

# MULLING OVER MULLER: CALVIN AND AMYRAUT

Observations

on

Richard J. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*  
(Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2012)

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In a passing criticism of my *Calvinus*, Dr Richard Muller dismisses as 'unfortunate' my claim that Amyraut's soteriology may be identified as 'authentic Calvinism'.<sup>1</sup> Yet even he has admitted that 'Calvin's teaching was ... capable of being cited with significant effect by Moïse Amyraut against his Reformed opponents'.<sup>2</sup> So why is my claim so 'unfortunate'? Others seem to agree with me. According to Dr F. P. van Stam, at a time when Bezan ultra-orthodoxy had replaced Calvin's balanced biblicism, 'Amyraut...revealed the attraction which the theology of Calvin held for him. He demonstrated this preference in an array of books, in the process proving his familiarity with the writings of this reformer. ... Amyraut rediscovered Calvin, as it were, and was perhaps the Calvin-expert of the day. In any case, Amyraut fell under the spell of Calvin's theology'.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, historian Philip Benedict - who incorrectly imagines the Canons of the Synod of Dort (1618-19) to represent a *higher* orthodoxy than is the case - recognises Amyraut's position in France accurately when he says that 'the theologians of the Academy of Saumur ... consciously opposed Beza and appealed to Calvin instead. ... In effect they reversed the steps that had been taken in the passage from Calvin to Calvinism'.<sup>4</sup>

Back to Dr Muller, no one can fail to be impressed by the author's erudition. His output never fails to blitz the reader with his syntax and sources. In fact, one requires at least Master's degree standard to grasp the relentless argumentation of today's premier Reformed scholar. His ratiocination hardly fails to intimidate those tempted to challenge his conclusions. However, in the course of baffling his readers with unremitting polysyllabic pronouncements, one wonders if Dr Muller is in danger of over-stating his case.

In his numerous articles and books over more than two decades, the author has sprung surprises on the unwary 'Orthodox Calvinist' reader, not least by denying that Amyraldianism should be dismissed as a 'heresy'.<sup>5</sup> We also learn that the terminology of 'limited and unlimited atonement is 'confusing' and should be 'set aside'.<sup>6</sup> However, as this book makes clear, he is equally determined to establish a decisive 'disconnect' between Calvin and Amyraut. In his conclusion, we are

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<sup>1</sup> R. A. Muller, 'Beyond Hypothetical Universalism: Moïse Amyraut (1596-1664) on Faith, Reason and Ethics' in Martin I. Klauber (ed), *The Theology of the French Reformed Churches from Henri IV to the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: reformation Heritage Books (2014), 198.

<sup>2</sup> *The Unaccommodated Calvin* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), 62.

<sup>3</sup> *The Controversy over the Theology of Saumur* (Amsterdam & Maarssen: APA-Holland University Press, 1988), 431.

<sup>4</sup> *The Faith and Fortunes of France's Huguenots, 1600-85* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 227.

<sup>5</sup> R. A. Muller, 'Beyond Hypothetical Universalism, 216.

<sup>6</sup> Richard J. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2012), 279.

told in no uncertain terms why this has to be:

Over against Amyraut, Calvin categorically denied two wills in God and categorically denied the universal grace that fuelled Amyraut's version of hypothetical universalism.<sup>7</sup>

In view of the author's concern that we should permit 'the theologians of the era to speak in their own language',<sup>8</sup> one has to question the validity of this statement. Indeed, for one who engages in rigorous Latinate semantics, is Dr Muller using the English 'categorical' correctly? In short, is it true that Calvin denied 'absolutely', 'without qualification' and 'expressly' two wills in God? And did the reformer deny 'absolutely', 'without qualification' and 'expressly' the idea of universal grace that Amyraut found in his writings?

On the first issue, let us recall (divested of his Latin) what Calvin wrote:

Seeing that in His Word He calls all alike to salvation, and this is the object of preaching, that all should take refuge in His faith and protection, it is right to say that He wishes all to gather to Him. Now the nature of the Word shows us that here there is no description of the secret counsel of God - just His wishes. Certainly those whom He wishes effectively to gather, He draws inwardly by His Spirit, and calls them not merely by man's outward voice. **If anyone objects that it is absurd to split God's will, I answer that this is exactly our belief, that His will is one and undivided: but because our minds cannot plumb the profound depths of His secret election to suit our infirmity, the will of God is set before us as double.**<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, Calvin affirmed elsewhere that while God's will 'is one and undivided, to us it appears manifold, because, from the feebleness of our intellect, we cannot comprehend how, though in a different manner, he wills and wills not the very same thing'.<sup>10</sup>

Surely, Calvin is careful to qualify his denial of 'two wills in God'. There's no categorical denial here, but a statement about the distinct aspects of God's single yet 'two-fold' will.

