



The doctrine of providence in the *Institutes* of Calvin – still relevant?

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Denique ... facile, si animadvertas, perspicies, extremum esse omnium miseriarum, providentiae ignoracionem; summam beatitudinem in eiusdem cognitione esse sitam. (*Inst.* 1.17.11; CO 2/3;164.)

In short ... if you pay attention, you will easily perceive that ignorance of providence is the ultimate of all miseries; the highest blessedness lies in the knowledge of it. (*Inst.* 1.17.11.)

Abstract

The doctrine of providence in the *Institutes* of Calvin – still relevant?

In the reformed tradition and theology, the doctrine of providence has always been important and relevant, so much so that it forms an integral part of the reformed confessions. At the same time some of the most difficult theological questions are raised regarding this doctrine, questions like the following: Is God in control of everything? What is the relationship between the providence of God and sin, suffering, man's responsibility, et cetera? In our times the doctrine as such is questioned or even rejected. What makes this topic even more important is the commemoration of the publication of Darwin's book, "The origin of species", coupled with the renewed emphasis on Darwinism, evolutionism and atheism.¹ From the perspective of

1 The fact that these three theories or schools of thought are mentioned together in the abstract, does not imply that they are regarded as being the same. There are indeed differences that have to be taken into account.

the Calvinistic-reformed theology and in the light of the commemoration of Calvin’s birth 500 years ago, it is important to determine the relevance of Calvin’s thoughts on a number of important issues in the current debate, e.g. the doctrine on God, providence and creation, sin, suffering, et cetera. It is also determined that Calvin’s thoughts are reflected in the reformed confessions, which is still the living faith of reformed churches all over the world.

Opsomming

Die leer oor die voorsienigheid in die *Institusie* van Calvin – nog steeds relevant?

Die leer van die voorsienigheid was nog altyd in die reformatoriese tradisie en teologie besonder belangrik en vorm ook ’n integrale deel van die gereformeerde belydenisskrifte. Terselfdertyd word van die moeilikste vrae juis in verband met hierdie dogma gevra; vrae soos die volgende: Is God in beheer van alles en almal? Wat is die verhouding tussen God se voorsienigheid en die mens se verantwoordelikheid, die mens se sonde, lyding, ensovoorts? In ons tyd word die leer oor die voorsienigheid as sodanig selfs bevraagteken of verwerp. Die belangrikheid van die onderwerp wat hier aan die orde gestel word, word verder beklemtoon deur die herdenking van die boek van Charles Darwin, “The origin of species”, 150 jaar gelede. Saam met die skeppingsleer kom ook die voorsienigheidsleer in die gedrang. Vanuit die Calvinisties-reformatoriese teologie en in die lig van die herdenking van Calvyn se geboorte 500 jaar gelede, word die relevansie van Calvyn se siening vir die huidige debat bepaal. In hierdie opsig handhaaf Calvyn onverswak die leer van die Skrif en buig hy voor die verborge raad van God oor sake waarop die Skrif nie ’n antwoord gee nie. Die gedagtes van Calvyn vind ook baie konkreet neerslag in die gereformeerde belydenisskrifte wat steeds die lewende geloof van gereformeerde kerke wêreldwyd is.

1. Introduction

In the reformed tradition and theology, the doctrine of providence has always been regarded as one of the most important doctrines (Sproul, 2006:143). There was also never any doubt about the relevance of this doctrine. Believers through the ages have been comforted by the doctrine that God is caring for, sustaining and governing the whole of the universe and the lives of all human beings and other creatures. The dogma of providence still forms an integral part of the reformed confessional heritage (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 9-10; Belgic Confession Article 13; Westminster Con-

fession, chapter 5, etc.). At the same time, some of the most difficult questions in the theological field have always been asked, regarding God's providence and the relationship between his providence and the freedom and responsibility of man (Du Rand, 1982:207). Questions that are mostly asked are inter alia the following: What is the relationship between the providence of God and sin? What is the relationship between the providence of God and man's responsibility? What is the relationship between providence and history, between providence and human suffering, between providence and cosmic disasters like the Tsunami of some years ago, et cetera? (Van Wyk, 1993:1.)

In the past few decades, the doctrine of providence has, however, on the one hand, "become eclipsed and obscured" (Sproul, 2006: 143). On the other hand, the questions mentioned above and many more have been raised with more urgency and intensity than ever before. In a certain sense, the doctrine of providence as such is being questioned or even rejected.

