

# The Reformation Piety of Theodore Beza

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## Introduction

Theodore Beza (1519-1605) remains one of the enigmas of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation even though he led the church in Geneva, and its efforts in France, from the death of John Calvin in 1564 until his own death forty-one years later. These were tumultuous years in Geneva's history, and Beza led a very exciting and busy life at its helm.<sup>1</sup> But many scholars assume that Beza transformed Calvin's theology in the process, acting as a hinge between the biblical emphasis of the early Reformation and the later philosophical and logical (but not primarily biblical) emphases of Protestant Scholasticism.<sup>2</sup> We cannot here enter into the complexities of this debate, although we think that these charges are fundamentally wrong.<sup>3</sup> Our purposes in this article are much more modest. Here we hope to point out the major contours of Beza's piety.<sup>4</sup> Our hope is primarily to trace the course of Beza's thinking on this significant subject so that we can learn from him.

To understand Beza's piety we must attempt to enter into his worldview. This is necessary because Beza's view of ultimate realities shaped his evaluation of what was essential to Christian living. We will see that Beza had a very supernatural view of reality, complete with God and Satan, heaven and hell. This "eschatological vision," as I will call it, meant that for Beza the single most important aspect of Christian piety was that a believer might

navigate the vicissitudes of life and arrive safely in heaven. With this eschatological vision as the necessary background to Beza's thought, we shall then note three of Beza's emphases concerning Christian piety. First, we shall see the importance of the word of God; second, the reality of difficulties in Christian living; and, third, the hopefulness of God's sovereignty to Christian piety. These components together comprise Beza's realistic, yet ultimately optimistic, view of the Christian life.

## Beza's Eschatological Vision

Contrary to many historians' evaluations of Theodore Beza, I do not think Beza was primarily a scholastic logician. Instead, I believe that a careful reading of his works shows that he was fundamentally an affectionate follower of Jesus Christ, who yearned to be with Christ, but who viewed the Christian's life as a struggle. The hardships of the Christian life were the result of a battle raging between Satan and God. Although the outcome of the struggle for Christians was sure (i.e., they would certainly arrive in heaven), hell was a reality that was to be avoided at all costs. Here we will briefly outline the contours of Beza's eschatological vision.

## The Fact of the Spiritual Battle

Beza depicted Satan as active in the world, indefatigably trying to harm Christians.<sup>5</sup> So he indicted Satan as the

foremost of “my enemies” in his meditation on Psalm 102. The devil was “that great devouring lion, who has spoiled, torn, and swallowed so many” Christians “from the beginning of the world.”<sup>6</sup> Satan was the deadly aggressor in the spiritual battle.

Satan’s schemes took many forms. In the first place, he was incessant in troubling Christians, and in tempting them to sin. “Satan, the prince of darkness, lays always in wait to hurt us, seeking principally to make a breach into our hearts when we stand least upon our guard,” Beza warned. “Give us grace,” he therefore prayed, “to be delivered from the temptations of the devil, from uncleanness . . . into which our infirmity leads us.”<sup>7</sup> The devil also troubled Christians when they attempted to pray, “for besides that the devil at all times lies in wait, to seduce us, so does he, especially, at such times, seek to creep into our minds, to divert our thoughts elsewhere, that they may be polluted with many blemishes.”<sup>8</sup> One of the prerequisites of fervent prayer was thus to abandon “Satan with all his baits.”<sup>9</sup>

Only God could make Christians strong for the combat. They could not rely on their own efforts in the spiritual battle. Indeed, one of the devil’s favorite schemes involved making believers think they could stand against him in their own strength: “we have to learn how Satan,” Beza urged his listeners, “is never more ready for us to surrender, than when we think we have won the upper hand.”<sup>10</sup> Rather, the omnipotent God would protect his children. “Does Satan amaze you?” Beza asked his listeners when the Genevans feared a Catholic attack in 1587.<sup>11</sup> If so, believers need not worry, for their Lord

has vanquished him for you. Does the corruption of your nature astonish you? The Son of God making himself man has fully sanctified it for you. Do your sins make you afraid, which be fruits of this corruption? He has borne them all upon the tree, and has paid for your discharge. Which more is, his righteousness is yours, if he himself is yours. Are you afraid of men, if God is for you? Does death make you afraid? It is vanquished and turned into an entry of life. Behold then all your enemies scattered, behold quite under foot, all such as afflicted you within and without, because the Lord allows you for one of his servants and household.<sup>12</sup>

The battle was real, but God would protect his children and bring them safely to himself. Although Satan’s schemes were evil and troubling, “it is not in the power of any to trouble us, except when and how far it pleases God they shall do it.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, Beza urged his listeners to forgo trusting in their “imaginary powers” by partaking of the “real remedy” Christ modeled for them, namely, “to know prayer, provided that it is lifted up” to almighty God.<sup>14</sup>

### *The Battle for the Truth*

Satan especially sought to destroy the church because God cared for it and appointed it the guardian of the truth. The devil attacked the church by trying to foster heretical beliefs in her midst. So Beza warned his listeners to be on “guard here against a great ruse of Satan, pushing us if he can, from one extreme to the other, which are so many precipices. Therefore let us know that those are grandly self-deceived who want to subjugate the word of God to their own natural sense.” Instead believers must lean “on the word of God understood, and not at all on our imaginations, whether they are old or new.”<sup>15</sup> Satan moved in those “deceived who

seek for the true religion in the crowd, in custom . . . as if there had not already been more fools than wise men.” But, Beza went on to warn his listeners, “let us defend ourselves here against Satan’s ambushes, and let us remember this, which the true Jesus Christ admonished us (Matt. 24:23) to know, that false christs and false prophets” would come.<sup>16</sup>

