

An Analysis of John Calvin’s Criticism of Premillennialism in *The Institutes*

Dr. Mike Stallard, The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry
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Introduction

Most modern premillennialists speak fondly of the great Reformers of the sixteenth century. Many dispensational premillennialists have often considered themselves heirs of the strong biblical recovery that occurred in those days.¹ In particular, the Reformers had begun to embrace literal, grammatical-historical interpretation of the Bible to a much greater extent than the medieval approach they had inherited. Yet, their implementation of proper hermeneutics was incomplete. This is seen rather easily in the fact that the great Reformers maintained the Augustinian framework for amillennialism. Thus, they held that the Church is the kingdom and promoted supersessionism in which the Church has replaced Israel to the extent that there is no national future for Israel. A more literal understanding of both Old and New Testament texts pushes against this amillennialism that was accepted by both Luther and Calvin.

Premillennialism was the overwhelming view of the kingdom in the early Church.² Over time, due largely to the School of Alexandria in the east and Augustine in the West, amillennialism ruled the church for centuries. However, premillennialism, which never went away completely, was held by a growing number of believers at the time of the Reformation.³ Although a small minority in European Christianity, they nonetheless constituted a serious opposition to Luther and Calvin’s view of the kingdom. As a result, John Calvin attempted to refute premillennialism briefly in *The Institutes*.⁴

Calvin’s Disdain for Premillennialism

¹ Christopher Cone and James I. Fazio, eds, *Forged From Reformation: How Dispensational Thought Advances The Reformed Legacy* (El Cajon, CA: Southern California Seminary Press, 2017).

² Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, (reprint ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 2:614. Schaff strongly notes, “The most striking point in the eschatology of the ante-Nicene age is he prominent chiliasm, or millenarianism, that is the belief of a visible reign of Christ in glory on earth with the risen saints for a thousand years, before the general resurrection and judgment.” This conclusion is disputed by some historians. See Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), 262-64. Nonetheless, the dominance of premillennialism in the early church cannot be understated.

³ Today in North America, premillennialism is the most prevalent view among evangelicals.

⁴ The edition of Calvin’s *Institutes* used in this study is John T. McNeill, ed., *Calvin: The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. 2, translated by Ford Lewis Battles; The Library of Christian Classics, Vol. 21 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960). The shortened common form *The Institutes* or *Institutes* will be used throughout. In the notes we will use the acronym ICR to make the reference easier. The section where Calvin gives his critique of premillennialism is 3.25.5.

Calvin referred to premillennialists with the older term *chiliasts*.⁵ He does not hide his disdain for those who hold to a coming one-thousand-year reign of Christ. The Reformer calls their view a fiction that is “too childish either to need or to be worth a refutation.”⁶ Calvin proceeds to give a full page of repudiation nonetheless. Toward the end of his analysis of premillennialism, he remembers that he said they were not worth responding to and notes, “But let us pass over these triflers, lest, contrary to what we have previously said, we seem to judge their ravings worth refuting.”⁷ The chiliasts bring reproach upon Christ and his kingdom.⁸ They spout “stupid nonsense.” These opponents of Calvin’s view are either “utterly ignorant” or filled with “devious malice.” In the end, Calvin’s assessment is that chiliasts blaspheme God.⁹ So much for collegiality with brothers in Christ who disagree with your position! It is possible that the Reformer believed that many if not all of the premillennialists were unsaved. Calvin’s tone is actually a bit worse than what is found in Origen’s famous statement about the chiliasts in the early third century. At least Origen called chiliasts believers who, however, could not rub two thoughts together (this author’s summary).¹⁰

Just who did Calvin have in mind in these stinging criticisms? Those of us today who are premillennial react to Calvin’s words as if he is painting a caricature of what we really believe. But what is going on in his day that he is countering? There can be little doubt that the chiliasts he is dealing with come from the group the culture called Anabaptists. While not all Anabaptists were premillennial, the majority held that position.¹¹ Calvin married a widow who had been an Anabaptist and carried on many discussions with prominent Anabaptists especially during his stay in Germany from 1538-1541.¹² Calvin responded with sermons and treatises against the Anabaptists dealing with many issues.¹³

⁵ The word *chiliast* refers to the person who holds to chiliasm, the view that Christ is returning to earth to set up a one thousand-year kingdom. This word comes from the Greek word χίλια (*chilia*) for the number one thousand which occurs six times in Rev. 20:1-7. Throughout church history the term *millenarianism* has also been used, but the common term used at the present time is *premillennialism*. These words all refer to the same truth.