There are a number of reasons for this renewed debate on key aspects of the doctrine of providence or even the rejection of the doctrine itself. Van Wyk (1993:3) mentions in the first place the change that took place in the view on science (cf. also Sproul, 2006:144). Van Wyk (1993:3) mentions the changed view of God which is expressed in atheism, deism, pantheism and teopaschitism. The traditional view on God is mentioned by the New Testament scholar Scott McKnight of North Park University, Chicago, as one of the reasons why more and more young people abandon the Christian faith (Jackson, 2009:3). As far as atheism is concerned, we can only refer to the renewed onslaught as expressed in the slogan campaign on public busses in London ("There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life") (cf. Muller, 2009:6, 7). Recently a South African theologian, Julian Müller, has come to the conviction that the correct view on God should be formulated as "panentheism" (Müller, 2007:9), a term which indicates that God is in everything and everything is in God. Müller (2007:8, 9) argues that the traditional view of God was the result of a specific worldview. In the light of a new worldview it is necessary to formulate a new understanding of God. Sproul (2006:144) also refers to the new worldview: "Because we live in a time when the divine aspect is ignored or set aside, we have lost the sense of God's providence, which was at the core of Christian faith for centuries" (cf. also Van Wyk, 1993:3). In the South African context, the debate on the doctrine of the Trinity, that led to the formulation of the Ecumenical

creeds in the first centuries of the New Testament church, was re-opened once again (cf. König, 2009:17; Jackson, 2008:17). This has definite consequences for the view on the doctrine of providence if we keep in mind that this dogma must be seen as a trinitarian confession (Van Wyk, 1993:40, 41).

The year 2009 is also the year in which the publication is commemorated of Charles Darwin's book, *On the origin of species* (1859).² The renewed interest in and propagation of the theory of evolution and the ideology of evolutionism, puts the doctrine of creation under the spotlight. There is the viewpoint that Calvinism and Darwinism can be reconciled with each other, on condition that we change our view on God (Müller, 2009:4). In the curricula of public schools in South Africa, the theory of evolution is taught as facts. As will be indicated later in this article, the viewpoint on creation cannot be separated from the viewpoint on providence.

There is also the changed view that man has of himself. The autonomous man does not accept any law or god to rule his life and wants to determine his own destiny through technology and wealth (Van Wyk, 1993:4). Van de Beek (2001:446) sees this as the main reason why the doctrine of providence is questioned or rejected in our times.

Apart from these theological reasons, there are the practical circumstances which have become part of everyday life. In South Africa, but also in many other parts of Africa and the world, millions of people live in circumstances where crime and violence, murder, rape and poverty are at the order of the day. Together with the experience of two world wars during the previous century and other global disasters, these circumstances lead to questions whether God is in control and how a God of love can allow terrible things to happen (cf. Van de Beek, 2001:445; König, 2002).

2 As the title indicates clearly, the emphasis in the article is on the exposition of Calvin's doctrine on providence and a (brief) comparison with the reformed creeds in order to determine whether Calvin's thoughts influenced the formulation of the creeds. It is not within the scope of this article to engage in a dialogue with Darwin, the ideology of evolutionism, et cetera. The reference to Darwin, evolutionism, atheism, et cetera, has the purpose to illustrate the relevance and importance for an ongoing study on the doctrine of providence from the paradigm of the reformed theology. For those, however, who are interested in an evaluation of Darwinism from a reformed perspective, see inter alia Mouton (2009), and Ouweneel (1975). Although not written from a reformed perspective, the book of Milton, *Shattering the myths of Darwinism* (1997) is also worth reading.

In reformed theology, John Calvin is still regarded as one of the great theologians whose viewpoints cannot be ignored, even 500 years after his birth. Because his theology intends to be founded on Scripture alone, it has survived the ages. As far as the doctrine on providence is concerned, the central and increasing importance of this doctrine in his theology, is clear (Davies, 1992:96).

It is the purpose of this article to determine whether Calvin's viewpoint on providence is still relevant in the postmodern world of 2009. This will be done by evaluating his viewpoint as it is formulated in the *Institutes* of 1559,³ in the light of Scripture and the reformed confessions.

As far as the reformed confessions are concerned, the presupposition in this article is that the reformed theologian is bound to the confessions because (*quia*) they are in accordance with Scripture.⁴

2. Calvin's doctrine on providence

Calvin's view on providence is well-known, not only from his own writings, but also from overviews of his theology by Calvin scholars (cf. inter alia Wendel, 1965; Niesel, 1956). It is even more significant that 100 years ago, at the commemoration of the 400th anniversary of his birth, attention was also given to his doctrine on providence (Bohatec, 1909).

For the purpose of this article, therefore, a summary of Calvin's view, as it is formulated in the 1559 *Institutes*, will be given, with special reference to aspects which is particularly relevant today.

It must also be said that it is difficult to summarise Calvin's doctrine on providence without losing the specific tone in which it is formulated. The reason is that this is the one doctrine in the *Institutes* where Calvin almost goes into raptures in his formulation (Van Wyk, 1993:41; cf. also Partee, 1984:73). Therefore, in many cases, Cal-

3 Davies (1992:96) points out that Calvin gave relatively little consideration to the doctrine of providence in the 1539 edition of the *Institutes*, but this was rectified in the 1559 edition.