Biblical truth was essential. If one did not believe certain truths, one would be damned eternally. That is why Beza prayed that the church would “be my whole desire, and the sole subject of my delights, that I may never depart from there, notwithstanding whatsoever assaults and temptations I am to endure.” He yearned to remain in the church in the midst of the spiritual battle because “there is not any such mishap, or so much to be feared, as to be out of this holy temple, wherein only abides all light, truth, salvation, and life.”<sup>17</sup> The church, Beza prayed to God, was “where your truth is lodged.”<sup>18</sup> As such, it was the locus of salvation and life. Although the truth was being assailed by the schemes of the devil, it would prevail: from true doctrine “proceeds the stability of the Church, which the endeavors of Satan cannot shake, because the foundation of her faith and doctrine is grounded upon the true, and immoveable rock, even the pure confession of the name of Christ.”<sup>19</sup> Though Satan endeavored to destroy the church, the confession of the truth protected her in the midst of the spiritual battle.

### *The Eternal Stakes of the Battle*

Theodore Beza’s eschatological vision was eternal in its scope. He had his eyes fixed on eternity as he lived and ministered in this life. He wanted himself and those under his care to go to heaven and

not to have to suffer the perpetual torments of hell.

Beza acknowledged that eternity was an awesome experience to contemplate in this life. In the prayer “upon temporal death,” he exhorted persons to dwell upon the inevitability of eternity so that they might escape God’s judgment and resort to Christ for salvation:

The longest time of our course – whereof sleep nibbles away a good part – is but three-score and ten years, or four-score for the strongest bodies, while in every moment of life, the nearest and smallest danger that threatens us, seems to be death, which as our shadow, follows us at the heels, and laughs at our good devices, until she has scattered them in the wind, and brought us into ashes. But which is worse, where is the man, so holy and perfect, that does not tremble and quake, if there be represented unto him, O Lord, the tribunal seat of your sovereign justice, where we all, after death, must appear? Your indignation against sinners is manifest, and there is none righteous; your vengeance is ready against rebellion, whereof we are all guilty, which does also cause, that death is unto us, not only as a temporal ending as concerning the flesh, whereat nature is moved and abashed, but also an interior feeling of the curse fallen upon sin, yea even an entry into eternal death, unless there be for us with you our Father, redemption in our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>20</sup>

So those who did not receive redemption must certainly go to “the tribunal seat of [God’s] sovereign justice” and experience God’s “indignation against sinners” and his “vengeance [which] is ready against rebellion.”<sup>21</sup>

Hell’s torments would be excruciating for unbelievers. “These miserable men,” Beza noted, “depart this their earthly habitation, with great grief and trembling.” Their eternal fate is foreshadowed

in the misery and fear they experience on the brink of death which is “the proof that they are going to make, of the eternal torments with the devils in the burning lake of fire and brimstone, which is never quenched, given to the soul presently upon the temporal death.” Their “eternal death” is “a death which continues without dying.” And it will not only consist in torments of body but also of conscience, for “this pain is not the least to the damned . . . that they never have any motion of the spirit to repent or convert unto you the only and true God.”<sup>22</sup> Yes, hell will be for them an eternity of intense emotional, physical, and spiritual pain, because “when they think upon death, they see nothing but fearful, horrible, damnable, all-intolerable pain, without diminution or end, an infernal, devilish, and endless torment, a gnashing of teeth, with blasphemy and despair, a perpetual disquiet both in body and soul, an eternity to their woe and damnation.” But their misery consisted of much more than that. They shall also behold “a most merciful God, whom they shall know to be in heaven, and yet not to be their God, but their adversary, and sovereign judge, to be as severe and rigorous to them, as he shall be gentle and favorable to his children.”<sup>23</sup> Lest one argue with the deity that hell seemed an exorbitantly horrendous punishment for finite sins, Beza justified an eternal hell in Anselmian terms, “for your majesty being infinitely offended, ought also in justice to require a punishment without end.”<sup>24</sup>

So hell should be abhorred and avoided at all costs. Conversely, Beza encouraged believers to desire and seek after heaven with their most diligent effort. Heaven was a wonderful and joyful place, where a Christian would be freed from the trials

of his or her earthly pilgrimage. In heaven Christians “may once for all, wholly be set free from so miserable bondage of sin” and “they may behold [God] as it were face to face, yea and more rightly serve and honor him, whom all their lifetime they have most earnestly sought.”<sup>25</sup> Thus Beza prayed that the Lord would allow a believer who was near death “with the eyes of his faith, to behold the eternal blessings you reserve for him in your paradise, to live happy for ever.” Such a person could endure death since he knew he would soon “enjoy your presence in heaven.”<sup>26</sup>

Having an eternal perspective fortified believers in the present spiritual battle, according to Beza. It empowered Christians to withstand the temptations of the world. “To the children of darkness,” he commented, “the uncleanness of the flesh is a pleasant habitation. But to the children of light, to the immortal spirits, to the regenerate hearts, heaven is much more desirable.” He thus prayed “Grant therefore, my God, that as I daily grow towards my end, so I may live the more cheerfully, learning in your school, to prefer your eternal life, before the light of the Sun, the glory of heaven, before the vanity of the earth, the glorious habitation in paradise, before the painful tumults of the world, the society of angels, before the fellowship of mortal men, the only blessed and permanent life, before the passing shadow of this life.” He continued asking that he would “know how to prepare myself by continual meditation in these excellent Christian consolations, that happy are they that die in the Lord.”<sup>27</sup> Similarly, in his prayer “For heavenly life,” Beza asked the Lord “to give me grace, that withdrawing my affection more and more from the dark cloisters of the earth,

sprinkled with tears, I may lift up my desires to the lightsome habitation of thy deity, where the treasures and incomparable joys of your paradise do remain in an eternal life.” He prayed that he might comfort “myself incessantly night and day, in that the promise is made unto me through my savior Jesus Christ, to the end, that in my last hour—come out of my misery and entered into my felicity—I may with a happy flight go take my rest above in your peace, O my God, which surmounts all understanding, and for to sing psalms of thanksgiving unto you without end.”<sup>28</sup> Beza’s eschatological vision thus informed all that he did and taught. God would sovereignly bring his people to heaven to be with him, but the reality of the spiritual battle meant that the believer’s life on earth would be fraught with trials.

