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The Quest for the Historical Calvin

by Tony Lane

Mr Lane, who is Lecturer in Historical Theology in London Bible College, contrasts and compares various attempts to find out what Calvin actually said on various controverted issues.

I. INTRODUCTION

Was Calvin a Calvinist? Did the Calvinists distort Calvin's own teaching? These questions have provoked a vigorous debate among Calvin scholars and among students of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed theology. Theodore Beza,¹ Peter Martyr,² Girolamo Zanchius,³ the Puritans of England and New England,⁴ the Westminster Confession⁵ and others⁶ have all been compared with Calvin and castigated as perverters of his theology or defended as his true heirs.

The present study is offered as a modest contribution to this debate.

- ¹ J. S. Bray, 'The Value of Works in the Theology of Calvin and Beza', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 4 (1973), 77-86; *idem*, *Theodore Beza's Doctrine of Predestination* (Nieuwkoop, 1975); R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford, 1979), ch.2; I. McPhee, *Conservator or Transformer of Calvin's Theology? A Study of the Origins and Development of Theodore Beza's Thought, 1550-1570* (Cambridge, Ph.D. thesis, 1979); J. Raitt, *The Eucharistic Theology of Theodore Beza* (Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, 1972). R. T. Kendall's book is conveniently summarised in his 'The Puritan Modifications of Calvin's Theology', in W. S. Reid (ed.), *John Calvin. His Influence in the Western World* (Grand Rapids, 1982), 199-214.
- ² J. P. Donnelly, *Calvinism and Scholasticism in Vermigli's Doctrine of Man and Grace* (Leiden, 1976).
- ³ N. Shepherd, 'Zanchius on Saving Faith', *Westminster Theological Journal* 36 (1973-4), 31-47, responding to an earlier work by O. Gründler.
- ⁴ W. H. Chalker, *Calvin and Some Sixteenth Century English Calvinists* (Duke University, Ph.D. thesis, 1961); R. T. Kendall, *op. cit.*, responded to by P. Helm, 'Calvin, English Calvinism and the Logic of Doctrinal Development', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34 (1981), 179-85 and *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Edinburgh, 1982); R. W. A. Letham, *Saving Faith and Assurance in Reformed Theology: Zwingli to the Synod of Dort* (Aberdeen, Ph.D. thesis, 1979); P. Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*² (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1954); *idem*, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1958), 48-98, responded to by E. H. Emerson, 'Calvin and Covenant Theology', *Church History* 25 (1956), 136-44 & G. M. Marsden, 'Perry Miller's Rehabilitation of the Puritans: A Critique', *Church History* 39 (1970), 91-105.
- ⁵ R. T. Kendall, *op. cit.*, chh.13f.; H. Rolston, *John Calvin versus the Westminster Confession* (Richmond, Virginia, 1972), responded to by D. MacLeod, 'Federal Theology — An Oppressive Legalism?', *Banner of Truth* 125 (February 1974), 21-8; J. B. Torrance, 'Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology' in A. I. C. Heron (ed), *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today* (Edinburgh, 1982), 40-54; T. F. Torrance (ed.), *The School of Faith* (London, 1959), xi-cxxvi.
- ⁶ B. G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy* (Madison, Milwaukee & London, 1969); C. W. Bogue, *Jonathan Edwards and the Covenant of Grace* (Cherry Hill, New Jersey, 1975); R. W. A. Letham, *op. cit.*, chh.4,6f.; J. B. Torrance, 'Covenant or Contract?', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970), 51-76.

Of the areas where Calvin can be compared with his successors, this study will be limited to soteriology.⁷ Furthermore, the aim is to clarify the teaching of Calvin himself and there will be only limited reference to his successors.

Some claim Calvin as a Calvinist. Others, who radically oppose this claim, portray him as, if one may use the term loosely, a Barthian before Barth. It is the thesis of this paper that both of these interpretations are mistaken. There is in Calvin a tension (a biblical tension in the view of the present author) between the universal and the particular, between God's purposes for mankind as a whole and his purpose for the elect in particular.⁸ The 'Calvinist' and the 'Barthian' interpretations of Calvin both err in highlighting one half of the paradox and in ignoring, suppressing or minimising the other half. This is done for dogmatic reasons — the desire to claim Calvin for a particular school of thought. This paper seeks to rescue Calvin from those who have pressed him into their own theological ranks and to restore him to his true historical setting — in other words, to recover the historical Calvin.

II. CALVIN VERSUS CALVINISM

(1) Introduction

In this section Calvin will be compared with the Reformed orthodoxy of the seventeenth century and later, with 'five-point' federal Calvinism. (The word 'Calvinist' will be reserved for this position) The Westminster Confession will be cited as a convenient summary and authoritative exposition of this position, but the comparison will not be limited to Calvin and the Westminster Confession.

To talk of Calvin versus Calvinism is liable to mislead us. It can create the impression that the Reformed tradition begins with one authoritative figure, Calvin, and that all subsequent Reformed theology is an attempt to be faithful to his insights. This misconception is fostered both by the use of the word 'Calvinist' for 'Reformed' and by the tendency of later Reformed schools of thought to claim Calvin's support. We can be misled into thinking of Calvin as *the* sole father of Reformed

⁷ For other topics, cf. J. H. Primus, 'Calvin and the Puritan Sabbath: A Comparative Study' in D. E. Holwerda (ed.), *Exploring the Heritage of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1976), 40-75; J. Raitt, *op. cit.*; G. J. Spykman, 'Sphere-Sovereignty in Calvin and the Calvinist Tradition' in D. E. Holwerda (ed.), *op. cit.*, 163-208; R. J. Van der Molen, 'Providence as Mystery, Providence as Revelation: Puritan and Anglican Modifications of John Calvin's Doctrine of Providence', *Church History* 47 (1978), 27-47.

