

**Was  
Calvin a  
Theonomist?**

by  
*Gary North*

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# WAS CALVIN A THEONOMIST?

*Gary North*

This essay appears as my “Publisher’s Preface” to John Calvin, *The Covenant Enforced*, edited by James B. Jordan (ICE, 1990). I had several goals in publishing this collection of John Calvin’s sermons on Deuteronomy. The first was to provide primary source evidence to answer the question: “Was Calvin a theonomist?” These sermons reveal clearly that the answer is yes. Second, I am interested in Calvin’s social theory. This question interests me both as an historian and a social theorist. Was there something unique about Calvin’s social theory that separated him both from the medieval theorists who preceded him and the Lutherans who were his contemporaries? Third, and less relevant to the broader social and historical issues, I wanted an answer to the question: Is theology as taught in contemporary Calvinist seminaries consistently covenantal and Calvinistic, or has it drifted off into other paths? I say less *relevant* because contemporary Calvinism is today a minor institutional eddy in the broad stream of evangelicalism, a movement identifiable by the shrunken condition of its seminaries and also of the denominations that still profess *and enforce the* historic Reformed creeds.

I note the title of the book, *The Covenant Enforced*. Where is the covenant enforced – the covenant preached by John Calvin? The answer is clear:

almost nowhere. The systematic and self-conscious unwillingness of Calvinists to both preach and institutionally enforce covenant theology, beginning in the 1660's<sup>1</sup> and escalating ever since,<sup>2</sup> is at the heart of the spiritual crisis of the West.

## Calvin and Theonomy

Because Calvin wrote the single most effective theological handbook in the history of the church, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, readers have tended to ignore the enormous compendium of writings that constitute his life's work. The 22 volumes of Bible commentaries published by Baker Book House only skim the surface of his total output. Most of his writings have yet to be translated from the Latin. His 200 + sermons on Deuteronomy appeared in English in the late sixteenth century and were promptly forgotten.<sup>3</sup> Yet it is here, in his sermons on Deuteronomy, that we find the heart of Calvin's covenant theology. It is in Deuteronomy that God's covenant is presented most comprehensively.<sup>4</sup>

### What Is Theonomy?

The question, "Was Calvin a theonomist?", obviously demands a definition of theonomy. Theonomy, as Greg Bahnsen uses the term,<sup>5</sup> is a view of the Bible that argues for the continuing validity of God's revealed law in every area of life. Bahnsen argues that unless a specific Old Testament law has been abrogated by the New Testament, either by specific revelation or because of an application of a New Testament principle, its authority is still morally and/or judicially binding. "The *methodological* point,

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1. The Restoration of Charles H in England in 1660 marks the beginning of the decline.

2. See my forthcoming book, *Rotten Wood: How the Liberals Captured the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.*

3. These have been reprinted in the original small print by the Banner of Troth, Edinburgh.

4. Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1987).

5. I told him in 1977 that *theonomy* must be a composite of the Greek words for "reduced sales." I was wrong, though not about the level of sales. It is a composite of *theos* (God) and *nomos* (law).

then, is that we presume our obligation to obey any Old Testament commandment unless the New Testament indicates otherwise. We must assume continuity with the Old Testament rather than discontinuity. This is *not* to say that there are *no changes* from Old to New Testament. Indeed, there are – important ones. However, the word of God must be the standard which defines precisely what those changes are for us; we cannot take it upon ourselves to assume such changes or read them into the New Testament.”<sup>6</sup>

This position has produced a certain amount of exegetical bobbing and weaving. “There are,” Bahnsen writes, “*cultural* discontinuities between biblical moral instruction and our modern society. This fact does not imply that the ethical teaching of Scripture is invalidated for us; it simply calls for hermeneutical sensitivity.”<sup>7</sup> “Hermeneutical sensitivity” allows a degree of latitude – how much, no one can say in advance. But every intellectual and judicial system eventually adopts a similar qualification; the human mind is neither digital<sup>8</sup> nor *unfallen*. Nevertheless, theologians are at a comparative disadvantage in terms of creating a systematic apologetic system, since they assert that the Bible is relevant for every area in life, not just in great shining platitudes, but specifically. This makes for a complex, detailed, and difficult apologetic.<sup>9</sup>

In general, however, the precision of the definition of theonomy supplied by Bahnsen has led to an extensive output of theological works that apply it to a whole host of biblical-theological issues, including social theory.

