

BOOK REVIEW

H. L. Williams

English Hypothetical Universalism: John Preston and the Softening of Reformed Theology

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From the beginnings of the English Reformation to the middle of the seventeenth century lies a period of extensive and complicated development in matters of national, ecclesiastical and theological history. All three of these elements were intimately woven together in those days in the warp and woof of English life from the highest realms of state and church, to the humble levels of the peasant parishioners who gathered on Lord's Days to wait upon the ministry of God's Word. For everyone, Reformed Christianity, to some degree or other, permeated and affected the whole course of life, to the delight of some and to the resentment of others.

Interacting thus with politics and culture in all their multifaceted aspects, the course of the English Reformation was sadly encumbered with baggage that hindered the full reformation of the Church of England. The reigning monarch was "head of the Church," the Episcopal system of church government was retained, ministers continued to wear vestments, communicants knelt at the altar rail to receive the sacrament, and many ecclesiastics, conscious of the need to seek "preferment" in order to progress in the ministry, assiduously courted the favours of such prominent men of state as could provide the means to promotion.

In its praxis, the church leaned heavily on Cranmer's Prayer Book, which by statute imposed a rigidly liturgical form of worship. In doctrine, the Prayer Book's *Thirty-nine Articles* imposed a general standard, which, for all the excellent and reformational elements contained therein, nevertheless was unsatisfactory to promote the full reformation of the church according to biblical standards. Throughout the Elizabethan decades, therefore, many among the ranks of Anglican ministers and bishops became more and more dissatisfied with this "half-baked" reformation.

Their desire for a complete and fuller reform was nurtured and fuelled through their contacts on the European continent, especially the leaders of the Genevan Reformation.¹ Their efforts met intense opposition, both from dissident ecclesiastics inside the church and from the monarch and his stately entourage. Tensions arose, intrigues abounded and good men were affected by compromise. Politics, ever the “art of the possible,” intertwined with the machinery of a state church and became a salient factor in the development of theological doctrine, indeed, to be precise, in the very interpretation of the Word of God. Infuriated by the “Calvinist notes” of the old and best-selling Geneva Bible, the homosexual King James I was only too glad to encourage the production of the Authorised Version (AV; 1604-1611), a version that would have the “Calvinist notes” excised, a Bible that non-Calvinists could interpret to fit their predilections without let or hindrance from any Genevan notions.² King James regarded some of the explanatory notes to the Geneva Bible as “seditious,” and thus a change of version enabled that same monarch to promote his notion of the “divine rights” of kings, a principle that was to issue in despotism, bloodshed, persecution and a debilitating civil war later in that century.

This area of English history is complicated and murky. Except in general outline in popular, historical works, it is inaccessible to all but patient scholars who are able to penetrate this dense thicket of intricacy via privileged access to rare and valuable documents extant from and pertaining to the period under research. Over the last century and more, various different researchers have industriously laboured to bring to light the manifold and multifaceted developments of the period, but

¹For example, a large English contingent of exiles in refuge in Geneva in the sixteenth century maintained influential contact with the homeland. During this period, Calvin himself and his successor Theodore Beza were both regularly corresponding with English churchmen and the nobility with a view to promoting reform. John Knox was also instrumental in this work, both while at Geneva and while back in Britain.

²The Geneva Bible was so named because it was largely the work of those English scholars in exile in Geneva during the Marian period (1553-1558). It was first published (complete Old and New Testaments) in 1560. Between 1560 and 1644, at least a phenomenal 144 editions were printed, compared to a mere five editions of the Bishops’ Bible. The popularity of the Geneva Bible was unsurpassed, and it was only gradually eclipsed following the promotion of the AV subsequent to 1611 by the King and Archbishop Laud. Their promotion also led to a prohibition on the printing of the Geneva Bible in the realm. Nevertheless, the Geneva Bible was the version used by the Puritans and the Pilgrim Fathers (cf. the introduction to the definitive 1599 edition of the Geneva Bible, now reprinted in modern type and with the original explanatory notes by Tolle Lege Press of America).

