

Second Reformation Theology and the Question of Legitimacy: Calvin and A'Brakel Compared

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The Dutch Second Reformation or more accurately known as the “Nadere Reformatie” is a movement that has received ongoing interest since its development over the course of the seventeenth century and certainly provided inspiration to at least one later reformational movement, namely the “Afscheiding” in the Netherlands in the early nineteenth century. Nevertheless the question has been posed whether this movement was a true child of the Reformation. Was it faithful to the teaching of the early European Reformers? Modern historiography has often criticized it and its counterpart in England and Scotland, the Puritan Movement, for deviating from the orthodoxy of the Reformers and introducing scholastic reasoning that lead to harsh doctrinal formulation. Clearly such an accusation presents a challenge that deserves serious consideration.¹ In examining this question of legitimacy of the reformed orthodoxy of the Second Reformation, this study will examine firstly Calvin’s doctrine of Scripture. This will be compared mainly with Wilhelmus A’Brakel’s doctrine of Scripture. It is after all the Scriptures, as the Word of God that formed the foundation for the reformed body of truth; Hence Sola Scriptura was one of the five “Sola’s” which framed the Reformed faith. One of the most controversial doctrinal developments of the Puritan and Dutch Second Reformations in the 17th century, which still trouble the church today with often heated and controversial debate, is the whole topic of biblical covenants. One of the criticisms raised in the research referred to above is that the 17th century scholastic approach produced views of covenant that were rigid and lent itself to the errors of antinomianism on the one hand and dry legalism on the other.

Calvin on Scripture:

Warfield has noted that Calvin was a “thoroughly independent student of Scripture” and goes on to point out that although the genius of uncovering Justification by Faith alone was not given to him, nevertheless “the contributions of his fertile thought to doctrinal advance were neither few nor unimportant.”² Calvin begins his institutes with Book One “The Knowledge of God the Creator,” Chapter I “The Knowledge of God and that of ourselves are connected. How they are interrelated,” Section I “Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God.”³ Then follows the well known opening sentence “Nearly all the

¹ Various works have addressed this subject. Some of the key works are Richard A Muller, *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics four volumes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003) , Joel R Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), Paul Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1998), Sebastien Rehnman, *Divine Discourse: The Theological Methodology* (Baker Academic, 2005), J.V. Fesko, *Diversity within the Reformed Tradition* (Greenville: Reformed Academic Press), Lyle D. Bierma, *The Covenant Theology of Caspar Olevianus* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2005).

² B.B. Warfield, *Set of 10 Volumes: Volume 5*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2000), p21

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion [1559]*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) p35. The footnote to the word “knowledge” explains “The word

wisdom we possess that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”⁴

Calvin proceeds to develop this proposition in Book 1. He then explains the innate knowledge of God. This innate knowledge of God that we have is unfortunately corrupted so that men “ought”, then, to break forth into praises of him but are actually puffed up and swollen with all the more pride.”⁵ Nevertheless “Knowledge of this sort, then, ought not only to arouse us to the worship of God but also to waken and encourage us to the hope of the future life.”⁶ “But although we lack the natural ability to mount up unto the pure and clear knowledge of God, all excuse is cut off because the fault of dullness is within us”⁷. For this reason this innate knowledge of God together with the testimony of Natural Revelation in Creation leaves man without excuse for his warped knowledge of God, and proceeds to climax the argument with Book 1 Chapter VI “Scripture is needed as guide and teacher for anyone who would come to God the Creator.” He clearly explains the purpose of Scripture as “gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God.”⁸ For Calvin Scripture was the point of departure and foundation for establishing a right relationship with God.