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6. Greg L. Bahnsen, *By 'Ibis Standard: The Authority of God's Law Today* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1985), p. 3.

7. Greg L. Bahnsen, “The Reconstructionist Option,” in Bahnsen and Kenneth L. Gentry, *House Divided: The Break-Up of Dispensational Theology* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), p. 32.

8. Modern computers “think” digitally; they are in fact giant morons, not giant brains. A. L. Samuel, quoted by Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 92.

9. It also leads to the multiplication of critics who do not read it before they go into print with their criticisms.

## John Calvin, *Theonomist*

I have already given my one-word answer: yes. Now I need to prove it. The following extracts from sermons reprinted in *The Covenant Enforced* make his position plain. I begin with his view favoring the continuing validity of the Decalogue (ten commandments), the words of the law. He cites Deuteronomy 27:26: "Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them. And all the people shall say, Amen." His comments do not indicate any doubt on his part regarding the comprehensive claims of God's law

For this cause, therefore, it is said, "Cursed be he who does not confirm the words of this law." He is not here speaking of one or two commandments, or of some part of them, but of the whole law, every part and parcel thereof without exception. And indeed, we ought to think of how St. James says that He who has forbidden to steal, has also forbidden to commit adultery; and that He who has forbidden to murder has also forbidden false witnessing. We must not rend God's justice in pieces. In whatever way we offend, we violate God's law, and despise His majesty. But He will be acknowledged in His law throughout in all points, and not just in part, as I have told you before. [*Covenant Enforced*, p. 64.]

But here is a dreadful sentence, and such a one as ought to make the hairs stand stiff on our heads: "Cursed shall he be who does not perform all the words of this law." Who says this? It is God Himself. It is, then, a definitive sentence, such as admits of no appeal beyond itself. God will have all men confess it so, yea He will have every man confess it with his own mouth. What, then, remains for us to do? Where is the hope of salvation? From this we see that if we had only the ten commandments of the law we should be utterly undone and perish. It is necessary for us to have recourse to His mercy, which outstrips His justice, as St. James says (Jas. 2:13). God's goodness, then, must be manifest towards us to deliver us from the damnation all of us would experi-

ence if this curse should stand and there be no grace to overcome it. [*Covenant Enforced*, pp. 66-67.]

Did he take the details of the case laws seriously? Yes. He went to **Leviticus 18 and 20** in search of the definition of incest. He writes that “these degrees of consanguinity should be observed. For without such order, what would become of things? How would we differ from bulls and asses?”<sup>10</sup>

This comparison of a brute beast and a man without God’s law is a familiar one in Calvin’s ethical theology:

How are we made the people of God except by being His Church, and by having the use of His sacraments, and that is all the same as if He appeared among us? For we may not expect that God should come down from heaven in His own person, or send His angels to us. Rather, the true mark whereby He will be known to be present among us is the preaching of His Word purely unto us, for there can be no doubt but that then He bears rule in our midst. So then, let this thing profit us, that we know that our Lord receives us to Himself and will have us to be of His own household. Seeing it so, let us take pains to obey Him in all our life, and to keep His commandments. **Let us not wander like brute beasts as the wretched unbelievers do, because they never knew what it was to be of the house of God.** [*Covenant Enforced*, p. 33.]

Calvin believed in the primacy of obedience. This is why his theology is intensely ethical.

And we can see that the promise is not empty when we continue reading, “Keep the commandment I set before you this day,” says Moses, “that You swerve neither to the left nor to the right to go after strange gods and to worship them.” We see how God continually reminds us of obedience to His Word so that we should serve Him, though not in that hypocrisy to which we are so much inclined. Let

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10. *Covenant Enforced*, p. 54.

us remember therefore this lesson: That to worship our God sincerely we must evermore begin by hearkening to His voice, and by giving ear to what He commands us. For if every man goes after his own way, we shall wander. We may well run, but we shall never be a whit nearer to the right way, but rather farther away from it. [*Covenant Enforced*, p. 128.]