much of their work has too often been marred by their own personal predilections. Unless one has the discipline to follow all the lines of evidence, irrespective of what one “hopes to find,” one’s research will be marred by one’s own personal bias. All too many recent works published by reputable publishers remain, sadly, all too salient examples of this serious fault.³

In pursuit of the truth concerning this vital period of English history, Dr. Jonathan Moore’s book evinces a refreshing attitude with respect to all these exigencies. After reading it through twice, I came to the conclusion that it would be impossible to reconstruct Dr. Moore’s personal theological convictions from his book. This, indeed, is how a scholarly tome should be, a tracing of all the relevant evidence and a presentation of that evidence, followed by an assessment of the same without the writer intruding his own predilections on the material. In following out this method, he allows the facts to speak for themselves, then, from their weight of testimony, he draws out such conclusions as the force of logic demands. If this sounds rather clinical and academic, well it is, and *that is precisely how the search for truth should be*. The book is a development from the author’s successful Ph.D. research thesis submitted to Cambridge University about eight years ago, and as such is a model of well-directed, meticulous and unbiased scholarship.

The main focus of Dr. Moore’s thesis is to isolate, analyse, trace and evaluate the development of Reformed theology in England in the vital last decade or so of Elizabeth’s reign (1558-1603) and into the Jacobean period, whereafter the rise of a new Arminian phalanx ultimately gained control over church and nation prior to the resurgence of Puritanism, approximately 1635 to 1660. Hence of particular interest and salient importance are the developments in the soteriological doctrines and their effects on the pastoral practice of those times. A development was evident, as Dr. Moore unfolds, which shifted the Church of England from a strict Genevan-Perkinsian Calvinist orthodoxy and off in an Arminian direction. It involved the ditching of the doctrine of limited atonement and the development of a doctrine of a “hypothetical” universal atonement, in which Christ was said to have died for every individual *on condition that they believe*. Naked, this doctrine could only be Arminianism, but the leading theologians at the time clothed it with a modified

³For example, APA Holland University Press published in 1988 F. P. Van Stam’s monumental *The Controversy over the Theology of Saumur 1635-1650*. Roger Nicole, a Swiss-American Calvinist scholar, in reviewing this book in the *Westminster Theological Journal* (vol. 54, no. 2 [Fall 1992], pp. 392-396), noted its overt bias amongst other faults, and I find myself agreeing wholeheartedly with him.

doctrine of election, thus giving it a superficial resemblance to Perkinsian orthodoxy. In pastoral praxis, it enabled a modified universalist gospel to be preached with a “well-meant offer” as paralleled amongst Arminians and a “softening” of matters concerning reprobation and the sovereignty of God. An overt resistance by its advocates against the rising tide of Arminianism in the reign of James I lent it a superficial and temporary facade of orthodoxy. In practice, it landed its adherents in an area of unresolvable paradox, which provided a tilted logical platform with a distinct propensity to either embarrass or dispatch its adherents downwards into the Arminian abyss.⁴ Relentlessly, Dr. Moore opens up this whole vista for us and brings to light the leaders responsible for this “softening of Reformed theology,” namely, Archbishop Ussher of Ireland; John Davenant, sometime Bishop of Salisbury; and a popular preacher/teacher at university, parish and courtly levels, one John Preston, whose meteoric rise and short career form the main point of examination. We are also introduced to the outgoing ramifications of this “universalising” trend, one salient of which was the effect Davenant had through the English delegation to the Synod of Dort in 1618–1619, which, Dr. Moore avers, had some “softening” effect on the final text of the *Canons*. And, lurking behind it all, are the powerful demands of the Geneva-hating king and his royal court, who made sure they leant their weight to theological affairs as and when they deemed politic. Nuancing all this was the situation then intrinsic to the English state church in which the pastoral effects of having every Englishman a baptized member of the church had important distortive effects on theological formulation and practice.

