

JOHN CALVIN ON ‘BEFORE ALL AGES’

Paul Helm

Summary

This brief paper argues that John Calvin’s exegesis of πρὸ χρόνων αἰωνίων in 2 Timothy 1:9 and Titus 1:2 provides no reason for thinking that he rejected the Augustinian account of God’s timeless eternity. On the contrary, there is clear evidence in the Institutes that he took Augustine’s view. His exegesis concerns whether the phrase means ‘before time’ (as he thinks is the case in 2 Tim. 1:9) or ‘a very long time ago’ (its meaning in Tit. 1:2).

I. Introduction

The opening words of Professor Henri Blocher’s paper ‘Yesterday, Today, Forever: Time, Times, Eternity in Biblical Perspective’ are

Calvin, St. Augustine’s devotee and putative heir, dared to disapprove of his Master’s endeavours on time and eternity; the bishop of Hippo wasted his energy in a ‘subtle dispute’ that ‘does not fit St. Paul’s intention’.¹

By this Blocher evidently means us to understand that Calvin took a different view of God’s relation to time than Augustine’s conviction that God is ‘outside’ time, or that he exists timelessly. For evidence in support of this claim, Blocher refers to Calvin’s commentaries on 2 Timothy 1:9 and Titus 1:2. He adds in a footnote, paraphrasing Calvin (as he believes), that Augustine ‘inflicts upon himself extraordinary torments’ when he tries to understand the phrase ‘eternal times’. I shall try to show that the evidence in fact goes the other way, that Calvin definitively endorsed Augustine’s view on God’s relation to time (namely that God is timeless, or that he exists outside time) in the *Institutes*, and that the passages in the Pastoral Epistles to which Blocher refers are concerned with different issues.

¹ *TynB* 52.2 (2001) 183.

Time and Eternity in the Institutes

Calvin makes it clear in the *Institutes* that he is committed to the view that God is simple ('a simple, single essence'). But he not only adheres to a version of the idea of divine simplicity, he is an eternalist; that is, he holds that God exists beyond or outside time. The two views go nicely together; perhaps divine simplicity entails timeless eternity, though Calvin does not argue this. Nonetheless, he clearly affirms both positions. Here is a clear statement from Calvin of the Augustinian view of God and time

When we attribute foreknowledge to God, we mean that all things always were, and perpetually remain, under his eyes, so that to his knowledge there is nothing future or past, but all things are present. And they are present in such a way that he not only conceives them through ideas, as we have before us those things which our minds remember, but he truly looks upon them and discerns them as things placed before him. And this foreknowledge is extended throughout the universe to every creature.²

To God there is no future and past, but all things are present to him, so that even though we are constrained to use a term like 'foreknowledge', with its temporal connotation, God's knowledge is not before or earlier than the occurrence of what he knows; he knows all things in an immediate fashion. The same view is expressed by Calvin in connection with the Trinity. Writing of the 'order' of the persons in the Trinity he says

Although the eternity of the Father is also the eternity of the Son and the Spirit, since God could never exist apart from his wisdom and power, and we must not seek in eternity a before or an after, nevertheless the observance of an order is not meaningless or superfluous, when the Father is thought of as first, then from him the Son, and finally from both the Spirit.³

The ideas that in divine eternity all things are immediately present to God's mind, and that there is no before or after is pure Augustinianism, that of Book XI of the *Confessions* and elsewhere, as epitomised in these statements, for example

What times existed which were not brought into being by you? Or how could they pass if they never had existence? Since, therefore, you are the cause of all times, if any time existed before you made heaven and earth, how can anyone say that you abstained from working.⁴

Let us call this view 'Augustinian eternalism'.

² Calvin, *Inst.* III.21.5.

³ Calvin, *Inst.* I.13.18.

⁴ St. Augustine, *Confessions* (trans. Henry Chadwick; Oxford: World's Classics, 1992) 229.