Biblical law served the basis of Calvin's ethics. This is why he should be classified as a sixteenth-century theologian. But it was more than simply his commitment to the requirement of obeying God's law that made him a theologian. He also held a social theory that was essentially theologian in approach.

### Calvin's Social Theory

What is the nature of social change? This is the question of modern social theory.<sup>11</sup> Humanist scholars usually focus on the perceived dualism between mind and matter: ideas vs. history as the primary basis of social development. The Bible, in contrast, focuses on the question of ethics: covenant-keeping vs. covenant-breaking. This raises the key issue in biblical social theory: God's *sanctions in history*.<sup>12</sup>

Calvin's view of history was straightforward: God brings His sanctions – blessings and curses – in the midst of history in terms of each man's obedience to His law. Each man reaps what he sows in history. Calvin did not qualify this statement in any significant way, and he repeated it over and over:

For if any one of us should reckon up what he has suffered all the days of his life, and then examine the state of David or Abraham, doubtless he will find himself to be in a better state than were those holy fathers. For they, as the apostle says (Heb. 11:13), only saw things afar off, things that are right before our eyes. God promised to be their Savior; He had chosen them to be, as it were, of His household; but

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11. Robert A. Nisbet, *Social Change and History: Aspects of the Western Theory of Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).

12. Sutton, *Prosper*, ch. 4.



meanwhile where was He who was to be their promised Redeemer? Where was the doctrine that is made so clear to us in the gospel concerning the resurrection? They knew the same afar off, but now it is declared to us in the gospel in such a way that we may indeed say, as our Lord Jesus Christ gives us to understand, that blessed are the ears that hear the things that are told us concerning Him, and the eyes that see the things that we see, for the holy kings and prophets longed for the same, and could not obtain it (Matt. 13:16f. ).

We therefore have a much more excellent estate than they had who lived under the law. This is the difference of which I speak, which needed to be supplied by God because of the imperfection [lack of completion] that was in the doctrine concerning the revelation of the heavenly life, which the fathers only knew by outward tokens although they were dear to God. Now that Jesus Christ has come down to us, and has shown us how we ought to follow Him by suffering many afflictions, as it is told us (Matt. 16:24; Rem. 8:29), in bearing poverty and reproach and all such like things, and to be short, that our life must be as it were a kind of death; since we know all this, and the infinite power of God is uttered in His raising up Jesus Christ from death and in His exalting Him to glory of heaven, should we not take from this a good courage? Should not this sweeten all the afflictions we can suffer? Do we not have cause to rejoice in the midst of our sorrows?

Let us note, then, that if the patriarchs were more blessed by God than we are, concerning this present life, we ought not to wonder at it at all. For the reason for it is apparent. But no matter how things go, yet is this saying of St. Paul always verified: that the fear of God holds promise not only for the life to come, but also for this present life (1 Tim. 4:8). Let us therefore walk in obedience to God, and then we can be assured that He will show Himself a Father to us, yea even in the maintenance of our bodies, at least as far as concerns keep-

ing and **preserving** us in peace, delivering us from all evils, and providing for us our necessities. God, I say, will make us to feel His blessing in all these things, so that we walk in His fear. [*Covenant Enforced*, pp. 100-1.]

## **Blessings in the Small Things**

Calvin was not speaking merely of the great sweeping movements in mankind's history. He was speaking of the small things of each man's life. There is orderliness in a man's life because there is a coherent, predictable relationship between obedience and blessings. God does not limit His **covenantal** blessings to the afterlife:

**Let** us therefore be persuaded that our lives will always be accursed unless we return to this point whereto Moses leads us, namely to hearken to the voice of our God, to be thereby moved and continually confirmed in the fact that He cares for our salvation, and not only for the eternal salvation of our persons, but also for the maintenance of our state in this earthly life, to make us taste at present of His love and goodness in such a way as may content and suffice us, waiting till we may have our fill thereof and behold face to face that which we are now constrained to look upon as it were through a glass and in the dark ( 1 Cor. 13: 12). That is one more thing we ought to remember from this text, where it is said that we will be blessed if we hearken to the voice of the Lord our God.

