

JOHN CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF THE VISIBLE CHURCH: A KEY TO DIFFICULT TEXTS

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The Calvinist-Arminian debate has raged for centuries and undoubtedly will continue to do so for many more. In the last seventy or so years there has been a renewed interest in the theology of Calvin within scholarship.² Of course, the Calvinistic tradition never lost interest in Calvin; but wider scholarship now views Calvin's writings as, in their essence, the embodiment of a truly non-rationalistic, evangelical theology. To speak in exceedingly general terms, there are two main groups that claim Calvin as their founding-father: one following the "Calvinistic" (Bezan-Puritan) tradition, and the other which has been inspired by the writings of Karl Barth. The latter group will be called neo-Calvinism.³

Not so long ago, A. C. Clifford in his *Calvinus*⁴ sought to bring a traditional Calvinistic interpretation of Calvin to task. Of course, Calvinists will quickly reject Clifford's position. However, he has touched on something that is needing immediate attention and which, in their haste, Calvinists have probably overlooked. That "something" finds its focus in Calvin's doctrine of the visible church. The importance of looking at the doctrine is that in it is provided a key to understanding his theology; but, more importantly, through his wisdom we are given a crucial insight into a most perplexing series of verses in Scripture.

This paper will be divided into two main parts: an evaluation of a neo-Calvinistic interpretation of certain comments by Calvin, and an assessment of the position that says that the doctrine of the invisible and visible church is of little value.

To kick-off the article, certain "controversial" texts of Calvin that are cited by Clifford will be related.

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²I am thinking of the rise of Barthian historiography.

³"Neo-Calvinist" scholars are not necessarily wholly Arminian in their theology; but they reinterpret Calvin's soteriology, attributing to him certain Arminian tendencies. This group includes A. E. McGrath, R. T. Kendall, Michael A. Eaton, A. C. Clifford, Ronald S. Wallace, and Tony Lane.

⁴A. C. Clifford, *Calvinus* (Charenton: Reformed Publishing, 1996).

**A NEO-CALVINIST
INTERPRETATION OF CALVIN**

A. C. Clifford cites Calvin:

“And surely there is nothing that ought to be more effective in spurring on pastors to devote themselves more eagerly to their duty than if they reflect that it is to themselves that the price of the blood of Christ has been entrusted. For it follows from this, that unless they are faithful in putting out their labour on the Church, not only are they made accountable for lost souls, but they are guilty of sacrilege, because they have profaned the sacred blood of the Son of God, and have made useless the redemption acquired by Him, as far as they are concerned. But it is a hideous and monstrous crime if, by our idleness, not only the death of Christ becomes worthless, but also the fruit of it is destroyed and perishes”

Comment on Acts 20:28 . . .

“For we ought to have a zeal to have the Church of God enlarged, and increase rather than diminish. We ought to have a care also of our brethren, and to be sorry to see them perish: for it is no small matter to have the souls perish which were bought by the blood of Christ.”

Sermons on Timothy and Titus, 817 . . .

“. . . the price of the blood of Christ is wasted when a weak conscience is wounded, for the most contemptible brother has been redeemed by the blood of Christ. It is intolerable, therefore, that he should destroy for the gratification of the belly.”

Comment on Romans 14:15 . . .

“For one can imagine nothing more despicable than this, that while Christ did not hesitate to die so that the weak might not perish, we, on the other hand, do not care a straw for the

salvation of the men and women who have been redeemed at such a price. This is a memorable saying, from which we learn how precious the salvation of our brothers ought to be to us, and not only that of all, but of each individual, in view of the fact that the blood of Christ was poured out for each one If the soul of every weak person costs the price of the blood of Christ, anyone, who, for the sake of a little bit of meat, is responsible for the rapid return to death of a brother redeemed by Christ, shows just how little the blood of Christ means to him”

Comment on 1 Corinthians 8:11 . . .