'Before All Ages' in the Pastoral Epistles

Let us now turn to the two passages from the Pastoral Epistles which Blocher cites to support his view that Calvin disapproves of Augustinian eternalism. First, for expository convenience, Titus 1:2, which refers to faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time. The phrase *πρὸ χρόνων αἰώνων* is sometimes also translated by 'before the world began' or 'before all ages'. However, it is Calvin's understanding that this verse, with its reference to the promise of God, cannot here, in this passage, refer to a pre-temporal or pre-cosmic decree of God. His argument is that a promise requires a promisee, and since before time there was no one for God to promise to, the phrase often translated 'before all ages' or 'before the world began' must here be understood to mean 'a very long time ago'. Calvin locates that time as the time of the promise made to Abraham. Here are his words in full

As Augustine translated the words, *pro chronon aionion* to mean—not 'the times of ages' but 'eternal times', he gives himself great uneasiness about 'the eternity of time' till at length he explains 'eternal times' as denoting those which go beyond all antiquity. As to the meaning, he and Jerome and other commentators agree, that God determined, before the creation of the world, to give that salvation which he hath now manifested by the gospel. Thus Paul would have used the word *promise* incorrectly instead of *decree*; for before men existed there was no one to whom he could promise.

For this reason, while I do not reject this exposition, yet when I take a close survey of the whole matter, I am constrained to adopt a different interpretation—that eternal life was promised to men many ages ago, and not only to those who lived at that time, but also for our own age. It was not for the benefit of Abraham alone, but with a view to all who should live after him, that God said, 'In thy seed shall all nations be blessed' (Gen. xxii. 18). Nor is this inconsistent with what he says, in another sense, (2 Tim. i.9) that salvation was given to men 'before the times of ages'. The meaning of the word is still the same in both passages; for, since the Greek word *aion* denotes an uninterrupted succession of time from the beginning to the end of the world, Paul declares, in that passage, that salvation was given or decreed for the elect of God before times began to flow. But because in this passage he treats of the promise, he does not include all ages, so as to lead us back beyond the creation of the world, but shews that many ages have elapsed since salvation was promised.

If any person prefer to view 'the times of ages' as a concise expression for the ages themselves, he is at liberty to do so. But because salvation was given by the eternal election of God before it was promised, the act of giving salvation is put in that passage (2 Tim. i.9) before all ages, and therefore we must supply the word *all*. But here it means nothing more

than that the promise is more ancient than a long course of ages, because it began immediately after the creation of the world.⁵

So Calvin is contrasting the meaning of the phrase *πρὸ χρόνων αἰωνίων* as it occurs in two passages. In Titus 1:2, the phrase must mean, he thinks, 'a very long time ago', because for God to have promised a promisee must already exist. But in 2 Timothy 1:9 there is no reference to a promise made by God but to a divine gift. There is no need to locate that gift in time. (Calvin does not consider the objection that if a promise requires a promisee who exists so a gift requires a recipient who exists.) Calvin's (briefer) comment on 2 Timothy 1:9 bears this out his interpretation of Titus 1:2

He (viz. Paul) employs this phrase (viz. *pro chronon aionion*) in the same sense in which he elsewhere speaks of the uninterrupted succession of years from the foundation of the world (Tit. i.2). For that ingenious reasoning which Augustine conducts in many passages is totally different from Paul's design. The meaning therefore is,—'Before times began to take their course from all past ages'.⁶

This reference to Augustine's 'ingenious reasoning' is evidently (*inter alia*) to Augustine's *The City of God*, where Augustine writes

What ages passed ere man's creation, I confess I know not: but sure I am, no creature is co-eternal with the Creator. The apostle speaks of eternal times, not to come, but (which is more wondrous) past. For us he says: 'under the hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, hath promised before all eternity of time; but His word He hath manifested in time' (Tit. 1:2, 3). Behold, he talks of time's eternity past, yet makes it not co-eternal with God. For he not only existed Himself before all eternity, but promised eternal life before it, which He manifested 'in His due time'. What other is this than "His Word"? For that is 'eternal life'. But how did He promise it unto men that were not before eternity, save that in His eternity and His co-eternal Word He had predestinated what was in time to be manifested?⁷

Had Calvin wished to dissent from Augustine's view that God is eternal, not in time, then this short passage provides him with at least two opportunities to do so. For Augustine here says that the Creator is eternal and that times eternal past are nevertheless not co-eternal with God. But what concerns Calvin is not Augustine's general view of God's relation to time but the (surely obscure) idea

⁵ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon* (tr. William Pringle; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 284.

