

FRANCIS TURRETIN: INSTITUTES OF ELENCTIC THEOLOGY

Book Review by Hugh L Williams

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In English at Last After 300 Years!

January 1993 saw an epochal event in the publishing world of Reformed Theology. The long inaccessible work of that master theologian, Francis Turretin of Geneva (1623-1687), is now emergent from the presses in an English translation for the first time.

Why is this so important? Just who was Francis Turretin, anyway? And, one has heard of 'Systematic' Theology, but what is 'Elenctic' Theology?

To answer these questions, we must go back to the Geneva of the late 16th and early 17th centuries. An Italian refugee of the name Turretin had arrived in that city and was made a citizen thereof in 1627. He and his son were stalwarts of the Reformed Faith, the son Benedict becoming a celebrated pastor and professor of theology. In 1620 he had assisted at the Synod of Ales, of which the moderator was none other than the famous Pierre du Moulin.¹ It is Benedict's son Francis, born in 1623, with whom we are now concerned. Manifesting evident tokens of genius in childhood, Francis Turretin grew into a distinguished scholar and attended upon the instruction of the famous Diodati, translator of the Italian Bible and Beza's successor in the Chair of Theology at Geneva. It was, indeed, to this very same Chair of Theology that Turretin was destined, and he took up this office in 1653 following Theodore Tronchin, who interestingly had been, like his

predecessor Diodati, a member of the Synod of Dordt. Such men were giants of their age, and Francis Turretin himself lacked nothing, as he took up the very office once held by no less than John Calvin.

In this office, Turretin laboured faithfully for 34 years, during which time he was "as a public teacher faithful and undaunted, daily inflicting severe blows on Popery, Socinianism, and Arminianism. From the pulpit he thundered against prevailing immoralities, and with many tears he besought sinners to be reconciled to Christ. His eloquence was of the most persuasive and irresistible character. Pictet² celebrates his benignity, his pity to the poor, his care of the widow and the orphan, his hospitality, and his edifying discourse."³

In 1679 Turretin began the publication of his *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae* in three volumes in Latin, the academic *lingua franca* of those days. As such, the volumes were readable in all universities and seminaries from Eastern Europe to Oxford, and on to North America. Though only accessible to those proficient in that ancient tongue, the *Institutes* made a deep and widespread impression, with further editions being run off in quick succession. In the ensuing 18th century, the rationalism of the so-called 'enlightenment' flooded across Europe and interest in Reformed theology declined. Geneva itself became, after Pictet's death in 1724, overwhelmed by that same tide of infidelity, as first Amyraldianism then Arminianism, swept in to the old fortress of Calvin. Nevertheless, Turretin's *Institutes* continued to have an effect, especially in the New World, where the masses of Dutch, Scotch and Irish immigrants fervently held to the doctrines of the Reformers. By the early 19th century, we find Turretin used as a basic manual of theological teaching in such famous seminaries as Princeton and Richmond. At the latter, we are told, the great Dabney in his theology classes would hold, once a week, a recitation on Turretin covering 10 to 12 pages. The students were then, using Turretin as a basis, instructed to research the topic addressed and to produce each one his own written thesis on the same by the following week.⁴ And all this in Latin! Plenty of theology was available in English but so great was the impact of Turretin that he was preferred, even if he was available only in Latin.

Perhaps, however, times were changing and proficiency in that tongue was on the wane. At Princeton, no less than Charles Hodge evidently set great store by Turretin and it was to the end that all

his students might have access to the storehouse of Turretin's *Institutes*, that he arranged for an English translation to be made. Thus all, not just those proficient in Latin, would be able to study Turretin. This was not, however, the first assay in translating Turretin. In 1817, a certain Presbyterian minister and scholar, James R Willson by name, had published a book with the title: *A Historical Sketch of Opinions of the Atonement*. Some 180 pages of this was given over to Willson's own translation of certain parts of Turretin's *Institutes*, namely those sections where Turretin deals with the nature and extent of the atonement.⁵ A useful contribution, but still the vast bulk of the *Institutes* lay beyond the ordinary man's grasp. Hodge set about providing a remedy to this situation. His request for a translation was made to a friend of his, a certain George Musgrave Giger, who between 1847 and 1865 was Professor of Classics at Princeton University. His labour of love during some of those years produced an 8000–page handwritten document which Hodge made available for students to consult in the library of Princeton Seminary.⁶