Calvin’s acceptance of the canon of scripture was not merely a blind trust as Warfield points out “These grounds (for accepting scripture)... were historico-critical. Calvin, we must bear in mind, was a Humanist before he was a Reformer, and was familiar with the whole process of determining the authenticity of ancient documents.”⁹ “The organon of his critical investigation of the canon was in effect twofold. He inquired into the history of the books in question. He inquired into their internal characteristics.”¹⁰ Ultimately for Calvin the acceptance of Scripture as the Word of God and the authority given to it was of the Holy Spirit. “Hence the Scriptures obtain full authority among believers only when men regard them as having sprung from heaven, as if there the living word of God were heard.” The church is therefore established by the scriptures and not the scriptures by the church. “...credibility of doctrine is not established until we are persuaded beyond doubt that God is its Author.”¹¹

Brakel on Scripture:

Brakel defines and explains his view of Scripture most fully in his work entitled “De Redelijke Godsdienst.” He derives the title from Romans 12:1 “... which is your reasonable service.” The word service he translates as “godsdienst”, which in Dutch would mean “religion”; however the direct translation of the Dutch word would be “God service” which accurately translates the meaning. He then notes “Religion consists of four matters: 1) its foundation or basis, 2) its form or essence, 3) its regulative principle, and 4) its

“knowledge” in the title, chosen rather than “being” or “existence” of God, emphasizes the centrality of revelation in both the structure and the content of Calvin’s theology.”

⁴ Ibid., 35

⁵ Ibid., 55

⁶ Ibid., 62

⁷ Ibid., 69

⁸ Ibid., 70

⁹ B.B. Warfield, *Set of 10 Volumes: Volume 5*, p53

¹⁰ Ibid., p54

¹¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion [1559]*, p75

practical manifestation.”¹² In dealing with religion’s “regulative principle” he immediately identifies “the revelation of God’s will as the regulative principle according to which man, as a servant, must engage himself. It has not been left to man to determine the manner in which he would serve God, for then he would stand above God.”¹³ Man is immediately put into a position of subjection to and dependence upon God who indicates “what He requires man to do and in which manner He wishes this to be accomplished.”¹⁴

Concerning this dependence, “God has created within all men an innate knowledge that God is, that is, an acknowledgement that God exists. This does not mean that man, in his existence, is immediately conscious of God: rather this consciousness comes gradually with an increase of age.”¹⁵ In a development on the thought of Calvin who says that this innate knowledge is active in a child, Brakel postulates that Man is created with inborn knowledge of God where innately aware that God exists. This does not mean that the infant has this realization, but it grows as the child matures (i.e. as a habit or seed). Brakel does not see the innate knowledge of God working mutually exclusive from Scripture and the working of the Spirit, but rather these means assume this innate knowledge in stimulating inquiry and saving knowledge. Brakel therefore attaches importance to knowledge of God from Nature but this knowledge does not have the qualities as ascribed to it in Romanism and Socinianism¹⁶. Consequently it is clear that these innate ideas are not that of Descartes where substantial knowledge of God can be attained extra scripture.

For Brakel “The soul in Adam could not be separated from the image of God in its narrow sense, as the image of God permeated and energized the entire soul. We are merely making an intellectual deduction here. As a result of Adam’s fall, the image of God in its narrow sense, consisting of spiritual knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, has been entirely removed from all the faculties and propensities of the soul, Nevertheless, Adam did not lose his human nature. He retained the soul in its essence and propensity, consisting of intelligence, will, disposition, reason, and consciousness of God. The consciousness of God is as natural to man as his ability to reason.”¹⁷ This Innate knowledge therefore by the fall has lost its spiritual capacities and qualities. The pre-fall condition of the soul is different in its very nature from the post-fall soul of Adam. “Consequently, there is neither a remnant nor a certain degree of the image of God in natural man. It is therefore evident that both natural knowledge and morality do not differ from the image of God in its narrow sense in degree, but in essence.”¹⁸ Brakel seems to indicate that this remnant of innate knowledge can convict of sin, but does not result in true conversion. This natural knowledge can change people into mere moral persons; that is their outward display of wickedness is tempered in a natural way. Here Brakel applies more to this wider image than Calvin would. Nevertheless there is a similarity to Calvin’s thought, who disagreed with Luther’s

¹² Wilhelmus a’Brakel, *The Christians Reasonable Service*, ed. J.R. Beeke, trans. B Elshout, Volume 1, (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1999), p3

