

## Calvin on Epicurus and the Epicureans: Background to a Remark in Article 13 of the Belgic Confession

Following a lengthy explanation of the Reformed doctrine concerning providence, Article 13 of the Belgic Confession concludes with a negative statement: “On this we reject the damnable error of the Epicureans who say that God does not involve himself in anything, and allows all things to go by chance.”<sup>1</sup> It is not unusual for this confession to add a rejection of a specific teaching to the positive explanation of a doctrine. For example, a lengthy list of names is appended to Article 8, dealing with the Trinity. In that case, a broad selection of people with religious interest is mentioned, including Jews, Muslims, false Christians, and heretics. In Article 13, on the other hand, the rejection concerns a philosophical school named after a philosopher who had died around 270 B.C., and whose school had petered

---

\* Originally published as “Calvin on Epicurus and the Epicureans (Art. 13),” *Calvin Theological Journal* 40 (2005) 33–48. Used with permission.

<sup>1</sup> The Dordrecht text of 1619 does not differ from the 1566 text: “Sur cela nous rejettons l’erreur damnable des Epicuriens, qui disent que Dieu ne se mesle de rien, et laisse aller toutes choses à l’aventure.” Two changes had been made in 1566. The word *opinion* used in the first edition of 1561 was replaced in the second edition by *error*, making it more clear that this statement is one of the rejections of errors that frequently occur in the Belgic Confession. The first edition also contained the word *plus* following *mesle*. This word was deleted, presumably because the original formulation could give the impression that God at some moment stopped being involved. The development of the text can be reconstructed with the help of the text edition published by J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, ed., *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1976) 90–92.

out around A.D. 200.<sup>2</sup> Why would the Reformers in the sixteenth century be sufficiently interested in this ancient philosophy that they would even mention it in their confession?

The author of the Belgic Confession, Guido de Brès,<sup>3</sup> wrote two other books, discussing in one Roman Catholic doctrines and in the other the teachings of several Anabaptist groups. However, neither is helpful in providing a background for this remark in Article 13, because they do not refer to Epicurus and the Epicureans. Another possible source for information are two earlier confessions that Guido de Brès obviously used in making the Belgic Confession: the Gallican Confession, inspired by Calvin and Beza's Confession of the Christian Faith, both dating from 1559. A comparison with the Gallican Confession shows that Guido de Brès modeled Article 13 of the Belgic Confession on Article 8 of the Gallican Confession, and included elements from section 1, 3 of Beza's Confession. However, neither of these articles mentions Epicurus or the Epicureans.

Early commentators on the Confession do not discuss the identity of these Epicureans. They simply assume that the Confession refers to the Epicureans Paul met on the Areopagus.<sup>4</sup> In popular as well as in more scholarly explanations published in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Epicurus or the Epicureans are simply mentioned without any explanation<sup>5</sup> or even totally ignored.<sup>6</sup> The exception is C. Vonk, who, on the basis of a quotation from Calvin, states that the error of the Epicureans refers to the

---

<sup>2</sup> See P. H. De Lacy, "Epicureanism and the Epicurean School" and "Epicurus," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (8 vols.; ed. Paul Edwards; New York: Macmillan, 1967) 3.2–5.

<sup>3</sup> Nicolaas H. Gootjes, "The Earliest Report on the Author of the Belgic Confession," *Nederlands Archief voor de Kergeschiedenis* 82 (2002) 86–94.

<sup>4</sup> B. Bekker, *De leere der gereformeerde kerken van de vrije Nederlanden, begrepen in dessever geloofsbelijdenisse* (Amsterdam: Daniel Van den Dalen, 1696) 194, adding the remark that Epicureanism had been revived by Spinoza, 196; A. Rotterdam, *Verklaring der Nederlandsche geloofsblijdenis* (ed. A. Kuyper; 1755; repr., Rotterdam: Gebroeders Hoge, 1900) 1.428.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Beets, *The Reformed Confession Explained* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1929) 112; A. D. R. Polman, *Onze Nederlandsche Geloofsblijdenis* (4 vols.; Franeker: Wever, n.d.) 2.80 (in a quote from Augustine); J. Van Bruggen, *Het amen der kerk* (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1964) 67; and P. Y. DeJong, *The Church's Witness to the World* (St. Catharines: Paideia Press, 1980) 239, 248.

<sup>6</sup> J. I. Doedes, *De Nederlandsche Geloofsblijdenis* (Utrecht: Kemink & Zoon, 1880–1881) 134–143.

lifestyle of many people in the sixteenth century.<sup>7</sup>

Particularly since the 1980s, the development of Epicureanism has become better known. It is now recognized that this philosophy was rediscovered during the Renaissance of the fifteenth century, becoming an important movement during the following century. Not much was left of Epicurus' original literary production—in all, no more than three letters and some statements. His teaching became known primarily through Lucretius' poem *De rerum natura*, which was rediscovered in 1417<sup>8</sup> and first printed in 1473.<sup>9</sup> Its popularity can be measured by the fact that twenty-five editions were published during the period 1515–1600. This does not mean that the editors and publishers fully supported Epicureanism. Both Bérault, who wrote the preface for a 1514 edition of Lucretius, and Lambin, who published a critical edition of Epicurus' work in 1563, distanced themselves from this teaching.<sup>10</sup>

The Epicureanism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries cannot be taken as simply a rehash of the old teachings of Epicurus. As mentioned, one reason was the lack of surviving original texts written by Epicurus, so that his views had to be reconstructed on the basis of summaries and compilations from the second and third centuries A.D.<sup>11</sup> More important is the fact that the instigator of this movement, Lorenzo Valla, using Epicurean concepts such as pleasure, reinterpreted their meaning for his own time.<sup>12</sup> This resurgence of Epicureanism in Italy exercised considerable influence in Europe. An early example is the emergence of Epicureans in Strasbourg in the first part of the sixteenth century,<sup>13</sup> but later Epicureanism became a powerful influence in several European countries such as France and England.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> C. Vonk, *The Nederlandse Geloosbelijdenis* (2 vols.; Voorzeide Leer IIIA–B; Barendrecht: Drukkerij “Barendrecht,” 1955–1956) 1.315, referring to a statement by Calvin quoted on p. 294.

