

I Love Your Law: A Sermon about law and grace

Ps. 119: 97-104

Jer. 31:27-34

2 Tim. 3:14-4:5

Luke 3 18:1-8



There is a common theme to the readings from the Psalm, the Old Testament reading, and the epistle this morning. It is a theme that would be tempting to overlook. One could preach on the gospel, which is about prayer. The epistle is the classic text for the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. The Jeremiah passage is about another central theme in Christian theology, the new covenant. Better to stick with one of these.

However, I am a glutton for punishment. And the passage that keeps nagging me is the Psalm. In the revised lectionary reading for this morning, the selection begins at verse 97. "Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day." Verse 104 concludes, "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way." One could

choose almost any passage from Psalm 119 and find the same theme: Verse 72 states “The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces.” In verse 127 we read, “Therefore I love your commandments above gold, above all fine gold.” In case, you have missed it, the Psalmist loves God’s law the way that other people love money or mouth-watering desserts. If he were writing today, he might say, “I love your law more than a double shot Cafe Latte.”

And the Psalmist does not love the law because it shows him how sinful he is, how far below the standards of the law he has fallen, and how he needs to throw himself on God’s mercy. No. He loves the law because he keeps it, and he intends to keep on keeping it: “Take away from me scorn and contempt, for I have kept your testimonies.” (v. 22) And again, “Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes; and I will keep it to the end.” (v. 33) Anyone who has read Psalm 119 all the way through notices that it is one long meditation on God’s law, how the author delights in it, and how he intends to keep it.

If we think that we can get away from all this talk about law by turning to the New Testament gospel of grace, we are simply mistaken. The epistle reading from 2 Timothy is the classic passage for the doctrine of biblical inspiration. We read here that “All Scripture is inspired by God” (or as the English Standard Version puts it, “breathed out”). (2 Tim 3:16) Theologians have spilled much theological ink about what *theopneustos*, translated “inspired,” means, whether inspiration applies to original autographs only, or whether it is a process that includes compilation and redaction, whether words are inspired or concepts, to what extent the biblical authors maintained their individual personalities. The arguments go on and on. What is often missing from these discussions, however, is the central point – what the text says about the purpose of inspiration. Paul begins the section with an exhortation: “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed.”¹ Then follows the

statement about inspiration, immediately followed by the purpose of these inspired writings. The Scriptures, we are told, “make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.” Because they are God-breathed, they are “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”

When 2 Timothy was written, the New Testament canon did not yet exist. So when Paul writes to Timothy about the Scriptures here, he is talking about the Old Testament, and he is saying the same thing that the Psalmist says about the law. It makes us wise. It trains us in righteousness. It equips us for good works. That, my friends, is law. Paul is, in essence, giving us a short New Testament version of the same thing we find in Psalm 119. Paul might just as well have written, like the Psalmist, “I love your law!”

As twenty-first century people, we tend not to know what to do with this kind of language. Our problem is not just that the Psalm is long and repetitive. Or that Paul tells us that the Scriptures are “profitable for training in righteousness.” It is that we do not know what to make of this central theme: “I love your law!” The problem is that we do not really love God’s law. Not really. We might respect the law, or feel that we must do our best to obey it. But how can we think of it as enjoyable and sweet? Usually we think of the law as commanding us to do the thing we have to do, but we would rather not do—to tell the truth when lying might save us from embarrassment, to be faithful to our spouse when we find ourselves alone in a hotel in a strange city, and we meet a very interesting stranger, to point out to the store clerk that she gave us too much change. The law is about something we might have to endure, but not something we enjoy.

Why don’t we love the law? I am going to suggest three reasons for our discomfort with divine law, and I would suggest there is a dialectical progression to these three reasons. One leads

logically to the next. I am going to provide three suggestions as to how we might overcome the obstacles set by these reasons. With each reason, I am going to suggest a theologian who provides an appropriate solution. I am going to show how each solution echoes material found in one or the other of this morning's lectionary readings. And I am going to conclude by making some suggestions about how we might come to love God's law.