4 For a closer elucidation of the matter of binding to the confessions in the reformed tradition, cf. inter alia Coetzee (2010), Strauss (2006), Heyns (1977), Du Plooy (1982; 1991), Wentzel (1998), and Wethmar (2002).

vin's viewpoint will be given in his own words, although translated in English.⁵

2.1 Providence and the view on God

The doctrine on providence forms part of the doctrine on God Himself. It has to do with the decrees and the works of God. As far as Calvin is concerned, the statement can be made that his view on God determines in every aspect his view on providence. In this regard we can refer to his remark in *Institutes* 1.3.2 on those who do not believe in God: "The most audacious despiser of God is most easily disturbed, trembling at the sound of a falling leaf" (Beveridge, 1966:44).⁶ It is the sovereign, holy will of God that is the dynamic power through which everything happens (Du Rand, 1982:64).

God reveals Himself through his works. That is how we come to know Him. With reference to texts like Psalm 104, Romans 1:20 and Hebrews 11:3 Calvin (*Inst.* 1.5.1) states the following:

Indeed, his essence is incomprehensible; hence, his divineness far escapes all human perception. But upon his individual works He has engraved unmistakable marks of his glory, so clear and so prominent that even unlettered and stupid folk cannot plead the excuse of ignorance. (Battles.)⁷

God is omnipotent and his omnipotence is manifested in his providence in a positive, active and dynamic way (*Inst.* 1.16.3). Those who deny this "as much defraud God of his glory as themselves of a most profitable doctrine ... Those who ascribe just praise to God's omnipotence doubly benefit thereby" (Battles; *Inst.* 1.16.3).⁸ Those

5 English translations is either given from Beveridge (1966) or Battles (1977). It is indicated every time which translation is used. In the case of direct quotations, the Latin text is also given in a footnote from the edition of Baum *et al.*(1864).

6 "Ut enim quisque est audacissimus Dei contemptor, ita vel ad folii cadentis strepitum maxime perturbatur." (CO 2/3-38.)

7 CO 2/3-42.:

Essentia quidem eius incomprehensibilis est, ut sensus omnes humanos procul effugiat eius numen; verum singulis operibus suis certas gloriae suae notas insculpsit, et quidem adeo claras et insignes ut sublata sit quamlibet rudibus et stupidis ignorantiae excusatio.

8 "Nec vero magis Deum sua gloria fraudant quam se ipsos utilissima doctrina ... Qui vero Dei omnipotentiae iustam laudem tribuunt, duplicem inde percipient fructum." (CO 2/3-146.)

who think about providence in accordance with Scripture, will always know and confess that they have to do with their Maker and therefore manifests humility, fear and reverence (*Inst.* 1.17.2).

Thus, God governs in his providence, overruling all events. "... He not only sees, but ordains what He wills to be done" (Beveridge; *Inst.* 1.16.4).⁹ Those who deny his government, makes Him the ruler of the world only in name and not in reality. "For what, I ask, is meant by government, if it be not to preside so as to regulate the destiny of that over which you preside?" (*Inst.* 1.16.4). This means that God is in control of everything. It is the comfort of the believer that his heavenly Father "so embraces all things under his power – so governs them at will by his nod – so regulates them by his wisdom, that nothing takes place save according to his appointment" (Beveridge; *Inst.* 1.17.11).¹⁰

This brings us to the issue of fortune or chance. Calvin states categorically that the providence of God, is opposed to "fortune and fortuitous causes" (*Inst.* 1.16.2).¹¹ In this regard he also refers to Augustine who said: "I regret having so often used the term fortune" (Beveridge; *Inst.* 1.16.8).¹² Calvin goes so far as to say, with reference to Basil the Great, that fortune and chance are heathen terms (*Inst.* 1.16.8). "The pagans attribute to fortune what Christians assign to the providence of God" (Partee, 1984:70). Calvin can not emphasise his view in this regard strong enough. Human affairs are not whirled about by the blind impulse of fortune (*Inst.* 1.17.1). It is an insult to God to say that man is exposed "to every blind and random stroke of fortune" (Beveridge; *Inst.* 1.17.10).¹³ Instead of shuddering at the idea of chance, the believer may commit himself to God (*Inst.* 1.17.11).

God's involvement in the ruling and guiding of everything in the universe and in our lives, is by no means passive or merely a matter

9 According to Beveridge (1966:175, footnote 2) the French version of the *Institutes* adds: "C'est à dire, que non seulement il voit mais aussi ordonne ce qu'il veut estre fait".

10 "Quid enim, quæso, est moderari nisi ita præesse ut destinato ordine ea regas quibus præes?" (CO 2/3-148.)

11 "fortunæ et casibus fortuitis" (CO 2/3-145).

12 "non mihi placet toties me appellasse fortunam" (CO 2/3-151).

13 "Ad caecos et temerarios quoslibet fortunæ ictus." (CO 2/3-163.)

of permission. “The providence of God must not be watered down to a merely permissive attitude” (Niesel, 1956:75, 76). Therefore, Calvin finds it difficult to speak of divine “permission”, as far as man’s actions are concerned (Du Rand, 1982:66). We will come back to this point in the section dealing with providence and sin. At this point we can just refer to Calvin’s very clear viewpoint in the light of the history of Job and texts like 2 Kings 22:20, Acts 2:23; 33:18; 4:28, et cetera.