“Christ redeemed us to have us as a people separated from all the iniquities of the world, devoted to holiness and purity. Those who throw over the traces and plunge themselves into every kind of licence are not unjustly said to deny Christ, by whom they were redeemed.”

Comment on 2 Peter 2:1 . . .

“Certainly, in 2 Pet.2:1, there is reference only to Christ, and He is called Master there. Denying . . . Christ, he says, of those who have been redeemed by His blood, and now enslave themselves again to the devil, frustrating (as best they may) that incomparable boon.”

Comment on Jude 4 . . .⁵

Clifford' s neo-Calvinistic interpretation of Calvin says that he taught that Christ secured a provisional salvation for every single man by his death on the cross.

⁵Ibid., 51-61.

A RESPONSE TO NEO-CALVINISM

Exclusivist Statement

Do the texts in question teach this view? To traditional Calvinists one of the most natural responses would be to reply with Calvin's exclusivistic statements: Christ did not die to save all men. For example, Calvin writes,

[Paul] clearly proves the stupidity of the argument of certain interpreters who maintain that all are elected without distinction, because the doctrine of salvation is universal, and because God invites all men to Himself without distinction. The general nature of the promises does not alone and of itself make salvation common to all. Rather, the peculiar revelation which the prophet has mentioned restricts it to the elect.⁶

The Visible and Invisible Church

Let us take another route to the debate,⁷ and follow Calvin's doctrine of the visible and invisible church.

Fundamental to Calvin's doctrine of the church is his understanding of the continuity of the covenants: the church in the Old and New Testaments is the same. To him, the saints of the old covenant participated in the same covenant as we. They shared in a "common salvation through the grace of the same Mediator."⁸ There was one covenant with two administrations. The Jews were not to aspire to temporal blessing, but to the hope of immortality. The covenant itself was founded upon the grace of God, and not upon their own merits. They also "knew and had" Christ the Mediator.⁹ They were therefore "parties to the Gospel covenant," and knew the way of justification by faith.¹⁰

⁶John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, Calvin's Commentaries, eds. D. W. Torrance & T. F. Torrance, trans. R. Mackenzie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 232.

⁷There are obviously other ways of approaching the debate.

⁸John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., trans. H. Beveridge (London: James Clarke, 1962), 2.10.1.

⁹Ibid., 2.10.2.

¹⁰Ibid., 2.10.4.

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All of the differences between the two covenants belong not to their substances, but to their administrations.¹¹ The old gave a foretaste of the heavenly inheritance under earthly blessings, but the new “leads our minds directly to meditate upon it.”¹² The old was full of types, which were the shadow without the substance, namely, Christ. The new brings to us Christ Himself.¹³ Thirdly, the law given in the old covenant was put on stone; the law imparted in the new is written on hearts of flesh. Calvin then says,

The Old Testament is literal, because promulgated without the efficacy of the Spirit: the New Spiritual, because the Lord has engraven it on the heart The Old is deadly because it can do nothing but involve the whole human race in a curse . . . the former is the ministry of condemnation, because it charges the whole sons of Adam with transgression This must be referred to as the Ceremonial Law.

Finally, the old was a dispensation of fear and bondage; the new brings freedom and confidence (Rom 8:15).¹⁴

To Calvin, the new covenant church is almost an exact replica of the old covenant church. He develops this to say that those who are brought into the presence of God in the New Testament era as *confessing* members *are* the church. “Visible,” to Calvin, corresponds to the church on earth as its members see it, and “invisible” to the church in heaven and on earth as God sees it according to his eternal decree.¹⁵

It will be to our advantage if we compare Calvin to John Murray's¹⁶ view on the visibility and invisibility of the church, since Murray was a strong Calvinist whose theology of the visible church represented probably one of the first Calvinistic departures from Calvin's interpretation. Being a good Presbyterian, Murray also has a healthy understanding of the continuity of the covenants.¹⁷ Yet, he does

¹¹Ibid., 2.11.1.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., 2.11.4.

¹⁴Ibid., 2.11.7-9.

