

**CALVIN IN THE THEOLOGY OF THOMAS F. TORRANCE:  
CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF MAN (1949)**

**Alasdair Heron, Dr.Theol.**  
**(Retired) Professor of Reformed Theology**  
**University of Erlangen, Germany**  
arheron@gmx.de

**ABSTRACT:** *Thomas F. Torrance gave a great deal of attention to Calvin throughout his own theological work, without ever being a "Calvinist" in the narrow sense. The article explores his first extended published study of Calvin, Calvin's Doctrine of Man (1949) and analyzes in particular Torrance's report in his preface of how he has studied, read and interpreted Calvin. This can be seen as an important key to his attitude and relationship to Calvin throughout his theological career.*

When I first agreed to write on this subject, I had a preliminary idea that it could be interesting and rewarding to study in detail how Calvin's work was used, quoted, criticised or developed in Tom Torrance's teaching, postgraduate supervision and his own voluminous writings. As with so many other promising but still inchoate ideas, this one proved to be unrealisable under my circumstances and in the time available. This paper will therefore have to remain a more limited introductory essay; but I hope it may at least prove suggestive for work that others might attempt.

When we survey the enormous range of Tom Torrance's publications and the increasing stream of recent writing on his theology, at least four points relating to Calvin immediately come into focus. First, TFT's work was regularly (if to varying degrees) peppered with references to Calvin, not only on specific doctrinal points but particularly on topics relating to scientific method, the structure of theological inquiry and the inner coherence of dogmatic theology.<sup>1</sup> At

the same time it is obvious that Calvin was not the only influence or model here: on the question of specifically scientific method Torrance clearly owed more to stimuli from nineteenth or twentieth century scientists, especially James Clerk Maxwell and Albert Einstein, or philosophers such as Michael Polanyi; and in the matter of dogmatic method, Karl Barth, Athanasius and the Cappadocian fathers of the fourth century were arguably more decisive and of further-reaching influence than the Genevan Reformer, though Torrance was always happy to include Calvin where possible among his witnesses and did repeatedly emphasise certain key points, such as Calvin's reversal of the procedure of the medieval *quaestio* with its order of questions (*an sit, quid sit, qualis sit*) in the context of speech about God.

Second, while it is clear that TFT studied Calvin intensively, absorbed an enormous amount from him and had immense respect for the significance of Calvin's theological thought, work and witness, he cannot simply be called a "Calvinist" – neither in the sense of one who simply repeats what he finds in Calvin nor in the sense of the commonly misnamed "Calvinism" so widespread in the generations after Calvin's death and still manifest in various forms of "neo-Calvinism" up to the present day. Indeed one cannot travel far with Torrance - and the same can also be said of his brother James – without recognizing in both a marked critical distancing from "Calvinism," an aversion which was not merely emotional and certainly not arbitrary, but originated in an awareness of the great gulf yawning between "Calvinism" and the atmosphere of the warmly evangelical theology in which both had grown up and to which they remained loyal in their own rather different ways throughout their lives. This aversion found different forms and expressions in the two brothers – more intellectually

---

<sup>1</sup> There are some remarks on this in my contribution, "T.F. Torrance in Relation to Reformed Theology," in Elmer M. Colyer (ed.), *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology. Theologians in Dialogue with T.F. Torrance* (Lanham/Boulder/New York/Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 31-49.

and theologically wide-ranging in TFT<sup>2</sup>, more pastorally in JBT<sup>3</sup> – but had recognisably similar roots.

Third – to make yet a further differentiation – Torrance was not chiefly a Calvin historian (after the style, let us say, of T.H.L Parker, whose numerous works are still among the finest – and best written – monuments of recent Calvin research). In fact, TFT was not so much an historian in the strict sense as an interpreter of theological ideas, certainly in an historical perspective, but primarily searching for their abiding objective reference and validity or specifically contemporary relevance. His interest was thus in Calvin's theology, in Calvin's thought, in Calvin's exegesis and hermeneutics, but much less in Calvin's person and career or in the nuts-and-bolts history of Calvin and the Swiss or Genevan Reformation, or indeed of the Scottish Reformation with its varied Calvinian and other colourings. (The same, it may fairly be said, also applies to his interest in

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. e.g. the opening paragraph of the seminal article, "Knowledge of God and Speech about him according to John Calvin," in *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1965), 76-98: "It belongs to the great merit of John Calvin that he worked out the difficult transition from the mediaeval mode of thinking in theology to the modern mode, and placed the theology of the Reform on a scientific basis in such a way that the logic inherent in the substance of the Faith was brought to light and allowed to assume the mastery in human formulation of it. Calvin has not always been interpreted like this, yet if he has been misunderstood, perhaps it was his own greatness that was to blame. Calvin made such a forward advance in theological thinking that he outstripped his contemporaries by centuries, with the result that they tended to fall back upon an old Aristotelian framework, modified by Renaissance humanism, in order to interpret him. Thus there was produced what history has called 'Calvinism', the rigid strait-jacket within which Calvin's teaching has been presented regularly to succeeding generations." (*Theology in Reconstruction*, 76.)