<sup>8</sup> Maristella de P. Lorch, “The Epicurean in Lorenzo Valla’s *On Pleasure*,” in *Atoms, Pneuma, and Tranquility: Epicurean and Stoic Themes in European Thought* (ed. Margaret J. Osler; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 90.

<sup>9</sup> Margaret J. Osler and Letizia A. Panizza, introduction to *Atoms, Pneuma, and Tranquillity*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Howard Jones, *The Epicurean Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1989) 152–54.

<sup>11</sup> Osler and Panizza, introduction to *Atoms, Pneuma, and Tranquillity*, 5–6.

<sup>12</sup> De P. Lorch, “The Epicurean in Lorenzo Valla’s *On Pleasure*,” 97–123.

<sup>13</sup> Marc Lienhardt, ed., *Croyants et sceptiques au XVI<sup>e</sup> Siècle: Le dossier des “Epicuriens”* (Strasbourg: Librairie Istra, 1981) 17–46.

<sup>14</sup> See the chapters by Louise Fothergill-Payne, M. J. Osler, Lisa Tunick Sarason, J. J. Macintosh, and B. J. T. Dobbs, in *Atoms, Pneuma, and Tranquillity*. Later

All of this goes to show that the designation “Epicureans” in the sixteenth century does not necessarily refer to ancient followers of the classical philosopher Epicurus. The name was used more widely and could even refer to contemporaries. To obtain a clearer view on the meaning of the Epicureans in the article on providence in the Belgic Confession, it will prove profitable to consult Calvin, who exercised considerable influence in the Reformed churches of that time. Several references to this philosophy can be found sprinkled through his many publications. It has been noted before that Calvin used these names for his contemporaries,<sup>15</sup> but to date no general survey of the way Calvin speaks about these Epicureans has been published. The obvious place to look for clues is his doctrinal summary, the *Institutes*, intended to present the main tenets of Scripture in a systematic way. Here, however, Calvin mentions them only a few times. He refers twice to Epicurus, in *Institutes* 2.2 and 1.5.4, and three times to the Epicureans, in *Institutes* 1.5.12, 1.16.4, and 3.23.8. These statements are mostly very brief, and none sheds light on the meaning and background as to why this name was used.

More information can be obtained when Calvin’s exegetical work is considered. With the help of the index of the *Corpus Reformatorum* edition of Calvin’s *Opera*, ten instances can be found in Calvin’s commentaries where the personal name “Epicurus” is used and fifteen instances of the collective name “Epicureans.” A survey of these statements will be followed by a discussion on the identity of the Epicureans Calvin had in mind.<sup>16</sup>

---

developments are discussed in Christopher J. Betts, *Early Deism in France* (Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1984); Alan Ch. Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650–1729*, vol. 1: *The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); and Reid Barbour, *English Epicures and Stoics: Ancient Legacies in Early Stuart Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> Susan E. Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 20–21, who mentions that L. Febvre had noted as early as 1947 that the term was used polemically for sixteenth-century opponents; Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography* (1995; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 201–202; Serene Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) 126–128; Thomas H. L. Parker, *Calvin: An Introduction to His Thought* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) 43–44; and Herman J. Selderhuis, *God in het midden: Calvijns theologie van de Psalmen* (Kampen: Kok, 2002) 101.

<sup>16</sup> For the quotations from Calvin, existing English translations were consulted without always following them closely.

## Calvin on Epicurus

Beginning with the statements referring to the philosopher Epicurus himself, we find Calvin accusing him of denying creation. In his commentary on Exodus 2:4, he remarks that we must maintain this principle that God by his providence governs all mortals, and yet with special care he honors his elect and is aiming to free and to favor them. This is followed by a rejection: “For it is not less absurd to ascribe to luck such a skillful combination resulting from the various and manifold means than to contrive with Epicurus that the world was produced from loose particles.”<sup>17</sup> Calvin’s statement ends with a rejection of Epicurus’ view that the world came into existence as the result of random meetings of unconnected particles. It should be noted that he uses this as a negative argument for maintaining providence in his own time. He sees Epicurus’ view on the lack of God’s involvement in the origin of the world as the background for the denial of providence in his own time. A similar remark can be found in Calvin’s explanation of Psalm 104:24, praising God that he has made everything in wisdom and that the world is filled with his works. Calvin contrasts this statement with the teaching of Epicurus: “With the same statement the prophet refuted the madness of those who dream up that the world was produced by chance, as Epicurus foolishly said that the basic elements consisted of loose particles.”<sup>18</sup> Again, Calvin refers to a classical philosophical statement by Epicurus in order to reject the contemporary view that the world was produced from chance.

Creation is not the only issue where Calvin disagrees with the Epicureans; he also feels the need to confront them when dealing with providence. Explaining the statement of Psalm 9:9 that God will judge the world in righteousness, Calvin remarks that God exercises his lordship in righteousness and just government. This leads to a rejection of Epicurus: “This is true theology, not to imagine with Epicurus that God is devoid of work as well as enjoyments, and someone who, content with himself alone, neglects the human race.”<sup>19</sup> Again, Epicurus’ name is mentioned as a representative of all those

---

<sup>17</sup> *Calvini opera*, 24.24: “Neque enim minus absurdum est tam concinnam ex vario et multiplici adiumentorem [read: adiumentorum] concursu moderationem fortunae adscribere, quam fingere cum Epicuro mundum ex atomis conflatum.”