¹⁵Ibid., 4.1.7.

¹⁶John Murray (1898-1975), a Scotsman, was professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1937-1966.

¹⁷See John Murray, *The Covenant of Grace* (London: Tyndale Press, 1956).

not like the designation “the invisible church.” The New Testament never *defines* the church as an entity that is invisible to the eye, he reasons.¹⁸ He allows for a use of “invisible,” inasmuch that, in theological terms only, God knows those who are his.¹⁹ To Murray’s mind, we can use the terms “visible” and “invisible” only if we are referring to *perspectives* of viewing a church that is the company of the elect. The true church, according to Murray, has people mixed with it who are non-elect. In other words, the terms “visible” and “invisible” are not denominations of the *nature* of the church. Murray concludes, in opposition to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (25:2), that the “church as visible may not be *defined* in terms of mere profession”²⁰ [emphasis his].

The difference of opinion between Calvin and Murray has distinct knock-on effects. Calvin thinks that the reprobate or non-elect “believers” can go by the name of the church, for they have been brought into the covenant community,²¹ and as such *have experienced deliverance*, in some fashion, from Satan and the world. Moreover, they have received the Word of God and the blessings of the sacraments.²² Calvin therefore refers to an “adoption” of the visible church,²³ and to the “redeemed” of the visible church; and by these terms he is referring to every single person within the church. The reason why Calvin can refer to the adoption and redemption of *all* within the visible church is that he considers the visible church to have been corporately delivered. God’s covenant was made with Abraham and his seed. The New Testament covenant is made with all those who *profess* to be the seed of Christ.²⁴ The true or invisible church, on the other hand, is that which has been forgiven its sins, and has received the *regenerating* Spirit.²⁵ The visible church is the corporate church, according to Calvin. To retain true salvation, and not merely a superficial inclusion into the covenant, Calvin refers to the salvation of the elect, the invisible church, in individual terms. Individuation is

¹⁸John Murray, *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 1:231-36.

¹⁹Ibid., 231.

²⁰John Murray, *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 262. See *Christian Baptism* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1990), 4:31-44.

²¹Ibid., 4.1.20.

²²Ibid., 4.1.7.

²³*Genesis*, 2 vols., trans. J. King (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), 2:45.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵*Institutes*, 4.1.2-4.

obvious in the visible church, in that the sinner “believes” and repents. Yet, to take Calvin’s visible church perspective, even someone who repents can fall away.²⁶

Murray had no *such* corporate dimension to his soteriology, and no belief that all those who *professed* faith, regardless of whether they were truly regenerate, had been redeemed by Christ’s death. Hebrews 6:4-5; 10:26, 29; and 2 Peter 2:20-22, are instances, according to Murray, of how close a person can get to salvation. Men can believe and repent, and yet not be saved.²⁷ Murray never states that Christ *in any way* “redeemed” these men. But the difference between him and Calvin is one that needs to be underlined: there is not one Calvinist scholar *I have read* who is prepared to say that God redeems the non-elect. Yet, each Calvinist scholar would insist that Calvin believed the same truths as himself. This is not to say that Calvin was an Arminian, but merely to state that Calvinists have to face the full force of Calvin’s terminology.

Now, the texts that Clifford cited will be scrutinised.

The Controversial Texts Examined

Coming back full-circle, the first thing to say is that in our reading of various materials, I have come across only two Calvinistic scholars who have commented on the texts in question. There are undoubtedly others; yet, the paucity of Calvinistic commentary is probably indicative of the difficulties Calvinists face when trying to negotiate the texts in question.

“SOULS THAT PERISH,” ETC.

The neo-Calvinist R. T. Kendall quotes one of Calvin’s “controversial” statements, “it is no small matter to have the soules perish which were bought by the blood of Christ.”²⁸ Kendall thinks that Christ’s death on earth was for every man, while his heavenly intercession secures salvation only for the elect. The Calvinist Paul Helm replies that the context of this quotation is the death and

²⁶John Calvin, *Hebrews & I & II Peter*, D. W. Torrance & T. F. Torrance, trans. W. B. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 74.

