving faith without being assured of salvation. According to Dr. Kendall Calvin held that faith and assurance are inseparable but could only do so because he also held that Christ died for all men. If the would-be Christian believes that Christ died only for the elect then he will wonder whether he is one of the elect or not, and be plagued by doubts which he will mistakenly try to allay by attempting to discover, through self-examination, whether or not he has the marks of the elect.

Furthermore, since faith is no longer regarded by the Puritans as a passive persuasion but as an act of the will, assured faith can no longer be seen as something which God grants, but rather as something that must be sought, by self effort, and which may therefore not be found.

Limited atonement and faith as an act of the will put paid to assurance. According to Dr. Kendall we find the Puritan preachers exhorting their hearers to prepare themselves for grace, and as a means to this they preached the law before they preached the gospel and urged repentance before faith. In so doing they opened the door to legalism, and salvation by religious self-effort, so largely undoing and obscuring the Reformation re-discovery of salvation by divine grace done

through faith alone.

It falls well outside the scope of an article such as this to provide a detailed refutation of such serious charges<sup>9</sup> but a number of the main flaws in this case can be indicated.

(i) According to Dr. Kendall Calvin taught that Christ died for all men. It is certainly true that Calvin's teaching on the extent of the atonement is less precise than the later Calvinists. (This is, after all, what should be expected. It is only when issues become controversial that statements about them achieve scientific precision.) But he does occasionally commit himself to definite atonement; and the overall logic of his position requires this view. Furthermore according to Dr. Kendall though Calvin does not teach that Christ died only for the elect he does teach that Christ intercedes in heaven only for the elect.

But this is doubtful, for three reasons. The first is that such a view of Calvin appears to be entirely novel. If it had the remotest plausibility then we should surely have heard about it before 1979, through the numerous detailed controversies over the extent of the atonement during the Arminian controversy. In the second place, Dr. Kendall's exposition of Calvin is strained. In the *Institutes* Calvin insists on the unity of the work of Christ. Christ purged sin by his own blood, making satisfaction through his sacrifice and appeasing God's wrath as intercessor.<sup>10</sup> There is not a hint of the sharp difference in scope that Dr. Kendall thinks Calvin teaches between the death of Christ for all men and his intercession for the elect alone. But, even if the opposite could be shown, it would not help Dr. Kendall's overall case in the least. Dr. Kendall thinks that because Calvin taught that Christ died for all men he can be trusted with an assurance that never calls for self-examination and for self-questioning.

Thou hast died for sinners,  
Therefore, Lord, for me!

Christ, according to Dr. Kendall, intercedes only for the elect. But how is this doctrine of 'limited intercession' supposed to be any improvement on the doctrine of 'limited atonement' as regards assurance? The problem is merely transferred. Now the question becomes not, has Christ died for me? but, Does Christ intercede for me? So it is hard to see how, either on the evidence from Calvin, or on the overall logic of his argument, Dr. Kendall has made out his case.

(ii) According to Dr. Kendall, as has already been noted, Calvin taught that faith is a passive persuasion of the mind, not an act of the will, and that true faith is assured faith. But there is reason to think that this is too simple a view of the matter, and therefore mistaken. Dr. Kendall says that Calvin teaches that in conversion our natural will is abolished, 'effaced'.<sup>11</sup> But what Calvin actually says is

What takes place is wholly from God. I say that the will is effaced; not in so far as it is will, for in man's conversion what belongs to his primal nature remains entire.

I also say that it is created anew; not meaning that the will now begins to exist, but that it is changed from an evil to a good will.<sup>12</sup>

It seems clear enough from this that Calvin took essentially the position of the Westminster Divines, that in conversion the Holy Spirit renews the wills of the elect and by his holy power determinates them to that which is good.<sup>13</sup>

Dr. Kendall as we have seen, regards it as axiomatic that for Calvin faith includes the personal assurance of salvation,

quoting the well-known definition of faith given in the *Institutes*: 'a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise of Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit'.<sup>14</sup> This appears to settle the matter. But does it? A little further on in the *Institutes* Calvin says this:

Unbelief is so deeply rooted in our hearts, and we are so inclined to it, that not without hard struggle is each one able to persuade himself of what all confess with the mouth, namely that God is faithful.<sup>15</sup>

Calvin is prepared to recognise that faith may be accompanied by doubt, adding that while faith 'ought to be certain and assured, we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt'. Once more it is noteworthy that Calvin's position is quite close to that of the *Westminster Confession*.

(iii) According to Dr. Kendall the end result of the process of degeneration set in train in English Puritanism after the death of Calvin is 'preparationism'. Others have made similar claims about new England Puritanism.<sup>16</sup> 'Preparationism' is the view that a person can prepare himself, unaided by divine grace, to receive grace.

