

# 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 *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_sbct-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php)

# CALVIN AND ENGLISH CALVINISM: A REVIEW ARTICLE

G. MICHAEL THOMAS,  
BRIGHTON ROAD BAPTIST CHURCH, CROYDON

The republication of R.T. Kendall's *Calvin and English Calvinism*<sup>1</sup> is to be welcomed. As the author observes in the preface to this edition, the work has caused a great deal of interest and controversy since it was first published in 1979. This was not only in scholarly circles, but, partly due to Kendall's association with the late Dr D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones and his appointment as minister of Westminster Chapel, the views expounded in this work became widely known in conservative Reformed circles, and have been hotly debated. Paternoster Press have performed a valuable service by making it available again, because it deserves to be known by a new generation, and also because those who read it twenty years ago may find that to reconsider it now sheds light on their own theological pilgrimage. *Calvin and English Calvinism* is unchanged, except for the addition of a new preface, in which the author makes it clear that his views remain unaltered, and an appendix, attempting to demonstrate Calvin's espousal of a 'universal atonement' position, taken from an unpublished thesis by Curt Daniel<sup>2</sup>. Apart from this there is no attempt to take account of research over the last twenty years, and so the bibliography is now significantly out of date.

## The Argument

Kendall concerns himself with the teaching of English 'Calvinists' on faith and assurance. He wisely avoids the term 'Puritan', recognizing that its ecclesiological connotations might exclude from his study those who participated in a common flow of thought regarding the meaning and experience of salvation. He prefers to speak of the 'experimental predestinarian' tradition. A certain bias away from convinced Anglicans is detectable, however, in the selection of theologians studied. It could be argued that one or two thoroughly episcopal Anglican predestinarians such

---

<sup>1</sup> R.T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism*; Paternoster Press, Carlisle, 1997; 263pp., £19.99; ISBN 0 85364 827 1.

<sup>2</sup> C. Daniel, 'Hyper Calvinism and John Gill' (Ph.D. University of Edinburgh, 1983).

as Bishops Joseph Hall and John Davenant and Archbishop James Ussher, men of international influence and reputation, deserved inclusion, and might have significantly affected Kendall's conclusions. Perhaps they were not considered sufficiently 'experimental'.

The author endeavours to show that in this tradition: a) faith came to be seen as an act of the will rather than of the understanding; b) repentance came to be seen as preceding faith in the *ordo salutis*, and, to this end, the preaching of the law came to be regarded as necessary preparation for the proclamation of the gospel; c) assurance came to be separated from saving faith, to be obtained not as part of the direct act of faith but by a subsequent 'reflex act'; d) assurance came to be based upon sanctification; e) preparation for faith became a key element. Kendall makes it clear that he regards these trends with disfavour, and that 'Westminster theology is...haunted with inconsistencies' (p. 212).

Such a stand would give students of historical theology, especially those who would see themselves as being in the Reformed tradition, much to think about. Kendall's claims, however, are more radical. He maintains that, in the above points, English Calvinism was departing from Calvin himself. At the root of these retrograde developments was the doctrine of limited atonement, a belief not held, according to Kendall, by John Calvin. It was Theodore Beza, Calvin's co-worker and successor at Geneva, who introduced limited atonement, and who carried Reformed Christians in the direction of seeking assurance on the basis of sanctification, with all the introspection and legalism that went with it. The difference between Calvin's and Beza's doctrine of faith is not merely quantitative, but qualitative, and the origin of the difference is linked to Beza's doctrine of limited atonement (p. 38). In the process of working out his contentions, Kendall makes his criticisms boldly: 'Calvin's thought, save for the decrees of predestination, is hardly to be found in Westminster theology' (p. 208). 'Westminster theology hardly deserves to be called Calvinistic' (p. 212). In that Beza's departure from Calvin is seen as the root of almost all the problems tackled in the book, this review will concentrate chiefly on the relationship between the theology of the two Genevan Reformers.

Kendall's first sentence in his first chapter, on Calvin, sets the scene uncompromisingly: 'Fundamental to the doctrine of faith in John Calvin is his belief that Christ died indiscriminately for all men' (p. 14). He adds to this the novel opinion that, while Calvin maintained universal atonement, he taught that Christ prays only for the elect, and thus election is ratified, not by the atonement, but by the intercession of Christ. He explains that, according to Calvin, the benefits of Christ's passion are obtained through

faith. Such faith in Christ carries within itself its own assurance of salvation and election, for Christ is, in Calvin's phrase, the 'mirror of election'. Those troubled about whether or not they are chosen should look away from predestination, and look to Christ, and so find all the assurance they need. We are told that 'the later distinction between faith and assurance seems never to have entered Calvin's mind' (p. 25). However, Kendall faces the fact that Calvin taught that there was such a thing as temporary faith, which could resemble in some respects the faith of God's elect. This Kendall regards as an unfortunate lapse on Calvin's part, because it gave rise to the question, 'Is my faith the faith of the elect or the kind of faith it is possible for a reprobate to exercise?'

