

FEDERAL THEOLOGY AS A THEOLOGY OF GRACE

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The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that federal theology is a theology of grace. That is to say, over against the suggestions of some recent critics it will be argued that the system of doctrine which is called federal theology is, in its essence, as a way of understanding the revelation of God in the Scripture, a system which gives the necessary commitment to the sovereign grace of God in all His dealings with mankind.

There are two particular problems associated with this enterprise due to the nature of the questions to be asked and the issues which are at stake:

1. The first problem concerns the need for definition. Federal theology as a system has a long history, as we shall see presently. The system has been developing, changing and adapting throughout the whole course of that history. The federal theology of Robert Rollock was not the same as the federal theology of William Perkins which in turn was not identical to the federal theology of the Westminster Divines as expressed in the Confession and Catechisms. Even in the modern era, the federal theology of Charles Hodge was different from the federal theology of John Murray. The fact that this is so should encourage us to be precise in our definitions when we speak of federal theology.¹

2. The second problem arises directly from this. These various species of federal theology are each open to criticism, but the criticism which is justifiable in the case of one may not be justifiable in the case of another. For example, those who hold to a 'Three covenant' system of federal theology have sometimes been charged with a mistaken understanding of the relationship between the persons of the Trinity, by positing a covenant between the Father and the Son. This charge is less easily directed at those who hold a 'Two covenant' system.

We could go so far as to say this: even were it possible to prove conclusively that the federal theology of, for example, William Perkins was fundamentally mistaken and misguided, this does not necessarily involve a general indictment of federal theology. In other words, criticisms which may be legitimate in respect of one period during the rise and development of federal theology may not be justified at a later juncture.²

In order to sharpen this issue a little way we may express it in a somewhat different manner: for Dr R T Kendall or Prof J B Torrance to criticise federal theology as it has developed historically is one thing, but unless it can be proved that federal theology, by its very nature, is incompatible with the gospel of God's free grace in Christ then the critics have done no more than enable the federal theologians to identify certain problems and weaknesses adapt the system accordingly. In short, those who point out the problematic nature of certain aspects of federal theology are really assisting in the development of the system.

To use an illustration: when the Board of Trade representative comes to Mallaig to examine the Knoydart ferry he may identify certain flaws in the boat which require to be dealt with. This is a help (if also a financial burden) to the boatman who then has the necessary repairs made and sets sail with a new confidence in his vessel. If, on the other hand, the Board of Trade representative discovers that the ferry has a major, irreparable structural fault, then the boat would simply have to be scrapped.

It is my contention that the criticisms raised against federal theology

(where valid) are of the former variety which, when recognised, cause us to adjust the system and carry on with a new confidence. I do not believe that the ship has been demonstrated to be unseaworthy.

In order to prove this case I want to do three things. First, to speak briefly of the rise and development of federal theology, second, to outline some of the criticisms levelled against it and to identify two of the most significant of these, and third, to answer these criticisms by citing the example of one particular federal theologian and by engaging in a comparative historical analysis of Calvin.

In all of this I am working under the following hypothesis: if it can be demonstrated that a given theologian was both a consistent federal theologian and also a theologian of grace, then the case will have been made. That is to say, it will have been proved that federal theology is consistent with the Reformed understanding of grace. The corollary of this is that the critics will henceforth be confined to showing that 'certain' federal theologians at 'certain' points in history were guilty of 'certain' errors.

A. The Rise of Federal Theology

Let us begin, then, by outlining briefly what federal theology is and how it developed. Federal theology (or covenant theology) is that system of thinking about the relationship between God and humanity which places the doctrine of the covenants at the centre, around which everything else revolves. The plural 'covenants' is appropriate here because sometimes three covenants are used, sometimes only two: the covenant of works with Adam, the covenant of grace made with the elect in Christ, with the covenant of redemption made between God the Father and God the Son as the possible third. Historically this system is located in the 'Calvinist' or 'Reformed' tradition of Protestantism.