⁶ ICR, 995.

⁷ Ibid., 996.

⁸ Ibid., 995.

⁹ Ibid., 996.

¹⁰ Origen, *On the First Principles*, 2.11.2.

¹¹ For a brief summary of Anabaptist views on the Second Coming, see Mike Stallard, “The Eschatology of the Anabaptists,” *Our Hope*; Online; <https://our-hope.org/blog/biblical-studies/systematic-theology/historical-theology/eschatology-of-the-anabaptists>.

¹² Schaff, *History*, 8:363-424.

¹³ John Calvin, *Treatises Against the Anabaptists and Against the Libertines* translated and edited by Benjamin Wirt Farley (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001). One of the problems of historical analysis is that the culture of that day lumped disparate dissident groups under the category of Anabaptists or Re-baptizers. This included more biblical Anabaptists like the Swiss Brethren who broke off from Zwingli, inspirationists including more radical, mystical, and sensationalizing groups such as those involved in the Münster fiasco of 1534-35, and the rationalists like Michael Servetus who were unitarian. For the best historical summary of the various Anabaptist groups, see William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism* (3rd ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996); Hans J. Hillerbrand, ed., *The Reformation: A Narrative History Related by Contemporary Observers and Participants* (Reprint ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), 214-97; Hans J. Hillerbrand, *The World of the Reformation* (Reprint ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), 58-71. It is quite unfortunate that the culture

That John Calvin did not favor the Anabaptists is evident to any cursory reading of his works. From several treatises, three of which were devoted to his perception of the theology of their radical movement, to multiple references and colorful flourishes through his various editions of the Institutes, Calvin appears to have hardly published a single positive word about them. His often pejorative rhetoric about the group at times even rivaled the visceral language regularly used by Martin Luther against his own detractors.¹⁴

It is also tragically true that Calvin colluded in the death of Michael Servetus, a rationalist, although there is great controversy in this matter and in other possible executions with Calvin's blessing.¹⁵

Guilt by Association Argument

Calvin was not above using a guilt by association argument against his theological opponents. One of the plainest examples is his coupling of the so-called error of the chiliasts with pagans who deny the resurrection. The two issues on the face of things do not seem to be related. Chiliasts of that time period did not normally deny the resurrection as did pagans. The Reformer's argument reminds of one of my relatives decades ago telling me they could never be a premillennialist because that's what Jehovah's Witnesses believe! Calvin writes this way in a larger section on the doctrine of the resurrection which is normally quite good. However, he notes that the denial of the resurrection had "crept into the church itself, for the Sadducees dared publicly assert that there is no resurrection, in fact, that souls are mortal."¹⁶

Two further issues are presented by Calvin relative to pagan denial of the resurrection. First, he argues that the custom of burial should convince pagans about the truth of resurrection: "and God willed that the same custom [burial] remain among the Gentiles so that the image of the resurrection set before them might shake off their drowsiness."¹⁷ The problem with this is that the eastern practice of cremation, while not popular, was fully known in the

labeled anyone who did not follow either Roman Catholicism or the main Reformers as Anabaptists without proper qualifications.

¹⁴ Brian C. Brewer, "'Those Satanic Anabaptists': Calvin, Soul Sleep, and the Search for an Anabaptist Nemesis" in *Calvin and the Early Reformation* edited by Brian C. Brewer and David M. Whitford (Boston, MA: Brill, 2020), 125.