So the first reason that we twenty-first century people, find the law uncomfortable is that modern and post-modern people value their freedom. Autonomy and freedom from external authority has been the driving theme of modern Western self-identity. Law, especially divine law, is an imposition. To deny us our freedom is to deny us that which makes us truly human—to be all that we can be. Moreover, divine law strikes us as arbitrary and irrational. True post-modernist authenticity demands that we ourselves decide what laws will rule our lives, based on what makes sense to us and brings us fulfillment.

Modern and post-modern people see a disconnection between divine law and human flourishing. I would suggest that, historically, the reasons for that stretch back to a divorce between divine law and what theologians call teleology, between law and creation, between law and human happiness, and between law and God as our Chief Good, that happened some time in the late Middle Ages.² In one of her essays, Dorothy Sayers uses the example of making an omelet to suggest two kinds of law.³ There are arbitrary laws, such as insisting that anyone who makes an omelet must wear a top hat while doing so. And then there are laws that are inherent to the nature of what is being done, such as the law that states that anyone who makes an omelet must break eggs.

When we lose the relation between divine law and the order of creation, and God's nature as the Chief Good, and our own good

as being found in conformity to God's intentions for our happiness, we end up thinking that God's law falls into the top hat wearing category rather than the egg breaking category. Then we will view God's law as a case of the biggest bully on the block pushing his weight around. However, it makes a big difference if we understand there to be an inherent connection between divine law and divine Goodness, between law and creation, and human happiness. Divine law is, then, like the law about breaking eggs when we make omelets.

Thomas Aquinas would be the theologian who best illustrates this principle that Divine Law is about sharing God's goodness with creation (*Summa Theologiae*, "Treatise on Law," 1.2.90-108).⁴ Divine law is about an ordered universe, and about what creatures need to do to get along in that universe. For human beings, divine law means that God has created us for friendship with himself, and we can only be happy when we obey God's law because God's law is just the way things are. God is not a bully; God is more like an artist.

We find a similar notion of law in Psalm 119. There is a connection between God's law and God's goodness: "I know, O LORD, that your rules are righteous, and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me. Let your steadfast love comfort me. (75-76) There is a connection between God's law and the order of creation: "Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens. Your faithfulness endures for all generations; you have established the earth, and it stands fast." And, finally, there is a connection between God's law and human happiness: "The LORD is my portion; I promise to keep your words. I entreat your favor with all my heart; be gracious to me according to your promise." (57-58)

In the Old Testament Wisdom literature, God's wisdom is expressed both in creation and in law. The New Testament writers re-interpret these Wisdom passages and apply them to the pre-existent Jesus, the Word of God, through whom God has

created, and then redeemed the universe (Col. 1:15; 2:3; John 1; Heb. 1). It is in the incarnate Christ that we see God's wisdom come among us, and Jesus' teaching in passages like the Sermon on the Mount is God's wisdom come among us. (Matt. 5-7) He is the new Moses. So Jesus expresses God's law as for our good, and that is just the way things are. Egg breaking, not top hats.

The second reason that divine law makes us uncomfortable is that we are post-Reformation Christians. We live on the other side of the great divide between Law and Gospel. Law, we know, always condemns. Law reminds us that we are guilty. Although there is a radical Lutheran reading of the law that sometimes seems simply to dismiss law, Reformation Christians are not alone here. I have both studied at and taught theology in Roman Catholic settings, and in completely secular settings; I have graded countless undergraduate papers written not only by Protestants, but by Roman Catholics, as well as unbelievers, that have informed me that Judaism is bad because it is a religion based on law and good works.

So this is our second problem. If an arbitrary divine law is an affront to our autonomy, a perfect divine law is an affront to our dignity. A God who is wholly Good is not much better than a God who is an omnipotent bully, if we don't measure up to his perfect standards. We know that we fail to keep the law, and, the law reminds us continually of that failure. A God who threatens and judges us is a God we resent.