One appreciates now the kind of theology on which America's robust 19th century Presbyterians were brought up. While Presbyterianism saw wholesale apostasy in England and Scotland, in the USA it maintained, through Princeton and then Westminster, a salient witness to the Reformed Faith across most of two centuries. Indeed, it is to Westminster Seminary that we must now turn to follow the next phase of the story. At its western outpost in Escondido in California, the scholar–librarian, James Dennison Jr, recalls how he was taught from Turretin by Dr John H Gerstner at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.⁷ Though only introduced to excerpts from the *Institutes*, nevertheless his enthusiasm was fired and after many years he was able to negotiate photocopies of Giger's manuscript. After some years of labour editing the original translation and researching the masses of citations made by Turretin in his work, the first volume has now appeared in print in English, so that we can all read it! Even the Greek and Hebrew references have been transliterated into English characters and, though this still leaves the Hebrew looking incomprehensible, this is a minor quibble.

Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company and their typesetters, the Thoburn Press, are to be commended for the quality of production and binding, well suited to the status of the material. We eagerly await, in God's providence, the arrival of the two further volumes that will complete the set. By God's grace, what

was once available only as a formidable encyclopaedia of Reformed thought in the *lingua franca* of a former age, is now reappearing for the first time in the *lingua franca* of our own age, English.

Volume 1, which is now available, contains Topics 1–10, as follows:

- Topic 1 – Theology.
- Topic 2 – The Holy Scriptures, the Word of God.
- Topic 3 – The One and Triune God.
- Topic 4 – The Decrees of God and Predestination.
- Topic 5 – Creation.
- Topic 6 – Providence.
- Topic 7 – Angels.
- Topic 8 – The State of Man Before the Fall.
- Topic 9 – Sin in General and in Particular.
- Topic 10 – The Free Will of Man in a State of Sin.

Volume 2 will contain Topics 11–17 and the final Volume 3 will contain:

Topics 18–20.

James Dennison's extensive indices to all three volumes.

Dennison's newly researched and verified bibliography of Turretin's citations.

Benedict Pictet's Oration for Turretin's funeral.

* * * * *

But what exactly is the significance of Turretin for us today? There are tomes enough of good theology in English on the religious book market, why go back to something 300 years old? To answer such a question, one must enquire into that title: *Institutes of ELENCTIC Theology*. What is the meaning of *Elenctic* theology – is it really any different from *Systematic* theology? *Elenctic* is evidently derived from the Greek verb ἔλεγχω and its cognates. In the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Hans-Georg Link gives us the full range of the semantic field for this group of words. Meanings like: "To bring to light, to expose, to set forth, convict, punish, discipline," are listed for the verb, and its cognate noun ἔλεγχος yields such definitions as: "proof, evidence, conviction, reproof, correction." This now begins to shed some light, not only on Turretin's title but also on his method of presentation. One might say that he seeks in this work to present proofs of Biblical doctrine and to express convictions concerning the same, together with their ramifications

for Christian life. In addition there is the element of rebuke and reproof as he deals with the salient heresies of his day (It happens that they are also the salient heresies of our day, there being, as Solomon said, "nothing new under the sun in this respect!) Certainly Turretin's method seems to bear all this out. Under the Sixth Topic, for instance, he handles the subject of Providence and over the next fifty pages he enters the subject via nine questions, such as:

Question II: Is the Providence of God rightly called 'fate,' and is fatal necessity properly ascribed to it? We distinguish.

Question III: Do all things come under providence—small as well as great, contingent and free, natural and necessary? We affirm.

Within the bounds of each posited question Turretin explores the semantics of the words relevant to the debate, the reasons why such a question is asked, the various ideas of philosophers, theologians and heretics, with a statement of the Biblical position as grounded in exegesis. In answering each question Turretin quotes from an amazing array of authors and sources and James Dennison has taken enormous pains to check and verify the quotes and to state the references in the text as they pertain to modern editions of the works cited, such as for instance the Loeb Classical Library. Dennison will be providing a full dictionary catalogue of these references in Volume 3 of the set. He says the list runs to over a thousand individuals.⁸ We must salute Dennison, as well as Turretin for this truly monumental achievement.

