JOHANNES PISCATOR’S (1546–1625) INTERPRETATION OF CALVIN’S INSTITUTES

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INTRODUCTION

The question of the interpretation of Calvin in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has been in vogue for quite some time. Opposing answers have attempted overarching solutions to the issue. This short essay is inserted in response to such a question but with a more modest objective. It attempts to look at one important Reformed theologian’s condensed version of Calvin’s Institutes and provide comments about its contribution to a post-Reformation controversy. Before the thesis of this essay is stated, two pieces of information are necessary to set the context: First, the importance of this Reformed theologian; and second, Johannes Piscator’s abridgment of Calvin’s Institutes within this genre of writing.

SETTING THE CONTEXT

Piscator as an influential Reformed theologian

Piscator’s contribution to the Reformed tradition comes from his connections with major representatives of this tradition and is transmitted through his influence as a teacher and writer. He was a student of Jerome Zanchi at Strasbourg. In Tübingen, the Lutheran Jakob Andreae introduced him to Calvin’s Institutes and Piscator’s appreciation for the Genevan reformer grew in proportion to his criticism of the Lutheran faith. Throughout his teaching career he was in close contact with figures such as Zacharias Ursinus, Caspar Olevianus, Franciscus Junius, David Pareus, among others. He corresponded frequently with and had the appreciation of Theodore Beza. Piscator was thus part of a strong Reformed lineage.

He was also very influential in his teaching and writings. His forty-one years teaching at the Hohe Schule in Herborn was the occasion for

1 For a vast bibliography on the issue see Muller, “Calvinists I” and “Calvinists II.”
spreading his beliefs. He provided basic theological training for hundreds of students from all parts of Germany, as well as France, Poland, and Hungary. His writings were voluminous and regarded as important contributions to the spread of Calvinism. His translation of the Bible into German was the first complete translation since Martin Luther’s. Another example of his exegetical expertise was his commentaries on every book of the Bible. Later Reformed theologians, such as Petrus van Mastricht, recommended Piscator to their students as a commentator which should be among the first for them to look at. In sum, a theologian like Piscator, with so many connections to Reformed luminaries and with a wide influence through his teaching and writing, makes it important to investigate how he communicates Calvin’s theology.²

Piscator’s Aphorismi within its genre

After highlighting the major networks of influence in which Piscator became involved, it is also necessary to situate his summary of Calvin’s Institutes within the context of this genre. In 1589, Piscator wrote Aphorismi doctrinae christianae ex Institutione Calvini excerpti, a type of summary of Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion in aphorisms.³ The Aphorismi arose out of a course on Calvin’s Institutes in Herborn, originally taught by Caspar Olevianus, which Piscator had to take over after the death of the Heidelberg pastor (1587), three years after the inauguration of the school (1584). Thus, by taking this chair for so many years, Piscator’s work became a major source of spreading Reformed theology to Herborn students. This was possibly the most popular book written by Piscator, with eleven Latin editions from 1589 to 1630 and one English translation in 1596.⁴

Piscator’s Aphorismi is an interesting version of Calvin’s Institutes in comparison with other summaries. Olivier Fatio has analyzed several of these as vehicles of Calvin’s theology especially to laymen and students of

² For more on Piscator’s life, see Georgio Pasore, Oratio Funebris in Obitum Reverendi et Clarissimi Theologi Johannis Piscatoris (Herborn: Muderspachius & Corvinus, 1625); Johann Hermann Steubing, Caspar Olevian; Johannes Piscator (Leipzig: Cnobloch, 1841), 98–117; Frans Lukas Bos, Johann Piscator: Ein Beitrag Zur Geschichte der Reformierten Theologie (Kampen: Kok, [1932]), 9–31.
³ I will be quoting mainly from the third edition (London: Field, 1595) but also from the 11th ed. (Oxford: Lichfield and Cerveine, 1630).