I have put forward only a few of many testimonies. Yet from these it is more than evident that they babble and talk absurdly who, in place of God’s providence, substitute bare permission – as if God sat in a watchtower awaiting chance events, and his judgments thus depended upon human will. (Battles; *Inst.* 1.18.1.)¹⁴

All the counsels and actions of both believers and unbelievers are governed by God’s providence (*Inst.* 1.18.2).

2.2 Providence and Christology

Niesel (1956:71) points out very clearly that in Calvin’s theology, the doctrine on providence cannot be separated from Christology. When Calvin gives an explication of God’s providential care, he focuses it upon the redemptive work of God in Jesus Christ. It is Christ Himself who teaches in Matthew 10:30 that all events whatsoever are governed by the secret counsel of God (*Inst.* 1.16.2). Calvin refers to the “Messianic” text of Genesis 22:8 when he states that providence consists in action. In this regard, Van de Beek (2001:451) points out that the core text on providence (Gen. 22:8), leads to the atoning sacrifice. The closeness of God Who takes responsibility for our existence and therefore also for our guilt by presenting the sacrifice, is all that matters (Van de Beek, 2001:452). “... throughout his work Calvin praises the power and the goodness of the triune God who has drawn near to us in Jesus Christ” (Niesel, 1956:71). With reference to Hebrews 1:3, Calvin states that Christ together with the Father guides all created things (*Inst.* 1.13.12). We will come back to

14 (CO 2/3-168.):

Me ex multis pauca tantum proferre testimonia ...; ex quibus tamen satis superque licet nugari eos et ineptire, qui in locum providentiae Dei nudam permissionem substituunt, ac si in specula sedens exspectaret fortuitos eventus, atque ita eius iudicia penderet ab hominum arbitrio.

this Christological approach when we come to a comparison between the doctrine of Calvin and the reformed confessions.

2.3 Providence and creation

The doctrine on providence and the doctrine on creation cannot be separated from each other. On the contrary, one's view on creation will and must determine one's view on providence and vice versa. It is God the Creator who governs, guides and cares for his creation. This is the clear view of Calvin: "... the presence of the divine power is conspicuous, not less in the perpetual condition of the world than in its first creation" (Beveridge; *Inst.* 1.16.1).¹⁵ Providence is nothing else than the ever present relationship of the Creator to his creation (Niesel, 1956:70). For Calvin, creation and God's government form part of the same confession (Du Rand, 1982:63). "Faith should at once proceed from the truth that God is the Creator of all things to the truth that He is their perpetual governor and preserver ... by a particular providence which provides for, sustains and nourishes everything He has made" (Whitney, 1957:90, with reference to *Inst.* 1.16.1). Du Rand (1982:63) goes so far as to say that the meaningfulness of the doctrine on creation, in Calvin's view, is found in the correlating doctrine on God's providential government. With reference to Hebrews 11:3 Calvin makes the statement that "unless we pass on to his providence ... we do not yet properly grasp what it means to say: "God is Creator" (Battles; *Inst.* 1.16.1).¹⁶ By a special providence, God the Creator sustains, cherishes and superintends everything that He has made, even to the least sparrow (*Inst.* 1.16.1).

This viewpoint of Calvin on the relationship between creation and providence is most important and relevant for the current debate between Darwinism or evolutionists and Calvinism. It is not coincidental that in 2009 both the birth of Calvin and the publication of Darwin's *On the origin of species* are commemorated. These commemorations have the result that both the theology of Calvin and the viewpoint of Darwin have come under the spotlight in a very special way. As was stated above, there is the viewpoint that Calvinism and Darwinism can be reconciled with each other (Müller, 2009:4). For

15 "ut non minus in perpetuo mundi statu quam prima eius origine praesentia divinae virtutis nobis illuceat" (CO 2/3-144).

16 "nisi ad providentiam eius usque transimus, nondum rite capimus quid hoc valcat, Deum esse creatorem ..." (CO 2/3-144).

those who adhere to the viewpoint of Calvin, that God as a personal being, created everything from nothing (*ex nihilo*) through the eternal Word Jesus Christ (John 1:3), such a reconciliation is not possible. If you do not confess and accept that God is the Creator, you will also not confess that He sustains and governs everything and everyone in creation. In Darwinism there is no place for a doctrine on creation (*creatio*) (Du Rand, 1982:116). Although Darwin himself was not an atheist but an agnostic (cf. Bowler quoted in Brits, 2009:9), in the current debate there seems to be a very close relationship between evolutionism and atheism.¹⁷

2.4 Providence and man's responsibility

Although Calvin clearly states that God is in control of everything and everyone's life, that his providence implies an active, positive and dynamic ruling, sustaining and caring, he never neglects man's responsibility. With reference to Proverbs 16:9, he says that the eternal decrees of God

by no means prevent us from proceeding, under his will, to provide for ourselves, and arrange all our affairs ... He who has fixed the boundaries of our life, has at the same time intrusted us with the care of it, provided us with the means of preserving it, forewarned us of the dangers to which we are exposed, and supplied cautions and remedies that we may not be overwhelmed unawares. (Beveridge; *Inst.* 1.17.4.)¹⁸

By stressing the responsibility of man, Calvin does not mean to lessen the power of the Creator, but God has endowed man with reason and will-power so that he may use them and make decisions. At the same time it is true that God makes possible the decisions and actions of men and subdues them to his purposes (Niesel, 1956:75).

