

Introduction

Calvinism is rooted in a form of religion which was peculiarly its own, and from this specific religious consciousness there was developed first a peculiar theology, then a special church-order, and then a given form for political and social life, for the interpretation of the moral world-order, for the relation between nature and grace, between Christianity and the world, between church and state, and finally for art and science; and amid all these life-utterances it remained always the self-same Calvinism, in so far as simultaneously and spontaneously all these developments sprang from its deepest life-principle.

—Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*

The dictum *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* is often taken to be a summary statement about the Reformed churches. They are “reformed” in doctrine and practice, according to the word of God. They are also “always reforming,” that is, always in the process of further refining their doctrine and practice in light of reflection on the word of God. It is vital that Reformed theology holds on to both these things. Reformation of life and doctrine is not something that, once achieved, can be set aside as if the church this side of the grave can be confident that it has arrived at doctrinal and liturgical perfection. The Reformed churches have always regarded reformation as an ongoing process, a matter of continuing the work begun in the sixteenth century in the communities of the present.

We look back, informed by a tradition of rich theological reflection. But we also look forward, reforming our life under the word of God in preparation for the life to come. However, sometimes it appears that the popular perception of Reformed theology is rather more like a great shire horse stuck in the mud than a majestic Andalusian, charging ahead with its rider. Often, Reformed theology is epitomized as a project that has reified the thought of one individual, John Calvin. All subsequent theology must nod in the direction of the great Frenchman and take its cue from his work. There is much to be said for the theology of Calvin, and a great deal that the student of divinity can learn from him. However, Reformed theology was never identified with the project of one person and was never supposed to be a straitjacket binding its practitioners. As a growing consensus of historical theologians at work on this area have argued elsewhere, the Reformed tradition comprises a variegated and diverse body of theological views even on matters once thought to be definitive of those churches bearing its name, including the doctrines of double predestination and limited atonement,—to name but two of the most obvious candidates.¹

If contemporary Reformed theologians often hold on to their heritage as thinkers in a tradition that has been reformed in doctrine and practice according to the word of God (that is, the *ecclesia reformata* aspect of our dictum), too often there is reticence to hold this together with the notion that the Reformed churches must continue to be reformed in light of the word of God. This is not a platitude; it bespeaks something substantive about method in Reformed theology, as the best practitioners of this tradition

1. To give two recent examples, see Richard A. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), and, as an example of this sort of revisionist historiography, the essays collected together in Maartin Wisse, Marcel Sarot, and Willemien Otten, eds., *Scholasticism Reformed: Essays in Honour of Willem van Asselt*, Studies in Theology and Religion 14 (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2010).

demonstrate. One need only consult the differences between, say, Zwingli and Calvin, or Edwards and Hodge, or even Schleiermacher and Barth, to see this is the case. Reformed theology is always being reformed in each new generation. The churches of the Reformation continue to face new challenges and difficulties as the Christian churches encounter one another in dispute as well as ecumenical friendship and dialogue, and as other religious traditions challenge sometimes long cherished views about matters vital to the Christian faith in general and the churches of the Reformation in particular, such as the scope and nature of salvation, or the uniqueness of divine revelation in Christ.

The present work takes forward a constructive theological project in Reformed theology. That is, it seeks to show by example that the Reformed tradition is alive and well and has important resources by means of which contemporary systematic theology can be fructified. In some of my previous work, I have been drawn to the margins of theological orthodoxy or to the doctrinally eccentric, because I think that those occupying such liminal places are intrinsically interesting subjects for theological exploration. Their work also throws light upon the shape and character of more mainstream theology. Theology at the margins forces us to ask uncomfortable questions about what we think are settled issues, provided we are willing to listen to its messengers.

This book is not about theology from the margins, though it will appear to be that to many readers unfamiliar with the history of Reformed theology. This is because Reformed theology as it is usually reported today is not the whole story. We might say that for many people with only a superficial understanding of the Reformed tradition, a part of that whole has come to stand in for the whole itself. This is not so much synecdoche (a trope where the part stands in for the whole, as in the phrase “head of state”) as it is a fallacy

of composition (conflating a part with the whole). It would be like conflating the contemporary Tea Party of American politics with the historic Republican Party, or (to take a British example) like conflating the politics of New Labour with the historic socialist movement that coalesced into the Labour Party early in the twentieth century. In both these cases, the parts enumerated really are important features of contemporary American and British political life; both represent influential strands of a larger political party and ideology. But neither is identical with the larger whole of which it is a part, and anyone confusing the part with the whole would be thought partisan or misinformed.