<sup>3</sup> James' work and the cases he deployed were also of course much more specifically focused on the history of Scottish and British reformed theology through the centuries since the Reformation. He too, however, came in for criticism from some who felt he was unjust to the tradition of Federal Theology, notably Charles S. McCoy and J. Wayne Baker in their jointly edited *Fountainhead of Federalism. Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenantal Tradition. With a Translation of De testamento seu foedere Dei unico et aeterno* (1534) by Heinrich Bullinger (Louisville, KY, 1991). See e.g. p. 11. On this difference of views cf. Alasdair Heron, "Der Gottesbund als Thema der reformierten Theologie," *Historische Horizonte. Emden Beiträge zum reformierten Protestantismus* 5 (Wuppertal, 2002), 39-65.

the Church Fathers and the early church.) This point cannot be explored in full depth here, but it deserves to be mentioned, for it is at least related to some common criticisms of his exegetical and theological-historical work, beginning prominently with James Barr's *Semantics of Biblical Language*.<sup>4</sup> The issues there come clearly to light in Torrance's later riposte to Barr in 1993, which can also serve here as a representative statement of his own position on language and reality:

Several years after [this book] first appeared it came under heavy criticism from James Barr in his book *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford, 1961) . . . because of the way in which I had used and interpreted a number of biblical terms and themes, largely under the guidance of Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* to which Barr was also rather hostile. Professor Barr is a brilliant philologist whose ideas cannot be ignored, although they are often rather exaggerated . . . His critical linguistic examination of my account of the way in which New Testament passages are to be understood in the light of the Old Testament was intended to clear away what he felt to be some serious misunderstandings of biblical teaching. Some of his criticisms I accept, but by no means all of them – in any case they do not affect at all the main thrust of the book. I believe that his basic approach and line of argument was misleading and unfortunate, for it treated language independently as something having significance in itself, to be interpreted through the interrelation of words and statements and the syntactical pattern of continuous discourse, and not

---

<sup>4</sup> James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, 1961. The appearance of this publication in the same year that Barr left New College for Princeton caused something of a stir at the time but seems sometimes to have been forgotten since. E.g. Alister E. McGrath, *T.F. Torrance. An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999), p. 183, only mentions Barr's later 1991 Gifford Lectures, published as *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon 1993) which are more specially directed against Barth's rejection of natural theology. However Paul D. Molnar, *Thomas F. Torrance. Theologian of the Trinity* (Ashgate: Farnham/Burlington 2009), 333-334 quotes Torrance's criticisms of what he perceived as Barr's "sceptical nominalism" in "Scientific Hermeneutics according to St. Thomas Aquinas," *JTS XIII.2*, 1962, 258-289; *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1965), 19; Molnar also refers to the statement reproduced more extensively here from the Preface to the second edition of *Royal Priesthood*.

primarily by reference to the realities beyond which they are meant to direct us.<sup>5</sup> While this has the advantage of helping to counteract misleading subjectivist slant in interpretation, it inevitably widens the gap between language and being by reducing the semantic function of language to the syntactic relations linguistic units have with one another. This is a peculiar form of Nominalism which rejects the relation of language to knowledge and culture, and which to get any kind of sense out of theological language treats it as some kind of description of religious phenomena. It is not surprising that by denigrating the objective reference of biblical language Barr should find so many biblical theologians "obscure," for he fails by his conflation of semantics with syntactics to deal faithfully with their language in accordance with their intention in using it. He thus neglects the fundamental principle of hermeneutics advanced by the Greek Fathers that we do not subject realities to the terms referring to them, but subject terms to the realities to which they refer. The Latin Fathers followed suit with their axiom, *non sermoni res, sed rei sermo subjectus est*. This is particularly the case with biblical language for the divine truth signified lies beyond the words and statements signifying it. Hence in spite of what James Barr had to say about the biblical and theological language deployed in this book I have allowed it to appear in its original form, not because it is in no need of linguistic correction, but because I stand fully by the argument it advances and the biblical and theological truth which it attempts to set forth.<sup>6</sup>

*Mutatis mutandis*, we may perhaps apply to Torrance's approach to Calvin<sup>7</sup> something of what he himself says about his study of Barth's early theology:

---

<sup>5</sup> This sentence seems imprecisely formulated. It would, I think, read better as ". . . realities beyond, to which they are meant to direct us."

<sup>6</sup> *Royal Priesthood*, 2nd edn. (London: T.& T. Clark, 1993), ix-x.