Here it is vital to make certain distinctions if confusion is to be avoided. The *Westminster Divines*, together with the whole Puritan and Reformed (and Augustinian) tradition, deny that an unregenerate person can prepare himself spiritually to receive God's grace. The 'natural man' does not want God, nor does he want to want God.<sup>17</sup> He can, however, do certain things that in the normal course of events are necessary for receiving God's grace; for example go to church, or read the Bible, or peruse the pages of *Evangel*. Further, the Puritans and Calvin (following Scripture) teach that often God himself prepares people (whether they are conscious of it or not). The modern discussion of preparationism, including Dr. Kendall's treatment, is made almost wholly worthless by a failure to make these necessary discriminations.

In maintaining the essential continuity between Calvin and the later Calvinism it is important not to exaggerate the other way. There was doctrinal development and change, over the understanding of the nature of the atonement, for example, over Covenant Theology and divergences over Church-State relations as well as differences in literary style and approach. It would be surprising too if in such a broad family there were not members of it who thought of 'Calvinism' as a rigid and legalistic system. But what is remarkable is how unified in theological and spiritual outlook was this diverse body of men, at least until the philosophical and theological upheavals of the eighteenth century.

## II.

But why does this controversy matter today to anyone except University dons and research students in search of a thesis topic? Is it not another example of dry-as-dust theology? There are four reasons why this would be an over-hasty reaction.

(a) Many of the readers of this magazine have become Christian within a particular tradition, the tradition of Calvinistic evangelicalism. 'Tradition' is a word that is viewed with suspicion. To many Protestants it suggests the classical Roman Catholic view of oral tradition, of another source of religious authority independent of Holy Scripture. But this is not the only meaning of the word. Any organisation existing over a period of time develops traditions, some consciously, some

not. It is for this reason that New Testament Christians were bidden to hold fast to some traditions, and to spurn others (2 Thess. 3-6). We can no more avoid being the product of a tradition that we can avoid having parents.

This being so, that person is surely extremely strange who does not want to know about his tradition, about how he comes to be the sort of Christian he is. How does such a tradition come to be? What is the relationship of the tradition of Calvinistic evangelicalism to the Protestant Reformation, and of both to Scripture?

Connected with this is the matter of the confessional identity of churches. Many Churches have a confession of faith as their subordinate standard. This is most apparent in the case of Presbyterian churches, but is also true, historically, both of Congregationalism and of many Baptist Churches. Often the status and validity of such confessions has been a matter of intense debate. Are confessions such as the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, which have had an almost incalculable influence on Protestantism, in fact departures from the spirit and the letter of the Protestant Reformation? Are they documents in which relationalism and intellectualism prevail over the Christian faith, in which a system is imposed on the Gospel, or does the gospel speak for itself in them? Do they inculcate a legalistic attitude of mind? Is Professor J.B. Torrance correct when he says the *Westminster Confession* has serious weaknesses 'in the understanding of God, of grace, and of the Holy Spirit' due to being dominated by the eternal Decrees and the scheme of Federal Theology?<sup>18</sup> Or was B.B. Warfield correct when he claimed that the *Westminster Assembly* provided formularies which have held sway by the inherent power of their truth, "the culminating Reformed Confession of Faith, and a Catechism preeminent for the exactness of its definitions of faith and the faithfulness of its ethical precepts"?

(b) There is the bearing of all this on the Christian's understanding of Scripture and his use of Christian literature. No one is suggesting that the tradition of Scriptural exegesis of evangelical Calvinism is infallible, but, building in many aspects on the amazing pioneer work of Calvin, it has nourished countless Christians. Take, for example, *I John*. Many have thought that *I John* provides the Christian with tests to examine himself. ('We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren' *I John* 3:14; Cf. *I John* 2:3, 5). If so then it would seem that this supports the propriety of self-examination. The Puritans would agree. But would Calvin? Not according to many, and Calvin in their estimate rediscovered the biblical gospel in its proper biblical emphasis. Confusion! What seems to support the straightforward interpretation of *I John* is charged with being legalistic and introspective. And what of Christian literature? The Hodges and Owen and Warfield (for example) are not infallible. But are they reliable? Can the Pastor and the individual Christian use such literature with confidence?