Before embarking upon either an explanation of federal theology or a discussion of its history, there are two preliminary remarks to be made. First, as W A Brown has shown³ we must distinguish between the 'covenant idea' and 'covenant theology'. The word 'covenant' appears 275 times in the Old Testament and 31 times in the New Testament⁴ and, this being the case, any theology seeking to do justice to the Bible must give serious consideration to an understanding and explanation of this concept. This, clearly, does not involve the development of a covenant theology, and hence we must remember throughout that the 'covenant idea' is common to Christianity whereas what we are considering is distinctive and related to a specific group of theologians. Second, although in its later forms federal theology posits two or three covenants we must not thereby assume that those who only speak of one covenant are not federal theologians.⁵

To put it another way, if a writer who holds to the covenant of grace also teaches that Adam was representative of all men, that he was promised life for himself and his descendants if he obeyed God's will, and that by deliberately going against God he brought ruin both upon himself and his seed, then that writer holds to the covenant of works, even if he should never express it in those terms. Let us consider a concrete example of just such a situation.

L J Trinterud⁶ and later J G Moller⁷ trace the beginnings of federal theology in Britain back to William Tyndale. Moller writes, 'The earliest English exposition of covenant theology is to be found in the works of William Tyndale',⁸ and Trinterud comments, 'The various writings of William Tyndale show a whole-hearted and systematic adoption of the law-covenant scheme as the basis of his entire religious outlook.'⁹ An examination of

Tyndale's writings shows that he did indeed contrast what we are by nature in Adam and what we are by grace in Christ, despite the fact that he speaks of only one covenant, that is, the covenant of grace.¹⁰ Even William Ames¹¹ who did distinguish between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, normally uses the word 'covenant' to refer to the latter of these.¹²

Bearing these two things in mind let us now summarise the way in which federal theology interprets the Bible. Having created the world God made Adam, an innocent creature formed in his own image with no moral flaw. Adam did have the freedom to rebel against God, since otherwise he would have been a mere puppet, but the conditions in which he found himself were such as could not themselves create in him any thought of rebellion, all things being 'very good'. It is important to stress this freedom, however, and say with Perkins, "...our first parents were created perfect but mutable."¹³

While Adam was still in this innocent state God made a covenant with him. By nature Adam deserved nothing of God, the Creator being in no way obliged to the creature, and hence even if he had continued in an innocent state he would not thereby have earned anything, far less eternal life. Only when God, by His grace, entered into a covenant with man did the possibility of such a hope arise. In this covenant (Gen.2:16,17) life was promised to Adam upon condition of perfect obedience and in particular obedience to God's command about not eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The sanction, in case of failure to obey, was death. This covenant was made not only with Adam but with all humanity, he being the 'federal' or corporate head of the race.

When Adam broke the covenant (Hosea 6:7) he did so as a public figure on behalf of humanity and therefore his sin was imputed to all those whom he represented in the covenant, that is, everyone except Christ the Second (or last) Adam. This is our original sin, actual sin being the outworking of the principle of sin in our lives.

Since God could not ignore his righteousness or justice in order to forgive sinners a satisfaction had to be made. This was in the form of a sacrifice as 'typified' by the ceremonial law. This, God completed and enacted in the form of a covenant. As Boston puts it, "As man's ruin was originally owing to the breaking of the covenant of works, so his recovery, from the first to the last step thereof, is owing purely to the fulfilling of the covenant of grace."¹⁴ In what, then, did this covenant consist?

God elected some certain individuals out of the mass of fallen humanity and made a covenant with them in Christ their federal head. Christ offers Himself as a penal, substitutionary sacrifice to atone for the sins of the elect. This act of propitiation satisfies the justice of God. This is not to suggest that God was propitiated into loving the elect, rather it was His love which led to the propitiation. The elect are kept by the power of God and therefore cannot 'fall from grace'. Ultimately they will be with God in heaven through all eternity.

Now this has been a very brief summary of the main points of federal theology and we could have expanded at length upon any of the doctrines raised, but it should serve to give the general picture as we now move into a discussion of the history of federal theology.

