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THE INFLUENCE OF WILLIAM OF OCKHAM ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE
STRONG CALVINIST DOCTRINE OF LIMITED ATONEMENT

BY

MICHAEL HIPSLEY

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The tremendous reverence accorded to the sovereignty of God by Reformed Theologians is one of the most respectable aspects of the system of Five Point Calvinism.¹ When taken to the extreme of Strong Calvinism² it is also one of the most abhorrent, stripping God of His essential goodness and love for the sake of His essential freedom and justice. This is particularly true of the Doctrine of Limited Atonement which contends that the atoning sacrifice of Christ is only for the elect and not available to all men. What may be surprising to the Strong Calvinist however, is that this doctrine does not, as many suppose, have its origins in the great Protestant doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*, but, ironically, in the Scholastic Theology of the Late Middle Ages against which the reformers fought so vehemently. Limited Atonement ultimately is founded not upon the

¹The beliefs of Five Point Calvinism is usually represented by the acrostic T.U.L.I.P. respectively representing the doctrines of Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints.

²For the purposes of this paper the position of Strong Calvinism will be used to represent any within the Calvinist System who hold to a position of 1) Total Depravity on an intensive basis; 2) Unconditional Election from a divine and human standpoint; 3) Limited Atonement in the sense that Christ's sacrifice was limited to the elect and not for all men; 4) Irresistible Grace on the unwilling; and 5) Perseverance of the Saints as a requirement for proving justification.

evidence of scripture, but in the voluntarist and nominalist philosophy³ of the Fourteenth Century Scholastic William of Ockham (1280-1347). Ockham's system which denies any divine essence other than the absolute freedom of God's will a position that is ultimately self-defeating and untenable but nonetheless serves as the central element for the exposition and justification of the Strong Calvinist position. As such, the Doctrine of Limited Atonement, at least as it is understood and presented by Strong Calvinists, is, in the end, left without any foundation and crumbles with system on which it is based.

Before investigating the influence of William of Ockham on the doctrine of Limited Atonement it would be beneficial to briefly establish what is meant by the term. For the purposes of this inquiry, Limited Atonement, the "L" of T.U.L.I.P. will refer to the Strong Calvinist position which holds that God elects some men to salvation and appoints others to damnation apart from any act of their will in the matter and, in this sense, the atoning work of Christ is limited only to the elect and not available to all men.⁴ The implications of this position are astounding for not only does this doctrine limit the extent of Christ's sacrificial atonement, it also implicitly denies God's omnibenevolence; no God who elects some to live and condemns others to death apart from their own free choice can legitimately be called all loving.⁵ For this reason

³Nominalism holds that there are no essences or natures in reality, but that these exist only as ideas or concepts in the mind. Voluntarism, which is inextricably linked to nominalism holds that because there is no divine essence that God is bound only by the absolutely free dictates of his own will. It is difficult to see in Ockham's philosophy which idea precedes the other, but they are undeniably connected, one proceeding logically from the other.

⁴This definition shows the inter-relation between the doctrines of Limited Atonement and Unconditional Election; one necessarily leads to another in the Strong Calvinist System.

⁵For a more detailed discussion of the implications of Limited Atonement regarding the extent of Christ's sacrificial atonement and God's love see Chapter 12 in Geisler, Norman.

many Calvinists reject Limited Atonement as “the most objectionable part of the Calvinistic scheme.”⁶ Not only is this doctrine repugnant, it appears to be more than biblical. Laurence Vance explains that “while the Atonement of Christ is a biblical doctrine, the describing of it as *limited* changes things considerably” amounting to what he describes as “the prefixing of a qualifying term to an otherwise scriptural one.”⁷

The question then remains, if Limited Atonement cannot be shown to be scripturally accurate⁸ (John Calvin himself stated emphatically that the Bible clearly indicated that the atonement was available to all men),⁹ then for what reason would a Strong Calvinist hold to such a doctrine? The answer to this question lies in a philosophical and theological presupposition to which Strong Calvinists are unquestionably committed, a priori, and from which the connection of their theology to William of Ockham’s philosophical system is undeniable: the absolute sovereignty of God. From this it follows that, if a foundational link between Ockham’s

Systematic Theology. Vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation*, Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2004.