### **The Bible and Christian Piety**

To Beza the spiritual battle necessitated *sola scriptura*. The living God had revealed himself and his ways, and continued to speak, through his word, the Bible. But, as Beza repeated continually, the devil vigorously opposed God’s living voice in Scripture. If Christians were to withstand the wiles of the devil, they must be girded by truth from God. Roman Catholic, heretical, and any other human ideas that came between the individual and the Bible must be abandoned. The Bible had to be trusted and proclaimed.

### ***The Sufficiency of the Bible***

For Beza, the Bible’s sufficiency derived from its authorship. The Scriptures were God’s own voice to his people. As such they were authoritative and sufficient for God’s people. “Does the Word contain all that which we must believe and do?” Beza

asked at the head of his *Petit Catéchisme*. The necessary response was “Yes, without having any need to add anything to it or take anything from it.”<sup>29</sup> The Bible was sufficient because God himself had written it. So, Beza argued that the eighth psalm’s true meaning was found in three New Testament verses “as the Holy Ghost interprets it.”<sup>30</sup> “The Son of God,” he said elsewhere, “has left us his lively portrait in his doctrine written by the Apostles, comprising whatever is necessary for us to know, either touching his person, or touching all the counsel of God his Father concerning our salvation.”<sup>31</sup> Similarly, in his prayer, “To crave of God the light of his word,” Beza said, “you have so far graced us, that this your word of life has been, and still remains among us, faithfully collected in the sacred registers of the holy scripture, so to be unto us, the image of your glory, the law of your kingdom, the ladder of heaven, the gate of paradise, the trumpet of salvation, to be brief, the treasury of piety, virtue, wisdom, consolation, and perfection.”<sup>32</sup>

This Bezan emphasis on God’s active speaking through the Bible explains the usefulness he saw for the Scriptures in the church. Satan was active in the world, especially attacking the church. His major ploy was to entice persons to trust the power and accuracy of their unaided reason. This was a dangerous evil, Beza warned in a sermon to his students. The God-given protection against this demonic scheme, significantly, was found in biblical doctrine. Instead of following Satan’s schemes, believers should “lean on the word of God understood, and not at all on our imaginations, whether they are old or new.”<sup>33</sup>

The Scripture, God’s living word, must therefore be the constant diet of his



people. Summarizing the “principal end” of Psalm 119, Beza reiterated the divine origin and the sufficiency of the Bible, as well as the vital need for God’s Spirit to apply the Scriptures to Christians. The purpose of this psalm was

that men ought to be enticed to the careful study of the heavenly doctrine. . . . And the whole doctrine may be brought to these four principal heads. (1) That those things are signified by the name of the heavenly doctrine, which are revealed of God himself, and comprehended in the holy scriptures – whether we understand that part which commands that which we ought to do, and forbids the contrary, the name of the Law being taken in a more straight signification, or whether we understand that other part, wherein it is taught what we must believe to salvation, which we call the gospel. (2) That this doctrine is declared from heaven, not that we should comprehend it in our understanding only, but that every one should follow it with an earnest care, without fainting, as the rule of his whole life. (3) That we may be both willing and able to embrace and follow it, we must of necessity pray for the Spirit of God, which may both drive away darkness from our understanding, and amend our affections that are wholly corrupted. (4) Though the world being terrified, partly with the fear of dangers, partly with the greatness of calamities, and partly also deceived with a feigned show of profit, does rather go some other way, yet they only do wisely, which stick unto that way which is set down in the word of God, what difficulties so ever do offer themselves in this life, so that at the last they shall have the fruition of true and everlasting life.<sup>34</sup>

To Beza the Bible was of supreme usefulness for God’s people because of its divine origin. It alone contained “heavenly doctrine” from God himself.

### ***The Bible’s Role in the Spiritual Battle***

As he surveyed the contemporary landscape, Beza noticed Satan’s machinations behind Rome’s heretical doctrines. In his sermons on the Song of Songs, for instance, Beza noted the demonic origin of Roman doctrine. He rebuked the Catholics for “their false and cursed doctrine” which they attempted to cover with “lies and falsehoods.” This practice, he argued, originated with “Satan their father” and was carried on “in the school of these foxes, or rather these wolves, which are the talents and the teeth of that great monster of Rome.”<sup>35</sup> In another place, he warned his flock to “take diligent heed of Satan’s and his ministers’ subtlety, who would bear us in hand that all old wine is good, and must be received: which is most false. For there is as well old wine mingled and poisoned, as new wine, which we must warily take heed of.”<sup>36</sup> The sure antidote against such demonic poison, Pastor Beza noted, was to judge everything by the sure canon of the Bible, “to consider well whether it be drawn out of the true vessels of . . . the writings of the prophets and Apostles, otherwise called, the Old and the New Testament, and so consequently reject and refuse without all exception whatever wine is drawn elsewhere.”<sup>37</sup> According to Theodore Beza the Bible was the weapon Christians needed to wield in the spiritual battle. The Bible was essential to Christian piety.

### **Difficulties of Piety in the Spiritual Battle**

Assurance of salvation was a pressing pastoral reality with which Beza was very familiar. Given Beza’s eschatological vision, the need for Christian assurance was great. Christians’ lives here were not

their final homes. They were on a pilgrimage here; heaven was their true, eternal rest. But until they arrived in heaven, they would experience troubles, and occasional doubts about their standing with God.

