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“COVENANT” AND POLITY IN THE THOUGHT OF EARLY REFORMERS

SIMON P. KENNEDY

The idea of “covenant” is prominent in Reformed political thought. Indeed, early Reformed thinkers who wrote about politics often used the concept of covenant to illustrate their ideas about society or to theorise about the relationship between the ruler and the people. However, the dominance of liberalism in post-seventeenth century Western political thought often means that anything resembling a consensual agreement is liable to be labelled a “social contract.” This has resulted in a distortion of the concept of covenant and perhaps a distortion of the nature and legacy of the Reformed tradition of political thought more generally. I hope to demonstrate that the earliest Reformed political thinkers did not understand “covenant” as equivalent to the later idea of “social contract”. There is not space enough here to compare the two concepts at length, so I will merely show how the idea of “covenant” was used and understood in early Reformed political thought.

First, some definitions. The family of words under question here includes terms like covenant, compact, pact, treaty, and contract, along with their Latin equivalents (*foedus*, *pactum* or *pactio*, and *contractus*).¹ But in using this family of terms, did Reformed Protestants intend anything like the liberal idea of a social contract? The evidence suggests that they did not.

WE READ OF TWO SORTS OF COVENANTS
AT THE INAUGURATING OF KINGS, THE
FIRST BETWEEN GOD, THE KING, AND THE
PEOPLE, THAT THE PEOPLE MIGHT BE THE
PEOPLE OF GOD. THE SECOND, BETWEEN
THE KING AND THE PEOPLE, THAT THE
PEOPLE SHALL OBEY FAITHFULLY, AND
THE KING COMMAND JUSTLY.

John Calvin applied the idea of *pactio*, and the related *foedera*, to God’s dealings with his people (both Israel and the Church) in a number of places. In his discussion of the continuities between the Old and New Testaments, Calvin uses the term *foedus* to refer to the way that God related in a particular and conditional manner to his people. Two examples will suffice.

In one case Calvin says that God related to Israel through a particular covenant before Christ’s advent. He writes about “the covenant [*foedus*] which the Lord made with the Israelites before the advent of Christ.”² A further example can be found in Calvin’s discussion of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, where he writes that “since the Lord calls his promises covenants [*foedera*] ... sacraments are signs of the covenants [*foederum*], [and] a resemblance is able to be adduced from the covenants [*foederibus*] of men themselves.”³ So *foedus* is used by Calvin to describe God’s dealings with humankind, and principally as a theological term, while

he mentions the “covenants of men themselves” as an aside. However, the idea of *foedus*, and the related *pactio*, were given common politi-

2. ‘quod olim cum Israelitis foedus ante Christi adventum Dominus pepigit’. Jean Calvin, *Institutio christianae religionis* (Geneva: Robert I. Estienne, 1559a), 290, 2.10.1 The translation is my own.

3. ‘Et quando Dominus promissiones suas foedera nuncupat ... sacramenta, symbola foederum: ab ipsis hominum foederibus simile adduci potest.’ Jean Calvin, *Institutio christianae religionis*. (Geneva: Robert I. Estienne, 1559b), 353, 4.14.6 Translation is my own.

1. Harro Höpfl and Martyn P. Thompson, “The History of Contract as a Motif in Political Thought,” *The American Historical Review* 84, no. 4 (1979): 927.



FROM THE HISTORY OF THE NORDIC PEOPLES, OLAUS MAGNUS.

cal-theological usage by Reformed thinkers during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

The influential tract *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos* (1573), attributed to “Junius Brutus” but probably authored by Phillipe Du Plessis Mornay, provides an example of political-theological use of the *foedus* word family.⁴ Mornay writes that “we read of two sorts of covenants (*foedus*) at the inaugurating of kings, the first between God, the king, and the people, that the people might be the people of God. The second, between the king and the people, that the people shall obey faithfully, and the king command justly.”⁵ Mornay is here establishing the principle of covenant (*foedus*) between both a people and God, a King and God, and (critically for Huguenot political theory) between a people and their King. He goes on to use both *pactio* and *foedus* in the same line of thought when he writes: “Now after that kings were given unto the people, there was so little purpose of disannulling or disbanding the former pact (*pactio*) ... We have formerly said [that] at the inaugurating of kings, there was a double covenant (*foedus*).”⁶ This example illustrates the seed of the political-theological concept of covenant in the political thought of the Reformed stream.