Scholarly this book is indeed. The author indicates the depth and breadth of his researches via his references and bibliographies. Pages xix and xx are largely taken up by a key list of abbreviations of such institutions as the British Library in London, the University Library at Cambridge, the Northamptonshire Record Office, to name a few, then also of the learned journals that regularly punctuate the higher academic scene, such as the *Bulletin for Historical Research*, the *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, the *Sixteenth Century Journal*, the *Reformation and Renaissance Review*, and many more. Pages xv to xix are given over to a list of abbreviations used for the works of John Preston. With each of these latter abbreviations come not only the

⁴Cf., for instance, Dr. Moore’s references to the “paradoxes” intrinsic to various areas of Preston’s theology (pp. 128, 139). Notable, too, are his references to a certain elusiveness in Preston vis à vis Puritan standards on worship and episcopacy, and an absence of evidence concerning his attitude to clerical vestments and to the signing of the cross in baptism (p. 14).

titles, but a synopsis of the subtitles, together with dates and provenances of publication. The utility of these abbreviations emerges as one reads through the book and finds these academic resources referenced again and again as Dr. Moore underpins his research via testimony direct to, *inter alia*, such important documentation. Again, in the final section of the book, one finds some 66 pages of detailed bibliography. Preston's *Works* receive the fullest referencing here as they are the primary sources for the thesis, and Dr. Moore adds his own 10 pages of bibliographical notes introducing those works. In the ensuing 15 pages not only does he reference Preston's published works in detailed and chronological order, but he also lists references to "manuscripts and letters by John Preston." This mass of primary research material is then followed by some 61 references to rare and restricted archive material located in such institutions as the Bodleian Library at Oxford, Emmanuel College Library at Cambridge, the Public Record Office in London and others. Some 17 pages of further primary resources alphabetically present published books pertaining to and/or from the historical period under research, the whole of this comprising some 70 different authors or resources, with extensive details concerning the titles and provenances of the said material. Under this bibliography one finds, for example, references to such records as the *Acta Synodi Nationalis... Dordrecht habitae anno 1618 et 1619*, the full spectrum of the copious works of such as Richard Baxter, Bishop Davenant, Archbishop Ussher, James Arminius, etc., and even the *Records of the Hon. Society of Lincoln's Inn*, this last indicating to me the extensive and exhaustive lengths to which Dr. Moore went to pursue the lines of evidence in his researches. Such meticulousness is further evinced by the secondary bibliography, extending some 21 pages listing alphabetically "Books, Articles, and Theses" that bear on the area of the author's researches. Some 203 authors and their various relevant works are listed here. Casting one's eyes down the columns indicates that Dr. Moore has spared nothing to familiarize himself with a vast array of scholarship. One finds copious references to Dr. Richard Muller and Dr. Carl Trueman for instance, besides extensive references to many other writers, some of whom Dr. Moore has, by virtue of his research, effectively shown to be inadequate in their knowledge and understanding of the period in question and, as a result, to greater or lesser degrees distortive in their assessments of it. Finally, some eight double-column pages present a useful index.

As a testimony to the profound meticulousness and scholarly importance of this volume, there are included recommendations by such eminent scholars as Patrick

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Collinson and Eamon Duffy of Cambridge University, Willem J. van Asselt of the University of Utrecht, Anthony Milton of Sheffield University, Alan Ford of Nottingham University, and Rev. Iain Hamilton of Cambridge Presbyterian Church. Dr. Carl R. Trueman, the Professor of Historical Theology and Church History at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, has provided a most interesting and useful foreword.

Between the introductory section (pp. i-xx) and the Index, some 294 pages comprise the body of the book proper. The material is divided into five major sections:

Section I: Preston's Life

Ch. 1 A Biographical Introduction

Section II: Preston's Heritage

Ch. 2 William Perkins and Elizabethan Particularism

Section III: Preston's Theology

Ch. 3 The Divine Decree

Ch. 4 The Death of Christ

Ch. 5 The Gospel Call

Ch. 6 Defender of the Faith at the York House Conference

Section IV: Preston's Mentors

Ch. 7 Bishops James Ussher and John Davenant

Section V: Conclusions

Bibliography

Underpinning the whole of these five sections and the following bibliographical notes on Preston's *Works* are some 1044 footnotes. They are printed where they should be, at the bottom of the relevant page, not hived off as a sort of appendix toward the end of the book. In this respect, the publisher, William B. Eerdmans, is to be commended; some recent tomes put out from no less than the Oxford University Press have not reached this standard with the footnotes. Again, after two readings, I did not pick up any typographical errors; quite a feat, I should say! Eerdmans have produced a fine volume, well presented on acid free paper as a strongly bound paperback with an attractive cover and marketed at a thoroughly reasonable price. My only caveat on this front is that the book is really worthy of being case-bound, as it is in my estimation a landmark tome that should greatly enhance our perception of English theological history and correct an array of previously held wrong impres-