A view which has been influential in some quarters is that of A H Strong who claimed that Cocceius was the originator of the scheme.¹⁵ It is extremely difficult to see why this retained credibility in the light of the rather obvious fact that the William Ames mentioned above was one of Coc-

ceius' teachers, and the federal system is clearly expounded in his work.¹⁶ It would seem that Strong's determination to show that the federal doctrine of imputation was not sufficiently Augustinian¹⁷ has led him to be careless in his research. There is no question but that federal theology as a two covenant system can be traced back many years before Cocceius to Mattias Martinus, and as a one covenant system to Martinus' direct predecessors, that is, Caspar Olevianus and Zacharias Ursinus, the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism.

From this point on, federal theology developed gradually. During the sixteenth century treatises appeared by Zwingli in 1526 (on the subject of infant baptism) by Bullinger in 1534 (this was the first specifically on the covenant theology) and subsequently by many others throughout Europe, all bearing witness to the rise and influence of the federal position.

In order to correct an error, let us consider for a moment the following statement by W A Brown, "The covenant idea makes its earliest appearance in practical rather than theoretical form in the National Covenants entered into by the Scottish people and their rulers."¹⁸ This is simply not true. The Scottish people at this stage had not only the 'covenant idea' but developed covenant theology. The National Covenant (1638) and the Solemn League and Covenant (1643) were declared only a few years before the Westminster Assembly of Divines at which there was a strong Scottish presence in men such as Samuel Rutherford. It is inconceivable that anyone could imagine that the 'covenant idea' appeared in 1638 but by 1645 it had grown into fully fledged federal theology. This opinion also fails to take account of monographs on federal theology which appeared earlier. The best known of these is by Robert Rollock published in 1596.

Federal theology received its first confessional expression in the Irish Articles (article 21) written by James Usher and subsequently received classic expression in the Westminster Confession of Faith and associated Catechisms. From then until the beginning of the present century federal theology was dominant theological perspective within Calvinism, with the Princeton School of theologians giving the classic form to what has come to be known as 'Westminster theology', these writers leaning heavily upon Owen and the other Puritan writers.

B. The Critics

Having briefly outlined the nature and history of federal theology, it is now necessary to take note of certain criticisms which have recently been made of the system.

R T Kendall, in his Oxford thesis¹⁹, deals with the nature of saving faith from Calvin to the Westminster Confession. He sets out to answer five main questions:

1. Whether the 'seat' of faith is located in the understanding or in man's will;
2. Whether faith precedes repentance in the ordo salutis (or vice versa);
3. Whether assurance of salvation may be enjoyed by a 'direct' act of faith or if such assurance must be delayed until a 'reflex' act of faith comes;
4. What is the ground of assurance; and
5. What place a doctrine of temporary faith has in theology that makes one's sanctification or repentance the ground of assurance.²⁰

In answering these questions Kendall puts forward the thesis that there was a significant difference between the theology of John Calvin and that of

Beza his successor. He further argues that federal theology can be traced to Beza (through Ames and Perkins) but certainly not to Calvin. On every major doctrine, including the nature and extent of the atonement, the nature of saving faith, assurance, repentance and sanctification he draws a distinction between the federal position and that of Calvin. He concludes, "Calvin's thought, save for the decrees of predestination, is hardly to be found in Westminster theology."²¹ In short, he regards federal theology as a radical departure from the theology of the Reformation.