¹³ Ibid., p4

¹⁴ Ibid., p4

¹⁵ Ibid., p5

¹⁶ Ibid., p12, 13

¹⁷ Ibid., p18

¹⁸ Ibid., p19. I.e. Brakel bases this statement on his finding fallen man “entirely blind and dead” merely possessing “both the natural knowledge of God as well as morality.” He sites Gal 4:8, Eph 4:18 and 1Cor 15:34 as proof of this spiritual blindness and deadness.

view that at the fall man became a “devil,” by ascribing substantial morality in fallen man. At times Brakel’s view of reason is ambiguous. For instance there seems to be an over-confidence in reason when he exhorts everyone to “therefore strive earnestly to acquire the knowledge of God, without which there can neither be faith, love, religion, nor salvation.”¹⁹

Brakel now comes to consider the necessity and role of the Word of God in Salvation. His opening sentence reiterates that “the knowledge of God derived from nature is insufficient unto salvation.”²⁰ After discussing revelation prior to Moses producing the Pentateuch, the names assigned to God’s Word and the necessity of God’s Word he addresses “The Origin of the Holy Scriptures” and states “The primary, yes, the only essential cause is God.”²¹ In answer to the objection that the Holy Scripture has inherent divine authority superior to the church because the church is older than the Scripture, Brakel insists “The church is not older than the Word; the very opposite is true, the Word is the seed of the church. ... Thus, the church does not give divine authority to the Word among men. We do not believe the Word to be divine because the church declared it to be so, but the Holy Scriptures themselves manifest their divinity to the attentive hearer or reader...”²² Concerning “The Substance or Contents of the Word of God,” it is “the covenant of grace, or to state it differently, it contains the perfect rule for faith and practice.”²³ The Word of God is perspicuous and not to be interpreted by a Pope or others on our behalf, but every person is obliged to study the Scriptures for themselves. Brakel is therefore careful to explain the use of reason in understanding the Scriptures. Contrary to the Socinians who believe “that the entire Word of God as well as every individual text must be examined in the light of reason...” Brakel maintains that intellect and reason “are only the means, however, whereby we may know what God says in His Word.” They “may not be considered as a basis for, as a rule to go by, or as a touchstone, in determining whether that which God reveals in His Word is truth ... Reason must surrender itself to the Word; the Word must never surrender itself to Reason.”²⁴ Ultimately Spiritual knowledge requires the enlightening and empowering work of the Holy Spirit. Man’s spiritual attainments are limited to natural things. We cannot reach a spiritual dimension unless taught of the Holy Spirit a saving knowledge of the truth. “God’s Spirit reveals the mysteries of the Word to the heart, testifies that the Word is truth, and gives faith to embrace it.”²⁵ Here Brakel follows Calvin as discussed in the last paragraph in “Calvin on Scripture” above.

Calvin on Covenant:

Professor Graafland has pointed out in his study on the historical development of the covenant entitled “Van Calvijn tot Comrie – Oorsprong en ontwikkeling van de leer van het verbond in het Gereformeerd Protestantisme,” that Calvin has not developed a systematic view on covenant. Nevertheless he has referred extensively to covenant at various places in his Institutes of the Christian Religion and in his various commentaries