⁸ R. B. Knox, 'John Calvin — An Elusive Churchman', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34 (1981), 147-56, rightly points to the tensions in Calvin's thought.

theology and into assessing all subsequent theologians in terms of fidelity to, decline from or improvement on his position. But this approach is fundamentally unhistorical. In the early years of the Reformation Calvin was simply one (albeit the greatest) Reformed theologian. Zwingli, Oecolampadius, Bucer, Bullinger and Peter Martyr are to be seen as Calvin's colleagues rather than his disciples. Calvin did not occupy the solitary role often ascribed to him in the popular imagination. He is the leading, not the sole, Reformed theologian of the early Reformation period. Differences between Calvin and seventeenth-century Reformed theologians need not be the infidelity of 'successors' to their 'founder'. They can equally reflect the influence of other early Reformed theologians. This is amply demonstrated by Dr. R. W. A. Letham in a recent thesis.⁹ He traces two main streams of Reformed theology from the earliest times, one represented by Zwingli, Bucer, Peter Martyr and Calvin and the other represented by Oecolampadius, Capito, Bullinger and Tyndale. Seventeenth-century 'departures' from Calvin are often only the influence of the 'other' stream of Reformed theology. While Calvin's stream was more prominent in the sixteenth century the rise of Covenant Theology marks the growing influence of the other stream in the seventeenth century.

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(2) Scholasticism

A widespread criticism of the Calvinists is that they introduced into their theology a scholasticism foreign to Calvin himself.¹⁰ Such claims are hard to assess because of the vagueness of the term 'scholastic'. Definition is difficult because scholasticism is an approach to theology rather than a set of particular beliefs. But there are five major tendencies which have been identified as the marks of the scholastic approach:¹¹

- (1) The deduction of a logical system from basic principles by rational means, especially Aristotelian syllogism.
- (2) Emphasis on the role of reason and logic (especially Aristotle's), making them equal to revelation.

⁹ R. W. A. Letham, *op. cit.* The differences between the two streams initially concern the definition of faith and its relation to assurance and widen to include issues such as limited atonement, supralapsarianism and conditionality of the covenant.

¹⁰ B. G. Armstrong, *op. cit.*, 31-42; P. Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, 50-3; T. F. Torrance (ed.), *op. cit.*, xvi-xx. For a defence of Beza in particular against this charge, cf. I. McPhee, *op. cit.*, xiii-xxvii.

¹¹ The list is mine, based on lists of B. G. Armstrong, *op. cit.*, 32; J. S. Bray, *op. cit.*, 137f.; J. P. Donnelly, *op. cit.*, 197-9. I. McPhee, *op. cit.*, xxi-xxii, questions the applicability of such definitions to Protestant orthodoxy.

- (3) Concern for a logically consistent watertight system.
- (4) Speculative interest in abstract metaphysical questions, especially concerning God and his will.
- (5) An unhistorical approach to Scripture, treating it as a body of propositions and seeing faith as assent to these propositions rather than trust in Christ.

Granted this definition, do we see here a sharp contrast between Calvin and Calvinism? It would be wrong to imply that there is an absolute contrast, but there is a significant shift in emphasis. This can be seen by considering the five points in turn.

98 (1) Calvin's primary concern was to expound the scriptural revelation and it is now widely accepted that no doctrine is elevated to the position of being a 'controlling principle'.¹² Calvinism, on the other hand, exalts the external decrees of God into such a position. While Calvin expounds the doctrine of predestination at the conclusion of his treatment of soteriology, the Westminster Confession places it immediately after the chapters on Scripture and God.¹³ Calvinists also show an interest in logically deduced doctrines, such as limited atonement, while Calvin warned against speculation.

(2) Calvinism undoubtedly places a greater emphasis on reason, but this is simply a relative difference. It would be nonsense to suggest either that Calvin gave *no* role to reason and logic or that the Calvinists made them *equal* to revelation. Calvin is capable of employing Aristotelian categories (such as the fourfold cause of justification) and scholastic distinctions (such as the two types of necessity),¹⁴ though he normally shuns them. It is mistaken to suggest that Calvin completely rejected Aristotelian logic.

(3) Calvinism manifests a *greater* concern for a logically consistent watertight system than does Calvin, but this is not an absolute contrast. The Calvinists were not willing to suppress what they clearly saw as scriptural teaching in the name of logical consistency. Calvin was *happier* than them to allow paradox and tension in his theology and not to attempt to tie together all loose ends, but this does not mean that he renounced logic or had no interest in consistency.

(4) Here lies the greatest difference. Calvinism has repeatedly manifested an interest in speculative questions such as the order of the divine

¹² Cf. T. H. L. Parker, 'The Approach to Calvin', *Evangelical Quarterly* 16 (1944), 165-72.

¹³ Cf. *Institutio* 3.21-24 with Westminster Confession ch.3. More recently, L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London, 1971), 100, argues that the 'only proper theological method' is to consider the divine decrees before considering the specific works of God.

¹⁴ *Inst.* 3.14.17, 1.16.9.

decrees (infralapsarianism versus supralapsarianism). The doctrine of limited atonement is argued more on logical grounds than on direct biblical evidence. Calvin, by contrast, showed a strong aversion to all speculation. 'The moment we go beyond the bounds of the word we are out of the course, in darkness, and must every now and then stumble, go astray, and fall.'¹⁵ It can of course be questioned whether or not Calvin always remained within these limits himself, but there can be no serious doubt about his passionate conviction that we ought to remain within them. If he transgressed, it was not consciously or wilfully. As regards his method, he was resolutely opposed to speculation beyond what is revealed.

(5) While Calvin may have been more historical than the Calvinists in his approach to Scripture, he still thought of it as revealed propositions from God,¹⁶ while the Calvinists were not totally unhistorical in their approach. Faith for Calvin includes assent to *all* of Scripture, as well as trust in God's promises in particular.¹⁷

Did the Calvinists introduce a scholasticism foreign to Calvin? We are dealing here with a relative matter, with a question of emphasis. 'Every sixteenth century theologian exhibits some traces of scholasticism in his teaching, but not all are thereby scholastics. The crucial consideration is the relative density of elements associated with scholasticism within a theologian's thought.'¹⁸ Calvinism became more scholastic than Calvin. Probably the most serious change lay in the increasing role given to logical deduction and the increased willingness to speculate. One of the most blatant manifestations of this is in the question of the extent of the atonement.