In contrast to the opening sentence of the chapter on Calvin, the chapter on Beza begins with the words, 'Fundamental to the doctrine of faith in Theodore Beza... is his belief that Christ died for the elect only' (p. 29). Because Beza's strong supralapsarian doctrine of predestination led him to limit the work of Christ to the elect, the initial act of faith could not be a knowledge of God's love in Christ to *me*, and the salvation which he has obtained for *me*. It had to have the character of an appropriation of God's love and salvation offered indiscriminately but not known, at that stage, to be intended or valid for *me*. Accordingly, Beza could not teach that assurance could come directly by looking to Christ, as an integral part of saving faith. Rather, by a subsequent act of reflection or logical deduction, a person reasons, 'Only the elect believe, I believe, therefore I must be one of the elect.' Because it can be difficult to observe and judge the quality of one's own faith, Beza took the further step of encouraging people to regard their good works as evidence of their faith. Kendall describes Beza's double-payment argument: the person who knows Christ died for him can tell the devil that his salvation is beyond doubt since a just God cannot demand double payment for sin. It should be pointed out that it has not been shown that Beza used this argument as a proof or consequence of limited atonement. The passage referred to simply relates the sacrifice of Christ to the person who is feeling troubled about his sins.<sup>3</sup> There are other places, however, where Beza argues that God's justice will not allow Christ's sacrifice to be ineffective for those for whom it was offered, namely the elect. Kendall has been criticized for basing his conclusions on a narrow band of Beza's writings (those that are more systematic, and are available in English translation), and it has been suggested that a survey of Beza's

---

<sup>3</sup> Beza, *A brief and Pithie Sum of the Christian Faith* (London, 1572), pp. 21a-21b.

homiletic literature would create a more balanced picture. Whether or not this is the case, it is difficult to argue with the main outline of Kendall's account of Beza.

Following the treatment of Calvin and Beza, and a glance at the Heidelberg theologians, *Calvin and English Calvinism* goes on to demonstrate the concern of teachers like William Perkins, Paul Baynes, John Preston and Thomas Hooker to lead people to faith in Christ, and to enable them to have an assurance of being true believers and therefore of having been predestined to faith and salvation. The task set for English Calvinists, as inheritors of the theology of Calvin and Beza, was to enable people to distinguish in themselves between true and temporary faith, as described by Calvin, and to do so without the help of a universal atonement, which had been removed from the Calvinistic inheritance by Beza. Kendall leads us through various attempts to do this, and argues that the definition of saving faith became more and more voluntaristic in the process. It was necessary for faith to be an act of the will, mainly because the lack of universal atonement took away the possibility of the initial act of faith being an assured knowledge that 'Christ died for me'. The climax of this process was the Westminster Confession, which presented a theology significantly different from Calvin's.

Readers should appreciate that it is difficult for an account covering so many theologians to carry full conviction at every point. It would be possible to question a number of Kendall's conclusions along the way, e.g. the classification of the Heidelberg theologian Ursinus as an upholder of limited atonement (p. 13 n.9). Kendall's account of the English predestinarians should be compared with other studies, such as that of Wallace<sup>4</sup>, before all its conclusions about individual theologians should be accepted. This is not to dispute, however, that the broad picture Kendall paints of the thought of English experimental predestinarians is convincing. In the opinion of the reviewer, he establishes the importance to them of assurance, helpfully describes the problems relating to assurance inherent in their system, and shows that they came to rely a great deal on the action of the will, both in preparing oneself to believe, and as the crucial distinction between saving and non-saving faith. It is fascinating to see the story unfolding in slightly different ways in different thinkers, to the point where so-called 'antinomianism' developed as a reaction to the stress on faith as a condition, preparation for faith, and good works as the

---

<sup>4</sup> D. Wallace, *Puritans and Predestination: Grace in English Protestant Theology 1525-1695* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1992).

evidence of faith. Such antinomianism was not a denial of the value of the moral law in guiding the conduct of the Christian, but of exalting it to be such a key factor in preparation and assurance, and of presenting faith as if it were another law by whose fulfilment salvation could be won.