Johannes Althusius’ ideas about *pactio* fit within, and develop, this stream of Reformed thought. Althusius conceived of society itself as a kind of pact (or compact). In the opening paragraph of his *Politica* (1614), Althusius writes that the symbiotes (his general term for all who are participants or partners in a common life) make a pact each with the other. (*Politica* 1:1) Further on he says that they form a bond by way of a pact (*vinculo pacti*). (*Politica* 1:6) This pact is either ex-

pressly made or tacitly made; there is no need to have to draw up a new pact each time the conditions of the political fellowship (*consociatio*) change slightly. (Cf. *Politica* 5:3) People participate by general consensus through this pact in the building of political life together. Humans bind themselves to one another through this pact. People are in society together, closely connected, and are so because of a kind of mutually-binding oath.

This is clearly no kind of “social contract” as liberal theorists would understand it. Althusius’ *pactio* is not a loose agreement whereby some people can be disqualified if they transgress the conditions of said agreement, nor is it voluntary in nature and therefore easily dissoluble.⁷ The pact described by Althusius is also not based on individual people agreeing together to submit themselves to a ruler or a sovereign. As Althusius expounds in the rest of the *Politica*, his idea of a pact involves different elements of society, including the family, the guild, local and provincial authorities. Indeed, as Harro Höpfl and Martyn Thompson observe, Althusius “insisted on interpreting all significant relationships within the *societas perfecta* as contractual,” but in the sense of a consensual ‘covenant’.⁸ Society, in the thought of Althusius, is evidently not underpinned by a social contract as such.

This necessarily brief excursus into the early Reformed politico-theological idea of covenant hopefully demonstrates that the idea is best understood in the context of the broader tradition’s theology and social theory. It is beyond question that Calvin’s ideas about biblical covenants do not resemble a modern liberal social contract. Both the author of the *Vindiciae* and Althusius should not be labelled social contractarians either. Instead, Reformed political ideas about societal covenants and pacts ought to be understood within the theological and social context in which they were formed.

4. On the question of authorship, I follow those whom Quentin Skinner describes as ‘the best modern scholars’; see Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought: Volume 2. The Age of Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 306, n3.

5. ‘*Duplex autem foedus in Regum inauguratione legimus: primum, inter Deum & Regem & Populum, ut esset Populus, Dei Populus. Secundum vero inter Regem & Populum, ut bene imperanti bene obtemperarentur.*’ Junius Brutus, *Vindiciae contra tyrannos: sive, de principis in populum, populique in principem, legitima potestate* ([s.n.]: Edimburgi, 1579), 11–2. The translation is from Junius Brutus, *Vindiciae contra tyrannos, a defence of liberty against tyrants, or, Of the lawful power of the prince over the people, and of the people over the prince*, trans. by William Walker (London: Richard Baldwin, 1689), 8.

6. ‘*Iam ex quo Reges Populo dati sunt, no modo non debet haec eadem Pactio ... Diximus in Rege inaugurando duplex foedus initum suisse.*’ Brutus, *Vindiciae contra tyrannos*, 35–6. Translation is from Brutus, *A defence of liberty*, 26. I have changed the translation of *pactio* from ‘contract’ to ‘pact’.

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7. The only exception to this is the pact to form a collegium. This matches the nature of the political fellowship in question, and is not reflective of Althusius’ own idea of a societal pact.