⁶Laurence M Vance, *The Other Side of Calvinism*, rev. ed. (Pensacola, FL: Vance Publications 1999), 405.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Limited Atonement is in clear contradiction to the clear teaching of scripture that the atonement of Christ was for the entire world. It does not lie within the scope of this paper to give a detailed exposition of scriptural evidence against Limited Atonement. For a detailed discussion of this topic please refer to Chapter 12 in Geisler, Norman. *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation*, Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2004.

⁹Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2004), 382-384. Geisler sites numerous examples of Calvin’s perspective on this matter including the following quote from Calvin’s Commentaries on Galatians 5:12 which clearly and succinctly establishes Calvin’s perspective on what the Bible had to say about the extent of the atonement; “. . . God commends to us the salvation of all men without exception, even as Christ suffered for the sins of the whole world.”

philosophy and the formation of the Doctrine of Limited Atonement can be established; and if it can be further demonstrated that this philosophy is in error, then the doctrine of Limited Atonement is false and should be either discarded or modified to reflect the true conditions.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF WILLIAM OF OCKHAM

The Philosophy of William of Ockham has its origins in the metaphysical and theological turmoil of the fourteenth century. Although there were numerous thinkers who influenced the development of Ockham's thought, two of the most important are Duns Scotus (1265-1308) and Peter of Spain (1226-1277). These two thinkers provided the two most foundational elements of Ockham's thought: Scotus, ironically Ockham's philosophic nemesis, provided the metaphysical starting point from which Ockham would develop his ideas; and Peter of Spain the epistemological shift which gave Ockham his direction. The influence of the ideas which these two men lent to Ockham is critical for the analysis of Ockham's thought and therefore, requires a brief explanation.

In Scotus, Ockham found an undoing of Thomistic Metaphysics in the rejection of "the distinction between essence and existence."¹⁰ After Scotus, Scholastic metaphysics returned to the platonism of the early scholastic period in which it was enmeshed prior to Aquinas; a system where essence and existence were identical and as such the metaphysician was trapped in an idealistic worldview from which he could not disentangle himself. Ockham's hostility towards Scotus came, ironically through his acceptance of Scotus' metaphysical conclusions which

¹⁰Meyrick H. Carré, *Realists and Nominalists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 106.

resulted in Ockham solving of the problem by rejecting essences altogether.

The influence of Peter of Spain came in a shift of focus from metaphysics to logic as the primary means of understanding philosophy; an understanding that result in the development of nominalism and voluntarism. Meyrick Carré explains this influence stating that for Peter of Spain and those who followed him, “metaphysical questions concerning the nature of the objects to which terms refer became a matter of secondary interest. When the principle consideration is the way in which things are understood and expressed, the path is open for a development of conceptualism and nominalism.”¹¹ Peter of Spain and those who followed him, in shifting their emphasis of philosophy from metaphysics to logic, essentially severed truth from any grounding in reality; what was logically true, expressible in thought and language, was actually true.

Ockham, then, represents the synthesis of the ideas of late Scholasticism. Carré explains that, “none of these writers [the late scholastics] developed the implications of these ideas in the persistent manner of Ockham.”¹² What Ockham essentially did was to take the resulting ideas from Scotus’ metaphysic and Peter of Spain’s epistemological shift and carry them forth to a logical conclusion. The result of this conclusion was to have a profound influence on the academic world of Europe and an unquestionable influence upon the men who would develop the theology of the Reformation.