²⁷John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 2:110-11.

²⁸R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 16.

intercession of Christ for the elect.²⁹ Helm is right in what he says. However, to prove that Christ's death and resurrection were for the elect does not in itself disprove that his death was, in some measure, also for the non-elect. Thus, Helm misses part of Kendall's argument.

The Calvinist scholar Roger Nicole, concerning Calvin's comments on the warnings of Hebrews 6:4-6, 10:29, 2 Peter 2:1, says that they cannot refer to universal atonement, since to Calvin the context is concerned merely with apostates.³⁰ In short, Nicole notices how the number denoted is limited. I would say that none of the texts cited by Clifford refer to the redemption of every single man; the context of each is concerned with those within the church who have professed faith. In the quest to prove that Calvin taught that Christ died for every single man, the verses cited by Clifford are therefore inadmissible evidence.

ROMANS 14:15

This still leaves the difficulty of explicit statements by Calvin stressing that there are those who had been redeemed, and yet who perished. Of Romans 14:15, John Murray says it is the stronger brother who is exhorted not to destroy the weaker brother. "Destroy" does not imply eternal perdition. However, if the weaker brother were not to repent of his sin, this "would lead to perdition."³¹ All of this Calvin could have meant. In explanation of Calvin's exegesis of Romans 14:15, Nicole says that the context of Romans 14:4 [*sic*] is concerned with Paul affirming that the weaker brothers will not perish, but God will make them stand. Apart from the possibility of Nicole dealing with the wrong text, Calvin, in both Romans 14:4, 15, never once mentions the fact that the weaker brother will not perish.³² It is possible, although improbable, that Calvin never meant to suggest *in his exegesis of Romans 14:15* that a redeemed brother can perish. But one fact remains: in his comments on Jude 4 and 2 Peter 2:1, Calvin categorically states that there are some who have been redeemed, and yet who have fallen away.

²⁹Paul Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 40.

³⁰John Calvin's View of the Extent of the Atonement," *WTJ* 47 (1985): 214.

³¹Roger Nicole, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 2:192.

³²See John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, Calvin's Commentaries, eds. D. W. Torrance & T. F. Torrance, trans. R. Mackenzie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 290-91, 298.

2 PETER 2:1

R. C. H. Lenski fearlessly asserts of 2 Peter 2:1:

Here we have an adequate answer to Calvin's limited atonement: the Sovereign, Christ, bought with his blood not only the elect but also those who go to perdition. Calvin does not accept this epistle as canonical; in his extensive commentary on the New Testament it is not treated. May this clause, perhaps, have been a reason for this omission?³³

Lenski obviously never read Calvin's commentary on what he thought to be the canonical epistle of 2 Peter! The purpose of citing Lenski is to demonstrate that 2 Peter 2:1 is naturally, to his mind, said to cause a problem for Calvin's "Calvinistic" theology. If such a scholar as Lenski was willing to boldly state such things, then the neo-Calvinist ought to be a little more cautious of what he thinks Calvin is saying in 2 Peter 2:1.

The context of 2 Peter 2:1 is the local church. The reference is to false prophets entering the church and teaching damnable heresies. To cite this text as proof of Christ's death for every single man is therefore *eisegesis*.

The church context is conspicuously brought out in Calvin's comments on 2 Peter 1:1-2:

[Peter] goes on to say that *swift destruction* comes upon them so that others do not involve themselves with them.

2. *And many shall follow.* It is no small stumbling-block to those who are weak to see false teachings received by the common approbation of the world, and a huge number of men led astray, so that only a few remain in pure obedience to Christ. There is nothing that disturbs godly minds so violently today as such defection. Scarcely one in ten of those who enlist under Christ keep the purity of their faith to the very end.³⁴

³³R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1966), 305.

³⁴Calvin, *Hebrews*, 346.