Given the fact of the spiritual battle, as a wise pastor Beza knew that struggling Christians needed assurance of their future life in heaven. They needed this encouragement to keep waging the war necessary in their pilgrimage on their way to their eternal resting place. This explains, I think, the numerous *loci* of assurance that Beza delineated in his writings. As we shall see, he encouraged his flock to seek for certainty of their salvation in a variety of places. The weary pilgrims needed the solace of numerous means of finding assurance so that they would be strengthened to persevere. Ultimately, though, Beza knew that Christians would not have complete, final assurance until they were ushered safely into God's presence. Satan's wiles were too crafty, and their own indwelling sin was too powerful to allow them to have complete lasting assurance until they went to be with their Lord forever. Beza's eschatological vision thus informed his belief in the urgency, as well as the imperfection, of Christian assurance in this life.

In his paraphrase of the twenty-seventh psalm, Beza showed his readers that Christians' foes, that is, their spiritual "enemies," made assurance necessary. Although Beza here emphasized the necessity of the correct use of "means" for obtaining salvation, he also located all of the means *extra nos*:

Here are opened unto us, even when all things seem most desperate, three lively, and never failing fountains, whence we may draw assured comfort. One is, to take hold of the power of God by true faith,

and oppose it against all the boastings of the enemies. The second, a continual desire always of the glory of God, keeping evermore a safe conscience, and using diligently the means whereby our faith may be confirmed, that is to say, the hearing of the word preached and the use of the sacraments – if so be that we may have them; if not, yet must we have a continual meditation of them. The third is, earnest prayer, with faith and patience.<sup>38</sup>

Although Beza did not elaborate on the identity of the enemies, he did argue that the adversaries' attacks made the situation desperate for believers. In light of the attacks, Christians needed to find assured comfort. Right use of these means assured one of success against the assaults of the enemy.

Additionally, in the *Tabula Praedestinationis*, his polemical treatise defending Calvin's view of predestination, Beza noted that assurance was made necessary because of the realities of spiritual opposition.<sup>39</sup> After he had explicated the doctrine of predestination, Beza labored in the final chapter to show "How Individuals, with Some Profit, Can Apply This General Doctrine to Each Other."<sup>40</sup> Here Beza taught that assurance was necessitated by the spiritual battle. He also put forward a two-pronged basis of assurance: the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit to the Christian and the external witness of a changed life resulting in good works. Beza's pastoral advice, since it was elaborated in this polemical and doctrinal context, is remarkable:

So then, do you wish (whoever you are) to be assured of your predestination, and therefore the salvation you await, against all the attacks of Satan? I say, do you want to be assured, not by doubts and conjectures that assail the human mind, but as certainly and surely as

if you ascended to heaven itself and understood that secret decree from the very mouth of God? Take care, and be diligent that you do not begin at the highest stage, for otherwise you will not endure the immense light of God. Therefore, begin at the lowest stages; and when you hear God's voice resounding in your ears and heart and calling you to Christ, the only Mediator, consider step by step, and inquire carefully if you are justified and sanctified by faith in Christ. For these are the effects, and from them we understand that faith is the cause.

You will know this partly from the Spirit of adoption who inwardly cries "Abba, Father," and partly from the power and efficacy of that same Spirit within you – if, that is, you experience and also demonstrate in reality that sin, though it "dwells" in you, does not "reign" in you. But what then? Is it not the Holy Spirit who causes us spontaneously not to give free reign to our wicked and depraved desires, as those are wont to do whose eyes the Prince of this world has blinded? Who else "exhorts us to prayers," no matter how cold and sluggish we are? Who arouses in us those "inexpressible sighs"? Who implants in us after we have sinned (sometimes intentionally and knowingly) that hatred for the sins that we commit – not because we fear punishment but because we offend our most merciful Father? Who, I say, bears witness to us that our sighs are heard? Who urges us even to dare entreat God, our God, and still our Father, even after we have offended him? Is it not the Spirit, and he alone, whom "freely we received," as "freely he is given" for a sure pledge of our adoption? But if we can infer faith from these effects, we can only conclude that we are efficaciously called and drawn, and that from this calling in turn (which we have shown is peculiar to God's children) we comprehend entirely what we are seeking. We therefore were given to the Son, since we were predestined by God's eternal counsel, which he proposed in himself, to be adopted in the Son. From this it follows, in short, that since we were predestined by that

most unshakable will of God, which depends on itself alone, and since "no one can snatch us from the hand of the Son," and since perseverance in faith is necessary for salvation, we have a sure expectation of our perseverance, and consequently our salvation. And therefore it is wicked to have any more doubts concerning that matter.

Consequently, it is totally wrong to say that this doctrine renders us negligent or dissolute. It is so wrong that, on the contrary, it alone gives us access to examine and even understand, by means of his Spirit, the very "depths" of God. We only know those "depths" in part as long as we sojourn here, and therefore we must daily do battle with the "heavenly weapons" against despair. . . . Furthermore, how can anyone remain firm and constant to that end, against so many dangerous internal and external temptations, and so many "strokes of chance," as the world likes to say, if he has not first established in his mind what is utterly true: that God does all things according to his good will, no matter what, or whatever instruments he uses, in the interest of his own, and that the man who is set in such a plight may number himself among "those in his book"?<sup>41</sup>

This lengthy quotation from a treatise defending predestination against Jérôme Bolsec's attacks demonstrates again that for Theodore Beza assurance was necessary because of eschatological reality. Knowing the proper means by which to arrive at assurance strengthened the Christian "against all the attacks of Satan." Such knowledge strengthened the believer to "daily do battle with the 'heavenly weapons' against despair." Assurance was requisite because of the spiritual battle.