It is important to note that Ockham was not just a philosopher or logician. Ockham was also a theologian and his work is inextricably tied to the person and nature of God. It is in his thought about God that we see Ockham’s connection to Limited Atonement most clearly. In

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., 107.

many ways his thought was consistent with that of the scholastics before him, however he made a subtle but critical distinction that was to have far-reaching consequences. Albert Hakim's analysis of Ockham brings forth this distinction:

As with all the other theologian-philosophers of the Middle Ages, Ockham's philosophy centered on God, the fulcrum around which everything else moves. All such philosophies hold that God is supreme in every respect – in knowledge, in being, in goodness, in power; yet in how these attributes are to be understood there can be significant differences. All hold, for example, that God's will is supreme; yet there is a vast difference in the way Ockham fashions this understanding of the divine will. It is not only that things exist because God wills them to exist, but also that they are what they are because God wills them to be that way; in other words, a thing is the kind of thing it is not according to the nature of reality, but according to God's *will*. The name attached to this view of God's will is *voluntarism* (from the Latin *voluntas*, meaning will).¹³

Voluntarism, the system resulting from Ockham's investigation is then, rooted in the emphasis which he placed on the sovereign will of God. He held that God's will was *absolutely* sovereign and the basis for all reality. Voluntarism affirmed above all else the absolute supremacy of God's will in the most absolute possible sense. Frederick Copleston sheds light on the reasoning that brought Ockham to such a conclusion: "He [Ockham] thought of the theory [that there is a divine essence] as implying a limitation of the divine freedom and omnipotence, as though God would be governed, as it were, and limited in His creative act by eternal ideas or essences."¹⁴ Thus, voluntarism was necessary to defend the sovereign will of God; and from this flowed Ockham's other major doctrine: nominalism.

Copleston further explains how nominalism related to Ockham's effort to establish the

¹³Albert B. Hakim, *Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001), 232.

¹⁴Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 3, *Late Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), 50.

absolute supremacy of God's will, and, in so doing, speaks to the immense complexity of Ockham's system. "It does not seem to me very easy to synthesize all the elements of his thought; but perhaps it might be as well to remark immediately that one of Ockham's main preoccupations as a philosopher was to purge Christian theology and philosophy of all traces of Greek necessitarianism, particularly of the theory of essences, which in his opinion endangered the Christian doctrines of the divine liberty and omnipotence."¹⁵ Here we see the necessary connection between nominalism and voluntarism unified in their theological aim. In creating this system Ockham was able both to rid theology and philosophy of the very concept of essences (ironically by making essences merely concepts) which had for so long plagued it, and in the same act free God from any hindrance that natures or essences might bring to His will. Hakim brings the final result of this to light demonstrating how nominalism and voluntarism work together to free God from any limitation save that of logical contradiction and His own divine will. "At bottom, voluntarism means that there is no necessity for a thing to be what it is before God wills it; for that would be putting God under a necessity and contrary to His absolutely free will. It does not follow that a thing could be different from what it is, or that, if God so chose, could have been someone else; that would be meaningless. It is simply that God willed this *to be this*, period; all things then are possible to God, except what is clearly contradictory. . . ."¹⁶

Despite what were plainly good intentions on the part of Ockham, his system was to result in shocking consequences when applied to the activity of God as he related to His creatures. Having established a metaphysical position about the nature of God, Ockham then

¹⁵Ibid., 48.

¹⁶Hakim, 232.

carried this forth, with frightening consequences yet admirable consistency, in application to ethics and morality. What Ockham concluded, and rightly so based on his starting point, was that God was in no way bound by morality in any sense; what God did was moral by virtue of the fact that God chose to do it and apart from any innate goodness in God. “The same voluntarism extends to the realm of ethics, for it is God’s will here too that determines the morality of an action. If God wills an action to be designated as good, it is good; bad if he designates it so. As Ockham writes in his *Commentary on the Sentences*, ‘God cannot be obliged to any act whatsoever; by the fact alone, whatever God wills is right.’”¹⁷ Frederick Copleston explains just how far the consequences of Ockham’s idea reached. “God can do anything or order anything which does not involve logical contradiction. Therefore, because there is no natural or formal repugnance between loving God and loving a creature in a way which has been forbidden by God, God could order fornication. Between loving God and loving a creature in a manner which is illicit there is only an extrinsic repugnance, namely the repugnance which arises from the fact that God has actually forbidden that way of loving a creature. Hence, if God were to order fornication, the latter would be not only licit but meritorious.”¹⁸ The net result of this application is a theology in which morality amounts to little more than a divine whim to which man is helplessly subject.