### Some Questions

We can be grateful to Dr Kendall for detecting differences between this kind of theology and that of Calvin. There is a distinction between Calvin's characteristic way of encouraging people to find assurance of election in their communion with Christ by faith and Beza's tendency to urge people to deduce their election from their faith by rational argument. Calvin's theological and pastoral acuteness made him aware that to look to Christ by faith is very different from looking at one's faith in Christ, but Beza does not show the same sensitivity. The Westminster Confession's assertion that the 'principall acts' of saving faith are 'Accepting, Receiving, and Resting upon Christ' does not seem to be wholly in tune with Calvin's definition of faith as 'a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ', nor does Calvin's insistence that faith is, or at least entails, a measure of assurance, sit comfortably with the Westminster *Larger Catechism's* 'Assurance of grace and salvation not being of the essence of faith, true believers may wait long before they obtain it'.<sup>5</sup>

However, some of his important points remain doubtful. Is it justifiable to make Beza as critical to the development of Reformed theology as Kendall does? English 'Calvinists' drew on sources other than Beza – indeed, other than Geneva – from Zurich and Heidelberg, for example. There is evidence that the predestinarianism of Martin Bucer, the reformer of Strasbourg, had led him to a limited atonement position as early as the 1530s, while Jerome Zanchi became a prominent defender of both absolute predestination and limited atonement, and in this connection was devoting attention to the problems of assurance, in Strasbourg in the early 1560s.<sup>6</sup> Certainly in the case of Bucer, and almost certainly in the case of Zanchi, there was no crucial dependence upon Beza in this: these positions arose easily and naturally from the predestinarianism shared in common by the Reformers.

---

<sup>5</sup> Citations from Kendall, pp. 201, 18, 203.

<sup>6</sup> See G.M. Thomas, *The Extent of the Atonement: a dilemma for Reformed theology from Calvin to the Consensus* (Carlisle, 1997), pp. 7-8, 96-8.

It is not entirely true, as Kendall seems to say (p.19), that Calvin always used words like 'knowledge', 'illumination', 'assurance' to describe the nature of faith. He also used voluntaristic words like 'embrace' and 'receive',<sup>7</sup> while Beza was not averse to defining faith as assurance.<sup>8</sup> While Calvin focuses on the assurance that arises directly as faith in Christ is exercised, he does leave the door open to the possibility of reasoning from one's faith by a process of deducing cause from effect, when he says that our election is confirmed to us by faith, in the sense that 'that which was unknown is proved' – we ascend from faith to God's secret ordination, 'in order that the effect may not bury the cause'.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, it would be possible to give a more sympathetic account than Kendall's of Beza's teaching on assurance. Undoubtedly sanctification played a part in it, but in the discussion in *A Brief and Pithie Sum of the Christian Faith*, which Kendall makes use of on p. 33, it is by no means the only factor. Beza speaks of the assurance that is part of faith and of the witness of the Spirit of adoption within the believer. He appeals to sanctification, but this could be interpreted as simply saying that sanctification (and here he is talking about loving God and hating sin rather than merely doing good deeds) can only be present as a result of faith and the grace of God, and so is a sign of grace, and that faith without works is dead. Beza does talk about commencing with works in the search for assurance, but this is because he thinks in terms of chains of cause and effect. Works, being the last link in the chain that starts from predestination are thought of as the most accessible first point in the route to discovering predestination. However, although works occupy this position, they are never more than subsidiary, a help in confirming the reality of one's faith. Our point is not that Beza's discussion is as careful as might be wished, or that it does not embody a dangerous tendency, or that Beza's emphasis on limited atonement did not blunt the edge of the assurance inherent in faith, but merely that his teaching on assurance would not have to sound quite as crude as Kendall makes it, especially when he goes so far as to accuse Beza of thinking of faith as being 'rewarded' with salvation.

---

<sup>7</sup> E.g. *Institutes* 3:24:6, 3:11:7.

<sup>8</sup> See Beza, *A Book of Christian Questions and Answers* (London 1584), section 4, question 3, 'What is fayth? A certaine perswasion and assurance which every true Christian man oughte to have, that God the father loveth him, for Jesus Christ his sonnes sake.'

<sup>9</sup> *Institutes* 3:24:3.

These points illustrate a weakness in Kendall's work, namely the way he overstates his case. Readers are presented with blacks and whites, where more subtle shades would be truer to the subject. If he had claimed to have detected trends and emphases rather than a 'radical departure', the reaction to his findings might have been less excited, but more profitable. This is especially apparent in regard to the presentation of Calvin and Beza as holding diametrically opposed views on the extent of Christ's redeeming work to which we turn now.