Here I suggest that we turn to Phillip Melanchthon, Martin Luther's disciple. In the "Apology for the Augsburg Confession," Melanchthon suggests that we cannot love God if we do not first see God as a lovable object. The human heart cannot love a God whom it perceives as angry and threatening or giving commands of the law. God can only be loved if we first see that God is merciful, that God loves us, and is for us. Only then can we experience the gratitude that enables us to respond to God's love with love of our own. If we

understand God's command as an expression of his love, we can respond with love in kind.

A helpful illustration for this is a scene from one of my favorite movies, *The Princess Bride*. The narrator tells us that nothing gives the heroine Buttercup more pleasure than ordering around the farm boy Westley. Westley always responds with the three words, "As you wish." One day, Buttercup is amazed to discover that when Westley says, "As you wish," he means "I love you." And then she is even amazed to discover that she truly loves him back. Then follows the scene where Buttercup says to Westley, "Farm boy, fetch me that pitcher." Westley responds, "As you wish," hands her the pitcher, they look deeply into each others eyes . . . and the next scene fades to their two silhouettes in front of the setting sunset. Whether Buttercup and Westley are quite correct in their Law/Gospel hermeneutic, the key point is clear. We do not hesitate to respond to the orders of the one we love with those three words: "As you wish."

The passage from Jeremiah addresses this second problem. We cannot respond to the commands of a God before whom we have guilt, because we can only fear that which condemns us. God speaks to that fear in Jeremiah, "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, the covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. . . For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (Jer. 31: 31-32, 34) A few verses earlier God says, "As I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring harm, so I will watch over them to build and to plant." (v.28) The husband whose command Israel has disobeyed by breaking the covenant has dealt with Israel's unfaithfulness with love, by building up, not destroying, by forgiveness, and forgetting of wrong

deeds, with a new covenant.

This language of new covenant is why we call the New Testament the New Testament. The salvation to which Paul refers in 2 Timothy, about which the inspired Scriptures make us wise, is the "salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." Paul summarizes this salvation earlier in 2 Timothy. It is the "gospel of the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our own works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." (2 Tim 1:8-10)

We now have the solution to our second problem, our guilt before the law that condemns us. The God whose law we have violated has shown himself a lovable object. In Christ he has redeemed us; through his death, not because of our good works, but because he loves us. He has abolished our death.

This leads us to our third problem. The law may be for our good. The God who has forgiven us in Christ may have shown himself a lovable object by taking our sin upon himself, but we are still left with a problem that makes us unable to respond to the law with a simple "As you wish."

That is the problem that Augustine addresses in *The Confessions*. Augustine begins *The Confessions* with the famous prayer that acknowledges that we are made for God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in God. And throughout *The Confessions*, it appears that Augustine's restless heart is searching for the God in whom alone he can rest. At the end of Augustine's journey, however, it turns out that Augustine has not been searching for God, but running from him.⁵ Our problem is that our restless hearts are corrupt. We resist God. We flee from God. Before we can rest in the God for whom our hearts are made, before we can see God as a lovable object who

has forgiven our sins, our hearts must change. As long as we are sinful, we will continue to perceive the law as a command to wear top hats when we make omelets. We do what we love. As long as we love sin, we will hate the law, and we will not see God as a lovable object. The problem is not with the law; it is with us. We need to change. It is not just that we need forgiveness, but that we need deliverance from ourselves.

Jeremiah addresses not only our need for forgiveness, but also our need to become someone else: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts." And when that happens, says Jeremiah, we will no longer need to teach one another, "Know the Lord," for we shall all know him (Jer. 31:33-34).