<sup>18</sup> *Calvini opera*, 32.94: “Eodem quoque elogio vesaniam eorum coarguit propheta, qui mundum fortuito conflatum esse somniant, sicuri Epicurus ex atomis nugatus est composita fuisse elementa.”

<sup>19</sup> *Calvini opera*, 31.100: “Atque haec vera theologia est, Deum non imaginari, cum Epicuro, vacantem otio vel deliciis, et qui se uno contentus humanum genus

who view God as not being involved with people. However, Calvin's main interest appears to be warning his contemporaries not to follow this kind of teaching. The same intention can be detected in Calvin's commentary on Psalm 11:4–5, taken by Calvin as meaning that David entrusts himself to God. He remarks in this context that Epicurus and similar people who imagine God to be at leisure spread a couch for him rather than erect a judgment seat. Calvin emphasizes God's activity: "However, this is the glory of faith, that God as the maker of the world in no way neglects the order established by him."<sup>20</sup>

Two other instances of Calvin's mentioning Epicurus in connection with providence can be found in his lectures on Daniel. In his extensive explanation of 2:21, Calvin states that two alternatives to God's providence have been mentioned: nature and fortune. He considers those philosophers who ascribe the highest authority to nature as much more sound than those who assign the highest place to fortune and continues: "Besides, neither God nor nature will have a place in the vain and more or less changeable government of the world when all things without any order rush in sight in great confusion. If this is granted, then surely the teaching of Epicurus will be established. For if God relinquishes the supreme government of the world with the result that all things change at random, then he ceases to be God."<sup>21</sup> It should again be noted that Calvin is not combating an old heresy; he is dealing with a view present in his own time. In his rejection, Calvin refers to Epicurus as having propounded a similar view. This reference to Epicurus serves as a warning to his contemporaries not to follow this kind of teaching. Calvin mentions the negative side of the same issue in his remarks on Daniel 4:17: "Unbelieving people readily lock up God in heaven, as Epicurus imagined that God delights in idleness. Therefore Daniel showed that God is robbed of his right, unless 'he is recognized as Lord in the realm of men,' that is the earth, to humiliate those whom he pleases."<sup>22</sup>

---

negligat...."

<sup>20</sup> *Calvini opera*, 31.123–24: "Nam Epicurus et similes, qui otiosum fingunt, potius sternunt illi cubile, quam tribunal erigant. Haec autem fidei gloria est, Deum mundum opificem minime negligere ordinem a se conditum."

<sup>21</sup> *Calvini opera*, 40.576–77: "Et tamen philosophi, qui summum imperium assignant naturae, multo sunt saniores reliquis, qui statuunt in supremo gradu fortunam.... Atqui neque Deus, neque natura locum habebunt in vana et quasi versatili mundi gubernatione, dum sine ordine omnia se tumultuarie in speciem praecipitant. Quod si conceditur, certe Epicuri doctrina locum habebit: quia si Deus resignat summum mundi imperium, ita ut omnia temere sic versentur, iam desinet esse Deus."

<sup>22</sup> *Calvini opera*, 40.663: "Libenter ergo increduli Deum coelo includerent,

A statement made in the days of the prophet Zephaniah that God does neither good nor evil (Zeph. 1:12), provokes Calvin to a lengthy response: “In a similar way, even gentile authors reproach Epicurus that he would have acknowledged that gods exist, since he does not dare to deny any god in a straightforward way as Diagoras and others did, but he locked them up in heaven to enjoy their leisure and delights.” Calvin disagrees: “But this means in reality imagining a god who is no god.” Even in this case, his remark is followed by a contemporary application: “Therefore those who want to quell in their consciences the awareness of and the difference between good and evil, construct for themselves the following crazy notions: God does not care about human affairs, he is content with his own heavenly happiness, he never comes down to us and both adversity and prosperity happen to people by chance.” Calvin adds his own admonition: “Therefore I say that this is the culmination point of godlessness, when people harden themselves in the mistaken opinion that God is quietly reposing in heaven.”<sup>23</sup>

There is also a marked opposition to Epicurus on the issue of God’s judgment. Dealing with Isaiah 5:19 where God is urged to hasten with his work, Calvin says that this text refers particularly to God’s judgment: “Godless people think that God is indifferent, and that he does not care about human affairs, as Epicurus stated that God’s highest happiness is that he is free from any occupation. For though they imagine there is a god, they do not at all acknowledge his judgment.”<sup>24</sup> Calvin compares the views of godless people in his own day with statements made centuries before by Epicurus, with the intent of warning his contemporary readers of

---

quemadmodum Epicurus finxit Deum suis delitiis frui in otio. Ergo Daniel ostendit Deum spoliari iure suo, nisi cognoscitur dominator in regno hominum, hoc est, in terra, ut humiliet quos visum est.”

<sup>23</sup> *Calvini opera*, 44.22–23: “Ita etiam profani scriptores Epicuro exprobrant, quod quum negare prorsus non auderet esse aliquem deum, sicuti Diagoras et similes, confessus fuerit deos esse: sed incluserit ipsos in coelo, ut illic fruuntur otio et delitiis. Hoc vero est imaginari deum qui deus non est.... Qui ergo volunt extinguere sensum et discrimen boni et mali in suis conscientiis, illi sibi fabricant ista deliria, Deum non curare res humanas, contentum esse sua felicitate coelesti, neque descendere usque ad nos, et fortuito tam res adversas quam prosperas contingere hominibus.... Atque ideo dixi esse summam impietatis cumulum, ubi scilicet sese confirmant homines in hoc errore, Deum quiescere in coelo.”

<sup>24</sup> *Calvini opera*, 36.116: “Existimant impii Deum otiosum esse, nec curare res humanas: quemadmodum Epicurus summam Dei felicitatem statuebat, quod omni negotio vacaret. Quamvis enim imaginerentur aliquem Deum, iudicium tamen eius minime agnoscunt.”

the mistaken opinion that God is indifferent.