<sup>7</sup> For his view of the epochal significance of Calvin himself cf. e.g. his article, "Knowledge of God and Speech about him," in *Theology in Reconstruction*, 76-98.

This work is not a compendium of Barth's early teaching, for I have not sought to expound the content of his thought so much as the course of his debate with modern theology, the "Copernican revolution" which he has initiated, and his relentless probing into the nature of scientific method in dogmatic thinking. Far less is it a manual of "Barthian theology." A "Barthian theology" is just as impossible as an "Einsteinian science," but just as there is a pre-Einsteinian science and a post-Einsteinian science, so there is a pre-Barthian and a post-Barthian theology, for the contribution of Karl Barth to theology is, like that of Einstein to natural science, so deep-going and fundamental that it marks one of the great eras of advance in the whole history of the subject.<sup>8</sup>

Fourth, Torrance's *oeuvre* does include a fair number of pieces – books and articles – more directly devoted in whole or in part to Calvin. These range from the earlier studies, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*<sup>9</sup> and *Kingdom and Church*,<sup>10</sup> to the post-retirement *SJT* monograph *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin*.<sup>11</sup> I had some personal involvement in the production of the last of these as one of the editors of the series in which it appeared. A rather different personal connection with *Kingdom and Church* is given by the fact that on its publication in 1956 my father reviewed it for the BBC, and in the pages of his copy there is still enfolded a letter from Tom thanking him for the review and adding a little information about the origins of the book. Finally, my copy of the first of these books, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*, still contains heavy pencil markings of mine dating from the time when I was teaching in

---

<sup>8</sup> T.F. Torrance, *Karl Barth. An Introduction to His Early Theology, 1910-1931* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1962), 9. One might perhaps say that TFT's interest was in what he saw as "real history" as opposed to "mere history" in the sense of the pedantic reconstruction of past historical facts.

<sup>9</sup> *Calvin's Doctrine of Man* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957.)

<sup>10</sup> *Kingdom and Church: A Study in the Theology of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1956.)

<sup>11</sup> *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1988.)

New College and preparing a conference paper on Calvin's understanding of the *imago dei*.<sup>12</sup> This led me to the thought of focusing in this paper upon these three books and upon what Torrance himself says in them about Calvin and the special motives of his own interest in Calvin.<sup>13</sup> These observations could not substitute for a full survey of all the shades of TFT's occupation with Calvin, but might supply a certain initial orientation. As I worked on the paper, however, it became clear that the necessary attention to the first of these books alone would require more or less all the space available – and that such attention could also be rewarding because it can trace how TFT actually worked on and with Calvin at a relatively early and certainly quite formative stage of his post-doctoral theological research and writing.

The Preface to *Calvin's Doctrine of Man* is especially informative, for it not only introduces TFT's earliest extended study of Calvin but can also be seen as foreshadowing his future work as well. He begins by noting the works of Calvin with which he had busied himself since beginning his ministry in Alyth in 1940;<sup>14</sup> the *Commentaries* (in a complete English edition presented to him by the Rev. R.B. Hastie of Blairgowrie),<sup>15</sup> the (French) *Sermons* in the *Corpus*

---

<sup>12</sup> Delivered, if I remember aright, to the Académie Internationale des Sciences Religieuses at its annual meeting in Genoa in the summer of 1980. The paper was eventually published as "Homo Peccator and the *Imago Dei* according to Calvin," C.D. Kettler and T.H. Speidell (ed.), *Incarnational Ministry. The Presence of Christ in Church, Society and Family. Essays in Honor of Ray S. Anderson* (Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1990), 32-57.

<sup>13</sup> I would also have liked in this context to draw on Torrance's Introduction and Historical Notes to the republication of Beveridge's *Tracts and Treatises on the Reformation by John Calvin*, 3 vols (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd & Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1958), but at the time did not have these to hand.

<sup>14</sup> The Preface is dated June 1947, when TFT was still in the parish of Alyth. Later in that year he moved to Beechgrove Church in Aberdeen.

<sup>15</sup> Presumably this was the Calvin Translation Society edition published in Edinburgh by T. & T. Clark between 1843 and 1855. Towards the end of the Preface, on p. 9, TFT lists this edition of the *Institutes, Commentaries and Tracts, including some Sermons*, along with Tholuck's edition of the *Commentarii in Novum Testamentum* (Berlin, 1833-1834). Later he was himself to initiate and edit a complete new edition of Calvin's *New Testament Commentaries* published by St Andrew Press.



