

Is There A Dichotomy Between John Calvin And His Scholastic Followers?

Many have made the claim that there is a clear distinction between what Calvin believed and what his more strict followers taught, especially in the areas of double-predestination and limited atonement. We are told that Calvin believed that Christ's atonement was for every man and this part of the TULIP formulation¹ was hardened into a narrower meaning by Beza, Perkins, Ames and others, being solidified in the Canons of Dordt, over 50 years after Calvin's death.

Perhaps the most well known exponent of this idea is the work of R.T. Kendall. Despite this notion being thoroughly trounced by the most distinguished academics and theologians,² these works are ignored or unknown to most readers. However, the dubious claims of a disparity between Calvin and later English Calvinists are hyped up by one speaker, preacher and author after another, so that many readers believe what they are told. This paper seeks to, as briefly as possible, outline the situation and show the truth.

The false claim

In essence, the modernists teach that Calvin was a heart-warming preacher of the Gospel who pleaded and persuaded his hearers to yield to Christ. His later followers, and especially the Puritans, preached a hard, legalistic Gospel, which over-emphasised a fatalistic predestination. Some imply that Calvin would have opposed these preachers for teaching a false Gospel; Kendall is one who adopts this extreme view.³ [It should be noted that the claim rests on a false evaluation of the Puritans as well as a distortion of Calvin.]

The idea is that Theodore Beza (Calvin's friend and successor in Geneva) gravely distorted Calvin's teaching, leading Puritans like William Perkins and William Ames to develop a false Calvinism, which in turn led to the Westminster Confession being separated from Calvin's real theology. The key argument is that Calvin taught that Christ died for all, not just the elect; that God loves everyone. Essentially, the false claim is that Calvin did a good work in preaching the true Gospel, but his followers then undid that work and took the Reformation in a false direction, which then determined future reformed tradition.

The reason for this recent shift in historic understanding of Calvinism is to accommodate the modern distortion of the Gospel which is everywhere preached: that God loves everybody, that Christ died for everyone and that faith can be generated by man's free will to latch on to the universal, common grace purchased by the cross – available to all.⁴ In defending this un-Calvinistic scheme, some have resorted to changing the presentation of what Calvin taught so that it complies with the modern idea of the Gospel.

¹ TULIP is an acronym used to summarise the Calvinistic doctrines of grace as presented at the Synod of Dordt, that is: Total Depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace and Perseverance of the saints in grace.

² For example: Roger Nicole, ANS Lane, W Stanford Reid, Carl Trueman, Paul Helm, Richard Muller. The most accessible, yet thorough, defence of Calvin is Helm's *Calvin and the Calvinists*, Banner of Truth, (1982). The most succinct and wide ranging is Nicole's, *John Calvin's View of the Extent of the Atonement*, to be found in the collection of his writings *Standing Forth*, Christian Focus Pub / Mentor (2002).

³ Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1694*, OUP (1979) and *Who by Faith* (1981). See also: Alan Clifford, *Calvinus. Authentic Calvinism, A Clarification*, Charenton (1996), Holmes Rolston, *Calvin versus the Westminster Confession*, John Knox Press, (1972); Norman Douty, *The Death of Christ* (1978).

⁴ This, in fact, is the basis of Arminian synergism, not Calvinism, where man co-operates with God in salvation. It is also similar to Amyraldianism.

The evidence for the claim.

Proponents take casual comments made by Calvin in sermons and blow them up to mean something opposed to his recorded theology. Calvin spoke, usually without notes, very frequently and was keen to press the Gospel message to his hearers. As with all preachers, it is very easy in these circumstances to locate something ambiguous in the speech and twist it to mean what you want. However, a careful comparison of the quotes usually used reveals that Calvin's words are very often taken completely out of context or cut selectively.⁵ Amazingly, sometimes the translation of Calvin's original is faulty.⁶ Cases can be found where the writer makes Calvin say the opposite of what he actually said in context.⁷ Conclusions are also drawn which are the categorical opposites of what Calvin's written theology states.⁸ It is noteworthy that the modernisers signally fail to use Calvin's clear doctrinal statements in theological works, or his tracts, since these demolish their case.

The difficulty in Calvin's writings.