### **Calvin and Beza on the Extent of the Atonement**

Kendall maintains that, in spite of believing in the predestination of a limited number, Calvin held firmly to the view that Christ died for all. He attaches great importance to this point, while conceding that 'a definitive study on this is yet to be written' (p. 3). His claim about Calvin's position is supported in the text and footnotes by a number of citations from Calvin (supplemented by an appendix with more citations), most of which are given brief treatment and seem quite ambiguous. For example, to quote 'Christ suffered for the sins of the world, and is offered by the goodness of God without distinction to all men'<sup>10</sup> as evidence of universal atonement begs the question how Calvin understood the terms 'world' and 'all'. The quotation includes the expression, 'without distinction', so dear to later advocates of limited atonement, who would use it in contrast to the expression, 'without exception'. The way Calvin set aside the 'sufficient for all, efficient for the elect' formula of the Middle Ages (and later Reformed theology of all shades) is taken by Kendall to be a rejection of limited atonement, whereas Calvin's meaning in the two contexts in question seems rather to lean in the opposite direction: he will not appeal to the formula because it does not say enough about predestination.<sup>11</sup> Beza,

---

<sup>10</sup> From Calvin's *Commentary on Romans*, on 5:18, on p. 13 n.3.

<sup>11</sup> J. Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. and ed. J.K.S. Reid (London, 1961), pp. 148-9; *Commentary on 1 John*, on 2:2. Kendall appears to believe that 'sufficient for all, efficient for the elect' was a formula espoused by Reformed theologians who favoured limited atonement. In fact, it was dear to those who took the other side of the argument, such as the English deputation, and Matthias Martinius of Bremen, at the Synod of Dort. Those who favoured a very restricted position found it something of an embarrassment, because they had to add that, while the sufficiency was universal because of the



without question an advocate of limited atonement, admitted the truth of this formula, but dismissed it as being not very useful, just as Calvin did.<sup>12</sup> Kendall says that Calvin never makes 'all' mean 'some' (p. 13, nn. 2-3), but in fact, Calvin bewilderingly takes 'all' to mean 'some' in some places dealing with the atonement, and 'some' to mean 'all' in others where the context is similar.<sup>13</sup> Besides the weakness and ambiguity of much of Kendall's evidence in advocating that Calvin maintained what, on the face of it, seems an unlikely combination of particular predestination and universal atonement, readers will look in vain for any help in understanding how Calvin could have cheerfully maintained that Christ died for all and yet God only elected some. Did Calvin not feel there was some difficulty in holding such apparently incongruous doctrines? If he did hold them, is there no evidence of his seeking to explain how both can be true, or of a tendency to regard the one or the other to be telling the more basic truth about God? Did he think of the decree of election as somehow subordinate and logically posterior to the decree to send Christ, or that both are parallel and never meet? Kendall says, 'Calvin's position, despite his saying Christ's death for all makes all inexcusable, still requires that one be among the number of the elect to be saved' (p. 17), but he does not seem to feel that there is some difficulty in this, or wonder whether the penetrating mind of Calvin felt at all uncomfortable about it. One feels the need for more attention to how universal atonement and particular predestination fitted into the rest of Calvin's theology before being convinced that Kendall has given a complete explanation of the matter.

It is not possible to make an adequate investigation in this article of whether Calvin believed that Christ died for all or for the elect only. The view that Calvin believed in universal atonement, though it has

---

infinite merit of Christ, this sufficiency did not correspond to any divine intention within the decrees of predestination.

<sup>12</sup> Beza, *Ad Acta Coloquii Montisbelgardensis Tubingae Edita Responsionis Pars Altera* (Geneva, 1588), pp. 217-18.

<sup>13</sup> *Commentary on 1 John*, on 2:2, 'all refers to all who would believe.' *Commentary on 1 Timothy*, on 2:5, 'The universal term all must always be referred to classes of men but never to individuals.' *Sermons on Isaiah's prophecy of the Death and Passion of Christ*, trans. and ed. T.H.L. Parker (London, 1956), p. 141, 'The word "many" is often as good as equivalent to the word "all".' *Commentary on Hebrews*, on 9:27, 'He says, "many", meaning "all", as in Romans 5.15.'

supporters, also has critics.<sup>14</sup> While not denying the force of some of the citations given by Kendall, they do need to be set beside others, amply provided, for example, in Rainbow's *The Will of God and the Cross*, which support the other side of the argument. A survey of these may not convince the impartial reader that Calvin was a wholehearted exponent of limited atonement, but it will demonstrate that Kendall has been selective in his quotation. References can be given almost *ad infinitum* to support both points of view. Both sides can even appeal to Calvin's comments on the same passages of Scripture. For example, in his *Commentary and Sermons* on 1 Timothy 2:3-6, his understanding of the 'all' God wills to save and for whom Christ died seems to swing backwards and forwards

