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Old Ideas for a New Consensus

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A Calvinist by Any Other Name

Tom J. Nettles

An encouraging development within the last year has been an increasing openness to serious theological dialogue. Witness the Patterson-Mohler discussion at the 2006 Pastors' Conference at the Southern Baptist Convention and the Akin/Coppenger live radio discussion during the 2007 Pastors' Conference. These discussions generated no visible animosity—quite the opposite—but did set a context for serious and substantial doctrinal polemics.

At the 2007 Southern Baptist Convention, the packet given messengers contained a booklet published by Convention Press entitled *Building Bridges*. Readers saw a foreword by Charles Colson, a preface by Thom Rainer, CEO of Lifeway, and articles by Timothy George and David Dockery. The back cover sports a statement by Morris Chapman: “David Dockery and Timothy George have charted a wise and faithful course for Southern Baptists for the 21st Century. Their invitation to renewal is one worthy of following. I am extremely pleased and thankful for this consensus building project. I commend *Building Bridges* to every Southern Baptist and invite you to join us on the hope-filled, Christ honoring journey.” The invitation that they issue does give hope of really helpful historically informed, exegetically careful and theologically meaningful engagement with truth.

Recently published by Rowman and Littlefield and edited by Douglas K. Blount and Joseph D. Wooddell, *Baptist Faith and Message 2000: Critical Issues in America's Largest Protestant Denomination* has a vigorous discussion of the theological importance of that document. The writers all are unwavering in their commitment to the usefulness of confessions for theological definition and discipline. Also, they are not afraid to show why a new statement was needed in order to clarify some issues that were ambiguous in the 1963 document as well as why certain additions were demanded by the challenging intellectual and cultural direction of contemporary society and the murkiness of much so-called evangelical theology. Many chapters in the book call for serious and edifying theological reflection.

Robert Stewart, writing on the doctrine of “Man” and citing the words “free choice,” asked what kind of freedom does sinful man possess? He presents a strong case for a “compatibilist” view of freedom using theological assertion from within other parts of the BF&M to make his point. He applied this briefly, but with helpful implications, to the issues of God and evil. In addition, Stewart addressed the dicey issue of original sin, actual transgression, and condemnation. He offered an interpretation that he feels will satisfy the “Reformed” Baptists in the

SBC (though he does not claim to be among them) and at the same time be true to the confession.

R. Albert Mohler, writing on the doctrine of salvation, pointed to several significant and necessary additions in the 2000 Confession emphasizing the “exclusivity of salvation through conscious personal faith in Christ” (40, 44) to close the door to inclusivism or universalism. Mohler also gave some helpful discussion to the question of the *ordo salutis* in the confession’s treatment of regeneration, repentance, and faith. He showed the tension that exists between Herschel Hobbs’s personal explanation of regeneration and that which is indicated by the confession, both in 1963 and in 2000 (41). Mohler sees the confessions as a healthy expression of a “modified Calvinism” following J. Newton Brown’s wording and arrangement of the *New Hampshire Confession*. He observes, “[T]he New Hampshire tradition represents a congenial meeting place for Baptists who are traditional Calvinists and those whose Calvinism is more modified” (38).

Danny Akin’s discussion of “God’s Purpose of Grace” gives a frank warning about extremes. Some Calvinists can be extreme and thus unresponsive to the evangelistic realities of Scripture and obvious human need. Some non-Calvinists can be simplistic and dismissive of the clear scriptural warrant for dealing honestly with such biblical ideas as election, predestination, human inability, and implications of divine sovereignty. He discussed the tension involved in divine sovereignty and human responsibility, gave a brief outline of the “Five Points,” and delivered a biblical and pastoral defense of “Eternal Security/Perseverance of the Saints.” He pointed to Charles Spurgeon as one who maintained a proper emphasis on both divine sovereignty and human responsibility (42–53).

Many other fine articles [e.g. Steve Lemke’s article on “Education,” Joseph Woodell on “Scripture,” Doug Blount on “God,” Jerry Johnson on “Religious Liberty,” and others] grace this volume. Its strongest feature may be the opportunities that it will provide for denomination-wide substantial theological critical enquiry. We should seek to evoke this in our respective spheres of influence.

Now back to the George/Dockery booklet. They not only provide occasion for discussion, but make specific proposals that call for serious engagement. David Dockery calls for a new consensus in Southern Baptist life that will unite seven different groups that participated in the “Conservative Resurgence.” He identified these, including short and appropriate definitions, as Fundamentalists, Revivalists, Traditionalists, Orthodox Evangelicals, Calvinists, Contemporary church Practitioners and Culture Warriors. With the breakdown of the cultural and programmatic consensus that so clearly defined Southern Baptists for fifty years of the twentieth century, the present circumstance of theological tension calls for a “new Consensus to point us toward renewal in the 21st Century” (25). In doing this Dockery said, “We will need to distinguish between markers of Southern Baptist identity and markers of Southern Baptist consistency” (30). I confess, I am not sure what this distinction would look like. The result of this distinction, however,

he identified as concentration on “primary and core convictions” without ignoring “necessary boundaries.”

Dockery then suggested twelve points of proposal for a new consensus. These twelve points undulate in a basically triadic movement between affirmation of the truthfulness of Scripture, going beyond the mere affirmation of Scripture to “commit ourselves foremost to the gospel,” and realization that we can not find unity if we try to demand doctrinal uniformity by going beyond “first order gospel issues.” He mentioned, more than once, the necessity of avoiding demands about “secondary and tertiary” issues. He wants both a formal principle and a material principle for renewal, he wants a center and a circumference for doctrinal confession, but he does not want a “straight jacket” created by demand for doctrinal uniformity in violation of the “considerable diversity” historically reflected among Southern Baptists. The real sticky part of creating a consensus on Dockery’s foundation is the discovery of what all of the seven groups are willing to call secondary and tertiary issues. Presumably, given the emphasis on the Bible and that those “beliefs that rest firmly on scriptural foundations can be regarded as binding on Southern Baptists,” nothing that is the legitimate child of biblical exegesis can be regarded as secondary or tertiary.

Methodologically, two approaches suggest themselves. One, we could start over with no stated doctrines and build a new statement of Christian faith for our generation using only our advanced status of the biblical text and our state of the art hermeneutics. Each generation would be encouraged to do this work all over for themselves. Two, we could begin with the present confessional status of Christianity and test each confessional article by examining its affirmations, and proof texts if there be any, in a rigorous exercise of biblical exegesis. As each article is affirmed or denied or amended exegetically with relative degrees of clarity and consensus, some nomenclature indicating primary through tertiary acceptability should be discussed and used to label each doctrine or acceptable variants on each doctrine.

Even though he is a profoundly careful New Testament exegete, other elements of Dockery’s suggestions indicate that he would be hesitant about option one and more receptive to option two in order to remain in dialogue with the church through the centuries. President Dockery’s article prompts theologians, and in fact every Christian, to ask what does it mean to be “grounded in the Gospel?” (32). What must be said about depravity and the way it is expressed in sin? In what sense are one’s depravity and his capability of “moral action” [a BF&M, article III idea] related? Is only a word, deed or purposeful thought considered a “moral action,” or is the indwelling propensity of heart a “moral action?” What must be said about election to reclaim a gospel of grace? Both biblical exegesis and the historic confessions draw us to the investigation and rightly call on us to give some precision to our faith at this point. If election depends on foreknowledge of a sinner’s faith, can one conceive of this as an action of divine grace or does it

become a mere nullity, a pure irrelevancy? Is this a theological issue of primary, secondary or tertiary importance? What must be said about the death of Christ and how it inevitably invites discussion of the biblical ideas of substitution, propitiation, reconciliation, forgiveness, justification and redemption? Are all of these mere potentialities as a result of the death of Christ, or were they intrinsically involved in His vicarious suffering as His crowning act of obedience and the fountain of all other spiritual blessings? I hopefully submit that this is precisely what Dockery had in mind when he urged, “We need to commit ourselves foremost to the Gospel, the message of missions and evangelism, the message that is found only in Jesus Christ and His atoning death for sinners.” (35) Dockery also is right, showing that his biblical exegesis is informed by historical theology, to emphasize that this Jesus Christ is the one of the “orthodox tradition . . . recovered in conversation with Nicea, Chalcedon, Augustine, Bernard, Luther, Calvin, Wesley” and others. This is the only Jesus Christ, the one of the Bible, that can propitiate divine wrath, make forgiveness both gracious and just, reconcile the world to God, and through whose blood we have redemption. In fact, like His word of creation, as the Word of God, was necessarily effectual, His work of redemption has absolutely secured the “purchased possession.” I would suggest that such a person as Christ is could not have done what He did without its having absolutely invincible efficacy in perfect fulfillment of His Father’s will and to the perfect demonstration of the glory of the triune God.

A thoughtful discussion, therefore, of what is involved in a “reaffirmation of the Gospel center” (33) and some defined circumference (32) prompts one to consider how long the diameter must be from circumference to circumference in the confessional circle of Southern Baptists. The longer the diameter the more doctrines are included, the less persons can actually sign on, and the greater the unity within. The shorter the diameter, the less doctrines are included, the more people *can* sign on (if they would want to), and the more frustrating and superficial is the experience of unity. That is, unless one begins to minimize the importance of doctrines that he thinks are biblical by considering them secondary or tertiary. Southern Baptists in the twentieth century have gradually expanded the diameter on purely doctrinal issues and added articles on social, organizational, and ethical issues, which exponentially extends the sphere of biblical doctrine accounted as important for unity. Compared, however, with the confession that governed the majority of Baptist churches North and South in the 17th – 19th centuries, the Second London Confession [i.e. the Philadelphia and Charleston Association confessions] the diameter in purely doctrinal areas has severely shortened, both in clarity of definition and exegetical usefulness. So, is the call for consensus a call for more clearly defined unity by increasing both the number and the clarity of doctrinal confession; or a call for a more easily attained unity by decreasing the number of doctrines expounded and increasing their ambiguity. Within this unity, how much tolerance will be given to those who believe the confession, or

some acceptable variant as speculated above, but think that much more is vitally important?