8. Höpfl and Thompson, “The History of Contract”, 935.

RICHARD HOOKER'S DEFENSE OF THE CHURCH CALENDAR

W. BRADFORD LITTLEJOHN

One of the most remarked-upon features of Richard Hooker's magisterial *Lawes of Ecclesiasticall Politie* is the great time and care he expends on justifying each detail of the Book of Common Prayer, including some that might seem a trifle hard to justify. Indeed, Diarmaid MacCulloch famously remarked that if the Prayer Book had required clergy to preach standing on their heads, Hooker would've found an argument to justify it. This is, of course, a tad unfair, and indeed, it is one of the remarkable things about Hooker's work that he felt called upon to offer such arguments at all; the anti-Puritan writers who had preceded him generally felt no obligation to say more than, "The Queen has so decreed, so get over it." By offering extended rational justifications for disputed practices, Hooker showed his recognition that Christian liberty and good government required that laws must show themselves to be reasonable before obedience was demanded.

On the other hand, while Hooker's easiest strategy, when confronted with "show me the proof text" Puritans, might have been to simply assert express biblical warrant for disputed ceremonies, he actually preferred to avoid this approach. He did not want to claim, after all, that a particular church ceremony or custom was one that all Christians everywhere were compelled to adopt, and he did not want to fall prey to the biblicist temptation of trying to wring a warrant from Scripture at all costs, and distort the Word of God in the process. Certainly, too, he wanted to steer clear of the Roman Catholic danger of making the dispensation of grace depend on any ceremonies besides the two sacraments (although more Anglo-Catholic interpreters have frequently tried to conscript him for this cause). Rather, they were fitting adornments of the hidden work of grace, and, appropriately used, aids to our sanctification. Accordingly, Hooker's justification of disputed ceremonies often begins from generally-recognized foundational principles about God and man, before seeking support not only in Scripture but even from pagan practice, and general human experience as well. His treatment of festival days (that is to say, the church calendar) is a case in point. Hooker begins his treatment, in Book V, ch. 69, in a quintessentially Hookerian fashion—that is, by beginning at the beginning, the *very beginning*: "As the substance of God alone is infinite and hath no kind of limitation, so likewise his continuance is from everlasting to everlasting and knoweth neither beginning nor end" (V.69.1). After saying a bit about God's infinity and eternity, he turns to contrast it to our own boundedness to time: "Now as nature bringeth forth time with motion, so we by motion have learned how to divide time. . . . For time considered in itself is but the flux of that very instant wherein

HOOKER DOES NOT THINK IT IS FITTING FOR HOLY DAYS TO BE MERE OCCASIONS OF PRIVATE REMEMBRANCE AND DEVOTION, FOR THEY COMMEMORATE THE VERY PUBLIC ACTIONS OF GOD IN HISTORY AND HENCE DESERVE PUBLIC RECOGNITION

the motion of the heaven began" (V.69.2) Although God is timeless in himself, notes Hooker, he can hardly be so in his dealings with us, time-bound as we are, and hence as he acts in history, certain times and places become memorials of his saving work: "No doubt as God's extraordinary presence hath hallowed and sanctified certain places, so they are his extraordinary works that have truly and worthily advanced certain times, for which cause they ought to be with all men that honour God more holy than other days" (V.69.3).

But *how* should they be honored? Hooker turns to consider this question in ch. 70.

Hooker does not think it is fitting for holy days to be mere occasions of private remembrance and devotion, for they commemorate the very public actions of God in history and hence deserve public recognition:

"The sanctification of days and times is a token of that thankfulness and a part of that public honour which we owe to God for admirable benefits, whereof it doth not suffice that we keep a secret calendar, taking thereby our private occasions as we list ourselves to think how much God hath done for all men, but the days which are chosen out to serve as public memorials of such his mercies ought to be clothed with those outward robes of holiness whereby their difference from other days may be made sensible. (V.70.1)"