Biblical scholars sometimes debate these days whether Romans 10:4 should be translated as "Christ is the *end* of the law, for righteousness to everyone who believes," or, instead, "Christ is the *goal* of the law." Theologically, I would say that both need to be said. Christ is the end of the law in the sense that our salvation is not based on our moral behavior or good works or our ability to obey the law, whether that means in terms of its ceremonial precepts, or rather of its primary moral teaching, to love God with all our heart, and our neighbors as ourselves. We have failed to do these things. At the same time, Christ is the goal of the law in that the righteousness and moral goodness that God's law asks of us has been fulfilled in Christ, and he intends to fulfill it in us, in our own lives.

It is important to remember that Paul does not end his discussion of law in Romans with 7:25, "I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin." Romans 7 is not Paul's description of the "normal Christian life." It is rather the diagnosis of the abnormal life we all live when we resist God's law because we are enslaved to sin.

Paul's prescription follows in the next two verses of Romans 8. After stating in Romans 8:1 that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, Paul continues, "For the *law of the Spirit* has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." (2-4). Thomas Aquinas asked whether the gospel is a new law, and he responded that it is, but that the new law is not really law because it is the love of the Holy Spirit dwelling in our hearts that enables us to fulfill God's law by loving God with all our heart and our neighbors as ourselves. (*Summa Theologiae* 1.2.106)

Paul's discussion of law in Romans 1-7 is followed in Romans 8 by his discussion of new life in Christ, and the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit who not only forgives us our sin, but frees us from its power in our lives. Because the Holy Spirit dwells within us; we are united to the risen Christ, and we become new creatures. As through faith and baptism we are united to Christ, we share in Christ's death and resurrection, we die to sin, and we are raised to walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:1-14). We become new creatures, our hearts are changed (2 Cor. 5:17). We do what we love, and we now love the law of the God who first loved us, gave his Son to die and live for us, and now gives us his Holy Spirit, to share the Son's resurrection life with us. So Christians do indeed love God's law – not as a source of self-righteousness, certainly not as a task for self-improvement, but as our loving response to the God who has shown his love for us in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and now, through his indwelling Spirit, frees us from the slavery of sin, so that we can become slaves to righteousness (Rom. 6:15-18).

Now before I get carried away, I need to qualify myself. There is still the Augustinian dilemma. We are fooling ourselves if

we believe that we can simply snap our fingers, and undo all of that self-centeredness that loves sin, and so does not love God. God's law is for our good, but learning to love God's law does not happen overnight. Jesus was not jesting when he suggested that following him meant that we must take up our cross. (Mark 8: 34-35) Part of that cross means dying to the self that hates God's law, and crucifixion is a slow and painful death. In this world, we are pilgrims, and we need to learn over and over again that God is a lovable object. As we are reminded constantly here at Trinity School for Ministry, we live in the eschatological tension between the "already and the not yet."

But as we keep our eyes on Jesus, and not on ourselves, and not on the pride or shame that comes with trying to keep the law, or failing to keep it, we really do come to know God as that lovable object. The Holy Spirit really does dwell within us, and, as we are united to the risen Christ, Jesus lives his resurrection life in us; through that resurrection life, we are caught up into the eternal love of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit that is the Trinity itself, and our lives produce the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22) This is the triune love that has created the world, has shared this love with us, and has made us friends with God (John 15:15). When that love commands, we more and more find ourselves responding, "As you wish." Amen.

1 Most critical biblical scholars question whether the apostle Paul actually wrote the pastoral epistles. Theologically, it does not matter whether 2 Timothy is the actual work of Paul's own hands, of an amanuensis writing in his name, of a Pauline disciple writing in his spirit, or is a compilation that contains original Pauline material. "Paul" here refers to "canonical Paul." If Paul actually wrote it, so much the better.

2 I would lay the blame here at the feet of William of Ockham, but John Duns Scotus prepared the way.

3 Dorothy Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (NY: Harper & Row, 1979), 15-16.

4 Or, if you're Anglican, Richard Hooker.

5 I owe this reading of *The Confessions* to Rusty Reno from an article that I think appeared in *First Things*.

Determinism? It's a heresy, why?

