

A Luxuriant Demonology?

The Idea of a Benevolent God in Calvinist Orthodoxy

By David Golding

Many of the earliest American colonists wrestled with an inquietude born of their Calvinism. From the start, they built and expanded communities with a zeal for building up God's glory and for fighting off satanic influences. This enthusiasm prompted rhetoric which has continuously sustained a reputation as full of talk about depraved and degenerate humans and a draconian and militant God. American society in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries especially lambasted Calvinist notions of human corruption and the sovereignty of God. Unitarian leader William Ellery Channing decried Calvinist orthodoxy in 1846 for systematically encouraging Christians to adopt immoral assumptions of human agency. He believed that this system argued in behalf of "unspeakable cruelty" by teaching that God "brings us into life wholly depraved." In Channing's mind, creating persons completely depraved and then punishing them for such depravity made God merciless and despotic, a notion he could not reconcile with his observations of human virtue.¹ The sardonic writer, H. L. Mencken, labeled American Calvinism a "luxuriant demonology" in which "even God himself [is] transformed into a superior sort of devil ever wary and wholly merciless." Puritanism was particularly bellicose and unbearingly burdensome "upon the exchange of ideas in the United States."²

Such criticisms continue to the present. Dave Hunt recently argued that Calvinism misrepresents God enough that Calvinists in turn worship a god of their own making. His book *What Love Is This? Calvinism's Misrepresentation*

of God recycles old descriptions all too common in nineteenth-century stereotypes: Calvin's God is a monster who does violence to the human will, humans are puppets, and an unjust notion of divine favoritism replaces grace.³ Like Hunt, other anti-Calvinist authors continue in the same vein, with such titles as "The Other Side of Calvinism" and "The Five Points of Calvinism: Weighted and Found Wanting."⁴ Such a strain of uneasiness, criticism, and sometimes vitriol over the outgrowth of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination has remained fairly constant in American religious history and social discourse.

The duration of the debate over whether Calvinist orthodoxy adopts the idea of a benevolent God certainly attests to the complexities and nuance of what Calvin advanced as a systematic theology. Nevertheless, Calvin himself—straightforwardly and repeatedly—insisted that correct faith always acknowledges the fundamentality of God's benevolence. Jonathan Edwards (a preeminent theologian of American origin and a noted Calvinist), though famous for his revivalist sermons that spoke of a terrifying God who casts sinners to hell at whim, followed in Calvin's foundational doctrine and even brought innovations to Calvinist theology in support of a benevolent God theory. These two pillars of Calvinist orthodoxy—Calvin and Edwards—articulated in writing what many lay Calvinists also believed. In many ways, it never occurred to the average Calvinist whether or not God was benevolent; the real question addressed whether God had chosen one or another for salvation.

"Calvinism" as a category problematizes the debate and clouds many analyses of Calvinist orthodoxy, in particular when judging Calvinist theism. One author commented, "Calvinism is an indispensable term, but it is one which Calvin himself rejected and considered odious."⁵ Interpretation of Calvinist doctrine depends on whether one adheres to a strict qualification of "Calvinism" as written or expressed theology, or to "Calvinism" as a broader classification for a social or religious movement. Precisely because of the inconsistencies in the public discourse due to loose conceptions of what Calvinism represents, one scholar suggests a neologism as a possible aid in interpreting Calvinism, what he calls a "misponent." By distinguishing between opponents, proponents, and misponents (those that misunderstand Calvinism and thus place themselves at odds with their own misplaced

conceptions of Calvinist belief), Charles Partee maintains that commentary surrounding the debate is better understood. Misponents typically force a system into Calvin's writings, mistaking systematic thinking for Western protocols of taxonomy in the work of theology and philosophy. To Partee and others, Calvin's *Institutes* "represents a single, searching, and systematic mind at work, but not a system."⁶ Writing theology with highly technical qualifications and presuppositions was perhaps one of Calvin's chief virtues: his *Institutes* and Biblical commentaries represent some of the most voluminous Christian writings from a single theologian. Calvin's literature, though a thoroughgoing and systematic expression of his mind, even so and at once lends itself to the errors of "misposition."

Not only did misponents confuse American public interpretations of Calvinism. The slave question prior to the Civil War introduced intra-theological debate that split many Calvinists on the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. Some of the first abolitionists came out of Calvinist tradition. Elijah P. Lovejoy, a Presbyterian clergyman who was assassinated for his abolitionism, used the doctrine of human depravity as an argument against slavery: all were depraved, and God alone was master. As tensions worsened and civil war broke out, theological debate surrounding humanism, the nature of humankind, and consequently, the nature of God formed a part of the polarizations between abolitionists and anti-abolitionists.⁷ These factors, coupled with the rhetoric of misponents, contributed to a public consciousness unfavorable to traditional Calvinistic orthodoxy. Restricting the discourse to the writings of authentic Calvinist thinkers helps to focus our attention on what Calvinism incorporates as orthodox or typical belief.