⁶ Calvin, *Commentaries*, 196.

⁷ Augustine, *The City of God*, Book XII, Chapter XVI (London: Dent, 1945). Other places where St. Augustine discusses the interpretation of the two verses are *On Genesis against Manichees* 1:2:3–4, *Against Priscillian* 5:6, and *On Diverse Questions* 72. I am grateful to Professor Tony Lane for drawing my attention to these.

that there were 'eternal times' before man's creation, that time has an 'eternity past'. This is not only inherently obscure, it is also inconsistent with Augustine's position elsewhere in *The City of God*, in the *Confessions* and elsewhere, that the creation is marked by temporality, because time is the measure of change, and that there is a first moment of time.

Faced with the words *πρὸ χρόνων αἰώνιων* there is, in Calvin's view a simple choice; either the phrase refers to a very long time ago, the time of Abraham, or it refers to God's pre-temporal decree (the view which Augustine finally adopts in this passage), a view which Calvin does not in general dissent from ('I do not reject this exposition') but which he does not think that this passage actually teaches.

By contrast in Calvin's view when the same phrase occurs in 2 Timothy 1:9 it does not mean 'a very long time ago' but 'before time began', itself a characteristically Augustinian idea. In his comments on this passage Calvin is making the same complaint against Augustine as before, in reference to the bishop of Hippo's comment on Titus 1:2, not to his comment on 2 Timothy 1:9 to which Calvin makes no direct reference here.

These interpretations of Calvin are borne out by what he says in his *Sermons* on the same verses, though hardly surprisingly his words here do not contain any explicit reference to Augustine.

On 2 Timothy 1:9 Calvin says

(Paul) saith that this grace of salvation was given us. And how? Before all times saith he. We must go beyond all nature if we will know, how we are saved, and by what cause, and from whence it cometh.⁸

And on Titus 1:2

Moreover, Saint Paul speaketh here of the promise of God which was made before all times, and of that that is shewed us in fit and convenient season. As touching the promise, some take it for the election which he made of all the faithful, as we saw, he said to Timothy, that life was given them before all everlastingness: but because this word *promise*, is an assurance of men to whom God speaketh, I doubt not but Saint Paul's meaning here is by *everlasting times*, to signify unto us a long possession. For we know that God hath witnessed to us even from the beginning of the world, that he should be our Saviour, and therewithal gave us a pledge of it, even the Redeemer, whom he committed to us; he standeth in that purpose still.⁹

⁸ *Sermons of M. John Calvin on the Epistles of S. Paul to Timothy and Titus* (London, 1579, facsimile reprint, Edinburgh, Banner of Truth Trust, 1983) 712. The English spelling of this quotation and the next have been modernised.

⁹ Calvin, *Sermons*, 1039.

So, according to Calvin, in Titus 1:2 *πρὸ χρόνων αἰωνίων* refers to the time of God's promise, while in 2 Timothy 1:9 that same phrase refers to God's pre-temporal decree. In neither passage does he directly discuss Augustine's view of God's relation to time, though his reference to God's pre-temporal decree is surely an endorsement of it. He disagreed with Augustine over his interpretation of Titus 1:2, but this disagreement provides us with no evidence that he took exception to Augustine's general position (and that of almost the entire Christian tradition) that God exists timelessly, outside time. Evidence here and elsewhere shows that on the general issue of God's relation to time Calvin was thoroughly and consistently Augustinian.