(3) *Limited Atonement*

Did Calvin hold to the later Calvinist doctrine of limited atonement? A variety of answers have been given. Some maintain that Calvin clearly taught universal atonement, that Christ died for all men without exception.¹⁹ Others claim that he held to limited atonement, that Christ died

¹⁵ *Inst.* 3.21.2, cf. 3.21.1, 3.24.4, all with regard to predestination. Cf. E. J. Meijering, *Calvin wider die Neugierde* (Nieuwkoop, 1980) for a thorough discussion of this question.

¹⁶ *E.g. Inst.* 1.7.1.

¹⁷ *Inst.* 1.7.1. Cf. R. W. A. Letham, *op. cit.*, 132f.

¹⁸ J. P. Donnelly, *op. cit.*, 197f.

¹⁹ R. T. Kendall, *op. cit.*, 13-18, follows a long tradition. Cf. reviews by S. Ferguson in *Banner of Truth* 168 (September 1977), 16-21 (reviewing an earlier presentation of Kendall's thesis) and A. N. S. Lane in *Themelios* 6.1 (September 1980), 30. Mr. C. Daniel is preparing a study on this subject which will be the fullest to date and which maintains that Calvin held to universal atonement.

for the elect alone, at least by implication.²⁰ Yet others argue that Calvin never answered this question, which was not a topic for debate in his time.²¹

On what grounds is it claimed that Calvin believed in limited atonement? *First*, he held to the efficacy of the cross. It is the 'effectual completion of salvation'.²² But in the context this implies that the work of salvation is *objectively* accomplished by the cross and Calvin later makes it clear that this is of *no use* to us unless the Holy Spirit apply it to us personally. 'So long as we are without Christ and separated from him, nothing which he suffered and did for the salvation of the *human race* is of the least benefit to us.'²³ Calvin does not appear to be taking the Calvinist line that the cross itself guarantees the subjective appropriation of salvation by the elect. *Secondly*, it is argued that the *logic* of Calvin's position demands limited atonement.²⁴ But to deduce such a doctrine by logical extrapolation is to indulge in speculation beyond what is revealed, to which Calvin was vigorously opposed. Furthermore, such deductions are based on one aspect only of Calvin's teaching, the particular or limited aspect, while there is also a universal aspect in his teaching.²⁵ Logical deductions from the latter aspect could equally lead to a doctrine of universal atonement. *Thirdly*, it is argued that because only the elect are saved and because Christ's death procures salvation, Christ died for the elect alone.²⁶ But this overlooks the distinction, noted above, between the objective work of Christ and the subjective application of it by the Holy Spirit. Similarly, the advocates of limited atonement love to pose the dilemma: does the work of Christ merely make salvation *possible*, without making *certain* the salvation of anyone, or does it effectually *guarantee* the salvation of the elect, for whom alone Christ died? Calvin's position is well summarised by the retort of Professor James Torrance: our salvation is made certain, not merely possible, by the combined work of Father, Son and Holy Spirit (*i. e.* not by the cross

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²⁰ P. Helm, *art. cit.*, 180-2; *idem*, *op. cit.*, 13-23, 32-50; R. Nicole, *Moyse Amyraut (1596-1664) and the controversy on universal grace, first phase (1634-1637)* (Harvard University Ph.D. thesis, 1966), 14-21, followed by W. R. Godfrey, 'Reformed Thought on the Extent of the Atonement to 1618', *Westminster Theological Journal* 37 (1974-5), 137f.

²¹ W. Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (London, 1967), 395-402; S. Ferguson, *art. cit.*, 17-19; R. W. A. Letham, *op. cit.*, 124-6. Cunningham's main concern is to deny that Calvin held to universal atonement.

²² *Inst.* 2.16.13, cited by P. Helm, *art. cit.*, 180f. Cf. R. Nicole, *op. cit.*, 19.

²³ *Inst.* 3.1.1, my italics.

²⁴ W. R. Godfrey, *art. cit.*, 137f.; P. Helm, *art. cit.*, 18-22, where the argument concerns more what Calvin *ought* to have believed; R. Nicole, *op. cit.*, 18.

²⁵ Cf. section III.3, below.

²⁶ P. Helm, *op. cit.*, 16-18.

alone, taken in isolation). *Fourthly*, it is argued that many 'universal' statements in Calvin are either quotation from Scripture or reference to the universal call of the gospel.²⁷ But Calvin presumably agreed with scriptural passages which he quoted and he based the universal offer of the gospel on the revealed will of God that he desires the salvation of all.²⁸

Did Calvin then teach universal atonement? There are many instances where he seems to imply this.²⁹ But there is one passage where he appears to deny it, where he states that the flesh of Christ was not crucified for the wicked and his blood was not shed for their sins.³⁰ This can either be taken as evidence that Calvin did not have a fully-developed position on this matter, or else interpreted to bring it into line with the main thrust of his teaching.³¹

(4) *Subjectivity*

Seventeenth-century Calvinism in general and the Westminster standards in particular are criticised for shifting the focus of attention from the objective person and work of Christ to the subjective matters of personal appropriation of salvation and sanctification.³² The emphasis shifts from what God has done for us in Christ to what we must do in response. The emphasis shifts from the *history* of salvation (objective, universal, christological) to the *order* of salvation (subjective, personal, anthropological).

The issue here is change of emphasis rather than change in content, though the former is not without implications for the latter. A comparison of Calvin with the Westminster Confession would make it clear that there *is* a significant shift in this direction. The preoccupation of the Westminster divines with the appropriation of salvation and the *ordo salutis* is foreign to Calvin.³³ This has important theological and pastoral consequences, especially in the doctrine of assurance. The West-

²⁷ W. R. Godfrey, *art. cit.*, 137f.; R. Nicole, *op. cit.*, 20.

²⁸ Cf. section III.3, below.

²⁹ R. T. Kendall, *op. cit.*, 13-18, lists some. A very full list will appear in C. Daniel's forthcoming study.

³⁰ In his reply to Heshusius (J. K. S. Reid (ed.), *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (London & Philadelphia, 1954), 285). Cf. *Comm. Jn.* 10.11; *Comm. I Jn.* 2.2.

³¹ C. Daniel, in his forthcoming study, seeks to interpret this passage in line with universal atonement.