This is to be applied to all parts of our lives. For example, when a man wishes to prosper in his own person – that is, he desires to employ himself in the service of God and to obtain some grace so that he may not be unprofitable in this life but that God maybe honored by him – let him think thus to himself: “**Lord**, I am Yours. Dispose of me as You will. Here I am, ready to obey You.” This is the place at which we must begin if we desire God to guide us and create in us the disposition to serve Him, so that His blessings may appear and lighten upon us and upon our persons.

So it is concerning every man's household. [*Covenant Enforced*, p. 107.]

The same thing is true concerning cattle, food, and all other things. For we see here [in this text] that nothing is forgotten. And God meant to make us to perceive His infinite goodness, in that He declares that He will deal with our smallest affairs, which one of our own equals would be loath to meddle with. If we have a friend, we should be very loath, indeed, and ashamed to use his help unless it were in a matter of great importance. But we see here that God goes into our sheepfolds and into the stalls of our cattle and oxen, and He goes into our fields, and He cares for all other things as well. Since we see Him abase himself thus far, shouldn't we be ravished to honor Him and to magnify His bounty? [*Covenant Enforced*, p. 108.]

## A Covenantal Promise

God promised the Israelites that they would be blessed, so as to confirm His covenant with their fathers. "But thou shalt remember the LORD thy God: for it is he that giveth thee *power* to get wealth, that he may establish his covenant which he sware unto thy fathers, as it is this day" (*Deut.* 8:18). Calvin echoed this view God's blessings in history point to His faithfulness in eternity

Let us conclude, then, that when God says that He shall bless us in the fruit of the earth, and that He shall bless us in the fruit of our cattle, it is a most certain argument that He will not forget the principal thing. These things are lowly and of little count, and many times men despise them, and yet we see that God takes care of them notwithstanding. Since this is so, will He forget our souls, which He has created after His own image, which also He has so dearly redeemed with the sacred blood of his Son? Surely not. First of all, therefore, let us acknowledge God's favor toward us, in abasing Himself so far as to direct and govern everything that belongs to our lives and sustenance. And from there let us rise up higher, and un-

derstand that He will not fail us in the things that surpass this present life, but rather that in the chief things that belong to our life, indeed even in this world, God will stretch forth His hand to furnish us always with all things that are needful. [*Covenant Enforced*, pp. 108-9. ]

## A Visible Testimony to Our Enemies

These blessings of God will be visible to pagan enemies of God. He cites Deuteronomy 28:10: "And all people of the earth shall see that thou art called by the name of the LORD; and they shall be afraid of thee." The point here is: these blessings are not merely internal, "spiritual-only" blessings; they are public blessings. They are blessings that differentiate covenant-keepers from covenant-breakers, not merely in eternity, but in time and on earth.

Now He says moreover, that other people shall see that we are called by God's name, and they shall fear us (v. 10). It is not enough that God promises to make us feel that we are safe in His keeping; but He also says that even the pagans, our mortal enemies and the despisers of His majesty, shall be made to know the same. Now it is certain that the infidels do not know the arm of God in such a way as it ought to be known to us. They come far short of it. For though they see, they do not see. How then can it be possible for them to perceive that God has blessed us, that we live by His favor, and that we are nourished through His provision? After all, they are **blockish**, and do not recognize that anything comes to them from the hand of God . . . .

They will not know it through any persuasion of mind or through any such true understanding of it as we ought to have. But Moses says that they shall have it proved to their faces; as for example, we see the wicked grind their teeth when they behold the faithful prospering, and when they see that God upholds and keeps them. And how does this come about? Truly they will be astonished at it, and they will not be able to think otherwise but that God does indeed favor their adversaries – not that they

take it to heart or have a proper attitude about it, but in that they are at least confounded in their own selves. [*Covenant Enforced*, pp. 117-18.]

## Can Such Things Really Be?

Men who receive the blessings of God, even faithful men, will have doubts about the relationship between obedience and historical blessings. Calvin recognized this fact of life and warned against it. Unfortunately, his warning has not been taken seriously by those who profess to be his disciples today.