Most importantly, Turretin represents a period in post-Reformation Reformed dogmatics that has been termed the Zenith. Whereas at the time of Luther and Calvin when the Reform was in its pioneering stages, when the great breakthrough against the Romanist night was being made and hundreds and thousands of Reformed Christians were suffering martyrdom for their faith, the later period from the 16th into the 17th centuries represented a time when the Reform had become established in lands like Holland and especially Switzerland. A great crop of heretics had come on the scene, such as Arminius in Holland and Amyraut in France. The Reformed theologians of the period took great pains to tie up the loose ends of doctrine left from the initial Reformation period, to explore the ramifications of those doctrines, defend them against the wholesale attacks that were being daily made on them, and codify their findings in the form of catechisms, creeds and confessions of faith. In England, the likes of John Owen

engaged in this task and, on the Continent, his contemporaries were men such as Voetius and Witsius in Holland and, undoubtedly the greatest of them, Francis Turretin in Geneva. These men gave long hours of study and reflection with regard to the doctrines of the Reformed Faith, such as had hitherto not been altogether possible in the immediate days of the Reformation.

It is interesting to compare the *Institutes* of Calvin with those of Turretin. Calvin immediately strikes the reader as one who might be termed a 'cavalry captain' with dashing sword, making rapier thrusts at the enemy. By contrast, Turretin might be likened to an engineer who builds the castle for refuge. His *Institutes* may not have the dash and fervour of Calvin's but they are a profound and monumental exposition of the faith, if anything possessing greater precision than those of the Reformer.

In this respect arises another aspect of the significance of Turretin for us today. In this latter half of the 20th century one hears again the same dissentient tones aimed at Reformed theology as Turretin heard in his day. Not only is an ebullient Arminianism on the scene but the enemy has come much within the Reformed camp itself. Voices are raised, theses written and arguments are vociferously prosecuted that would, if given any credence, undermine and demolish the revival of the Reformed Faith – a revival that has ensued from the work of the Banner of Truth Trust and the ministry of Dr Lloyd Jones and other notaries of the faith too numerous to be listed here. We are told that our modern 'Calvinism' is not the true 'Calvinism' of Calvin, and the reason that underlies this is the very development of Protestant theology that Turretin represents. We are told that after Calvin's death, Beza and then Perkins really cut loose from the Reformers' moorings and re-introduced Aristotelian logic into theology, tearing it away in great measure from its Biblical foundations. Theologising was done according to the principles of 'scholasticism,' or the methods of the pagan Greek philosopher Aristotle. Exegesis became subordinated to 'logic' and, where the Scriptures would not 'fit' the logic, they were subordinated and secondary interpretations superimposed on them, or – to put it bluntly – they were 'bent.' As a result, it is suggested that the doctrines of Calvin concerning the atonement and justification were seriously modified in order to fit in with the systematic codifications of the new race of theologians that included the men of Dordt and Westminster. The 'Calvinism' of such doctrinal standards is therefore called into question and, 'Calvin against the Calvinists'

is a theme heard today, even in the camp of the Reformed. The logical methods described by Aristotle have indeed proven useful in the formulation and codification of theological concepts and there is nothing wrong in that. If a systematic theology is written some method or other has to be used, or what is presented will just be a chaotic mess. (Of course, some men prefer chaotic messes, like Esau who desired his 'mess of pottage' above the oracles of God. They like chaos and lack of clear order, because they are then free to express what they consider to be the truth.) Now it is no more a sin for a theologian to codify his teaching according to Aristotelian method than it is for him to make use of the forms and methods of the grammar of the language with which he is working. He may have learnt his grammar from a godless, pagan teacher, but if the precepts are an accurate observation of the rules of language, he would be an idiot not to conform to them. Thus also with Aristotle's logic, the use of this 'scholastic' method in Turretin makes for a clear and succinct presentation of the truths of God's Word. But our modern men create a 'bogey' here. Anything tainted with scholasticism is suspect, they say, and must go. The theology of the Puritans and the 17th century stalwarts of the faith is automatically besmirched with the allegation that it is all fundamentally a distortion of the Bible and a distortion of what John Calvin originally taught. We are then faced with a 'new-look' Calvin, who is supposed to be closer to the likes of Arminius and Wesley in his theology, than to Owen and Turretin!

