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CALVIN ON INFANT SALVATION

BY CHARLES EUGENE EDWARDS, D.D.

BEN AVON, PENNSYLVANIA

Since John Calvin never taught that deceased infants are eternally lost, how say some among us that he did so teach? Possibly, for the same reason that when a minister in more recent times has publicly denounced the repulsive saying, "There are infants in hell not a span long": forthwith some hearers have declared that they heard him preach this very obnoxious doctrine! Calvin's doctrine was discussed with sufficient thoroughness by Dr. Charles W. Shields in the *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* of October, 1890 (p. 634) with a convincing array of quotations—some references needing correction, perhaps for printer's errors.

Most of the quotations in this article are from the splendid series of the Calvin Translation Society, which deserves a warm tribute. It is a surprise to see in the *Brittanica's* article on Calvin (13th Ed., Bibliography) for this Society, "48 vols. Edinburgh, 1843-1855", when we can count fifty-one of these English volumes, mostly commentaries. When will American Calvinists surpass the work of those patrons, some from the nobility, by raising funds for Calvinistic theological literature in English and many foreign languages? A fund of a million dollars would be a bagatelle for such a worldwide need, perhaps not enough for the group of the Slav languages alone; and one year's income from it, not more than enough to print in English three thousand sets of Turretin's *Theology*, the first textbook in Princeton and other seminaries, that Genevan theologian who has been ranked next to Calvin. Do we have not because we ask not? The first denomination, Board, Committee, or institution that obtains such a unique endowment, will have a commanding position, for all other Calvinistic organizations will be inclined to beg for its aid. And observe how lavish in publications are the enemies of the Reformed faith!

Arminius said that Calvin excels beyond comparison in the interpretation of Scripture. Hooker said that the "perfectest divines were judged they which were skilfulest in

Calvin's writings". In addressing the 9th General Council of the World's Presbyterian Alliance at a celebration in New York of the 400th anniversary of Calvin's birth, Dr. B. B. Warfield pointed out that Calvin marked an epoch in the history of the doctrine of the Trinity; that he was the first to present the work of Christ as Prophet, Priest and King; his impulse also was epoch-making in Christian ethics; and he was preeminently the theologian of the Holy Spirit. Also that he was distinctively the Biblical theologian of his age; where scriptural declarations failed him, there he stopped short. American Calvinists should render to Calvin what is due to him, a fair interpretation of his writings, comparing some debatable phrase with his most frequent and clearest statements.

Dr. Shields says (Op. Cit. p. 644) "It is safe to say that no modern divine, not even Dr. Charles Hodge or Dr. Shedd, has taught infant salvation more clearly and strongly than John Calvin. Not only in his *Institutes* and *Commentaries*, but in his polemical writings against Romanists, Lutherans, Anabaptists and infidels, he has presented the subject from every possible point of view and with the greatest variety of illustration." He says (p. 645), "As to the *reason* of infant salvation, Calvin teaches plainly that infants are salvable as infants and because of their infancy. As to the *mode* of infant salvation, Calvin teaches most clearly and fully that infants are redeemed by Christ from the guilt of original sin and cleansed from its inherent taint by the Holy Spirit, not as adults, but by inscrutable methods, even before the possibility of faith and good works on their part, and without the opportunity of preaching and baptism on our part."

In his *Institutes*, Book IV, Chapter XVI (p. 350, Vol. III), Calvin for about thirty-five pages offers arguments for the baptism of children. Of all his works, the *Institutes* are the most widely disseminated and famous, with a marvelous history and influence, with "the roll of an oration".