¹⁵ Schaff, *History*, 8:681-798; Roland H. Bainton, *Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus 1511-1553* (Revised ed., n.p.: Blackstone, 2005); Arnold Huijgen, "The Challenge of Heresy: Servetus, Stancaró, and Castellio" in *John Calvin in Context* edited by R. Ward Holder (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 258-66.

¹⁶ ICR, 995. This statement shows that Calvin believed that the Church existed prior to Pentecost. Most likely, he holds that Israel is the OT Church. The word *Church* refers to the collection of the saved of all ages or at least since Abraham in keeping with the later expressions of covenant theology.

¹⁷ Ibid.

West by the sixteenth century.¹⁸ It is not clear that all the Gentiles had the image of the resurrection portrayed for them through burial of the dead. Calvin is apparently analyzing the issue from within his own culture without consideration of others. He then moves from one issue to the other in the following way: “But Satan has not only befuddled men’s senses to make them bury with the corpses the memory of resurrection; he has also attempted to corrupt this part of the doctrine with various falsifications that he might at length destroy it...but a little later there followed the chiliasts, who limited the kingdom to a thousand years.”¹⁹ Thus, in some way, pagan denial of the resurrection is in Calvin’s mind similar to chiliasts limiting the kingdom of God.

Premillennialists Limit the Kingdom to a Thousand Years

To accuse premillennialists of limiting the kingdom to a thousand years seems a bit odd to Bible-believing Christians who hold that position today. Premillennialists believe that, after the millennium, God’s kingdom continues with God, Christ, and the saints reigning forever (Dan. 7:13-14, 18; Rev. 22:5). Nonetheless, Calvin fleshes out his allegation with several lines of thought as he responds to his understanding of what the Anabaptist chiliasts of his day were teaching. We will address Calvin’s comments under four categories: (1) Revelation 20, (2) the charge of universalism, (3) the immortality of believers, and (4) eternal punishment.²⁰

Revelation 20

First, he notes that the chiliasts misunderstand the key passage of Revelation 20:1-7: “For the number ‘one thousand’ does not apply to the eternal blessedness of the church but only to the various disturbances that awaited the church, while still toiling on earth.”²¹ Apparently, Calvin does not want the debate to be about whether the term *one thousand* points to the eternal destiny of the church or to simply a one-thousand-year period. His comments suggest that he does not believe that the Anabaptist chiliasts are interpreting the thousand years as symbolic of an indefinite period of time. That would not fit his complaint that they limited the kingdom to a thousand years. Instead, following the Augustinian model for history, he places the thousand years, which he holds as an indefinite period of time, before the Second Coming and makes it coextensive with what most premillennialists call the Church Age.

¹⁸ The travels of Marco Polo (1254-1324) were being disseminated in Western Europe by the early 1300s. He regularly mentions cremation of the dead in his *The Travels of Marco Polo*.

¹⁹ ICR, 995.

²⁰ Ford Lewis Battles organizes Calvin’s discussion of the error of the chiliasts into three categories: Revelation 20, a terminal thousand-year reign means Christ’s kingdom is terminal; God’s justice and majesty are eternal. See Ford Lewis Battles, *Analysis of the Institutes of the Christian Religion of John Calvin* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1980), 275.

²¹ Ibid.

He gives no attempt to exposit the passage in context and merely states the position. It is unfortunate that Calvin did not leave us a commentary on the book of Revelation.

Since the Reformer does not tell us his basis of interpretation on Revelation 20, one can only surmise the probability that he follows the traditional Augustinian recapitulation view of the Apocalypse.²² This view is still a major approach to the book of Revelation used by many modern amillennialists.²³ Revelation is broken down into seven literary sections (1-3, 4-7, 8-11, 12-14, 15-16, 17-19, and 20-22) each of which covers or recapitulates information about the present age. Conveniently, there is a section break between chapters 19 & 20 which prevents the Second Coming (chapter 19) from preceding the thousand-year reign of Christ (chapter 20). This overall understanding of the book of Revelation cannot be maintained for several reasons:

1. It does not fit with the outline of the book itself given in 1:19. This verse highlights the three segments of the book: the things which you have seen (the portrait of Christ in chapter 1), the things which are (the seven letters in chapters 2-3), and the things which will take place after these things (chapters 4-22). This outline does not fit the amillennial recapitulation view of the book.
2. The frequent use of the Greek word *καὶ* (*and*), sometimes called *kaimeter*, demonstrates the chronological flow of the narrative of the book which goes against the amillennial recapitulation view.²⁴ If the entire book is flooded by the use of narrative language and flow (although admitting to possible interludes), it is impossible to see the book as divided up into seven sections each of which presents the Church Age.
3. There is a unity to chapters 19-20, specifically the destruction of the unholy trinity of Antichrist, the False Prophet, and Satan. To break these chapters apart leads to distortion and a non-contextual understanding.
4. There is the ever-present theological problem of the binding of Satan in Rev 20:2-3. While various answers have been given by amillennialists, it is virtually impossible to say that Satan is bound in the present age. During the Church Age, the devil attacks believers (Rev. 2:9; 3:9; Eph. 6:11-12; 1 Pet. 5:8) and deceives unbelievers (Acts 13:10; 2 Cor. 4:3-4).

²² This approach is sometimes called *progressive parallelism*.

²³ See Mike Stallard, "A Review and Refutation of Sam Storms' *Kingdom Come: The Amillennial Alternative*," (presented at the Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics, Calvary Bible College and Theological Seminary, Kansas City, MO, September 2014). A version of this article was also given at the Pre-Trib Study Group. The paper is available at the website (www.pre-trib.org).

²⁴ Edward Hindson, *The Book of Revelation: Unlocking the Future* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2002), 9. Using Logos Bible Software, the word *kai* is found 1,123 times in the book of Revelation in NA28.

In light of these reasons, the interpreter should avoid using the amillennial recapitulation view of the Apocalypse.

The Charge of Universalism

The second line of thought in Calvin's discussion of chiliasm's limiting of the kingdom is found when he shifts from the statement on Revelation 20 to this perplexing affirmation: "On the contrary, all Scripture proclaims that there will be no end to the blessedness of the elect or the punishment of the wicked."²⁵ Geneva's spiritual leader suggests a couple of things. First, he may indicate that the chiliasts ended the ultimate happiness of the saved after the thousand years are over (this will be addressed more fully in the next section). In Calvin's mind, perhaps the chiliasts ended the history of man at the conclusion of the millennium. This is probably a straw man since the very thought of such teaching is absurd, even for those in the Radical Reformation.

More importantly, Calvin's focus on "no end...of the punishment of the wicked" points to the charge that chiliasts of his day were teaching universalism, that everyone gets saved in the end. There is no hint in the interaction that the chiliasts were teaching some form of annihilationism. Instead, the focus is on God's ultimate decision to end judgment so that all creatures enjoy the benefits of salvation. The editor of *The Institutes* lists four Anabaptist teachers who held to universalism that Calvin has in mind: John (Hans) Denck, Balthasar Hubmaier, Sebastian Franck, and Melchoir Hofmann.²⁶ There are two factors in assessing this possibility. One is that the Anabaptists tended to accept unlimited atonement. Calvin would perhaps see this as universal salvation since atonement in his limited sense is automatically applied once it is supplied (to the elect). Concerning Hans Denck, Estep notes, "Denck did not teach that all people would eventually be saved. Instead, he taught that Christ's death was an atonement sufficient for all humankind but efficacious only to the believer. His theology is not so much an echo of Origen as an anticipation of Jacobus Arminius."²⁷ Denck himself made the following statement:

You might say, 'Yes he may well have died out of love, but not for all, but only for some.' Answer: since love in him was perfect, which hates or envies no one, but receives everyone, though we were all his enemies, he could not exclude anyone...Should it not be true, nonetheless, that he died for all even though not all were saved?²⁸

²⁵ The editor adds the verses Matt. 25:41, 46 to this statement.