Finally, Epicurus' name comes up in connection with two rather isolated issues. The first concerns human desires. Dealing with the lusts of the flesh, in connection with 1 John 2:16, Calvin refers to the three-fold division of lusts by Epicurus that had become known through Cicero and others: "He regards some [lusts] as natural and necessary, others as natural but not necessary, and still others as neither natural nor necessary." Calvin does not agree with this rather positive approach, for John rejects the lust of the heart altogether, as being always unbridled.<sup>25</sup> In dealing with worshipping the living God (1 Thess. 1:9), Calvin remarks that many people, having thrown away all awareness of God, rush into profane and rude contempt. Epicurus and Diogenes the Cynic are mentioned as representatives of those who had ridiculed the superstitions of the people, "but in such a way that they include corrupt and improper acts in the worship of God."<sup>26</sup> Here, Calvin connects Epicurus with forbidden ways of worshipping God.

This survey of Calvin's statements allows us to make two more general observations. In the first place, although Calvin opposes several aspects of Epicurus' teaching, his main objection concerns the denial of God's providence. Second, Calvin does not refer to Epicurus' denial of providence simply for traditional or antiquarian reasons but because he notices that these ideas are being propagated in his own time.

This can be confirmed from early annotations on the *Institutes*.<sup>27</sup> To give an example, in the main text of *Institutes* 1.2.2, Calvin refers to Epicurus, but the marginal note applies Calvin's statement to the Epicureans: "Further explanation of this application, with a necessary refutation of impious curiosity and of the Epicureans."<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> *Calvini opera*, 55.319: "Nota est ex Cicerone et aliis trimembris Epicuri partitio, qua inter cupiditates discernit: quum alias facit naturales et necessarias: alias naturales, non tamen necessarias: alias nec naturales, nec necessarias. Verum Iohannes, cui nota erat cordis humani ataxia, secure damnat cupiditatem carnis, quia semper intemperanter diffluat, nec mediocritatem servet."

<sup>26</sup> *Calvini opera*, 52.144: "Sic olim ab Epicuro, Diogene cynico, et similibus derisae fuerunt vulgi superstitiones: sed ita ut Dei cultum promiscuum cum perversis ineptiis miscerent."

<sup>27</sup> On the value of these marginal notes, see Richard A. Muller's study in his *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 63–78.

<sup>28</sup> Iohannes Calvinus, *Institutio Christianae Reäigionis* (Geneva: Esaiiah Le Preux, 1612) 3: "Usus illius amplificatio, cum necessaria profanae curiositatis et Epicureo-

## Calvin on the Epicureans

Calvin uses the designation “Epicureans” more frequently than the name of the founder of this philosophy. A closer look at these passages confirms that this name usually refers to Calvin’s contemporaries. A good example can be found in his commentary on Exodus, where he discusses Pharaoh’s rhetorical question: “Who is the LORD, that I should obey him?” (Ex. 5:2). After having defended himself against an objection brought up by the Roman Catholics, Calvin continues:

Although the Epicureans (the world is now filled with this disgrace) arrogantly rage against God, they always spread some vague reasons under which their detestable furor is hiding. For they allege that, in view of the great variety of opinions, it is virtually impossible to discern who God is or what he commands. In sum, it comes down to this that they want nothing to do with God, and yet they weaken the disgrace of godlessness facetiously, as if they would be at liberty to repudiate what they knowingly ignore.<sup>29</sup>

Calvin is obviously speaking about people of his own day who ignore God and his will.

This is not to deny that in certain instances Calvin does refer to the ancient Epicureans. One obvious example can be found in his exegesis of Paul’s speech on the Areopagus, in which he discusses Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. At the beginning of his exegesis on Acts 17:18, Calvin remarks: “The Epicureans undoubtedly vexed the holy man because of their customary impudence.” Later, Calvin describes their practices: “The Epicureans did not simply despise the good and intelligent arts, by their own admission they hated these. Their philosophy was to imagine a sun of two feet wide, [and] a world brought together from single particles. And by such deceptive talk they destroyed the astonishing handiwork which is visible in the skillful production of the world.”<sup>30</sup> In his exegesis on the saying

---

rum refutatione.”

<sup>29</sup> *Calvini opera*, 2.70: “Epicurei etiam (qua labe nunc refertus est mundus) quamvis petulanter despument adversus Deum, semper tamen offundunt aliquas nebulas, sub quibus lateat detestabilis eorum furor. Obtundunt enim, in tanta opinionum varietate vix posse discerni quisnam sit Deum vel quid iubeat. Summa tamen hue redit, ne quid sit ipsis negotii cum Deo et tamen iocose diluant impietatis dedecus: ac si liberum esset repudiare quod scientes ignorant.”

<sup>30</sup> *Calvini opera*, 48.405: “Non dubium est quin Epicurei, pro solita sua protervia, vexarint sanctum virum.... Epicurei non tantum spernebant bonas et ingenuas artes, sed ex professo oderant. Eorum philosophia erat solem fingere bipedalem, mundum ex atomis conflatum: atque ita ludendo, admirabile artificium, quod in

“Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die” (1 Cor. 15:32), Calvin remarks that this is “a statement of the Epicureans, who measure man’s highest good by enjoyment in the present.” In his opinion, Paul used here a saying common among the Epicureans. Calvin evaluates this view: “If death is the end of man, nothing is more satisfying than to enjoy oneself free of care, as long as life lasts. Such statements occur repeatedly in Horace.”<sup>31</sup> Another reference to early Epicureanism can be found in his explanation of Psalm 107:43. After having rejected Aristotle’s teaching about providence because of his many wild speculations concerning God’s providence, Calvin is even more severe toward the Epicureans: “Not only does the prophet condemn the Epicureans (whose foolishness was even more crude) for their insanity, but he admonishes [us] that in these great philosophers an even more detestable sign of blindness was seen.” Calvin calls for continued observation of God’s works in this world.<sup>32</sup>