In this discussion of infant baptism (p. 355-7), Calvin says, "Our Lord Jesus Christ, to give an example from which the world might learn that he had come to enlarge rather than to limit the grace of the Father, kindly takes

the little children in his arms, and rebukes his disciples for attempting to prevent them from coming (Matt. XIX. 13), because they were keeping those to whom the kingdom of heaven belonged away from him, through whom alone there is access to heaven.—If the kingdom of heaven is theirs, why should they be denied the sign by which access, as it were, is opened to the Church, that being admitted into it they may be enrolled among the heirs of the heavenly kingdom? How unjust were we to drive away those whom Christ invites to himself, to spoil those whom he adorns with his gifts, to exclude those whom he spontaneously admits. But if we insist on discussing the difference between our Savior's act and baptism, in how much higher esteem shall we hold baptism (by which we testify that infants are included in the divine covenant) than the taking up, embracing, laying hands on children, and praying over them, acts by which Christ, when present, declares both that they are his, and are sanctified by him?—When he orders that little children shall be allowed to come to him, nothing is plainer than that mere infancy is meant. Lest this should seem absurd, he adds, 'Of such is the kingdom of heaven'. But if infants must necessarily be comprehended, the expression, 'of such', clearly shows that infants themselves, and those like them, are intended." Also (p. 367), "God gave, in the case of John the Baptist, whom he sanctified from his mother's womb, (Luke I. 15) a proof of what he might do in others. They gain nothing by the quibble to which they here resort, viz., that this was only once done, and, therefore, it does not forthwith follow that the Lord always acts thus with infants. That is not the mode in which we reason. Our only object is to show, that they unjustly and malignantly confine the power of God within limits, within which it cannot be confined". Calvin does not believe that the text (John III. 5) "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God", refers to baptism (Op. Cit. p. 375) "To be born again of water, and of the Spirit", he says, "is nothing else than to receive that power of the Spirit, which has the same effect on the soul that water has on the body.—This, moreover, plainly explodes the fiction of those who consign all the unbaptized to eternal

death.—(p. 376) By assenting to their fiction, we should condemn all, without exception, whom any accident may have prevented from procuring baptism, how much soever they may have been endued with the faith by which Christ himself is possessed. Moreover, baptism being, as they hold, necessary to salvation, they, in denying it to infants, consign them all to eternal death. Let them now consider what kind of agreement they have with the words of Christ, who says, that 'of such is the kingdom of heaven'. And though we were to concede everything to them, in regard to the meaning of this passage, they will extract nothing from it, until they have previously overthrown the doctrine which we have already established concerning the regeneration of infants."—(p. 380) "Every one whom Christ blesses is exempted from the curse of Adam, and the wrath of God. Therefore, seeing it is certain that infants are blessed by him, it follows that they are freed from death." (p. 383) "Paul teaches that the ordinary way in which God calls his elect, and brings them to the faith, is by raising up faithful teachers, and thus stretching out his hand to them by their ministry and labors. Who will presume from this to give the law to God, and say that he may not ingraft infants into Christ by some other secret method?" (p. 384), "What I have said again and again I now repeat, that, for regenerating us, doctrine is an incorruptible seed, if indeed we are fit to perceive it; but when, from nonage, we are incapable of being taught, God takes his own methods of regenerating. p. 385 "Wherefore, if we would not maliciously obscure the kindness of God, let us present to him our infants, to whom he has assigned a place among his friends and family, that is, the members of the Church".

The Calvin Translation Society published the commentaries covering most of the Old Testament, excepting the books from Judges to Job, inclusive; and all of the New Testament, except Revelation and the two chapters, II. and III. John. Quotations from these volumes, also from the three books of *Tracts* or selected treatises, are not so accessible to many readers as the more widely published *Institutes*. In the second of the three volumes on the Har-