Now Moses repeats again what he had said concerning the fruit of the womb, of cattle, and of the earth. Surely it would have been sufficient to have promised once that all bodily blessings come from God. But on the one hand we see the mistrust that is in men, how when God speaks to them, they ceaselessly argue and reply, saying, "Yes, but can I be sure of it?" And therefore to give us better resolve, God confirms the matter He had previously spoken of. Again we see our unthankfulness to be such that we attribute things to "Fortune" or to our own skill and craft, which are actually done for us by God. Therefore He calls us to Himself, and shows that it is He who does it.

And on the other hand, He would have us to understand that if we intend to prosper in all points, we must hearken to Him and obey Him. For all men, yea even the most wicked in the world, desire to have issues of their own bodies, increase of cattle, and great revenues. But what? In the meanwhile we despise God, the author of all goodness, and seem as though we labored purposefully to thrust His hand far from us, which is as much as if I should ask a man for an alm and then reach up and box his ear, or as if he should come to my aid and I should spit in his face; even so deal we with our God. [*Covenant Enforced*, p. 119.]

## Negative Sanctions, Too

There are not merely positive sanctions in life, but also negative sanctions. We can expect to receive

**these** if we do not honor God as the sanctioning Sovereign in history:

It is certain that God will threaten often before He finally comes to execute judgment. Let us therefore consider His long patience in **tarrying** for us (Ps. 86: 15; Rem. 2:4). For if we abuse the same, it will result in nothing other than a heaping up and doubling of God's wrath toward us, so much so that it would have been better for us if He had rooted us out the first day than to have borne with us so long. Let scoffers say that respite is worth gold. There is no respite that we would not redeem with a hundred deaths, were it but possible, when we have been so stubborn against our God and so disobedient to His Word that we have made into a laughing matter His giving us some token of His anger.

Let us therefore consider that as long as God is sparing us He is giving us leisure to return to Him, and that if our enemies have left us alone, it shows His favor to us, that we might act to prevent His wrath. But if we will neither hear Him when He speaks nor receive His warnings, then we will need to give ear to these His threats here set forth, and it becomes **necessary** for Him to send us off to another school. It is of the wonderful goodness of our God that when we have thus provoked Him (as we see we do), yet He forbears us and does all to recover us to Himself, not by forcing us with many strokes, but by attracting us after a loving fashion, being ready to receive us to His mercy, not standing as a judge to vex and to condemn us.

But what? When we have shown contempt for all this, it must come to pass in the end (as I have said before) that our Lord will stir up against us other masters, so that the wicked will rise up against us and seek to make a slaughter of us by butchering and murdering us, being in very deed the executors of God's vengeance – of which we were warned long beforehand, though we chose to laugh at it, continuing in our sins and wickedness. That is

why I said that as long as God speaks to us, and we condemn ourselves and acknowledge our sins and seek atonement with our God that we may live in peace in this world, then even if it is God's will that we should have enemies and be kept occupied with wars, yet notwithstanding He holds us still in His keeping, and we are maintained and defended by His power and goodness. [Covenant *Enforced*, pp. 152-53.]

There can be little doubt that Calvin believed in a **covenantal** view of history in which the ethical character of men's lives affect their outward conditions. The judicial content of Calvin's ethical system was explicitly biblical. Without this belief in **covenantal** cause and effect in history, there could be no possibility of creating an explicitly biblical social theory. That such a view of history is rejected by most Protestant theologians today, and has been rejected as far back as 1700, explains why no Protestant group other than the Christian Reconstructionists have attempted to devise a uniquely biblical social theory. It also helps to explain the enormous hostility of modern Calvinist theologians and fundamentalist church leaders to Christian Reconstructionism: they hate Old Testament law with a passion. Even more than this, they hate the idea of God's sanctions in history in terms of this law, for such a view of sanctions would make Christians morally responsible for applying His law to the details of life, preaching the conclusions publicly, and enforcing them wherever legally possible. In short, it would make Christians responsible for what goes on in society. Responsibility on this scale is what modern Christianity for over a century has desperately sought to avoid.