³² J. B. Torrance, 'Calvinism and Puritanism in England and Scotland — Some Basic Concepts in the Development of "Federal Theology"' in *Calvinus Reformator* (Potchefstroom, 1982), 264-86; T. F. Torrance (ed.), *op. cit.*, xviii-xix, xlviii-xlix.

³³ Cf. E. H. Emerson, *art. cit.*, 142: 'Puritan thought differs from Calvin's in being much more concerned with man's salvation and less concerned with God's glory'.

minster Confession advises the Christian to look within himself for the evidence of election, a course of action which Calvin regarded as highly dangerous.

(5) Faith

One of the differences between the two streams of Reformed theology lies in the concept of faith. Calvin belonged to the school which saw faith primarily as passive, as a persuasion of the mind.³⁴ Seventeenth-century Calvinism drew mainly on the other stream, seeing faith primarily as active, as the will embracing Christ. The Westminster Confession illustrates this. Faith 'believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the word'. 'But the principal acts of saving faith are, accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone.'³⁵

Another aspect of the doctrine of faith lies in its relationship to repentance. Calvin taught that faith is prior to repentance while many Calvinists reversed the order.³⁶ But in defense of the latter it is argued that the order is logical rather than chronological, 'so how that question is resolved in the *ordo salutis* carries no implications for the order of the various phases of Christian experience.'³⁷ But because the order is logical rather than chronological it does not necessarily follow that the order is theologically and pastorally irrelevant. Calvin defined repentance in such a way as to link it with the concept of regeneration and thus to portray it as one of the benefits of the gospel, as a gift of God, as something to be received by faith, not as something to be achieved before faith. If repentance is placed before faith it can easily come to be seen as a *pre*-condition of faith in such a way that folk feel unable to come to Christ on the grounds that they are not repentant. This undermines the free character of the gospel and is contrary both to Calvin and to the authentic evangelical tradition:

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to thee for dress;
Helpless, look to thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly:
Wash me, Saviour, or I die!

³⁴ Cf. A. N. S. Lane, 'Calvin's Doctrine of Assurance', *Vox Evangelica* 11 (1979), 42-4.

³⁵ Westminster Confession ch.14.2. This contrast is not absolute: cf. section III.4, below.

³⁶ *Inst.* 3.3.1f. Cf. R. T. Kendall, *op. cit.*, 27.

³⁷ P. Helm, *art. cit.*, 184. He claims that the *mainstream* Reformed tradition did not see repentance as temporally prior to faith, but a number of exceptions are given by G. Thomas, 'Becoming a Christian — Covenant Theology: A Historical Survey' in *Becoming a Christian* (Westminster Conference, 1972), 12f.

(6) Assurance

There is a sharp contrast between Calvin and the Westminster Confession in the matter of assurance of salvation.³⁸ The Confession sees faith and assurance as closely related but distinct. Christians may have assurance of salvation and it is our Christian duty to seek it, but it is not of the essence of faith and a true believer may be long without it.³⁹ But for Calvin faith, by definition, includes assurance. 'Those who doubt their possession of Christ and their membership in His Body are reprobates.'⁴⁰ Calvin and the Westminster Confession belong to the two different streams of Reformed thought and the relation between faith and assurance is another area in which the streams diverge.

Despite this apparently clear contrast between Calvin and Calvinism, acknowledged by William Cunningham, the staunch defender of Calvinism,⁴¹ attempts have been made to suggest that there is no really significant difference here. A number of arguments have been brought forward.

First, it is claimed that Calvin does in fact distinguish faith and assurance, but the passages cited do not support this claim.⁴² *Secondly*, it is argued that for Calvin, 'while faith *ought* to be assured faith, there is no such thing as perfect or total assurance, a completely doubt-free confidence that God's mercy applies to *me*.'⁴³ But Calvin does not concede that *faith* includes any doubt about one's personal salvation. What he teaches is that the *believer* is constantly assailed by doubt, i.e. that his faith is constantly under attack.⁴⁴ This Calvin concedes, in line with pastoral reality, without in any way weakening the identification of faith with assurance. Similarly he can explain weak assurance in terms of weak faith without thereby weakening the link between faith and assurance.⁴⁵ Calvin's response to the pastoral problem of weak assurance is *not* to separate faith and assurance but to urge stronger faith.

Thirdly, Calvin is faulted on logical grounds. To define faith as belief in one's *own* salvation is unsound because 'it holds true universally, that God requires us to believe nothing which is not true before we believe it'

³⁸ For a fuller treatment, cf. A. N. S. Lane, *art. cit.*

³⁹ Westminster Confession ch.18.

⁴⁰ *Comm.* II Cor. 13.5.

⁴¹ W. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, ch.3.

⁴² P. Helm, *art. cit.*, 182, cites *Inst.* 3.2.11f. and Calvin's commentary on the Penitential Psalms. But the former contrasts true and false faith, not faith and assurance, while *Comm.* Ps. 38.21f., 51.7-9 emphasises precisely the inseparability of faith and assurance.

⁴³ P. Helm, *op. cit.*, 25 (his italics).

⁴⁴ Cf. A. N. S. Lane, *art. cit.*, 33.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 32f.

and we are not saved *before* we believe.⁴⁶ This argument, much beloved by Calvinists,⁴⁷ would if correct prove not that Calvin was a Calvinist but merely that he was mistaken. (The nature of the argument provides an incidental illustration of the shift towards scholasticism by the Calvinists.) It does at first sight appear as if Calvin is caught on the horns of a dilemma, yet he saw no problem here while the Calvinists do. This is perhaps further evidence of a significant shift in perspective between Calvin and the Calvinists. The dilemma need not however be real, as I have sought to demonstrate elsewhere.⁴⁸

Fourthly, it is argued that the Reformers faced a different pastoral situation to the later Calvinists and that this explains why the former could neglect the topic of assurance.⁴⁹ But the situation is more complex than this argument allows. In the first place, the Reformers were not unaware that believers could doubt their own salvation, as seems to be implied. This was not a pastoral discovery of the seventeenth century. Secondly, it is not true simply to state that the sixteenth-century Reformers identified faith and assurance while the seventeenth-century Calvinists separated them. The two approaches belong to the two different streams of Reformed tradition. While the former is more common in the sixteenth century and the latter more common in the seventeenth century, *both* are found throughout. The contrast cannot simply be explained by changed pastoral situations. Furthermore, it could plausibly be argued that the heightened pastoral problems of the seventeenth century are at least in part the *consequence* of the shift in theological perspective, rather than its cause. The Westminster Confession directs the believer to look within himself for the evidence of election.⁵⁰ Calvin vigorously opposed such a course of action, seeing it as pastorally disastrous.⁵¹ The pastoral situation of the seventeenth century could be seen as a vindication of his warnings.