Prof. J B Torrance is also critical of federal theology, and his main criticisms are as follows:

1. In federal theology there takes place a change in the *ordo salutis* from that of earlier writers, such that there is a growing emphasis on election which is seen to 'precede' grace and becomes the major premise from which all the other doctrines are worked out.²²

2. The federal scheme "is built on the priority of Law over Grace".²³ Prof. Torrance means by this that "the English Puritan tradition, in its practical concern to use the law as a schoolmaster to bring men to Christ, universalised from that use of the law ('law-work'), read it back into Creation and into the doctrine of God, and grounded the Two Covenants on it."²⁴

3. Federal theology, through its adoption of a Western 'Nature-Grace' model mistakenly regarded Christ as head of the elect. Prof. Torrance writes, "The State, the civil order, is thus interpreted non-Christologically in terms of natural law and the light of reason (in terms of 'common grace' by later Calvinists). But this dualistic model fails to take adequate account of the New Testament doctrine of the Headship of Christ over all creation and all nations as Mediator."²⁵

4. Federal theology, with its doctrine of the covenant of works, is guilty of a misunderstanding of the nature of a covenant and in fact confuses a covenant with a contract, and hence views man's relationship with God in a legal, contractual manner.²⁶

Obviously it is not possible in a paper of this length to deal with all of the criticisms raised by Dr Kendall and Prof. Torrance, but it seems to me that there are two charges presented against federal theology by these writers which deserve specific consideration.

1. The crux of Prof. Torrance's critique of federal theology is that it rendered the covenant of Grace conditional through a misunderstanding of the nature of a Biblical covenant, and hence regarded faith and repentance as pre-requisites for pardon.

2. The crux of Dr Kendall's critique of federal theology is that it involves a radical departure from Calvin and a distortion of Reformed theology through the introduction of the doctrine of limited atonement.

C. The Response to these criticisms

In order to respond to the first of these we now move to the main section of this paper, namely, a consideration of the theology of Thomas Boston. The thesis may be put like this: I believe that an examination of the life and works of Thomas Boston enables us to regard him as a paradigm of federal theology properly understood as a theology of grace.

We can sharpen the issue at stake here by putting it like this: does repentance precede or follow saving faith and pardon of sin? As you will

know, Boston's principal claim to fame was as one of the "Marrow Men" and you will recall that the "Marrow Controversy" arose out of a previous disagreement about the nature of repentance. There is no need at this point to discuss Fisher's Marrow of Modern Divinity²⁷ and its treatment by the General Assemblies of 1720 and 1722 except to remind you that these "Black Acts" were originally occasioned by the Auchterarder Creed.

A student in the Presbytery of Auchterarder in 1717 was asked to sign a proposition before being licensed. The proposition ran, "I believe that it is not sound and orthodox to teach that we must forsake sin in order to our coming to Christ."²⁸ The student, William Craig, would not so affirm and the Presbytery of Auchterarder refused to license him. The General Assembly of 1718 condemned the Presbytery in the strongest terms and supported the student.

Those of you who were present at Sinclair Ferguson's masterly lecture on this subject will recall the serious implications for the doctrine of God which were implicit in the ensuing controversy. This morning, however, I want us to concentrate simply on the question of repentance. The Auchterarder Presbytery, by asking students for the Ministry to assent to the proposition, were saying that repentance is not a qualification for grace nor a condition for the covenant of grace. The General Assembly, in opposing the Auchterarder 'Creed' asserted that it was.

Here then is the issue: were Boston and the other Marrow Men being consistent and true to their federal theology and Reformed heritage when they reviewed repentance as a result of grace and not a cause, or was it the General Assembly and the theologians representing that position who were the true federal theologians? In order to answer this it is necessary to do two things: first, to show that Boston was a consistent federal theologian and committed to the Westminster Confession of Faith; and secondly, to deal with his understanding and exposition of the doctrine of repentance.

1. Boston, the Federal Theologian

An examination of Boston's treatises on the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace²⁹ should be sufficient to convince anyone that he was committed to federal theology and to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms as an expression of that theology. These treatises compare favourably with anything which has ever been written on the covenants, and certainly with the work of Witsius and Cocceius.

If this were not sufficient then Boston's two volumes of commentary on the Shorter Catechism³⁰ must be cited in his favour. At every point he supports and expounds the position advocated by the Confession, and indeed his sermons on the catechism follow precisely the corresponding sections in the Confession itself. At no point does Boston express disagreement with the Westminster Divines.