Such ideas are not really new. Turretin faced them in his day. During his extensive student life he spent time studying under "Placaesus, Amyraut, and Capellus; men whose learning, subtilty, and peculiar views on theology"⁹ was a cause of wholesale controversy in Reformed churches all over the Continent and in Britain. They claimed, too, to have a more accurate appreciation of Calvin than did the great phalanx of orthodox divines of that age. Pierre Courthial,¹⁰ in his important essay *The Golden Age of Calvinism in France*,¹¹ likens the influence of these theologians at Saumur to the "rotting of a fish" which "begins with the head,"¹² and he goes on to say that under their "regrettable influence... the faith of a growing number of pastors and churches was impregnated with Arminian influences. People of the Reformed Faith became a rarity." Turretin, having studied at Saumur, had first hand knowledge and insight into the errors of this school of thought and, in respect of this, Dabney considers Turretin to have delivered a "fatal refutation" to the position held by the men of

Saumur, which is found in his *Institutes*, Volume 1, Topic 4, Question 17.¹³ Thus Turretin is of great and ongoing importance in the theological battles of today.

As to the 'bogey' of Aristotelianism, one wonders what all the fuss is about. Read a Topic in Turretin – yes, go out and buy him: sell your shirt if you have to! – and see if it does 'bend' the Scriptures! The proof of the pudding is in the eating, not in somebody's phobic propaganda. In this respect one notes that ten eminent theologians of today, not all of whom one would say are fully part and parcel of a Reformed constituency, have nevertheless sounded their accolades for this production. Names like Carl F H Henry, Sinclair B Ferguson, Leon Morris and others are all quoted on the rear of the dust jacket. Richard B Caffin says that the publication "should prove to be a big step forward toward remedying the widespread neglect and misunderstanding, even misrepresentation, of seventeenth century Reformed orthodoxy." John M Frame, another 'Westminster' man, can say how "I am impressed anew with the true greatness of Turretin's achievement... One can find a very deep pastoral and devotional strain in Turretin.... wonderfully edifying teaching." Indeed one might say that Turretin's method of codification and presentation will be found to be most useful, precise and succinct and in no way detrimental to the proper exegesis of Scripture. Coming as it does from the period of the zenith in the production of Reformed theology, one can in no way overestimate its importance. Richard A Muller speaks of this period as being "the final codification of orthodoxy"¹⁴ and says further, "Whereas the Reformers painted with a broad brush, their orthodox and scholastic successors strove to fill in the details of the picture."¹⁵ As to Aristotelianism and its academic methodology known as 'scholasticism,' Muller astutely points out that "since scholasticism is primarily a method of approach to academic disciplines, it is not necessarily allied to any particular philosophical perspective, nor does it represent a systematic attachment to, or concentration upon, any particular doctrine or concept as a key to [a] theological system."¹⁶ In other words, 'scholasticism' as utilised by Reformed theologians of the late 16th century and throughout the 17th century, is really only a 'vehicle' for expressing Scriptural truth in codified form. Other philosophical methods were used by some in those days who objected to 'Aristotle,' notably the method of dichotomising devised by Pierre de la Ramee (Ramus), who was himself somewhat hostile to Aristotelianism. Nevertheless, his new mode of

philosophical approach made no difference to the results of exegesis. Those who used the Ramist method were such as Perkins, Polanus, Ames and many Puritans. Their orthodoxy, like that of Ramus, is no different to the so-called 'scholastics.'

It is therefore an occasion of thanksgiving to God and of rejoicing to see Turretin in English. Need I say more, except to urge every pastor, elder, deacon and anyone with enthusiasm for "the faith once delivered to the saints" to purchase these volumes as they appear.