We have to accept that there are some difficulties in Calvin's writings. This is hardly surprising since there are so many spanning several decades, most taken down in shorthand and later edited. Where there are apparent paradoxes or contradictions in sermons, it is vital to compare them with Calvin's clear theological statements in the *Institutes* or his theological tracts – these are the products of his refined theology written down with care. The *Institutes* were continually improved and enlarged throughout his life.

- Calvin's *Institutes* are not a text-book but more the work of a counsellor using an immediate, brotherly style. So, while it fully discusses theology, and while the engaging style conveys a certain power [the book transformed Europe], there is sometimes a lack of precision and exactness. For example, when Calvin says, '*Christ died for us*', he means, '*Christ died for the elect*' since he is addressing Christian believers.⁹
- Calvin does not systematically discuss the concept of limited (particular or definite) atonement in the *Institutes*.
- For some there is a certain ambiguity in the use of words like: 'all', 'world', 'every'. For instance, in some passages modernisers read 'all' to mean 'every human being', when it is clear to historic Calvinists that he means 'all kinds of'. Calvin himself states: '*The universal term "all" must always be referred to classes (genera) of men but never to individuals (personae)*'.¹⁰
- Calvin's emphasis on a universal and indiscriminate preaching of the Gospel to all is considered by some to necessitate a universal provision of grace. Calvinists explain that

⁵ Kendall, p19, quotes Calvin – '*Faith is something merely passive..*' but Calvin actually stated: '*as regards justification, faith is something merely passive*' (*Inst.* 3:13.5). This is critical. Regarding justification faith makes no contribution it is gained only by the merits of Christ; however, in appropriating Christ faith is active and Calvin specifically says that faith 'receives'. (I am indebted to Helm here.)

⁶ For instance: Douthett quotes from Calvin's own will that Christ's blood was shed for '*the sins of the human race*' but the original French is '*for all poor sinners*', the absence of the article strongly implying 'all kinds of poor sinners'. Calvin's point in his last will and testament being that Christ died for sinners, of which he was numbered.

⁷ For example: Rolston, p31, par 1 compared with Calvin's sermon on 1 Tim 2. Nicole (note 36, p308) shows that Kendall quotes a tiny fraction of a paragraph to convey the very opposite of what Calvin states in his treatise on Predestination (see *Calvin's Calvinism*, p165-6).

⁸ For example: Rolston, p29 '*God loves all with a fatherly love*', compare Calvin: '*The reprobate are hateful to God*', *Institutes* 3:24,17; [God's] '*decree fixed the number of those whom he is pleased to embrace in love, and of those whom he is pleased to display his wrath*', *Institutes* 3:29,17 .

⁹ I acknowledge Helm on this point, p13.

¹⁰ Commentary on 1 Tim 2:5.

there is an indiscriminate external call in preaching but an effectual inward call by the Spirit to the elect only.

- Calvin sometimes uses universal language in connection with stressing the exclusivity of Christ's mediatorship in contrast with other systems that use intermediaries (e.g. Mary) or a different basis of acceptance (e.g. good works).
- Calvin sometimes uses universal language in order to emphasise that the elect are chosen from all types of people in contradistinction to some who would restrict salvation to certain people types – like Jews.

Argument¹¹

- Calvin starts with the sovereignty of God in his *Institutes* and works from that. His whole theological structure implies definite atonement for those selected by God in eternity.
- Election is the driving force of salvation. Calvin is clear in defending the election of some not others, thus to posit a universal salvation based upon a selective and discriminate purpose in God is absurd and contradictory.
- Calvin clearly defends the concept of definite salvation for the elect, not the possibility of salvation for all, when he states that repentance and faith are merited for the elect in Christ. The cross actually accomplishes salvation.¹²
- Calvin links the redemption of Christ with his office of intercessory High Priest; i.e. the blood of Christ is as wide as those for whom Christ prays.¹³
- Calvin highlights particularity in the very texts which are used to support universalism.¹⁴
- Calvin sometimes uses universal language to deliberately highlight the need for an indiscriminate preaching of the Gospel.¹⁵
- Calvin applied the scope of the atonement to restricted groups: Christ's people (Matt 1:21), his friends (Jn 15:13), his sheep (Jn 10:15), his church (Eph 5:23-26), for 'us' (Titus 2:14).
- Calvin specifically denies universal atonement.¹⁶
- Since Calvin held to penal substitution in the atonement, if he also held to universal atonement there would be no hell. Penal substitution, where Christ actually paid the penalty for the sins of his people, necessitates definite atonement. Calvin was far too careful and wise to miss this connection.
- Calvin upheld the Trinity. To posit universal atonement in the work of Christ necessitates undermining the unity of God, since the decree of God is selective (for the elect) and the work of the Spirit is to apply salvation to the elect alone.
- Is it logical to believe, or is there any evidence, that Beza single-handedly transformed Calvinism throughout Europe in the time immediately after Calvin's death changing it from universalistic to particular? If so, why did Beza write no polemic on this matter?