Timothy George's article, "Was Jesus a Baptist?" includes a charming and moving personal testimony (37–41), an affirmation of the need for the conservative resurgence (41, 42), and a helpful agenda for achieving "the miracle of dialogue." He summarized the purpose of his article in the provocative statement, "We will not meet tomorrow's challenge by forgetting yesterday's dilemma, but neither will we win tomorrow's struggles by fighting yesterday's battles" (42). He proposed "Retrieval for the Sake of Renewal," "Particularity in the Service of Unity," and "Humility in the Presence of the Holy."

Under "Retrieval," George highlighted the cantankerous issues of creedalism and Calvinism. He affirmed the use of confessions but cautioned against their tendency to choke and stultify when applied wrongly and issued the popular warning against magnifying secondary and tertiary issues to a place of primary importance. He affirmed his personal adherence to historic Baptist Calvinism but warned Calvinists against becoming real, as opposed to alleged, hyper-Calvinists. Thankfully, he also issued a strong warning against the tendency of Arminianism to become Pelagianism and soon to become a faith-denying liberalism (50).

Dr. George made a bold proposal at this point in the interest of facilitating the bridge-building atmosphere. "Let us banish the word 'Calvinist' from our midst," he declared, for it has become the new n-word for some and an "unseemly badge of pride" for others. This proposal does not come from lack of awareness either of the dynamics of Baptist dialogue or of the importance of Calvin as a theologian. George knows as much about Calvin, and appreciates his influence, as any scholar in the world. But he believes that no Baptist is a strict follower of Calvin for the issues of church and state, infant, baptism, or Presbyterian polity as advocated by Calvin do not resonate with our sense of biblical truth. Like Dockery, George is interested in cultivating a culture of truth-telling in the context of mutual respect and earnest persuasion in the context of brother-love. He wants to talk about the most highly contested and deeply disturbing issues between Calvinists and non-Calvinists. He is not seeking to avoid the emerging issues of the neo-Controversy.

But the suggestion to avoid the word "Calvinist" seems to be both unrealistic and superficial. First, why does it seem unrealistic? When the word is as deeply entrenched in the history of Christianity, especially Protestantism, and the polemical side of Protestantism, and the English Puritan/Separatist/Baptist development, and is in the historical documents pervasively, how can the term be avoided? What would one designate as its replacement. Would contra-Remonstrant be satisfactory? Hardly. Would "those that believe the doctrines of grace" be a sufficiently manageable term? It has some merit but non-Calvinists might not want to concede as a term of party identification the words "doctrines of grace" to a party that they oppose in one or a number of doctrines, as if they reject grace in that particu-

lar case. Second, it seems superficial, because the objection to the word Calvinist is not a matter of the sound of the word or of the particular objectionable teachings George mentioned that all Baptists resist. When one speaks of Calvinism today in a Baptist context, especially among those involved in discussion about it, no one is thinking that Baptist Calvinists defend infant baptism or reject church-state separation or are wanting to surrender local church autonomy or pastoral accountability to a local congregation as a member of that congregation. But when one begins to speak of God's gracious and sovereign election, established before the foundation of the world itself, of a fixed number of specific individuals unto salvation to be accomplished through the death, resurrection, ascension and intercession of his Son for those elect persons, what is that called? When one speaks of human sinfulness involving the captivity of the affections to such a degree that no sinner will, or can, repent of sin and place his trust in Christ alone for salvation apart from an omnipotent and effectual operation of the Spirit that calls, and thus grants, such a sinner genuine sorrow for sin and unrelenting faith in Christ, what does one call that? Some will think it is heresy and others will think it is lovely gospel truth, but all will call it Calvinism. Not the name, but the doctrine constitutes the point of contention.

I agree that we need not prejudice the effectiveness of dialogue by the insistent use of a label, but some usefulness at least must be discerned in a summary word that encapsulates a substantial body of doctrine. When Jonathan Edwards published *Freedom of the Will*, he explained his choice of the words "Arminian" and "Calvinist" for the purposes of less awkward discussion. Noting that some claim that "the keeping up such a distinction of names, has a direct tendency to uphold distance and disaffection, and keep alive mutual hatred among Christians, who ought all to be united in friendship and charity, though they cannot in all things think alike," he admitted that "there are some unhappy consequences of this distinction of names." He felt that the objections were "carried far beyond reason," however, for succinct designations give quick and easy signification to our minds, "and our speech is delivered from the burden of a continual reiteration of diffuse descriptions, with which it must otherwise be embarrassed." Then, after explaining that he meant no reproach by using the term "Arminian" instead of some circumlocution or other designation likely to be taken as the product of an ill-temper, he observed a notable situation relevant to the Southern Baptist dilemma. "However, the term *Calvinistic* is, in these days, among most, a term of greater reproach than the term *Arminian*; yet I should not take it at all amiss, to be called a *Calvinist*, for distinction's sake; though I utterly disclaim a dependence on Calvin, or believing the doctrines which I hold, because he believed and taught them; and cannot justly be charged with believing in every thing just as he taught." We simply view the words as convenient descriptions of doctrine with which we might agree or disagree, but not as insults.

George's call for particularity in service of unity issues several compelling challenges. Every follower of Christ must cultivate an appreciation and respond positively when another speaks honestly and transparently in an attempt to advance the truth. In addition, every Christian must speak the truth and argue for a truth that assumes a love for each follower of Christ, accepts the reality that everyone born of God loves the truth, and excludes the embracing of error. The long-term goal George envisions is unity, for how can we come to agree if we do not know the points at which we clearly disagree. All of this takes place in a context of love sobered with the realization of our own sinfulness, proneness to error, and need of constant streams of grace. In this context, a sobering stewardship necessitates the courage and skill to realize where one has gone outside the zone of acceptability and must be seen as an enemy of the cross of Christ, or a preacher of another gospel, not to be encouraged or embraced in Christian fellowship, but opposed.

His call for humility in the presence of the holy should never be far from our consciousness. While we never underestimate the necessity of our faithfulness and the accountability that we have before God for the right disposition of our gifts, we should never overestimate our personal importance or consider our concerns as superior to those of others. The Bible not only gives us a system of truth, but insists that the effect of truth on the heart of the one that believes it is humility—"God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6).

The great theologian Charles Hodge, no compromiser of the truth but rigorous in his exposition of the historic Reformed faith, gives us a concept that might help us negotiate the kind of inter- and intra-denominational discussions that should regularly take place. "The true method in theology," he asserted, "requires that the facts of religious experience should be accepted as facts, and when duly authenticated by Scriptures, be allowed to interpret the doctrinal statements of the Word of God." He went on to say:

So legitimate and powerful is this inward teaching of the Spirit, that it is no uncommon thing to find men having two theologies,—one of the intellect, and another of the heart. The one may find expression in creeds and systems of divinity, the other in their prayers and hymns. It would be safe for a man to resolve to admit into his theology nothing which is not sustained by the devotional writings of true Christians of every denomination. It would be easy to construct from such writings, received and sanctioned by Romanists, Lutherans, Reformed, and Remonstrants [Arminians], a system of Pauline or Augustinian theology, such as would satisfy any intelligent and devout Calvinist in the world." (Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:16, 17).

This issue of the *Founders Journal* will give a quick synopsis of the theological commitment of J. P. Boyce with some attention to his method—not exhaustively because I have not discussed his commitment to biblical exposition as the rock-bottom foundation of all theology or his view of the clarity of Scripture that undergirds much of his doctrinal formulation. Nevertheless, he stands as one theologian who can guide us in our search for a new consensus. He would say that it should look a whole lot like the old consensus. Included also is an article by Stephen Matteucci, a Southern Seminary student, on Calvin and prayer. When one grasps Calvin’s doctrine of prayer and its usefulness for Christian assurance and piety, who would not want to be a Calvinist in prayer. This lives in the realm of “heart” theology addressed by Hodge. Last, a Calvinist more infamous than respected because of the perpetuation of gross caricatures, Theodore Beza, gives the Christian a great sense of God’s deep care and concern for His people, in this world and the next. Shawn Wright, a valued colleague in the church history department of Southern Seminary who is doing more than anyone to dispel the pall of forbiddenness that has cloaked the name of Beza, shows how his theology, in this case his eschatological vision, demonstrates the deep intensity of his pastoral concern. Again, this is a kind of Calvinism to which every minister should aspire.

Let us go now to the pages before us and see what these classic Calvinists have to say to us about our Southern Baptist struggle. ☺

News

Florida Baptist Truth Project

This past July, nearly 3000 copies of the Amazing Grace DVD were mailed out to Southern Baptist pastors in the state of Florida in July 2007. You can learn more about this project on our website:

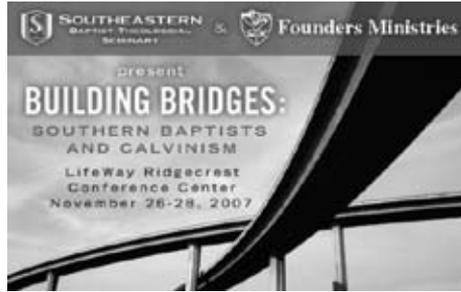
wwwFOUNDERS.org/articles/eNews0607ud.htm

And read updates: wwwFOUNDERS.org/dvdblog/

Southern Baptist Founders Conference Southwest

The Southern Baptist Founders Conference Southwest will be held September 27–29, 2007 at Heritage Baptist Church in Mansfield, TX. The theme will be “How Can a Man Be Right With God: The Doctrine of Justification.” Sam Waldron, Academic Dean and Professor of Theology, Midwest Center for Theological Studies, Owensboro, KY, will be the keynote speaker.

For more information, see online: wwwFOUNDERS.org/conferences.html



Calvinism, a frequent topic within the Southern Baptist Convention and beyond, will be the theme of a conference sponsored by Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and Founders Ministries on November 26–28, 2007.

The conference, titled: “Building Bridges: Southern Baptists and Calvinism,” will be held at Ridgecrest Conference Center in North Carolina.

Topics will include: The Historical Record, Calvinism: A Cause for Rejoicing, A Cause for Concern; The Atonement: Its Design, Nature and Extent; Theological Stereotypes: Let’s Be Fair and Honest with Each Other; Election and Calling: A Biblical/Theological Study; Working Together to Make Christ Known.

Each subject will have at least two speakers addressing differing perspectives and at least one panel discussion will be held.