Fifthly, it is argued that Calvin's definition of faith is to be taken as 'a definition, not of saving faith at its lowest, but of faith set free from fetters and in lively exercise.'⁵² Suffice it to say that this interpretation finds no warrant in Calvin and that he emphatically states that faith

⁴⁶ W. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, 119.

⁴⁷ P. Helm, *art. cit.*, 182f. G. J. Keddie, ' "Unfallible Certenty of the Pardon of Sinne and Life Everlasting" ', *Evangelical Quarterly* 48 (1976), 233. Cf. J. Macleod, *Scottish Theology* (Edinburgh, 1974), 28-31.

⁴⁸ A. N. S. Lane, *art. cit.*, 43f.

⁴⁹ W. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, 113f.; P. Helm, *art. cit.*, 185; G. J. Keddie, *art. cit.*, 230-3; J. Macleod, *op. cit.*, 28.

⁵⁰ Westminster Confession ch.18. Cf. A. N. S. Lane, *art. cit.*, 48.

⁵¹ A. N. S. Lane, *art. cit.*, 35f.

⁵² J. Macleod, *op. cit.*, 27f. Cf. P. Helm, *op. cit.*, 24-30.

without assurance is not true faith. He *did* allow that those weak in faith will be weak in assurance, but his advice to such was not to seek assurance as something *distinct* from faith (the Calvinist position) but to strengthen their faith and thereby their assurance.⁵³

Finally, some misinterpret Calvin by suggesting, contrary to the passages quoted above, that assurance is to be based on an awareness that one has true faith.⁵⁴ What these writers fail to discern is that there is for Calvin only one *primary* ground of assurance: Christ and the promises of the gospel. Other evidences, such as good works or the experience of faith, are legitimate but *only* while they are seen as secondary or supportive grounds, not if they usurp the place of the primary ground.⁵⁵

There is a significant divergence between Calvin and Calvinism at this point. History shows that the teaching of the full Calvinist position gives birth to churches where lack of assurance is rife. The Calvinist approach of separating faith and assurance, far from being the pastoral cure for lack of assurance seems to be its cause. This is tragic as assurance of salvation is rightly considered to be one of the major distinctives of evangelical Christianity and Calvin himself is one of those responsible for this.

(7) *Covenant Theology*

This study will touch only briefly on the question of Calvin and covenant theology, because it has been well aired by two of the other writers and elsewhere.⁵⁶ There are three important areas where Calvin can be distinguished from covenant theology.

First, the mark of covenant theology is that 'the idea of covenant came to be an organizing principle in terms of which the relations of God to men were construed.'⁵⁷ For Calvin, by contrast, while the idea of

⁵³ A. N. S. Lane, *art. cit.*, 32f.

⁵⁴ J. S. Bray, *art. cit.*, 80; P. Helm, *op. cit.*, 26f. G. J. Keddie, *art. cit.*, 231f. I. McPhee, *op. cit.*, 330-9, especially 336f., tends in this direction.

⁵⁵ A. N. S. Lane, *art. cit.*, 33-6. D. A. Stoute, *The Origins and early Development of the Reformed Idea of the Covenant* (Cambridge, Ph.D. thesis, 1979), 229-31, sees the role given by Calvin to good works as evidence of his recognition of the need for psychological as well as theological bases for assurance and as the seed of later Calvinist developments. A more natural explanation of the role that Calvin gives to works would be the need to accommodate biblical passages such as 1 Jn. 2.3.

⁵⁶ P. Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*², 365-462; *idem*, *Errand into the Wilderness*, 48-98; M. E. Osterhaven, 'Calvin on the Covenant', *Reformed Review* 33 (1979-80), 136-49; H. Rolston, *op. cit.*

⁵⁷ J. Murray, 'Covenant Theology' in P. E. Hughes (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* vol.3 (Marshallton, Delaware, 1972), 200.

covenant was important, 'it would indeed be a forced interpretation that would see Calvin as a covenant theologian in the sense that the covenant concept was an "organizing principle" in his theology.⁵⁸ It would therefore be incorrect to call Calvin a covenant theologian. This implies a difference in theological approach between Calvin and Calvinism — indeed the phenomenon of a single organisational principle can be taken as further evidence of the Calvinist tendency towards scholasticism. But it does not of necessity imply any doctrinal difference between Calvin and Calvinism.

Secondly, full-blooded covenant theology postulates, in addition to the covenant of grace, a covenant of works made with Adam before the Fall. As the Westminster Confession puts it:

The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.⁵⁹

Calvin has no concept of a covenant of works before the Fall.⁶⁰ But Calvin did hold that God's dealings with man differ before and after the Fall, inside and outside of Christ, and this is at least a major part of what is meant by the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.⁶¹ Indeed one writer can maintain that in Calvin's thought 'the pale shadow of this development [the covenant of works] may be seen lurking in the background.'⁶² The difference between Calvin and Calvinism here lies mainly (but not necessarily exclusively) in the more scholastic approach of the latter, developing the covenant concept beyond its scriptural position (where Calvin keeps it) into an organisational principle. Robert Rollock, one of the earliest covenant theologians took it to be an *a priori* principle that God never deals with man other than on the basis of a covenant.⁶³

Thirdly, it is maintained that Calvin believed that the covenant (of grace) is unconditional while the covenant theologians made it conditional. But the picture is not so simple. In the first place, not all federal theologians held or hold the covenant to be conditional — in fact the conditionality of the covenant was a major area of controversy *within*

⁵⁸ C. W. Bogue, *op. cit.*, 56.

⁵⁹ Westminster Confession ch.7.2. Cf. ch.19.1.

⁶⁰ H. Rolston, *op. cit.*, builds upon and exaggerates the difference here.

