

# Was Calvin a Calvinist? Or, Did Calvin (or Anyone Else in the Early Modern Era) Plant the “TULIP”?

Richard A. Muller

Abstract: Answering the perennial question, “Was Calvin a Calvinist?,” is a rather complicated matter, given that the question itself is grounded in a series of modern misconceptions concerning the relationship of the Reformation to post-Reformation orthodoxy. The lecture examines issues lurking behind the question and works through some ways of understanding the continuities, discontinuities, and developments that took place in Reformed thought on such topics as the divine decrees, predestination, and so-called limited atonement, with specific attention to the place of Calvin in the Reformed tradition of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

## I. Defining the Question: Varied Understandings of “Calvinism”

Leaving aside for a moment the famous “TULIP,” the basic question, “Was Calvin a Calvinist?,” taken as it stands, without further qualification, can be answered quite simply: Yes ... No ... Maybe ... all depending on how one understands the question. The answer must be mixed or indefinite because question itself poses a significant series of problems. There are in fact several different understandings of the terms “Calvinist” and “Calvinism” that determine in part how one answers the question or, indeed, what one intends by asking the question in the first place. “Calvinist” has been used as a descriptor of Calvin’s own position on a particular point, perhaps most typically of Calvin’s doctrine of predestination. It has been used as a term for followers of Calvin — and it has been used as a term for the theology of the Reformed tradition in general. “Calvinism,” similarly, has been used to indicate Calvin’s own distinctive theological positions, sometimes the theology of Calvin’s *Institutes*. It also is used to indicate the theology of Calvin’s followers. More frequently, it has been used as a synonym for “Reformed” or for the “Reformed tradition.”

1. **“Calvinism” as Calvin’s own position.** If the first option is taken as the basis for the question, the answer is simply, “Yes, of course Calvin was a Calvinist” — “Calvinist” and “Calvinism” indicating the specific position of Calvin on various theological, ecclesial, political, and even philosophical issues. This is perhaps the

intention of the title of a work such as Henry Cole's translation of Calvin's various treatises on predestination, namely, *Calvin's Calvinism*. It is also the usage of writers like Peter Toon and Basil Hall, the latter going so far as to apply the term "Calvinism" restrictively to the purportedly perfectly "balanced" theology of Calvin's 1559 *Institutes*.<sup>1</sup> There are, however, a host of problems posed by this approach — not the least of which is that it (apparently intentionally) leaves Calvin as the only Calvinist.

Beyond that, this approach begs the question of what criterion has been applied to the *Institutes* of 1559 to arrive at the conclusion that it represents a perfectly balanced theology in contrast to the presumably less well-balanced theologies of Huldrych Zwingli, Johannes Oecolampadius, Martin Bucer, Heinrich Bullinger, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Wolfgang Musculus, Zacharias Ursinus, and a host of others usually identified, together with Calvin, as belonging to the Reformed tradition. Arguably, that criterion has been the personal theological preference of various proponents of the approach and it has consisted in modern readings of the *Institutes*, out of its historical context, as if it were a prototype for some modern theological system — whether Friedrich Schleiermacher's, Karl Barth's, G. C. Berkouwer's, or some other recent theologian's. The purported balance, whether found in Calvin's understanding of predestination, or his so-called christocentrism, or his advocacy of the *unio mystica*, claims a coherent dogmatic center to Calvin's thought that cannot be found in the thought of his contemporaries — but which also is not found in Calvin's thought. The coherentist approach not only leaves Calvin the only Calvinist, it also portrays Calvin's Calvinism as proto-Schleiermacherianism, proto-Barthianism, or proto-Berkouwerianism (to coin a somewhat less than euphonic term).

Once the modern mythologies of coherence around neo-orthodox or other themes have been dissipated, a further problem emerges. The identification of Calvinism with Calvin's own distinctive doctrines, encounters the extreme difficulty of actually finding distinctive doctrines in Calvin. This problem has been enhanced by the numerous books that present interpretations of such decontextualized constructs as "Calvin's doctrine of predestination," "Calvin's Christology," or "Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper," as if Calvin actually proposed a highly unique doctrine. We need to remind ourselves that the one truly unique theologian who entered Geneva in the sixteenth century, Michael Servetus, did not exit Geneva alive. Unique or individualized doctrinal formulation was not Calvin's goal. If, for example, there is anything unique in his doctrine of predestination, it arose from the way in which he gathered elements from past thinkers in the tradition and blended them into his own formulation. But the fact is that his formulation is strikingly similar to those of Bucer, Viret, Musculus, and Vermigli. Even Bullinger's

---

1. Peter Toon, *The Emergence of Hyper-Calvinism in English Nonconformity, 1689-1765* (London: The Olive Tree, 1967), p. 143; and Basil Hall, "Calvin Against the Calvinists," in *John Calvin: A Collection of Distinguished Essays*, ed. Gervase Duffield (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), pp. 19, 25-26.

formulation, which differed on several distinct points, like the relation of Adam to the decree, has clear affinities with Calvin's teaching.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, there are some distinctive elements in Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's supper — but there is so much that was drawn from Bucer and Melanchthon. If one were to strip out these commonalities and focus only on the truly distinctive elements one would not have a theology remaining nor would one have a series of related motifs sufficient to the construction of a theology — and even if one attempted to do this, one would not have a theology of Calvin, but rather a kind of dogmatic Julia Childs concoction made up out of a pile of chopped-up ingredients, varying in taste from cook to cook. In other words, the identification of Calvinism with the unique theology of Calvin represents a fallacy.