What did Calvin dogmatically state?

Regarding predestination

- *'The fiction of Pighius is puerile and absurd, when he interprets grace to be God's goodness in inviting all men to salvation ... For Paul most clearly separates the*

¹¹ I am indebted to Nicole in this section.

¹² *Institutes*, 2, c17.

¹³ *Comm.* Isa 53:12. Jn 17:19.

¹⁴ *Comm.* Ezek 18:32; Jn 3:16; 1 Tim 2:4; Titus 2:13; 2 Pt 3:9; 1 Jn 1:29; 2:2. *Institutes* 3.24.15, 16. *Calvin's Calvinism*, p90-106.

¹⁵ E.g. in *Comm.* 2 Pt 3:9.

¹⁶ See quote mentioned later by Cunningham from *Treatise on Partaking of the Flesh and Blood*.

foreknown [Calvin explains that *foreknown* means God's in purpose not man's merit] *from those whom God deigned not to look in mercy ... [Pighius] holds fast the fiction that grace is offered equally to all.'*¹⁷

- *'Nothing is less accordant with the nature of God that he should have a double will ... He does not in himself will opposites.'*¹⁸ [That is, God does not decree or predestine salvation to all men then only decree to save some. If God willed the salvation of all, there would be no hell.]
- *'He [God] freely chooses some to life who are not yet born, leaving others to their own destruction, which destruction all men by nature equally deserve.'*¹⁹
- *'When Pighius (Calvin's opponent) holds that God's election of grace has no reference to, or connection with, His hatred of the reprobate, I maintain that reference and connection to be a truth. Inasmuch as the just severity of God answers, in equal and common cause, to that free love with which he embraces His elect.'*²⁰

Regarding reprobation

- *Eternal life is foreordained for some, and eternal damnation for others. Every man, therefore, being created for one or the other of these ends, we say, he is predestined either to life or to death.*²¹
- *Before the first man was created, God in his eternal counsel had determined what he willed to be done with the whole human race... he adopted some for himself for salvation, he destined others for eternal ruin... the reprobate are the vessels of the just wrath of God... the reprobate remain in their blindness... While we are elected in Christ, nevertheless that God reckons us among his own is prior in order to his making us members of Christ.*²²
- *'If this being "afore prepared unto glory" is peculiar and special to the elect, it evidently follows that the rest, the non-elect, were equally "fitted to destruction"'*²³

Regarding the power and purpose of the atonement

- *'Christ truly acquired and merited grace for us ...if Christ made satisfaction for our sins, if he paid the penalty owed by us, if he appeased God by his obedience ... then he acquired salvation for us by his righteousness.'*²⁴
- *'This is our acquittal: the guilt that held us liable for punishment has been transferred to the head of the Son of God. We must, above all, remember this substitution.'*²⁵

Regarding the breadth of the atonement

- *'[Salvation is offered indiscriminately to all and this is] perfectly consistent for all that is meant by the promise is, just as his mercy is offered to all who desire and implore it, and this none do, save those whom he has enlightened. Moreover he enlightens those whom he has predestined to salvation. Thus the truth of the promises remain firm and unshaken, so that it cannot be said there is any disagreement between the eternal election of God and the testimony of grace which he offers to believers.'*²⁶

¹⁷ *The Eternal Predestination of God*, in *Calvin's Calvinism*, p49-51. Note that Calvin here condemns many modern 'Calvinists' who espouse this teaching that is 'puerile' and 'absurd'.

¹⁸ *Institutes* 3:24,17.

¹⁹ *Calvin's Calvinism*, p75.

²⁰ *Calvin's Calvinism*, p75.