sions on important points of theological doctrine and practice, specifically, on the extent of the atonement, the divine decrees, the development of the so-called “free offer of the gospel,” and the relationships between the “English Hypothetical Universalists” and the then-rising Amyraldian tendencies in the French Reformed Churches.

Dr. Moore begins his study with a careful 24-page biographical analysis of Preston’s life. He follows the young John Preston from his Northamptonshire home through his school and university life at Cambridge, where he was confronted with the claims of Christ through the ministry of John Cotton, whereon the whole course of Preston’s life and academic career was changed, issuing in his ordination as priest in June 1614. His enormous popularity as a preacher and teacher precipitated a meteoric rise to ecclesiastical prominence which he doubtless accelerated via his careful cultivation of contacts and friendships with the “right people.” Preston rose to become chaplain to the Prince Royal, the future Charles I. The picture of Preston which now emerges is one in which we find a good man balancing precariously between political expediency on the one hand and theological truth on the other. Powerful statesmen, like the Duke of Buckingham, were already reacting against the Genevan Calvinism in the Church of England, as was the King, and within the ranks of the clergy themselves an Arminian reaction was afoot.

Dr. Moore considers the question of whether or not Preston could be classified as a “Puritan,” and points out that Preston was somewhat elusive on the matters that would be decisive on this point. Nevertheless, the man evinced that he was also somewhat uncomfortable under the trend of things in the Church of England. Such ambivalence meant that King James nursed a certain degree of suspicion concerning him, and Preston does seem to have straddled the fence betwixt Puritan and Conformist parties, a factor which in the end meant he risked odium from both these quarters before death cut short his career in 1628.

The published theological works of Preston, says Dr. Moore, are “almost entirely consumed with matters of spiritual experience and matters of piety,” with prominence given to such themes as “preparation for salvation,” the “quest for full assurance” and “self-examination” prior to holy communion. All in all, it was a theology and praxis “more concerned about promoting a generic unity within the spiritual brotherhood than pressing home potentially divisive distinctives” (pp. 20-21). It appears that “many attributed their spiritual awakening to Preston’s preaching,”

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some of whom became eminent Puritan preachers. Such preaching was the man's main priority, and it seems that in order to facilitate this end, he was also "a highly successful politician of the utmost cunning" (p. 21). One can agree, with Dr. Moore, that Patrick Collinson's description of Preston is accurate: "one of the more enigmatic figures in the history of religion, and of politics" (p. 24).

In what kind of a Church of England did Preston operate? What was the heritage already established into which he emerged and grew as a young Christian, and how did this affect his theology? Dr. Moore examines this thoroughly in his second chapter, "William Perkins and Elizabethan Particularism." This most useful study gives us an accurate picture of what forces would have impinged on young Preston and affected his theological convictions. Immediately, we are brought into contact with the larger-than-life figure of William Perkins, who in 1595 dominated the orthodox party of the church from his lecturer's post at Great St. Andrews, Cambridge. Perkins' theology was the epitome of "late Elizabethan Reformed divinity" and "his output as a preacher and theological writer was astounding." An examination of the salient and characteristic points of Perkins' theology indicates a sound and experimental predestinarianism which includes the Genevan doctrines of double predestination, Christocentric supralapsarianism and limited or particular atonement, in which he asserted that it was a dilution of the very concept of propitiation to introduce any ideas of a universal element in the atoning work of Christ. Arising out of this, Perkins "denied any will or desire of God to save the reprobate," thus distancing his theology from any notions of a "well-meant offer of the gospel to all." In this respect Perkins averred that to affirm "that the promises of the Gospel ... belong to all and every man whatsoever, unless he will reject them, is a device of man's brain" (pp. 51-52).⁵