Speakers include: David Dockery, James Merritt, Malcolm Yarnell, David Nelson, Charles Lawless, Nathan Finn, Ken Keathley, Greg Welty, J.D. Greear, Sam Waldron, Voddie Baucham, Jeff Noblit, Tom Nettles, Thom Rainer, Brad Waggoner, Ed Stetzer, R. Albert Mohler, Jr., Danny Akin and Tom Ascol.

For more details visit Lifeway’s website at: www.lifeway.com (search for “Building Bridges Calvinism and Southern Baptists”).

“Calvinism has generated a lot of interest in recent years in Southern Baptist life. Unfortunately we have often talked at and not with one another. Unhealthy rhetoric and misrepresentations from all directions has led to confusion and even ill will among brothers and sisters in Christ. We hope this conference will demonstrate how important theological issues can be discussed with grace, integrity and love.” —Danny Akin

“We intend to follow the example of those who have gone before us by rediscovering the spiritual vitality that comes from humble, honest theological dialogue. We have a significant lineup of excellent theologians who represent what Scripture means when it says iron sharpens iron. This conference is an opportunity for Southern Baptists to experience the kind of theological sharpening that takes place when brothers and sisters come together to learn from one another and to challenge each other to follow our Savior more faithfully.” —Tom Ascol

Boyce the Theologian

Tom J. Nettles

“But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5).

In 1920 Mrs. J. E. Peck contributed to the *Western Recorder* an article in remembrance of J. P. Boyce (1827–1888). Among many outstanding features, she remembered him vividly as a great theological teacher through biblical exposition. She recalled the first time that she saw him when he gave an exposition to a group of students at a commencement.

He took for his text the epistle to the Romans. Romans is next to Ephesians the deepest book in the Bible. I groaned inwardly. Dr. Boyce was a learned man and I looked for a discourse over the heads of his audience, especially of the students to whom he was preaching. He had not spoken a dozen sentences before everyone, including the students, was listening with the most absorbing attention. He made Romans a living entity. He put Paul’s great argument so clearly and simply all could understand. We saw clearly what were the errors in that important church and that Paul combated them in the best and most powerful way. That was a matter of course since Paul was inspired, but it was not a matter of course that an audience of plain people unlearned in the schools should be enabled to comprehend all these great things in that great epistle and it showed that the speaker was as great an expositor as has been known in the world.¹

This charming memory not only points to the pedagogical magnetism of Boyce but to two other life-long commitments. One, he never grew weary, but rather increased in his intense affection, toward the great systematic expression of doctrine laid out by Paul in the book of Romans. Two, he believed that these doctrines were for all the sheep of Christ. Doctrine, particularly the distinguishing doctrine of God’s sovereign grace, should be the common property of all the church for its edification and comfort.

Early Preparation of Mind and Heart

J. P. Boyce was reared in the richest home in South Carolina. His mother came to faith in Christ under the ministry of Basil Manly, Sr. in 1830 and left the Presbyterian to be a part of the Baptist congregation. For ten years he felt the deep impressions made both by Manly’s pastoral care and his theologically alive experimental preaching. Others that deeply influenced his thinking were W. T.

Brantly, Sr., Francis Wayland and Richard Fuller. During spring vacation from Brown, Boyce, already showing signs of deep conviction about his sin and the undeniable truth of biblical Christianity, attended the preaching of Richard Fuller who had come from Beaufort to preach each evening at the First Baptist Church of Charleston. He was converted and baptized on April 22 while the meeting was in progress.

On returning to Brown, Boyce immediately began Christian service in earnest and a rigorous reading program. Boyce's reading regimen during his last year in college was very impressive, demonstrating an increasing zeal for Christian theology and apologetics, including Bishop Butler's famous *Analogy of Religion*. A spiritual renewal on campus prompted Boyce to observe, "Never have I felt until this revival," Boyce revealed, "what a blessed privilege it is to save a soul." Giving a foretaste then of his future calling, Boyce remarked, "May my prayer evermore be to God that he may make me instrumental in his hands in the salvation of many! It is indeed a glorious and blessed privilege to labor in the vineyard of my Master."²

A Worker in the Master's Vineyard

Boyce, licensed to gospel ministry on November 14, 1847, was kept from immediate theological study by problems with his eyes. He married on December 20, 1848, about a month after having accepted the position as editor of a Baptist newspaper in Charleston SC, *The Southern Baptist*. He had begun gathering an impressive theological library during and immediately after his final year at Brown and had scheduled an arduous and aggressive reading program. Boyce's voluminous reading of substantial theological works and his zeal for orthodoxy immediately showed itself in the pages of the paper. The almost twenty-two year old Boyce began to argue for a doctrinal standard to mark the Baptist witness southwide. In his introductory editorial he staked a claim to the task of theological watchman: "We are as editor of the Baptist as much a Watchman on the Walls of Zion as he who sounds the alarm from the sacred desk. May God strengthen me to perform this work." He closed with the pregnant sentiments of a lover of truth: "But if an earnest desire for the furtherance of the principles of our denomination, and a full belief in their scriptural truth, accompanied by a determination to labor earnestly, industriously and prayerfully, be any index of success, we have that index."³

The most ambitious theological undertaking during the few months that Boyce edited the paper consisted of his publication of a lengthy defense of the doctrine of imputation in a series of eight articles. Concurrent with these articles, Boyce included seven articles by W. B. Johnson that defended a scheme of redemption that did not involve the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to the believer. Greg Wills has made a strong case for J. L. Reynolds as author of the articles.⁴ Other evidence suggests that Boyce at least participated in some aspects of the writing and certainly sympathized fully them. An editorial he wrote prior to the appearance of these articles, entitled "Purity of Heart," included the theological point "Christ is made your righteousness. He imputes unto you the purity of his own pure life and ensures unto you the blessings which that purity gives."⁵

Books in his library show personal engagement in the content of the articles. At any rate, it is clear that Boyce approved the articles that endorsed imputation of the righteousness of Christ. I will treat them as presenting Boyce's views and representing his life-long commitments.

His target in these articles probably was the professor at Furman University, whose place years later Boyce was to fill, J. S. Mims. Mims rejected the doctrine of imputation and had made caustic remarks on the issue in 1848 in an address entitled "Orthodoxy." Also involved in resisting the confessionally orthodox position was the seasoned preacher and denominational leader William B. Johnson, from whose pen Boyce published seven articles. The deep earnestness and serious mindedness about issues of doctrinal truth permeate the entire series. In his announcement of the series Boyce wrote, "Opposed as we are to controversies generally, we can never refuse our columns to contributions such as these." He could not object to a "temperate discussion of any theological question" because "controversy is apt to elicit the truth."⁶

Several enduring traits of Boyce's subsequent contribution to the theological life of Baptists appear rather boldly in this early polemical exchange. First, Boyce shows that he has read widely in Reformed literature and accepted it as the Baptist heritage a departure from which could only bring disaster. Second, Boyce indicated his confidence in the confessional history of Baptists and his zeal to preserve the Particular Baptist heritage so thoroughly entwined in the doctrines of the proto-Southern Baptist generation. Third, while dealing with the issue of imputation, Boyce showed his penchant for clearly stated categories of systematic theology involving an awareness of the interdependence of all the facets of a system of doctrinal truth and their necessary development from Scripture rightly interpreted.

The Reformed Heritage

One must recognize that Boyce's love for the family of Reformed thinkers in these articles precedes his study at Princeton. His various mentors prior to Princeton all gave Boyce reason to consider that heritage as his own. The articles quote Charles Hodge, J. H. Thornwell, Richard Furman, Andrew Rivet, Turretine, the Westminster Confession, Archibald Alexander, Jonathan Edwards, Andrew Fuller, Robert Haldane, Herman Witsius, Gerhard Oncken and others. They specifically criticized Socinianism, Arminianism, Pelagianism, the New Divinity, as well as a point by point refutation of William B. Johnson and his absorption in the New Divinity viewpoint.⁷

This love affair with a wide range of Reformed literature continued throughout his life. His massive and lovely library contained all the major works of the Continental Reformed theologians, the English Puritans, the Presbyterians both in Scotland and America, Jonathan Edwards. He required his students to read Turretin in Latin. John A. Broadus commented on Boyce's love for this tradition.

For one who sympathizes with what we call the Calvinistic, or Augustinian, type of Theology, this work is in certain important respects

unrivaled. Many a subject is presented with such exact analysis, such complete statement, such consummate argumentation, as one very rarely encounters in the noblest writings. Some persons call the book dry,—an epithet which not a few apply to all systematic theological discussions; but to Boyce it was simply delightful. It gratified his taste for analysis, it satisfied, his Calvinistic convictions, its energetic and forcible exhibitions of truth awakened in him practical as well as intellectual sympathy.⁸

Boyce continued this interaction with the Reformed thinkers, virtually identifying Baptist theology as a species of that great tradition. His *Abstract of Systematic Theology*, published in 1887, Boyce gave witness to his forty year commitment to and love of that theology described by John Broadus as “that exalted system of Pauline truth which is technically called Calvinism, which compels an earnest student to profound thinking, and, when pursued with a combination of systematic thought and fervent experience, makes him at home among the most inspiring and ennobling views of God and of the universe he has made.”⁹

The Use of Confessions

The importance of Baptist confessionalism also appears strongly in the articles on imputation. The series began by quoting from the *Baptist Catechism* and the Charleston Confession of Faith. A sense of honest stewardship demanded that faithfulness to a confessional standard be maintained. A simple agreement that the Bible is inspired while “exploding” its distinctive doctrines does little to protect the substance of the Christian faith. A confession of faith protects the denominational witness to full-orbed truth and must be set forth as the documentation of unity. If Baptists tolerate the “explosion” of such doctrine as the deity of Christ, total depravity, and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, “unless the churches interpose, it is difficult to predict what explosions are to follow.” Should other explosions begin to occur, however, “the final explosion,” so affirmed the article, “will send the denomination in twain.” If such a division may be avoided “only by conniving at pernicious errors, and standing silently by, while the landmarks of our fathers are one after another stricken down, I for one say—Let it come.”¹⁰ Whether Reynolds or Boyce, the urgency sizzles.