mony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke, (pp. 389-391) Calvin discusses the three passages where Christ blesses the children. He says, "This narrative is highly useful; for it shows that Christ receives not only those who, moved by holy desire and faith, freely approach to him, but those who are not yet of age to know how much they need his grace. Those *little children* have not yet any understanding to desire his blessing; but when they are presented to him, he gently and kindly receives them, and dedicates them to the Father by a solemn act of blessing.—But the disciples rebuked them.—They reckon it unworthy of his character to receive *children* and their error wanted not plausibility; for what has the highest Prophet and Son of God to do with *infants*? But hence we learn, that they who judge of Christ according to the feeling of their flesh are unfair judges; for they constantly deprive him of his peculiar excellencies.—*Suffer children*. He declares that he wishes to receive *children*; and at length, *taking them in his arms*, he not only embraces, but *blesses* them by the *laying on of hands*; from which we infer that his grace is extended even to those who are of that age. And no wonder; for since the whole race of Adam is shut up under the sentence of death, all from the least even to the greatest must perish, except those who are rescued by the only Redeemer. To exclude from the grace of redemption those who are of that age would be too cruel.—*Infants* are renewed by the Spirit of God, according to the capacity of their age, till that power which was concealed within them grows by degrees, and becomes fully manifest at the proper time. Again, when they argue that there is no other way in which we are reconciled to God, and become heirs of adoption than by faith, we admit this as to adults, but with respect to *infants*, this passage demonstrates it to be false. Certainly, the *laying on of hands* was not a trifling or empty sign, and the prayers of Christ were not idly wasted in air. But he could not present the infants solemnly to God without giving them purity. And for what did he pray for them, but that they might be received into the number of the children of God? Hence it follows that they were renewed by the Spirit to the hope of salvation."

In his commentary on Rom. V. 17 (pp. 210-11) Calvin says, "Christ—is communicated to infants in a peculiar way; for they have by covenant the right of adoption, by which they pass over unto a participation of Christ. Of the children of the godly I speak, to whom the promise of grace is addressed; for others are by no means exempted from the common lot".

Dr. Shields says (Op. cit. p. 648) "Calvin elsewhere teaches that uncovenanted infants, neither for the sin of Adam, nor for the sin of their own parents, can be excluded from the election of God and the redemption of Christ; in other words, he distinguishes between infants that are saved by covenanted mercy and infants that are saved by uncovenanted". Also, (p. 647) "If the salvation of all infants be not formally taught in the works of Calvin, neither is it so taught in the Bible itself. It was not his wont to dogmatize beyond the written Word.—He raises no barriers against the universal extent of infant salvation".

Dr. Shedd says (in his useful book of about 170 pages, which deserves republication, *Calvinism: Pure and Mixed*. A Defence of the Westminster Standards, p. 114): "Though the elder Calvinist did not, like the later, say that infant salvation is classical, not individual, he yet prepared the way for it, by distinguishing between infants that are saved by 'covenanted' mercy and those that are saved by 'uncovenanted'."

In his answer to the calumnies of Westphal (*Tracts*, Vol. II, p. 319) Calvin says, "We give hopes that infants may obtain salvation without baptism, because we hold, that baptism, instead of regenerating or saving them, only seals the salvation of which they were previously partakers". And in his "Antidote to the Sixth Session of the Council of Trent" (*Tracts* Vol. III. p. 109-10), "The salvation of infants is included in the promise in which God declares to believers that he will be a God to them and to their seed. In this way he declared, that those deriving descent from Abraham were born to him (Gen. XVII. 7). In virtue of this promise they are admitted to baptism, because they are considered members of the Church." And further, in the

same volume, in his treatise, with its appendix, on *The True Method of Giving Peace, and of Reforming the Church* (p. 275), "The offspring of believers is born holy, because their children, while yet in the womb, before they breathe the vital air, are included in the covenant of eternal life. Nor, indeed, are they admitted into the Church by baptism on any other ground than that they belonged to the body of Christ before they were born." See also, pp. 347-8, and pp. 350-1:—"By the doctrine of the gospel, those who were formerly aliens are ingrafted into the Church.—In regard to the young, as God comprehends them also under the covenant, they are no longer reputed aliens, but are heirs of grace, as we learn from Peter's discourse".—"As to the children of Papists, the answer is easy.—They cease not to be the children of saints, though it be necessary to go farther back for their origin. God does not stop at the first degree, but diffuses the promise of life to a thousand generations. Paul does not inquire what kind of father each had, but recognizes all as holy who had sprung from Abraham and the other patriarchs" (also, pp. 354-5).