Even in Ockham’s day the moral conclusions of voluntarism were being applied to the atonement of Christ, as Stephen Strehle explains in his work *The Catholic Roots of the Protestant Gospel*, “. . . this means that God . . . could damn the righteous and exonerate the

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Copleston, 104-105.

guilty, he could overturn his commandments, even his ten commandments, and demand the exact opposite of his laws; he could justify us or condemn us without Christ, with or without atonement, and with or without grace, especially created grace.”¹⁹ Furthermore, Strehle continues, “For Ockham, of course, there really is no need for Christ to suffer . . . both the atonement and justification, the work of Christ and its application, are subject to the same voluntarism throughout.”²⁰ In the end, the system of voluntarism is so extensive as to render even the atonement of Christ as an optional and even arbitrary act of God.

To summarize, when Ockham’s system is carried out to its logical conclusions the resulting view of God is one in which God, unbound by any nature or essence, is absolutely free to do anything within the confines of what is logically possible. The notion of innate goodness in God or of actions that are truly righteous or wicked in and of themselves vanishes. In the end, “hatred of God, stealing, committing adultery, are forbidden by God. But they could be ordered by God; and, if they were, they would be meritorious acts;”²¹ because in the end as Ockham himself wrote, “by the very fact that God wills something, it is right for it to be done. . . .”²²

It is this philosophical system upon which the Doctrine of Limited Atonement is founded. Although the reformers may not have carried voluntarism to the extent that Ockham did nor applied it to their theology with the same consistency, it is nonetheless present. The historical

¹⁹Stephen Strehle, *The Catholic Roots of the Protestant Gospel: Encounter Between the Middle Ages and the Reformation* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1995), 70.

²⁰Ibid., 71-72.

²¹Copleston, 105.

²²Ibid., 104.

connection between Ockham and Limited Atonement is quite clear and it is to this connection that our attention must now turn.

THE HISTORICAL CONNECTION BETWEEN OCKHAM AND LIMITED ATONEMENT

The impact of Ockham's thought upon Europe was immense. In many ways he set in motion the ideas that would culminate in the current state of Modern Western Philosophy. Étienne Gilson cites the incredible and complete influences Ockham's ideas had: "The late Middle Ages were then called upon to witness the total wreck of both scholastic philosophy and scholastic theology as the necessary upshot of the final divorce of reason and Revelation."²³ Though it is not within the scope of this paper to give exposition to this effect, suffice it to say, the influence of Ockham was profound, invading all of the major universities of Europe regardless of their acceptance or rejection of his system. "The influence of Ockham is everywhere present in the fourteenth century; It progressively invaded Oxford, Paris, and practically all the European universities. Some would profess it, others would refute it, but nobody was allowed to ignore it."²⁴ Europe, by the end of the fourteenth century, had been infected with nominalist and voluntarist ideology.

The first link in the intellectual chain between the philosophy of William of Ockham and the doctrine of Limited Atonement was through the little known theologian Gabriel Biel (c.1425-

²³Étienne Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (New York: Charles's Scribner's Sons, 1938), 88.

²⁴Ibid., 87.

1495) whose thinking was to have a significant influence upon the later development of Luther's system. The influence of Biel not only demonstrates the connection between Ockham and the Reformation, but also elucidates another very important part of the puzzle; explaining why Reformed Theologians and Reformation Historians are so blind to the influence of Ockham upon the thought of the Reformation. Heiko Oberman in *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism*, explains why nominalistic influence upon the Reformation has been so obscured. "Reformation scholars have been inclined to view the later middle ages merely as the 'background of the Reformation' and have too often been guided in their evaluation by statements of the Reformers – especially Martin Luther – which by their very nature tend to be informed by a conscious departure from particular developments in the medieval tradition. There is a tendency in this school to stress contrasts between Luther and the late medieval theologians and in general to assign Luther more to the tradition of St. Paul and St. Augustine than to that of William of Occam and Gabriel Biel."²⁵ The reaction of the Reformers against late Medieval Scholasticism will be discussed in greater detail in the section dealing with Luther, for now it is sufficient to say that the declining scholastic period was a significant shaping force upon Reformation thought; one that was perhaps made all the more powerful by the blindness which Reformation Theologians had to it."