17 It is not within the scope of this article to evaluate evolutionism in depth, neither to make a study of all aspects of creationism.

18 CO 2/3-157:

aeternis Dei decretis nos minime impediri quoniam sub eius voluntate et prospiciamus nobis, et omnia nostra dispensemus ... Namque is qui vitam nostrum suis terminis limitavit, eius simul curam apud nos deposuit, eius conservandae rationibus subsidiisque instruxit, periculorum quoque praescios fecit; ne incautos opprimerent, cautiones ac remedia suggessit.

2.5 The relationship between God's providence and sin

It is especially on the topic of sin that Calvin emphasises the responsibility of man. Although some scholars (Du Rand, 1982:67) are of the opinion that Calvin comes very close to the viewpoint that God is the author of sin, Calvin denies any deterministic approach from his side. It is especially in his treatise, *Against the Libertines*, that Calvin undertakes to distinguish his view of God's providence from the determinism of the Libertines and to protect human moral agency from the consequences of their determinism (cf. Calvin, 1980:190). Calvin indeed rejected determinism in strong terms (Van Wyk, 2002:542). In the *Institutes* (1.17.5), referring to sinners like murderers and thieves, he states categorically: "I deny that they serve the will of God" (Beveridge).¹⁹ Striking is the metaphor of the sun and the corpse that he uses to explain his view:

And whence, I ask you, comes the stench of a corpse, which is both putrefied and laid open by the heat of the sun? All men see that it is stirred up by the sun's rays; yet no one for this reason says that the rays stink. Thus, since the matter and guilt of evil repose in a wicked man, what reason is there to think that God contracts any defilement, if He uses his service for his own purpose? (Battles; *Inst.* 1.17.5.)²⁰

Even Satan himself, "with all his furies and engines, is curbed as with a bridle" (Beveridge; *Inst.* 1.16.3).²¹

2.6 Providence and suffering

As far as the relationship between God's providence and suffering is concerned, Calvin's view is that it is comforting to the believer to know, in their adversity, that everything which they endure, is by the ordination and command of God (*Inst.* 1.16.3). As far as the believer is concerned, if "anything adverse befalls him, he will forthwith raise his mind to God, whose hand is most effectual in impressing us with

19 "Se denim eos Dei voluntati servire nego." (CO 2/3-158.)

20 CO 2/3-158:

Et unde, quaeso, foetor in cadavere, quod calore solis tum putrefactum, tum reseratum fuerit? Radiis solis excitari omnes vident; nemo tamen illos foetere ideo dicit. Ita quum in homine malo subsideat mali materia et culpa, quid est quod inquinamentum aliquod contrahere putetur Deus, si ad suum arbitrium utatur eius ministerio?

21 "coercetur satan cum omnibus suis furiis totoque apparatus" (CO 2/3-147).

patience and placid moderation of mind" (Beveridge; *Inst.* 1.17.8).²² In the same paragraph he continues to refer to Joseph's response to what his brothers did to him (Gen. 45:7, 8; 50:20), the words of Job in chapter 1:20 and David's response to the cursing of Shimei. Whatever an enemy commits against us, was permitted by God and sent "by his righteous dispensation" (Beveridge; *Inst.* 1.17.8).²³ And if disasters and miseries occur in our lives without the agency of men, Calvin (*Inst.* 1.17.8) reminds us of God's word in Leviticus 26:23, 24: "If in spite of these things you continue to be hostile towards Me I myself will be hostile towards you and will afflict you for your sins seven times over" (*Inst.* 1.17.8). The most useful consideration in Calvin's view is, "that God arms both the devil and all the wicked for the conflict, and sits as a judge of the games to exercise our patience" (Battles; *Inst.* 1.17.8).²⁴ With reference to Psalm 91, Calvin stresses the comfort we may experience from the doctrine of providence "that he has been received into God's safekeeping and entrusted to the care of his angels, and that neither water, nor fire, nor iron can harm him, except in so far as it pleases God as governor to give them occasion" (Battles; *Inst.* 1.17.11).²⁵

Finally, in our struggle with the tragic phenomenon of suffering, we must be modest and always keep in mind that we are dealing with things we as tiny human beings cannot perceive. "But we must so cherish moderation that we do not try to make God render account to us, but so reverence his secret judgments as to consider his will the truly just cause of all things." (Battles; *Inst.* 1.17.1).²⁶ And again Calvin explains this statement with a striking metaphor.

22 "Si adversi quid contigerit, extemplo mentem hic quoque extollet in Deum, cuius manus ad patientiam placidamque animi moderationem nobis imprimendam valet plurimum." (CO 2/3-160.)