Notice the reference to the “weak,” a theme running throughout the controversial quotations cited by Clifford. Further, Calvin distinguishes between pure obedience and faith, and that which is presumably impure or false. He also states that 2 Peter 2:1-2 and Jude 4 teach the same truth.³⁵ Hans Boersma concludes:

It seems that Calvin did not mean to make a statement about the actual extent of the atonement when speaking of perishing souls who were brought by Christ’s blood. More likely Calvin meant to impress the responsibility of those who might become instrumental in the destruction of souls for whom Christ’s death was meant to be. Calvin thus makes somewhat of an overstatement when he uses commercial terminology to express intent.³⁶

Most of this statement is acceptable. However, it mixes matters up. Calvin, in the verses that Boersma has in mind is concerned with a soul that *has been* redeemed. Moreover, Boersma seems to superimpose a neo-Calvinistic interpretation of the text when he says that Christ’s death was “meant to be” for those whose souls might be destroyed.

Nicole tries to get out of the difficulty of what 2 Peter 2:1 says according to Calvin, by concluding:

If the apostates are thought to have been regenerate at any time, however, it would appear that the scope of the atonement exceeds the scope of ultimate salvation. This would also raise a difficulty with the doctrine of perseverance. The solution may be found in viewing the description of Hebrews and 2 Peter as expressing what the apostates at one time professed to have rather than what they had in fact.³⁷

In his comments on 2 Peter 2:1, Calvin does not declare what the apostates think to be true or no. On the contrary, he writes of what God declares to be the case: there are those who had been redeemed, and yet who then had fallen away. What is Nicole’s difficulty? It is that he is thinking in terms of the invisible church. He is thinking in terms of

³⁵Ibid. On 1 Corinthians 8:4-9, see *Institutes*, 4.10.22-23.

³⁶Hans Boersma, “Calvin and the Extent of the Atonement,” *EQ* 64:4 (1992): 352.

³⁷Nicole, 215.

redemption being a perfected state only. To Calvin, to be “redeemed” may or may not be a perfected state; it all depends on whether the reference is to the visible or invisible church. Even so, he never argued that any apostate had been regenerated, because regeneration is a blessing reserved only for the elect.

Thus, Calvin's doctrine of redemption in the controversial texts under examination is built on his view of the visible church.

The Calvinist Wayne Grudem says that 2 Peter 2:1 refers to prophets who were Jews. Ever since the exodus, anyone who was a Jew was said to have been redeemed in the exodus event by God. The false prophets, Grudem goes on, were obviously Jewish false prophets who had rejected God the Father. Grudem ends by commenting, “Christ's specific redemptive work on the cross is not in view in this verse.”³⁸ Grudem does not say in what way the false prophets were unfaithful to God the Father. We surely are meant to presume from Grudem that the false prophets preached a message that was not faithful to God's revelation. But since the text has nothing to do with Christ's specific redemptive work, it is difficult to ascertain what to Grudem was the precise message of the false prophets. Dick Lucas and Christopher Green, using Grudem, are a little more pointed. They say that those whom the Sovereign Lord has bought are actually “the people” mentioned earlier in the verse, the Jews.³⁹ What is the sum of Lucas' and Green's position? It is this: Jewish false teachers were somehow — for Lucas and Green do not know how⁴⁰—denying God the Father's redemption of the Jews from Egypt. Yet, Lucas' and Green's argument begs the question; for what relevance does God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt have for a New Testament church? It is not being suggested that there is no relevance, but only that it is not made clear by Grudem, et al., and that it is very convenient for them that it is not clear what these false prophets were teaching. Also, Lucas' and Green's grammatical argument is very tenuous. The nearest antecedent of *autous* (“them”) is *yeudodidaskaloi* (“false teachers”).⁴¹

³⁸Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 1994), 600.