By a gross misrepresentation, the Westminster Shorter Catechism might be made to teach that all infants are doomed to everlasting perdition. It says, "All mankind by their fall lost communion with God, are under his wrath and curse, and so made liable to all the miseries of this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell for ever" (Q. 19). If not another word is permitted, this statement, of course, includes every infant. It is only when the gospel is added that we may exclaim, "Hallelujah! What a Savior!" So too, there are paragraphs where Calvin makes no allusion to salvation, where he contemplates the judgments of God upon Sodom or Babylon, where children are involved in calamities with their parents; judgments temporal, which but for the grace of God, would result in judgments eternal. Dr. Shields furnished a series of such quotations, as he says, "the worst for our purpose". We take the risk of abbreviating some of them.

Commenting on Gen. XIX. 24, Calvin says (Vol. I, p. 513): "As it is often asked, from this passage, 'What had

infants done, to deserve to be swallowed up in the same destruction with their parents?' the solution of the question is easy; namely, that the human race is in the hand of God, so that he may devote whom he will to destruction, and may follow whom he will with his mercy". The same allusion occurs in Calvin's comment on Ezek. XVIII. 20 (Vol. II. p. 218:—If any one asks by what right they perished, first they were sons of Adam and so were accursed, and then God wished to punish the Sodomites through their offspring, and he could do so deservedly". See also, on XVIII. 1-4, p. 218:—"As far as concerns the Prophet's expression, the dispute concerning infants is vain and out of place, since the Prophet only wished to refute that impious perverseness, as I have said, so that the people should no longer charge God with cruelty." Babylon is another illustration, Is. XIV. 21 (Vol. I. pp. 452-4): "God does not punish any innocent person; and this passage ought not to be understood as if the punishment due to ancestors were transferred by God to children who in other respects deserved no such punishment; for the guilt of the children is connected with the guilt of the fathers.—The children of the Babylonians who were slain were not innocent, for here the cause is assigned, 'that they may not fill the earth with cities.'" But compare his remark on Nineveh, Jonah IV. 10, 11 (*Twelve Minor Prophets*, Vol. III. p. 144): "God intended to show, that though there was the justest reason for destroying entirely the whole city, there were yet other reasons which justified the suspension of so dreadful a vengeance; for many infants were there who had not, by their own transgression, deserved such a destruction".

Dr. Shields says (p. 635) that Calvin never uses the phrase "reprobate infants"; nor even the phrase "elect infants" as carrying with it a possible implication of non-elect infants. The scriptural, Calvinistic doctrine of reprobation or preterition is stated in the Westminster Confession (III. 7):—"The rest of mankind, God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass

by, and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice." Dr. Shedd, in his *Calvinism: Pure and Mixed*, explains and defends this doctrine. He shows that it is impossible to retain the doctrine of the sovereignty of God in election unless his sovereignty in preterition is upheld also. He says (p. 43), "What is preterition? It is God's passing by a sinner in the bestowment of *regenerating*, not of common grace. All men are blessed with common grace.—(p. 55) It is said that the doctrine of preterition is not and cannot be preached. It does not require technical terms and syllogistical reasoning in order to preach a doctrine. Who so preaches the doctrine of the trinity, or of regeneration, or of original sin, or of vicarious atonement, or of endless punishment? The doctrine of preterition is preached whenever the herald proclaims to the transgressor of God's law that sin is guilt and not misfortune; that the criminal has no claim upon the pardoning power for pardon; that the Supreme Judge might justly inflict upon him the penalty which his sin deserves; that his soul is helplessly dependent upon the optional, unobliged decision of his Maker and Savior; and that it is nothing but God's special grace in regeneration that makes him to differ from others who go down to perdition.—(p. 110). There never was an age of the world when men more needed than now to be reminded that they are resisting the common grace of God, and rejecting his universal offer of mercy, and that in so doing they run the great hazard of God's *preterition*; of being passed by in the bestowment of *regenerating* grace."