We might note here that such strict Calvin-Beza Genevan doctrine manifestly distances Perkins from the erstwhile "Calvinism" of modern Calvinists, who openly and deliberately proclaim that "God in the Gospel expresses his desire for all to be saved" and that the "promises of God in the gospel apply to all men." Having established that Perkins asserted that the reprobate have no "title to the death of Christ" (pp. 44, 53), Dr. Moore shows that, according to Perkins, "To the world of the lost, Christ makes no offers." To unbelievers, "the gospel is presented as a divine com-

⁵Dr. Moore clearly refutes the notion that Perkins espoused and taught "a well-meant gospel offer" for all, as claimed by Timothy Song (p. 51).

mand, and the particular promise is generally proclaimed. There is therefore in Perkins still no conditional gospel promise” (p. 54).

Importantly, Dr. Moore goes on to establish that such views were not merely peculiar to Perkins alone. While the English presses, he says, “heaved with Perkins’ heavy tomes, no publications against Perkins’ theology accompanied them, at least not in his lifetime.” In pages 55-68, Dr. Moore presents the evidence that shows that, if anything, Perkins’ position was but a manifestation of the regnant “Calvinist consensus” of his times that had come to the fore in the later Elizabethan period, having established itself against opposition in the earlier Reformation period, and itself being evidently a theology not “original” to the English church. The influence of Geneva is evidently in the background here. The evidence presented is formidable and persuasive, such that Dr. Moore can fittingly head this section of his chapter 2 as “Perkins as a Representative Elizabethan Churchman.” And this may also be ramified by reference to the Geneva Bible, which, as stated above, was *the only popular Bible* amongst the English from 1560 to 1644, wherein the explanatory notes clearly indicate a Perkinsian style of orthodoxy, an orthodoxy clearly obtained from the Geneva of Calvin, Beza, Knox and the Marian exiles.

Thus Dr. Moore sets the stage for his examination of John Preston’s theology. He informs us that Preston was to his generation as popular and powerful an influence as Perkins in his. But it was into a milieu permeated by Perkinsian-Genevan Calvinism that Preston emerged, and was soon to be a leading theological light in the English church. Over the following 90 pages, comprising chapters 3 through 6, Preston’s theological works are examined meticulously, and immediately we are confronted with someone who is shifting the predestinarian ground away from the Perkinsian emphasis. On the issues of the divine decree, the extent of the atonement and the gospel call, Preston’s works indicate a clear and decisive foray in the direction of Arminianistic universalism. But without becoming an Arminian, with his astutely honed political sense, Preston trod some sort of an enigmatic middle road.⁶ In his generation, king and court were expressing disenchantment with Genevan doctrine, and the new zeitgeist of the times was precipitating open and avowed dissent amongst churchmen against the old Elizabethan consensus. Whilst maintaining certain sympathies toward the Puritan-Perkinsian element, Preston

⁶For instance, Dr. Moore shows how Preston was “sensitive to the fact that the doctrine of absolute reprobation was becoming increasingly unpopular with many in Jacobean England” (pp. 79ff.).

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was evidently amenable to modifying doctrine in order to maintain the Church of England in a broadly evangelical position and avoiding, at the same time, any political backlash. Such a course got him into embarrassing conflicts, notably the York House Conference of 1626. By this time, Preston had developed his doctrine to include a universal atonement and a “gospel offer” in which he employed terms and phrases like “Christ is dead for all men.” Dr. Moore is able to show that in this Preston was not making a discrimination between “*died* for all men” and “*dead* for all men.” In fact, as Dr. Moore indicates, the Marrowmen of Scotland a century later were, wittingly or otherwise, adopting Preston’s formulation here almost word for word, but justifying it on a nonexistent disparity betwixt the two phrases (pp. 112ff., esp. p. 116).⁷

By 1626, a year into the reign of Charles I, an emergent anti-Calvinism was bold enough to challenge openly the Calvinist wing of the church, and the period is well-described by scholars as the watershed, when the Calvinists effectively lost control of the Church of England and a rampant Romanist-sympathetic Arminianism rose to prominence. Dr. Moore describes to us the details of the vital York House Conference of 1626, in which Preston was somewhat unwillingly pressed into taking up the defence of the hitherto status quo “Calvinism,” which, by then, he and others had somewhat diluted from the first-water Genevan orthodoxy of such as Perkins. It was some of the remnant of the “Puritan” or Perkinsian orthodox wing of the church who had arranged the conference as a means of confronting and confuting certain outspoken and virulent Arminians of that time. It seems they had in mind a running of the whole affair as a “dress rehearsal” to assess the practicability of indicting the said Arminians before the Houses of Parliament.