There is a final, deeper problem with this approach as well. The question also assumes that the theological tradition in which both Calvin and the later thinkers who have been identified as Calvinists reside was rather exclusivistically founded on the theology of Calvin himself and that Calvin's theology — typically identified with Calvin's *Institutes* in the final edition of 1559 — supplies the foundational index by which membership in that tradition ought to be assessed. This form of the question assumes that later Reformed theologians either intended to be or should have been precise followers of Calvin rather than also followers of Zwingli, Bucer, Oecolampadius, Bullinger, and others, and not merely followers of Calvin in general or Calvin of the tracts, treatises, commentaries, and sermons, nor the Calvin of the 1539, 1543, or 1550 *Institutes*, but the Calvin of the 1559 *Institutes*.<sup>3</sup> This form of the question is aided and abetted by the numerous books on Calvin's theology that are based solely or almost solely on the *Institutes* and that do not examine the thought of any of Calvin's predecessors or contemporaries:<sup>4</sup> his thought becomes its own criterion for its assessment and, by extension, the sole guide to all that is Calvinistic. This view is so misguided that it needs no extended rebuttal: it abstracts Calvin from himself by denying the importance of the larger portion of his work even as it abstracts him from his historical context and from the tradition in which he was a participant.

**2. “Calvinism” as the approach of Calvin’s “followers.”** If, however, by “Calvinist” one means a follower of Calvin and by “Calvinism,” the theology of his followers, it should be clear that no one can be his own follower. Whereas the first option leaves Calvin as the only Calvinist, this option either prevents the identification of Calvin as a Calvinist or, falling back on the kind of sentiments fueling the first option, judges the followers on the basis of a rather narrow norm

---

2. Note the conclusions in Cornelis P. Venema, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Doctrine of Predestination: Author of “the Other Reformed Tradition”?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002).

3. Hall, “Calvin Against the Calvinists,” p. 19.

4. E.g., T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin: an Introduction to His Thought* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995); Charles Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2008).

constructed out of Calvin's theology. It should also be clear, inasmuch as those identified as followers were seldom, perhaps never, precise imitators, that by the very way in which the question has been posed, it is usually looking for a negative answer: to the extent that later so-called Calvinists were not intellectual clones, Calvin ought not to be identified with them — and to the extent that Calvin's thought ought to supply the norm for all later Reformed theology, those usually called Calvinists can be viewed as theologically problematic for not following him. Framed in this way, the question is, quite frankly, bogus. It decontextualizes both Calvin and the later Reformed writers and it replaces historical analysis with dogmatic generalization, as will be seen when we examine a few specifics concerning trajectories of formulation of doctrines such as predestination and the satisfaction of Christ.

At a somewhat more complex level, the question assumes that "Calvinist" is an appellation that might have been happily accepted by Calvin himself and by pastors, theologians, and exegetes who belonged to the same theological trajectory or tradition as Calvin within, let us say, a hundred years after his death. That assumption is false on both counts. Calvin himself viewed the term Calvinist as an insult and thought of his own theology as an expression of catholic truth. It has been quite well documented that the terms Calvinism and Calvinist arose among the opponents of Calvin, notably among Lutheran critics of Calvin's work on the doctrine of the Lord's supper, and the beginning of the usage marks not a distinct tradition flowing from Calvin but the identification of a rift among the reformers who had initially understood themselves as "evangelical" and only after the middle of the sixteenth century began consciously to separate themselves into distinct confessional groups, namely Lutheran and Reformed.<sup>5</sup> In 1595, when William Barrett attacked the teachings of Calvin, Vermigli, Beza, Zanchi, and Junius, he was rebuked, among other things, for calling these stalwarts of the faith "odious names" including identifying them as "Calvinists."<sup>6</sup> Later theologians in the tradition of which Calvin was a part typically identified themselves as Reformed Catholics, members and teachers in the reformed and therefore true Catholic Church, as distinct from the un-reformed Roman branch of the catholic or universal church. When the noted exegete and theologian Andreas Rivetus (1573-1654), defended elements of Calvin's exegesis against various detractors, he also took pains to indicate that Calvin was neither the *autor* or the *dux* of "our religion."<sup>7</sup> Such comments, often connected with repudiation of the name "Calvinist" are common among seventeenth-century

---

5. Cf. the comments in Brian Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 27-48.

6. See John Strype, *The Life and Acts of John Whitgift, D.D.*, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1822), III, p. 318: "eos odioso nomine appellans Calvinistas."

7. Andreas Rivetus, *Catholicus Orthodoxus, oppositus catholico papistae* (Leiden: Abraham Commelin, 1630), p. 5.

Reformed thinkers.<sup>8</sup> In short, none of the theologians whose thought is at issue in the question, “Was Calvin a Calvinist,” identified themselves in this way.

By extension, then, the question raises the issue of the identification of followers — and this, albeit perhaps a somewhat clearer way of posing the query, is a rather difficult issue to settle historically. Precisely what constitutes a follower? If to be a follower one must identify one’s self as a follower, then there was probably only a single Calvinist in the century following Calvin’s death, namely Moyses Amyraut. In the debate over Amyraut’s so-called hypothetical universalism, moreover, most of the theologians usually identified as Calvinist thought of Amyraut as departing significantly from the spirit of Calvin’s theology, particularly at the point of his citing Calvin. Of course, after the era of Reformed orthodoxy, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, self-proclaimed “Calvinists” abound, typically so called because of their advocacy of one or another form of the doctrine of predestination, whether or not clearly rooted in Calvin’s own formulations, and because of their opposition to so-called “Arminians,” so called because of their soteriological synergism, whether or not (usually not!) they actually followed Arminius’ teachings.