Gabriel Biel's connection to Ockham is certain. Biel was educated at the University of Erfurt in the mid fifteenth century, a university which "favored Occam to the exclusion of both

²⁵Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2000), 1.

Thomism and Scotism,.”²⁶ and later taught at the University of Tübingen from 1484-1489 where “he succeeded in bringing the *via moderna* [Ockham’s system] to a place of preeminence.”²⁷ Biel was not only influenced by Ockham, but was a primary force in the dissemination of his ideas.

Although Biel was not bound to Ockham in his thinking, often in his work citing “Bernard of Clairvaux, Peter Lombard, the old Franciscan school, Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and Dun Scotus,.”²⁸ it is clear that Ockham’s voluntarism was the dominant influence upon his thought about God, as Oberman demonstrates:

In two places Biel gives an almost programmatic statement of his deepest ethical convictions. The first and most elaborate one we find in his lectures on the Mass. Here he defines the priority of God’s will over any moral structure by saying that God does not will something because it is good or right. If this were the case, God’s will would be subject to created principles of morality, whereas Biel is convinced that nothing can be called good unless it be accepted as such by the ‘uncreated principle,’ God. This seems to express the same absolute voluntarism and ethical positivism which even more moderate critics have noted in Occam’s works . . . The second passage in which Biel discusses this question is the negative counterpart to the first and corroborates our first impression: God can do something which he himself has declared unjust; however, if he does it, it then becomes right; therefore the will of God is the first rule of all justice.²⁹

In the conclusion of this statement we also see in Biels’s adoption of voluntarism, a foreshadowing of the future justification of Limited Atonement; God’s arbitrary election of some and reprobation of others in the limitation of Christ’s atonement is said to be as just simply by defining whatever God chooses to do as just; that is, a divine act is just by virtue of the fact that

²⁶Ibid., 11.

²⁷Ibid., 17. The *via moderna* or modern way was a term used of nominalism in contradistinction to Scholasticism which was given the label *via ancien* or ancient way.

²⁸Ibid., 5.

²⁹Ibid., 96.

God chooses to do it. Although Biel rejected (inconsistently) the idea of Double Predestination, he clearly held that the atonement was based solely on the will of God alone, having nothing to do with the free choice of man. “No change in the elect or reprobate could ever affect or influence God since there is no cause for predestination outside God. God’s eternal decision to predestine a man is due to the contingent will of God who has the power to accept and to reject.”³⁰ This passage, taken by Oberman from Biel’s own writings, clearly illustrates the manner in which voluntarism, once accepted, necessarily determines what a theologian must believe about the atonement: once voluntarism is accepted a theologian, if he is to be consistent must hold that salvation can only be based in the unmitigated will of God.

Although we find in Biel a primary source of the dissemination of voluntarism, he, unlike Ockham, was not consistent in his application of the system. This was to be an all too common trait of the Reformers. Though Biel accepted Nominalism and Voluntarism, he, at times, lapsed into contradiction by ascribing essence to God. “On the contrary, God’s will operates according to God’s essential wisdom, though this maybe hidden from man.”³¹ This same inconsistency would plague later theologians influenced by Biel. Interestingly, they also made use of his solution to the contradiction by appealing to mystery or, as Biel put, that which was “hidden from man.”

Gabriel Biel’s influence upon Luther has its origin in Luther’s training as an Augustinian Monk and thus, it was a seminal influence in the formation of Luther’s theology. Luther was educated by men who were themselves disciples of Biel’s theology and as a result passed his

³⁰Ibid., 187-88.