⁶¹ Cf. A. A. Hoekema, 'The Covenant of Grace in Calvin's Teaching', *Calvin Theological Journal* 2 (1967), 133, for the idea that the 'spiritual truths underlying this doctrine' of the covenant of works are found in Calvin.

⁶² D. A. Stoute, *op. cit.* 240, cf. 248f.

⁶³ Cited by D. A. Stoute, *op. cit.*, 249.

federal theology.⁶⁴ In the second place, Calvin's position is not totally clear. Many maintain that he saw the covenant as unconditional,⁶⁵ but some have discerned a conditional element in his teaching on the covenant.⁶⁶ This debate is not necessarily as significant as may appear. To some extent at least it is an argument about words in that all agree that there are senses in which the covenant is both conditional and unconditional.⁶⁷

III. CALVIN VERSUS BARTHIANISM

(1) *Introduction*

The rise of Neo-Orthodoxy and the influence of Karl Barth in particular has given a great stimulus to Calvin studies in this century. As well as reviving interest in Calvin, this school has given us many valuable insights into his theology and has opened our eyes to much in it to which Calvin scholarship had been largely blind. Many of the leading Calvin scholars in recent times have been of the Neo-Orthodox persuasion. But while they have opened our eyes to things in Calvin which others had overlooked they have not all been spared the temptation that has afflicted the Calvinists — the temptation to press Calvin into their ranks to make of him Karl Barth's first and greatest disciple. If we are to recover the historical Calvin we must rescue him not just from the 'Calvinist reactionaries' but also from the 'Barthian revisionists'.

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The Barthians, among others, have performed valuable service in pointing us to the difference between Calvin and Calvinism. But they have not always escaped the danger of overplaying these differences and presenting a picture of Calvin biased in the opposite direction. This can lead to an interpretation of Calvin in which certain elements of his teaching, *e.g.* double predestination, no longer fit and these elements are then seen as 'inconsistent' with the 'true' thrust of his teaching.⁶⁸ The natural explanation is not that Calvin did not really know his own mind when it came to predestination but that the inconsistency is clear evidence of the inadequacy of the interpretation of Calvin offered.

⁶⁴ J. Murray, *art. cit.*, 208-12.

⁶⁵ R. L. Greaves, 'John Knox and the Covenant Tradition', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 24 (1973), 31f.; R. W. A. Letham, *op. cit.*, 119-22; G. Thomas, *art. cit.*, 7; L. J. Trinterud, 'The Origins of Puritanism', *Church History* 20 (1951), 45.

⁶⁶ C. W. Bogue, *op. cit.*, 57-60; A. A. Hoekema, *art. cit.*, especially 155-9; D. A. Stoute, *op. cit.*, 221-41.

⁶⁷ J. Murray, *art. cit.*, 211f.

⁶⁸ This method, the construction of a logically coherent system from Calvin's writings, is precisely the scholastic method into which the Calvinists fell.

Calvin can be made to teach almost anything if we are free to launder out whatever in his teaching deviates from the desired interpretation.

(2) *Knowledge of God*

W. H. Chalker, in his doctoral thesis, argues that for Calvin there is no knowledge of God except in Christ, which means there is no knowledge of God except as Saviour, which means in turn that problems with assurance are *impossible* since God can be known only as Saviour. This neat picture, which conveniently coheres with Dr Chalker's own position and contrasts with the Puritanism which he dislikes, does not fit Calvin.⁶⁹

Even if we concede, as some would not, that for Calvin there is no true knowledge of God outside of his *revelation*, it by no means follows that there is no true knowledge of God outside of his revelation of himself as *Saviour*. Calvin clearly teaches that it is possible to know God as Creator and Judge before and without knowing him as one's own Saviour. *First*, he teaches that it is the role of the law to point us to Christ. This is the first, though not the principal, use of the law.⁷⁰ *Secondly*, Calvin clearly teaches that it is possible to know one's lost condition prior to coming to faith: 'We will never seriously apply to God for pardon, until we have obtained such a view of our sins as inspires us with fear.'⁷¹ While the knowledge of one's lostness may not be separated from a knowledge of God, it does not follow that this is a knowledge of God *as Saviour*.⁷² Turning to Christ is usually preceded by an awareness of sin. 'Examples of evangelical repentance we see in all those who, first stung with a sense of sin, but afterwards raised and revived by confidence in the divine mercy, turned unto the Lord.'⁷³ *Thirdly*, it is possible according to Calvin to be aware of one's own reprobation, at least in rare cases.⁷⁴ Legal repentance is seen in those, like Cain, Saul and Judas, who 'perceived the heinousness of their sins, and dreaded the divine anger; but, thinking only of God as a judge and avenger, were

⁶⁹ W. H. Chalker, *op. cit.*, ch.2, summarised and answered in A. N. S. Lane, *art. cit.*, 36-45.

⁷⁰ *Inst.* 2.7.6-9. P. Helm, *op. cit.*, 67-9, rightly points to this element in Calvin, but wrongly concludes that 'the convicting power of the Law is *necessary* before faith' (my italics).

⁷¹ *Comm. Ps.* 51.3. Cf. J. Calvin, *Concerning Scandals* (Edinburgh, 1978), 20f.; *idem*, *Tracts Relating to the Reformation* vol.1 (Edinburgh, 1844), 133f. J. K. S. Reid (ed.), *op. cit.*, 234f.

⁷² *Inst.* 1.1.2 illustrates this well.

⁷³ *Inst.* 3.3.4.

⁷⁴ *Comm. Mt.* 27.3; *Comm. Heb.* 12.17.

overwhelmed by the thought.⁷⁵ *Fourthly*, Calvin refers to those with mere historical faith, temporary faith, etc. These people clearly have a significant knowledge of God, in the case of the latter sometimes falling little short of the elect, yet they have no *saving* knowledge of God.⁷⁶

These examples all show that it is possible to know the gospel and in some sense to know God, without being saved. Of course, one could retort that this is no *true* knowledge of God, but this reduces to the tautology that 'there is no true (saving) knowledge of God without knowing him as Saviour.' Calvin clearly used the concept of the knowledge of God in a broader sense than this.