¹⁹ Ibid., p21

²⁰ Ibid., p23

²¹ Ibid., p23 - 27

²² Ibid., p31, 32

²³ Ibid., p34

²⁴ Ibid., p59, 60

²⁵ Ibid., p61

and collected sermons.²⁶ In Calvin's commentary on Genesis 17 one senses a dualism when Calvin says "...for the promise by which the Lord had adopted them (natural descendants of Abraham through Isaac – insert M du Preez) all as children, was common to all: and in that promise, it cannot be denied, that eternal salvation was offered to all. What, therefore, can be the meaning of Paul, when he denies that certain persons have any right to be reckoned among children, except that he is no longer reasoning about the externally offered grace, but about that of which only the elect effectually partake? Here, then, a twofold class of sons presents itself to us, in the Church; for since the whole body of the people is gathered together into the fold of God, by one and the same voice, all without exception, are, in this respect, accounted children; the name of the Church is applicable in common to them all: but in the innermost sanctuary of God, none others are reckoned the sons of God, than they in whom the promise is ratified by faith"²⁷ (I.e. saving faith – insert M du Preez). Graafland sums this up aptly for us "We voelen het ambivalente in Calvijns gedachtengang, die tussen het vleeselijke en het geestelijke zaad als het ware in balanceert. Daarom komt Calvijn anderzijds er ook niet toe om het andere uiterste te stellen, namelijk dat elk natuurlijk nakomelingschap wordt uitgesloten en dat het alleen om een geestelijk nakomelingschap gaat, uitsluitend bestaande uit de (ware) gelovigen, God's uitverkorenen uit alle volken van alle tijden. Calvijn kiest dus niet voor een alleen-natuurlijke maar ook niet voor een alleen-geestelijke visie op het verbond. Maar, zoals wij al zeiden, hij bewandelt een middeweg, enigzins ambivalent, al meent hij zelf, dat zijn oplossing gemakkelijk is."²⁸ Graafland disagrees with P.A. Lillback's view that Calvin's doctrine of covenant modifies his view of election. He correctly points out that it is precisely the other way around, i.e. election modifies his view of covenant, as one can see in the quotation above from Calvin's commentary on Genesis.²⁹

Brakel on Covenant:

In Brakel we find the covenant defined systematically in his work "Redelijke Godsdienst." He begins his discussion proper on Covenants with the Covenant of Redemption. This Covenant he discusses as a separate chapter under the Loci dealing with the Doctrine of God, immediately following the chapter dealing with Election and Reprobation. Space does not allow us to go into detail on this aspect but a few highlights show us the essence of his teaching. Brakel believes that "by virtue of this covenant the Lord Jesus is the Executor of the salvation of the elect. The Father has given them into His hand and entrust them to Him. The Son in love has accepted them and has committed Himself not to lose one of them, but to raise them up again at the last day (John 6:39)."³⁰ Brakel makes it plain at the start of the chapter that this is not a new scheme unique to the Second Reformation, but

²⁶ Dr C. Graafland, *Van Calvijn Tot Comrie: Oorsprong en ontwikkeling van de leer van het verbond in het Gereformeerd Protestantisme (6 Dele in 3 Volumes)*, (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1996), p83 – 84. In fact Graafland has given Calvin more attention; he dedicates a full part, Deel 2, to examining Calvin's view of covenant. He gives six reasons for asserting the importance of giving attention to Calvin and the covenant.

²⁷ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries Volume 1 (Genesis) trans. Rev. John King*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), p445 – 447

²⁸ Dr C. Graafland, *Van Calvijn Tot Comrie: Oorsprong en ontwikkeling van de leer van het verbond in het Gereformeerd Protestantisme (Deel 1&2)*, p 90

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p88

³⁰ Wilhelmus a'Brakel, *The Christians Reasonable Service*, p251

rather “The first Reformers and some subsequent writers have spoken with much reverence about this sacred mystery, some discussing it at great length.”³¹

With the majority of Puritan and Nadere Reformatie divines, he holds forth a second covenant, a covenant established at creation, which he calls the Covenant of Works. This covenant is stated and explained under the Loci dealing with Anthropology. “The Covenant of Works was an agreement between God and the human race as represented in Adam, in which God promised eternal salvation upon condition of obedience, and threatened eternal death upon disobedience. Adam accepted both this promise and this condition.”³² The federal nature of this agreement meant that “Having broken the covenant, Adam did not only become sinful himself, but also all his descendants with him.”³³ In his chapter on Original and Actual Sin, the nature of the Original Sin is explained. All men are guilty not of the actual sin committed by Adam, but by the sin of Adam being imputed to them.³⁴