Such public memorialization consists, he says, of three elements: Praise, Bounty (that is, "plentiful and liberal expense") and Rest. After a rather beautiful aside on what he means by Rest—it is no mere idleness, but a foretaste of the heavenly consummation of all our labors—he turns to offer his historical justification of the practice. This justification, thinks Hooker (here as ever following his principle that "grace perfects nature") is found equally in nature and in grace: "even nature hath taught the heathens, and God the Jews, and Christ us, first that festival solemnities are a part of the public exercise of religion" (V.70.5). That is to say, the similarity with pagan practice was not, as the Puritans had thought, necessarily reason to jettison a practice; it might be proof of the timeless rationality of the practice. Hooker notes too that Paul's condemnation of Jewish festival days was not meant as a rejection of *any* such "sanctification of days and times" but simply of the idea that we were bound before God to celebrate them—they were matters of Christian liberty, to be sure. However, while Hooker denies that God's law binds us perpetually to any *particular* observation of festival days, he does think that we cannot get by without *some* sacral organization of time: "the very law of nature itself, which all men confess to be God's law, requireth in general no less the sanctification of times, than of places, persons, and



tonly and not part of any fixed church calendar, Hooker insisted that regular repetition was the whole point, given our nature as rational animals: “Which iteration is a most effectual mean to bring unto full maturity and growth those seeds of godliness. . . . The constant habit of well doing is not gotten without the custom of doing well, neither can virtue be made perfect but by the manifold works of virtue often practised” (V.71.3).

But still, if these were matters of Christian liberty, didn’t that mean that no church or state could make laws requiring rest and celebration on one day rather than another? This objection leads Hooker into one of his most impassioned and eloquent statements on the relation between liberty and government, which begins:

“Which opinion, albeit applied here no further than to this present cause, shaketh universally the fabric of government, tendeth to anarchy and mere confusion, dissolveth families, dissipateth colleges, corporations, armies, overthroweth kingdoms, churches, and whatsoever is now through the providence of God by authority and power upheld.”

But as this is only a short article, we will have to leave it there. For the rest of the quote, read Hooker yourself, and for a full exposition of Hooker’s argument on the relation of Christian liberty, human law, and church ceremonies, see my book *The Peril and Promise of Christian Liberty: Richard Hooker, the Puritans, and Protestant Political Theology* (forthcoming from Eerdmans in April).

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things unto God’s honour” (and, he adds, requires at the very least that we continue to set aside one day in seven).

Whereas the Puritans were often willing to allow for occasional days of sacred feasting or fasting, so long as they were not celebrated wan-

WAS JESUS A PACIFIST?

“In this concise little book, the author does more than merely refute the case for Christian pacifism. He also shows that special revelation coheres with general revelation and that natural law (which results from God’s creative work) coheres with the Bible (which is inspired by the Creator). . . . This little work is highly recommended for anyone who is struggling with this issue.”

—**Dr. Craig A. Carter**, Professor of Theology,
Tyndale University College, Toronto, Ontario

ANDREW A. FULFORD
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RICHARD HOOKER ON FESTIVAL DAYS

TRANSLATED BY W. BRADFORD LITTLEJOHN

BOOK V.69: OF FESTIVAL DAYS AND THE NATURAL CAUSES OF THEIR CONVENIENT INSTITUTION.

...

[3.] Although there is a time for everything, the works of God always have that time which is most fitting for them. Some of His works are ordinary, and some more rare; all are deserving of recognition, but all do not need to be marked out for remembrance in the same way. For just as God, although He is everywhere, does not make all places equally holy with his presence, neither does God give the same honor to all times. For if God treated all times or places alike, why did He say to Moses, "This very place wherein thou standest is holy ground?" Why did the prophet David say of one particular festival day, "This is the day which the Lord hath made?" No doubt, just as God's extraordinary presence has hal- lowed and sanctified certain places, so his extraordinary works have set apart certain times, so that all God-fearing men should regard them as more holy than other days.

...