### **Ethically Random History: A Non-Calvinist Theology**

We now come to the third aspect of this inquiry the concept of history taught at Calvinist seminaries. Before beginning this inquiry, let us once again consider Calvin's view of the **covenantal** nature of God's sanctions. He insisted that this **covenantal** relationship did not end with the New Covenant era:

Now Moses says that this people shall be an astonishment, a proverb, a byword, and a ridicule among the nations in which they will be dispersed. Here our Lord shows that as His goodness should be displayed among the people of Israel, so that every man should rejoice in the seed of Abraham, so should the very same people be abhorred and detested. The promise to Abraham was thus: All nations shall be blessed in thy seed. Of course, it is true that we must look to our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the very bond of the seed of Abraham, or else this blessing has no place or ground to stand upon. Yet notwithstanding, they who were descended from the race of Abraham should have been blessed by God so that they might have been an example, that everyone desiring grace might say, "O God, take pity on me, as upon the children of Abraham," whom He had chosen and adopted. Such was the promise.

Behold here the threat that was laid against it: When men see how fiercely God smites the people whom He had chosen, they will be astonished at it and think thus with themselves, "Is it possible that they whom God chose should now be cast off and be persecuted and thrown under foot with all manner of reproach?" And upon this, men may say, "O God, keep me that I not fall to such a case as this people is in." Or else when they intend to curse, they might say, "God do to you as He did to those vile Jews." This much is to be understood from this place.

Now let us mark that just because the Holy Spirit spoke thus by the mouth of Moses, it was not His intention that this doctrine should serve only for two thousand years or thereabouts, which was the time the law lasted until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but that we at this day must apply the same to our own use. Inasmuch as God has come near to us, we must walk in His fear in spite of Satan, so that His goodness may shine in us and be perceived to remain upon us. And on the other side, when we are unthankful, and our God is as it were mocked by us, it is needful for us to think thus:



“Well, we may shrink back from the way, but we shall gain nothing from all our plans, for in the end we shall surely come to shame.”

In truth we see how it is said that the name of God will be blasphemed among the unbelievers because those who were counted faithful earlier have been so cast down that God may seem to have falsified His promise and to have deluded them, so far forth must the vengeance of God extend. Now, seeing that this is so, let us learn to submit ourselves to our Lord while He allures us to Himself with gentleness, and so hold ourselves under His obedience that we may not become a byword and a ridicule to all the wicked, who seek nothing but to blaspheme God and to make a mock of us. Let us, I say, look well to that. [*Covenant Enforced*, pp. 190-91. ]

His language could not have been any plainer. Because of this, we can say without question that what parades itself as modern Calvinism is a far cry from Calvin in the area of the doctrine of the covenant. In fact, it is the opposite of Calvinism, covenantally speaking. It is one long denial of the ethical cause-and-effect relationship in history that Calvin insisted on, again and again.

Modern Calvinism is generally either amillennial or premillennial. It denies that covenant-keepers in history will receive sufficient external blessings of God to overcome the efforts of covenant-breakers to suppress the gospel and the civilization that springs from it. Similarly, they deny that God's negative sanctions in history will weaken the covenant-breakers sufficiently to make their resistance to the gospel successful in the long run. In short, they deny Calvin's view of the covenant.

Calvin was a postmillennialist. He may not have been one with the consistency that Bahnsen alleges,<sup>13</sup> but there was definitely a postmillennial strain to his theology, although he sometimes made amillennial-like statements.<sup>14</sup> The Puritans adopted his post-

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13. Greg L. Bahnsen, “The *Prima Facie* Acceptability of Postmillennialism,” *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, 111 (Winter 1976-77), pp. 69-76.

14. Gary North, “The Economic Thought of Luther and Calvin,” *ibid.*, II (Winter 1975), pp. 102-6.

millennial views, while continental Calvinism after 1700 adopted his **amillennial** elements. But there is no doubt that his views on God's sanctions in history tended toward postmillennialism: the inescapable triumph of covenant-breakers in history, before Jesus returns in final judgment.