---

<sup>14</sup> Among those maintaining that Calvin held to universal atonement are P. van Buren, *Christ in Our Place: the Substitutionary Character of Calvin's Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Edinburgh, 1957), pp. 102-6; B. Hall, 'Calvin against the Calvinists', in G.E. Duffield (ed.), *John Calvin* (Abingdon, 1966), pp. 19-37; B.G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth-Century France* (Madison, WI, 1969), p. 137 n. 58; M.C. Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology: the Doctrine of Assurance* (Edinburgh, 1985), pp. 13-19; J.W. Anderson, 'The Grace of God and the Non-elect in Calvin's Commentaries and Sermons' (Th.D., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1976), pp. 104-46; C. Daniel, *op. cit.*, pp. 777-828; S. Strehle, 'The Extent of the Atonement within the Theological Systems of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries' (Th.D., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1980), pp. 84-94; A.C. Clifford, *Atonement and Justification; English Evangelical Theology 1640-1790: an Evaluation* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 142-61. Among those who regard Calvin's teaching on the atonement as essentially particularistic are P. Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Edinburgh, 1982); R. Nicole, 'John Calvin's View of the Extent of the Atonement', *Westminster Theological Journal* 47 (1985), pp. 197-225; W.R. Godfrey, 'Tensions within International Calvinism: the Debate on the Atonement at the Synod of Dort' (Ph.D., Stanford University, 1974), pp. 80-82; R.A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Durham, NC, 1986), pp. 33-5; J.H. Rainbow, *The Will of God and the Cross: an Historical and Theological Study of John Calvin's Doctrine of Limited Redemption* (Allison Park, PA, 1990).

between 'the elect of all classes' and 'all including those who perish'.<sup>15</sup> The facts that Calvin gives no – or virtually no – attention to the extent of the atonement as a topic in its own right, and that scattered throughout his writings are many statements that lean one way and many that lean the other, are enough to indicate that to classify Calvin simply as adhering to one or other position is suspect and possibly, in terms of the development of Reformed theology, anachronistic. Kendall is correct in recognizing, as a general fact, that Calvin may not always have been consistent, so it is regrettable that he did not apply this insight to Calvin's position on the extent of the atonement. The reviewer believes that, as a rule, Calvin spoke of the atonement as universal when he was dealing with the promise of the gospel, and particular in the context of eternal election.<sup>16</sup> Whether or not this is the best analysis, it seems that a more nuanced treatment than claiming Calvin as a supporter of either universal or limited atonement is required. Kendall's claim that Calvin held to universal atonement but to a particularistic high priestly intercession is perhaps a concession towards this necessity. It is not really surprising if, when focusing on the exalted Christ, Calvin speaks chiefly of the efficacy of his work, and therefore has in mind the elect as the intended recipients of salvation. But Christ's intercession is also of a piece with his sacrifice as two aspects of his priestly work, and Christ is the object of faith as both sacrifice and intercessor. So Calvin can also use the language of universal applicability in connection with the intercession.<sup>17</sup> An unqualified division between universal atonement and limited intercession is unlikely to stand scrutiny, but a more general recognition that Calvin saw both universal and particular aspects to Christ's saving work seems to be demanded by the evidence.

Calvin sometimes spoke of Christ's death as being intended for the elect, and sometimes spoke of it in universal terms. It can therefore be said that Beza was faithful to him in teaching that Christ died for the elect, but

---

<sup>15</sup> See *Commentary, and Sermons of M. John Calvin on the Epistles of S. Paule to Timothie and Titus* (London, 1579). See also Thomas, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-3.

<sup>16</sup> See Thomas, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-34.

<sup>17</sup> In *Sermons on Isaiah, op. cit.*, pp. 143-8, Calvin says that Christ does not pray for all. He explains that the intercession of Christ is only effectual to those who avail themselves of it by faith. He also says, in the same context of Christ's death and intercession, 'Let us not fear to come...seeing He is sufficient to save us all.'

that his predestinarian consistency prevented him having Calvin's freedom to speak of Christ's dying for all. Kendall is right to detect a shift. But it was a shift of emphasis, based on elements in Calvin's thought, not the sharp change of direction Kendall portrays by passing over some elements in Calvin's thought.

### Predestination

Behind Kendall's insistence that Calvin stood for the universality of the atonement, can be detected the view that, to Calvin, predestination was just one doctrine among others. It did not exercise a controlling influence over other doctrines, and did not cause them to be modified, even if they seemed inconsistent with particular predestination. Predestination was a truth to be brought forward to emphasize that salvation is all of grace, and to perform certain practical functions like producing gratitude, humility and confidence in the believer. But it was not to be integrated into a system of doctrine, certainly not as a controlling factor, and it was to be pushed to the background when inviting people to faith or dealing with those struggling with doubts and fears. This view of Calvin has seemed to appeal widely to those who would regard themselves as his followers today and has been advocated by scholars like W. Niesel, B.G. Armstrong, C. Partee and A.C. Clifford.<sup>18</sup> Kendall identifies himself with the view that Calvin introduced predestination only to explain the observed differentiation in the way people respond to the gospel (p. 15 n.4).