²¹ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 3; 21 headed: *Eternal Election, or Gods' Predestination of Some to Salvation and of Others to Destruction*.

²² *Theological Treatises*, Library of Christian Classics, 'Articles Concerning Predestination, p179.

²³ *Calvin's Calvinism*, p76.

²⁴ *Institutes* 2:17.3

²⁵ *Institutes* 2:16.5

²⁶ *Institutes*, 3:29,17.

- *‘Through Isaiah he still more openly shows how he directs the promises of salvation specifically to the elect: for he proclaims that they alone, not the whole human race without distinction, are to become his disciples (Isa 8:16). Hence it is clear that the doctrine of salvation, which is said to be reserved solely and individually for the sons of the church, is falsely debased when presented as effectually profitable to all.’²⁷*
- *‘Grace rescues from God’s curse and wrath and eternal death a limited number ... but the world itself is left to its own destruction.’²⁸*
- *‘Christ was so ordained the saviour of the whole world, as that he might save those that were given unto him by the Father ... that he might be the eternal life of them whom he is the head.’²⁹*
- *‘Salvation and the knowledge of the truth are always inseparably joined together ... If God had willed that his truth should be known unto all men, how is it that ... so many nations exist unto whom his pure truth has never been sent by him at all? ... How is it that he never opened the eyes of all?’³⁰*

Regarding the Gospel call

- *‘Those, therefore, whom he has created for dishonour during life and destruction at death, that they may be vessels of wrath and examples of severity, in bringing their doom, he at one time deprives of the means of hearing his word, at another by the preaching of it blinds and stupifies them the more.’³¹*

Regarding the love of God

- *‘... by an eternal decree fixed the number of those whom he is pleased to embrace in love, and of those whom he is pleased to display his wrath.’³²*
- *The reprobate are hateful to God, and that with a perfect justice, since those destitute of his Spirit cannot produce anything that does not deserve cursing.³³*
- *‘When, again, God rejected Esau ... he gave a manifest and signal proof of his free love, of that love with which he loves none others than those whom he will’. [The whole paragraph declares God’s love is particular only.]³⁴*
- *‘All men are hateful to God in fallen Adam.’³⁵*

Many more quotations could be added if space allowed.

What about Calvinistic scholasticism after Calvin?

When someone in history breaks from old traditions and establishes a new direction of study, certain norms, concepts or axioms are developed. These form the basic foundation for the development of these truths by his followers (a school) who are called to apply them to succeeding generations and new problems. This is how a scholastic method arises and it is what happened after Calvin. Although used pejoratively as meaning: ‘rigid’, ‘dry’ or ‘dead’, the term ‘scholasticism’ is simply part of the normal development of ideas as dogma is further defined and systematised. It is the clarification of a logical belief system based upon foundational assumptions and principles. Frequently, the philosophical methodology of Aristotle is used (as it was by the Church Fathers) along with principles of logic and

²⁷ *Institutes* 3:22.10.

²⁸ *Institutes* 3:22.7

²⁹ *Calvin’s Calvinism* (Treatise on Pred.) p94.

³⁰ *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p277.

³¹ *Institutes* 3:24,12

³² *Institutes* 3:29,17.

³³ *Institutes* 3:24,17

³⁴ *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p268.

³⁵ *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p270.

reason. In Evangelical theology, the key basis is the Bible, and the main purpose is the honouring of God. There is nothing wrong with correct scholasticism.

As Calvin's successors further honed and defined reformed theology, they considered themselves to be in complete harmony with the theology of their master.

- Calvin's followers (e.g. Peter Martyr, Zanchius, Beza, Piscator, Ames & Abbot) wrote expressing clear endorsement of limited atonement while Calvin was still alive. Calvin did not take issue with them.
- In connection with the doctrine of predestination Calvin urged readers of his sermons on election and reprobation in Genesis to consult Beza's works for further systematic clarification.
- William Cunningham published an article in 1861 reviewing the supposed contrasts between Beza and Calvin. He showed that Calvin supported limited atonement by quoting: *'I should like to know how the wicked can eat the flesh of Christ which was not crucified for them, and how they can drink his blood which was not shed to expiate their sins'*.³⁶ Cunningham concluded, *'no sufficient evidence has been produced that Calvin believed in a universal or unlimited atonement.'* ... *'There is sufficient evidence that he did not hold this doctrine.'* ... *'Calvin consistently, unhesitatingly, and explicitly denied the doctrine of God's universal grace and love to all men'*.³⁷ Few would deny that Cunningham is an academic of the first order, held in esteem by all and a reputable Calvin scholar. His words must be taken seriously.