³¹Ibid., 99.

ideas, particularly those pertaining to God's sovereignty, onto Luther. Oberman notes this formative influence upon Luther in the framing of the scope of his work on Biel. "The indebtedness of Biel to Duns Scotus and Jean Gerson at the one hand, and the obedient discipleship of Bartholomaeus von Usingen, professor at Erfurt – and in this function teacher of Luther – at the other, mark the time span of our more detailed investigation."³²

One need not look very far to see evidence of Ockham's thought in Luther's work. Luther himself was keenly aware of his indebtedness to Ockham as Albert Hakim notes, "This [the influence of voluntarism is clearly seen in Martin Luther, two centuries later, for whom the glory of faith lay in the fact that it is a gift from on high and transcends capabilities of the human intellect which, on its own, cannot rise to a sure knowledge of God; it is no wonder that Luther could refer to Ockham as 'my dear master.'"³³ In *The Bondage of the Will*, we see from his own pen the influence that Ockham had on Luther's theology. "For if we believe it to be true that God foreknows and predestines all things, that he can neither be mistaken in his foreknowledge nor hindered in his predestination, and that nothing takes place but as he wills it (as reason itself is forced to admit), then on the testimony of reason itself there cannot be any free choice in man or angel or any creature."³⁴ Timothy George demonstrates Ockham's influence even more succinctly again quoting Luther: "God wills it so, and because he wills it so, it is not wicked."³⁵ Luther did

³²Ibid., 4.

³³Hakim, 235.

³⁴*Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 224.

³⁵Timothy Goerge, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1988), 77.

not stop here however, but directly applied Ockham's to the atonement. George writes that, "He [Luther] even restricted the scope of the atonement to the elect: 'Christ did not die for all absolutely.'"³⁶ In this sense, Luther's thought represents the fruition of Ockham's thought upon the theology of the atonement.

Be this as it may, Luther's position represents a glaring contradiction. It is one of theology's great ironies that the man who brought Christianity back to the foundational soteriological doctrine of *Sola Fide*, should turn around and in his doctrine of the atonement completely undermine his own efforts. How can man be saved by faith alone if, as Luther asserts, "free will after the fall exists in name alone"³⁷ and salvation is based not in our decision to accept Christ by faith but in God's arbitrary election of some men apart from their will to whom He chooses to extend the atonement. If what Luther says is true, that, "man is said to possess no worth in himself and contribute nothing to his own salvation,"³⁸ then this is nothing less than a reversal of the Protestant doctrine Luther resurrected. If Luther's view of God's nature is to be carried to its logical conclusion, his principle doctrine should be re-rendered as "Faith by salvation alone." Like Biel before him and Calvin after, Luther can only punt to mystery in effort to hide this contradiction.³⁹

Although it is difficult to trace exactly how Ockham came to influence the thinking of John Calvin, there is little doubt that Calvin was indeed profoundly influenced by his ideas.

³⁶Ibid., 77.

³⁷George, 75.

³⁸Strehle, 16.

³⁹George, 77-8.

Calvin studied at the University of Paris which Oberman identifies as one of the chief centers of Ockham's thought.⁴⁰ The extent to which this shaped Calvin is hard to discern, and though Calvin doubtless was exposed to voluntarism there; a more likely source is in the works of Luther which were widely circulated throughout Europe. Evidence for this connection comes in the fact that Calvin conducted a life-long correspondence with Philip Melanchthon, the chief theologian of Lutheranism, centering on the very issue of predestination.⁴¹

Regardless of the means by which voluntarism entered into Calvin's theology, it is clear that it did. One need only look to Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* to see this. The *Institutes* reveal a theology steeped in voluntarism and completely consistent with that of Luther, Biel, and Ockham. "But I say that they [objectors to voluntaristic theology] sufficiently prove what I contend: God, whenever he wills to make way for his providence, bends and turns men's wills even in external things; nor are they so free to choose that God's will does not rule over their freedom."⁴² Calvin's application of this doctrine of God's will to Predestination implies Limited Atonement "We call predestination God's eternal decree, by which he compacted with himself what he willed to become of each man. For all are not created in equal condition; rather,

⁴⁰Oberman, 4.

⁴¹Vance, 67. It is interesting to note that Melanchthon was acutely aware of what Luther's voluntarism implied for Protestant Theology and rejected it outright reshaping Luther's theology to conform to *Sola Fide*. Calvin would take Protestant Theology in the other direction where it would eventually, under his chief theologian Theodore Beza, be shaped into what is now the theology of Strong Calvinism.