Finally, in his published prayers Beza reiterated how the spiritual battle made assurance both necessary and difficult to obtain. In the preface to his *Houshold Prayers*, Beza noted that prayer itself was



often difficult for believers because of Satanic opposition. Since God wanted prayers to be fueled by affection for him, Beza urged his readers that “we must, praying carefully, lift up our hearts with a true zeal to God, banishing out all other thoughts, abandoning Satan with all his baits, opening our hearts, that our heavenly Father may thereunto infuse and pour down his blessings.”<sup>42</sup> Later, Beza remarked that not only did a believer’s indwelling corruption hinder prayerfulness, but in addition, “the devil does at all times lie in wait to seduce us. So does he, especially, at such times, seek to creep into our minds, to divert our thoughts elsewhere, that they may be polluted with many blemishes, notwithstanding that they of themselves sufficiently go astray. Yes our vanity, imperfection, and coldness, does many ways betray itself, that we may well say in one word: no man prays rightly, but he, whose mouth and mind Christ directs with his Spirit.”<sup>43</sup> Satanic opposition was real. Prayer was a spiritual weapon to be wielded by believers against the devil.

The *Houshold Prayers* also noted the means of protection in the battle. In the fight against the devil for assurance, Christians must lean on the love and perfect character of their Heavenly Father. In one place, for example, Beza prayed, “Strengthen us likewise with your virtue, O almighty God, against the temptations and assaults of Satan, delivering us victoriously, preserving us also from such dangers and miseries, as everywhere follow us at the heels in this life . . . because we are of the number of your children.”<sup>44</sup> In another prayer, Beza rejoiced that though Satan’s schemes were bad, God’s grace was more powerful: “Satan, the prince of darkness, lies always in wait to hurt

us, seeking principally to make a breach into our hearts when we stand least upon our guard. But, O Almighty God, in your presence also are the thousands of angels, to watch those whom you have called to the inheritance of your salvation, of which number we believe ourselves to be, through the mercy which it has pleased you to show us. Give us grace therefore to be delivered from the temptations of the devil.”<sup>45</sup>

For Theodore Beza assurance of salvation was necessitated by the spiritual battle raging around Christians as they made their pilgrimage to heaven. The devil made believers question their standing with God. As a pastor sensitive to the spiritual predicaments of his parishioners, Beza encouraged his listeners to seek assurance in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit would testify to them internally of their salvation, and the good works they produced in response to their salvation would serve as external proofs of the same. Their hope resided thus in God’s character and the grace he had shown them and promised to continue to pour out on them for eternity. But until believers reached their final resting place in heaven, they would not have complete assurance due to the trials that inevitably attended this life.<sup>46</sup>

### **God’s Sovereignty: Bedrock of Christian Piety**

Beza’s eschatological vision—his belief in believers’ pilgrimage through a spiritual battle on their way to the eternal joy and happiness of heaven—informed his pastoral view of reality. The times were precarious. The plague constantly threatened Geneva and Catholic armies besieged the city; Lutheran antagonists repeatedly attacked the Reformed doctrine of the eucharist and predestination;

fellow believers in his beloved France suffered death under Catholic rule; the future of the Geneva Academy appeared bleak.<sup>47</sup> But above and behind all these concerns, Beza perceived a battle between God and Satan, a war which inevitably involved Christians. How could believers have confidence in such dangerous times? Their assurance of salvation and the certainty that they would persevere all the way to heaven, their survival in times of political turmoil, their strength in the midst of Satan's attacks, their very salvation—all these things depended on God's absolute sovereignty, according to Beza. God's sovereignty at its heart was a pastoral doctrine for Theodore Beza.

Beza's writings are replete with applications of the truth of God's sovereignty to his listeners and readers. He did not, to be sure, shy away from very technical discussions about predestination and providence in his teaching or his polemics. But his overriding concern remained the comfort and assurance of believers. The following survey of the pastoral uses Beza made of this doctrine will demonstrate that he taught that God's sovereignty was the ultimate source of joy, assurance, and salvation for Christians in the midst of the spiritual battle raging around them. God's sovereign ability to keep his promises was thus the anchor for his hurting people.

So Beza urged Gaspard de Coligny to trust in the Lord as he led the Protestants during precarious times in France. Beza exhorted his friend to be "assured of the faithful guidance of such a Guide, who will lead you through the right path, whatever difficulty there is of unknown and inaccessible places." He counseled him to rely "upon that faithful Leader, who can lead you through a sure path in

the midst of impassable and inaccessible places."<sup>48</sup> And in the midst of evil, indeed sometimes inexplicable evil, Beza insisted that even when they did not understand God's ways, Christians must seek to trust in him and his providential control over all things. "If you see in a country oppression of the poor, and defrauding of right and equity, think not too much upon this manner of doing whatsoever men list. For he that is higher than the highest works these things, and there are that are higher than they," he wrote. Rather, he cautioned his listeners not "to begin to doubt of that providence of God. For however these things seem to be tossed up and down, as if the world had no governor, yet be sure there is one above all these, that abuse the honor whereunto they are advanced, who has also standing by him innumerable and most mighty ministers, whom in due time he may set a work to execute his decrees upon these proud men."<sup>49</sup> In another place, Beza wrote that "it pleases God to temper the life of man by giving sometimes prosperity, sometimes adversity," but that persons "are not able to attain to his wisdom" in these matters. The only proper course, and the only avenue open to prospering in adversity, was to rest wholly in God's wisdom: "the only means to escape out of all these straights" is "neither profanely inquiring into God himself" nor "wickedly scorning at that, which he can not conceive, but falling down before the majesty of God, which we cannot comprehend." Such persons "rest wholly in his will."<sup>50</sup> God would take care of his people, even when they did not understand his ways.