Thus, there is natural and necessary reason why we should single out some days for solemn observance, in order to declare our gratitude to God for his great redeeming works. It remains to be considered what kinds of duties and services are in- volved in honoring such days.

70. THE MANNER OF CELEBRATING FESTIVAL DAYS.

The sanctification of days and times is a mark of the thankfulness and public honor which we owe to God for His great blessings. Therefore it is not sufficient for us to keep a private calendar, taking time when- ever it suits us individually to reflect on how much God has done for all men. Rather, the days which are chosen to serve as public memorials of his mercies should be clothed with outward robes of holiness whereby their difference from other days may be made visible. But since we cannot honor such days by slowing down or changing time itself, we honor festival days by the sorts of actions with which we mark them.

[2.] "This is the day which the Lord hath made," says the prophet David; "let us rejoice and be glad in it." So it is clear that one general duty for honoring festival days is to celebrate them with solemn joy. There are three natural ways of displaying such joy: first, to praise the Lord with cheerful enthusiasm; second, to express our delight by lavish and charitable displays of conviviality; third, to cease from our ordinary labors and toils, which are not fit companions of such glad- ness. Festival solemnity therefore is nothing but the union of these three elements, Praise, and Bounty, and Rest, in due proportion.

...

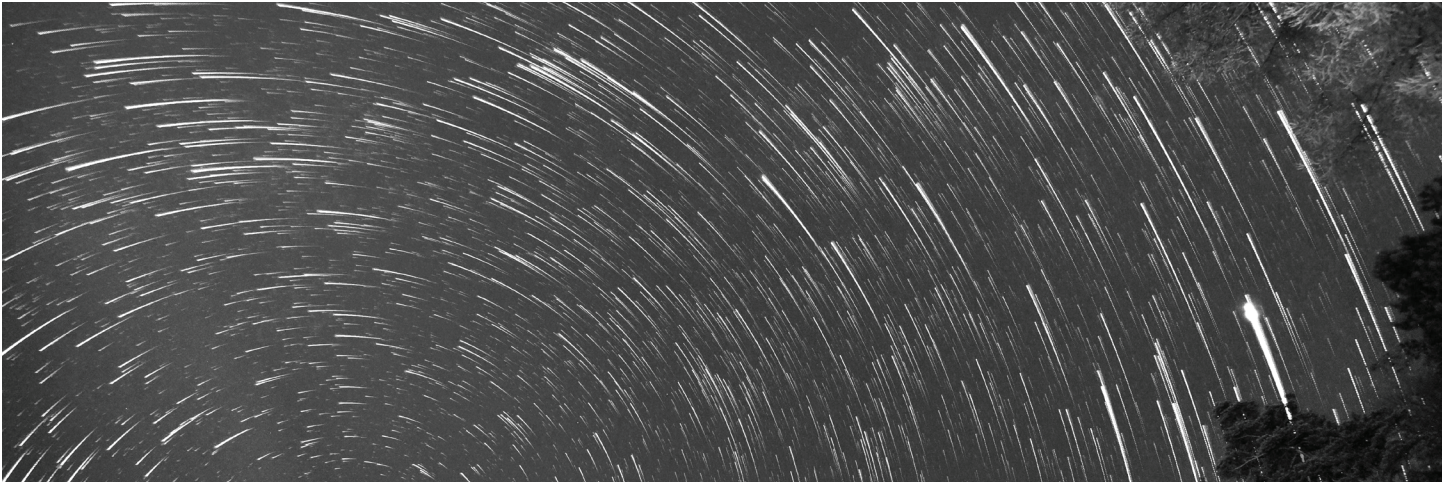
THE VERY LAW OF NATURE ITSELF,
WHICH ALL ADMIT TO BE A FORM
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AS A GENERAL PRINCIPLE THAT
WE SHOULD SANCTIFY CERTAIN
TIMES TO GOD'S SERVICE JUST
AS WE DO CERTAIN PLACES,
PERSONS, AND THINGS.