Nevertheless, this is just what has happened with much (though not all) contemporary reporting of Reformed theology. Key themes have been written into the popular versions of accounts of this tradition, and—importantly for our purposes—other things have been written out of the narrative. By my restoring something of the broader doctrinal context of Reformed theology, it is hoped that readers may come to see that this particular strand of Christianity is much more variegated and diverse in its theological commitments than is often reported in popular versions of it. These differences are not trivial. Nor are the matters in question of secondary importance. In several cases, a right understanding of the doctrinal diversity tolerated within the confessional bounds of Reformed theology shows that the Reformed have permitted different and conflicting views on a particular matter that is far from being doctrinally marginal.

For instance, Reformed theology is often thought to entail or at least imply a doctrine of determinism. God ordains all that comes to pass, so God ordains all that I will do, every action I perform; in which case, I am not free to do other than what God has ordained. There have been some high-profile Reformed theologians who have

taken this line, and today the view that is often reiterated on this score owes much to the work of Jonathan Edwards. His *Freedom of the Will* is perhaps the most sophisticated and unrelenting philosophical account of the relationship between divine determinism and human freedom ever penned by a Reformed theologian.² But his view is not identical to the Reformed view per se. Nor is it the case (contrary to popular belief) that the Reformed confessions require belief in some version of divine determinism. In Chapter 3, I deal with this in detail, arguing that the Reformed confessions neither require nor deny divine determinism. In fact, a species of theological libertarianism is consistent with Reformed theology, given certain qualifications (though I do not *endorse* such libertarianism here).

Another important example of this sort of mistaken view of Reformed theology can be found in popular accounts of the scope of atonement. Often, central tenets of Reformed theology are summed up in the acrostic tulip.³ However, the *L* here, which stands for “limited atonement,” is not the only view permissible within Reformed confessionalism. There is a strand of Reformed thinking, which goes all the way back to the early Reformers of the sixteenth century, that denies the doctrine of limited or, more accurately, *definite* or *particular* atonement. In its place, these Reformed thinkers posited a universal atonement. They thought that Christ died for all humans in accordance with the overwhelming testimony of the New Testament. The elect are given faith to believe in Christ and are saved. Those that are passed over by the Holy Spirit are left in their sins and perish as a consequence. Until fairly recently, this alternative to the definite-atonement view was regarded as the preserve of a

2. Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey, vol. 1 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Perry Miller (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957).

3. T = Total depravity; U = Unconditional election; L = Limited atonement; I = Irresistible grace; P = Perseverance of the saints.

vociferous minority in early-modern Reformed theology that has persisted in periodic pockets of discontent ever since. It is usually called Amyraldianism, after Moïse Amyraut, the seventeenth-century French theologian with whom this doctrine has come to be associated. However, there were many who espoused this view besides and before Amyraut, and Amyraut himself learned it from his Scottish teacher John Cameron.⁴

The scope of atonement is one of the major themes of this book. It turns up first in the chapter on eternal justification, which has to do with whether the elect are justified in eternity or from eternity, and whether coming to faith represents merely an epistemic change in the elect individual (that is, a coming to see what she already is in Christ from eternity) or whether it is more than that—a real change in time, which is foreordained by God. Chapter 3, on libertarian Calvinism, also has to do with the scope of salvation, although it is dealt with there only in passing. The claim that divine ordination does not require determinism all the way down is important when considering matters pertaining to human freedom, including human freedom with respect to salvation. But it also informs the chapters that make up the second half of this volume.