Boyce continued strongly to urge the prescriptive and disciplinary use of confessions as a safeguard for denominational identity and witness and a grand privilege for all who are set aside as teachers. He argued that case strongly in July, 1856, before the trustees of Furman University after he was as professor of Systematic Theology at Furman University. His inaugural address to that position became one of the true landmarks of Southern Baptist denominational life. He proposed as one of his key ideas about theological education that the denominational theological seminary be protected by firm subscription to a confession of faith. He argued that this requirement did not contradict Baptist views of liberty but represented a faithful execution of the Baptist concern for church purity. “The same views of the spirituality of the church,” Boyce explained, “have impressed upon us the necessity of excluding those who have violated the simplicity which is in Christ.”¹¹

He contended that “peculiar obligations rest” on those responsible for educating a rising ministry. That person should have perfect agreement with the confession proposed. “No difference, however, slight, no peculiar sentiments, however speculative, is here allowable.” He may not teach if he has mental reservation concerning the doctrinal statement and never should private understandings of disagreements be foundational to a person’s employment in a confessional institution. If a confession is wrong, then those who have legitimate authority may change it; but never should the principle be established that “the professor sign any abstract of doctrine with which he does not agree and in accordance with which he does not intend to teach.”¹²

In 1874, Boyce answered an article that appeared in the *Baptist Record* about two objections to the seminary. One concerned the ownership of the Seminary and the nature of the Board of trustees, which Boyce answered energetically and exhaustively. The second concerned the “doctrines taught in the Seminary against which some four or five State Conventions have earnestly protested.”¹³ In investigating the second objection, Boyce found that it amounted only to the fact that one of the current five professors had stated a willingness to accept immersion in a non-Baptist congregation as acceptable for membership in a Baptist church.

Giving full attention to the objection, Boyce reviewed the importance of having a “creed” as a doctrinal standard for the school in securing the perpetuity of sound teaching. He recalled the difficulty some brethren had in accepting the idea of a “creed.” In light of disagreement on which currently available confession most suitably met the need, the decision to write a new doctrinal platform met with approval. With Basil Manly carrying the lion’s share, but all the faculty and the educational committee joining, finally a twenty-article platform, distilled mainly from the Charleston Association Confession, was adopted entitled the *Abstract of Principles*. Three principles governed the final articulation of the text. 1. “A complete exhibition of the fundamental doctrines of grace, so that in no essential particular should they speak dubiously; 2. They should speak out clearly and distinctly as to the practices universally prevalent among us; 3. Upon no point, upon which the denomination is divided should the Convention, [that is the educational convention convened for this purpose] and through it the Seminary, take any position.”¹⁴ “There were brethren,” Boyce recalled, “and I admit that I was one of them—who would then and there have abandoned our object, rather than aid in raising an institution whose funds and endowments were not secured to the maintenance of the principles and practices then prevalent, and still prevailing, in our Southern Zion.” In particular Boyce emphasized that “the doctrines of grace are therefore distinctly brought out in the abstract of principles.”¹⁵

Boyce saw clearly that the nature of biblical revelation called for the summation of its progressively revealed redemptive scheme in succinctly articulated confessional articles as Paul himself did in 1 Timothy 3:16, among other places. God’s revelation in Scripture is both propositional and clear. In addition, Boyce listened well to the history of the church. He knew that individual items of biblical truth had progressively been condensed into confessional formulas, beginning with the great Christological creeds of the fourth and fifth centuries and culminating in the great Protestant creeds, in order to highlight truth and root out and reveal

error. Also important was Boyce's conviction that heretics often like to hide their deviations from biblical truth behind an ostensible devotion to the words of the Bible. One of the surest ways for error to overtake and smother truth is its appearance as an angel of light, heterodoxy appearing as pious devotion. Furthermore, Boyce knew that confessions had played an important part in the Baptist witness through the years. Baptists had protected the purity of their testimony to truth through the publication of confessions. They had both affirmed their faith and tested its existence in others through this method.

The Systematic Arrangement of Doctrine

Equally as important, additionally, for maintaining theological faithfulness is the extended argument for theological coherence built upon a full display of all the relevant biblical material on any subject. As the Confession, or catechism, consisted of a distillation of thought into a simple, but hopefully sufficient, assertion, even so a systematic theology involved the expanse of thought that provides the demonstration in support of the assertion.

The articles on Imputation reveal Boyce's conviction that systematic theology has both a pedagogical and a protective function. Pedagogically, it serves as an aid to give structure to biblical teaching. Christians learn the Bible better when they have a guide that helps them know how to relate the multiplicity of subjects to one another in Scripture. As a protective measure, systematics upholds Christian truth by helping one discern the relationships of the various elements of truth to one another. In his *Abstract of Systematic Theology*, Boyce observed on the issue of Christian Dogmatics, "It comprises in addition such philosophical explanations as seem necessary to make a complete and harmonious system. These additions are not necessarily non-scriptural, for they are often the embodiment of the very essence of Bible truth, though not of its formal utterances."¹⁶

The initial article on imputation quoted Archibald Alexander as confirming the systematically strategic place of the doctrine of imputation. "We confess ourselves to be of the number of those," so wrote Dr. Alexander, "who believe, whatever reproach it may bring upon us from a certain quarter, that if the doctrine of imputation be given up, the whole doctrine of original sin must be abandoned." But even more was at stake in the relinquishing of this truth. Its sinews connect the whole of specifically Christian truth. "And if this doctrine be relinquished, then the whole doctrine of redemption must fall, and what may then be left of Christianity they may contend for that will, but to ourselves, we shall be of opinion that what remains will not be worth a serious struggle."¹⁷

Boyce did not change his views on that issue. In the opening paragraph to his discussion of justification in the *Abstract of Systematic Theology* he wrote, "No doctrine of Scripture is more important than that of justification. It involves the whole method of the salvation of sinners. It is vitally connected with all other fundamental doctrines. A correct conception of it cannot exist when other truths are ignored, or only partially received. The opinions held upon this point control in great part the theological views in general of all Christian individuals and parties."¹⁸

The fourth article laid siege to the New Divinity theology itself invoking this same conviction of the internal connections of doctrine. After giving voice to the judgment of James H. Thornwell on the New Divinity, Reynolds, and Boyce through him, remarked that, though the charges seem startling, they are verified in the history of New England Congregationalism. “The pantheistic Parkerism of the present day, is only one of the stages in the descent from the denial of imputation, down through Socinianism to open infidelity and Atheism.” He continued, “For if this doctrine be chargeable with injustice, Atheism is our last and only refuge.” Why is this so? Imputation is “inextricably interwoven with the Sacred scriptures—it pervades the moral government of God.” But in the New Divinity movement God’s moral government of the world necessarily excluded any hint of imputation. Philosophically, they concluded the very idea to be intrinsically unethical. If so, its clear presence in Scripture renders that book as built on an ethically faulty foundation. Should the opponents of imputation succeed in their charge, “the converts to their opinion would reject a book which so manifestly teaches the doctrine,” and, if consistent, would proceed to the “denial of all moral government and the entire rejection of the divine existence.”¹⁹

This same commitment to coherence and synthesis based on the unity of truth Boyce demonstrated throughout his career. He referred to the development of doctrine as the process by which the truth becomes “harmoniously stated.” “The leading truths involved in every prominent doctrine of the word of God,” Boyce wrote in explaining how systematics arose incrementally in the history of Christianity, “were held and maintained long before the doctrine itself became the subject of definition.” If this were the invention of new teaching, it would be wrong and rightfully rejected by every Christian. When it represents, however, the gathering of all the relevant biblical material and placing each idea in its proper relation with its proper weight, excluding nothing and comprehending everything, this alone produces true teaching and protection from error.²⁰

Boyce’s colleagues and students recognized his love of systematization. Broadus made the following observation.

He was a strong and deep thinker. Very rarely do you find a man so widely acquainted and actively occupied with practical affairs, yet so delighting in the profoundest thought. He really loved to follow out a close-linked and vigorous line of argument. He took pleasure for its own sake in the elaborate analysis, exposition, and vindication of some great theological theme. In our hurriedly practical age many talented men imagine that they have no time for calm and prolonged thought; yet not only ministers, but lawyers and business-men and teachers, might well observe the examples in which the reflective and the active powers of a strong man reinforce each other.²¹

The students learned to appreciate their drilling in systematics. What they found irksome in its exacting requirements, they soon found beneficial in real substantial and observable progress in knowledge and expression. “Many a time since,” so testified J. William Jones, “I have had occasion to thank God and to

thank my old professor for the thorough drill he gave us in the doctrines of God's Word." He spoke of the requirement Boyce had of minute analysis of the flow of argument, paragraph by paragraph, of Dick's *Systematic Theology*. Another said that Boyce's "faithful teaching and thorough drill in Systematic Theology" had been a healthy tonic to him "in a malarious atmosphere."²²

The same commitment to coherence and system one may find throughout his *Abstract of Systematic Theology*. He compared theology to a science that is built on facts. "It inquires into their existence, their relations to each other, their systematic arrangement, the laws which govern them, and the great principles which are the basis of this existence, and these relations." How clearly and consistently he articulated this commitment can be seen in his approach to the doctrine of perseverance. He affirmed its inseparable connection with "the other doctrines of grace which we have found taught in God's word." According to Boyce these doctrines usually are accepted together or rejected together because of their mutually dependent character. While all Romanists, Arminians, and Lutherans reject them, Calvinist confessions contain them all together. "All the evidence therefore, of the truth of the doctrines already examined, may be presented in favour of this which is a necessary inference from them." By the same token, he claimed, "all the independent proof of this doctrine confirms the separate doctrines, and the system of doctrine, with which it is associated."²³

And Now . . .

In closing, Christian commitment calls us to a genuine sympathy for the theological vision of J. P. Boyce and the firm commitment of the struggling saints and prominent preachers of the early years of the Southern Baptist Convention. Dissenters from these convictions have been scattered throughout each generation of Southern Baptists from the beginning but in increasing measure and proportion throughout the twentieth century. Many have observed the consequent fragmentation and destructive effects of this loss of conviction, but few have made a full recovery of the viewpoint that sustains life and truth. Many have felt the dark oppression of the loss of truth, but few have perceived the path that leads to the restoration of light and freedom. By God's grace, may each reader be among those that embody that conviction and give strong encouragement to others in that direction. Such a profound conviction held conscientiously, will restore energy to one's spiritual confidence, fullness of conviction to one's love of the Bible, and zeal for the proclamation of the faith that leads to godliness. ☪

Notes:

¹ Mrs. J. E. Peck, "James P. Boyce," in *Western Recorder* (February 26, 1920).