The schemes of Satan were especially vexing to God's people. The devil tried to keep Christians apart from Christ and incited heinous evil against believers

through those who opposed the Protestants. But God in his sovereignty would prevail over Satan and judge the wicked. In 1586 Beza described the two sorts of “mountains” that might tend to separate believers from the Lord, whom Beza identified with the “bridegroom” in his exposition of Canticles:

For first of all Satan and his accomplices do what lies in them to hinder this bridegroom and this spouse from ever seeing each the other, leaving no kind of cruelty unpracticed, nor any kind of subtle and crafty sly means unattempted to work this division and divorce, which is verified throughout the whole sacred history. But to go no farther for proof of this, what has been done in this behalf in our time by kings and emperors enchanted and bewitched by that whore of Rome, and by her slaves? And what does the world still do every day? If we read over all the histories of the ancient persecutions, no one excepted, shall we find the like unto that which has been practiced in our time? For there is neither fire, nor water, nor air, nor earth, which have not all of them been employed to suck the life of our poor brethren. There is no kind of cruel death through which they have not passed, neither have the hands of the hangmen only been wearied with their slaughter, but the people also have been employed to drench themselves with the blood of the poor, meek and innocent, without distinction of age or difference of sex, or any privilege of nature whatsoever. And this licentiousness has been permitted, to any that would dye his hands red with innocent blood, not in time of war and hostility, but in the greatest appearance and confidence that might be of peace and friendship.<sup>51</sup>

In the midst of this calamity Beza encouraged his listeners to trust their Lord: “Let us therefore know and hold this for an irrefragable point and undeniable, and altogether resolved upon . . . that the Lord

is never late or slack in coming, that is to say, fails not to come at the point, yea and that leaping over all that which might seem to slack and stay his coming.”<sup>52</sup>

God’s control, Beza asserted, reached right down to ordering the deeds the devil should do. Rather than causing consternation among believers, though, Beza argued that this truth should comfort them: “This doctrine is full of excellent comfort. For thereby we understand, that by the power of our God, the rage of that hungry lion is abated and bridled, and that God will never suffer him to do anything against his children, which shall not be to their good and profit, as the apostle tells us (Rom. 8:28) and also teaches us by his own example (2 Cor. 12:17).”<sup>53</sup>

Beza argued that God’s sovereignty assured Christians of their salvation. Their Sovereign was the author of salvation from its very beginning until the time he brought his children to be with him in heaven. As believers held on to this promise, Beza argued, it would produce comfort and joy, even during times of earthly conflict. Thus Beza prayed “to obtain the gift of faith”:

So great is the vanity, ignorance, and infirmity of our nature, that if you, O most merciful God, work not that in us, which you command us to do, if you do not teach us that we may know, if you do not convert us, that we may cleave to your word, if you do not give us to your Son, that he may keep us yours, if he bring us not clothed in his righteousness to the throne of your grace, and if your spirit leads us not in the paths of your kingdom, holding us fast in the effects of his gifts, upon the way of your truth, we cannot hearken to this voice of the shepherd of our souls, neither in our hearts conceive such and so lively a faith, that all uncertainty might be banished, and the same sealed with his own efficacy: much less can we feel the

peace and joy that true faith brings with it.<sup>54</sup>

As he had saved them, so God would grant his children the grace to persevere, Beza argued. Believers could take great comfort in their Lord's continuing sovereign grace in their lives. "He who has obtained the gift of true faith and has trusted in that same goodness of God," Beza urged, "must also be concerned about his perseverance. Yet he should not doubt, but should rather call on God in every kind of temptation and affliction, with the sure hope of attaining what he asks, at least as far as it is expedient, since he knows himself a child of God, who cannot fail him."<sup>55</sup> They would persevere because God who required holiness in his people would sanctify them sovereignly as well. So Beza urged his listeners when they were troubled about their standing to call upon the Lord:

Have recourse unto him which has made us, and who alone can make us anew, by the same power, which is his Holy Spirit, enlightening the eyes of our understanding (Eph. 1:18, Acts 26:18), framing a clean heart within us (Ps. 51:12), creating in us both to will and to do (Phil. 2:13), in a word, making us from the head to the feet new creatures (2 Cor. 5:17), that is to say, such as this spouse is set before us here to be, which is at large described unto us by Ezekiel.<sup>56</sup>

The grand result of God's sovereignty for a believer in this life was assurance of salvation, Beza argued. In the troubles of life, believers could trust that God, in his power, would uphold them, and they could hope that God would grant them a sense of his love:

It may please the Lord who has drawn us out of darkness into this light of his truth, and has placed

and preserved us most miraculously here in this holy rest and peace of conscience, waiting for the full accomplishment of his promises, to settle and engrave in our minds this holy assurance of his mighty power in good will towards us, that we be never astounded by the assaults of Satan, and of such his adherents as he employs and uses against us: but that contrariwise we persevere and continue in this holy profession of his truth, as well by mouth, as also by an holy and Christian life, until we come unto the real enjoying of all that, which he has made us to believe and hope for, according to his most holy and most assured promises.<sup>57</sup>

Ultimately, though, Beza looked forward to heaven as the answer to the vicissitudes of the earthly pilgrimage. The prospect of eternal felicity might seem remote during one's earthly life, but it was certain because of God's sovereign action on behalf of his people. So while he was praying "That we may well use afflictions," Beza exuded confidence in God's eternal goal for his people:

Especially grant, O Lord, that I may attain to this reason of true wisdom, always to be content with your will, the sovereign and just cause of all things; namely, in that it pleases you, that the livery of your household should consist in carrying their cross after your Son, to the end, that I should never but be seasoned to drink the wholesome myrrh which purges the soul from the lusts of the flesh, and replenishes the same with the desires of eternal life. Also that I learn in whatsoever my estate, cheerfully to submit myself to the conduct of your providence, as being well assured, that whatsoever I suffer, all the crosses of my life shall be unto me so many blessings and helps from you my Father, to make me go the right way into your kingdom, and increase unto me the price of glory in the same.<sup>58</sup>

The wise, powerful, and loving Father

would certainly bring his children to himself for eternity. The complete sovereignty of God was the foundation of Beza's view of the Christian life. Rather than negating Christian piety, God's sovereignty provided the necessary foundation upon which Christian piety could stand, and hope.