*Reformatorem*<sup>16</sup> and the *Institute*.<sup>17</sup> He observes:

Constant reading of these many volumes in the course of sermon preparation . . . convinced me that Calvin's own theological position was very different from the hardened system that has long passed under the name of Calvinism. It is a sad reflection that the Reformer's thought should have been crusted over for so long by a species of Aristotelianism, the very *damnosa hereditas* against which Calvin himself revolted with the full impetus of his mind and soul.<sup>18</sup>

This distancing from "Calvinism" runs like a thread through the whole Preface, as the following further excerpts will show; but TFT had other points to make as well, which are highly relevant for the way he had worked and the resulting form of his presentation:

It has been my attempt to lay bare Calvin's own thought and to present it as far as possible in his own way and in his own words. Traditional Calvinism I have studiously avoided, and have made no reference to any works on Calvin, ancient or modern, so that this presentation might be free from the imputation of partisanship in any of the different schools, such as that of the Dutch Calvinists,<sup>19</sup> or that of W. Niesel and the

---

<sup>16</sup> The list on p. 9 also includes "A. Golding's translation of the *Sermons on Job* (1584 edition), *Sermons on Deuteronomy* (1581), *Sermons on Galatians* (1574), *Sermons on Ephesians* (1577); and L. Tomson's translation of the *Sermons on Timothy and Titus* (1579)." While he does on occasion cite the French text of sermons from CR (as well as other French or Latin sources reproduced there), a rapid scanning of his footnotes indicates that for the sermon quotations and references he largely drew on those available in these English translations. He himself remarks, however, "Though these translations have been most useful, I have allowed myself the freedom of altering them as occasion arose, either in order to express the original more accurately, or to erase archaic expressions."

<sup>17</sup> It was I believe TFT himself who first pointed out to me that the title of Calvin's *Institutio* is singular; however he often followed the almost universal (mal-) practice in British and American Calvin scholarship of using the plural, *Institutes*. My own endeavours as author and editor over the last more than thirty years have been singularly unsuccessful in modifying that widely and deeply ingrained custom!

<sup>18</sup> *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> It is not specified here which "Dutch Calvinists" Torrance has in mind, but we may assume he has in view the revived Dutch Calvinist thought of the nineteenth and early twentieth century associated with the names of Kuyper and Baavinck.



late Peter Barth.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, the bulk of the book consists of citations gathered from all over Calvin's works, and arranged together with as little explanatory material of my own as was necessary. I am conscious that in the very arrangement of this material, as also in the exposition, interpretation has been unavoidable, but it is, I believe, in the direction in which Calvin's own thought moves as it is drawn out, particularly in its relevance to the modern theological debate.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps surprisingly, Torrance does not specifically say at this point *which* "modern theological debate" he has in view here. When, however, we observe the leading role that the themes of human knowledge of self and God<sup>22</sup>, the *imago dei*,<sup>23</sup> perversity and sin,<sup>24</sup> and natural theology<sup>25</sup> play in the book, these are obvious pointers, which other statements by TFT elsewhere spell out explicitly. Neither Dutch Calvinists nor Peter Barth and Niesel are in view here; rather Karl Barth and Emil Brunner and their polemical debate in 1934 and 1935 on the issues of the *imago dei* in the light of the Fall, of the resultant possibility and scope of natural theology – and of Brunner's appeal to Calvin's views on the subject. That debate has since attained a kind of classical status as one of the crucial fundamental theological confrontations of the last century, but it was

---

<sup>20</sup> Peter Barth († 1940) and Wilhelm Niesel were the successive editors of Calvin's *Opera Selecta*, of which, however, only vol. 1 had been published by 1949: it had indeed already appeared in 1926. Vol. 2, prepared by Dora Scheuner and edited by Niesel, would only follow in 1952. In the context of the German Church Struggle in the 1930s Niesel edited the collection, *Reformierte Bekenntnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen* and later published *inter alia* his well known *Theologie Calvins* and *Reformierte Symbolik*. TFT does not say more at this point on what exactly he means by the "school" of Peter Barth and Niesel, but one may well suspect he felt it to be too much a form of repristination of Calvin and classical Reformed theology in the face of the Lutheranism which was (and still is) numerically dominant in the German protestant churches. TFT had little more sympathy for that kind of assertive Reformed confessionalism than Barth had for the *Jungreformatorische Bewegung* in the German Confessing Church in the 1930s.

<sup>21</sup> T.F. Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*, Eerdmans edn. 7.

<sup>22</sup> Chapters 1; 10.

<sup>23</sup> Chapters 3-6.

<sup>24</sup> Chapters 7-9.

<sup>25</sup> Chapters 11-12.