Dr. Moore’s account of the York House Conference is both fascinating and revealing. Prominent is the moment when Preston was confronted with the disparities betwixt the *Canons of Dordt* and certain of the *Thirty-nine Articles* with respect to the extent of the atonement. Preston “hesitated” to reply and the opposition immediately realized that they had him cornered. From his “hypothetical universalistic” position, Preston would, of course, have been forced to agree with the Arminians concerning the alleged universality of the atonement and the free offer of the gospel. As the debate unfolded, as Dr. Moore aptly puts it, “Alarming for Preston, White’s

⁷Cf. Dr. Moore’s recent lecture, “English Hypothetical Universalism and Its Influence on Scottish Marrow Theology” (http://nesher.org.uk/JBSaudio/jbsAM_2008..mp3).

‘Arminianism’ was coming to sound remarkably like his own brand of hypothetical universalism at this point” (p. 159; italics mine). The ensuing argument makes fascinating reading, as the Arminian again and again presses his question concerning the extent of the atonement, demanding of Preston a straight answer. In attempting an answer, Preston went so far as to quote Prosper of Aquitaine, who had “semi-Pelagianised” Augustine’s theology some 1200 years previously! And he hedged, apparently by asserting (as do modern, mainstream “Calvinists”) that Christ did not die for all men equally. The Arminians jumped on this and asserted that this position “*in the context of human inability, removes all sincerity from the gospel call to believe and repent*” (p. 164; italics mine). An unmistakable consequence that now leaps out from this material (though Dr. Moore himself does not assert such) is that Preston’s major shift in his Calvinistic doctrine concerning the atonement and the gospel call is one that is shared by modern, mainstream Calvinism. What irresistibly follows from this is that modern, mainstream Calvinism is strictly not Calvinism. It is distinctly not Genevan-Perkinsian Reformation orthodoxy.

Dr. Moore aptly and accurately sums up this episode with the words: “Preston was promoting the tenets of a *new and much softer brand* of Calvinism” (p. 166; italics mine). The York House Conference, played out before such nobility as the Duke of Buckingham, was hence seen as a triumph for the Arminian party, an occasion when “doctrinal Calvinists were humiliated in front of Buckingham.” The Puritan party never went on to bring the case to the House of Lords, and Dr. Moore indicates that “Preston alone seems to have received the blame for all this.” The fact is that the conference was initiated by those of the Puritan party who were, if anything, of the remnant of the older Perkinsian orthodoxy, and they evidently did not realize, until too late, that their champion “Calvinist” was a man who had modified his orthodoxy on certain vital salient points (p. 167).⁸ Modified Calvinism or not, Preston’s views were no more attractive to the rising Arminian phalanx than the doctrines of Perkins. One immediate outcome of the York House Conference was that “soon afterwards the Duke of Buckingham ceased to be Preston’s patron,” a severe and damaging blow to Preston’s public and political prestige, indeed.

But how, just how, did such a man as Preston deviate from the Perkinsian heritage into which he emerged as a newly regenerated Christian? In the earlier period

⁸Dr. Moore indicates that these “old-line” Calvinists most likely felt “betrayed by Preston’s advocacy of a far more moderate soteriology, which was unable roundly to confute a rising Arminianism.”