²⁶ ICR, 996.

²⁷ Estep, *Anabaptist Story*, 111.

²⁸ Morwenna Ludlow, "Why Was Hans Denck Thought To Be a Universalist?" *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 55 (April 2004): 261. Ludlow cites the following reference for the quote, but I have not found it in my English edition: Edward J. Furcha and Ford Lewis Battles, eds., *Selected Writings of Hans Denck* translated by Edward J. Furcha (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 1976), 201. The pagination in my copy only goes to page 156 including endnotes.

It seems from such language that Denck was simply arguing for unlimited atonement and not universalism.²⁹ If this is the area that Calvin is thinking through about various chiliasts, he certainly does not analyze their teaching about the atonement based upon their categories but based upon his own.

On the other hand, could it be that there were Anabaptist chiliasts who clearly taught universalism? Article 17 of the Lutheran Augsburg Confession of Faith (1530) appears to generalize that Anabaptists were universalists: “They condemn the Anabaptists, who think that there will be an end to the punishments of condemned men and devils.”³⁰ We will limit our discussion here once again to Hans Denck, a leading Anabaptist in Southern Germany whom Estep defended against the charge as shown above.³¹ In the historical literature, Denck is almost always the chief Anabaptist poster child raised in this discussion.³² Often, his is presented as a newer version of the third-century universalism of Origen. Modern Universalists themselves claim Denck as one of their own.³³ The Christian Universalist Association promotes a statement supposedly by Denck on the final end of sin: “For sin is over against God to be reckoned as nothing; and however great it might be, God can, will, and indeed already has, overcome it for Himself to His own eternal praise without harm for any creatures.”³⁴ Perhaps the phrase “without harm for any creatures” is the language suggesting universalism, although something stronger would be clearer. In addition, the same group cites and debates a poem written by the alleged universalist about ultimate reconciliation:

Oh, who will give me a voice that I may cry aloud to the whole world
that God, the All Highest,
is in the deepest abyss within us
and is waiting for us to return to Him

²⁹ In this matter, Denck is clear and unambiguous: “Through His suffering Christ has made satisfaction for the sin of all men.” See Hans Denck, “Recantation” in *Selected Writings*, 124.

³⁰ Article 17 is entitled “Of Christ’s Return to Judgment.” The article also condemns chiliasm with the somewhat enigmatic statement: “They condemn also others who are now spreading certain Jewish opinions, that before the resurrection of the dead the godly shall take possession of the kingdom of the world, the ungodly being everywhere suppressed.” See Book of Concord, online; <https://bookofconcord.org/augsburg-confession/article-xvii/>; accessed 13 November 2021.

³¹ Hubmaier may have made the editor’s list because he baptized Denck. I have not found any universalism in Hubmaier’s teaching. However, it appears that Hubmaier was not a chiliast (“Hans Hut” in *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*; Accessed 20 November 2021). While I have read many Anabaptist writings, I have certainly not read them all. Therefore, my analysis is preliminary at this point.

³² In his own day, Denck (who died in 1527) was the victim of false attacks without faithful analysis of his writings as a formal evaluation of his particular writing titled *Confession* demonstrates: “A brief analysis bears out this observation, for the *Evaluation* by the preachers shows clearly that they must have responded to a caricature of the man rather than to specific matters he stated in the document” (Furcha, “Preface” in *Selected Writings*, 4).

³³ See the summary article entitled “The History of Universalism (Part Two),” Christian Universalist Association; online; <https://christianuniversalist.org/resources/articles/history-of-universalism-part-2/>; Accessed 13 November 2021.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Oh, my God, how does it happen in this poor old world,
 that You are so great and yet nobody finds You,
 that You call so loudly and nobody hears You,
 that You are so near and nobody feels You,
 that You give Yourself to everybody and nobody knows Your name!"³⁵

Does this poem actually teach a universalist perspective? Perhaps the two expressions "God...is waiting for us to return to Him" and "You give Yourself to everybody" can be stretched to entertain thoughts that everyone is saved in the end. The poem, however, does not clearly express what the universalists wish it did.