[5.] Even nature itself taught the hea- thens, just as God taught the Jews and Christ taught us, both that festival so- lemnities are an important part of the public practice of religion, and that the three natural elements of such solem- nities are praise, bounty, and rest. Un- fortunately, the heathens used these ceremonies for the worship of their false gods, and not only directed them to a wrong end but also corrupted the form and measure of their observance. Thus, when the Israelites impiously fol- lowed their corrupt example, they are condemned at every point: their hymns or songs of praise were idolatry, their bounty excess, and their rest sloth. Ac- cordingly, the law of God which ap- pointed their festival days also taught

them how they should be celebrated. Following this pattern, King David ordained praise to be given unto God in the Sabbaths, months, and appointed times, as their custom had always been before the Lord.

...

[9.] If it be asked whether we observe these times as a binding re- quirement of divine law, or only as a human institution in the Church, I would say this: the very law of nature itself, which all admit to be a form of God's own law, requires as a general principle that we should sanctify certain times to God's service just as we do certain places, persons, and things. Thus it has pleased God to require us to set aside for all time some days to show devotion, never to be done away with; some other days required just as strictly but not for all time; and, for still others, to leave the choice of holidays to the voluntary discretion of the Church. An example of the first was the appointment of the Sabbath day; of the second, the feasts prescribed by the law of Moses; and of the third, the feast of Jesus' dedication invented by the Church. The moral law itself requires a seventh part of the time throughout the age of the whole world to always be spent in the service of God.



Even though for us the specific day has been changed to honor the new revolution begun by our Saviour Christ, still, the same proportion of time continues, because, in recognition of the gift of creation (and now much more of the new creation added by the Prince of the world to come), we are bound to consider the sanctification of one day in seven a duty which God's unchanging law requires forever. Our opponents, however, say that we ought to abolish all other festival days, since their continuance nourishes wicked superstition in the minds of men. Besides, they object, such days are all abused by Papists, the enemies of God; and some, such as Easter and Pentecost, even by the Jews.

...

71. OBJECTIONS TO OUR KEEPING ANY FESTIVAL DAYS BESIDES THE SABBATH.

[3.] Not only do they complain that church holidays limit the praises of God unto certain times, but also, in the other direction, that they restrict men from working at their ordinary trades on those days. They object that it is not in the power of the Church to command rest when God has not, since God has left all men the liberty to work six whole days if they desire, and it is no more lawful for the Church to remove this liberty to work six days than to abrogate God's command to rest one day of the week.

They do grant that in times of public calamity, it may be appropriate—indeed it can be required—for the Church to proclaim special days for fasting and prayer (and thus cessation of work), as the Jews did in Babylon, for, they say, the Church “has received commandment” from God for this practice. But without some express commandment from God, they charge, there is no power under heaven that may presume by any decree to restrain the liberty that God has given.

[4.] This opinion, even if applied no further than to this particular issue, shakes the universal fabric of government; leads to anarchy and

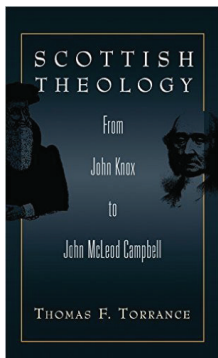
confusion; dissolves families; dissipates colleges, corporations, and armies; overthrows kingdoms, churches, and anything that is now, according to God's providence, upheld by power and authority. For God has prescribed ahead of time only the weightiest matters, precisely defining those things everyone must do and those things no one should do. But in all other matters He has left all men either to be guided

by their own good discretion, if they are free from subjection to others, or else to be ordered by such commandments and laws as proceed from those superiors under whom they live. However, our modern patrons of liberty have here made solemn proclamation that all such laws and commandments are void, since our opponents leave every man to the freedom of his own mind in all matters that are neither required nor prohibited by the Law of God. But it is only in such matters, mind you, that the laws of human governments have authority, and such laws cannot possibly be established without in some way limiting the liberty of their subordinates. According to our opponents, then, if the father commands the son, or the husband the wife, or the master the servant, or the leader the soldier, or the prince the subject to go or stay, to sleep or wake at such times

as God himself has not specifically commanded, then the subordinates are to stand in defense of the freedom which God has granted and to act however they wish, insisting that it is just as wicked for men to command them where God has left them free, as to command them what God has forbidden.