However, Calvin confronts himself primarily with contemporary Epicureanism. For him, the main issue is their denial of God’s involvement in the world. He mentions various aspects in his commentary on the Psalms. Explaining Psalm 10:5–6, Calvin emphasizes God’s judgment, remarking that the faithful are not afraid of this, but the ungodly are. He mentions as an example the Epicureans, who, “not daring to deny God openly, imagine him to delight in being idle.”<sup>33</sup>

Calvin points out several consequences of this teaching. Explaining the beginning of Psalm 139, he concludes, “God is not locked up in heaven, so that he, delighting in idleness, is indifferent to human matters, as the Epicureans invent. Rather, although we may stray away far from him, he is not

---

mundi fabrica cernitur, delere.”

<sup>31</sup> *Calvini opera*, 49.553–54: “Vox est Epicureorum, qui summum hominis bonum praesenti voluptate metiuntur.... Existimo Paulum vulgare inter homines perditos ac prostitutae nequitiae dicerium usurpasse: vel (ut brevius dicam) vulgare Epicureorum proverbium: ut concluderei, si mors est interitus hominis, nihil esse satius quam securo delitari, quamdiu vita suppetit. Quales sententiae identidem apud Horatium recurrunt.”

<sup>32</sup> *Calvini opera*, 10.145: “Propheta autem non modo Epicureos (quorum crasior fuit fatuitas) amentiae damnat, sed admonet, in summis illis philosophis magis detestabile fuisse caecitatis portentum.”

<sup>33</sup> *Calvini opera*, 31.112: “Impii vero contra, quamvis ea despiciant, ne tamen eorum metu vel cura turbentur, in coelum ablegant: sicut Epicurei Deum palam negare non audentes, fingunt in otio deliciari.”

far away.”<sup>34</sup> On the basis of Psalm 33:14, translated as: “From the dwelling place of his throne he watched all inhabitants of the earth,” Calvin rejects the opinion that God is doing nothing: “This means that heaven is not a summer palace for enjoyment, as the Epicureans dream, but a royal residence from where he exercises his reign over all the world.”<sup>35</sup> Calvin again mentions the Epicureans when dealing with the expression of trust in God used in Psalm 121:3: “He who watches over you will not slumber.” He elaborates on this: “For that reason God is presented to the believer as a defender, that they rely on his providence without fear.” Calvin mentions two opposing views, the first being that of the Epicureans “who, imagining that God has no concern for the world, extinguish all piety.”<sup>36</sup> Actually, he considers the views of the contemporary Epicureans to be the most dangerous threat to the Christian way of living.

Their teaching that God does no more than enjoy himself in heaven implies that the world has to take care of itself. In his commentary on Habakkuk 1:13, Calvin discusses the question of whether God does no more than observe how evildoers devour people more righteous than they are. In a fairly lengthy response, he maintains that God does not neglect the world he created. In that context, he mentions the Epicureans: “[The prophet] does not say that the world revolves by chance, or even that God enjoys his delights and a quiet life in heaven, as the Epicureans make up, but he confesses that the world is supervised by God, that human affairs are governed by him. However, since [the prophet] is unable to see his way clear when things are so confused, he discussed this by himself rather than with God himself.”<sup>37</sup> Calvin rejects the simple solution given by the Epicureans of his time that God keeps himself apart from the world and maintains his prov-

---

<sup>34</sup> *Calvini opera*, 32.377: “Deum non esse coelo inclusum, ut se otio oblectans (sicut Epicurei fingunt) res humanas negligat: sed quamvis longe ab eo peregrinemur, eum tamen non longe abesse.”

<sup>35</sup> *Calvini opera*, 31.331: “Significai enim, coelum non ad delicias, ut somniant Epicurei, otiosum esse palatium, sed regiam e qua imperium suum per omnes mundi partes exercent.”

<sup>36</sup> *Calvini opera*, 32.300: “Ergo fidelibus proponitur Deus custos, ut secure in eius providentiam recumbant. Nam sicut ab Epicureis, qui fingunt nullam esse mundi curam Deo, omnis pietas extinguitur.”

<sup>37</sup> *Calvini opera*, 43.513: “Non dicit mundum fortuito volvi, nec Deum etiam delicias suas et quietem colere in coelo, quemadmodum faciunt Epicurei: sed fateatur mundum adspici a Deo, curari res humanas. Quia autem non potest sese expedire rebus tam confusis, disceptat potius secum quam cum ipso Deo.”

idence. At the same time, he does not come up with an easy alternative solution but rather indicates that God's government of the world is beyond our comprehension. The Epicureans were so important for Calvin that he even warned against them in one of his sermons. He did this with a complicated sentence of unusual length. Dealing with the section in Hannah's song stating that God brings death and makes alive and sends poverty and wealth (1 Sam. 2:4–8), he exclaims:

Behold, therefore, these two reasons which we have mentioned before, from which it is clear what was touched upon before, namely that concerning God's omnipotence,—whether we hear something from others, or we ourselves read it in the holy books—we must consider the same [= God's omnipotence] in ourselves, in order that we do not imagine that it is idle in heaven, as the Epicureans usually do, because it makes itself abundantly clear by its effects, unless we are unperceptive in full light.<sup>38</sup>

For Calvin, providence is so obvious that his hearers not only could read in Scripture but also hear from other people that the omnipotent God is not in heaven taking it easy but is obviously working on earth. This should cause Christians to observe God's providence in their own lives. Calvin feels the need to emphasize this because certain contemporaries, whom he calls Epicureans, believe that God in heaven does nothing on earth.