I think I must be in a cranky mood today. At any rate, the following is also something I originally put on a certain (NeoCalvinist) Anglican(?) blog in response to the following:

The man born blind in John 9 was not an accident of biology. He was born blind so that the Lord Jesus could give him sight. Joseph was not sold into slavery by accident. He was sold into slavery by the express intended purpose of God to redeem many. The Assyrians did not destroy Israel on their own accord. They came as the arm of God to punish. The Lord Jesus was not crucified by fortunate happenstance. The men who delivered Him up and killed him did so by divine decree. There are no random molecules in the universe. Everything is governed by the decretive will of God. Nothing happens except that He has decreed it from the beginning. No death, no misfortune, no suffering, no sorrow, no misery is beyond his reach, or outside the scope of His will. That is why we can say that everything has purpose in this life, and that everything will eventually reveal the glory of God. We do not have to understand. It is sufficient that God understands.

Providence means that God is capable of bringing good out of evil. But God does not decree or create evil. Evil is entirely the result of the rebellion of creatures, which God permits, but does not cause. Certainly "No death, no misfortune, no suffering, no sorrow, no misery is beyond his reach, or outside the scope of His will." It does not at all follow that "Nothing happens except that He has decreed it from the beginning."

God does not decree sin. God hates sin, and his Son died to redeem us from that sin which God hates. To state that God decrees sin is to place on God the responsibility for that which he hates, and condemns, and the effects of which his Son died to alleviate.

The relation between God and creatures is absolutely unique, and not one that any creature can even imagine because all of our knowledge takes place within the finite contingent structures of created reality. But God is not part of that reality at all. We literally cannot imagine the relation between God and creatures, and determinism is as much a case of such an idolatrous attempt to imagine the connection, as are attempts that imply that (as my interlocutor put it), God "struggles with a creation in which random suffering is exactly that – random, devoid of purpose." Both positions are equally "nonsense."

The vast majority of Christians throughout history have not found it necessary to posit determinism in order to assert God's providence and control of his creatures. Indeed, God's sovereignty is more honored if we recognize that God creates creatures in such a manner as to give them a genuine but contingent created integrity. God is quite capable of working through genuine created causality to bring about his intentions. He does not have to be a determinist to do so. God does not create evil, and he does not decree sin. God does not create or cause that which he hates.

Of course, God is quite capable of using the evil that he does not cause, and which he hates, to accomplish his purposes. Of course, God is capable of working through the sins of Joseph's brothers or Pharaoh or Pilate to accomplish his purposes. But God did not determine that Joseph's brothers betray him or that Pharaoh would enslave the Hebrews, or that Pilate would crucify Jesus. To suggest such is close to blasphemy.

I realize such discussions are interminable, and generally raise more heat than light. Rather than enter into endless discussion, I point readers to my philosophical and theological betters. One might read Augustine. But certainly Thomas Aquinas and Richard Hooker have thought through these things as carefully as have Calvin and his successors.

The language of Scripture is phenomenal when it comes to describing God's relation to creatures, as it is phenomenal when it describes things like the rising of the sun, scientific realities, or God's body parts ("The arm of the Lord is not shortened . . ."). Scripture nowhere provides detailed metaphysical discussion of such questions as the relation between primary and secondary causality, or, how God works through created contingent events in such a manner as to provide not only for his sovereignty but their integrity as creatures. To assume that it does is to make a category mistake, like those Vatican officials who chided Galileo for contradicting the clear teaching of Scripture about the rising of the sun.

There has been in the history of the church reams of paper and gallons of ink spent on discussing questions relating to how divine sovereignty relates to created contingencies. Every metaphysical issue—incarnation, Trinity, creation, grace, sacraments, etc.—is a variation. If it were simply a matter of quoting a few passages of scripture, the issue would have been settled long ago.

