

The Views of John Calvin

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Even though John Calvin (1509-1564) died 54 years before the Synod of Dort his name has been associated with the five points. They are nearly always called 'The Five Points of Calvinism' even though Calvin had nothing to do with the formulation of them.

On October 16 1551 a dramatic confrontation occurred in Geneva between John Calvin and Jerome Bolsec over the doctrine of predestination.

Jerome Bolsec, a Carmelite monk and doctor of theology in Paris, was drawn to the Reformation and so forced to leave France. By early 1551 he had settled in the canton of Geneva working as a physician. He became critical of Calvin's doctrine of predestination. It was a Friday evening when one of the Genevan ministers at a regular meeting for a sermon and discussion preached on predestination. Bolsec, who seemed to think that Calvin himself was absent, criticised Calvin and his doctrine of predestination very sharply. In response Calvin rose and gave a brilliant defence of predestination. Calvin's teaching on this subject is clearly unpacked in his Systematic Theology popularly known as *The Institutes*.

As we would expect, Calvin's teaching anticipates the formularies of Dort including the doctrine of God's love for all mankind and the free, unfettered and uninhibited offers of the gospel to sinners.

In his commentary on Romans 5:18 Calvin writes: 'Paul makes grace common to all men, not because it in fact extends to all, but because it is offered to all. Although Christ suffered for the sins of the world, and is offered by the goodness of God without distinction to all men, yet not all receive him.' Note Calvin uses the word offered. Also noteworthy is his concept of God's goodness which is consistent with his belief in common grace. The goodness of God is given to all mankind, not the elect only.

Calvin's concept of common grace has been the subject of intense study. The most comprehensive work ever written on the subject of common grace is in Dutch by Abraham Kuyper in three large volumes. An important work discussing the various positions held on common grace is by Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*.¹ Writers on this subject refer to Calvin's recognition that the good in mankind, including religious aspiration, decent behaviour, social brotherliness, artistic and scientific achievement, is bestowed by God. There are many such references in Calvin's *Institutes*.²

In Calvin's commentary on Matthew 23:37, 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing', he suggests that we have here a lament which expresses a 'maternal kindness'. He writes as follows 'In a manner of speaking, God bares his breast to us in the overtures of the gospel.'... 'Indeed, it is precisely the tender-heartedness of God's lament in the Person of his Son that renders human unbelief in response to the Gospel such a monstrous thing. For this reason - the sinner's stubborn refusal to respond appropriately to God's kind overtures - a dreadful vengeance awaits us as often as the teaching of his Gospel is put before us, unless we quietly hide ourselves under his wings, in which he is ready to take us up and shelter us.'³

In his lectures on Ezekiel, Calvin expressly states that God announces through the prophet, 'his wish is that all should be saved' (Ezek 18:23,32). Likewise on 1 Peter 3:9 Calvin observes, 'Though God has secretly determined to save the elect alone, he declares in the Gospel that he desires the salvation of all. The only solution open to us is to acknowledge that in his revealed will God stretches out his hand to all alike, even though secretly he has determined to save one and not another. Nonetheless, there is no ultimate disharmony between God's purpose of election and the universal call of the gospel, however difficult this harmony may be for us to comprehend.'

Calvin does not expound the extent of the atonement. Efforts have been made to determine Calvin's view on that subject by referring to his commentaries. Dr R T Kendall claimed that Calvin believed in an unlimited atonement, which is the view of Paul Van Buren, J W Anderson and Curt Daniel. A A Hodge, Robert Godfrey, Roger Nicole maintain that Calvin did believe in a limited atonement. S J Hayhow in an article in the *Banner of Truth* magazine (Issue 330) maintains that Calvin implicitly held to particular atonement. His citation of Calvin shows that Calvin certainly held to the sufficiency of the atonement for all. In another article in the same

magazine (Issue 398) Iain Murray refutes firmly Dr Alan Clifford who seeks to build a major theological structure on his view that Calvin held to a universal atonement.

Robert A Peterson Sr. in his book *Calvin and the Atonement*⁴ points to the fact that both sides can select evidence to support their position. Peterson observes that there are two strains in Calvin and these reflect the Bible's own antinomy between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. It is refreshing to see in Calvin's commentaries an insistence to allow the text to speak for itself even when this would seem to contradict limited atonement. Examples are John 3:16 and 1 John 2:2.

In contrast John Gill in his book *The Cause of God and Truth* works on these texts in such a way to deprive them of the plain meaning they are intended to convey. Sadly this reveals a scholastic and rationalistic way of thinking. Spurgeon in commenting on Gill's commentary describes Gill as 'hacking and hewing terribly to bring the Word of God into a more systematic shape'.⁵ John Gill will be discussed in the chapter on Hyper-Calvinism. Arminians on the one side and Hyper-Calvinists on the other cannot live with antinomy. Both impose human reasoning on the text of Scripture. Both attempt to unscrew the inscrutable.

Robert A Peterson Sr. confesses, 'I have resisted the temptation to read my view into Calvin. I hold to a position of limited atonement but continue to think that the evidence is too ambiguous to allow a definitive answer to the question of what Calvin taught on the matter (p. 118).' In this view Peterson is followed by Robert Letham.⁶

¹ Cornelius Van Til, *Common grace and the Gospel*, Presbyterian and Reformed, 232 pp., 1972.

² John Calvin, *Institutes*, volume one, p. 276, The library of Christian classics, Westminster Press, 1960.

³ With regard to the tender-heartedness of God, Don Carson speaks of God's yearning, inviting, seeking love and he refers to John 3:16 and Ezekiel 33. Don A Carson, *Love in Hard Places*, Paternoster, 2002, page 15.

⁴ Mentor, 1999, ISBN 1 85792 377 4.

⁵ C H Spurgeon, *Commenting and Commentaries*, Kregel, 1954, p. 9.

⁶ *Saving Faith and Assurance in Reformed Theology: Zwingli to the Synod of Dort*, 2 vols (Ph.D dissertation, University of Aberdeen, 1979) 1:125-126.