23 "Iusta eius dispensatione" (CO 2/3-161).

24 "tam diabolum quam improbos omnes Deum armare ad conflictum, et sedere quasi agonothetam ut patientiam nostrum exerceat" (CO 2/3-161).

25 "In eius porro fidem se receptum, angelorum curae demadatum, neque aquae, neque ignis, neque ferri noxa posse attingi, nisi quoad locum illis dare Deo moderatori libuerit." (CO 2/3-163.)

26 "Sed tenenda modestia est ne ad causam reddendam Deum trahamus; sed ita revereamur occulta eius iudicia, ut nobis eius voluntas iustissima sit rerum omnium causa." (CO 2/3-154.)

When the sky is overcast with dense clouds, and a violent tempest arises, the darkness which is presented to our eye, and the thunder which strikes our ears, and stupifies all our senses with terror, make us imagine that everything is thrown into confusion, though in the firmament itself all continues quiet and serene. In the same way, when the tumultuous aspect of human affairs unfits us for judging, we should still hold that God, in the pure light of his justice and wisdom, keeps all these commotions in due subordination, and conducts them to their proper end. (Beveridge; *Inst.* 1.17.1.)²⁷

It is this modesty that will prevent us from murmuring against God for adversities, or to charge Him with the blame of our own wickedness (*Inst.* 1.17.3). On the other hand, it is insane to subject God's works to our judgements and to investigate his hidden counsel (*Inst.* 1.17.1). We must never try to be wiser than the Spirit of God (Davies, 1992:105). In the context of predestination,²⁸ Calvin (*Inst.* 3.23.4) refers to Romans 9:20, 21 to motivate that his answer has Scriptural authority.

In the present situation in South Africa, with more than twenty murders per day, apart from all the other crime and violence (cf. Coetzee, 2004), poverty and unemployment, but also in many other parts of the world, people are struggling to find answers to the phenomenon of suffering. There are no easy answers, but the answer we find in the doctrine of providence as it is expounded by Calvin, is much more satisfactory and comforting than all other answers given, because Calvin gives the answer of faith both in the Fatherhood and sovereignty of God. Furthermore, he suffices with the answers God gives in his Word. An example of such an unsatisfactory answer is that God sometimes just loses concen-

27 CO 2/3-154:

Quum coelum occupant densae nubes, exoriturque violenta tempestas, quia et tristis caligo oculis obiicitur, et tonitru aures percellit, et sensus omnes terrore obstupefiunt, videntur nobis omnia confundi et misceri; eadem interim semper manet in coelo quies et serenitas. Ita statuendum est, dum res in mundo turbulentae iudicium nobis eripiunt, Deum ex pura iustitiae et sapientiae suae luce hos ipsos motus optime composito ordine temperare ac dirigere in rectum finem.

28 Dealing also with Calvin's doctrine on predestination in this article, would make the scope too wide, although some scholars see a very close link between providence and predestination (Davies, 1992:103-105). Davies (1992:103) also notes that Calvin does not deal with predestination as part of the doctrine on God, but as part of the doctrine on salvation.

tration or does not give enough attention, and then one of his children is raped or some other tragic event takes place (cf. Janson & König, 2002:76). In this regard we can also refer to König (2002) who deals with the question: "Can we say God is in control?" König differs radically from the viewpoint of Calvin. He calls Calvin's doctrine on the providence of God a strange doctrine that cannot be accepted from the viewpoint of a biblical theology (König, 2002:155). Van Wyk (2002) pointed out clearly that König's interpretation of Calvin does not in all aspects do justice to the viewpoint of Calvin. König's interpretation of Calvin is just too simplistic (Van Wyk, 2002:542).²⁹

2.7 Providence and the church

It must be mentioned that, although the providence of God has to do with his ruling, guiding and sustaining of the whole of creation and every human being, it is applicable in a specific way to the church.

... God may reveal his concern for the whole human race, but especially his vigilance in ruling the church, which he deigns to watch more closely (Battles; *Inst.* 1.17.1).³⁰

The church is the sanctuary in which God dwells and He reveals his presence there still more plainly (Niesel, 1956:73). "... the righteous are the special objects of his favour, the wicked and profane the special objects of his severity" (Beveridge; *Inst.* 1.5.7).³¹ Calvin (*Inst.* 1.17.6) quotes a number of promises of God from Scripture, inter alia Psalm 55:23, 1 Peter 5:7, Psalm 91:1, Zechariah 2:8 and Isaiah 49:15 where God's special care for his chosen people is clearly proclaimed. Then he concludes (*Inst.* 1.17.6): "Indeed, the principal purpose of biblical history is to teach that the Lord watches over the ways of the saints with such great diligence that they do not even stumble over a stone." (Battles.)³² In this regard, Niesel

29 König (2003) responded from his side on Van Wyk's evaluation of his book and once again defended his viewpoint on Calvin.

30 "... ut totum humanum genus sibi esse curae Deus ostendat; praecipue vero in regenda ecclesia (quam propiore intuita dignatur) se excubias agere" (CO 2/3-154).