of his ecclesiastical career, he was to be found in the year 1615 expressing his enthusiasm for the “limited atonement” expressed in Hildersham’s lecture against the Arminians (pp. 139-140). But henceforward he evinces a distinct “universalistic” tendency, which developed and matured as the years went by. Dr. Moore introduces evidence that explains, however, that even in his earlier career, Preston was already evincing traits that have induced some modern researchers to conclude that there are “unresolved paradoxes” in his theology. Certain of these traits concern the atonement and the gospel “offer.” It emerges from the evidence Dr. Moore presents that right in the early trajectory of Preston’s career “he was becoming more and more sensitive to Arminian criticisms and, endeavouring to follow that *via media* of least offence, was losing the stark simplicity of Elizabethan formulations.” This meant that on matters like reprobation for instance, “Preston was now caught on the horns of an unsolvable paradox,” for he was teaching that whilst “God *desires* to save the reprobate through the free offer” yet “*simultaneously* God *purposes* to increase their damnation through that very same free offer” (p. 139; italics mine).⁹

It is in chapter 7 that Dr. Moore pursues the origins of Preston’s modified orthodoxy. Here we find the quiet and, it must be said, virtually surreptitious workings of two eminent “Calvinist” churchmen, Archbishop Ussher of Ireland and John Davenant, sometime Bishop of Salisbury. From the later writings of another “universalist,” Richard Baxter, it is possible to trace a line of evidence that links these two men closely together, and also with Preston. According to Baxter, it was Ussher who brought both Davenant and Preston into a belief in “universal redemption.” We are introduced at this point to a private letter on the extent of the atonement written by Ussher and circulated quietly amongst what was evidently a cartel of ecclesiastics amenable to Ussher’s views. Written in March 1618, a few months before the convening of the Synod of Dordt, it expresses Ussher’s “middle way” doctrine of “hypothetical universalism,” in which he “traced the extreme absurdity of the doctrine of definite atonement.” Ussher apparently did not want this published and lamented that copies of it had been circulated to so many (pp. 175ff.). It had its effects without doubt. And it is known that the majority of the English delegation to the Synod of Dordt had espoused Ussher’s conclusions. And they had done so prior to this letter. Dr. Moore goes on at length to unfold a fascinating concatenation of evidence which it is impossible to consider fully here. Ussher, it seems, could be something of an enigma, at least on certain points. Whilst in 1627

⁹Anticipations of Cornelius Van Til, it would seem!

he could be found publicly opposing “five-point Arminianism” against those men who had embarrassed Preston at the York House Conference, yet in other quarters he could be found giving expressions that gave the Arminians cause to believe that he was basically espousing the same doctrines as they. Interesting too is the evidence introduced in a footnote that Bishop Brian Walton (who later in the seventeenth century was to oppose Dr. John Owen over matters of the transmission of the biblical text) claimed, shortly after Ussher’s death in 1656, that ultimately “Ussher finally renounced the doctrines of Geneva” and espoused “resistible grace in the manner of Bishop Overall” (a pronounced Arminian), and also “came to deny absolute reprobation” (p. 179, n. 32).¹⁰

This theology, gestating in the ranks of the English established church, rubbed off on those under Ussher’s influence, principal alumni being first John Davenant and then Preston. There are ramifications traced out here that extend right into the Synod of Dordt, at which gathering the English delegation quite distinctly tried to water down the Calvinism of the Synod and, to some extent at least, succeeded. Davenant, one of the leading English delegates, would later write in his *Works* that “there is a universal propensity in God to save every man, if he should believe in Christ,” and that the death of Christ “was capable of application to Judas” and “no one is actually reconciled to God by the work of Christ alone” (pp. 190, 191, 194)!

Dr. Moore gives us a careful analysis and critique of Davenant’s theology, isolating the logical inconsistencies therein, and drawing attention to some such significant evidence as that Davenant taught the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. Another Dordt delegate, Samuel Ward, also taught the same, and he was “counselled by Davenant” to “keep [such views] quiet” at Dordt, so that the Arminians would not be given any advantage (pp. 194-195, n. 109)! Elsewhere we find that Davenant “more than once paraphrases [Romans 9:18] to say that God ‘hath mercy on whom he will, and whom he will he *leaves hardened*’” (p. 207; italics Moore’s).¹¹ Again, Davenant argued that “saving grace” was “given to the non-elect who finally despise it” (p. 208). On the matter of the nature of the gospel promise, Davenant is

¹⁰Dr. Moore himself takes Clausen’s viewpoint that Ussher’s deathbed “conversion” is probably fictitious. But if so, yet it still does throw sharply into relief the proclivities of Ussher’s doctrines to engender Arminian speculations like this.