It is uncertain what universalism has to do with a belief in a premillennial coming of Christ to earth. After all, Origen (d. 254) is the preeminent example in church history of a universalist, but he was amillennial not premillennial. The two issues are simply not linked in the way presented by Calvin. It is possible that the terms *Anabaptist* and *chiliast* were just grab-bag labels for all alleged heresies from Calvin's point of view. Further, writers like Denck at certain individual points have affinity with Pelagius and Origen even though their overall theological system was different. This would have turned the Reformers against them even if the evaluation was confused. After Calvin mentions the problem with the thousand years, his mind goes to other areas of doctrine he thought totally wrong in the same group of people. However, the fact remains that a belief that all men will be saved has no logical connection with chiliasts limiting the kingdom of God. If anything, one could argue that the kingdom is expanded in terms of the number of people who would enjoy it, but Calvin is focused on time.

The Immortality of Believers

After this terse statement about universalism, Calvin returns to the issue of the thousand years. Earlier we noted that Calvin had hinted absurdly that the chiliasts end the positive blessings for believers at the end of the thousand years. In some way, they do not continue into eternity with the blessings of God. Now, he states clearly and strongly that this is exactly what he believes about chiliasts! Note his words: "Those who assign the children of God a thousand years in which to enjoy the inheritance of the life to come do not realize how much reproach they are casting upon Christ and His Kingdom."³⁶ How do they cast such reproach? Calvin goes on to state his main concern: "For if they do not put on immortality, then Christ himself, to whose glory they shall be transformed, has not been received into undying glory."³⁷ The key word is *immortality*. If the thousand years is all that is to come, then believers do not possess immortality. Nothing else makes sense. In the next section after the discussion of

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ ICR, 995.

³⁷ Ibid. At this point the editor suggests the passage 1 Cor. 15:13ff.

chiliasm, Calvin addresses resurrection of the flesh and immortality of the soul. He considers the heresy of those who denied the future bodily resurrection of believers and accepted only a spiritual body throughout eternity.³⁸ In his thoughts here about chiliasts, Calvin's mind is moving in the same general territory. Calvin's misunderstanding here could be why he conjoins pagan denial of resurrection with the chiliasts. The immortality of believers is at stake in his mind.

Beyond that, Calvin teaches that limiting the kingdom to a thousand years is a grave injustice toward God and Christ: "If their blessedness is to have an end, then Christ's Kingdom, on whose firmness it depends, is but temporary. In short, either such persons are utterly ignorant of everything divine or they are trying by a devious malice to bring to nought all the grace of God and power of Christ, the fulfillment of which is realized only when sin is blotted out, death swallowed up, and everlasting life fully restored!"³⁹ According to this statement, Calvin criticizes the chiliasts for making Christ's kingdom temporary, nullifying the grace of God and the power of Christ, and destroying the concept of everlasting life where sin and death are removed. The only way to take Calvin's statement is that he thought chiliasts ended the future of believers at the end of the millennium. In essence, Calvin says that the chiliasts cannot be right because everyone knows God's kingdom lasts forever. What is our assessment of Calvin's analysis? On the face of it, it does not apply to the premillennialism that has been taught throughout church history even into modern and postmodern times. Based upon current premillennial teaching, Calvin's analysis is mostly a caricature. I have found no premillennialists of any time in history who have taught that the thousand years ends the blessedness of the saved and stops the ongoing kingdom of God and Christ. Perhaps some sect or individual taught it, but I have not seen it. In this light, Calvin's assessment remains problematic.