If this is not sufficient then we must refer to the Marrow Controversy and make the point that during the whole course of the controversy Boston and the others were at pains to point out that they were not disagreeing with the Westminster Confession, but that they accepted the doctrines contained therein. In particular, in their response to the 'Twelve Queries' put to them by the General Assembly, the Marrow Men affirmed their allegiance to the Confession, and indeed at several points quoted the Confession against the Assembly.³¹

Despite this clear evidence, D J Bruggink, in his Edinburgh thesis on Boston³² puts forward the astonishing view that Boston was not really happy

with the Confession standards. Of Boston's aforementioned two volume commentary on the Shorter Catechism he writes, 'the attempt to conform to a given pattern has resulted in a Boston who is not at all true to himself.'³³ Thereafter Bruggink always refers to these volumes at Boston's 'formal exposition'³⁴, underlining his view that they represent a Boston 'from whom life has largely disappeared.'³⁵ Those of you familiar with these volumes and their wealth of solid Biblical exposition will no doubt be astonished to learn that this is a Boston with no life in him! You will probably be less astonished to learn that Bruggink does not offer one convincing reference to support this hypothesis.

Having made this general case, Bruggink then goes on to assert that Boston's theology is centred upon the doctrine of Union with Christ, and that this involves a lessening of the importance given to federal theology within the whole scheme. He writes, 'Among Boston's earliest theological writings there are strong traces of the doctrine of union with Christ'³⁶. Strong traces but again no references. Bruggink later writes, 'The Marrow contains a strong implicit doctrine of union with Christ.'³⁷ Again, no references. It seems to me that Boston and the Marrow Men do not give any more place to union with Christ than to other significant Biblical doctrines, and to say that Boston's entire theological system centres on this concept is simply indefensible. Bruggink's determination to prove that Boston was not a consistent federal theologian has led him astray.

One amusing point is that both the General Assembly of 1720 and Bruggink in 1956 are concerned to prove that Boston (and the Marrow Men) were going against the Westminster Confession, but that the Assembly did it to protect the Confession and Bruggink does it to protect Boston!

2. Boston on Repentance.

Having attempted to demonstrate that Boston was a consistent federal theologian let us now consider his views on repentance. We do this by first making reference to his edition of the Marrow of Modern Divinity³⁸ and then to his other writings.

The Marrow's teaching on repentance is that repentance follows saving faith. It is presented in the dialogue in this way: the various characters are discussing the freedom with which a sinner may come to Christ when Nomista (a legalist) says, "But, sir, suppose he hath not yet truly repented of his many and great sins, hath he any warrant to come unto Christ by believing, till he has done so?"³⁹ In answer to this Evangelista (a minister of the Gospel) insists that the sinner's warrant is to come to Christ by believing and not by repenting. He goes on to ask Nomista if he would require the sinner to repent before coming to Christ, to which Nomista replies, "Yea, indeed, I think it very meet he should."⁴⁰ Evangelista is clear and firm in his reponse when he says, "why, then, I tell you truly, you would have him do that which is impossible."⁴¹

Boston is wholehearted in his support of the Marrow at this point. In commenting upon this last statement of Evangelista he writes, "We must take Christ in our way to the Father, else it is impossible that we guilty sinners can reach unto Him. And no man can come unto Christ but by believing in Him (John 6:35) therefore it is impossible that a man can truly repent before he believe in Christ."⁴² A little later in the argument, presumably in case anyone should imagine that the Marrow is antinomian, Boston writes, "It will not be amiss here to observe how our author, in his accounts of the relation betwixt faith and repentance, treads in the ancient paths, according to his manner."⁴³

Boston goes on to support this remark by citing Calvin, Rutherford and both

the Shorter and Larger Catechisms, together with several other contemporary catechisms and confessions. He thus shows that the Marrow was in line with Reformed Orthodoxy. Had he wished he could have quoted from Perkins, Owen and numerous others also.⁴⁴ The Marrow itself, of course, is largely a compilation of quotations from the great Reformed and Puritan writers and hence this uniformity of opinion on the matter of repentance is precisely what we should expect.