Brakel then goes on to discuss the Covenant of Grace. According to Brakel, a covenant “consists in a mutual, binding obligation between two or more individuals, who, contingent upon certain conditions, promise certain things to each other.”³⁵ Accordingly “Between God and man there is therefore such a covenant of grace in the true sense of the word.”³⁶ Nevertheless we see that in spite of this mutual relationship, man does not enter into this covenant as an equal party but rather “The one party and covenant initiator is the Lord God who in this covenant must be viewed as the all-sufficient One. God is all-sufficient in Himself, and does not need the worship of man’s hands. Man’s goodness does not extend to Him.”³⁷ The covenantal conditionality does not therefore refer to “conditions which man presents, for man is neither interested in a covenant nor inclined to enter into covenant with God. He therefore neither proposes such a covenant nor makes any request or promise for the purpose of moving God to enter into covenant with him. But God wondrously makes the initial proposal, and promises benefits in order to motivate and allure man to enter into covenant with Him.”³⁸

Brakel points out that the covenant of the Old Testament is the same covenant that is presented in the New Testament. There is in essence no difference. At the same time he goes on to prove that there is no external covenant. The only covenant is that which is made with the elect which is the Covenant of Grace. The question then is what of the Covenant that was made with all Israel as a nation. Brakel says that “In a general sense God established this covenant with the entire nation, but not with every Individual. Everyone was to truly enter into this covenant by faith.”³⁹ “The ungodly merely entered the covenant under pretext.”⁴⁰ The outward is merely the pretense of godliness that flatters God

³¹ Ibid., p263

³² Ibid., p355

³³ Ibid., p381

³⁴ Ibid., p383 – 385

³⁵ Ibid., p429

³⁶ Ibid., p429

³⁷ Ibid., p431, 432

³⁸ Ibid., p439

³⁹ Ibid., P 462

⁴⁰ Ibid., P 462

with the mouth and to lie to him with the tongue.⁴¹ For Brakel the Covenant of Grace is no less than God making covenant with the elect. To in any way allow for God binding himself to the ungodly is unacceptable, for God does not bind himself to evil and rebellion. What then is the position of the non-elect in the Covenant of Grace? Having disallowed an external covenant as regards the non-elect he nevertheless allows for a form of participation. According to Graafland “A Brakel zoekt daarvoor een uitweg, die hij omschrijft als, ‘uytwendige inlatinge in het Verbondt der Genaden’. Hen, voor wie dit geldt, omschrijft hij als zodanigen, ‘die haer uytwendig inlaten in het Verbondt der Genaden, ende haer maer uytwendig sonder waer geloove ende bekeeringe onder die Bondgenooten onergerlyk gedragen’.⁴² Brakel therefore effectively undermines his own position that there is no separate external covenant. What effectively is the difference between an external covenant and “een uitwendige toelating tot het (echte) genadebond.⁴³ Although Brakel denies that the two positions are not the same, he nevertheless leaves doubt in his covenant idea.

Conclusion:

In evaluating the legitimacy of the Second Reformations claim to its Reformation roots we have established clearly that the representative divines of each era held to a consistent view of Scripture. Scripture is God’s Word. It holds authority over the life of the Church and the life of the believer. ‘Reason’, to use an expression of the Puritan John Flavel, ‘takes its place at the feet of Faith’. In order for this Word to have any spiritual power, to take root in the life of a man, to change the heart of a man – in short for this Word to bring spiritual life, it must have the corresponding work of the Holy Spirit. John Calvin has been called the theologian of the Holy Spirit. But we have seen in Brakel the same respect, even a demand, for the work of the Holy Spirit. Brakel may perhaps at times open himself to the accusation of Biblicism, but this does not detract from his theologically balanced and devotional guide to Reformed Theology. At worst we can say that what Brakel does is to more clearly illustrate the genius of Calvin in consistently staying within safe limits in his biblical exposition and definition.