Conclusions

It is vital to appreciate Calvin's seasoned and deliberate statements on contentious aspects of theology. Foremost in these will be his final edition of the *Institutes* (1559), but also his polemical treatises on *The Eternal Predestination of God* (1552) and *The Secret Providence of God* (1558).³⁸ However, Calvin's sermons of Genesis are also key. These were preached towards the end of his life in September 1559.³⁹ The 13 sermons on the election of Jacob and the reprobation of Esau give us Calvin's developed theology on double predestination after all his years of preaching. They were considered so valuable by his contemporaries that they were published as a separate book in 1562 in French and 1579 in English.⁴⁰ Modernisers rarely quote from these latter two sources, if ever. Some appear to know nothing of their existence, but these sources make it plain, Calvin not only taught a double predestination, but believed in limited atonement.

- Calvin held to definite atonement.
- Calvin did not have a universal theory of atonement.
- Calvin did not believe that God loved everyone.
- Calvin held to double predestination.
- Beza did not harden Calvin's theology of predestination, but he did clarify it, especially in diagrammatic form.
- There is a continuity of reformed theological thinking and Calvinistic Evangelical preaching from Calvin, through his successors on the continent, and through the Puritans and Dissenters in England. The Calvinistic doctrinal tradition can be traced from Calvin through: John Knox in Scotland, William Perkins and William Ames in England, Theodore Beza in Switzerland etc.

³⁶ W. Cunningham *Reformers & the Theology of the Reformation*, p396. The quote is from Calvin in *Treatise on Partaking of the Flesh and Blood*, see Reid, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, p285.

³⁷ Cunningham, p396, 398.

³⁸ Published together by RFP as *Calvin's Calvinism*.

³⁹ Calvin died in 1564.

⁴⁰ Old Paths Pub. Have recently re-published this in English for the first time since then.

- The Canons of the Synod of Dordt (Dutch / International Presbyterian), the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, the Westminster Standards (Presbyterian), the Savoy Declaration (Independent), the 39 Articles (Anglican), the Irish Articles (Bishop Ussher) and the Baptist Confession of 1689 were true explanations of the reformed doctrines of grace in the tradition of Calvin.

On the face of it Kendall's view appears well-nigh incredible, for it implies that practically all the Calvinist successors of Calvin from Beza to Warfield and beyond, passing through the Synod of Dort and the members of the Westminster Assembly, were basically wrong concerning the major direction of their theology.⁴¹

⁴¹ Nicole, p287.

Appendix One

Table Outlining the Claims of Kendall and Others⁴²

The False Claim – distortion of Calvin and Westminster Standards

Calvin	Westminster
Christ died for everyone but only intercedes for the elect.	Christ died and intercedes for the elect alone.
Christ procured the potential remission of sins for those who have faith.	Christ's death procured the <i>actual</i> remission of sins for the elect.
Faith is a passive persuasion of the mind.	Faith is an act of the will.
Faith and assurance are inseparable.	Assurance is subjective.
Faith as an instrument is God's act.	A person can prepare himself to receive grace without aid from God (Arminianism) through use of the law.
Election but no reprobation.	Double predestination (election and reprobation).

Some sample quotes:

- *'The architectural mind of Westminster theology, is Beza.'*⁴³
- *'Ames' theology is Arminian'.*⁴⁴
- *'Calvin's thought, save for the process of predestination, is hardly to be found in Westminster Theology'.*⁴⁵

Calvin's True Position – confirmed in Westminster Standards

Christ died and intercedes for the elect alone.
Christ's death procured the <i>actual</i> remission of sins for the elect.
Assurance of faith arises from one's experience of God's grace.
Double predestination, God elects some to life and others to wrath.
God prepares people for the Gospel, but they cannot prepare themselves by an act of will.
The moral law arouses guilt.
Evangelical repentance arises from saving faith.

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⁴² I owe a debt to Helm in this section.

⁴³ Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*, p210.

⁴⁴ Kendall, p157.

⁴⁵ Kendall, p208.