³⁹Dick Lucas and Christopher Green, *The Message of 2 Peter & Jude*, BST, series ed. J. Stott (Leicester: IVP, 1995), 89.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹See Edwin A. Blum, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, EBC 12, gen. ed. F. A. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, 1981), 276; Charles Bigg, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude*, ICC, eds. S. R. Driver, A. Plummer, C. A. Briggs (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1978), 273; Blum, 276; Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistles of Peter and the Epistle of Jude*, NTC (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 282; Richard Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*,

Moreover, denoted by *despōtēs* (“Sovereign Lord”) is possibly the Lord Jesus Christ (cf., Jude 4).⁴² Also, it is quite appropriate to refer to Christ redeeming his people (Gal 3:13; cf., 1 Cor 6:20; 7:23).⁴³ What Grudem also has to prove is that the prophets of 2 Peter 2:1 were Jews. Yet, he offers no evidence whatever. Donald Guthrie concludes that the church Peter is writing to is comprised of Jews and Gentiles.⁴⁴ The prophets Peter refers to in 2:1 are still the center of attention in 2:20. He says of them, “If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome.” The first thing to notice is that these prophets had known Christ. Secondly, they had escaped the corruption of the world. In its essence, soteric redemption is deliverance from evil by the power of God; there is a distinct theological consensus between the ideas of redemption and escaping the corruption of the world.

I think Calvin is faithful to a text like 2 Peter 2:1, because it does say that there have been some who had been redeemed (*agopazw*), and yet who had fallen away (cf. 1 Cor 6:20; 7:23). God’s act of the “deliverance” of the visible church is never considered by the *Confession* to be “redemption.”

CONTROVERSIAL INTERPRETATIONS BY CALVIN

Another example of a misunderstanding of Calvin’s visible-invisible tension is found in I. H. Marshall’s comments on him. The interpretation of Hebrews 6:4ff by Calvin is rejected by Marshall. He believes that Calvin is wrong to say that the writer of Hebrews is speaking to the elect, and also that Calvin is wrong to declare that those who fall away are reprobate. This contrast does not exist in the text *expressis verbis*, says Marshall. Also, Calvin’s reference to Mark 4:17 as proof of spurious faith proves nothing; for the text has nothing to say on spurious faith, Marshall continues; nor is there mention within the

WBC 50, gen. eds. D. A. Hubbard & G. W. Barker (Waco, Texas: Word Book Publisher, 1983), 240; R. H. Strachan, *The Second Epistle General of Peter*, EGT 5, ed. W. R. Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 133; Curtis Vaughan & T. D. Lea, *1, 2 Peter, Jude* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 167-68.

⁴²J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 327.

⁴³See Douglas Moo, *2 Peter & Jude*, The NIV Application Commentary, gen. ed. T. Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 92.

⁴⁴Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Leicester: IVP, 1970), 848-50.

text of the reprobate being non-regenerate and the elect being regenerate.⁴⁵

In response, the first thing to say is that Calvin is speaking of the visible church, something completely overlooked by Marshall. Thus, Calvin can address the Hebrew church *as if* it were the group of the true elect, but warn it by saying that, if it did fall away, it would betray that it was reprobate from the start. For example, when Paul writes to the churches he writes to the elect; yet he knew that the church was comprised of those who did have real faith and those who did not. Yes, Mark 4:17 is not mentioned in Hebrews 6:4ff, but there is a false faith referred to. There is no reference to regeneration *per se*, as Marshall rightly says; but to Calvin, "regeneration," in his comments on Hebrews 6:4ff, is doing service for true salvation.

CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF THE VISIBLE CHURCH: OF MARGINAL IMPORTANCE?

D. A. Carson's Critique of the Invisibility/Visibility Distinction

Drawing upon the excellent work of P. T. O'Brien,⁴⁶ Carson describes how the church is depicted consistently in the New Testament as a gathering or assembly. Particularly, Carson reasons that each local "church is the full manifestation in space and time of the one, true, heavenly, eschatological, new covenant church." Therefore, a local church is not one member parallel to other members and individual local churches, but a holistic representation, a colony, an offspring of the paternal eschatological reality or church.⁴⁷

This doctrine, continues Carson, is the expression of the realized eschatology that the church participates in: the people of God are already seated with Christ in heavenly places (Eph 2:5-6; Col 2:12-13; 3:3).⁴⁸

⁴⁵I. H. Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1969), 142-43.