As a matter of fact, the vast majority of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thinkers we identify as Calvinists did not identify themselves as followers of Calvin. Of course, founders of the Reformed tradition like Zwingli, Bucer, Oecolampadius, and Farel, all of whom belonged to a generation prior to Calvin’s would hardly have thought of themselves as followers of one of their younger protégés, no matter how talented. Neither did other Reformed writers closer in age to Calvin — among them Wolfgang Musculus, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Heinrich Bullinger, and Johannes à Lasco — view themselves as his followers or, indeed, as playing second fiddle to the virtuoso. Nor can we find Reformed writers of the next several generations — Zacharias Ursinus, Caspar Olevianus, Jerome Zanchi, Amandus Polanus, or even Calvin’s own successor, Theodore Beza — claiming to be followers of Calvin or, indeed, “Calvinists.”

If the issue of self-identification is set aside, there remains the problem of identifying followers in the context of a fairly broad tradition the content and character of which was not founded on an intention to follow in the footsteps of a single person and that did not, until more than a century and a half had passed, accept the name Calvinist as a useful designation. Should a theologian almost a decade older than Calvin, trained in the Universities of Padua and Bologna, who subsequently taught in Strasbourg, Oxford, and Zürich, and who, for all his general agreement with Calvin did not speak of a double decree of predestination but rather

---

8. E.g., Pierre Du Moulin, *Esclaircissement des controverses salmuriennes* (Leiden: Jean Maire, 1648), pp. 231-232; Jean Claude, *Défense de la Réformation contre le livre intitulé Préjugés légitimes contre les calvinistes*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Paris: L.-R. Delay, 1844), pp. 210-211; Pierre Jurieu, *Histoire du Calvinisme et celle du Papisme mises en parallèle: Ou apologie pour les Réformateurs, pour la Réformation, et pour les Réformés ... contre ... Maimbourg*, 3 vols. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, based on the Rotterdam printing of 1683 (S.l.: s.n., 1823), I, pp. 417-418.

identified predestination with election, who drew more positively on medieval scholastics (notably Thomas Aquinas and Gregory of Rimini) than Calvin, who did not view himself as a follower of Calvin, and whose abilities in Hebrew extended far beyond Calvin's be called a Calvinist? The theologian in question is Peter Martyr Vermigli, whose work was quite influential in the development of post-Reformation Reformed theology — and who, despite his own identity, has often been called a Calvinist.<sup>9</sup> Or, further, should a theologian at Cambridge University in the 1590s, who specifically identified himself as “Reformed” (not as Calvinist), who upheld episcopacy, whose teaching occupies a good deal of common ground with Calvin's doctrinal formulations but which also has affinities for the thought of Vermigli, Zanchi, Beza, Ursinus, and Olevianus, and also evidences some characteristics of later Reformed thought not found in the work of these predecessors, like a distinction between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace — should he be called a Calvinist? The theologian is William Perkins, often identified in the literature as a Calvinist and then, given the differences between his thought and Calvin's, used as a prime example in the attempt to pit “Calvin against the Calvinists.” The list could be extended indefinitely.

One might, then, rephrase the question a bit and ask “Were the Calvinists really Calvinists?” or, more pointedly, “Did the Calvinists ever intend to be Calvinists?” If a “Calvinist” is taken to mean an intentional follower of Calvin or, indeed, an imitator or duplicator of Calvin's thought, the answer is simple. No, there were no Calvinists — unless, of course, we fall back into the first-noted pattern of definition and make Calvin the only one.

**3. “Calvinism” as a name for the Reformed tradition.** There is, of course, third, another usage of the terms “Calvinist” and “Calvinism” — namely, as references to thinkers and teachings associated with the Reformed tradition. This is the more common usage, as evidenced in the works of historians like Perry Miller, John T. McNeill, and more recently Philip Benedict.<sup>10</sup> Framed in this way, the questions become “Was Calvin Reformed?” and “Were other writers who belonged to the same confessional trajectory as Calvin, whether or not they count as his followers, also Reformed?” One might think that the answers to these alternative questions are quite simple: namely, “Yes.” But these questions too are complicated by the way in which one identifies what is properly Reformed — specifically by the way in which Reformed, used as a synonym of “Calvinist,” is defined as more or less in agreement with Calvin's theology, whether as understood in its full extent and diversity or as

---

9. On Vermigli, see Frank A. James, III, *Peter Martyr Vermigli and Predestination: the Augustinian Inheritance of an Italian Reformer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

10. Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Macmillan, 1939; repr. Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), pp. 93-97; John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. vii-viii, et passim; Philip Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. xxii-xxiii.

resident in the 1559 *Institutes*. If the question is now re-phrased with better attention to historical contexts and documents it might read, “What is the nature and, potentially the source, of the continuities and discontinuities, similarities and differences that exist between the thought of John Calvin and later thinkers who stand within the boundaries of Reformed confessionality?” — which brings us to a series of theological considerations.

## II. Theological Considerations: Calvin in Relation to the Later Reformed

The question “Was Calvin a Calvinist?” has, of course, been debated largely in terms of a series of theological issues, perhaps most notably the divine decrees, predestination and so-called “limited atonement,” two of the “points” associated with the famous TULIP, plus the issue of covenant. When posed in these forms, the question is typically answered in the negative and usually on highly questionable grounds. For example, Calvin’s views on predestination have been contrasted with later Reformed understandings of the doctrine on several grounds: Calvin purportedly “moved” predestination out of relation to the doctrine of God to a kinder, gentler place in the *Institutes* — the Calvinists reverted to the practice of placing the doctrine in proximity to the doctrine of God and created thereby a system of theology resting on predestination and metaphysics.<sup>11</sup> Further, Calvin’s theology was not so much predestinarian as “christocentric” — and the later Calvinists lost this christocentricity.<sup>12</sup> Or, by way of confusing issues of method and content, Calvin was a humanist, indeed, a humanist imbued with a covenantal approach to theology — the later Calvinists were predestinarian and scholastic, having lost the humanistic inclinations of the founder of the movement.<sup>13</sup> Or, finally, given the christocentric orientation of Calvin’s theology, his views on the work of Christ tended toward “unlimited atonement” in contrast to the “rigid” view of “limited atonement” that resulted from later Calvinist predestinarianism.<sup>14</sup> In sum, Calvin taught a finely balanced, christocentric theology whereas the Calvinists focused their theology on the divine decrees and produced the rigid, scholastic system of “five points” summarized by the acrostic TULIP.