² John A. Broadus, *Memoir of James Petigru Boyce* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1893), 50, 51.

³ James P. Boyce, "Our Salutatory," *The Southern Baptist* (November 22, 1848).

⁴ Greg A. Wills, *The First Baptist Church of Columbia, South Carolina, 1809–2002* (Nashville: Baptist History and Heritage Society, 2003), 44–51.

⁵ James P. Boyce. *The Southern Baptist* (November 29, 1848) 2.

- ⁶ Boyce, "Our Correspondents," *The Southern Baptist* (February 21, 1849).
- ⁷ Boyce, "On Imputation, IV," *The Southern Baptist* (March 14, 1849).
- ⁸ Broadus, *Memoir*, 268.
- ⁹ Broadus, *Memoir*, 73.
- ¹⁰ Boyce, "On Imputation, I" *The Southern Baptist*, (February 21, 1849).
- ¹¹ Boyce, "Three Changes in Theological Institutions." In *James Petigru Boyce: Selected Writings* ed. Timothy George (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1989), 56.
- ¹² Boyce, *Changes*, 50.
- ¹³ Boyce, "The Two Objections to the Seminary, I" *Western Recorder* (April 11, 1874).
- ¹⁴ Boyce, "The Two Objections to the Seminary, V" *Western Recorder* (June 20, 1874).
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology*, 5.
- ¹⁷ Boyce, "On Imputation, I."
- ¹⁸ Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology*, 394–95.
- ¹⁹ Boyce, "On Imputation, IV" (March 14, 1849)
- ²⁰ Boyce, "The Doctrine of the Suffering of Christ," *The Baptist Quarterly* (October, 1870) 385–86.
- ²¹ Broadus, *Memoir*, 349.
- ²² Broadus, *Memoir*, 266.
- ²³ Boyce, *Abstract*, 428.

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³⁴ One of the ways some scholars maintain that Beza changed Calvin's theology relates to the Christian's quest for assurance of salvation. Calvin, they say, found assurance by looking to Christ for forgiveness. Beza changed the focus to the Christian's works, introducing the "practical syllogism," and thus robbed believers of certainty of salvation. Nothing could be further from the truth as I show in *Our Sovereign Refuge*, 199–225.

³⁵ E. William Monter, *Calvin's Geneva* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1967; reprint, Huntington, NY: Robert E. Kreiger, 1975), 194.

³⁶ Theodore Beza, *Correspondance de Théodore de Bèze*, ed. H. Meylan, A. Dufour, C. Chimelli, and B. Nicollier (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1970), 6:19.

³⁷ Theodore Beza, *Ecclesiastes, or the Preacher. Solomons Sermon Made to the people, teaching every man howe to order his life, so as they may come to true and everlasting happines. With a Paraphrase, or short exposition thereof, made by Theodore Beza* (Cambridge: n.p., n.d.), on Eccl 5:8.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, C4–C5.

³⁹ Beza, *Canticles*, 246–47.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 247.

⁴¹ Beza, *Job*, on Job 1:6.

⁴² Beza, *Household Prayers*, in the prayer "To obtain the gift of faith."

⁴³ Beza, *Tabula*, in *The Potter and the Clay*, 58.

⁴⁴ Beza, *Canticles*, 36–37.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 358.

⁴⁶ Beza, *Household Prayers*, K3v–K4v.

A Strong Tower For Weary People: Calvin's Teaching On Prayer

Stephen Matteucci

Editor's Note: In Mr. Matteucci's original paper, he presented a creative and provocative theological interaction with Calvin's doctrine of prayer at two further points. Space issues dictated their omission, but they are worthy of earnest commendation. One point was that we must see prayer as intrinsically causative of God's decreed will as a mean through which God works, much like He works forgiveness through the death of Christ, or works glorification through the resurrection of Christ. In The Lord's Prayer we see that God expects to work His dominion in conjunction with the moral and spiritually mature desires and requests of His children. Another point is that we cannot pray in absolute abandon of any personal desire or in entire self-forgetfulness. God has bound up His glory, that is the full range of multifaceted demonstrations of His wisdom and holiness, in this world and the next in the well-being of His people and the completion of their joy. He is glorified in our unalterable happiness.

Prayer as a Manifestation of Piety

The modern caricature of John Calvin portrays him as a disembodied brain, an unfeeling logic machine that spits out hard doctrines without regard for the experience of the average Christian. As with any good caricature, this one has some resemblance to Calvin's life: Calvin did deal with hard doctrines and he was logical. That, however, is where the resemblance ends. Calvin was a pastor and, while his writings are more theologically rich than the writings of today's pastors, his overriding concern was to help Christians live for Christ, to move Christians forward in their life of piety towards God. According to Calvin, piety is "that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces."¹ Calvin's theology, writes John T. McNeill—who edited Calvin's *Institutes*—is "his piety described at length."²

As a matter of fact, Calvin designed the *Institutes* to promote piety among his readers. The subtitle of the first edition (1536) read, "Embracing almost the whole sum of piety, & whatever is necessary to know of the doctrine of salvation: A work most worthy to be read by all persons zealous for piety."³ In his prefatory letter to King Francis I, Calvin says that his purpose "was solely to transmit certain rudiments by which those who are touched with any zeal for religion might be shaped to true godliness."⁴

The personal piety of the Christian, however, was not the ultimate goal of Calvin's work; piety was an indispensable means to the ultimate goal: the glory of God. In Cardinal Sadoletto's letter to Geneva, he focused the attention of the Genevans on the necessity of attaining heaven. Calvin countered by admonishing that

it is not very sound theology to confine a man's thoughts so much to himself, and not to set before him, as the prime motive of his existence, zeal to illustrate the glory of God. For we are born first of all for God, and not for ourselves. ... I am persuaded, therefore, that there is no man imbued with true piety, who will not consider as insipid that long and labored exhortation to zeal for heavenly life, a zeal which keeps a man entirely devoted to himself, and does not, even by one expression, arouse him to sanctify the name of God.⁵

A man of piety, according to Calvin, seeks to glorify God and personal piety is God's method of being glorified: "God has prescribed for us a way in which he will be glorified by us, namely piety."⁶

As Calvin taught on prayer, then, his goal is to build up the prayer life of his readers as a way of advancing their personal piety so that they will glorify God in their lives. He encouraged Christians to pray, by emphasizing their great need for prayer, teaching them God's great promises about prayer, and highlighting the many blessings to be found in prayer. The focus is firmly on the individual Christian on his knees before the Father and the relationship with God that is forged during those times of prayer.

Calvin's goal of encouraging piety is demonstrated by his instruction on prayer. He devoted the longest chapter in the *Institutes* to teaching and encouraging Christians to pray. Flowing from his high view of God's majesty and sovereignty, along with a healthy respect for man's neediness before God, Calvin's instructions about prayer have laid a firm foundation for the Christian's walk for nearly 450 years. This article will focus on Calvin's "rules" for prayer and show how they mirror his evangelical emphasis on Law and Gospel.

A Consistent Structure

The content of Calvin's teaching on prayer is wonderfully consistent with his views of God and man and the world and sin in the rest of his theology. In Book One on the *Institutes*, Calvin explains that knowledge of God and knowledge of man are closely linked together and that a true knowledge of man is only possible if we first know God.

As long as we do not look beyond the earth, being quite content with our own righteousness, wisdom, and virtue, we flatter ourselves most sweetly, and fancy ourselves all but demigods. Suppose we but once begin to raise our thoughts to God, and to ponder his nature, and how completely perfect are his righteousness, wisdom, and power—the straightedge to which we must be shaped. Then, what mas-

quering earlier as righteousness was pleasing in us will soon grow filthy in its consummate wickedness. What wonderfully impressed us under the name of wisdom will stink in its very foolishness. What wore the face of power will prove itself the most miserable weakness. That is, what in us seems perfection itself corresponds ill to the purity of God.⁷

After describing the majesty of God and the sinfulness of man, Calvin showed that redemption is possible only through the grace of God given through Jesus Christ. Calvin's view of prayer adopts this same structure. The majesty and holiness of God make Him unapproachable by sinful man; reconciliation with this holy God comes only through the work of Jesus Christ, and we may only approach this throne of justice in the name of Jesus Christ. We approach God in prayer in the same way and on the same basis that we approach God for salvation—on the merits of Christ alone by faith alone through grace alone. Just as Calvin discussed the knowledge of God through His Word, man's perversion of that knowledge, his spiritual inability, and the strict requirements of the Law before he discussed the person and work of Christ and the aid of the Holy Spirit, so he gave the high expectations that God has in our right approach to Him before he shows us the aid we have in Christ's intercession and the gift of the Spirit. The four rules teach us that God cannot be approached lightly or formally or frivolously or coldly; God must be approached reverently, humbly, fervently, and hopefully. When expounding these rules, Calvin sets the standard high, so high that failure to keep these rules not only derails prayer, but could endanger the Christian's soul.

Four Rules for Prayer

The first rule of right prayer is reverence. When we pray, Calvin writes, we must "be disposed in mind and heart as befits those who enter conversation with God."⁸ Reverent prayer is prayer with a mind "raised above itself that it may not bring into God's sight anything our blind and stupid reason is wont to devise, nor hold itself within the limits of its own vanity, but rise to a purity worthy of God."⁹ Calvin asserted that "the only persons who duly and properly gird themselves to pray are those who are so moved by God's majesty that freed from earthly cares and affections they come to it."¹⁰ Later in this section, Calvin warned against a wandering mind that is easily distracted, so reverence may merely be an encouragement to "apply oneself totally [to prayer], avoiding all distractions and wandering thoughts" and an instruction that "[c]oncentration must be sought after; one must learn to discipline one's mind in prayer."¹¹

Calvin's second rule requires that we desire the things we seek from God. On one level, this rule is a warning to those who recite prayers from habit, saying the words of a prayer without feeling any need for what is asked.¹² But, again, the language Calvin used is stronger, setting a higher standard:

A fault that seems less serious but is also not tolerable is that of others who, having been imbued with this one principle—that God must be appeased by devotions—mumble prayers without medita-

tion. Now the godly must particularly beware of presenting themselves before God to request anything unless they yearn for it with sincere affection of heart, and at the same time desire to obtain it from him.¹³

What should we do if we do not have this kind of yearning? Should we put off praying? No, Calvin replied; consideration of our circumstances—whatever they are—should produce in us this deep feeling of need. If we are in severe trouble, the troubles themselves will make us feel our needs; and if we are living with an abundance of material wealth, we merely have to “consider how many dangers at every moment threaten” us in order for us to understand our great need for prayer. Thus, every circumstance of life “pricks us the more sharply . . . to pray earnestly,”¹⁴ and so we have no excuse.