The Second Reformation divines were men for their time and so used the Reformation teaching as a starting assumption to address the pastoral issues of doctrine and church life that they faced. The question is, were their assumptions and consequently their doctrinal development a misrepresentation of the work of the original Reformers? Or even if their assumptions were correct, did they build incorrectly on these assumptions? J. V. Fesko in his work, *Diversity within the Reformed Tradition*, argues convincingly that Calvin’s predestinarian framework was Supralapsarian. Throughout his work he counters the argument of a certain historiography that argues that 17th century “scholasticism distorted the theology of Calvin.” This argument he points out is represented by well known theologians among who are R.T. Kendall, J.B. Torrance, Holmes Rolston, M.Charles Bell, Basil Hall and Brian G. Armstrong.

Although a key feature of Fesko’s thesis is spent in proving that Beza’s supralapsarianism is not a deviation, but a continuation of the thought of John Calvin, he also points out that

⁴¹ Dr C. Graafland, *Van Calvijn Tot Comrie: Oorsprong en ontwikkeling van de leer van het verbond in het Gereformeerd Protestantisme (Deel 5&6)*, p347

⁴² *Ibid.*, p346 (references Redelyke Godsdiens Chapters 16 & 37)

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p347

the main tenets of the more thoroughly worked out covenant scheme of the Second Reformation are found in Calvin's writings. This confirms the brief analysis of the Covenant in this article where the continuation of thought is found. Clearly we would be guilty of anachronistic reasoning to read into Calvin the more definite and systematic covenantal thought of the second reformation divines. We do not see a systematic or clear exposition of the Covenant of Works or Redemption. We also do not see all the developed nuances of the Covenant of Grace in Calvin. Nevertheless we do see that there is a progression of thought, a development as it were, on Calvin's doctrine of covenant. Firstly, some have taught that Calvin did not see in scripture and teach clearly the imputation of Adam's sin to all mankind. This imputation of Adam's sin is taught clearly in the federal theology of Brakel, and is given succinctly in the Westminster Confession that the "first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience."⁴⁴ This idea, although not encased in federal language is expressed by Calvin who writes "Adam was not only the progenitor but, as it were, the root of human nature; and that therefore in his corruption mankind deserved to be vitiated Adam so corrupted himself that infection spread from him to all his descendants That is, the beginning of corruption in Adam was such that it was conveyed in a perpetual stream from the ancestors into their descendants."⁴⁵

Secondly, the unconditional aspect of the covenant established by Brakel and Calvin has been shown in the foregoing whereby God acts graciously in establishing the covenant. Both however also speak of condition in the covenant. Fesko emphasizes this in Calvin who wrote "in all covenants of his mercy the Lord requires of his servants in return uprightness and sanctity of life, lest his goodness be mocked or someone, puffed up with empty exultation on that account, bless his own soul, walking meanwhile in the wickedness of his own heart."⁴⁶

In examining the doctrines of Scripture and Covenant of Calvin and that worked out by a'Brakel 150 years later we do not see a theology that is manipulating or bending the teaching of the Reformer away from the doctrines of grace. We do see that development takes place, but one sees a wrestling with present day issues and an attempt to achieve clarity of thought rather than to develop new and different ideas. In fact a'Brakel would insist that he is being faithful to the past teaching, not for the sake of tradition, but for the simple reason that the old teaching is true to Scripture. As we have noted, others have disagreed with him and his contemporaries, but our investigation in examining the available material has found that the Second Reformation represent a legitimate continuation of the First Reformation.

⁴⁴ Westminster Divines, *Westminster Confession of Faith*, (Edinburgh: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1977 Reprint Edition), p42

⁴⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion [1559]*, 2.1.6-7; pp.248 – 50 quoted in Diversity within the Reformed Tradition, J.V. Fesko, Reformed Academic Press, 2001. p287

⁴⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion [1559]*, 3.17.5; p808 quoted in Diversity within the Reformed Tradition, J.V. Fesko, Reformed Academic Press, 2001. p287 Fesko also references John Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, trans., Arthur Golding (London, Henry Middleton, 1583; Reprint; Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, n.d.), Sermon 148; Deut. 26.16 – 19; p.913b. See also Gerald Lewis Blog web address <http://kerugma.solideogloria.com/> for comments on Calvin's commentary on John 15.1-6