TFT's conviction that in the end the proponents had talked past each other and that they had not perhaps paid sufficient careful attention to what Calvin had actually written. This is how he puts it in a much later article, "My Interaction with Karl Barth":

Back in Scotland I produced a work entitled *Calvin's Doctrine of Man* in order to cut through the tangled debate between Barth and Brunner on the relation between grace and nature, for in their appeals to Calvin they appeared to be shooting past each other.<sup>26</sup>

One might add that they appeared to him to be shooting past Calvin as well! Certainly TFT devotes in this study much more closely focussed attention and extended analysis than is to be found in either Barth or Brunner to the way in which these central themes of theological anthropology are reflected in a wide range of Calvin's work. He then goes on in the Preface to emphasise the complexity of Calvin's thought:

One of the calamities of traditional exposition and interpretation of Calvin's theology has been, by means of arid logical forms, to make Calvin's own distinctions too clean and too rigid. This has resulted in an over-simplification which has obscured the flexibility as well as the range and profundity of his thought. There is no doubt that Calvin was at times himself guilty of this procedure, particularly in his more systematic treatises when he was engaged in debate, as in regard to the problems of predestination and providence, but in the vast bulk of his

---

<sup>26</sup> My quotation is from a typescript copy of February 1st 1985. The article was published in D. McKim (ed.), *How Karl Barth Changed My Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 52-64. Cf. the remarks of Alister McGrath, *T.F. Torrance. An Intellectual Biography*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 80: "Torrance . . . saw himself both as an heir and interpreter of the Reformed tradition, particularly in relation to Calvin. He also found time to work on an aspect of Calvin's theology which was of some importance to him – theological anthropology. The question of Calvin's understanding of human nature, and particularly the nature and epistemic capacity of human nature in consequence of it being created in the image of God, had featured prominently in the 1934 debate between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, and had proved to be a divisive matter subsequently. Torrance believed that Barth and Brunner were "shooting past each other" on this matter, and wanted to sort it out. The book was published in 1949 by Lutterworth Press, and is now regarded as something of a landmark in British Calvin studies."

work where he sticks closely to the Scriptures there is much profound theology that has never been sufficiently brought to light.<sup>27</sup>

More is involved here than simply TFT's criticism of "the calamities of traditional exposition and interpretation of Calvin's theology"; they indeed are not the main focus of his interest and attention. It is rather his own discovery (or rediscovery) of a "flexibility," "range" and "profundity" in Calvin's thought, which have traditionally been obscured by "arid logical" systematisation. Calvin is better, profounder, richer and deeper than systematised "Calvinism," even if Calvin himself was sometimes "guilty of this procedure" under the pressure of controversy, as in the case of "the problems of predestination and providence."

In other words, Torrance is convinced on the basis of his own study of Calvin that what have long counted as the foundation and cornerstones of classical Calvinism are in fact results of an over-simplified, over-clear and over-rigid systematising tendency which is admittedly even present at times and under certain circumstances in Calvin himself, but does not adequately correspond to the real profundity, breadth and complexity of his insights or to the whole broad stream of his exegetical and theological work. Calvin, we may say, is better than "Calvin" – to say nothing of "Calvinism" – and it is the real, complex, many-stringed Calvin who needs to be rediscovered and heard through and above what we might call the reduced "Calvin," even if that reduced "Calvin" is admittedly also there in Calvin himself. TFT goes on:

This is particularly true in regard to Calvin's teaching about the *imago dei*. There is a great deal of his thought on this difficult subject which has not yet found its way into exposition, and still lies buried in the cumbrous tomes of the *Corpus Reformatorum*. This is so varied that it is not easy to reduce to a concise and orderly account. Indeed that may be quite impossible, because in the nature of the case it is not possible to put fully into clear and distinct ideas just how a human creature may image the glory of God. I have tried, however,

---

<sup>27</sup> *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*, 8.

at the cost of repetition, to give some progression to this exposition, and at the same time to present before the reader something of the actual fullness and width of Calvin's own teaching. At times, the account has necessarily been circular, but becomes clearer, I think, when the whole matter has been set forth.<sup>28</sup>

Reading these sentences more than sixty years on from when they were first written I am reminded of Tom's once remarking to me (some thirty years ago when I was teaching alongside him in New College) that the same theological topics are frequently handled in Calvin's sermons and commentaries very differently from the style and treatment in the *Institute*.<sup>29</sup> That was an insight he had won from these early Calvin studies and it was one I was even then ready and willing to accept, although my own work with Calvin at the time tended to be focussed on the *Institute*. I was not then doing much first-hand research or writing on Calvin, but was using the *Institute* as a source-book for the teaching of dogmatics, particularly in Christology.<sup>30</sup>

Later in Erlangen I had greater occasion to make my own acquaintance with "the cumbrous tomes of the *Corpus Reformatorum*"

---

<sup>28</sup> *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. e.g. *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*, 73-74: "In the foregoing discussion frequent citations have been made from Calvin's Sermons on the Book of Job, where the text gives him ample opportunity to develop his teaching on the doctrine of man. Though he is constantly employing eristic, as he does in the Commentaries and in the Institutes, his discussion in the Sermons keeps very close to the Scripture, so that what doctrine we have in them is given in the form of Biblical theology. At the same time, his later sermons, particularly on Job, Deuteronomy, and on Ephesians, are of particular value in giving us his mature teaching about man. It is not always easy to reach consistency in interpreting his thought in the Institutes and in the Commentaries, but in the Sermons on Job particularly, we have in constant repetition, and without the bias due to systematic treatment, teaching which brings out in particular fullness and clarity his views about the *imago dei*."