Moreover, in countless hymnals, denominational and undenominational, we see the doctrine of preterition.

"Pass me not, O gracious Father,
 Sinful though my heart may be;
 Thou might'st pass me, but the rather
 Let thy mercy light on me.

"Pass me not, O gentle Savior,
 Hear my humble cry;
 While on others thou art calling,
 Do not pass me by".

Verily, millions, ever increasing, are singing preterition.

Again hear Dr. Shields (Op. cit. p. 636:—"Calvin nowhere connects the fate of infants directly with the secret decree of reprobation or formulates it as a doctrine.—Not a hint of their reprobation can be traced in his elaborate discussions. And the reason is plain. It is because he allows himself no data for such a tenet. He distinguishes repeatedly between "the *supreme* or *remote* cause" of reprobation in the secret will of God and its "*mediate* and *proximate* cause" in the actual sin of the transgressor; and since the latter is wanting in the case of infants, he could not assume the former without invading unrevealed mysteries. There is no exception to this in his often quoted or rather misquoted statement of the *decretum horrible* (*Inst.* Book III. Chap. XXIII. 7. Vol. II: p. 568) "I again ask how it is, that the fall of Adam, but for the remedy, had involved so many nations with their infant children in eternal death, unless that it so seemed to God. The decree, I admit, is dreadful". It is plain that Calvin is here referring to the general condemnation of the whole race of mankind, and not to any special reprobation of infants, much less is he excluding them, as a class, from the great remedy" *

And hear again from Dr. Shedd's *Calvinism*, p. 35-6:—"The Divine sovereignty in the salvation of sinners when properly viewed, inspires a solemn and religious awe before that Infinite Being who, in the language of Elihu, 'giveth not account of any of his matters'" (*Job* 33:13). This is the meaning of Calvin's "*decretum quidem horribile fateor.*" Those who quote this in disparagement of the doctrine of predestination, suppose that he used *horribile* in the modern vulgar sense of "hateful" and "repulsive", as when persons speak of a "horrible stench", or an "awful noise". Of course he could not have intended to pour contempt upon what he believed to be a truth of revelation, by employing the word in this popular and somewhat slangy signification. Calvin was a highly educated classical scholar, and his Latin is as accurate and elegant as any since the days of Cicero

* *Involveret* (involved), not *involvit* (involves). *Absque remedio* (but for the remedy), not *sine remedio* (without remedy).

and Virgil. In the classical writers *horror* sometimes signifies awe and veneration. Lucretius, for example, describes the worship of the gods as originating in the "*mortalibus insitus horror*" (De Natura v. 1164). The feeling of reverential fear is expressed in Jacob's words, "How *dreadful* is this place!" (Gen. 28:17), In this sense of the word, the doctrine of predestination might be called "a dreadful decree", without disparaging it in the least".

Dr. Shields says that Calvin only alludes to infant perdition in his controversial writings as a mere absurdity to be charged upon an opponent, and repudiated as no less blasphemous than revolting. Since these passages have been strangely misquoted and perverted, it may be worth while to examine them in detail. He then quotes from a treatise not included in the volumes of the Calvin Translation Society, on *The Eternal Predestination of God*, Amsterdam Edition, pages 610-11. This volume is in the Library of the Pittsburgh-Xenia Theological Seminary, and its condition shows evidence of usage in the days of "auld lang syne." "A Romanist theologian, Albert Pighius, who denied the doctrine of inherited guilt, had represented Christ in the last judgment as sentencing men to eternal punishment, merely because of their actual offenses against himself.—Calvin quickly reduces such reasoning to absurdity, by applying it to the case of young children not old enough to have performed or omitted works of Christian charity for which they might be assigned to the right or left hand of the Judge." Indeed, by a theological strategem, he puts his opponent in a beautiful dilemma. Let us hear Calvin:—"If Pighius holds that original sin is not sufficient to damn men, and that the secret counsel of God is not to be admitted, what will he do with infant children who, before they reached an age at which they can give any such specimens (of good or evil works), are snatched from this life? When the condition of birth and death was alike to infants who died in Sodom and in Jerusalem, and there was no difference in their works, why will Christ at the last day, with some standing at his right hand, separate others at his left? Who will not adore the wonderful judgment of God, whereby it