31 "... suam piis clementiam, improbis ac sceleratis severitatem declaret" (CO 2/3-460).

32 "Quin etiam hic potissimus est scopus in historiis biblicis, ut deceant tanta sedulitate vias sanctorum custodiri a Domino, ut ne ad lapidem quidem impingant." (CO 2/3-159.)

(1956:74) makes the remark that it is Calvin's purpose to point out that God sustains the whole world and proves Himself the Lord of each creature, because He wills to be the Lord of his church. He guides the movement of nature and history, because He wills to guide and maintain his church. We can say that history in general is there for the sake of the history of the church. Niesel (1956:74, 75) also notes that the church is the object, but not the final goal of God's providence. The church is the sanctuary of the Lord where Christ is the chief corner stone. Therefore, in focusing his providence especially upon the church, He wishes to encourage us to call upon Himself, the living God (cf. also *Inst.* 1.17.9).

Du Rand (1982:65) furthermore points out that it is due to the eschatological focus of God's actions that the church has a special place in his providence. The church is the particular showground of God's providence.

2.8 Providence and faith

It actually follows automatically that faith is a prerequisite for accepting and understanding the doctrine on providence. Although, according to Calvin (*Inst.* 1.16.1) even wicked men are forced, by the mere view of the universe, to rise to the Creator, it is only faith which has a method of its own in assigning the whole praise of creation to God. In this regard he refers to Hebrews 11:3. And it is only faith that "penetrate deeper" and acknowledges the indispensable relation between creation and providence.

2.9 Calvin's use of Scripture

John Calvin was in the first place and above all a biblical theologian, "and not a philosophical theologian" (Davies, 1992:95). Although he was acquainted with the viewpoints of all the well-known philosophers, he always evaluated their thoughts in the light of Scripture and in the end determined the meaning of Scripture. As far as the *Institutes* is concerned, which formed the main source for this article, Calvin himself said (Beveridge, 1966:21):

... my object in this work was to prepare and train students of theology for the study of the sacred volume, so that they might

both have an easy introduction to it, and be able to proceed in it, with unfaltering step ...³³

In researching Calvin's doctrine on providence, it becomes clear once again that he did not want to do anything else than explicating Scripture (cf. Davies, 1992:95-98). In a more in-depth study of Calvin it would be worthwhile to do thorough exegesis of the major texts he uses as sources for the doctrine on providence. A comparison of Calvin's view with the reformed confessions in any case shows a remarkable consensus in the use of Scripture on which this doctrine is founded.

3. The reformed confessions³⁴

The reformed confessions deal with the doctrine on providence especially in Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's day 9, 10, Belgic Confession Article 13 and Westminster Confession, chapter 5.³⁵ As far as a comparison between the viewpoint of Calvin and the Heidelberg Catechism is concerned, valuable contributions were made inter alia by Schulze (1993; 1994). Simpson (1981:38) points out convincingly that Calvin's Catechism was one of the most important sources used in writing the Heidelberg Catechism (cf. also Coetzee, 2008). In the time of the Reformation, when the other reformed confessions were written (inter alia the Belgic Confession and the Westminster confession), the works of Calvin, like his *Institutes* and *Catechism*, were common property. It is most likely that the authors of the above-mentioned confessions were well acquainted with and influenced by Calvin's viewpoints. As far as the doctrine on providence is concerned, Verboom (1996:85-88) deals with the specific background of the Heidelberg Catechism with reference to Calvin's Catechism of 1542 and the *Institutes*. The purpose of this part of the article is to determine any correspondence between the viewpoint of

33 "Porro hoc mihi in isto labore propositum fuit, sacrae theologiae candidates ad divini verbi lectionem ita praeparare et instruere, ut et facilem ad eam aditum habere, et inoffenso in ea gradu pergere queant." (CO 2/3-1.)

34 Quotations from and references to the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession are taken from the publication of the Dutch Reformed Church (1986). As far as the Westminster Confession is concerned, Sproul (2006) is used.

35 For the purpose of this article, the research was restricted to the confessions mentioned above.

Calvin and the reformed confessions, in the light of the status and authority these confessions have in the reformed tradition.

3.1 Christological approach

It was pointed out in point 2.2 above that Calvin, in his explication of God's providential care, focuses on God's redemptive work in Christ. In the confessions it is significant that we confess our faith in the providence of God within the same framework. In Lord's Day 9 and 10 of the Heidelberg Catechism, the fact that the Father of Jesus Christ is our Father for the sake of Christ and that He as our Father cares for us and sustains and governs the whole of creation, forms the core of our confession. It is part of our only comfort in life and death (Lord's Day 1). We find the same "Christological approach" in the Belgic Confession. We are pupils of Christ and everything that happens, befalls us by the direction of our heavenly Father.

3.2 Rejection of chance or fortune

In the same way as Calvin does, the reformed confessions also deny categorically the occurrence of any chance or fortune. In the Belgic Confession article 13 it is stated in very clear terms that God, after the creation of everything "did not forsake them or give them up to fortune or chance". Furthermore, we are taught by the doctrine of providence that "nothing can befall us by chance". And in Lord's Day 10 of the Heidelberg Catechism we confess that "all things come not by chance, but by His fatherly hand".