**1. The Problem of TULIP.** By way of addressing these issues, we should note first and foremost the problem of TULIP itself — an acrostic that has caused much

---

11. Hall, “Calvin Against the Calvinists,” pp. 19-37.

12. E.g., Walter Kickel, *Vernunft und Offenbarung bei Theodor Beza* (Neukirchen: Neukirchner Verlag, 1967).

13. Thus, Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth Century France* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

14. As, e.g., in M. Charles Bell, “Was Calvin a Calvinist,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 36/4 (1983), pp. 535-540; idem, “Calvin and the Extent of Atonement,” in *Evangelical Quarterly*, 55 (April, 1983), pp. 115-123; James B. Torrance, “The Incarnation and Limited Atonement,” in *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, 2 (1984), pp. 32-40; Kevin Dixon Kennedy, *Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

trouble for the Reformed tradition and has contributed greatly to the confusion about Calvin and Calvinism. (I don't plan to tiptoe through this issue.) It is really quite odd and a-historical to associate a particular document written in the Netherlands in 1618-19 with the whole of Calvinism and then to reduce its meaning to TULIP. Many of you here know that the word is actually "tulp." "Tulip" isn't Dutch — sometimes I wonder whether Arminius was just trying to correct someone's spelling when he was accused of omitting that "i" for irresistible grace. More seriously, there is no historical association between the acrostic TULIP and the Canons of Dort. As far as we know, both the acrostic and the associated usage of "five points of Calvinism" are of Anglo-American origin and do not date back before the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> It is remarkable how quickly bad ideas catch on. When, therefore, the question of Calvin's relationship to Calvinism is reduced to this popular floral meditation — did Calvin teach TULIP? — any answer will be grounded on a misrepresentation. Calvin himself, certainly never thought of this model, but neither did later so-called Calvinists. Or, to make the point in another way, Calvin and his fellow Reformers held to doctrines that stand in clear continuity with the Canons of Dort, but neither Calvin nor his fellow Reformers, nor the authors of the Canons, would have reduced their confessional position to TULIP.

In fact, it is quite remarkable how little the acrostic has to do with Calvin or Calvinism, as is most evident in the cases of the "T" and the "L." I don't think Calvin ever uttered a phrase that easily translates as "total depravity." He certainly never spoke of "limited atonement." Neither term appears in the Canons of Dort, nor is either one of these terms characteristic of the language of Reformed or Calvinistic orthodoxy in the seventeenth century. Like the TULIP itself, the terms are Anglo-American creations of fairly recent vintage. "Total depravity," at least as understood in colloquial English, is so utterly grizzly a concept as to apply only to the

---

15. See Ken Stewart, "The Points of Calvinism: Retrospect and Prospect," in *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, 26/2 (2008), pp. 187-203. There are, of course, many early references to the "five points" or "five articles" in controversy between Reformed and Arminian: e.g., Peter Heylin, *Historia quinqu-articularis: or, A declaration of the judgement of the Western Churches, and more particularly of the Church of England, in the five controverted points, reproched in these last times by the name of Arminianism* (London: E.C. for Thomas Johnson, 1660); and Daniel Whitby, *Daniel. A Discourse concerning I. The true Import of the Words Election and Reprobation ... II. The Extent of Christ's Redemption. III. The Grace of God ... IV. The Liberty of the Will ... V. The Perseverance or Defectibility of the Saints*. London, 1710; second edition, corrected, London: Aaron Ward, 1735), often referenced as "Whitby on the Five Points" or "Five Arminian Points": note George Hill, *Heads of Lectures in Divinity* (St. Andrews: at the University Press, 1796), p. 78. Occurrences of phrases like "five distinguishing points of Calvinism" also occur earlier, referencing the Canons of Dort without, however, specification of the points themselves: see, e.g. Daniel Neal, *The History of the Puritans and Non-conformists ... with an account of their principles* (London: for J. Buckland, et al., 1754), I, p. 502; Ferdinando Warner, *The Ecclesiastical History of England, to the Eighteenth Century* (London: s.n., 1756-57), II, p. 509; note also that the editor of Daniel Waterland's sermons identified justification by faith alone as one of the "five points of Calvinism": see Waterland, *Sermons on Several Important Subjects of Religion and Morality*, preface by Joseph Clarke, 2 vols. (London: for W. Innys, 1742), p. xviii.



theology of the Lutheran, Matthias Flacius Illyricus who an almost dualistic understanding of human nature before and after the fall, arguing the utter replacement of the *imago Dei* with the *imago Satanae* and indicating that the very substance of fallen humanity was sin. Neither Calvin nor later Reformed thinkers went in this direction and, to the credit of the Lutherans, they repudiated this kind of language in the Formula of Concord. What is actually at issue, hidden under the term “total depravity” is not the utter absence of any sort of goodness but the inability to save one’s self from sin.