However, there are a number of persuasive studies indicating that predestination was more dominant in Calvin than this view allows.<sup>19</sup> His

---

<sup>18</sup> W. Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin* (Philadelphia, 1956), esp. pp. 159-81; Armstrong, *op. cit.*; C. Partee, 'Calvin's Central Dogma Again', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 18 (1987), pp. 191-9; Clifford, *op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> D.N. Wiley, 'Calvin's Doctrine of Predestination: his Principal Soteriological and Polemical Doctrine' (Ph.D., Duke University, 1971); I. McPhee, 'Transformer or Conserver of Calvin's Theology? A Study of the Origins and Development of Theodore Beza's Thought' (Ph.D., Cambridge University, 1980); P.C. Holtrop, *The Bolsec Controversy on Predestination, from 1551 to 1555: Statements of Jerome Bolsec and the Responses of John Calvin, Theodore Beza and other Reformed Theologians* (Lewiston, NY, 1993). W.J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: a Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (New York, 1988), pp. 232-4, has pointed to 'the existence of two rather different Calvins.... Later

contests with Bolsec and Castellio, and the lack of sympathy between Bullinger and him over his attitude to predestination in the Bolsec dispute,<sup>20</sup> and works like the *Eternal Predestination* and the *Congrégation on Eternal Election*,<sup>21</sup> are enough to make this clear. This prominence of predestination accounts for the presence of passages seeming to favour limited atonement as well as those indicating universal atonement. While it may be necessary, with H. Bauke, to understand Calvin's theology as a *complexio oppositorum*<sup>22</sup>, in which apparently contradictory elements are embraced, there are many indications that Calvin made efforts to integrate his doctrine of predestination with the whole range of his teaching, and that some elements have been adapted to fit the predestinarian commitment. At the end of his treatment of predestination in the *Institutes*, he deals with biblical texts that seem to show that God has a desire to save all. Calvin's approach is that when universal saving will and particular predestination seem to be in conflict, particular predestination must take precedence.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, it is not true that predestination simply fulfils the function of explaining why some rather than others believe, for in a prominent position in introducing *Institutes* 3:24 on election, he traces the gospel itself, and not just the response to it, to predestination.<sup>24</sup> This strongly predestinarian flavour to Calvin's theology means that Beza's soteriology may as easily be regarded as a legitimate organic development of Calvin's

---

Calvinists were the heirs of the systematic and philosophical Calvin....'

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, the letter of 27 November 1551, in *Registres de la Compagnie des Pasteurs de Genève au Temps de Calvin*, vol. 1 (Geneva, 1962), pp. 124-5.

<sup>21</sup> In *Calvini Opera*, 8, cols 89-118.

<sup>22</sup> H. Bauke, *Die Probleme der Theologie Calvins* (Leipzig, 1922), pp. 16-19.

<sup>23</sup> *Institutes* 3:24:15-17: 'seems to deny' 'he only means...' 'he means nothing more than...' 'we must expound the passage [seeming to speak of a universal will to save] so as to reconcile it with another [speaking of election and reprobation]', 'however universal the promises of salvation may be, there is no discrepancy between them and the predestination of the reprobate, provided we attend to the effect' (*i.e.* reprobation wins!), 'all that is meant by the promise is....'

<sup>24</sup> 'the preaching of the gospel springs from the fountain of election...', *Institutes* 3:24:1.

teaching as a radical departure from it. Indeed, it may be regarded as a development made almost inevitable by the loose ends in Calvin's own thought. When it is considered that Beza was compelled by historical circumstances to defend and consolidate Calvin's teaching, it is not surprising that the polemical task should have produced a more logically defensible system. Thus, while differences of emphasis may readily be conceded, the sharp division asserted by Kendall is unsubstantiated.