Most Calvinists have no idea of just how rich and complex the

discussion has been. Needless to say, most Christians have not been determinists. The ecumenically orthodox consensus of the church is that:

1) God is the supreme Good, in whom there can be no evil—not because whatever is, is good, or because something becomes good merely because God wills it, but because God's nature is inherently good, and God cannot will or create evil.

2) In discussing the relation between Creator and creature, not only divine aseity and sovereignty, but also created contingency and genuine created reality, must be preserved. God creates and works through created contingencies in such a manner that they retain their integrity as created contingencies.

3) Sin exists, but God is in no way the cause of it. Sin is completely contrary to God's will. God is in no way the cause of the sinful actions of creatures. God permitted, but did not cause, the fall into sin.

4) God is sovereign over his creation. God is present to each creature and each created event in that he gives existence to whatever is. If God were to cease creating and sustaining the universe for even a moment, it would collapse back into nothingness.

5) Although God is not the cause of evil, God is capable of bringing good out of evil, and does so. If God could not bring good out of evil, he would not be sovereign.

The above would be agreed to by Orthodox, by Catholics, including Augustinians, Thomists, Scotists, Dominicans, Molinists, Suarezians, by the vast majority of Protestants, including orthodox Lutherans, the vast majority of Anglicans (e.g., Richard Hooker, John Donne, Joseph Butler), Methodists, and, I think, even most Reformed today, for example, the late Thomas F. Torrance, who wrote a huge amount of material on how the patristic doctrine of creation made a radical change in how Christians viewed the world as compared to paganism, and how this has significant implications for the relation between

theology and modern science.

The one exception in the entire tradition would be traditionalist Calvinists. Luther himself was a determinist, but orthodox Lutheranism did not follow him in this. There is debate as to whether Calvin was a determinist, or rather, whether determinism was introduced by Beza. In my opinion, a careful reading of the texts indicates that Beza's supralapsarianism was simply a logical drawing out of the implications of Calvin's own understanding of providence.

At the same time, there is no inherent connection between a doctrine of Augustinian predestination and determinism. Augustine was the first advocate of unconditional predestination, but he rejected determinism until his dying day. Thomas Aquinas embraced Augustine's doctrine of predestination, as have many of his followers, but he emphatically rejected determinism because it would make God responsible for sin.

My own thinking on such matters has been greatly influenced by thinkers like Torrance, but also Thomists like Robert Sokolowski, Norris Clarke, Thomas Weinandy, and numerous others. I would also recommend the writings of Anglicans Austin Farrer and Eric Mascall. And, of course, there is the huge discussion in the entire tradition of the church, beginning with the church fathers. Calvinist determinism is just a tributary, and rather a small creek, in the huge river of Christian metaphysics.

I would add to the above that I grant to Calvinist determinism about the same amount of credibility I give to the Orthodox Essence/Energies distinction, to the Non-Chalcedonian Christologies of Copts or Armenians, to Lutheran ubiquity, Roman Catholic transubstantiation, Scotist possible worlds metaphysics, Molinist middle knowledge, or Openness of God theism. Like the above, it is a metaphysical theory that has been embraced by a sizable group of Christians in an attempt

to address certain theological problems raised by Scripture, and, in particular, the way in which particular divine and created realities relate. At the same time, each one of these views is a bit of metaphysical speculation that has been embraced by no other Christian body outside the particular body of advocates. As such, while the theories might be right, one tends to think that their continued adherence within the particular group in which they have arisen has more to do with inertia, and preservation of group identity than with well thought out solutions to the problems raised.