The question of the “L” in TULIP, of “limited” versus “universal atonement,” also looms large in the debate over whether or not Calvin was a Calvinist. This question, too, arises out of a series of modern confusions, rooted, it seems to me, in the application of a highly vague and anachronistic language to a sixteenth- and seventeenth-century issue. Simply stated, neither Calvin, nor Beza, nor the Canons of Dort, nor any of the orthodox Reformed thinkers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries mention limited atonement — and insofar as they did not mention it, they hardly could have taught the doctrine. (Atonement, after all is an English term, and nearly all of this older theology was written in Latin.) To make the point a bit less bluntly and with more attention to the historical materials, the question debated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, concerned the meaning of those biblical passages in which Christ is said to have paid a ransom for all or God is said to will the salvation of all or of the whole world, given the large number of biblical passages that indicate a limitation of salvation to some, namely, to the elect or believers. This is an old question, belonging to the patristic and medieval church as well as to the early modern Reformed and, since the time of Peter Lombard, had been discussed in terms of the sufficiency and efficiency of Christ’s satisfaction in relation to the universality of the preaching of redemption.

The question at issue between Calvin and the later Reformed does not entail any debate over the value or merit of Christ’s death: virtually all were agreed that it was sufficient to pay the price for the sins of the whole world. Neither was the question at issue whether all human beings would actually be saved: all (including Arminius) were agreed that this was not to be the case. To make the point another way, if “atonement” is taken to mean the value or sufficiency of Christ’s death, no one taught limited atonement — and if atonement is taken to mean the actual salvation accomplished in particular persons, then no one taught unlimited atonement (except perhaps the much-reviled Samuel Huber).

Historically, framed in language understandable in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there were two questions to be answered. First, the question posed by Arminius and answered at Dort: given the sufficiency of Christ’s death to pay the price for all sin, how ought one to understand the limitation of its efficacy to some? In Arminius’ view, the efficacy was limited by the choice of some persons to believe, others not to believe, and predestination was grounded in a divine foreknowledge of the choice. In the view of the Synod of Dort, the efficacy was limited according to

the assumption of salvation by grace alone, to God's elect. Calvin was quite clear on the point: the application or efficacy of Christ's death was limited to the elect. And in this conclusion there was also accord among the later Reformed theologians.

Second, there was the question implied in variations of formulation among sixteenth-century Reformed writers and explicitly argued in a series of seventeenth-century debates following the Synod of Dort, namely, whether the value of Christ's death was hypothetically universal in efficacy. More simply put, was the value of Christ's death such that, it would be sufficient for all sin if God had so intended — or was the value of Christ's death such that if all would believe all would be saved. On this very specific question Calvin is, arguably, silent. He did not often mention the traditional sufficiency-efficiency formula; and he did not address the issue, posed by Amyraut, of a hypothetical or conditional decree of salvation for all who would believe, prior to the absolute decree to save the elect. He did frequently state, without further modification, that Christ expiated the sins of the world and that this "favor" is extended "indiscriminately to the whole human race." Various of the later Reformed appealed to Calvin on both sides of the debate. (Only a very few writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth century argued that Christ's death was sufficient payment only for the sins of the elect.) Later Reformed theology, then, is more specific on this particular point than Calvin had been — and arguably, his somewhat vague formulations point (or could be pointed) in several directions, as in fact can the formulae from the Synod of Dort.

**2. The problem of predestination, christocentrism and central dogmas.** The issue of predestination is somewhat different: no one denies that Calvin taught the doctrine, although some have claimed that the christocentric Calvin moved predestination to a more gentle place in his 1559 *Institutes* and that his successors moved the doctrine back into relation with the doctrine of God in such a way as to create a more "strict" understanding of the doctrine. In fact, Calvin did not move the doctrine of predestination around. He kept it basically where he first placed it, having followed what he took to be a Pauline order suitable to catechesis.<sup>16</sup> The idea that this is a kinder, gentler placement of the doctrine ignores the fact of Calvin's definitions of predestination, election, and reprobation, do little or nothing to blunt the force of the doctrine and also coordinate quite precisely with the definitions of later Reformed writers, regardless of placement of the doctrine in a work of theology. Add to this that the later Reformed were hardly unaware of the relationship of placement of the doctrine to the literary genre of the theological work and also placed their formulations accordingly, some echoing Calvin's placement, some placing the doctrine ecclesiologically, many, of course, following a traditional placement in relation to the doctrine of God, arguably on the basis of a genre distinction between catechetical and creedal placements and more academic or

---

16. Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Formation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 118-139.

dogmatically argued placements, suited to detailed theologies developed for university study.<sup>17</sup>

Yet another issue here is the problem of so-called central dogmas. Much of the reason that the question of Calvin's relation to Calvinism is asked has to do with the fairly consistent identification, typical in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of Calvin's theology as focused on the doctrine of predestination. This assumption, together with the tendency to view the whole later Reformed tradition as massively focused on and, indeed, constructed around, the doctrine of predestination, created a sense of continuity between Calvin and Calvinism. Trends in the study of Calvin's thought, however have changed. As already noted, there was a tendency to identify Calvin as "christocentric" in much twentieth-century theology. As this tendency was or related to an altered view of later Reformed thought, it became fashionable to pose Calvin against the Calvinists — and, usually, to place the blame for a shift from christocentrism to predestinarianism on the shoulders of Theodore Beza.<sup>18</sup> Not only was this a highly dogmatized approach that paid little attention to the breadth of the Reformed tradition or to the altered historical contexts in which later Reformed theology developed, it had the further deficit of creating dogmatic caricatures and posing one against the other, as if Calvin's thought could be reduced to an anticipation of neo-orthodox christocentrism and later Reformed writers were simply predestinarians. Unfortunately we are moving not so much beyond such fallacious argumentation as into a new phase of the same: as the language of christocentrism has worn old, the new centrism has tried to impose a model of union with Christ on Calvin's theology and then to make the same sort of negative claim about later "Calvinists": now that Calvin can be seen to focus on union with Christ, his thought can be radically separated from the later Calvinists who purportedly never thought of the concept.<sup>19</sup> We can speculate that, when the union with Christ theme has run its course, there will be another false center identified for Calvin's thought that can then be juxtaposed with the purported centers or omissions of later Reformed theology.