There are four chapters that bear the word *universalism* in their titles (chapters 4–7). These plot important trajectories in Reformed understandings of the scope of atonement and election. The first of these, chapter 4, sets out a version of necessary universalism commensurate with theological determinism rather than libertarianism. Necessary universalism is the doctrine according to

4. It is not a little ironic that a greater historical understanding of this point has arisen at a time in which there are the beginnings of a renewed interest in articulating and defending the doctrine of particular atonement among certain Reformed and evangelical theologians. For historical work on this, see the literature cited in chapter 7. A significant recent attempt to restate particular atonement can be found in David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson, eds., *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

which necessarily all of humanity is saved through the work of Christ by divine ordinance. The Princeton stalwart Benjamin Warfield famously remarked that Calvinism is the one Protestant tradition of Christian theology whose assumptions can be pressed in the direction of universalism.⁵ As this chapter shows, the fact that the Augustinian tradition in a broad sense, and the Reformed tradition as a species of Augustinianism in a more narrow sense, can be pressed in this direction raises an important issue that goes to the heart of Reformed theology on the scope of salvation. It is this: Why does God not save everyone if there is no impediment to God's doing so (assuming God determines all the salvation of those God saves)? Given that the Reformed (and Augustinians more generally) claim that election depends on the work of Christ that has an infinite value, and upon God's intention in atonement which in turn is just God's good pleasure and will, the question is, why does God not save more than God does? Why not save all fallen humans?

This problem posed by Augustinian universalism (for such we shall call it) is addressed in chapter 5, on universalism and particularism. Here a case is made to rebut the objection that if there is no impediment to God's providing salvation for all in Christ, then God *ought* to provide salvation for all in Christ. One of the central planks of this rebuttal is the claim, common in much Reformed theology, that any theater of divine action is one in which God must display all God's attributes, including mercy and justice.

Given that universalism is a doctrine much discussed in contemporary systematic and philosophical theology, and that Barth's doctrine of election has left such a deep mark upon contemporary discussion of the scope of salvation in Reformed theology, a chapter on the Barthian account of election seems appropriate. As is well

5. See Benjamin Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), chap. 5.

known, Barth's doctrine has been the cause of not a little controversy in the secondary literature, and the contemporary discussion of his doctrine of election continues to be the subject of comment and often-heated debate in scholarly journals and popular blogs.⁶ The argument presented here has been through several iterations. It now seems to me that one strand of Barth's thinking is not universalistic, though it is hopeful about the scope of salvation.⁷ However, I argue in this chapter that there are other things he says that are more incautious and do press up against the doctrine of universalism. On balance, it may be that there is more than one doctrine of election in Barth's mature thought and that this tension in his thinking can be traced to his unwillingness to commit himself unequivocally to one or another of these views. At least some Barth scholars have recently argued that this tension arises because Barth himself saw a tension in Scripture between universalistic and particularistic passages and believed it inappropriate to attempt to reconcile what appear to be the paradoxical claims in Holy Writ.⁸ Be that as it may, Barth's

6. Much of the recent flurry of papers on Barth's doctrine of election was stimulated by Bruce L. McCormack's essay "Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology." It was originally published in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John B. Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), and has been republished, with some emendations and changes, in McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008). A recent collection of some of the journal papers on post-McCormack readings of Barth can be found in Michael T. Dempsey, ed., *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011). The literature on this topic continues to grow apace.
7. Conversations with David Congdon and George Hunsinger have made me revise my earlier views on this topic.
8. See, e.g., George Hunsinger, "Hellfire and Damnation: Four Ancient Views," in *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 226–49; and Bruce L. McCormack, "So That He May Be Merciful to All: Karl Barth and The Problem of Universalism," in *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack and Clifford B. Anderson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 227–49. I should add that I have some sympathy with this view. It is a common theme in much historic Reformed theology when it is faced with apparent paradoxes in Scripture. Another example pertinent to this volume is that of the hypothetical universalism of seventeenth-century authors like Bishop John Davenant. One reason Davenant gives in his *Dissertation on the Death of Christ* (in *An Exposition of the Epistle of St Paul to the Colossians*, trans. Josiah Allport, 2 vols. (London: Hamilton, Adams, 1832) for

doctrine is an important resource for contemporary theology. One of the most important implications of his doctrine for Reformed theology is in his call for a more christologically conditioned doctrine of election. Not that other Reformed accounts are nonchristological; nevertheless, Barth's doctrine places the person and work of Christ at the heart of the doctrine of election in a way that marks a step change from much historic Reformed discussion of the topic. In this way of thinking, not only is Christ's work the means by which some of fallen humanity is saved, but Christ is also, in one important respect, the ground of election, a matter to which I have attended elsewhere.⁹