Calvin’s third rule warns us not to trust in our own resources to meet our needs, but to trust only in God:

To this let us join a third rule: that anyone who stands before God to pray, in his humility giving glory completely to God, abandon all thought of his own glory, cast off all notion of his own worth, in fine, put away all self-assurance—lest if we claim for ourselves anything, even the least bit, we should become vainly puffed up, and perish at his presence.¹⁵

At one level, Calvin is telling us that pride before God is foolish; we are not praying to an equal for a little help to get us through, we are praying to the sovereign and holy God to sustain us in everything. Again, however, the language implies a warning, that “if we claim for ourselves anything, *even the least bit*” we run the danger of perishing in the presence of God.

The person who stares straight into the wrath of God, should, according to Calvin, be “encouraged to pray by a sure hope that our prayer will be answered.”¹⁶ It sounds strange that a person who has contemplated God’s wrath could, at the same time, have a “firm assurance of God’s favor.”¹⁷ While acknowledging the apparent contradiction, Calvin resolves it by an appeal to God’s goodness: although we deserve nothing but wrath from God, He chooses to give us what we need in answer to our prayers. So, Calvin’s fourth rule requires us to have a “sure hope that our prayer will be answered.”¹⁸

A Strong and Perfect Plea

After reading through these four rules, we may easily feel that prayer is impossible. If this is what is required by God to come into His presence, then it is safer to stay away from Him. But Calvin represented the true Christian with such a yearning for God that he cannot stay away and consistently sees prayer as his breath of life. “How much soever believers may feel that they are oppressed by a heavy load of iniquity, and are not only devoid of everything which can procure the favour of God for them, but justly burdened with many sins which make

him an object of dread, yet they cease not to present themselves, this feeling not deterring them from appearing in his presence, because there is not other access to him.”¹⁹

Calvin understood that this reaction needs the full biblical remedy of evangelical encouragement. “What I have set forth on the four rules of right praying is not so rigorously required that God will reject those prayers in which He finds neither perfect faith nor repentance, together with a warmth of zeal and petitions rightly conceived.” In fact, Calvin continued, “No one has ever carried this out with the uprightness that was due.”²⁰

The point of the four rules is not to make us good enough to approach God, but to show us that we will never be worthy, thus driving us to Jesus Christ: “For as soon as God’s dread majesty comes to mind, we cannot but tremble and be driven far away by the recognition of our own unworthiness, until Christ comes forward as intermediary, to change the throne of dreadful glory into the throne of grace;”²¹ “he is the only way, and the one access, by which it is granted us to come to God. ... Thus Christ is constituted the only Mediator, by whose intercession the Father is for us rendered gracious and easily entreated.”²²

And again he assured, “And as we have already shown that our prayers, which otherwise would be polluted, are sanctified by the intercession of Christ, so the Apostle, by enjoining us ‘to offer the sacrifices of praise to God continually’ by Christ (Heb. xiii.15), reminds us, that without the intervention of his priesthood our lips are not pure enough to celebrate the name of God.”²³ In ourselves, when properly under the impression of our sin and unworthiness to come to God, even in the supplication of prayer, we might still be timid of comprehending such infinite favor the Father has bestowed on us in the gift of His Son. He gave in addition, therefore “the Spirit as a witness of this adoption, that through him we may freely cry aloud, Abba, Father. Whenever, therefore, we are restrained by any feeling of hesitation, let us remember to ask of him that he may correct our timidity, and placing us under the magnanimous guidance of the Spirit, enable us to pray boldly.”²⁴

With such encouragement—the triune God Himself urging and aiding us in prayer—no Christian should be hesitant to pray. Even as Christ’s merits and Holy Spirit’s mortifying power invite us to freedom from the Law’s condemnation and its intimidation as an unattainable standard of righteousness so that we may see it as a lovely promise of our future glory, even so, Christ’s intercession combined with the Spirit’s intercession transforms Calvin’s rules of prayer, induced from Scripture, into a promise that one day we shall be lost in wonder love and praise in perfect and unbroken consciousness of God’s rule, will, glory, presence, and perfect provision. ☩

Notes:

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill, ed., Ford Lewis Battles, trans. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1.2.1.

² John T. McNeill, quoted in Joel R. Beeke, “Calvin on Piety,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 125.

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*: 1536 Edition, Ford Lewis Battles, trans. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), cited in Joel R. Beeke, “Calvin on Piety,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 126.

⁴ *Institutes*, 9.

⁵ John Calvin and Jacopo Sadeleto, *A Reformation Debate*, John C. Olin, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1966, 1976), 58.

⁶ Cited in Joel R. Beeke, “Calvin on Piety,” 127.

⁷ *Institutes*, 1.1.2.

⁸ *Institutes*, 3.20.4.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Institutes*, 3.20.5.

¹¹ Bruce A. Ware, “The Role of Prayer and the Word in the Christian Life According to John Calvin,” *Studia Biblica et Theologica* (Pasadena, CA: Fuller Theological Seminary), 77.

¹² “For many perfunctorily intone prayers after a set form, as if discharging a duty to God.” *Institutes*, 3.20.6.

¹³ *Institutes*, 3.20.6.

¹⁴ *Institutes*, 3.20.7.

¹⁵ *Institutes*, 3.20.8.

¹⁶ *Institutes*, 3.20.11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Institutes*, 3.20.12. [Beveridge translation]

²⁰ *Institutes*, 3.20.16.

²¹ *Institutes*, 3.20.17.

²² *Institutes*, 3.20.19.

²³ *Institutes*, 3.20.28. [Beveridge translation]

²⁴ *Institutes*, 3.20.37. [Beveridge translation]

The Reformation Piety of Theodore Beza

Shawn D. Wright

Theodore Beza (1519–1605) remains one of the enigmas of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation even though he led the church in Geneva, and its efforts in France, from the death of John Calvin in 1564 until his own death forty-one years later. These were tumultuous years in Geneva’s history, and Beza led a very exciting and busy life at its helm.¹ Though many scholars assume that Beza transformed Calvin’s theology from a humanist, biblical emphasis to the deductive and philosophical emphases of Protestant Scholasticism,² we respectfully disagree.³ Our purpose in this article is modest, to point out the major contours of Beza’s piety.

To understand Beza's piety we must attempt to enter into his worldview. We will see that Beza had a very supernatural view of reality, complete with God and Satan, heaven and hell. This "eschatological vision," as I will call it, meant that for Beza the single most important aspect of Christian piety was that a believer might navigate the vicissitudes of life and arrive safely in heaven. With this eschatological vision as the necessary background to Beza's thought, we shall then note three of Beza's emphases concerning Christian piety. First, we shall see the importance of the Word of God; second, the reality of difficulties in Christian living; and, third, the hopefulness of God's sovereignty to Christian piety. These components together comprise Beza's realistic, yet ultimately optimistic, view of the Christian life.

Beza's Eschatological Vision

Contrary to many historians' evaluations of Theodore Beza, I do not think Beza was primarily a scholastic logician. Instead, I believe that a careful reading of his works shows that he was fundamentally an affectionate follower of Jesus Christ, who yearned to be with Christ, but who viewed the Christian's life as a struggle. The hardships of the Christian life were the result of a battle raging between Satan and God. Although the outcome of the struggle for Christians was sure (i.e., they would certainly arrive in heaven), hell was a reality that was to be avoided at all costs. Here we will briefly outline the contours of Beza's eschatological vision.

The Fact of the Spiritual Battle

Beza depicted Satan as active in the world, indefatigably trying to harm Christians. So he indicted Satan as the foremost of "my enemies" in his meditation on Psalm 102. The devil was "that great devouring lion, who has spoiled, torn, and swallowed so many" Christians "from the beginning of the world."⁴ Satan was the deadly aggressor in the spiritual battle.

Satan's schemes took many forms. In the first place, he incessantly troubled Christians in tempting them to sin, lying "in wait to hurt us, seeking principally to make a breach into our hearts when we stand least upon our guard."⁵ He made more trouble when they attempted to pray, "for besides that the devil at all times lies in wait, to seduce us, so does he, especially, at such times, seek to creep into our minds, to divert our thoughts elsewhere, that they may be polluted with many blemishes."⁶ One of the prerequisites of fervent prayer was thus to abandon "Satan with all his baits."⁷

Only God could make Christians strong for the combat. The omnipotent God would protect His children. "Does Satan amaze you?" Beza asked his listeners when the Genevans feared a Catholic attack in 1587.⁸ If so, believers need not worry, for their Lord has vanquished Satan, forgiven their sins, given them His righteousness, and made the sting of sin into a door to life. "Behold then all your enemies scattered, quite under foot, all such as afflicted you within and without, because the Lord allows you for one of his servants and household." The battle was real, but "it is not in the power of any to trouble us, except when and how far it pleases God they shall do it."

The Battle for the Truth

Satan especially sought to destroy the church because God loved it and appointed it the guardian of the truth. The devil attacked the church by trying to foster heretical beliefs in her midst. So Beza warned his listeners to be on “guard here against a great ruse of Satan, pushing us if he can, from one extreme to the other, which are so many precipices. Therefore let us know that those are grandly self-deceived who want to subjugate the word of God to their own natural sense.” Instead believers must lean “on the word of God understood, and not at all on our imaginations, whether they are old or new.”¹¹

Biblical truth was essential. If one did not believe certain truths, one would be damned eternally. That is why Beza yearned to remain in the church in the midst of the spiritual battle because “there is not any such mishap, or so much to be feared, as to be out of this holy temple, wherein only abides all light, truth, salvation, and life.”¹² The church was where God’s “truth is lodged.”¹³ As such, it was the locus of salvation and life. Though Satan endeavored to destroy the church, the confession of the truth protected her in the midst of the spiritual battle.