As to the issue of christocentrism or of a christological focus juxtaposed with a decretal focus, this is, historically speaking, a fictitious issue based not on sixteenth- or seventeenth-century concerns but on particular patterns of twentieth-century theology. If by "christocentric" one means having a soteriology centered on Christ, then later Reformed writers were no more and no less christocentric than Calvin. All understood Christ's sacrifice to be the sole ground of salvation and all defined

---

17. See Richard A. Muller, "The Placement of Predestination in Reformed Theology: Issue or Non-Issue" in *Calvin Theological Journal*, 40/2 (2005), pp. 184-210.

18. See, e.g., Hall, "Calvin Against the Calvinists," pp. 25-28; Johannes Dantine, "Les Tableaux sur la doctrine de la prédestination par Théodore de Bèze," in *Revue de théologie et de philosophie*, XVI (1966), pp. 365-377; Walter Kickel, *Vernunft und Offenbarung bei Theodor Beza* (Neukirchen: Neukirchner Verlag, 1967), pp. 136-146.

19. Partee, *Theology of John Calvin*, pp. 3, 4, 25, 27, 40-41.

election as “in Christ.” If by christocentric one means something else, as for example, taking the “Christ event” as the sole revelation of God and therefore center of one’s theology (which is the typical twentieth-century usage), then the term does not apply either to Calvin or to the later Reformed — indeed, it arguably does not apply to any theologian or to any theology written between the second century and the nineteenth. In any case, “christocentrism” is not a useful category by which to assess Calvin’s relationship to other Reformed writers of the early modern era.<sup>20</sup>

On the related issue of claims of later Reformed writers producing a “decretal theology,” a form of determinism, or a “predestinarian metaphysic” foreign to Calvin’s thought, it is perhaps important to note that these terms, like TULIP, “limited atonement” and “christocentrism,” are not at all rooted in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: they are largely twentieth-century descriptors of an invented problem. Whereas there are, certainly, a series of nominally metaphysical assumptions shared by virtually all theologians of the older Christian tradition, such as the identification of God as absolute or necessary and the created order as relative or contingent, the older Reformed theology was hardly built on metaphysics and in no way can it be classed as a form of determinism. Far more clearly than Calvin, later Reformed theologians identified God as utterly free and capable of willing otherwise, identified the world as contingent, and viewed rational creatures capable of acting freely according to their natures, having both freedom of contradiction and freedom of contrariety.<sup>21</sup> Here, one might claim a certain degree of discontinuity between Calvin and later Reformed writers, but it is such that a careful reading of his works and theirs will show him to be more susceptible to a deterministic reading, they less so. But the basic issue of the relationship between Calvin and later Reformed theology with regard to predestination is quite simple: Calvin and other Reformed thinkers, whether earlier or contemporaneous or later all held to one or another form of the Augustinian understanding of predestination, as taught in Romans 9 and other biblical texts, namely, that salvation depends on the gracious will of eternal God and, therefore, it is intended by God from eternity that some be elect to salvation and others not. And since that is, historically, a long-held and widely argued pattern of formulation, it certainly cannot be the criterion by which either Calvin or anyone else ought to be identified as a “Calvinist.”

**3. The humanist-scholastic dichotomies.** The humanist-scholastic dichotomy appears in several forms in relation to the relationship of Calvin to Calvinism. One form rather simplistically contrasts Calvin’s humanism with the scholasticism later Reformed theologians: in brief, Calvin was a humanist; later Calvinists were scholastic; Calvin was not a Calvinist. This approach is highly problematic inasmuch

---

20. Cf. Richard A. Muller, “A Note on ‘Christocentrism’ and the Imprudent Use of Such Terminology,” in *Westminster Theological Journal*, 68 (2006), pp. 253-260.

21. As documented in Willem J. van Asselt, J. Martin Bac, and Roelf T. te Velde, trans., ed., and commentary, *Reformed Thought on Freedom: The Concept of Free Choice in the History of Early-Modern Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, forthcoming).

as it pits humanism and scholasticism against one another with reference to thinkers whose work embodied elements of both humanist and scholastic methods. As recent scholarship has quite definitively shown, Calvin, albeit trained philologically and rhetorically as a humanist, incorporated various elements of scholastic method, whether its topical and disputative models or its many distinctions, into his thought<sup>22</sup> — and the later Reformed, those benighted Calvinists, not only followed scholastic method in their more finely grained academic and disputative efforts but also employed the fruits of humanist philological and linguistic training. Indeed, humanist philological training was typical of the era of scholastic orthodoxy.<sup>23</sup> What is more, various elements of so-called scholastic method, like the identification and ordering of standard topics or commonplaces (*loci communes*), are in fact of humanist origin.