The last two chapters of the book represent an attempt to articulate a positive case for hypothetical universalism, the doctrine I earlier said has often mistakenly been conflated with the name of Amyraut. Just as there have been defenders of hypothetical universalism in the Reformed tradition from its inception, so there have been different versions of the doctrine. Amyraldianism is one; but there is an earlier and distinct version that was developed by a group of Anglican divines in the early seventeenth century, under the tutelage of Archbishop Ussher of Armagh. Perhaps the most distinguished defender of this Anglican version of hypothetical universalism is John Davenant, the lord bishop of Salisbury, leader of the British delegation to the Synod of Dort, and the onetime Lady Margaret Professor at Cambridge. In chapter 7, I offer a version of hypothetical universalism that uses Davenant's Anglican account in his *Dissertation on the Death of Christ*, an unjustly neglected piece of Reformed theology. It is usually eclipsed by John Owen's *The Death of Death*,

holding to universal atonement and the election of a particular number of fallen humanity is that both doctrines are clearly taught in Scripture. In fact, there is a striking parallel between Davenant's reasoning and that of McCormack, despite the different conclusions reached.

9. See Oliver D. Crisp, *God Incarnate: Explorations in Christology* (London: T & T Clark, 2009), chap. 2. Another interesting recent proposal that draws on Barth and the Puritan John Owen in this regard is Suzanne McDonald, *Re-Imaging Election: Divine Election as Representing God to Others and Others to God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

which offers arguably the most sophisticated defense of a definite-atonement doctrine.¹⁰ There are shortcomings with hypothetical universalism, the most important historic examples of which are dealt with in this chapter. Yet it is an important Reformed doctrine of the scope of atonement that should be taken much more seriously than it is at present. Reformed theologians have largely “forgotten” this rather different account of the scope of election and atonement.¹¹

One of the most famous objections to hypothetical universalism has to do with its doctrine of universal atonement, shared in common with the Arminians, Roman Catholics, and many of the fathers of the Church. The claim is made that if Christ’s work atones for the sin of all humanity, then those who are damned are punished twice for their sin: once in the person of Christ, and a second time in their own person, in hell. This seems monumentally unjust. But God is not unjust, so universal atonement must be false. Such reasoning is often given by those defending definite atonement, and Owen’s articulation of this objection is celebrated. However, I argue, in keeping with the nineteenth-century American Presbyterian Robert Dabney, as well as hypothetical universalists like Davenant, that this objection fails. There is no good reason to think that those who are damned are punished twice for their sin if universal atonement is true. The damned are not punished at all in the first instance; it is Christ who acts as their surety and who takes upon himself the penal consequences of their sin. And Christ’s work is not said

10. Recent defenders of “Amyraldianism” include the British pastor-scholar Alan Clifford, who is scathing about the influence of Owen’s doctrine of definite atonement. See, for example, his *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology, 1640–1790; An Evaluation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

11. An example: Richard J. Mouw, in a short treatment of the definite-atonement doctrine, when faced with the fact that there are biblical texts that seem to imply a universal atonement as well as texts that imply a particular redemption, says this: “I simply live with both sets of texts, refusing to resolve the tension between what looks like conflicting themes.” *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 42. But this is just what motivates hypothetical universalism!

to be effectual for the salvation of all humanity; it is only said to be sufficient to that end conditional upon faith, in keeping with the ancient catholic dictum that Christ's ransom is sufficient for all humanity but efficacious only for some (namely, the elect).

There is much work to be done not only in excavating forgotten doctrines of the Reformed tradition (thereby providing a more complete account of the shape of Reformed theology) but also in giving a positive statement of Reformed dogmatics for today. This volume is offered as a small contribution to that end. It is to be hoped that this is not merely a matter of interest for *Reformed* theologians, however. Many of these issues affect Christian theologians of whatever stripe who call themselves lovers of catholicity. For this reason, the whole of this book is prefaced with chapter 1, a treatment of tradition, faith, and doctrine. This sets the scene for what follows, as a chapter that is more methodologically focused. It provides an argument for thinking about the relationship between tradition, faith, experience, and doctrine that tries to show how these things belong together in a properly evangelical and catholic Reformed theology, that is, a theology of the heart. How doctrine is formed is an important issue, and this is one answer to that question, or, more accurately, the beginnings of one answer to that question. Given that there is a fundamental connection between what Reformed divines think about the scope of salvation and the sources of authority to which they appeal, this chapter seems pertinent. Perhaps others may take up this task and press it forward in a way that makes good on the claim, made by historic Reformed communions, to be engaged in the ongoing task of reforming theology.