The Eternal Stakes of the Battle

Theodore Beza’s eschatological vision was eternal in its scope. He had his eyes fixed on eternity as he lived and ministered in this life. He wanted himself and those under his care to go to heaven and not to have to suffer the perpetual torments of hell.

Beza acknowledged that eternity was an awesome experience to contemplate in this life. In the prayer “upon temporal death,” he recognized that even in the longest and strongest life “death, which as our shadow, follows us at the heels, ... laughs at our good devices, until she has scattered them in the wind, and brought us into ashes.” And none is so holy that in himself does not “tremble and quake” at “the tribunal seat of your sovereign justice, where we all, after death, must appear?” God’s indignation and vengeance to the natural specter of death adds “an interior feeling of the curse fallen upon sin, yea even an entry into eternal death, unless there be for us with you our Father, redemption in our Lord Jesus Christ.”¹⁴

Hell’s torments would be excruciating for unbelievers. “These miserable men,” Beza noted, “depart this their earthly habitation, with great grief and trembling.” Their misery and fear on the brink of death foreshadows their eternity, “the proof that they are going to make, of the eternal torments with the devils in the burning lake of fire and brimstone, which is never quenched, given to the soul presently upon the temporal death.” Their “eternal death” is “a death which continues without dying.” Torments of conscience added to those of the body constitute their pain, for “this pain is not the least to the damned, ... that they never have any motion of the spirit to repent or convert” to the only and true God.¹⁵ Yes, hell will be for them an eternity of intense emotional, physical, and spiritual pain, because “when they think upon death, they see nothing but fearful, horrible, damnable, all-intolerable pain, without diminution or end,” inflicted by a “a most merciful God,” who will “be as severe and rigorous to them, as he shall be gentle and favorable to his children.”¹⁶

Lest one argue with the deity that hell seemed an exorbitantly horrendous punishment for finite sins, Beza justified an eternal hell in Anselmian terms, “for your majesty being infinitely offended, ought also in justice to require a punishment without end.”¹⁷

Conversely, heaven was a wonderful and joyful place, where a Christian would be freed from the trials of his earthly pilgrimage. In heaven, Christians “may once for all, wholly be set free from so miserable bondage of sin” and “they may behold [God] as it were face to face, yea and more rightly serve and honor him, whom all their lifetime they have most earnestly sought.”¹⁸ Thus Beza prayed that the Lord would allow a believer near death to behold “with the eyes of his faith” the eternal blessings reserved “for him in your [God’s] paradise.”¹⁹

Having an eternal perspective fortified believers for spiritual battle, according to Beza. “To the children of darkness,” he commented, “the uncleanness of the flesh is a pleasant habitation. But to the children of light, to the immortal spirits, to the regenerate hearts, heaven is much more desirable.” He thus prayed “Grant therefore, my God, that as I daily grow towards my end, so I may live the more cheerfully, learning in your school, to prefer your eternal life—before the light of the Sun, the glory of heaven, before the vanity of the earth, the glorious habitation in paradise, [and may I] know how to prepare myself by continual meditation in these excellent Christian consolations, that happy are they that die in the Lord.”²⁰ Beza’s eschatological vision thus informed all that he did and taught. God would sovereignly bring His people to heaven to be with Him, but the reality of the spiritual battle meant that the believer’s life on earth would be fraught with trials.

The Bible and Christian Piety

To Beza the spiritual battle necessitated *sola scriptura*. The living God had revealed Himself and His ways, and continued to speak, through His Word, the Bible. But, as Beza repeated continually, the devil vigorously opposed God’s living voice in Scripture. If Christians were to withstand the wiles of the devil, they must be girded by truth from God. Roman Catholic, heretical, and any other human ideas that came between the individual and the Bible must be abandoned. The Bible had to be trusted and proclaimed.

The Sufficiency of the Bible

For Beza, the Bible’s sufficiency derived from its authorship—God’s own voice to His people. “Does the Word contain all that which we must believe and do?” Beza asked at the head of his *Petit Catéchisme*. “Yes, without having any need to add anything to it or take anything from it.”²¹ The Bible’s sufficiency consists of its self-interpretive authority,²² its compelling picture of Christ the Savior, and the counsel of God “concerning our salvation.”²³ The Bible, Beza affirmed in prayer, is “the image of your glory, the law of your kingdom, the ladder of heaven, the gate of paradise, the trumpet of salvation, to be brief, the treasury of piety, virtue, wisdom, consolation, and perfection.”²⁴

God’s active speaking through the Bible explains the usefulness Beza saw for the Scriptures in the church. Satan was active in the world, especially attacking

the church. His major ploy was to entice persons to trust their unaided reason. This was a dangerous evil, Beza warned in a sermon to his students. The God-given protection against this demonic scheme, significantly, was found in biblical doctrine. Instead of following Satan's schemes, believers should "lean on the word of God understood, and not at all on our imaginations, whether they are old or new."²⁵

To Beza, the Bible was of supreme usefulness for God's people because of its divine origin. It alone contained "heavenly doctrine" from God Himself.

The Bible's Role in the Spiritual Battle

Beza believed Satan's machinations prompted Rome's heretical doctrines. He rebuked the Catholics for "their false and cursed doctrine" which they attempted to cover with "lies and falsehoods." This practice, he argued, originated with "Satan their father" and was carried on "in the school of these foxes, or rather these wolves, which are the talents and the teeth of that great monster of Rome."²⁶ The infallible antidote to such deception, Pastor Beza noted, was to judge everything by the sure rule of Scripture, "to consider well whether it be drawn out of the true vessels of ... the writings of the prophets and Apostles, ... and so consequently reject and refuse without all exception whatever wine is drawn elsewhere."²⁷ According to Theodore Beza the Bible, the Christian's weapon in the spiritual battle, was essential to Christian piety.

Difficulties of Piety in the Spiritual Battle

As a pastor, and in light of his eschatological vision, Beza focused on assurance of salvation as a pressing need of his people. Christians here merely take pilgrimage; heaven holds their true, eternal rest. Until then, troubles, and occasional doubts, assault them. A wise pastor must find in Scripture the kind of assurance and encouragement that will give a persevering and hopeful, heavenly spirit to his flock. Ultimately, though, Christians would have complete, final assurance only in God's eternal heavenly presence. Satan's wiles were too crafty, and their own indwelling sin was too powerful for the case to be otherwise. Beza's eschatological vision informed his belief in both the urgency and imperfection of Christian assurance in this life.

Beza's paraphrase of the twenty-seventh psalm showed his readers that Christians' spiritual "enemies" made assurance necessary. The means of both salvation and assurance include a lively grasp of the power of God as opposed to the empty boasting of Satan, "a continual desire always of the glory of God" by subjection to His Word and church order, and "earnest prayer, with faith and patience."²⁸ For refuge from the attacks of adversaries, Christians needed to find assured comfort through the right use of these means.

At this point Beza's famous *Tabula Praedestinationis* is put to its most pertinent use.²⁹ Beza labored to show how one could be assured of his personal interest in the predestining grace of God by asserting a two-pronged basis of assurance: the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit and the external witness of good works.³⁰ Beza's pastoral advice arising from such a polemical context, is remarkable:

So then, do you wish (whoever you are) to be assured of your predestination, ... as certainly and surely as if you ascended to heaven itself and understood that secret decree from the very mouth of God? ... do not begin at the highest stage, for otherwise you will not endure the immense light of God. Therefore, begin at the lowest stages; and when you hear God's voice ... calling you to Christ, the only Mediator, consider step by step, and inquire carefully if you are justified and sanctified by faith in Christ. For these are the effects, and from them we understand that faith is the cause.

You will know this partly from the Spirit of adoption who inwardly cries "Abba, Father," and partly from the power and efficacy of that same Spirit within you – if, ... sin, though it "dwells" in you, does not "reign" in you, ... Is it not the Holy Spirit who causes us spontaneously not to give free reign to our wicked and depraved desires ...? Who else "exhorts us to prayers," no matter how cold and sluggish we are? Who arouses in us those "inexpressible sighs"? Who implants in us after we have sinned (sometimes intentionally and knowingly) that hatred for the sins that we commit – not because we fear punishment but because we offend our most merciful Father? ... Who urges us even to dare entreat God, our God, and still our Father, even after we have offended him? Is it not the Spirit, and he alone ...? But if we can infer faith from these effects, we can only conclude that we are efficaciously called and drawn, and ... therefore were given to the Son, since we were predestined by God's eternal counsel, which he purposed in himself, to be adopted in the Son. From this it follows, in short, that since we were predestined by that most unshakable will of God, ... and since "no one can snatch us from the hand of the Son," and since perseverance in faith is necessary for salvation, we have a sure expectation of our perseverance, and consequently our salvation. And therefore it is wicked to have any more doubts concerning that matter.

Consequently, it is totally wrong to say that this doctrine renders us negligent. ... [O]n the contrary, it alone gives us access to examine and even understand, by means of his Spirit, the very "depths" of God. ... Furthermore, how can anyone remain firm and constant to that end, against so many dangerous internal and external temptations, and so many "strokes of chance," as the world likes to say, if he has not first established in his mind what is utterly true: that God does all things according to his good will, no matter what, or whatever instruments he uses, in the interest of his own, and that the man who is set in such a plight may number himself among "those in his book"?³¹

Knowing the ordained means of assurance strengthened the Christian “against all the attacks of Satan” and daily to “do battle with the ‘heavenly weapons’ against despair.” Assurance was requisite because of the spiritual battle.

Finally, his published prayers emphasized how the spiritual battle made assurance both necessary and difficult to obtain. In the preface to his *Household Prayers*, Beza pointed to Satanic opposition and the straying nature of our own flesh as the chief difficulties in prayer. “The devil does at all times lie in wait to seduce us,” Beza warned, by creeping “into our minds, to divert our thoughts elsewhere, that they may be polluted with many blemishes, notwithstanding that they of themselves sufficiently go astray. Yes our vanity, imperfection, and coldness, does many ways betray itself, that we may well say in one word: no man prays rightly, but he, whose mouth and mind Christ directs with his Spirit.”³² Satanic opposition was real. Prayer was a spiritual weapon to be wielded by believers against the devil.