Another form of the humanist-scholastic dichotomy attempts to overcome the obvious problem of claiming Calvin was entirely humanistic and later thinkers entirely scholastic arguing a psychological bifurcation of Calvin into a thinker who had a broadly humanistic, gracious, and covenantal side to his personality and a rather dark, scholastic, predestinarian side.<sup>24</sup> When unleashed, this approach encourages a contrast between the humanistic Calvin and later Calvinists who, unfortunately, neglected Calvin the humanist and became the proponents of the scholastic predestinarian side of Calvin's legacy. This is a particularly problematic approach on several grounds. First, as is evident from Bouwsma's work, it rests on an unsubstantiated psychological argument that claims a bifurcated psyche in Calvin and then goes on quite arbitrarily to associate humanism with one side of the bifurcated psyche and scholasticism with the other.<sup>25</sup> Having drawn these conclusions, largely on the basis of one or another modern author's own preferences, this approach goes on to confuse the issue by associating humanistic and scholastic methods with particular contents, as if one could not be a humanistic predestinarian or a scholastic federalist. The conjunction of humanistic and scholastic elements in the thought of the Reformers was characteristic of the era.<sup>26</sup> There is absolutely no

---

22. David C. Steinmetz, "The Scholastic Calvin," in Carl R. Trueman and R. Scott Clark, eds. *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999), pp. 16-30; cf. Muller, *Unaccommodated Calvin*, pp. 36-61.

23. See Peter T. van Rooden, *Theology, Biblical Scholarship and Rabbinical Studies in the Seventeenth Century: Constantijn L'Empereur (1591-1648), Professor of Hebrew and Theology at Leiden*, trans. J. C. Grayson (Leiden: Brill, 1989); and Stephen G. Burnett, *From Christian Hebraism to Jewish Studies: Johannes Buxtorf (1564-1629) and Hebrew Learning in the Seventeenth Century* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996).

24. William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Philip C. Holtrop, *The Bolsec Controversy on Predestination, From 1551 to 1555*, 2 parts (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1993).

25. See my critique of Bouwsma's reading of Calvin in *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, pp. 79-98.

26. See e.g., Frank A. James III, "Peter Martyr Vermigli: At the Crossroads of Late Medieval Scholasticism, Christian Humanism and Resurgent Augustinianism," in Trueman and Clark, eds. *Protestant Scholasticism*, pp. 62-78; and Scott Manetsch, "Psalms before Sonnets: Theodore Beza and

ground for associating humanism with covenantal thinking and predestinarianism or, indeed, determinism with scholastic thinking: one can easily point to humanists like Pietro Pomponazzi and Lorenzo Valla who held deterministic philosophies and to scholastic works written by covenantal theologians — just as one can point to so-called covenant theologians, notably the archetypal covenant theologian Johannes Cocceius and his student Franz Burman, who held to typical Reformed doctrines of predestination and followed scholastic method,<sup>27</sup> or to Reformed theologians like Francis Turretin noted (perhaps unfairly) for their scholastic method and doctrine of predestination who also taught a fairly standard Reformed doctrine of the covenants.<sup>28</sup>

**4. Calvin, Calvinism, and covenant theology.** The relationship of Calvin's thought to later Reformed covenant theology has been a subject of much debate. Some have argued that Calvin was not at all a covenantal thinker, given his very brief and seemingly unilateral view of covenant in the *Institutes* and that later Reformed writers were immersed in covenantal thinking and insistent on the bilateral character of covenant.<sup>29</sup> Others have claimed that Calvin was a strongly covenantal thinker whose emphasis on grace was lost to later Calvinistic thinkers, who descended into predestinarianism and legalism.<sup>30</sup> Of course, the historical case is more complex, far more complex, than either of these approaches indicates; but, in its complexity it, clarifies somewhat the question of the relationship of Calvin to so-called Calvinism. In the first place, there is the genuine oddity that the line of scholarship associated with a radically unilateral understanding of Calvin's covenantal thought has consistently dismissed the work of those scholars who have identified Calvin's rather careful distinction between the unilateral and bilateral aspects of covenant at the same time that they have refused to examine Calvin's biblical commentaries in which this distinction resides. Arguably, the distinction is

---

the *Studia humanitatis*," in Andrew C. Gow and Robert J. Bast (eds.), *Continuity and Change: The Harvest of Late Medieval and Reformation History. Essays Presented to Heiko A. Oberman on his 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2000), pp. 400-416.

27. See Willem J. van Asselt, "Cocceius Anti-Scholasticus?" in Willem J. van Asselt and Eef Dekker, eds., *Reformation and Scholasticism: An Ecumenical Enterprise* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), pp. 227-251.

28. See James Mark Beach, *Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin's Federal Theology as a Defense of Divine Grace* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).

29. J. Wayne Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant: The Other Reformed Tradition* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1980); and idem, "Heinrich Bullinger, the Covenant, and the Reformed Tradition in Retrospect," in *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 29/2 (1998), pp. 359-376.

30. E.g., James B. Torrance, "The Concept of Federal Theology – Was Calvin a Federal Theologian?" in *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor*, edited by Wilhelm H. Neuser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 15-40; idem, "Covenant or Contract? A Study of the Theological Background or Worship in Seventeenth-Century Scotland," in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 23 (1970), pp. 51-76; and idem, "The Incarnation and "Limited Atonement," *The Evangelical Quarterly*, 55 (April, 1983), pp. 83-94.

a commonplace of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed thought and is found not only in Calvin's work but also in the work of later Reformed writers.

