

John Calvin on Universal Atonement/Reconciliation

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To me, John Calvin is a stimulating but sometimes conflicted thinker. For example, I grieve over his decision to turn Geneva into a theocracy based on the Mosaic Law. Geneva then exiled and executed heretics. This political decision came from his theological conviction; Calvin viewed the Law as having three parts: moral, civil, and ceremonial. I firmly disagree with Calvin on this point. I am also troubled by the ethical content located within his view of sanctification, where he makes Jesus and the Spirit a means to turn us back to the moral and civil portions of the Mosaic Law, to do them. How does this view give place to Jesus' radical teachings about giving up money and land for the poor, and loving our enemies in Matthew 5 – 7? Or, did Calvin adequately consider the implications of Paul's (and our) ongoing mission to ethnic Israel in Romans 11 as a basis for a Christian political pluralism that tolerates other religious views in the political square, rather than head back into the Old Testament for a model of a theocracy?

In effect, Calvin seems to have made the Gospel serve the Law, at least at times. Thus, I am concerned that Calvin's tendency to elevate the Mosaic Law in other ways unduly shaped his view of God and his definition of penal substitution.

Nevertheless, despite these disagreements, I find other things to appreciate in Calvin's writings and commentaries. In this paper, I am raising the question of whether Calvin would have been a 'Calvinist' especially of the stripe of Theodore Beza, his successor. Some scholars are uncertain that Calvin himself would have promoted the view of salvation/justification now commonly called TULIP, standing for Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints. I find the academic debates about Calvin's own beliefs quite stimulating. T.F. Torrance, for instance, reads Calvin as a theologian much closer to Karl Barth, and believes that Beza and others have misinterpreted Calvin. Here is a list of quotes from Calvin that suggest a view that does not conform to TULIP.

On Matthew 26:28 and Mark 14:24, 'blood...shed for many for the remission of sins' Calvin explains, 'By the word 'many' He means not a part of the world only, but the whole human race.' (*Harmony II*, Eerdmans, 1949, p.214 and New Translation, III, p.139)

On John 1:29 'the Lamb... which taketh away the sin of the world' he comments, 'And when he says the sin of the world he extends his favor indiscriminately to the whole human race.' (*Commentary on John's Gospel*, Eerdmans, 1949 I, p.64, New Translation IV, p.32)

On John 3:15, 16 'whosoever' etc. Calvin carefully explains, 'He has employed the universal term whosoever, both to invite all indiscriminately to partake of life, and to cut off every excuse from unbelievers. Such is the import of the term 'world'; for though nothing will be found in the world that is worthy of the favour of God, yet He shows Himself to be reconciled to the whole world, when He invites all men without exception to the faith of Christ, which is nothing else than an entrance into life.' (*Commentary on John's Gospel*, Eerdmans, 1949 I, p.25, New Translation IV, p.32)

On John 3:17 'not...to condemn the world; but that through him the world might be saved.' Calvin comments on the presence of 'world' (kosmos) twice in the verse: 'the word 'world' is again repeated, that no man may think of himself wholly excluded...showing that he here includes all men in the word 'world' **instead of restricting it to comprise the elect alone.**' (*Commentary on John's Gospel*, Eerdmans, 1949 I, New Translation IV, p.75)

On Romans 5:18 'So then as through one trespass the judgment came unto all men to condemnation; even so through one act of righteousness, the free gift came unto all men to justification of life.' Calvin regarded the whole world of mankind in 'all men' in both clauses and says God 'makes his favour common to all, because it is propoundable to all, and not because it is in reality extended [i.e. through their hearing about it]; for though Christ suffered for the sins of the whole world, and is offered through God's benignity indiscriminately to all, yet all do not receive him.' (*NT Commentaries*, New Translation III, p.117 – 118)

Commenting on Colossians 1:14, Calvin asserts, 'by the sacrifice of his death all the sins of the world have been expiated.' (*Commentary on Philippians*, Eerdmans, 1949, p.148, New Translation XI, p.308)

The universal scope of God's love:

- From *Institutes*, Book III, XX. 38, Battles, p.901, in commenting on the 'our Father' clause of the Lord's Prayer, Calvin says: 'Just as one who truly and deeply loves any father of a family at the same time embraces his whole household with love and good will, so it becomes us in like measure to show to his people, to his family, and lastly, to his inheritance, the same zeal and affection that we have toward this Heavenly Father. For he so honored these as to call them the fullness of his only-begotten Son [Eph.1:23]. Let the Christian man, then, conform his prayers to this rule in order that they may be in common and embrace all who are his brothers in Christ, not only those whom he at present sees and recognizes as such but all men who dwell on earth. For what God has determined concerning them is beyond our knowing except that it is no less godly than humane to wish and hope the best for them.'
- From *Institutes*, Book II, VIII. 55, Battles, p.419 speaking of Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan and love of neighbor, Calvin says, 'But I say: we ought to embrace the whole human race without exception in a single feeling of love; here there is no distinction between barbarian and Greek, worthy and unworthy, friend and enemy, since all should be contemplated in God, not in themselves... Therefore, if we rightly direct our love, we must first turn our eyes not to man, the sign of man, the sight of whom would more often engender hate than love, but to God, who bids us extend to all men the love we bear to Him, that this may be an unchanging principle: whatever the character of the man, we must yet love him because we love God.'