## **Meredith Kline vs. John Calvin**

Calvinist theologian Meredith Kline, a consistent amillennialist, is an equally consistent opponent of Calvin's ethics-based social theory. He has fully understood the inescapable connection between Calvin's **covenantal** view of historical sanctions and **postmillennialism**. He therefore rejects Calvin's **covenantal** view of historical sanctions. He adopts a view of ethical cause and effect in history which is essentially random – “largely unpredictable,” in his words – in the name of the doctrine of common grace. “And meanwhile it [the common grace order] must run its course within the uncertainties of the mutually conditioning principles of common grace and common curse, prosperity and adversity being experienced in a manner largely unpredictable because of the inscrutable sovereignty of the divine will that dispenses them in mysterious ways.”<sup>15</sup> Compare this view with Calvin's view of **non-random, providential history**

Thus you see how we may possess and enjoy the blessings of God, which are set forth for us in His law. And when we see that our Lord interlaces these blessings with many afflictions and corrections, as though He had cursed us, we must realize that His purpose in this is to provoke us day by day to repentance, and to keep us from falling asleep in this present world. We know that our pleasures make us drunken and unmindful of God unless He constrains us by pricking and spurring us forward. Thus you see how things that at first sight seemed contraries agree very well in fact. And in that respect does Moses say that these blessings shall light upon us and encompass us round about, as if he had said that we will

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15. Meredith G. Kline, “Comments on an Old-New Error,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, XLI (Fall 1978), p. 184.

always be certain of God's favor – so certain of it that it shall never fail us if we serve Him.

For the word “encompass,” or to light upon us [“overtake,” Dt. 28:2], indicates that the grace of God is not fleeting, *as though it fell at random* and as though we would not be able to catch it. No, says Moses, you shall be surrounded or encompassed with it. And therefore let us assure ourselves that the goodness of our God shall never fail us, so that we can never come to that goodness unless He draw us to Himself. And since we are subject to so many infirmities and vices, He, by bearing with us, shows us that we must have recourse to His free goodness for the forgiveness of our sins by the reconciliation that He has made in our Lord Jesus Christ, and that we, in straining ourselves to do His will, shall perceive that the goodness of God does not cease to be free to us, without owing us anything at all. [Covenant *Enforced*, pp. 93-94, emphasis added. ]

To see the world in terms of ethically (covenantally) unpredictable events necessarily involves the adoption of either a deistic view of the world – a wound-up clock — or else the rule of chaos. Calvin understood this, and he rejected both views, but especially Deism's view:

You see then how we must understand that all the afflictions and miseries we endure in this world are indeed strokes from God's own hand. And along these lines it is said by the prophet Amos, “Is there any evil in the city that God has not done?” (Amos 3:6). That is to say, “Can there happen either war or pestilence or famine or disease or poverty or any other calamity whatsoever, that does not come to you from God? Wretched people, are you so foolish and **beastish** as to imagine that God, who created the world, has left it at random and has no care to watch over His creatures, or to bestow on them what He thinks fitting for them? Does He not sometimes show His goodness and sometimes make them feel Him as judge, punishing the sins of men, and mak-

ing men know what His office is? Do you think that He lives idle in heaven, and that He does not set forth His power, or that the world is not guided and governed by His providence?"

*[Covenant Enforced, p. 140.]*

Calvin's view of history was that the basis of history's unfolding is neither gnostic (hidden principles) nor Deistic (mathematical-mechanical principles). He did not think that we should despair of finding God's hand in history, either because of its supposedly hidden nature or because of its replacement by scientific laws. I wish that we could say as much for Kline's view.

Calvin also did not adopt an interpretation of Genesis 1 that denied its historicity – seven literal days – even though such a reworked interpretation (the “literary framework hypothesis”) makes it appear that Genesis 1 can be conformed to pagan evolutionary scientists' very different timetable. He clearly recognized that scientific cause and effect is not valid substitute for God's revealed causes and effects.

Now finally it is here declared to us that the course of nature, as we call it, is nothing but the disposition of the will of God, and that He bears such rule over both heaven and earth and over rain and fair weather, that He changes them at His own pleasure, and yet does not send either without cause. If there were a permanent order in nature, it would seem unto us that God never meddled with it; we would grant that He made the world, but we would then say that He does not govern it. We would think thus: “What? When the springtime comes, we see that the rest of the year goes on in the same course as did the year before. It is always the same.” But in fact we see one winter is longer, and another winter later, and another earlier yet longer; we see one winter rainy, and another dry; we see abundance of snow in one year, and another year none at all; one year is hot, another cold. Now, does not such inequality make it manifest that God is at work? For the sun performs his office in one year as well as in the next, and always keeps his just course better than the best clocks in the world.