Notes

1. Pierre du Moulin was one of the premier leaders of the French Reformed Church. He lived to the grand old age of 90, from 1568 to 1658. He was awarded a Doctorate degree in Theology by Cambridge University and was well known for his combating Arminianism and Amyraldianism in the Continental churches. For information concerning him and his connection with the Turretin's, I am indebted to the late James A Willson in his biographical sketch of Turretin prefixed to the Baker edition (1978) of *Turretin on the Atonement*.
2. Benedict Pictet (1655-1724) was Francis Turretin's nephew and successor to the Chair of Theology at Geneva. He was the last of the orthodox line of men that stretched right back to Calvin and Farel. After his day, Amyraldianism triumphed at Geneva totally and developed onwards into the rationalism that destroyed the old Genevan tradition. Sad, sad!
3. This whole quotation is taken from page 6 of op. cit. note 1, where Willson is partly quoting what is possibly Pictet's funeral oration for his uncle.
4. See Thomas Carey Johnson: *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, B.O.T. reprint 1977, page 176. Dabney was rated by many as "the best teacher of theology in the United States" in his day.
5. Willson: op. cit. note 1 above.
6. See Editor's Preface in the new P & R edition of Turretin's *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Volume 1, page xxvii, where Dennison gives the background to the production of this new English edition.
7. Dennison: op. cit. note 6 above, page xxxi, being the Acknowledgments.
8. Ibid. page xviii.
9. Willson: op. cit. note 1 above, page 5. These men were the premier theological leaders of the School of Saumur in France about 1630 onwards. From them sprung a quasi-Calvinistic-Arminian heresy, which is emergent again today. For details, see Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*, page 394.
10. Pierre Courthial, Professor of Ethics and Practical Theology and Dean at the Faculte de Theologie Reformee, d'Aix-en-Provence, France. He served 23 years as a pastor in Paris, is author of *Fondements Pour l'Avenir* and is co-editor of two French reviews: *Icthus* and *La Revue Reformee*.
11. Courthial: Essay in *JOHN CALVIN? His Influence in the Western World*, Zondervan, 1982.
12. Courthial: Ibid. page 76, citing an old Provençal proverb.

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keeping the Sabbath after the time of Malachi (Matt 12:1-8; Luke 13:10-17; John 7:19-23; etc).

This is why Calvin now concludes his paragraph: "We must be careful... to observe[!] the general[!] doctrine - viz, in order that religion may neither be lost nor languish amongst us, we must[!] diligently attend on our religious assemblies, and duly avail ourselves of those external[!] aids which tend to promote the worship of God" (Acts 20:6-7; 1Cor 16:1-2; Heb 4:8-11; 10:25; Rev 1:10).

Notes

1. H J W Legerton: *The Church of Rome and the Lord's Day*, Lord's Day Observance Society, London, 1957, pp 5-9.
2. *Institutes*, II:8:28-33.
3. *Institutes*, II:8:30.
4. *Institutes*, II:8:31.
5. *Institutes*, II:8:32.
6. Thus P Fairbairn: *The Typology of Scripture*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, n.d., p 452.
7. *Institutes*, II:8:33.
8. *Institutes*, II:8:34

[To be concluded]

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13. Dabney, discussing "God's Indiscriminate Proposals of Mercy" in his *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, pages 282-3, refers to the French Amyraldians as "Hypothetic Universalists."
14. Richard A Muller: has written several important books on post-Reformation Reformed theological matters. I am quoting here from page 38 of his *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, Volume 1: Prolegomena.
15. Muller: op. cit. page 19.
16. Ibid. page 18

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wished to have it. Moreover, we would be delighted to see you at our meetings and conferences and have you share in our activities. We have no wish to influence you unduly, as clearly you have given much thought to the study of baptism. Nevertheless, we do have a considerable amount of literature relating to the subject and we would be only too pleased to send some of this to you. In particular, I would recommend the book "God's Everlasting Covenant of Grace" by Herman Hanko and I am taking the liberty of enclosing a photocopy of the Introduction for your perusal.

Thank you for so kindly sending a copy of the China Prayer Letter. It is to the glory of God that the church in that land has survived so many years under Communism - and not only survived but wonderfully grown. Christians in the West frequently get asked about the state of the church in China but are often unable to give a satisfactory answer. The leaflet provides a very useful insight and helps to counter that ignorance. May our gracious and sovereign God richly bless all your work and labour in His service (Hebrews 6:10).'