comes to pass that some are born at Jerusalem, whence soon they pass to a better life, while Sodom, the entrance to the lower regions, receives others at their birth? Moreover, I by no means deny that as Christ awards the meed of righteousness to the elect, so the reprobate will then suffer for their impiety and their crimes." Says Dr. Shields, "It will be seen that Calvin is here stating hypothetically, for the sake of argument, a difficulty which is involved in the doctrine of his adversary: "What will *he* do with infants, if the conditions of birth and death are alike in Sodom and Jerusalem? That no such difficulty pressed his own doctrine, may be shown by several considerations." These are conclusive, but we omit that discussion. (p. 639-40).

Then Dr. Shields (p. 641) adds:—"But the most conclusive passage is one which has been most frequently misapplied and interpreted. It occurs in the polemic treatise on the *Secret Providence of God in Reply to the Calumnies of Castalio*." Torn from its place as a fragmentary extract, it has been made to attribute to Calvin the atrocious sentiment that God himself casts new-born babes from their mothers' breasts down to hell. But when restored to its original connection, it will be found that he is simply repelling that idea as a cavil of his assailant. With the most malignant sarcasm, Castalio had likened God in the decree of reprobation to a father who commands his child to eat up a rock or mountain and then punishes him for disobedience.—By one swift stroke of logic, Calvin punctures this sophistry and exposes its vile absurdity as applied to the elect and to infants."

The following quotation from Calvin is given both in Latin and English by Dr. Shields, from the same volume mentioned above, and a treatise *De Occulta Dei Providentia*, Amsterdam Ed. pp. 644-5.

"As to your objection that no one can be justly condemned except on account of actual sin and after actual sin, there is no dispute between you and me concerning the former; since I everywhere teach that no one will perish unless by the just judgment of God. I may not disguise, however, that there is a hidden venom under your words;

for if the comparison which you propose be admitted, God will be unjust who involves the whole race of Abraham in the guilt of original sin. You deny that it is right for God to condemn any mortal except on account of actual sin. Countless mortals are taken from life while yet infants. Now put forth your virulence against God, who hurls innocent new-born babes, torn from their mothers' breasts, into eternal death. Whosoever will not detest this blasphemy, wherever it is publicly exposed, may revile me as much as he pleases. For I dare not ask to be exempt and free from the insults of those who do not spare God."

Dr. Shields says:—"Wherever doubt may be in some minds as to the exact point of this retort, the one thing certain in it is that Calvin is not here proclaiming his belief in the perdition of infants". In a footnote he states that the Latin, the logic and the doctrine of the passage all sustain the rendering above given. From these quotations, Dr. Shields' summary of Calvin's doctrine is justified:—"I everywhere teach that no one can be justly condemned and perish except on account of actual sin; and to say that the countless mortals, taken from life while yet infants, are precipitated from their mothers' arms into eternal death, is a blasphemy to be universally detested" (p. 643).

The enemies of our Reformed faith from the period of Calvin to this day have spread abroad their calumnies against him; but why should an American Calvinist join such a chorus? There seems to be a wholesome reaction against the literary efforts of some to besmirch the venerable memoirs of our American leaders and heroes. Rather would we place wreaths upon their sepulchres, and welcome visitors from foreign lands who do likewise. Our great Reformer would ask nothing of this sort. But we echo the aspirations of Calvin when our hearts unite in the refrain:

"All glory, laud and honor
To thee, Redeemer, King.
To whom the lips of children
Made sweet hosannas ring!"