We can assert three propositions at this stage: first, the Marrow of Modern Divinity and Thomas Boston are agreed that repentance follows saving faith. Second, this view was consistently held by the major Reformed theologians from Calvin on. Third, those who opposed the Marrow's doctrine of repentance were themselves out of step with Reformed orthodoxy and were, in fact, legalists.

Having shown Boston's view of repentance as found in the Marrow let us begin to consider his view as argued in the other writings. His argument is most clearly presented in an essay entitled, "Whether or not repentance be necessary in order to the obtaining of the pardon of sin?"⁴⁵ He begins by distinguishing between 'legal repentance' such as was seen in Judas and which he describes as "arising merely from the sense of God's wrath" and 'gospel repentance' "which is a saving grace, and acceptable to God."⁴⁶

He writes of the necessity of repentance in this way: "Faith and repentance, as they are ordinarily linked together in preaching, so they cannot be separated in practice. And though we may, and must distinguish between them, yet they must not be divided. And whatsoever precedency is here, it is rather in order of nature, than order of time..."⁴⁷ He also sees the necessity of repentance for full assurance of faith. He says "Repentance is a fruit of faith; and where there is no repentance, it cannot be supposed that assurance can be had. Yet this concession I understand so as, that although a clear discerning of repentance in a believer unto a firm assurance which fully quiets the heart, yet the believer may, without that, attain unto such an assurance, as is that of an adherence unto the truth of that proposition, 'My sins are pardoned'."⁴⁸

One important paragraph draws very near to the very issues at stake in the Marrow controversy: "I assert, with Rutherford, that in regard of our obligation to eternal wrath, and all the punishments of sin according to the order of justice by the law of God, faith in Christ is the only means and way to get out of our bondage and misery. And I wish this way of speaking of faith as a mean were more generally received. If it were so, it might be of good use to bury the debates about the conditionality of the covenant of grace, and the instrumentality of faith in our justification, and might tend to give us distinct uptakings of the true nature of the second covenant."⁴⁹

Boston then goes on to the most important section for our present study, namely, the place of repentance in the *ordo salutis*. He begins by saying that the first effect of saving faith is to unite the believer to Christ. He goes on, "Now if union with Christ be the immediate effect of faith, repentance must either go before faith, or it must come after remission of sins. The former cannot be said seeing the repentance in question is pleasing to God; but 'without faith it is impossible to please God' (Heb.11:16). The Lord himself tells us, that without him we can do nothing (John 15:5)...Now we are still without Christ till by faith we be united to him (Eph.3:17) wherefore true repentance cannot go before faith. It remains then that it comes after remission of sins."⁵⁰

Boston then underlines this by noting that true repentance flows from love to God. He writes, "Hence I argue thus: Our love to God follows upon, and

is a fruit of remission of sin; but our repentance proceeds from love to God, and so in order of nature is posterior thereto: ergo, repentance follows remission of sin."⁵¹ He supports this by arguing that repentance is a 'sanctifying grace' and to suggest that a sanctifying grace could be prior to pardon is to upset the juxtaposition of justification and sanctification.⁵²

When he goes on to the offensive Boston is particularly devastating. He refers to Socinius who believes that repentance comes before remission of sin and shows that the federal writers of his day who saw the need for repentance as a condition of salvation, were falling into the same trap. He sums up his argument against them in this way:

1. To use repentance as a condition of pardon is 'natural religion', that is, to give credence to the view that a person must earn his own salvation - this being the natural inclination of all men.

2. To see repentance as a condition is to change the covenant of grace out of all recognition. Indeed as a condition he goes so far as to say that it is to change the covenant of grace into a 'bastard covenant of works'.⁵³

There is no question, then, but that Boston was both a federal theologian and one who taught that repentance follows remission of sin. In other words, it is possible to have a federal theology which does not make the covenant of grace conditional.