There are also other significant relationships between Calvin's work and Reformed covenant theology. Calvin did, after all, state his definition of the covenant of grace as one in substance but differing in manner of administration or dispensation from the Old to the New Testament,<sup>31</sup> a definition that carried over into the covenant theology of the seventeenth century. Yet Calvin was neither alone nor very original in this formulation: it is present almost identically in earlier works by Zwingli and Bullinger. The scholarship that has associated Bullinger with origins of covenant theology as distinct from a Calvinian predestinarianism has typically played down the significance of this parallel and has also typically failed to note that Calvin did not actually develop his covenantal thought in relation to this definition, which occurs in the *Institutes* in the initial chapter on the relationship of the testaments. There is not, in other words, apart from this definition, very much covenant theology to be dredged out of the *Institutes* — and, accordingly, the *Institutes* was not heavily cited by later Reformed covenant theologians. What they did cite and cite both frequently and at some length were Calvin's commentaries in which most of Calvin's thought on covenant is recorded, as can be easily documented from the work of a thinker like Herman Witsius.<sup>32</sup>

### III. Conclusions

The term "Calvinism," like the acrostic TULIP, has been, in short, a cause of a series of problems concerning the identity of the Reformed tradition and of Calvin's relationship to the tradition. Both identifiers are anachronistic and reductionistic. Each of the several meanings of "Calvinism" results in mistaken understandings of the thought of John Calvin and its relation to the Reformed tradition of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Use of the acrostic TULIP has resulted in a narrow, if not erroneous, reading of the Canons of Dort that has led to confused understandings of the Reformed tradition and of Calvin's theology.

The underlying issue that is posed by these terms and by examples noted above of the theological and intellectual relationship of Calvin's work to the later Reformed tradition concerns the nature of a tradition as well as the character and variety of continuities and developments within a tradition. As Carl Trueman has recently pointed out, the entire question of continuity and discontinuity requires considerable nuancing.<sup>33</sup> There is, in the first place, the fundamental continuity of the basic

---

31. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans John Allen, 2 vols., 7<sup>th</sup> edition (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1936), II.x.2.

32. See the discussion of these citations in Richard A. Muller, "The 'Calvinists' Respond to Calvin," plenary address at the International Calvin Congress, Geneva, May, 2009.

33. See Carl Trueman, "The Reception of Calvin: Historical Considerations," in Andreas Beck and William den Boer, eds. *The Reception of Calvin and his Theology in Reformed Orthodoxy* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2010).

tradition of ecumenical and creedal catholicity, which, of course remained in place in the theologies of the Reformed and Lutheran branches of the Reformation as well as in the Roman Church. Second, there are issues of the broad continuities belonging to a specific Reformation and post-Reformation era confessional tradition — in the case of the Reformed confessional tradition, there is a common theological ground enunciated in the major confessional works of the mid-sixteenth century, namely the Gallican, Belgic, and Scots confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, all which were written in circles either in dialogue with or in one way or another indebted to Calvin and which, more importantly, represent the international community of Reformed belief to which Calvin belonged. In both of these cases, there is clear continuity between Calvin and his contemporaries as well as between Calvin and the later Reformed tradition not, of course, because of the individuality of Calvin's thought but because of its catholicity.

There is also the issue of the relationship of Calvin's thought to a tradition of which he was a part and which developed and changed over the course of time in relation to a complex series of differing historical contexts. As often noted, Calvin stands in relation to the Reformed tradition as one second-generation codifier among others, arguably the most prominent of the group if not always the primary voice leading to a particular formulation or development of thought in that tradition. He reflected on the work of predecessors like Zwingli, Bucer, Melancthon, Farel, and Oecolampadius; he engaged in dialogue and debate with contemporaries like Bullinger, Vermigli, Musculus, Viret, and à Lasco; and his work was received and defended in detail, his formulations (perhaps most notably his exegetical formulations) were consulted, modified, and incorporated into a developing, changing, and variegated theological tradition. Calvin did not originate this tradition; he was not the sole voice in its early codification; and he did not serve as the norm for its development.

As indicated from the beginning of this little survey of the issue of the relationship of Calvin to Calvinism, the issue is quite complicated — particularly if a proper understanding of "Calvinism" as loosely referencing the Reformed tradition is observed. The issue remains complicated, moreover, by the self-identification of various persons and groups as Calvinist or Calvinistic in the centuries after the decline of Reformed orthodoxy. These groups include Baptists who, on grounds of their denial of baptism to infants, would have been unwelcome either in Calvin's Geneva or in any of the confessionally Reformed contexts of the era of orthodoxy. Also to be noted here are various modern theologians and philosophers who call themselves Calvinist on grounds of a strict metaphysical determinism or compatibilism, a view that also was less than welcome in Reformed circles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

There, then, is a high degree of irony and as well of anachronism in these attempts to pit Calvin against a so-called rigid orthodoxy — largely on the basis of



the failure of the orthodoxy rigidly to reproduce Calvin's theology and largely driven by doctrinal criteria and even doctrinal slogans originating in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Given that the picture of later Reformed thought that we have seen emerge from a more detailed study of the late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century documents is the picture of a rather diverse movement with numerous antecedents in the earlier traditions of the church and in the work of a sizeable group of Reformers, both predecessors and contemporaries of Calvin, the very diversity of the movement militates against the characterization of it as rigid. What is more, had later Reformed theology formulated itself in the way pronounced as ideal by those who raise the question, "Was Calvin a Calvinist?," namely, duplicated Calvin's thought over and over again, not only would it have failed to survive as a confessional movement, it would also have attained a maximal rigidity. Quite to the contrary, the later Reformed tradition drew on and appealed to Calvin as one founding teacher among others, recognizing his abilities as a second-generation codifier of the Reformed faith, his limitations as a technical thinker, and his inability to address all of the issues that faced them in altered contexts and other times.

By way of conclusion, we return to the initial question, "Was Calvin a Calvinist?" The answer is certainly a negative. Calvin was not a "Calvinist" — but then again, neither were the "Calvinists." They were all contributors to the Reformed tradition. The moral of the story, perhaps, is to recognize the common ground on which Calvin, the various Reformed confessions, and the so-called "Calvinists" of the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries stand, and if you must, "gather ye rosebuds while ye may," but don't plant TULIP in your Reformed garden.