<sup>30</sup> The *Institute* tended also to figure at least in the background of courses on Scottish theology when I took over that responsibility on the departure of James Torrance for Aberdeen; but the source texts were then from the Scottish and British development of Reformed theology in which the issue of "Calvin and/ or Calvinism?" naturally played a part.

and could at least to some degree confirm this insight for myself, though I generally tended (and still incline) to feel there was still a great degree of coherence in content between the systematic thought of the *Institute* and the stylistically very different presentations of the Sermons and Commentaries, where the flow and profile of Calvin's expositions are admittedly much more directly determined by the run of the biblical text than by the purpose he followed in the *Institute* of articulating a coherent *Philosophie Chrestienne*.<sup>31</sup> Thus on the matter of predestination and providence I did not see so much of a gap as TFT would have felt between Calvin's many occasional statements, his detailed and often polemically pointed position in the *Institute* and other writings focusing directly and systematically on the topic, and what subsequent Calvinism made of it.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Calvin uses this term in the prefatory *Argument du present Livre* in the French editions of the *Institute* from 1541 to 1551 (*Calvini Opera Selecta*, vol. III, 7-8); ET in the McNeill/Battles edition, vol. 1 (LCC vol. XX, London & Philadelphia, 1950), 6-8 (which, however, only ascribes the *Argument* to the French edition of 1560). The *Argument* also partly reproduces the following sentences from the Letter to the Reader which was first published in the 1539 Latin edition and expanded in 1559 (ET in McNeill/Battles, 3-5). In this letter Calvin explains his view of the relation between the Institute and his commentaries: "Moreover, it has been my purpose in this labor to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word, in order that they may be able to have easy access to it and to advance in it without stumbling. For I believe I have so embraced the sum of religion in all its parts, and have arranged it in such an order, that if any one rightly grasps it, it will not be difficult for him to determine what he ought especially to seek in Scripture, and to what end he ought to relate its contents. If, after this road has, as it were, been paved, I shall publish any interpretations of Scripture, I shall always condense them, because I shall have no need to undertake long doctrinal discussions, and to digress into commonplaces. In this way the godly reader will be spared great annoyance and boredom, provided he approaches Scripture armed with a knowledge of the present work, as a necessary tool. But because the program of this instruction is clearly mirrored in all my commentaries, [1559 text: from 1539 to 1554 there stood here: "But because the commentaries on the Letter to the Romans will furnish an example"] I prefer to let the book itself declare its purpose rather than to describe it in words."

<sup>32</sup> This is not to suggest that there is *no* difference. It lies in my view, however, more in the way that Calvinism, here as in so many points following Beza, made a distillation of Calvin's double predestination the dominant cornerstone of its entire dogmatics. That further exaggerated the prominence Calvin admittedly

But then, there is also not so much difference as is often imagined between these positions and that of Martin Luther in *The Bondage of the Will* or – even more strikingly – Thomas Aquinas.<sup>33</sup> The important fact remains, however, that Calvin was at any rate more than just the author of the *Institute*, and while his positions there are frequently highly and subtly differentiated – even, indeed, on predestination and providence – other of his works can and do supply further perspectives and angles on these and all sorts of other questions.

In the light of this fundamental perspective, gained from Torrance's own engagement with Calvin's works over many years, and the resultant method of exposition adopted in his book, the next paragraph of the Preface also deserves to be attentively heard:

Against the constant temptation to eliminate certain elements of his thought as inconsistent with his main position, I have tried to handle these apparent contradictions as sympathetically as possible, on the assumption that Calvin could not have been as self-contradictory as he would at first appear, and that in the nature of the case a good deal of paradox was unavoidable. This procedure I have found to pay a good dividend, for again and again new passages and new ideas have come to my notice which throw light upon these earlier problems, and serve to show that in John Calvin the Reformed Church has had a theologian, with magnitude in mind and depth in understanding, second to none in the history of the Christian Church.<sup>34</sup>

What kind of "apparent contradictions" are in view here? Two examples come to mind, both of which played a part in the Barth-Brunner debate. They can be combined in the form of the question, "Does the fact that according to the Bible our human nature is made in the image of God

---

[*cont.*] already gave to the doctrine in the polemical context of the Reformation conflicts about grace and the freedom of the will – debates originally conducted with Roman apologists such as Pighius, but increasingly in the last quarter of his life with critics within and beyond Geneva.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *Summa Theologica* I, qu. 23!