But the precise contrary of this is undeniably the case! Rather, anything the law of God leaves undetermined and to human discretion is potentially subject to the laws of human authority, laws that, for the sake of the common good, must limit individuals' liberty in such matters as far as justice permits. This principle we must maintain, or else overturn the whole world and make every man his own ruler. Therefore, since labor and rest on any day besides the Sabbath are left free by the law of God, how could we forbid ecclesiastical laws from addressing such things without depriving the world of power to make any ordinance or law at all?

THIS OPINION...SHAKES
THE UNIVERSAL FABRIC OF
GOVERNMENT; LEADS TO ANARCHY
AND CONFUSION; DISSOLVES
FAMILIES; DISSIPATES COLLEGES,
CORPORATIONS, AND ARMIES;
OVERTHROWS KINGDOMS,
CHURCHES, AND ANYTHING THAT
IS NOW, ACCORDING TO GOD'S
PROVIDENCE, UPHELD BY POWER
AND AUTHORITY.



SCOTTISH THEOLOGY FROM JOHN KNOX TO JOHN McLEOD CAMPBELL

BY THOMAS F. TORRANCE

T & T CLARK, 1996

REVIEW BY SEAN G. MORRIS

Dr. Torrance's book is a staple for anyone wishing to better understand the development of Scottish theology. His work is a major contribution in the field, tracing out the origins and development of this academic arena.

However, Torrance's work is no mere historical survey, offering an impartial recounting of the story of theology in Scotland. This analysis is one in which theologians are critiqued or evaluated according to Torrance's estimation. Within this work's pages, we find the (dare I say "tired"?) face-off of "Calvin vs. the Calvinists"—a familiar trope for those in Reformed/Calvinistic academic circles, with its suggestion that the theological descendants of Calvin did not follow his lead in regard to numerous theological loci.

On this matter, Professor Donald Macleod notes in his own review of the work that "predictably, Torrance argues that Calvinism (especially Scottish Calvinism) represented a radical breach with Calvin himself. Indeed, he can scarcely speak of Calvinism without attaching to it some opprobrious epithet. It is always 'hard-line Calvinism', 'rationalistic, supralapsarian Calvinism', 'legalistic Calvinism', 'hard-line federalist Calvinism', 'extreme Hyper Calvinism' or 'the hyper-Calvinist establishment.'¹

Many of Torrance's emphases within the development of Scottish theology rightly warrant our appreciation: the Trinitarian nature of God, the central significance of the incarnation, the supreme importance of grace and the necessity of evangelism. Other emphases, however, are less secure in their merit.

Let us, then, evaluate three particular points within Torrance's work that warrant some interaction and critique.

CALVIN VS. THE CALVINISTS

The notion that later-developed Calvinism is something at odds with the convictions of Calvin himself goes back at least as far as the Amy-

1. For a fuller treatment and review of Dr. Torrance's book, ideas from which this author happily acknowledges borrowed insight, please see Prof. Donald Macleod, "Dr. T.F. Torrance and Scottish Theology: a Review Article," *Evangelical Quarterly* 72 (2000): 57-72.

raldian theologians of the early 17th century. But is such a theological divergence provable in the Scottish context? Torrance asserts that such a divergence is the case, arguing that Rutherford and Dickson are of a different school from Craig and Knox.