On occasion, Calvin does not limit himself to rejecting the Epicureans but continues with positive discussions of God's providence. An example can be found in his explanation of Psalm 115:3, translated as: "Our God in heaven, he did all he willed." That leads to the question of why God does not restrain the Devil and all godless people who resist him. Calvin responds with a reference to the Epicureans: "If [God] is imagined as being between activity and passivity so that he tolerates things he does not want to happen, then he is idle in heaven, as the Epicureans dream." In opposition, Calvin states: "But if we confess that God is endowed with the understanding to take care of, and to govern, the world of which he is the maker, and that he does not neglect any part of it, then it follows that whatever happens, happens because he wills it."<sup>39</sup> This is followed by a

---

<sup>38</sup> *Calvini opera*, 29.294: "En igitur rationes duas illas, quas supra diximus, ex quibus quod superius attigi fit conspicuum, nempe nos de Dei omnipotentia, vel ab aliis aliquid audientes, vel ipsi in sacris legentes, oportere eandem in nobis intueri, ne otiosam eam in coelis, ut Epicurei solent, imaginemur, quum sese, nisi penitus in media luce caligemus, suis effectis satis patefaciat."

<sup>39</sup> *Calvini opera*, 10.184: "Si medius fingitur inter actionem et passionem, ut tolerat quae fieri non vult: erit igitur otiosus in caelo, ut Epicurei somniant. Quodsi fate-

lengthy explanation of God's providence, including a discussion of texts such as Isaiah 5:26 and Psalm 36:7, in direct opposition to contemporary Epicureans who deny God's continued supervision over the world.

Providence is the most frequently mentioned area of disagreement with the Epicureans, but another issue is at least as important for Calvin. He is very concerned that the respect for and worship of God is in danger of disappearing as the result of their teaching. For that reason, he is even more strongly opposed to them than to Roman Catholicism. In his explanation of Galatians 5:29 he states:

The madness of the Epicureans surely affects me more than that of the Papists. They do not attack with great force. But as the name of God is more precious to me than life itself, it is impossible for me to be more anxiously vexed than when I see that a diabolical conspiracy is taking place to extinguish all fear and worship of God, to eradicate the remembrance of Christ or to expose it to the jeers of all the wicked, as when through one fire a whole area is burning.<sup>40</sup>

It is well known that Calvin disagreed with the corruption he saw in Roman Catholic worship, but he viewed the teaching of the Epicureans as much more dangerous, for this results in abandoning all interaction with God and with Jesus Christ.

Commenting on Paul's statement that people have turned away (1 Tim. 1:19), Calvin deplores the consequences implied in the teaching of contemporary Epicureans:

These days we see so many people led like cattle to the ravings of the Epicureans, because they had not sincerely embraced the true faith, so that their hypocritical behavior is uncovered. Yes, even the contempt of God grows all around, and the shameful and corrupt lifestyle of almost all levels of society show that no, or hardly any, uprightness exists in the world. Therefore it must be feared that soon the light which had been lit is extinguished, and that God allows the pure understanding of the gos-

---

mur Deum consilio praeditum esse, ut mundum, cuius est opifex, curet ac gubernet, nullamque negligat eius partem: inde sequetur, quidquid fit, ipso volente fieri."

<sup>40</sup> *Calvini opera*, 50.241–42: "Mihi certe plus moeroris hodie affert Epicureorum furor quam papistarum. Non grassantur vi et manu. Sed quo pretiosius mihi est nomen Dei propria vita, fieri nequit quin magis anxie torquear, quum diabolicam conspirationem fieri video ad exstinguendam omnem Dei timorem et cultum, ad exterminandam Christi memoriam, vel sannis omnium improborum prostituendam, quam si uno incendio tota una regio flagraret."

pel to remain with very few people.<sup>41</sup>

Calvin obviously sees the influence of the Epicureans on his time as detrimental for both serving God and living a holy life, fearing this might even lead to a collapse of the Reformation movement. Later in the same commentary, in his discussion of 6:14, Calvin includes the Epicureans among the evil influences of his time, used by Satan: “Conceited people rise up, Epicureans and Lucianists mock, shameless people insult, hypocrites rage, those who are wise according to the flesh harass us in secret, we are tempted with various tricks, now here, then there.”<sup>42</sup>

Luke’s account in Acts 8 of the encounter between two apostles and Simon the Sorcerer causes Calvin to launch an even stronger attack. Calvin raises the question of how Luke could say that Simon believed when somewhat later he proved to be a hypocrite. According to Calvin, there is a third option, which he describes at some length. “The Epicureans and Lucianists profess they believe, although inwardly they ridicule it, although the hope of eternal life is to them an incredible story, although in the end they have no more faith than dogs and pigs.” Their attitude is markedly different from the people described in Acts 8, who “are not regenerated by the Spirit of adoption, nor dedicate themselves to God with true heartfelt love, but nevertheless are convicted by the power of the Word.” This is, according to Calvin in his commentary on Acts 8:3, “a hypocrisy, by which one deceives oneself.” However wrong this may be, it is still different from the Epicureans: “Truly, we know that such hypocrisy did exist, by which someone has deceived himself. But [this is] not that crude kind by which the Epicureans and similar people make themselves known, because [the hypocrites] do not dare to confess contempt for God.”<sup>43</sup> Calvin considers the Epicure-

---

<sup>41</sup> *Calvini opera*, 52.264: “Et hodie permultos videmus, quia rectam fidem non sincere amplexi fuerant, pecudum instar ad Epicureorum deliria rapi, ut ipsorum hypocrisis detegatur. Quin etiam quum passim grassetur Dei contemptus, et flagitiosi perditique omnium fere ordinum mores demonstrent nihil aut quam minimum esse integritatis in mundo, valde timendum est ne brevi lux, quae accensa fuerat, exstinguatur, et paucissimis Deus puram evangelii intelligentiam relinquat.”