(3) Predestination

Calvin's doctrine of double predestination is an offense to the Barthian and various ways have been devised to circumvent it. Professor T. F. Torrance claims that for Calvin 'there may appear to be a two-fold will of God for salvation and reprobation, but at the *Parousia* we shall see that there was only one divine will for our salvation.'⁷⁷ But this seriously distorts Calvin's position.

Calvin contrasts two aspects of God's will. On the one hand there is his revealed will, his desire for the salvation of all, which leads to the offer of the gospel to all and the command to preach the gospel universally. But there is also God's secret will, by which he has determined that the elect and they alone will repent and be saved.

As lawgiver He illuminates all with the external doctrine of life, in this first sense calling all men to life. But in the other sense, He brings to life whom He will, as Father regenerating by the Spirit only His sons.⁷⁸

There is a tension here between the 'two wills' of God. Calvin maintains, as Professor Torrance rightly notes, that *ultimately* God's will is simple and single, not manifold.⁷⁹ But this ultimate simplicity is achieved, for Calvin, not by suppressing one of the two aspects of God's will and making the other ultimate (as does Professor Torrance) but by appealing to God's transcendent mystery.

If anyone objects that it is absurd to split God's will, I answer that this is exactly our belief, that His will is one and undivided: but because our minds

⁷⁵ *Inst.* 3.3.4.

⁷⁶ A. N. S. Lane, *art. cit.*, 44-6.

⁷⁷ T. F. Torrance (ed.), *op. cit.*, lxxviii. Cf. T. F. Torrance, *Kingdom and Church* (Edinburgh & London, 1956), 107.

⁷⁸ *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* (London, 1961), 106. Cf. *Inst.* 3.3.21, 3.24.15f.; *Comm. Ez.* 18.23; *Comm. Mt.* 23.37; *Comm. 1 Tim.* 2.4; *Comm. 2 Pet.* 3.9. For a good discussion of this point, cf. B. G. Armstrong, *op. cit.*, 186-91, 198f.

⁷⁹ *Inst.* 1.18.3, 3.24.17; *Comm. Ez.* 18.23.

cannot plumb the profound depths of His secret election to suit our infirmity, the will of God is set before us as double.⁸⁰

If there were any grounds for claiming that *one* aspect of God's will was ultimate for Calvin it would not be the universal will for salvation, which Calvin normally only mentions when forced to do so by the universal passages in Scripture, but the secret will of predestination which describes what actually happens.

The Calvinist and the Barthian both fall into the scholastic approach at this point. Each maintains the single will of God by suppressing the aspect which does not fit into their logically consistent system — the Calvinist allows his doctrine of predestination to suppress the universal element while the Barthian allows his christological principle to suppress double predestination. Calvin's position, acceptance of the paradoxical duality in God's will, is less logically tidy and less scholastically appealing, but truer both to Scripture and to human experience.

Another way to circumvent double predestination is to minimise its role in Calvin's theology. Some suggest that it is inconsistent with the main thrust of Calvin's teaching.⁸¹ Others attempt to make reprobation incidental to Calvin's teaching. Indeed it has been stated that 'for Calvin the doctrine of double predestination does not in *any* way change the picture of the God of gratuitous love.'⁸²

Calvin himself certainly felt the doctrine of reprobation to be important and engaged in vigorous controversy in its defense. Furthermore, reprobation is not incidental to his theology but is inextricably bound up with another doctrine — providence. Calvin held that 'by his providence, not heaven and earth and inanimate creatures only, but also the counsels and wills of men are so governed as to move exactly in the course which he has destined.'⁸³ With this view of providence he had no choice but to regard the Fall as positively ordained by God. He opposed those who taught that God merely 'allowed' the Fall.⁸⁴ In the final and definitive edition of the *Institutio* Calvin separated the doctrines of providence and predestination, but the influence of the former on the latter did not thereby cease. It has rightly been claimed that at this point Calvin is more 'Calvinist' than many of his followers, who have drawn back from the full rigour of his position.⁸⁵ To make Calvin

⁸⁰ *Comm. Mt.* 23.37. *Cf. Inst.* 3.24.17; *Comm. Ez.* 18.23.

⁸¹ H. Rolston, *op. cit.*, 29-32.

⁸² E. A. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York, 1952), 211 (my italics), *cf.* 211-20. *Cf.* J. S. Bray, *op. cit.*, 60-3, for an assessment of this.

⁸³ *Inst.* 1.16.8.

⁸⁴ *Inst.* 3.23.7f.

⁸⁵ D. MacLeod, 'Misunderstandings of Calvinism', *Banner of Truth* 51 (November/December 1967), 12.

appear more moderate than his followers by denying or minimising the harsher elements of his doctrine of reprobation is not to be true to the historical Calvin.

(4) *Faith*

Calvin defines faith as knowledge. Furthermore, the Gospel is to be seen as an unconditional promise of salvation. But it would be wrong to infer from this that Calvin was a 'Barthian' in the sense of believing that faith is merely the recognition of what is *already* true rather than the appropriation to oneself of a salvation which was not previously possessed.

In the first place, while Calvin defines faith as knowledge and as a persuasion of the mind he is emphatic that it is also more than this. Calvin did not locate faith *exclusively* in the mind, as has been suggested.⁸⁶ A 'faith' which did not proceed further than the mind would be mere intellectual assent, not saving faith. Faith is 'no mere opinion or persuasion.'⁸⁷ Faith needs to penetrate the *heart* before it becomes saving faith and the heart relates primarily to the will.⁸⁸

Is faith a condition of salvation for Calvin? Not in the sense of being something that man does without God's aid. Not in the sense of being a meritorious condition, not in the sense of deserving salvation. But faith *is* a condition of salvation in the sense that there is no salvation without faith.⁸⁹ To use Calvin's terminology, faith is the instrumental cause of justification.⁹⁰

Faith for Calvin can be likened to the passive acceptance of a free gift. The gift is free and unconditional in the sense that a friend might leave me a legacy in his will. There is no need for me to earn the gift or to do something for it, but nonetheless I do not gain possession of it until I receive it. If I refuse it or ignore it it does not become mine in reality, although I remain legally entitled to it. Similarly, faith involves freely laying hold of Christ who is unconditionally offered to all who will have him. It is wrong to suggest that faith is so passive that it does not include *appropriation* of salvation. Calvin himself freely spoke of receiving Christ, making him our own and appropriating him.⁹¹

It is at best misleading to say that 'for Calvin, the work of the Holy Spirit in evoking faith is to make us cognitively aware of *what we already*

⁸⁶ R. T. Kendall, *op. cit.*, 28. His position is opposed by A. N. S. Lane, *art. cit.*, 42-4; R. W. A. Letham, *op. cit.*, 127-9.