Federal Theology and Calvin

We must now give some consideration to the second major objection brought against federal theology, namely, that it involves a radical departure from Calvin. In this context two specific charges are made. R T Kendall argues that the introduction of limited atonement was quite inconsistent with Calvin's theology and J B Torrance argues that the place of election in the ordo salutis is correct in Calvin but mistaken in the federal theology.

It is interesting to notice that the analysis of Calvin upon which these criticisms are based is not one that is universally accepted. The views of Karl Barth on matters such as limited atonement and the need to interpret election Christologically are very similar to those of R T Kendall and J B Torrance, but even he does not attribute such views to Calvin. Indeed he gives us quite a different picture.

Barth is extremely critical of Calvin's doctrine of predestination which he admits was "...quite unequivocally double predestination"⁵⁴ and accuses Calvin of being speculative rather than Biblical. His most serious criticism of Calvin on this score is that he failed to interpret election Christologically.⁵⁵ In his assessment Calvin's doctrine was supralapsarian, although he says that it is difficult to judge.⁵⁶ More seriously (and contrary to Kendall) Barth says that the 'Grim doctrine' of limited atonement "...does follow logically from Calvin's conception of predestination."⁵⁷

The other point at which Barth's historical analysis differs from that of Kendall is on the effect of putting predestination at the beginning of the ordo salutis. With others, Kendall would argue that all the doctrines are effected adversely when predestination is put at the beginning. But Barth would not agree. Of the Westminster Confession he writes, "...it was not a matter of deducing all dogmatics from the doctrine of predestination.... If we read their expositions connectedly we are more likely to get the impression that from the standpoint of its systematic range and importance they gave to the doctrine too little consideration rather than too much."⁵⁸

Could Dr Kendall or Prof Torrance really agree that the Westminster Divines put too little emphasis on predestination?

This question of predestination leads us to the other argument. Prof Torrance argues that in the first draft of the Institutes Calvin followed the pattern of Luther's Smaller Catechism where election appeared in the second chapter, but that in the first draft of his catechism (1537) and later drafts of the Institutes he abandoned that pattern. Prof Torrance further argues that this was a most significant change since Calvin then began to treat election in the third book of the Institutes after dealing with the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Atonement.⁵⁹

What Karl Barth shows us, however, is that in the final form of the Catechism (1542) Calvin returned to Luther's original pattern. This change back would surely suggest that the shift between 1536 and 1537 was not so significant as is sometimes portrayed. In other words, to argue that Calvin's move from putting election at the beginning to putting it at the end of Book 3 involves a significant theological move, is simply not borne out by the historical evidence.

Barth demonstrates clearly that Calvin "...did partly share and partly inaugurate four different conceptions of the place and function of the doctrine of election."⁶⁰ Barth does not regard any one of these as being any more significant than any other and certainly would not draw the kind of conclusions which Prof Torrance does. I would suggest that the evidence does not allow us to do so.

Those of you who have been following the paper closely will have recognised that I am not a follower of Karl Barth, and I confess that it does feel strange to be quoting him in defense of my thesis, but Barth's historical analysis is both honest and rigorous and indeed represents the best sections in the whole Church dogmatics.

On the issue of the *ordo salutis* then, it is clear that the question of where we put the doctrine of election is less important than what we actually say about it. It is surely indisputable that Calvin has a stronger doctrine of predestination than many of the federal writers, and certainly stronger than the Westminster Confession.

On the issue of limited atonement it would be helpful to discuss the contribution of Boston who held together the doctrine of limited atonement and also the view that in some respect the death of Christ had a wider scope than the elect. The paradox involved in his position is very similar to the paradox of Scripture itself which must surely be a recommendation. There is, however, no time to take that further here.

Conclusion

In this paper, then, I have attempted to show that federal theology can be a theology of grace, but I am not for a moment arguing that federal theology and all federal theologians are free from error. Far from it, but I do believe (and this is surely the most important factor) that the Scriptures are best understood in federal terms, albeit with the qualifications I have suggested.