John Calvin begins the *Institutes* by exploring the doctrine of the nature of God. Correctly understanding certain preliminaries about God's nature is paramount for the believer, and Calvin does not hesitate to reiterate this fact throughout his work. Knowledge of God must come from the word of God, the Bible, because "[it is] not for us to attempt with bold curiosity to penetrate to the investigation of [God's] essence" (I.5.9). God becomes the holy other in Calvin's schema, and he therefore rejects any speculating or philosophizing about God's essence and attributes apart from the Bible. Calvin finds another pivotal doctrine that places immeasurable distance between humankind and God in the opening chapters of Genesis. God creates paradise and places

Adam there, however, Adam falls to temptation and transgresses. As a consequence, Adam is an enemy to God and God consigns him to death and mortal misery. By the “revolt of Adam the whole human race was delivered to the curse, and degenerated from its original condition” (I.2.1). Ever after, humans conceive progeny in sin:

They bring their condemnation with them from their mother’s womb, being liable to punishment, not for the sin of another, but for their own. For, although they have not as yet produced the fruits of their iniquity, yet they have the seed enclosed in themselves; nay, their whole nature is, as it were, a seed of sin; therefore, it cannot but be odious and abominable to God. (II.1.8.)

The sovereignty of God and the inherent depravity of human beings make it blasphemy for an individual to presume to approach God of their own ability in the slightest. “We dare not attach anything physical to God or subject him to our senses, as if he could be comprehended by our dull heads or be represented in any form,” Calvin advises.⁸

Humankind’s innate corruption disqualifies individuals from judiciously and rightly understanding the will of God. When Calvin advances his theory of predestination, then as now, some point out an inherent injustice in his portrayal of divine election. Only “foolish men” think it unjust for God to be angry. “They first ask,” he writes, “by what right the Lord becomes angry at his creatures who have not provoked him by any previous offense; for to devote to destruction whomever he pleases is more like the caprice of a tyrant than the lawful sentence of a judge” (III.23.2). For Calvin, God justly consigns men and women to hell because they, not he, are wicked, and those that bicker with this point are themselves wicked, too. Calvin always falls back on the sovereign and incomprehensible qualities of God’s will when pressed on the reasonable sense of injustice in his doctrine of predestination. He is content to acknowledge his own fallibility and rests the case on biblical truth emanating from God’s grace that cannot be refuted. Any apparent inconsistencies in what the Bible says or in what one may judge in the predetermined events of life does not make God any less sovereign or gracious, they only reflect our own misperceptions of reality, our own selfishness, or our own wickedness. “When, therefore, one asks why God has so done,” he writes, “we must reply: because he has willed it” (III.23.2).

Calvin dedicates hundreds of pages to the implications and technicalities of his view of the human condition and God's grace. In summary, Calvin advocates several qualities in God as fundamental to right faith. God is always just; he has a right to cast souls to hell; his will fully determines everything; his only inclination is benevolence. "Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us," which faith only comes by virtue of grace to the elect (III.2.7). God cannot be anything other than benevolent; his mercy is perfected and godly, not of a human dimension. His knowledge allows for identifying the wicked and those that are beyond hope, which he observes on a time scale completely foreign to human individuals. What may appear un-benevolent in God's judgment only reflects a pathetic attempt to judge God with human reason. Knowing of humankind's depravity, the sovereignty of God, and predestination ought to exhilarate persons who struggle with sin—the struggle indicates the likelihood that one has been elected to grace. Calvin parted ways with Luther not on the doctrine of predestination (both believed in it), but because Calvin thought this exhilaration ought to be freely discussed (Luther felt learning of predestination was for mature Christians alone).⁹ Benevolence in God was a given, and to a certain extent, a necessary feature of Calvin's thought on predestination.

Jonathan Edwards took up similar themes in his own theological work in the Calvinist tradition. Known for his "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" sermon, Edwards sought the repentance and revival of Americans during the Great Awakening of the 1740s. "There is nothing that keeps wicked men, at any moment, out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God," he said. Hellfire, damnation, wrath: such await humankind unless God wills otherwise. Despite such harsh depictions of God in relation to humans, Edwards innovated Calvinist notions and doctrine of God's benevolence; in his mind, an angry God and a benevolent God were not mutually exclusive. By intertwining scholastic metaphysics of the Trinity with Calvinism, Edwards produced a nuanced and supportive view of the angry-benevolent God.