Eternal Punishment

In the next and last section of Calvin's discussion of chiliasts, he returns to their alleged belief that there is an end to the punishment of the wicked: "Even a blind man can see what stupid nonsense these people talk who are afraid of attributing excessive cruelty to God if the wicked be consigned to eternal punishment."⁴⁰ This is probably a continuation of the issue of universalism discussed above.⁴¹ However, if the millennium is the end of it all for the chiliasts, then both the saved and lost cease to exist. That appears to be what Calvin is thinking about chiliast doctrine on this point. It is not clear, however, if the Reformer views the chiliasts as denying any form of hell as too cruel or if they are denying the *eternality* of the punishment as excessive cruelty. He may be leaning toward the latter, since he goes on to say that the chiliasts teach that eternal hell would make God unjust since "their sins, they say, are temporal."⁴²

³⁸ The editor suggests that this is probably a reference to the unitarian Laelius Socinus (ICR, 996).

³⁹ ICR, 996.

⁴⁰ ICR, 996.

⁴¹ Calvin seems to write in a sort of spiral in his section on chiliasts, coming back to issues previously raised.

⁴² ICR, 996.

Calvin responds correctly I believe to this argument when he notes, “God’s majesty, and also his justice, which they have violated by sinning, are eternal.” As a result, eternal punishment is not out of line and does not make God cruel and unjust. The language of the Reformer is quite strong as he speaks of the value of God versus the value of one individual soul: “This blasphemy is not to be borne, when God’s majesty is so little esteemed, when the contempt of it is valued less than the loss of one soul.”⁴³

The debates over eternal punishment have plagued the Church for almost two thousand years. Even modern day professing evangelicals have an array of positions on the subject.⁴⁴ Calvin’s own view on the matter in this section simply affirms the fact of eternal punishment but does not deal with its nature. In a later section of the *Institutes* he speaks about the lot of the reprobate and describes his understanding of the seriousness of the judgment:

Now, because no description can deal adequately with the gravity of God’s vengeance against the wicked, their torments and tortures are figuratively expressed to us by physical things, that is, by darkness, weeping, and gnashing of teeth, unquenchable fire, an undying worm gnawing at the heart. By such expressions the Holy Spirit certainly intended to confound all our senses with dread...As by such details we should be enabled in some degree to conceive the lot of the wicked, so we ought especially to fix our thoughts upon this: how wretched it is to be cut off from all fellowship with God.⁴⁵

Thus, Calvin holds to the metaphorical view of hell. However, he still sees the experience of hell by unbelievers to be so beyond the pale that its pain and suffering is horribly real. This section is the least egregious part of Calvin’s overall critique of chiliasm. However, it still wrongfully assumes that chiliasts of his day generally taught the end of eternal punishment in some way. The teachings of the Anabaptists on this score are not precise and developed. In general, most Anabaptists did not dwell on their eschatology, but focused on the present time and issues of Christian living. Thus, Calvin is out of bounds if he is dealing with an unnamed individual but applies his analysis across the board for all chiliasts.

Summary and Takeaways

We will finish our comments on Calvin’s analysis of premillennialism in two parts, assessing both Calvin and the Anabaptist chiliasts that he was apparently analyzing. First, relative to Calvin’s section on chiliasts, we see that its brevity prevents serious interaction on

⁴³ Ibid. Calvin may have in mind those like Felix Manz of the Swiss Brethren who has been accused (along with those like Michael Sattler) of teaching conditional immortality or annihilationism. See, for example, “Felix Manz’s View of Death—No Soul or Hell,” *Radix Anabaptist*; Online; Accessed 20 November 2021. My own analysis is that Manz does not express in detail any eschatological view on this matter. The interpreter must tread with caution. The temptation to overstate is ever present.

⁴⁴ William Crockett, ed., *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992). My own position is consistent with the literal position of eternal torment and suffering in hell defended by John Walvoord.

⁴⁵ *Institutes*, 3.25.12; ICR, 1007-08.

his part with his adversaries. As a result, there is a lack of clarity in the Reformer's remarks. This should not be surprising since Calvin has been accused of possessing little lucidness in his own eschatology beyond standard amillennialism.⁴⁶ Second, Calvin tends to overgeneralize by lumping several ideas together with chiliasm without mentioning names of those he is addressing. The fact is that he appears to combine chiliasts with Anabaptists without distinction. The broad nature of who the culture called Anabaptists thwarts the simplistic analysis that Calvin left us. Third, some of the doctrines he addressed such as eternal punishment and universalism do not have a direct connection to whether one believes that Jesus is coming to set up a thousand-year reign called the millennium. At best, Calvin deals with a small minority of teachers in his critique who are often vague. At worst, the Genevan Reformer borders on wild caricature. It is hoped that modern followers of Calvin's teaching would not read his words and assume that he has given a valid critique of today's premillennialism.