<sup>42</sup> *Calvini opera*, 52.330: “Quam multa enim assidue oculis nostris ingerit Satan, quae alioqui nos a recto proposito centies abducerent. . . . Insurgunt ambitiosi homines, subsannant Epicurei et Lucianici, insultant protervi, fremunt hypocritae, qui secundum carnem sapiunt, oblique nos mordent, sollicitamur variis artibus huc et illuc.”

<sup>43</sup> *Calvini opera*, 48.180: “Epicurei et Lucianici credere se profitentur, quum tamen intus rideant, quum illis fabulosa sit spes vitae aeternae, quum denique nihilo

ans as much worse than people who outwardly accept the Christian doctrine, for the Epicureans despise God.

This survey leads to the conclusion that the teachings of the ancient Epicureans were not Calvin's main focus. In most of the passages where he mentioned the personal name "Epicurus," he actually aimed his remarks at people in his own time who had similar opinions. When he used the collective designation "Epicureans" in all but a few passages, he did not mean the followers of Epicurus who lived between 200 B.C. and A.D. 200, but applied the name to prominent people living in his own time.<sup>44</sup> Overall, the great majority of the passages in Calvin's exegetical work referring to Epicurus and the Epicureans are actually directed against the views of Calvin's contemporaries.

Another noteworthy conclusion is that the disagreement between the Reformed doctrines as defended by Calvin and the teachings of the Epicureans is not limited to the one issue as to whether God is involved in the world. To be sure, Calvin's most frequent complaint concerns their view that God is presented as free from care, without involving himself with this world. This is stated on at least eleven occasions.<sup>45</sup> However, Calvin goes beyond that by spelling out the implications of the Epicurean view on God. He points out about eight doctrinal disagreements between the teachings of Epicureanism and the Christian faith.

1. Concerning the doctrine of God, Epicureanism denies God's activity in this world and rejects his omnipotence (Ex. 5:2).<sup>46</sup>

2. This implies that in the Epicurean view the world is without direction. The events in this world take place at random (Dan. 2:23). In other words, both good events and evil events simply happen by chance (Zeph. 1:12).

3. The fact that God does not pay attention to the world also shows in

---

plus habeant pietatis quam canes et porci. At multi sunt, qui utcunque spiritu adoptionis non sint regeneriti nec vero cordis affectu se Deo addicant, verbi tamen potentia victi.... Verum, talem fuisse hypocrisin sciamus, in qua se ipse deceperit: non crassam illam qua se venditant Epicurei et similes: quia Dei contemptum fateri non audent."

<sup>44</sup> This has not always been taken into account in the discussion on the Epicureans; see for example Ch. Partee, *Calvin and Classical Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 1977) 99–104.

<sup>45</sup> See his commentaries on: Ps. 9:9; 10:5–6; 11:4–5; 33:14; 105:6; 121:3; 121:6; 139:1–3; Dan. 4:17; Hab. 1:13; Zeph. 1:12.

<sup>46</sup> The texts in parentheses actually refer to Calvin's commentaries on these texts.

his attitude toward people—he simply ignores what happens to them. God neglects the human race (Ps. 9:9; Zeph. 1:12).

4. Another result of God's ignoring the world is that the people of this world do not actually know him. In support for this view, the Epicureans point to the fact that there are so many different opinions concerning God (Ex. 5:2).

5. God's staying aloof does affect the way the people live. They know that God is not concerned about what is going on in this world (Zeph. 1:12). They are unable to know what God commands (Ex. 5:2). The only criterion for proper living appears to be what is natural. This led the later followers of Epicurus to accept many human lusts as natural, contrary to the explicit statement of the apostle John (1 John 2:16). A shameful and corrupt lifestyle prevails among people in all levels of society (1 Tim. 1:19). In short, Epicureanism extinguishes all piety (Ps. 121:3).

6. In his commentary on 1 Thessalonians 1:9, Calvin also noted that the ancient Epicureans ridiculed not merely superstitious customs but even corrupted the worship of God itself. However, this is not limited to the past, for Calvin also mentioned the madness of the present Epicureans who extinguish all fear and worship of God (Gal. 5:29).

7. In the same passage, he added the observation that if obedience to God and worship are not necessary, there is also no need for Jesus Christ and his work.

8. Finally, Calvin mentioned that, according to their teaching, the hope of eternal life is no more than a story. The Epicureans deny life after this life on earth (Acts 8:13).

### The Identity of the Epicureans

Although Calvin both in his *Institutes* and in his commentaries repeatedly discussed the teachings of the Epicureans, he did not identify any by name. His references to the Epicureans should not be taken in the literal sense of adherents to the philosophy of Epicurus but must be seen in the context of his time when this name was frequently used as a pejorative designation.<sup>47</sup> Clear examples of this negative connotation can be found in Luther, for example, when he stated that under the papacy bishops live like Epicureans and sows, and elsewhere, that the pope and the cardinals are Epicurean sows.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> M. Lienhardt, "Exposé introductif," in *Croyants et sceptiques au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 40, n. 1; Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory*, 20.

<sup>48</sup> See his "Against Hanswurst" in *Luther's Works* (vol. 41: *Church and Ministry* 3;

The same use can be found in the opposing camp, when the theologians of Louvain disqualified their opponents as “the most crass pigs of Epicurus.”<sup>49</sup> In agreement with the customs of his time, Calvin used the collective name, Epicureans, first of all for its negative connotation.