### Conclusion

This examination of Theodore Beza's piety, or "spirituality," should be helpful to us as we seek to live faithful Christian lives in our day. Though the early twenty-first century is quite different from the sixteenth century, there is a great deal of commonality between the times. The outward problems we have are unique to us. We struggle with secular culture, not Catholic and Lutheran opponents; we combat postmodernity, not Tridentine thought. But nothing of real importance has changed. Heaven and hell remain the eternal locations to which every person is going, one an existence of eternal joy, the other a place of eternal torment. Satan is still raging against God, God's truth, and God's people. The Bible remains God's inerrant word, a trustworthy guide in every facet of our earthly pilgrimage. Believers still struggle to fight the fight of faith, to live in the world without being part of it, to have our hope fixed on heaven instead of the world around us. The outward trappings may be different, but the eternal realities are constant. Most significantly for us, our God still reigns sovereignly over us, over all our concerns, and over every aspect of the universe. Beza, and the Bible, urge and challenge us to put our hope in our Sovereign Father as we seek to honor him with our lives.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The best recent attempt at understanding Beza in his historical context is Scott M. Manetsch, *Theodore Beza and the Quest for Peace in France, 1572-1598* (Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought, vol. 79; Leiden: Brill, 2000). More generally on Beza's life see Henry Martyn Baird, *Theodore Beza: The Counsellor of the French Reformation, 1519-1605* (1899; reprint, New York: Burt Franklin, 1970), Paul-F. Geisendorf, *Théodore de Bèze* (Geneva: Alexandre Jullien, 1967), Jill Raitt, "Theodore Beza," in *Shapers of Religious Traditions in Germany, Switzerland, and Poland, 1560-1600* (ed. Jill Raitt; New Haven: Yale University, 1981), 89-104; and Richard A. Muller, "Theodore Beza," in *The Reformation Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Early Modern Period* (ed. Carter Lindberg; Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 213-24.

<sup>2</sup>R. T. Kendall argued for this thesis clearly: "The one man more than any other who was the architectural mind for English Calvinism was Calvin's successor at Geneva, Theodore Beza (1519-1605). Beza perhaps would not have wanted his theology to be known as Calvinism, but his systematizing and logicalizing theology had the effect of perpetuating a phenomenon that bore Calvin's name but was hardly Calvin's purest thought" ("The Puritan Modification of Calvin's Theology," in *John Calvin: His Influence in the Western World* [ed. W. Stanford Reid; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982], 201). See also Basil Hall, "Calvin Against the Calvinists," in *John Calvin*, (Courtenay Studies in Reformation Theology 1; ed. G. E. Duffield; Applendorf: Sutton Courtenay, 1966), 19-37; and Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism*



and Humanism in Seventeenth-Century France (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press), 32-33, 38-39, 41-42. Armstrong explained, "This new outlook [Beza's method] represents a profound divergence from the humanistically oriented religion of John Calvin and most of the early reformers. The strongly biblically and experientially based theology of Calvin and Luther had, it is fair to say, been overcome by the metaphysics and deductive logic of a restored Aristotelianism" (*Calvinism*, 32).

An unqualified adoption of the "Calvin versus Beza" thesis in two recent surveys of historical theology proves its continuing popularity. Thus Alister McGrath followed Armstrong's schema of scholasticism and made this judgment about the post-Calvin Reformed theologians: "It seems to be a general rule of history that periods of enormous creativity are followed by eras of stagnation. The Reformation is no exception." And Beza's works "present a rationally coherent account of the main elements of Reformed theology, using Aristotelian logic" (Alister McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1998], 169, 172). Roger Olson's negative judgment of Beza's contribution is even starker: "Many of the Reformed scholastics like Beza were fascinated with questions about the decrees of God. . . . Beza and other post-Calvin Reformed theologians began to wonder and speculate about the 'order of the divine decrees.' . . . Beza and cer-

tain other Calvinists were obsessed with the doctrine of predestination more than Calvin himself ever had been" (Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999], 456-57).

<sup>3</sup>For fuller discussion see Shawn D. Wright, *Our Sovereign Refuge: The Pastoral Theology of Theodore Beza* (Studies in Christian History and Thought; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004). Much of this article is based on material found in *Our Sovereign Refuge*.

<sup>4</sup>Much has recently been written on the meaning of "Christian spirituality." See, for example, Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 1-24. Protestants preferred the word "piety" to "spirituality," because the latter suggested Catholic notions of works-righteousness, they thought. On the distinction between piety and spirituality see Jill Raitt, "Saints and Sinners: Roman Catholic and Protestant Spirituality in the Sixteenth Century," in *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation* (ed. Jill Raitt; World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest, vol. 17; New York: Crossroad, 1987), 454-63. Calvin's major rubric for conceiving of the Christian life was a particular understanding of piety, an understanding that Beza seems to have adopted. On Calvin's view of piety, see Ford Lewis Battles, "True Piety According to Calvin," in his *Interpreting John Calvin* (ed. Robert Benedetto; Grand Rapids: Baker,

1996), 289-306, and Joel R. Beeke, "Calvin on Piety," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* (ed. Donald K. McKim; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 125-52.