⁴²John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, Trans. by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 2.4.7.

eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others.”⁴³ Under such circumstance it is impossible to see how the atonement could not be limited to the elect. The supremacy of God’s will and His complete autonomy from any hindrance in the execution thereof was the central aspect of Calvin’s theology of predestination and the atonement for how can man if enslaved in such a manner to God’s will have anything to do with his election; furthermore, how can such an atonement be said to be available to all.

Like those before him, Calvin too deferred to mystery when confronted with the abhorrent implications of this theological position. His reply not only expresses the conundrum in which Reformed Theologians found themselves, but demonstrates the circularity of their reasoning in the defense of their position. “For God’s will is so much the highest rule of righteousness that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous. But if you proceed further to ask why he so willed, you are seeking something greater and higher than God’s will, which cannot be found.”⁴⁴ Here we see clearly that the assumption of voluntarism and nominalism has led to a logically indefensible position; because they have defined God as being without essence, the only defense that the Reformed Theologian has at his disposal against the charge of contradiction is to reassert his circular definition and defer to mystery.

It should be noted that there is great controversy as to whether John Calvin actually held to the doctrine of Limited Atonement. Indeed, there is evidence that he did not. Norman Geisler demonstrates that in Calvin’s exposition of Scripture he overtly denied Limited Atonement

⁴³Ibid., 3.21.1.

⁴⁴Ibid., 3.23.2

showing that, in his commentary on Galatians 5:12 Calvin proposed that “God commends to us the salvation of all men without exception, even as Christ suffered for the sins of the whole world.”⁴⁵ Calvin even demonstrates this same inconsistency in the *Institutes*, affirming *Sola Fide* and asserting that faith is indeed the means of salvation: “We know that the promises [of salvation] are effectual only when we receive them in faith . . .”⁴⁶ As a result of this inconsistency of Calvin’s thought, both Moderate and Strong Calvinists have claimed Calvin for their own. Regardless of which side can rightfully claim Calvin as their own (if any), Laurence Vance, deftly sums up the theological confusion which Calvin left his followers in the matters of election and atonement. “Therefore, A. A. Hodge correctly ascertains: ‘Calvin does not appear to have given the question we are at present discussing a deliberate consideration, and has certainly not left behind him a clear and consistent statement of his views.’”⁴⁷

The question then remains if Calvin did not hold firmly to a voluntaristic theology then how has it come to pass that his name should adorn the system which so vehemently holds this position? Most Strong Calvinists will concede that Calvin did not himself formulate the Five Points; this was the done after Calvin’s death in the wake of the Arminian controversy through the Synods of Dort.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Five Point Calvinists maintain that these doctrines are intrinsic to his theology “because of the very nature of his system.”⁴⁹ The official formation of

⁴⁵Geisler, 384.

⁴⁶Ibid., 383. From *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.24.17.

⁴⁷Vance, 461.

⁴⁸Ibid., 460.

⁴⁹Ibid., 469.

the Five Points, though they may have their roots in Calvin, owe their formation to the response of Theodore Beza (1519-1605), Calvin's successor and chief theologian, to the Arminian controversy of the early seventeenth century. As Melancthon did for Luther, Theodore Beza systematized Calvin's theology. Beza, like Calvin, held to the absolute supremacy of God's will. Unlike Calvin, however, Beza was clear in his acceptance of Limited Atonement, holding that atonement was limited in its extent to the elect.⁵⁰

Strong Calvinists see in Beza the completion of John Calvin's theology. As Henry Martyn Baird explains in his biography of Beza, "If there was any difference [between the theology of Calvin and Beza], these doctrines were more strongly accentuated by Beza and more rigidly carried out to their legitimate consequences."⁵¹ Regardless of one's acceptance of Baird's position, in Beza the voluntarist and nominalist ideas of William of Ockham are finally formalized as official Reformed Doctrine. In much the same way that Ockham carried forth the seminal consequences of Scotus' and Peter of Spain's ideas to a consistent philosophical conclusion, Beza takes these same ideas as they existed inconsistently in Calvin's theology, and carries them to their necessary theological conclusion.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

What is undeniably clear within the history of the development of Limited Atonement is that the doctrine is derived from philosophical, not theological origins. There is no doubt that

⁵⁰Strehle, 93.