3.3 Providence and sin

There is also a clear correspondence between the viewpoint of Calvin and the confessions regarding the relationship between the providence of God and sin. As Calvin, the Westminster Confession (chapter 5, sec. 4) also confesses that God's providence extends even to the falling in sin. Also, like Calvin the Westminster Confession continues to state clearly: "... yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin". In the same way, the Belgic Confession (art. 13) declares that "God neither is the Author of nor can be charged with the sins which are committed".

3.4 Modesty and humility

In point 2.6 above it was pointed out that Calvin emphasises the calling we have to be modest in dealing especially with the difficult questions regarding the providence of God, questions like the relationship between providence and sin and the relationship between providence and suffering. In the Belgic Confession, article 13, the same truth is confessed in very clear terms: God’s

power and goodness are so great and incomprehensible that He orders and executes His work in the most excellent and just manner, even then when devils and wicked men act unjustly. And as to what He does surpassing human understanding, we will not curiously inquire into farther than our capacity will admit of; but with the greatest humility and reverence adore the righteous judgments of God, which are hid from us, contenting ourselves that we are pupils of Christ, to learn only those things which He has revealed to us in His Word, without transgressing these limits.

3.5 Providence and the church

The Westminster Confession (chapter 5, sec. 7) is in full agreement with Calvin’s view that God’s providence applies in a particular sense to the church when it confesses: “As the providence of God doth, in general, reach to all creatures; so, after a most special manner, it taketh care of His Church, and disposeth all things to the good thereof.”

3.6 Literal correspondence

Apart from the clear correspondence between the viewpoints of Calvin and the truths confessed in the reformed confessions as mentioned above, it is very significant, especially as far as the Heidelberg Catechism is concerned, that there is also literal correspondence. This is illustrated clearly in the following quotations:

- *Institutes* (1.17.6): “In regard to men, good as well as bad, ... their counsels, wishes, aims and faculties, *are so under his hand, that he has full power to turn them in whatever direction, and constrain them as often as he pleases.*” (Beveridge.)³⁶

36 CO 2/3-159:

Quantum ad homines attinet, sive boni sint sive mali eorum consilia, voluntates, conatus, facultates sub eius manu esse agnoscet, ut

- Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 10: "... since all creatures are so in His hand that without His will they cannot so much as move".
- *Institutes* (1.17.7): "This knowledge is necessarily followed by gratitude in prosperity, patience in adversity, and incredible security for the time to come." (Beveridge.)³⁷
- Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 10: "That we may be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity and with a view to the future may have good confidence in our faithful God and Father ...".

These quotations are clear evidence of the correspondence between Calvin's doctrine and the reformed confessions. It is therefore correct of Van Wyk (2002:550) to say that König, in his critical evaluation of Calvin, should also have taken the confessions, to which he as reformed theologian should be bound, seriously.

4. Concluding remarks

An overview of Calvin's doctrine on providence and a comparison between the viewpoint of Calvin and the reformed confessions, lead inevitably to the following conclusions:

- There is a striking correspondence between Calvin's doctrine and the reformed confessions. It is clear without any doubt that the viewpoint of Calvin influenced the church's formulation of the creeds to a very great extent.
- The main reason for this significant correspondence lies in the fact that the theology of Calvin is above all a biblical theology. Likewise, the reformed confessions are accepted by church communities in the reformed tradition, because they are in accordance with Scripture. After almost five centuries it could not be proven from Scripture that the dogma confessed in the reformed creeds, also regarding the providence of God, is unbiblical.
- In churches of the Calvinistic tradition, those in the offices of ordained minister, elder, deacon and doctor, but also all members,

flectere quo libuerit, ac quoties libuerit constringere, in eius arbitrio situm sit.

37 "Hanc notitiam necessario sequitur tum animi gratitude in prospero rerum successu, tum in adversitate patientia, tum etiam in posterum incredibilis securitas." (CO 2/3-160.)

are bound to the confessions, the "body of truth" (Sproul, 2006: vii).

- Criticism of Calvin's viewpoint should take into consideration the above-mentioned correspondence between his doctrine and the confessional heritage of the Reformation.
- There is no compromise possible between Calvinism and Darwinism as far as the viewpoint on creation and providence is concerned. Darwinism is founded at least on agnosticism if not to say atheism, while Calvinism is founded on the sovereignty of the living triune God and his infallible Word.
- The growing acceptance and propagation of Darwinism and evolutionism, together with the renewed onslaught of atheism, accentuates the relevance of Calvin's doctrine today, as well as the urgent need for churches and believers in the reformed tradition to live out the reformed confessions. This also apply to parents of baptised children as far as education in schools is concerned.
- In a world characterised by the results of sin, and millions of people facing the questions and problems of suffering in all possible manifestations, the comfort and consolation found in Calvin's explication of the gospel of Jesus Christ, is more relevant than ever.

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