⁸⁷ *Inst.* 3.2.1. Cf. 3.2.8,10,16,29f.,33,36,43.

⁸⁸ *Inst.* 3.2.10,33,36. Cf. A. N. S. Lane, *art. cit.*, 42-4.

⁸⁹ A. N. S. Lane, *art. cit.*, 41f.

⁹⁰ *Inst.* 3.11.7, 3.14.17,21.

⁹¹ A. N. S. Lane, *art. cit.*, 43; R. W. A. Letham, *op. cit.*, 128f.

are in Christ.⁹² There is the need to distinguish between the objective character of salvation, already complete in Christ, and our subjective partaking of it. 'So long as we are without Christ and separated from him, nothing which he suffered and did for the salvation of the human race is of the least benefit to us.'⁹³ 'According to the secret election of God, we are already 'sheep' in His heart, before we are born; and we begin to be 'sheep' in ourselves, through the calling by which He gathers us into His fold.'⁹⁴ While faith recognises what is already true (objectively) it makes us (subjectively) what we were not previously. While Christ has won our justification for us, we are not personally justified until we believe. While the preacher can tell the unbeliever that God has been reconciled to him in Christ (objectively) he must also, according to Calvin, tell him that he is not reconciled to God (subjectively) until he believes. While in the objective sense of the work of Christ one can say that 'forgiveness is logically prior to repentance', Calvin is emphatic that the unrepentant sinner is *not* forgiven in that he will be lost if he dies in that condition.⁹⁶ Calvin's teaching on the completeness of the work of Christ must not be confused with the 'Barthian' idea that all are saved and that the believer is simply the one who has come to realise what is true anyway of everyone. For Calvin faith *changes* the situation in that the child of wrath becomes a child of God.

(5) *One Covenant*

For Calvin there is only one eternal covenant of grace. This much is true in that Calvin did not employ the later Calvinist concept of a covenant of works for God's relationship to Adam before the Fall or to fallen man outside of Christ. But it would be wrong to draw from this the Barthian conclusion that God's only dealings with man are in Christ as their Saviour.⁹⁷ This would be to fall into the same scholastic approach as the federal theologians, that of subsuming all of God's dealings with man under the category of covenant. Calvin differs from such an approach in a number of ways. *First*, while he did not talk of a covenant of works, he made it clear that God's dealings with man differ before and after the Fall. *Secondly*, while there is only one covenant, it does not follow that God relates to all men according to this covenant. The covenant is made

⁹² J. B. Torrance, 'Calvinism and Puritanism in England and Scotland', 268 (his italics).

⁹³ *Inst.* 3.1.1. Cf. *Comm.* 2 Cor. 5.18 for a clear distinction between the objective and the subjective.

⁹⁴ *Comm.* Jn. 10.8, cited by Torrance in the passage noted in n.92, above.

⁹⁵ J. B. Torrance, 'Covenant or Contract?', 57.

⁹⁶ *E.g. Inst.* 3.2.25.

⁹⁷ Cf. T. F. Torrance (ed.), *op. cit.*, liv-lv, lxiii-lxv, cxiii.

not with all men but with the visible church, a group wider than the elect but narrower than the human race.⁹⁸ The covenant applies, for instance, to the children of Christians, not to the children of pagans.⁹⁹ That there is only one covenant does not mean that God deals with all men according to that covenant.

It has also been claimed that Calvin viewed Christ as the head of all men and not just of the elect.¹⁰⁰ But the passages cited in support of this contention clearly portray Christ as head of the *church*.¹⁰¹ The idea of the headship of Christ over all men is a Barthian idea alien to Calvin. The limitation of Christ's headship to the church, criticised as the federal theologians' perversion of Calvin,¹⁰¹ is found in Calvin himself.

IV. CONCLUSION

Calvin was above all a biblical theologian. Unlike many of those who have later claimed his support, he was an outstanding exegete and is one of the few pre-nineteenth-century commentators of abiding value for modern critical scholarship. His constant involvement with the biblical text, together with his aversion to speculation beyond what is revealed, kept him from abandoning some of the genuine biblical tensions and paradoxes. It is the contention of this paper that both the 'Calvinist' and the 'Barthian' interpretations of Calvin fall into the scholastic trap of seeking to reduce the tension in the interests of logical tidiness. Calvin did not give way to a controlling principle in his theology, whether that be the Calvinist doctrine of the eternal decrees or of Barthian 'Christomonism'. Calvin was prepared to recognise *both* God's universal love for all mankind and his desire for all to repent *and* his purpose that some only should be saved. To the feeble human mind these are irreconcilable. The mark of the true disciple of Calvin is the willingness to accept biblical paradox and not to seek to reconcile it in the direction of one pole or another.

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⁹⁸ *Inst.* 3.12.7

⁹⁹ *Inst.* 4.16.5.

¹⁰⁰ J. B. Torrance, 'Covenant or Contract?', 68. Cf. T. F. Torrance (ed.), *op. cit.*, cxi-cxvii, where the editor is expounding his own views but includes Calvin.

¹⁰¹ *Inst.* 3.1.1, 3.25.3; *Comm.* Rom. 8.30 have been cited. Cf. also *Comm.* Eph. 1.22f. *Comm.* Ps. 22.22, cited in T. F. Torrance (ed.), *op. cit.*, cxvii, does state that the Incarnation make Christ our brother. 'This, no doubt, to a certain extent, belongs to all mankind, but the true enjoyment thereof belongs properly to the genuine believers alone'. Calvin does not here justify Torrance's statement that 'there is a sense, therefore, in which we must speak of all men as ingrafted into Christ in virtue of His incarnational and atoning work'.

¹⁰² J. B. Torrance, 'Covenant or Contract?', 68.