JOHN HENRY LORIMER, THE ORDINATION OF ELDERS IN A SCOTTISH KIRK, 1891

Torrance posits a breach between later Scottish theology and the teaching of Calvin on the question of the extent of the atonement, and a similar discontinuity between earlier and later Scottish theologians. He alleges that both Calvin and the older Presbyterian tradition believed that Christ died for all; only after the Synod of Dort did the Reformed churches come to believe in limited atonement. This discussion is one which is quite lively and ongoing, and, as such, demands more nuance and in-depth treatment than current space allows.² Suffice it to say that the question of whether the Calvinistic understanding of the extent of the atonement was narrower

post-Calvin is a question that is hardly settled in a definitive way—much less settled in a manner favorable to Torrance's predilections.

ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

Tangential to his grievances with the doctrine of limited atonement, Torrance argues that this same doctrine was to blame for the problem of lack of assurance. He writes, "For generations of people in the Kirk, faith was deeply disturbed and shaken by the doctrine thundered from the pulpits that Christ did not die for all but only for a few chosen ones—assurance of their salvation withered in face of the inscrutable decree of divine predestination," (p. 59) again, theorizing that this doctrine was a later theological development of a more severe nature, in contra-distinction from Calvin's own articulation of the doctrine.

This is a fascinating theory, especially given Calvin's own writings on the issue, particularly in his sermons on Galatians where he writes, "it is often the case that believers do not always feel this great liberty and freedom: for we are often anxious, or expressing remorse, or doubting if God will hear us at all. Sorrow can oppress us to such an

2. For a more extensive treatment, I again refer to you to Prof. Macleod's excellent review.

extent that we have great difficulty formulating a prayer and expressing ourselves.”³

It is also worth questioning how often hard-line sermons on the nature of limited atonement were truly preached, or whether a strawman argument is being employed. This potential strawman is made more complicated by the spiritual and cultural differences at play between the northern and southern churches in the nation. We must, moreover, ask of Dr. Torrance: if assurance is of the essence of faith, what is the state of those who lack it? Are they to be considered unbelievers? It is this grave miscarriage of pastoral care that plagued the teaching ministry of John MacLeod Campbell and left a disastrous wake of salvation-doubting parishioners in his path.⁴

INCARNATION

One of the more innovative emphases for which Torrance advocates is the notion of “incarnational redemption,” and as added evidence to bolster his argument, he cites several Scottish theological luminaries as among those who share this position, notably Robert Bruce and Hugh Binning.

According to this idea, at the heart of Christ’s saving work is the fact that “we are sanctified in the purity of his Incarnation through union with him in his humanity” (p. 57). It is here held to be the incarnation, not the cross, which is the crucial aspect of atonement. For Torrance, the atonement does not come in some forensic act of imputed righteousness occurring at Calvary’s cross. For example, discussing Thomas Boston, Torrance writes (p. 210), “in the very act of assuming sinful flesh, far from sinning in it, Christ redeemed sin in the flesh

3. John Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians* (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 377.

4. Macleod, “Dr T.F. Torrance,” 66–67.

and sanctified it, that we sinners might be sanctified body, soul and spirit, in him.” Likewise, he refers to the Virgin Birth “as itself [a] saving and sanctifying event.” Frankly, such a view would find more sympathy from John of Damascus than John Calvin or John Knox.

Moreover, such a view fails to do justice to passages such as 2 Corinthians 5:21 or Romans 4:24–25, where readers are driven to realize that a transaction for sin took place, not at Bethlehem, but at Calvary. We would affirm with Torrance that God surely did love his people from eternity past, and that love took on expression at the incarnation; however, a critical link in the chain—namely, atonement at Calvary—must not be short-circuited in order to arrive at the stage of “reconciliation.” At this point, Torrance’s theology of atonement is distressingly underdeveloped.

CONCLUSION

Dr. Torrance is one of the pillars in the field of Scottish theology. His contributions to the doctrine of the Trinity, Christ’s incarnation, and the redemptive mission of grace of the Incarnate Son of God are much to be appreciated. But his worthwhile insights need not come by way of jettisoning or unduly excoriating the heritage that has been handed down in the Scottish theological tradition.

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