How, then, do we get such variety of weather? It is God's doing, to call us to Himself.

Truly the philosophers (and scientists) do seek out causes as they term them. There is such a meeting of stars (say they), and this proceeds of such and such a conjunction. But where does all this come from, if not from the hand of God? We must always resort to the first cause. And indeed, such men are nothing more than beasts if they will not admit that!

Yet it is not sufficient to know that God guides all His creatures, and that He holds them bridled in order to make them bow, just as a horseman makes his horse to turn on this hand and on that, to stop, and to run. It is not enough to know that God looses and binds and sends such changes as He likes; rather, we must also understand that God does nothing without reasons. For if we say that God governs the world and do not know why He plagues us, we shall quickly be inclined to murmur against Him. And meanwhile we shall not profit under His chastisements and corrections, but continue dulled in our sins. So then, let us mark that in shutting up the heavens that it yields no rain, and in drying up the earth as if it were iron, He is showing us our sins and that He is our judge. This is what we have to bear in mind concerning the course of nature, as it is here declared to us. [*Covenant Enforced*, pp. 143-44. ]

Calvin paid more attention to the biblical concept of providence than he did to science. I wish that we could say as much for Kline.<sup>16</sup> On the question of historical cause and effect, to speak of Meredith Kline's Calvinism makes about as much sense as speaking of Calvin Klein's Calvinism.

## Conclusion

The *Covenant Enforced* could have been called The *Forgotten Calvin*. John Calvin's theonomic legacy has been neglected by his spiritual heirs ever since

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16. At least some of those of us who were attending Westminster Theological Seminary in the early 1960's recognized that Edward J. Young's *Studies in Genesis 1* was a rejection of Kline's view, although Young politely used Nic Ridderbos as a stalking horse. It is sad that Young's son Davis did not follow in his father's footsteps.

the restoration of King Charles 11 in 1660. English and colonial American Puritanism became increasingly pietistic after the Restoration. Continental Calvinism also became pietistic. Both wings abandoned Calvin's respect for Old Testament law. Both wings abandoned Calvin's view of ethical cause and effect. Both wings abandoned his postmillennialism. <sup>17</sup>

There were ambivalent aspects of Calvin's thought. Like his postmillennialism, Calvin's theonomy was not rigorous. He did make statements against the legalistic, communistic Anabaptists that made him appear to be hostile to the Mosaic law, leading Rushdoony to criticize him for having taught "heretical nonsense."<sup>18</sup> We need to recognize that the social and theological issues of the sixteenth century were less developed than today's discussions in many respects, despite the far greater intellectual rigor of the theological discussions of that era compared with ours. But this should not blind us to the obvious: *John Calvin's covenant theology was in fact biblically covenantal in structure.* He believed in 1) the sovereignty of a Creator God, 2) a God who reveals Himself in history, 3) a God who lays down fixed laws, 4) a God who brings predictable historical sanctions in terms of these laws, and 5) a God who (probably) raises up His people to victory in history. He did not adopt the six loci of seventeenth-century Protestant scholasticism, with its narrow definition of theology. His Calvinism was not narrowly theological; it was cultural in the broadest sense.

In this sense, Calvin was a Christian Reconstructionist. His is a legacy worth recovering or suppressing, depending on one's agenda. (When you find a Calvinist who appears to be involved in suppression, ask yourself this question: "What is his agenda?" Then seek the answer. )

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17. The postmillennialism of Jonathan Edwards and His followers was not theonomic; it was pietistic and emotional rather than cultural. Gary North, *Political Polytheism: The Myth of Pluralism* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), ch. 7, subsection on "The Great Awakening." The postmillennialism of the Princeton tradition was also unconnected with considerations of biblical law. See Gary North, *Dominion and Common Grace: The Biblical Basis of Progress* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1987), Appendix.

18. R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Nutley, New Jersey: Craig Press, 1973), p. 9.

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