(c) Most important of all perhaps, the Christians own spiritual self-understanding is at stake. Need the Christian ever concern himself with the question of whether or not he is one of the elect? Is he right to assume that he is, because Christ has died for all men? What about doubts and fears and the danger of self-deception? Are these sometimes legitimate, or are they always improper? What about guilt before God? Ought the Christian to believe that he is guilty because he has broken God's law? Ought he to experience contrition and penitence, or ought he to banish such thoughts with the thought that God loves him? This matter runs deep. For those whose Christian experience is formed through (among other things) a belief in God's discriminating love, the danger of self-deception, and

the necessity of an experience of a 'law work', concepts such as *self-deception*, *conviction of sin* and *evidence of election* are not readily detachable from what it means to be a Christian. They are part of what a Christian is. To use such concepts is not simply to employ a traditional or historically-conditioned way of describing something that might equally well be described in other ways. These descriptions are part of the Christian's self-understanding, they determine the character of such a Christian's experience, they are for him inseparable from spiritual life. Thus it is not a light thing to be invited to entertain the thought that long-honoured Christian teachers have been mistaken in principle about the Christian faith, and have distorted the biblical message so as to subvert the very principle of salvation by grace through faith alone. It is of the utmost importance for the Christian's self-understanding and self-identity to try to get and to keep such matters straight.

#### References

1. J.B. Torrance 'Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology' in *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today* ed. Alasdair I.C. Heron (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1982) p. 52.
2. J.B. Torrance 'Calvin and Puritanism in England and Scotland — Some Basic concepts in the Development of "Federal Theology"', in *Calvinus Reformator* (Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, 1982) p. 273. These claims are repeated in almost identical words in 'The Incarnation and "Limited Atonement"' (*Evangelical Quarterly*, April, 1983, pp. 88-9).
3. *Institutes* II. 1.4.
4. *Institutes* IV. XX.15.
5. *Institutes* II. VIII.1.
6. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (edd. G.W. Bromily and T.F. Torrance, Edinburgh, T. and T. Clark, 1957) II.2. p. 17.
7. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979.
8. *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*, p. 208.
9. For further discussion see *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982).
10. *Institutes* II.XVI.2.
11. *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*, p. 21.
12. *Institutes* II.III.6.
13. *Westminster Confession of Faith* X.ii.
14. *Institutes* III.II.7.
15. *Institutes* III.II.15.
16. e.g. Norman Pettit, *The Heart Prepared* (1966).
17. *Westminster Confession of Faith* IX.III.
18. J.B. Torrance 'Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology', p. 45.
19. B.B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and its Work* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1931) p. 72.

## Incarnation

The Revd Dr Gerald Bray

Lecturer in Theology, Oak Hill College, London

Like the crucifixion, which we looked at in an earlier issue, the Incarnation belongs to the inner circle of Christian teaching. It is part of that precious store of doctrine which shapes the whole of our Christian life and penetrates beyond it to bear witness, even in our secular society, of the abiding truths of the Gospel. Christmas, the great feast of the Incarnation, is the most popular holiday of the year; it has even spread, thanks to commercialism, to non-Christian countries like Japan. At the theological level, books like *The Myth of God Incarnate* and its successors remind us of the importance of the doctrine in contemporary theological debate. Somewhere inbetween these two extremes, a host of voices calls us to practise a more 'incarnational' faith, by which is usually meant a modified form of that social gospel which passed for liberalism in the 1920's.

At every level of the Church, the Incarnation is now making itself felt, perhaps more than any other single doctrine. In the Scriptures it is spoken of somewhat indirectly in Matthew and Luke; it can also be found in Philippians 2:5-11, in Colossians and in Hebrews, not to mention half a dozen or so other passages. Yet by common consent, both in modern times and since the early Church period, the main focus of our attention is the Fourth Gospel, in particular the famous Prologue, and especially John 1:14 — *the Word became flesh*. John's speech is at once arrestingly direct and tantalizingly obscure. What can it mean to say that the word, which is surely an intangible thing, became *flesh*? The text hardly lends itself to any kind of allegory or typology, but what can the literal sense possibly mean?

Dr Bray continues his series of fresh assessments of key Biblical doctrines.



The need for caution is reinforced when we remember that the Christological disputes of the early centuries, which culminated in the famous, and now much-maligned, definition of the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451), can largely be understood as an attempt to expound this verse correctly. For Athanasius (c 296-373), it was the key to Christology, and his views, as we know, were appealed to by later generations as the irreproachable source of orthodoxy. An entire theological system was built on the polarity of Word and flesh, which, with minor modifications in the interests of greater clarity, remains the touchstone of right belief even today.

The extent to which this is accepted was demonstrated by the furore caused by recent assertions that the Incarnation is a 'myth'; the controversy revealed, if nothing else, just how deep the roots of incarnational orthodoxy are, even today. Nevertheless, the dispute also showed that many believers have a faith in the Incarnation which is more passive than active, more traditional than vital. To attack it might be sacrilege, but to