<sup>34</sup> *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*, 8.

mean that human beings have (as it were of themselves) a natural capacity to know God?" This question can be subdivided into further detailed sub-questions, but the two fundamental issues are already apparent: What is the nature of the *imago dei* and what innate capacity do we possess by virtue of the *imago* for knowledge of God? In support of his own argument Brunner had taken up points in Calvin which indicated a high evaluation both of the *imago* and its capacities and of a potential for knowledge of God even after the Fall. On both issues Barth famously replied *Nein!*<sup>35</sup> In fact, statements of Calvin's can be adduced in favour of both interpretations, but one must then look more closely to see whether the apparent contradiction is real.

Calvin's real position is in fact, one might say, more dialectical than self-contradictory: the answer to the question in each case depends on the light in which it is being seen and the perspective in which it is being posed. Calvin praises in the most glowing terms the qualities and capacities of human nature as created by God, but emphasises correspondingly drastically the consequences of the Fall, so that the undeniable inborn capacity of our nature to know God fails to bring forth its proper fruit, and runs out instead into idolatry.<sup>36</sup> Brunner had seen the first side of that but had not perhaps attended enough to the second.

Equally (if differently) dialectical is Calvin's approach to the question of what remains of the *imago dei* after the fall. If I may quote here from the conclusion of my own study of the matter:

We dare not pride ourselves upon the broken and shapeless remains of the *imago Dei* which we can seek to trace in our own being, but must look for its remaking from beyond. Otherwise, so far as Calvin is concerned, we simply repeat and reinforce the sin of Adam. [*Inst.* II.ii.10]

---

<sup>35</sup> The whole debate was of course rather more complex, covered more issues, went into them in more differentiated detail, and was additionally complicated by the personal dialectical characteristics of the two opponents! But the two issues picked out here can justly be said to be pivotal for the entire disagreement.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. e.g. *Inst.* IV.



There is, however, another side to the matter, and it is fitting to conclude this account of the *imago* presented by Calvin by giving it a suitably prominent place. We dare not look to ourselves and rest in what we see there; we must look to God and to God's paternal mercy in Christ. But how should we look on our neighbour? Does the *imago Dei*, even ruined and corrupted, have anything to tell us here? Calvin is in no doubt that it does – that we must look on our fellow humans with eyes that recognize the *imago Dei* in them, because that is how God wishes us to see them. Where the angle of vision is changed in this way, it is no longer of the ruin and destruction of the *imago* that we must speak, but of the dignity with which it surrounds and ennobles even the least and most unworthy, for there the discernment of the *imago Dei* is not an inducement to pride but to love, and as such is free of the dangers Calvin is so concerned to avoid. Several passages could be gathered from his writings on this, but it will suffice here to quote the fullest and most detailed that I have found:

[*Inst.* III.viii.6, which includes such statements as “. . . we are not to look to what men in themselves deserve, but to attend to the image of God, which exists in all, and to which we owe all honour and love” or “we are not to reflect on the wickedness of men, but look to the image of God in them, an image which, by covering and obliterating their faults, should by its dignity allure us to love and embrace them.”]<sup>37</sup>

In short, I wrote then, Calvin's doctrine “is much more subtle, much more dialectical, and indeed vastly more ‘human’ than the common caricatures of Calvin would suggest.”<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> A.I.C. Heron, “Homo Peccator and the Imago Dei according to John Calvin,” Christian D. Kettler & Todd J. Speidell (ed.), *Incarnational Ministry. The Presence of Christ in Church, Society and Family. Essays in Honor of Ray S. Anderson* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1990), 32-57 (here 53-55). Cf. also the earlier opening remarks in this paper with reference to the Barth-Brunner controversy (and also to Torrance's study).

<sup>38</sup> “Homo Peccator and the Imago Dei,” 32.

To return now to TFT's Preface, he has one further set of observations to make. These deserve to be attended to carefully, as they serve fairly precisely to show what TFT was and was not attempting to do with this study, and also what he expected to gain from this involvement with Calvin. Both points are highly relevant for the questions to which this paper intends to serve as an introduction:

As it has been my aim to set forth Calvin's teaching on the doctrine of man in its own light, I have not attempted much in the way of criticism. Doubtless I have been at times too kind to the Reformer, though it is easy to criticize after centuries of discussion of problems which were not acute and demanded no immediate solution in the sixteenth century. Many of these questions which concern us today deal with aspects of the doctrine of man which did not greatly agitate the Reformers, but I feel sure that the modern theologian can find no better solution to them than he will reach through a careful study of Calvin's thoroughly biblical position, and his searching understanding of human nature. It has not been my business to point out here any of these solutions, but I shall consider myself amply rewarded if I have succeeded in setting before the modern student much in Calvin's thought which is seldom brought to light, but which is extremely relevant to the present hour.<sup>39</sup>

The meaning of these sentences is obvious enough, but just for that reason one could be tempted to fly over them with only superficial attention. Pedantic though it may seem, it may be worth spelling the points out individually:

1. The aim of the study was to articulate what Calvin says, to "set forth" his "teaching on the doctrine of man in its own light." It was to find and present what is to be found in Calvin's own words, statements and arguments. It was therefore not to interpret Calvin in the light of another – e.g. a contemporary – context or to focus his views through the prism of a changed situation or within an altered framework of

---

<sup>39</sup> *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*, 8-9.

questions. It was to say what Calvin said in his context and hermeneutical situation, not what he might have said or would have said (or should have said!) in some other circumstances than those he faced or in view of questions he was not directly asked or asking. This may seem at first not quite compatible with what I remarked above under my opening point 3; in fact, it simply nails down more precisely what I was trying to formulate there. The foundation for any search for the abiding validity or relevance of what Calvin (or anyone else) has said is first of all to grasp as precisely as possible what he himself meant to say by it or what it meant for his readers or hearers in his setting. That was a fundamental principle of Calvin's own humanistically influenced hermeneutics, whether he was interpreting classical texts, the writings of the Bible or the documents of church history or the history of theology. And the principle remains essentially valid for all serious study of language, meaning and truth in spite of the fashion in some corners of philosophy and literature for modern hermeneutical fads which attempt to cut the Gordian knot of any search for "the real meaning" by asserting that it is a chimera, either unattainable or non-existent from the start. TFT's objective realism at any rate leaves no doubt about his stand on this point.

2. The study has "not attempted much in the way of criticism" and has "doubtless . . . been at times too kind" to Calvin. What exactly did TFT mean by these remarks? The first aspect – "not . . . much in the way of criticism" – reflects at the most elementary level the facts that, for example, no concluding systematic evaluation or critique of Calvin's teaching is offered, and that in the course of the presentation one must look very hard indeed for any trace of reservations about it, except in so far as apparent tensions in Calvin's views are in view. The second aspect may suggest a certain awareness of having interpreted Calvin – presumably in respect of such tensions – *in meliorem partem*. If such ameliorated interpretation is to be found in the study, it shows, I would suggest, in the italicised summaries prefaced to the individual chapters. Without going into detail, the general tone of these summaries

does suggest to me a Barthian<sup>40</sup> reading of Calvin, and one which goes further towards interpreting Calvin *via* Barth than Barth himself felt to be possible.<sup>41</sup> But as I never took the opportunity when I had the chance to ask TFT what precisely he meant by this concession, I can only offer this (in my view admittedly valid) observation as a guess at what he meant!

3. TFT emphasises that many current questions were not directly in Calvin's view, "were not acute and demanded no immediate solution in the sixteenth century" and that Calvin should not be criticized for that. This, however, clearly also implies that Calvin is not to be seen or understood as having the last word on all the issues, so that establishing what he said and meant does not finally close the questions.

4. At the same time TFT is convinced that careful study of Calvin's "thoroughly Biblical position" and his "searching understanding of human nature" make him a most valuable guide even in current debates going beyond his horizons of enquiry and in the search for their resolution. Admittedly this key statement seems a little ambiguous. It could be taken as meaning that going to school with Calvin and following the seriousness of his inquiry will lead to further answers to questions Calvin did not directly face. It could also, however, be taken as suggesting that somehow these answers are already implicit in Calvin himself and only require to be teased out. Probably TFT would say that both can apply according to

---

<sup>40</sup> "Barthian" not in the sense of "Barth v. Brunner," but in the sense of Barth's position from *CD* II/1 (published in German in 1940) onwards. E.g. such a sentence as that concluding of the first of the chapter summaries in *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*, 13: "The doctrine of depravity must be considered only within this doctrine of grace."

<sup>41</sup> Cf. e.g. the Preface to *CD* II/2, dated originally at Whitsun 1942: "To think of the contents of this volume gives me much pleasure, but even greater anxiety. The work has this peculiarity, that in it I have had to leave the framework of theological tradition to a far greater extent than in the first part on the doctrine of God. I would have preferred to follow Calvin's doctrine of predestination much more closely, instead of departing from it so radically." *CD* II/2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), x.

the case: one can be surprised both by how much Calvin turns out to have illuminated and by how helpful he proves in encouraging us to find corresponding answers to further questions.

5. Finally TFT emphasizes specifically that his study has not attempted to "to point out here any of these solutions" but that he will be satisfied if he has "succeeded in setting before the modern student much in Calvin's thought which is seldom brought to light, but which is extremely relevant to the present hour." That is above all a clear invitation to go to school with Calvin, and it is in that sense that Torrance offers the fruits of his own study.

These then are the results of my revisiting of *Calvin's Doctrine of Man* after a lengthy space of years. Just as this was TFT's first major study in Calvin, so it can still serve as a first introduction to his own engagement with the Reformer – and as said above, as setting the scene and tone for his future work on him.