What is equally clear, after all Muller's criticism of Amyraut, is that the Saumur professor maintained the same view as Calvin. In his 'heresy' trial during the Synod of Alençon in 1637, Amyraut was careful state that

... though they [Amyraut and Testard] considered [the divine] Decree as diverse, yet it was formed in God in one and the self-same moment, without any succession of thought, or order of priority and posteriority. The will of this most supreme and incomprehensible Lord, being but one only eternal act in him; so that could we but conceive of things as they be in him from all eternity, we should comprehend these [absolute and conditional] decrees of God by one only act of our understanding, as in

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 278-9.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 279.

<sup>9</sup> *Comment on Matthew 23: 37* (emphasis mine).

<sup>10</sup> *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I. xviii. 3, tr. Henry Beveridge (London: James Clarke & Co., 1962), i. 202.

truth they be but one only act of his eternal and unchangeable will.<sup>11</sup>

On the second issue, is there no evidence for the idea of 'universal grace' that Amyraut found in Calvin's writings? Apart from Muller's rather unpersuasive attempt to drive a wedge between Calvin and Amyraut over Ezekiel 18: 23,<sup>12</sup> Calvin seems quite comfortable with the 'common/special grace' distinction. Neither can Amyraut be charged with foisting onto Calvin the idea of a 'double mercy (or grace)' in the will of God:

Today also, God invites all men alike to salvation through the Gospel, but the world's ingratitude makes only a few enjoy the grace, which is set out equally for all. While the joy, then, has been confined to a small number, in respect of God, it is called universal.<sup>13</sup>

Paul makes grace common to all men, not because it in fact extends to all, but because it is offered to all. Although Christ suffered for the sins of the world, and is offered by the goodness of God without distinction to all men, yet not all receive him.<sup>14</sup>

For instance, let me think of myself in this way:...that God has bestowed grace upon the human race (in general) but that he has shown his grace to me (in particular), with the result that I am especially obligated to him.<sup>15</sup>

Let us fall down before the face of our good God...that it may please Him to grant His grace, not only to us, but also to all people and nations of the earth, bringing back all poor ignorant souls from the miserable bondage of error and darkness, to the right way of salvation...<sup>16</sup>

Christ was so ordained for the salvation of the whole world that He might save those who are given to Him by the Father, that He might be their life whose head He is, and that He might receive those into participation of His benefits whom God by His gratuitous good pleasure adopted as heirs for Himself. Which of these things can be denied?...Even those opposed to me will concede that the universality of the grace of Christ is not better judged than from the preaching of the Gospel. But the solution of the difficulty lies in seeing how the doctrine of the Gospel offers salvation to all. That it is salvific for all I do not deny. But the question is whether the Lord in His counsel here destines salvation equally for all. All are equally called to penitence and faith; the same mediator is set forth for all to reconcile them to the Father - so much is evident.<sup>17</sup>

It is not enough to regard Christ as having died for the salvation of the world; each man must claim the effect and possession of this grace for himself personally.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> John Quick, *Synodicon in Gallia Reformata* (London: Thomas Parkhurst and Jonathan Robinson, 1692), ii. 355.

<sup>12</sup> See 'A Tale of Two Wills? Calvin, Amyraut, and Du Moulin on Ezekiel 18: 23' in *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 107ff.

<sup>13</sup> *Comment*, Luke 2: 10.

<sup>14</sup> *Comment*, Romans 5: 18.

<sup>15</sup> *Sermons on 2 Samuel*, p. 357.

<sup>16</sup> *Sermons on Job*, p. 751 (Calvin's usual end of sermon prayer).

<sup>17</sup> *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, p. 102-3.

<sup>18</sup> *Comment*, Galatians 2: 20.

In this brief selection of statements, does the reformer deny 'absolutely', 'without qualification' and 'expressly' the idea of universal grace that Amyraut found in his writings? Hardly. Indeed, and when ultra-precise Dr Muller concludes rather vaguely (and dubiously from John Owen's perspective!) that 'Calvin...assumed that Christ's death paid the price for all sin and that all who believe the gospel will be saved',<sup>19</sup> one wonders what all the fuss is about.

***Postscript:***

As for the issue of the 'double-aspect' divine will itself, the concept may be illustrated from metallurgy. The process known as 'case-hardening' permits the strengthening of cylindrical low-carbon steel rods by exposing the outer surface to extra carbon infusion. This produces a mild, low-carbon steel component with a high-carbon, heat-treatable outer layer or ring. Such a rod consists of a 'double' metallurgical crystalline structure. It is undeniably 'one' component but with 'two' distinguishable features.

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<sup>19</sup> *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 279.