At the same time, it is possible to identify more specifically whom he had in mind when he referred to the Epicureans. In *Des Scandales*, a book outlining several dangers threatening the church of his time, Calvin also discusses a group of contemporary authors he calls Epicureans. They are included among the stumbling blocks for the church discussed in the second section of this book, in which he surveys “a host of sects and strange and monstrous errors.”<sup>50</sup> Calvin first mentions the Lucianists who “are mocking the whole religion of Christ,” adding in the same breath the “Epicureans who without any fear of God publicly dishonor themselves with wickedness.”<sup>51</sup> Characterizing them in the words of Romans 1:26–28, he states that those who had robbed God of his glory would receive as a punishment for their ungratefulness a just reward for their ingratitude. Speaking about their attitude toward the gospel, Calvin says that “some throw it down to trample it, others do not care and place it behind the vain enjoyments of the world, many even change it with glee into a joke for profane fun.” He calls them people who “despise the blood of Christ, the eternal truth of God and the light of life.”<sup>52</sup>

Two groups are distinguished, each identified by several names. The first consists of Agrippa, Servet, Dolet, and others, who have always

---

ed. Eric W. Gritsch; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1996) 211; and his “Against the Roman Papacy, an Institution of the Devil,” in *Luther's Works*, 41.287.

<sup>49</sup> Jones, *The Epicurean Tradition*, 163.

<sup>50</sup> *Calvini opera*, 8.13; a critical edition of the French text was published by Olivier Fatio, *Des scandales*, by John Calvin (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1984). An English translation was provided by John W. Fraser, *Concerning Scandals* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978). The Latin text of this book will be used because the French text is not as specific on this point as the Latin text, as noted by the editor of the French text; see *Des scandales*, 134, n. 240.

<sup>51</sup> *Calvini opera*, 8.43: “ut qui Deum fraudaverant suo honore, extremiae ignominiae subiecti, iustam reciperent ingratitude suae mercedem.” Fraser, *Concerning Scandals*, 60; Fatio, *Des scandales*, 135.

<sup>52</sup> *Calvini opera*, 8.44: “Evangelium, quo se nobis in filii persona offert ac donat, quomodo satis digne excipi potest? Atqui incomparabilem hunc thesaurum vulgari honore multi vix dignantur; alii abiiciunt ad pedes, alii vanis mundi delitiis secure posthabent; multi etiam tanquam aliquod ludicrum, iocose ad profanam oblectationem convertunt.” Fraser, *Concerning Scandals*, 60; J. Fatio, *Des scandales*, 135.

proudly rejected the gospel. Not only did they spew out blasphemies against the Son, they also denied the afterlife.<sup>53</sup> To the second group belong Rabelais, Peyrère, and Goveanus, introduced by Calvin as people who have tasted the gospel but are struck with the same blindness. The reason is that they have profaned the sacred pledge of eternal life.<sup>54</sup> In other words, they denied God's promise of eternal life for those who believe him. This world and this life are all there is for people.

Calvin has saved the worst offence for the end: "They pour out the poison of their ungodliness everywhere, to fill the world with atheism."<sup>55</sup> He adds an explanation of what is meant with this atheism of the Epicureans: "But this is the goal: to obliterate all fear of God from the souls of people. For they go the extreme of saying that all religions have their origin in the brain of people, that God exists because they like to believe this; that the hope of a future life has been invented for simple people who need to be nursed; and that the fear for judgment is a childish scare."<sup>56</sup> Calvin blames some Epicureans for taking God as a figment of the mind.

## Conclusion

This survey allows us to draw several conclusions:

In the first place, Calvin's opposition to the Epicurean rejection of providence, repeatedly mentioned in his commentaries, is part of a wider

---

<sup>53</sup> *Calvini opera*, 8.44: "Agrippam, Villanovanum, Doletum, et similes vulgo notum est tanquam Cyclopas quospiam semper fastuose sprevisse. Tandem eo prolapsi sunt amentiae et furoris, ut non modo in filium Dei execrabiles blasphemias evomerent, sed quantum ad animae vitam attinet, nihil a canibus et porcis putarent se differre." Fraser, *Concerning Scandals*, 61; Fatio, *Des scandales*, 136; both explain how Servet could be called Villanovanus.

<sup>54</sup> *Calvini opera*, 8.44–45: "Alii, ut Rabelaysus, Deperius et Goveanus, gustato evangelio, eadem caecitate sunt percussi. Cur istud? Nisi quia sacrum illud vitae aeternae pignus sacrilega ludendi aut ridendi audacia ante profanarant." Fraser, *Concerning Scandals*, 61, and nn. 9 and 11; Fatio, *Des scandales*, 138, 140.

<sup>55</sup> *Calvini opera*, 8.45: "Porro, quia non lapsu tantum suo vel praecipitio infrimos offendunt perditii isti homines, sed impietatis suae venenum huc illuc profundunt, ut atheismo orbem replent." Fraser, *Concerning Scandals*, 62; Fatio, *Des scandales*, 141.

<sup>56</sup> *Calvini opera*, 8.45–46: "Hic tamen finis est, ut omnem Dei timorem obleterent ex animis hominum. Nam eo tandem perrumpunt, religiones omnes ex hominum cerebro natas esse: Deum esse, quia credere libeat: futurae vitae spem lactandis simplicibus inventam esse: metum iudicii puerile esse terculamentum." Fraser, *Concerning Scandals*, 62; Fatio, *Des Scandales*, 141.

opposition to the teachings of the Epicureans. He disagrees with the general worldview of this philosophy in which God is not glorified, for neither his work in creating and governing this world, nor his work for the salvation of his people is recognized.

Second, a comparison of Calvin's remarks concerning the Epicureans in his commentaries with the summary treatment of Epicureanism in his book on the scandals leads to the conclusion that they agree in many of the particulars. The only important exception concerns actual atheism, which is mentioned among the scandals but is not attributed to the Epicureans in the commentaries.

Third, in view of the general background of the sixteenth century and specifically of Calvin's publications, the name "Epicureans" in Article 13 of the Belgic Confession should not be interpreted as referring to the ancient philosophical school of the Epicureans. Rather, this is a pejorative designation used for those who deny God's involvement in the world. More specifically, it refers to a vocal group of contemporary authors of French background who had in common the denial of God's involvement in this world.