The historical situation would seem to contain a presumption against driving such a wedge between the two Genevan Reformers, since it was Calvin who appointed Beza to preside over the Genevan Academy, and the two worked alongside each other in Geneva for sixteen years between 1548 and 1564. Beza's strongly supralapsarian predestinarian position was known to Calvin even before Beza came to Geneva from Lausanne, and there had been correspondence between the two on some of the finer points of predestination. Indeed, it was in the process of defending Calvin against Bolsec that Beza's infamous 'Table' of predestination was drawn up and circulated prior to publication.<sup>25</sup> Yet there is no evidence that Calvin – who was not slow to warn people of dangerous tendencies in their thinking, and had Bolsec arrested and expelled from Geneva for errors over predestination, raised any objection at all to Beza's emphases. Moreover, whilst it was true that Beza showed a greater concern to systematize, all the raw materials of his system can be found in Calvin. The historical situation must place the onus of proof on anyone who wishes to maintain that Beza departed seriously from Calvin, and, mainly because Kendall's account of Calvin's doctrine of predestination is incomplete, the reviewer is not convinced that he has demonstrated his thesis. Most of the major recent studies of Beza's thought have recognized important elements of continuity from Calvin.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> See letters of Beza to Calvin of 21 January 1552, 29 July 1555 and 22 January 1558, in *Correspondance de Théodore de Bèze*, ed. H. Aubert, F. Aubert and H. Meylan (Geneva, 1960-), vol. 1, pp. 81-4 (and see p. 84 n.5), 169-73, vol. 2, pp. 168-71. The 'Table' can be found in Beza, *The Treasure of Trueth* (London, 1576).

<sup>26</sup> See J. Raitt, *The Eucharistic Theology of Theodore Beza: Development of the Reformed Doctrine* (Chambersburg, 1972), p. 71; J.S. Bray, *Theodore Beza's Doctrine of Predestination* (Nieuwkoop, 1975), esp. pp. 86-106, 142; McPhee, *op. cit.*, esp. pp. 42-3, 82-3; Muller, *op. cit.*, esp. p. 95; R.W. Letham, 'Theodore Beza: a Reassessment', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 40 (1987), pp. 25-40; M. Jinkins,

**Limited Atonement, Predestination and Assurance**

Readers of *Calvin and English Calvinism* could be forgiven for coming to the conclusion that the anxiety over assurance within the Reformed tradition resulted partly from Calvin's raising the question of temporary faith, and mainly from Beza's doctrine of limited atonement. It would have been reasonable to have put some simpler explanations into the foreground. Any theology that proclaims salvation through faith is bound to precipitate the question in its adherents, 'Do I have faith?' The undeniable phenomenon of 'temporary faith' would necessarily give rise to questions about the nature of one's faith. It is difficult to see why Kendall should blame Calvin for talking about temporary faith and indicating how to distinguish it from the faith of God's elect. Kendall gives no suggestion what the alternative to this discussion might be.

Furthermore, whatever the effect of teaching about universal or limited atonement, it was surely the doctrine of predestination that gave added weight to concern about assurance within the Reformed tradition. To hold that salvation depends on faith raises questions, but to hold that such faith is the gift of God and will be granted only to those who have been predestined, irrespective of any personal effort or qualities, and that only such persons will persevere to the end for final salvation, invests those questions with much heavier significance. Calvin acknowledged this: 'Among the temptations with which Satan assaults believers, none is greater or more perilous than when disquieting them with doubts as to their election.... For there is scarcely a mind in which the thought does not sometimes arise, Whence your salvation but from the election of God? But what proof have you of your election?'<sup>27</sup>

Calvin's answer was to point away from the eternal decree, in that it is impossible to know who has and has not been elected by trying to scrutinize the decree. Those in doubt should turn to the 'posterior signs', the temporal manifestation of the decree, namely Christ and our calling.<sup>28</sup> As we embrace Christ offered to us in the Word, then Christ becomes our

'Theodore Beza: Continuity and Regression in the Reformed Tradition', *Evangelical Quarterly* 64 (1992), pp. 131-54. W. Kickel's *Vernunft und Offenbarung bei Theodor Beza* (Neukirchen, 1967), portrayed Beza as seriously departing from Calvin, but even that work had to recognize that, with respect to predestination, Calvin had signposted Beza's way (p. 47).

<sup>27</sup> *Institutes* 3:24:4, cf. 3:21:7, 3:24:6.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:24:4-6.

'mirror of election': believing in him, we know that we have been chosen in him. Calvin's espousal of an atonement with a certain universal aspect enabled him to urge people to look away from the decree to Christ, and to exercise a direct act of faith in him, finding assurance in Christ and the Word, and not in themselves. Both Calvin and Beza warned people not to look directly into God's decrees, but to look to Christ. Calvin expected assurance to arise directly in the act of looking in faith to Christ. Beza, working with limited atonement, tended to think of steps of faith by which one reaches assurance indirectly. Calvin allowed that other signs may have some kind of supporting role in bringing assurance,<sup>29</sup> whereas Beza put greater confidence in being able to detect such faith by looking at one's works. Though Calvin's may be judged the better way, the basic fact, which should not be overlooked, is that both were engaged in the enterprise of telling people to look away from predestination. The doctrine of predestination carried with it the assurance that the eternal salvation of the believer is secure because undergirded by the eternal and unchanging purpose of God, but, at the same time, it created an anxious concern to discover one's preordained status. This does not come across in *Calvin and English Calvinism*, which gives the impression that limited atonement was the main cause of difficulties over assurance, rather than a diminution of a difficulty inherent in the doctrine of predestination.