⁵¹Henry Martyn Baird, *Theodore Beza: The Counsellor of the French Reformation 1519 - 1605* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1899), 268

Strong Calvinists find Limited Atonement in scripture; however, what is equally doubtless is that they find it there not as a result of exegetical study, but through the imposition of a voluntarist conception of God upon the text. The theological implications which come to their apex in Beza's systemizing and formalizing activity, are the result of Ockham's philosophy applied to scripture, not clearly communicated in it. As such they are illicit by nature, violating the Protestant principles of biblical exegesis.

It was a philosophical shift, then, and not a theological revolution which led to the development Limited Atonement. Timothy George summarizes this development, demonstrating the philosophic roots of many of the changes that occurred: "We can point to three basic shifts which had far-reaching consequences for the development of theology during the period of the Renaissance and Reformation: (1) the shift from *being* to *will* as the primal metaphor for understanding God, (2) the shift from *metaphysics* to *metahistory* as a means of understanding God's relation to the created realm, (3) the shift from *ontological* to *logical* discourse as a method of doing theology."⁵² In light of this, it seems that B.B. Warfield's analysis of John Calvin's failure to deal with the nature and attributes of God, is mistaken. Warfield says of Calvin that, "it was due to this controlling religious purpose, and to his dominating religious interest, that Calvin was able to leave the great topics of the existence, the nature, and the attributes of God, without formal and detailed discussion in his 'Institutes.'"⁵³ Calvin's failure to deal with the nature an attributes of God can hardly be seen to be the result of a "dominate

⁵²George, 42.

⁵³Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1956), 142.

religious interest,” the very proposal seems to stand reason on its head. Would not one with such “controlling religious purpose” necessarily want to explore the nature and attributes of God? Calvin did not pursue the nature and attributes of God precisely because, as his own *Institutes* have shown, he did not believe that there were any to be pursued. This omission of Calvin’s part, whether intentional or unconscious, was philosophically motivated and based in some superior religious understanding as many Strong Calvinists would suggest. It is this philosophical pre-commitment which has wreaked such havoc upon Reformed Theology and is ultimately responsible for Five Point Calvinism.

In the end, the problem of Strong Calvinism is metaphysical. It is the, a priori denial of the divine essence by Ockham which really stands at the heart of the matter. The effect of this denial and its direct consequences for theology are clearly shown by Frederick Copleston in a comparison of the differences between Ockham’s and Aquinas’ philosophy as it related to their theology.

Having got rid of any universal idea of man in the divine mind, Ockham was able to eliminate the idea of a natural law which is in essence immutable. For St. Thomas man was contingent, of course, in the sense that his existence depends on God’s free choice; but God could not create the particular kind of being which we call man and impose on him precepts irrespective of their content. And, though he considered, for exegetic reasons connected with the Scriptures, that God can dispense in the case of certain precepts of the natural law, Scotus was fundamentally of the same mind as St. Thomas. There are acts which are intrinsically evil and which are forbidden because they are evil: they are not evil simply because they are forbidden.⁵⁴

Indeed, as we have seen, this result was exactly Ockham’s intention. He desired to strip any hindrance which might impede God’s will, but in so doing, turned God into an unloving and

⁵⁴Copleston, 104.

arbitrary monster not worthy of the glory which Ockham was so keen to ascribe to him. In contradistinction to this, the God which Aquinas' philosophy describes is one in whom there is no limit save for the limitations of His own completely perfect nature. For Aquinas, God's nature was not in opposition to His will, but in harmony with it. Once he has assumed Ockham, however, the theologian is limited to nothing but God's will and is thus relegated to work out his theology in contradiction, deprived by his very assumption of voluntarism of essence of God which would bring meaning and consistency to his theology. Apart from a philosophy and theology grounded in the reality of the divine essence, theology becomes untenable and invariably, if consistently applied, leads to repugnant and contradictory doctrines as the example of Limited Atonement so clearly demonstrates.

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