⁴⁶P. T. O'Brien, "The Church as the Heavenly Eschatological Entity," *The Church in the Bible and the World*, ed. D. A. Carson (Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1993), 88-119.

⁴⁷D. A. Carson, "Evangelicals, Ecumenism, & the Church," *Evangelical Affirmations*, eds. K. S. Kantzer & C. F. Henry (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1990), 364-66.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 367.

To finish the point, Carson says, “If this theological understanding of the Church is basically right, then the ancient contrast between the church visible and the church invisible, a contrast that has nurtured not a little ecclesiology, is either fundamentally mistaken, or at best of marginal importance.”⁴⁹

A Reply to Carson

O’ Brien, specifically, and Carson have done us a great favor in defining the church as the eschatological and heavenly gathering of God’s people. But Carson shows no real appreciation for the New Testament’s emphasis upon the aspect of the externality within redemption. Carson’s doctrine is so “heavenly oriented” that it provides no helpful basis for negotiating texts such as Hebrews 6:4ff and 2 Peter 2:1. It is one thing to say that the doctrine of the visible/invisible church is not theologically precise and needs revision, but another thing to say that the ancients were utterly ignorant of Scriptural facts when formulating the distinction. The purpose in Calvin’s writings for centering upon the invisible/visible distinction was that he wanted to, firstly, reveal that the old and new covenants were the same, and, secondly, that as the new was the same as the old covenant, then there will be those in the new who have experienced the blessing of God in the Gospel in a superficial or external manner, but who have never submitted heart, mind, and soul to Christ. In short, Calvin’s emphasis upon invisible/visible was thoroughly pastoral.

Murray was right to criticise the *Westminster Confession*, and Carson was right to underline the futility that has surrounded much of the discussion that historically has arisen from the doctrine of visibility/invisibility. But Murray’s doctrine so strongly emphasises the divine sovereignty that he fails to deal accurately with Hebrews 6:4ff, while Carson’s method reveals more about his theological training than it does anything else. He is not an historical or systematic theologian. His article focuses upon one doctrine in particular, namely the church. But in seeking to bring light upon the issue of church ecumenism he displays no *substantial* perception of the centrality of soteriology to defining biblical evangelicalism and for establishing a basis for discussing ecumenism.

⁴⁹Ibid.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the words of Timothy George are most appropriate:

The two poles of Calvin's ecclesiology, divine election and the local congregation, are held in the closest possible connection, frequently in the same sentence Only when we realize that Calvin never relaxed the visible/invisible tension can we understand his diverse characterizations of the church.⁵⁰

Clifford's assessment of Calvin's controversial statements faces two insuperable difficulties: Contextually, he does not address the blatant fact that Calvin never once refers to a provisional salvation of every single man; secondly, he takes no account of Calvin's doctrine of the visibility and invisibility of the church. On the other hand, Calvinistic scholars have rightly circumscribed Calvin's "invisible church" approach to theology. However, they have too readily bypassed, it would seem, the previously mentioned controversial statements of Calvin by focusing on the wider picture of perfect and sovereign salvation as also described by him.

To my mind, five point Calvinism is not threatened by Calvin's doctrine of visibility/invisibility; rather, it is enhanced by it. Accepting Calvin's approach does not, by any means, entail a concession to Arminianism or neo-Calvinism: It is not being argued by him that a person can be truly saved and then fall away, or that there is such a thing as a provisional salvation for all men. What Calvin has done is that he has "earthed" the church. To my mind, this is pastorally salutary, since he gives us the structure to understand the falling away of so many "believers" who have undeniably known the blessing of the Lord.

⁵⁰Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Leicester: IVP, 1988), 237.