It may be instructive to appreciate that the Lutherans criticized the Reformed for posing a threat to assurance. Lutheran indignation against Zanchi in Strasbourg in 1561-2, and Beza at the Colloquy of Montbéliard in 1586, was intensified by the Reformed espousal of limited atonement. However, the basic Lutheran objection was against a doctrine of predestination that posited a decree of election of a certain number of people before the world began. To the Lutherans, the way that doctrine of predestination caused Beza and Zanchi to limit the extent of the atonement to the elect was not surprising. But they did not see the root of the problem of assurance in limited atonement. In spite of Zanchi's and Beza's protestations to the contrary, the Lutherans regarded talk of absolute decrees about particular persons as meaning that people's attention would inevitably be diverted away from the Word and sacraments towards a process of prying into unfathomable mysteries, and could result only in either presumption or despair. It would be interesting to investigate whether the Lutherans discerned any difference between Calvin and

---

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:14:19.



Calvinists in this respect. The reviewer is not aware of any evidence that they did.<sup>30</sup>

Kendall's blaming of limited atonement for problems of assurance might be tested by a study of those Reformed theologians throughout the period in question who held to universal atonement. Among these would be James Ussher, John Davenant, Joseph Hall, Samuel Ward, John Preston (possibly), John Arrowsmith, Richard Vines, Lazarus Seaman, Edmund Calamy, Richard Baxter (whose 'neonomianism' was united with a vigorously defended universal atonement position) and in France, John Cameron and Moïse Amyraut. If problems over assurance were mainly due to limited atonement, we would expect such theologians to have something very different to say about faith and assurance than their universal-atonement contemporaries. The reviewer suggests that, as far as the English were concerned, it would be hard to establish a qualitative difference between their teaching about faith and assurance and that of their contemporaries. Cameron and Amyraut did revert to Calvin's explanation of faith as primarily a persuasion of the mind. However, the proponents of universal atonement, including these two, emphasized the character of faith as a condition as much as, if not more than, others. While their view of the extent of Christ's work may have had some bearing on their doctrine of faith and assurance, it would seem that it was by no means the only factor.

### **Covenant Theology**

Were other factors besides predestination and limited atonement responsible for fostering introspection, uncertainty and legalism? Kendall points to one, but perhaps could have attached even greater importance to it: the development of covenant theology in which a covenant of law or works is superseded, in God's dealings with human kind, by a covenant of grace and faith. Within this sort of covenant theology faith was seen as a condition to be performed, in some way analogous to the performance of works as the condition of the old covenant. As a condition to be performed it was liable to be viewed as an act of the will more than a kind of knowledge. Kendall states that 'Faith for Calvin was never a "condition"' (p. 210). In fact Calvin did refer to faith as a condition sometimes, but it was not his characteristic way of expressing himself, and Kendall's point may be accepted in so far that the formal conditionalism of later covenant theology is not to be found in the Genevan Reformer.

---

<sup>30</sup> See Thomas, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-8, 89-99.

Kendall repeatedly makes the provocative claim that English Calvinism's voluntaristic concept of faith was Arminian. If this be granted, the similarity was surely not because Arminius held to limited atonement, or particular predestination! It may well have had something to do with the commitment to the concept of a conditional covenant, which seventeenth-century Calvinists and Arminians shared. Among seventeenth-century English 'Calvinists', whether proponents of limited or universal atonement, covenant theology and particular predestination made a powerful combination. The covenant condition mitigated the inaccessibility of predestination, while predestination prevented the covenant condition from being impossible for people to fulfil, and left no place for pride on the part of those who might fulfil it. One might say that, in this construction, the very difficulty of the condition magnified the predestining grace of God which gives the ability to fulfil the condition. One might almost suggest that the grace of God would be magnified much more if God had made the condition even more difficult, and then graciously granted to the elect the ability to fulfil it. But one might then recognize that one would be travelling a road that led far away from the original genius of the Reformation doctrine of justification *sola fide, sola gratia, sola iustitia Christi*.

### Conclusion

R.T. Kendall has performed a considerable service by bringing into the open questions that need to be pondered, for they get close to the heart of the Reformed heritage. By setting Calvin and Beza in such sharp opposition, and not giving emphasis to their considerable common ground over predestination and even the extent of the atonement, he has perhaps laid something of a false trail. The story could have been told as one of development more than departure. Readers will gain most from *Calvin and English Calvinism* if they resist the temptation to cast Calvin as a hero and Beza as a villain in an attempt to distance themselves vicariously from some elements in the Reformed inheritance.