E. Brooks Holifield outlined Edwards' concepts here in excellent form:

It seemed rational that all knowledge, even God's knowledge, was "by idea." God must have an "idea of Himself," since otherwise God would lack self-awareness. But God's ideas were perfect, and "an absolutely

perfect idea of a thing is the very thing,” for it lacked nothing that was in the thing. It followed that God’s idea of Himself was God. The divine self-reflection begot the “substantial image of God,” the Son. And because the Father and the Son necessarily delighted in one another, the begetting of the Son issued in a perfect act of mutual love—or Spirit—which was distinct from both the Father and the Son. Edwards believed that his doctrine of an “exact equality” of the Spirit with the Father and Son improved on earlier Reformed theology that discussed the Spirit mainly as the agent who applied Christ’s benefits.

God created the world so that this divine excellency could be expressed, known, and admired. Here was the Calvinist conviction, expressed now in an aesthetic form, that the aim of creation was the glory of God.... The ultimate end of creation was not human happiness but the diffusion of God’s “excellent fulness” for its own sake.... In the diffusion of the divine beauty ... God became his own end.¹⁰

Edwards’ reformulation of trinitarian metaphysics postulated a universe that exists as an outgrowth of God’s benevolence in motion; to separate benevolence from God would be to dismantle the fabric of existence.

Edwards extended the boundaries of human reason previously fastened by Calvin when he wrote his *Miscellanies*. The believer could not only encounter through God’s grace an accurate knowledge of God’s benevolence but *comprehend* the mystery. Only a *benevolent* person could reason accurately about God, and by rectifying one’s life and acquiring the attributes of holiness, one could begin to methodically approach God. In this way, Edwards’ variation on Calvin’s human depravity doctrine took on Methodist overtones.¹¹

Various commentators of Calvinist orthodoxy also expressed similar beliefs in a benevolent God. Charles Hodge in 1851 distinguished justice from benevolence, and pointed to the quality of justice as the source of God’s anger. Justice, “an essential attribute of God,” necessarily seeks the punishment of sin “not merely as a means of moral impression, but for its own sake.”¹² Nathaniel McFetridge supported this summarized view of Calvinism: “[Calvinism] emphasized the guilt and moral impotence of man, exalts the justice and sovereignty of God, and refers salvation absolutely to the undeserved favor and new creative energy of God.”¹³ In the lives of Calvinists, God’s mercy never wavered, though one could struggle to find evidence on account of one’s

inconsistency with the Holy Spirit or one's sins. One example comes through the journal of Samuel Sewall, a Puritan in the early Massachusetts Bay Colony. Historian David Hall says of Sewall's journal that "God was merciful. He answered many prayers and fasts with favoring providences: the rains came, the sick were restored to health, the dying soared on wings to heaven. Whatever the specific situation, fasting and prayer functioned to transmute anxiety into assurance. They were acts that Sewall performed 'incessantly' to give himself security."¹⁴

Calvinist orthodoxy held a nuanced concept of God's benevolence. On the surface, Calvin's portrayal of God paints a bleak picture, with a kind of tyrannical behemoth casting souls into hell at whim. Misunderstandings of culture, social upheaval (like the slave question and Civil War) in some instances, and Calvin's own methodology that introduced ground for debate, all made for cursory and surface understanding of Calvinistic technicalities. Jonathan Edwards perpetuated this bleak picture in his Great Awakening sermons and literature, especially when trying to illicit a conversion response in his listeners and congregations. Nevertheless, Calvinist theologians consistently viewed God as sovereign, as above human beings in all characteristics and generally incomprehensible on a human scale. Calvinists appear to be motivated by democratic principles, as evidenced in Calvin's Geneva experiment and later American Calvinist political and religious expressions. Opposition to earthly and human tyranny grew out of their conception of God's grace toward the elect. God as merciful and gracious was a given for Calvinists, and any attempt to judge his will as un-benevolent reflects human error and not any injustice on God's part.

¹ William Ellery Channing in Edwin S. Gaustad and Mark A. Noll, ed., *A Documentary History of Religion in America: To 1877*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 259.

² H. L. Mencken, "Puritanism as a Literary Force" in *A Book of Prefaces*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1918), 197, 201–2.

³ Dave Hunt, *What Love Is This? Calvinism's Misrepresentation of God* (Sister, Ore.: Loyal Publishing, 2002).

⁴ Laurence Vance, *The Other Side of Calvinism*, rev. ed. (Pensacola, Fl.: Vance Publications, 1999); George Bryson, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Weighted and Found Wanting* (Costa Mesa, CA: Word for Today, 1996).

⁵ Menna Prestwich, *International Calvinism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 2.

- ⁶ Charles Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 29.
- ⁷ Edwin S. Gaustad and Leigh Schmidt, *The Religious History of America*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 184–89.
- ⁸ John Calvin in David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 60.
- ⁹ Steinmetz, 172–83; Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 178.
- ¹⁰ E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 113–14.
- ¹¹ Jonathan Edwards, *Miscellanies*, 626, 268.
- ¹² Charles Hodge in Gaustad, *Documentary History*, 414.
- ¹³ Nathaniel S. McFetridge, *Calvinism in History* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1882), 13.
- ¹⁴ David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 234.