Finally, I am aware that Calvinists not only insist that God decrees everything, but that God is not thereby the author of evil, and I am aware of the various ways in which they try to reconcile these two claims. To explain why they can't be reconciled would require a rather lengthy syllogistic argument outlining various distinctions between necessity, possibility, impossibility, contingency, and various kinds of necessity. However, in short, if God brings things about necessarily, then they are necessary, and cannot not have been. If God brings things about contingently, then they are not necessary, and might not have been. If God decrees all events in such a manner that the fall or sin cannot not have been, then the fall and sin are necessary, and God is the author of evil. This is true even if the necessity of the fall or sin are contingent on human actions, which, in themselves, are voluntary, but nonetheless determined in their outcome by the divine decree. If those human choices are determined by the divine decree in such a manner that they cannot not have been, then God is the author of evil.

However, that God is the author of evil is a heresy not only contrary to the plain teaching of Scripture, but also condemned universally by the Christian tradition—with the single exception of Calvinist determinism.

Hooker was a Calvinist . . . Right?

On a certain Neo-Calvinist, but (ostensibly) Anglican blog, someone recently posted the following:

At least one scholar to my knowledge has pointed out that Richard Hooker was more Calvinist than the Puritans

Say Whattt???!!!

My response:

To have actually read Hooker is to know otherwise. Hooker's position could be described as Reformed Catholic. With the continental Reformers, he affirmed the primacy and sufficiency of Scripture, as well as justification by faith. He also endorsed Calvin's distinction between justification and sanctification.

However, Hooker's understanding of law—which is central to his entire project—depends on Thomas Aquinas, not the Reformers. Hooker always speaks positively on law, and there are no parallels to the Reformers' (especially Luther's) negative assessment.

Hooker affirms a high doctrine of eucharistic presence, although he declines to speculate as to the "how." Of course, Calvin himself affirmed a doctrine of presence through the Holy Spirit—which echoes the Orthodox rather than Roman position. (Neither was anything like a Zwinglian.)

Hooker's doctrine of sanctification has parallels to the Orthodox doctrine of deification, and the Roman Catholic

doctrine of infused grace. Indeed, he uses the term infusion in reference to sanctification. He interprets sanctification in terms of (ontological) union with Christ's ascended humanity, and draws a close connection between sanctification and partaking of the body of Christ through participation in the Lord's Supper.

As do Jewel and Cranmer, Hooker endorses baptismal regeneration, and draws parallels between Christ's action and presence in the Eucharist and in baptism. (Of course, Hooker insists—as does Aquinas—that if faith does not follow infant baptism, that the sacrament is ineffective.)

While Hooker does not unchurch those Reformation churches that lack apostolic succession, he argues that episcopacy can be traced to the apostles, and that it is the preferred form of church polity, intended by God and preserved by providence.

In defending Article 17 (on predestination), Hooker affirms (contrary to Calvinism) unlimited atonement, and resistible grace. He rejects negative predestination (reprobation) as well as monergism, and affirms that the elect are those whom God knows to respond to the gospel with faith and persevere, i.e., he is an "Arminian."

As do Cranmer and Jewel, Hooker argues that the Anglican position is in continuity with the patristic church, and that medieval Roman Catholicism departed from the catholicity of the early church. As do Cranmer and Jewel, he appeals repeatedly to the church fathers to confirm his position. While affirming the sufficiency of Scripture, he interprets Scripture within the hermeneutics of the Rule of Faith—as do Cranmer and Jewel. While Cranmer, Jewel, and Hooker are often critical of Rome, they are so because they insist that Rome is NO LONGER catholic, and the C of E has returned to the catholic faith of the patristic church! To the extent that Rome has preserved practices dropped by the continental Reformers, e.g., liturgical worship and episcopacy, Hooker

insists that Rome is to be preferred.

While Hooker does not regard the deuterocanonical/apocryphal books as canon, he insists (contrary to Puritans) that they are edifying and to be read as part of the church's worship.

If Hooker is more Calvinist than the Puritans, then Metropolitan Jonah might well have to rethink his position about Calvinism.

At the same time, I certainly agree that people should actually read the Parker Society volumes as well as Hooker's Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, and his Discourse on Justification. They are full of surprises, not least of which that certain extreme Protestant readers of the Anglican Reformers are simply mistaken.