¹¹Davenant evinces what Dr. Moore describes as a tendency to “downplay the active divine hardening of the reprobate under the preaching of the gospel” (p. 207).

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explicit: in contrast to Perkins, he claims that the gospel promise is conditional and universal (p. 204).

These three men, Ussher, Davenant and Preston, says Dr. Moore, “strongly influenced each other.” Preston was one of Ussher’s admirers and correspondents. Davenant was “on close terms of intimacy” with Ussher. And what emerges clearly and importantly out of this whole business is that “Ussher consciously believed that his resultant position of hypothetical universalism was a *new position for his contemporaries, and not generally held at that time*” (italics mine).

The rest is, as they say, history. Dr. Moore concludes his chapter 7 saying that “Davenant, as well as significantly softening the final form of the *Canons of Dordt*, had, along with Ward, *considerably influenced the other members of the British delegation away from their initial defence of particular redemptionism*. With theologians as influential and respected as this British delegation now commending Bishop Ussher’s hypothetical universalism, the credibility and attraction of the position became a widespread reality in the Jacobean church” (pp. 212-213; italics mine).

In his final conclusions in the last chapter of his tome, Dr. Moore draws attention to the relationships between English and French “hypothetical universalism,” the latter more commonly denominated “Amyraldianism.” A *prima facie* similarity is evident betwixt these two, sufficient to have such a universalist as Richard Baxter eulogising both factions. However, Dr. Moore isolates significant differences as well as the similarities and notes that the contextualization historically of the two movements necessitated the differences. How the state church feature affected English Calvinist theology in this vital and formative period is well brought out. It explains a lot. One can see here the origins of what began as a reaction against the enforced paedo-baptism of the Church of England and developed into the founding of the modern baptist-immersionist cause. One can see also the beginning of the Puritan reaction against the train of Romanist-orientated ecclesiastics that stepped into the wake of Preston and Davenant, ecclesiastics administering the “sovereign drug, Arminianism” whose entry into higher ecclesiastical preferment was now well facilitated by the “hypothetical universalism” of their precursors. Inch by inch, decade by decade, theological nuance by theological nuance, the Church of England was being surreptitiously guided back to a course headed to Rome, and it was the Genevan-Perkinsian Puritan resurgence of the seventeenth century that derailed this particular hijacking and set it back three hundred years and more, giving to the world, as it did so, the monumental *Westminster Standards*.

For nigh another 400 years, the half-baked reformation of the Church of England has blundered on. Quasi-Arminianism, Amyraldianism, and outright Arminianism has characterised most of its best adherents since the times of Preston. One sees it emerging in nineteenth-century Anglican evangelicalism, where the Calvin Translation Society tampered with the renderings of Calvin in their translations of his Old Testament commentaries. One sees it in such a stalwart as Bishop Ryle. And, of course, in the eighteenth century, the Wesley brothers picked up virtually the bulk of their doctrinal peculiarities from the same source. More than one researcher has drawn a line from Davenant and Preston, through Baxter and the Wesleys, to modern times. As Dr. Moore states, they have also endeavoured to include Calvin himself in this line, a thesis which he rightly asserts has “backfired.” In respect of this, in his foreword to the book, Dr. Carl Trueman rightly says, “Dr. Moore dispatches to the ash can of history two of the central theses of the ‘Calvin against the Calvinists’ argument, as found in the influential work of R. T. Kendall” (p. x).

I must emphasise that the foregoing is but a scant sampling of the profundities of the volume under review, and I urge the reader to obtain his own copy and to study it deeply. This book should be on every minister’s urgent reading list. It should be on the shelves of every seminary and university library, and should be required reading in historical theology for every ministerial candidate. But more, though it is an academic work, it is so well written that it is within the capacity of the layman to follow its course and understand its thesis. Any person with Christian convictions ought to tackle it. It is, as I asserted earlier, a landmark volume, one which should issue vital corrections to our modern so-called Calvinist consensus in theology and practice. The time has come for us to return to the biblical and Genevan Reformation.