Finally, and perhaps most clearly, the narrative that the chiliasts of Calvin's day limited God's kingdom to a thousand years is a false narrative. One illustration expresses this truth clearly. Hans Schlaefter was a Roman Catholic priest who became an Anabaptist (for which he paid with his life in 1528).⁴⁷ He joined himself to the movement of chiliast Hans Hut. In a letter, he states,

Thus the Holy Scripture is now fulfilled, so that the punishment with which the world is to be visited, is ready and at hand; hence no one ought to be negligent; for the sword is drawn, the bow is bent, the arrow laid upon it, and aim is taken.

By this I do not mean that we are to seek refuge, than that whereunto He has sealed us that we may be assured of the eternal and imperishable kingdom with Him, and forever to possess it with Him in life everlasting; to this may God strengthen us all.⁴⁸

It does not sound like this Anabaptist chiliast was limiting the future kingdom of God to a thousand years. He expected an eternal, unending kingdom and the enjoyment of forever life with God. When reading such statements, one wonders what Calvin was thinking.

Now with respect to the Anabaptist chiliasts themselves, we can make a few observations. First, because of the persecution of various forms of Anabaptists, the leaders rarely lived long enough to produce detailed commentaries on books of the Bible or to write substantial systematic theologies as Calvin was allowed to do. The information from the chiliasts of that day is sketchy. There is certainly no clarity and no consensus on details of

⁴⁶ LeRoy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation*, Vol. 2 (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald, 1948), 426-42.

⁴⁷ H. Frank Eshleman, *Historic Background and Annals of the Swiss and German Pioneer Settlers of Southeastern Pennsylvania, and of Their Remote Ancestors, from the Middle of the Dark Ages, Down to the Time of the Revolutionary War* (Lancaster, PA: Dalcassian Publishing Company, 1917), loc 727-46.

⁴⁸ Cited in Estep, *Anabaptist Story*, 266.

eschatology other than belief in premillennialism. Second, what we do know is that Anabaptist chiliasm was similar to the Christian chiliasm that began to emerge in the second century. Jewish elements are diminished or altogether absent as Christian forms overtake the promised kingdom ideas from the Old Testament. There is no Zionism, no future for national Israel in its land. So, even though we can be a bit harsh in our critique of Calvin, most of the premillennialists among the Anabaptists had not yet arrived to the proper destination of dispensational premillennialism. Third, the Anabaptists debated among themselves. One particular example is the somewhat apocalyptic branch of Anabaptists under the leadership of the more mystical Hans Hut over against the more reserved and biblical Swiss Brethren.⁴⁹ Calvin's assessment does not do justice to such distinctions.

Calvin should be greatly revered for his Reformation stance on biblical authority and justification by faith. However, the exercise of studying Calvin's critique of premillennialism in this section of *The Institutes* was somewhat of a disappointment. But one issue that came to my mind as I studied was the fact that many dispensational premillennialists speak and write as if the millennium is the fulfillment of the covenant (Abrahamic, Davidic, and New) and kingdom promises. But how can a thousand years fulfill a forever promise? That is why I speak of the millennium as the "kick-off party" of God's forever kingdom. Eternity is the fulfillment of the promises. The millennium is merely the beginning. We must not forget that Calvin is basically correct when he says that God's kingdom lasts forever even if his view of that kingdom is not fully biblical.

⁴⁹ Gottfried Seebass, "Thomas Müntzer (c. 1490-1525)" in *The Reformation Theologians* edited by Carter Lindberg (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 348-49.