The *Household Prayers* also admonished Christians to find comfort in leaning on the love and perfect character of their Heavenly Father in this battle against Satan. Beza prayed, “Strengthen us likewise with your virtue, O almighty God, against the temptations and assaults of Satan, delivering us victoriously, preserving us also from such dangers and miseries, as everywhere follow us at the heels in this life ... because we are of the number of your children.”³³

Beza believed assurance of salvation a necessary weapon in the spiritual battle raging around Christians on their pilgrimage to heaven. The devil made believers question their standing with God. As a pastor sensitive to the spiritual predicaments of his parishioners, Beza encouraged his listeners to seek assurance in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit would testify to them internally of their salvation, and the good works they produced in response to their salvation would serve as external proofs of the same. Their hope resided thus in God’s character and the grace he had shown them and promised to continue to pour out on them for eternity. But until believers reached their final resting place in heaven, they would not have complete assurance due to the trials that inevitably attended this life.³⁴

God’s Sovereignty: Bedrock of Christian Piety

Beza’s eschatological vision—his belief in believers’ pilgrimage through a spiritual battle on their way to the eternal joy and happiness of heaven—informed his pastoral view of reality. The times were precarious. The plague, Catholic armies, Lutheran antagonists, persecution in France, and the instability of Geneva Academy conspired against Genevan Christians.³⁵ But above and behind all these concerns, Beza perceived a battle between God and Satan, a war which inevitably involved Christians. How could believers have confidence in such dangerous times? Their assurance of salvation and their safety in this world depended on God’s absolute sovereignty, according to Beza. God’s sovereignty at its heart was a pastoral doctrine for Theodore Beza.

Beza’s writings are replete with applications of God’s sovereignty to his listeners and readers. Though he engaged energetically in technical and polemical discussions, his overriding concern remained the comfort and assurance of believers. God’s sovereign ability to keep His promises anchored His hurting people.

So Beza urged Gaspard de Coligny to be “assured of the faithful guidance of such a Guide, who will lead you through the right path, whatever difficulty there is of unknown and inaccessible places.”³⁶ Even in the face of inexplicable evil, Christians must seek to trust in Him and His providential control over all things. In the midst of oppression, defrauding of rights, loss of equitable treatment, and incurable corruption in high places, Christians should not “to begin to doubt of that providence of God. For however these things seem to be tossed up and down, as if the world had no governor, yet be sure there is one ... who has also standing by him innumerable and most mighty ministers, whom in due time he may set a work to execute his decrees upon these proud men.”³⁷ God, so Beza taught, tempers “the life of man by giving sometimes prosperity, sometimes adversity.” We “are not able to attain to his wisdom” in these matters. The only proper course, and the only avenue open to prospering in adversity, was to rest wholly in God’s wisdom and fall down “before the majesty of God, which we cannot comprehend” and “rest wholly in his will.”³⁸ God would take care of His people, even when they did not understand His ways.

The schemes of Satan were especially vexing to God’s people. But God in His sovereignty would prevail over Satan and judge the wicked. The devil would leave “no kind of cruelty unpracticed.” He has failed to use “neither fire, nor water, nor air, nor earth, ... to suck the life of our poor brethren.” Not only have the hangmen been “wearied with their slaughter, but the people also have been employed to drench themselves with the blood of the poor, meek and innocent, without distinction of age or difference of sex, or any privilege of nature whatsoever.”³⁹ Even in this observable reality, it is an “irrefragable point and undeniable ... that the Lord is never late or slack in coming, that is to say, fails not to come at the point, yea and that leaping over all that which might seem to slack and stay his coming.”⁴⁰

God’s control, Beza asserted, reached right down to ordering the deeds the devil should do. Rather than causing consternation among believers, though, Beza argued that this truth “is full of excellent comfort” for “by the power of our God, the rage of that hungry lion is abated and bridled.” The truth stirs our confidence that “God will never suffer him to do anything against his children, which shall not be to their good and profit.”⁴¹

Beza argued that God’s sovereignty assured Christians of their salvation. Their Sovereign was the author of salvation from its very beginning until the time He brought His children to be with Him in heaven. As believers held on to this promise, Beza argued, it would produce comfort and joy, even during times of earthly conflict. Thus Beza prayed for the constant flow of God’s grace. For if God did work in us that which He commanded us to do, convert us to believe His word, bring us to Christ and clothe us in His righteousness, give us His Spirit to effect within us His gifts, we “cannot hearken to this voice of the shepherd of our souls, neither in our hearts conceive such and so lively a faith, that all uncertainty be banished.” Without God’s work in us, we can not “feel the peace and joy that true faith brings with it.”⁴²

As He had saved them, so God would grant His children the grace to persevere, Beza argued. “He who has obtained the gift of true faith,” Beza urged, “must

also be concerned about his perseverance.” Unwaveringly, he should “call on God in every kind of temptation and affliction, with the sure hope of attaining what he asks, at least as far as it is expedient, since he knows himself a child of God, who cannot fail him.”⁴³

They would persevere because God who required holiness in His people would sanctify them sovereignly as well. So Beza urged his listeners troubled about their standing to call upon the Lord “which has made us, and who alone can make us anew, by the same power, which is his Holy Spirit, enlightening the eyes of our understanding (Eph. 1:18, Acts 26:18), framing a clean heart within us (Ps. 51:12), creating in us both to will and to do (Phil. 2:13), in a word, making us from the head to the feet new creatures (2 Cor. 5:17)”⁴⁴

The grand result of God’s sovereignty for a believer in this life was assurance of salvation, Beza argued. In the troubles of life, believers could trust that God, in His power, would “settle and engrave in our minds this holy assurance of his mighty power in good will towards us,” and will cause us to “persevere and continue in this holy profession of his truth, as well by mouth, as also by an holy and Christian life” until He finally brings us to enjoy the fruit of “his most holy and most assured promises.”⁴⁵

Ultimately, though, Beza looked forward to heaven’s certainty as the answer to the mutations of the earthly pilgrimage, a certainty because of God’s sovereign action on behalf of His people. He taught his people to pray “always to be content with your will, the sovereign and just cause of all things.” They should see that God determines that “in carrying their cross after your Son” they are freed from the lusts of the flesh and replenished with desires for eternal life.” Such crosses “shall be unto me,” they would pray, “so many blessings and helps from you my Father, to make me go the right way into your kingdom, and increase unto me the price of glory in the same.”⁴⁶ The wise, powerful, and loving Father would certainly bring His children to Himself for eternity.

The complete sovereignty of God was the foundation of Beza’s view of the Christian life. Rather than negating Christian piety, God’s sovereignty provided the necessary foundation upon which Christian piety could stand, and hope. The intervening centuries have changed neither the enemies to our hope nor the truths in which its certainty resides. ☪

Notes:

¹ The best recent attempt at understanding Beza in his historical context is Scott M. Manetsch, *Theodore Beza and the Quest for Peace in France, 1572–1598, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought*, vol. 79 (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

² This thesis includes many notable names. R. T. Kendall argued for this thesis clearly. Others include Basil Hall, Brian G. Armstrong, Alister McGrath, and Roger Olson.

³ For fuller discussion see Shawn D. Wright, *Our Sovereign Refuge: The Pastoral Theology of Theodore Beza, Studies in Christian History and Thought* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004). Much of this article is based on material found in *Our Sovereign Refuge*.

⁴ Theodore Beza, *Christian Meditations upon Eight Psalmes of the Prophet David* (London: Christopher Barker, 1582), on Psalm 102:8.

- ⁵ Theodore Beza, *Maister Bezaes Houshold Prayers*, trans. John Barnes (London: n.p., 1603), P3r–P3v.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, B6r.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, B5v.
- ⁸ Jill Raitt, “Beza, Guide for the Faithful Life,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 39 (1986): 97–98.
- ⁹ Beza, *Christian Meditations*, on Ps 143:12.
- ¹⁰ Theodore Beza, *Master Bezaes Sermons Upon the Three First Chapters of the Canticle of Canticles*, trans. John Harmar (Oxford: Joseph Barnes, 1587), 236.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 437.
- ¹² Beza, *Houshold Prayers*, G2v–G3r.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, G1r.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, in the prayer “Upon temporal death.”
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, N2v–N3v.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, N1v–N2r.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Q5v.
- ¹⁸ Theodore Beza, *Job Expounded by Theodore Beza, Partly in Manner of a Commentary, Partly in Manner of a Paraphrase* [Cambridge: n.p., 1589], on Job 3.
- ¹⁹ Beza, *Houshold Prayers*, in the prayer, “At the visitation of the sick.”
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, in the prayer “Upon temporal death.”
- ²¹ Theodore Beza, *Petit Catechisme, Cest a dire, Sommaire Instruction de la Religion Chrestienne. Latin-François, par Theodore de Beze* (n.p.: n.d., 238). See also the English translation, *A Little Catechisme, That is to Say, A Short Instruction Touching Christian Religion* (London: Hugh Singleton, 1579), A.1.
- ²² Theodore Beza, *The Psalmes of David, truly opened and explained by Paraphrasis, according to the right sense of everie Psalm. With large and ample Arguments before everie Psalm. declaring the true use thereof*, trans. Anthonie Gilbie (London: Henrie Denham, 1581), 11.
- ²³ Beza, *Canticles*, 31.
- ²⁴ Beza, *Houshold Prayers*, in the prayer “To crave of God the light of his word.”
- ²⁵ Beza, *Sermons sur la Passion*, 438.
- ²⁶ Beza, *Canticles*, 290.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ Beza, *Psalmes*, 44.
- ²⁹ The best discussion of Beza’s *Tabula* is Richard A. Muller, “The Use and Abuse of a Document: Beza’s *Tabula Praedestinationis*, The Bolsec Controversy, and the Origins of Reformed Orthodoxy,” in *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment*, eds. Carl R. Trueman and R. S. Clark (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), 33–61.
- ³⁰ Theodore Beza, *Tabula Praedestinationis*, in *The Potter and the Clay: The Main Predestination Writings of Theodore Beza*, trans. Philip C. Holtrop (Grand Rapids: Calvin College, 1982), 80.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 80–82.
- ³² *Ibid.*, B6r–B6v.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, O3r–O3v.

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