<sup>5</sup>Compare Manetsch's opinion that when Beza referred to Protestants' opponents as "Satan" his "use of biblical images like these often served as a barometer of his angst and anger. When the reformer wished to express his deepest pain, frustration, or indignation, he frequently appealed to scriptural characters and concepts, interpreting the data of his experience in light of the biblical drama of God's chosen people struggling against Satan and his minions" (*Theodore Beza*, 53-54).

<sup>6</sup>Theodore Beza, *Christian Meditations upon Eight Psalmes of the Prophet David* (London: Christopher Barker, 1582), on Psalm 102:8.

<sup>7</sup>Theodore Beza, *Maister Bezaes Houshold Prayers* (trans. John Barnes; London: n.p., 1603), P3r-P3v.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, B6r.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, B5v.

<sup>10</sup>Theodore Beza, *Sermons sur l'Histoire de la Passion et Sepulture de nostre Seigneur Jesus Christ, descrite par les quatre Evangelistes* (Geneva: Jean le Preux, 1592), 197.

<sup>11</sup>Jill Raitt, "Beza, Guide for the Faithful Life," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 39 (1986): 97-98.

<sup>12</sup>Beza, *Christian Meditations*, on Ps 143:12.

<sup>13</sup>Theodore Beza, *Master Bezaes Sermons Upon the Three First Chapters of the Canticle of Canticles* (trans. John Harmar; Oxford: Joseph Barnes, 1587), 236.

- <sup>14</sup>Beza, *Sermons sur la Passion*, 129.
- <sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 437.
- <sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 325-26.
- <sup>17</sup>Beza, *Houshold Prayers*, G2v-G3r.
- <sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, G1r.
- <sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, in the prayer "Upon temporal death."
- <sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, N2v-N3v.
- <sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, N1v-N2r.
- <sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, Q5v.
- <sup>25</sup>Theodore Beza, *Job Expounded by Theodore Beza, Partly in Manner of a Commentary, Partly in Manner of a Paraphrase* (Cambridge: n.p., 1589), on Job 3.
- <sup>26</sup>Beza, *Houshold Prayers*, in the prayer, "At the visitation of the sick."
- <sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, in the prayer "Upon temporal death."
- <sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, in the prayer "For heavenly life."
- <sup>29</sup>Theodore Beza, *Petit Catechisme, C'est a dire, Sommaire Instruction de la Religion Chrestienne. Latin-François, par Theodore de Beze* (n.p.: n.d., 238). See also the English translation, *A Little Catechisme, That is to Say, A Short Instruction Touching Christian Religion* (London: Hugh Singleton, 1579), A.1.
- <sup>30</sup>Theodore Beza, *The Psalmes of David, truly opened and explained by Paraphrasis, according to the right sense of everie Psalme. With large and ample Arguments before everie Psalme, declaring the true use thereof* (trans. Anthonie Gilbie; London: Henrie Denham, 1581), 11.
- <sup>31</sup>Beza, *Canticles*, 31.
- <sup>32</sup>Beza, *Houshold Prayers*, in the prayer "To crave of God the light of his word."
- <sup>33</sup>Beza, *Sermons sur la Passion*, 438.
- <sup>34</sup>Beza, *Psalmes*, 284-85.
- <sup>35</sup>Beza, *Canticles*, 290.
- <sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 230.
- <sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>38</sup>Beza, *Psalmes*, 44.
- <sup>39</sup>The best discussion of Beza's *Tabula* is Richard A. Muller, "The Use and Abuse of a Document: Beza's *Tabula Praedestinationis*, The Bolsec Controversy, and the Origins of Reformed Orthodoxy," in *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment* (eds. Carl R. Trueman and R. S. Clark; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), 33-61.
- <sup>40</sup>Theodore Beza, *Tabula Praedestinationis*, in *The Potter and the Clay: The Main Predestination Writings of Theodore Beza* (trans. Philip C. Holthrop; Grand Rapids: Calvin College, 1982), 80.
- <sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 80-82.
- <sup>42</sup>Beza, *Houshold Prayers*, B5v.
- <sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, B6r-B6v.
- <sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, O3r-O3v.
- <sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, P3r-P3v.
- <sup>46</sup>One of the ways some scholars maintain that Beza changed Calvin's theology relates to the Christian's quest for assurance of salvation. Calvin, they say, found assurance by looking to Christ for forgiveness. Beza changed the focus to the Christian's works, introducing the "practical syllogism," and thus robbed believers of certainty of salvation. Nothing could be further from the truth as I show in *Our Sovereign Refuge*, 199-225.
- <sup>47</sup>Note Monter's helpful observations in this regard:

"The external history of the Republic of Geneva was extremely eventful during the forty years after Calvin's death.

Isolated geographically from Bern, the city was forced to go farther afield and seek more secure guarantees for her independence. The course of her diplomatic activities became more intense; their goals, more serious. Finally, by the end of the sixteenth century, Geneva had to fight a four-year war with the Duke of Savoy. Even afterwards, no definitive peace was concluded. Only when Geneva repulsed a surprise attack from Savoy (the famous Escalade of December 1602, which is still celebrated annually in Geneva) did she attain some measure of political security" (E. William Monter, *Calvin's Geneva* [New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1967; repr., Huntington, NY: Robert E. Kreiger, 1975], 194).

Compare Jill Raitt's comment that "the political history of Europe in the last quarter of the sixteenth century is a complex weave out of which it is not easy to pluck the pertinent threads" (*The Colloquy of Montbéliard: Religion and Politics in the Sixteenth Century* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1993], 45).

<sup>48</sup>Theodore Beza, *Correspondance de Théodore de Bèze* (ed. H. Meylan, A. Dufour, C. Chimelli, and B. Nicollier; Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1970), 6:19.

<sup>49</sup>Theodore Beza, *Ecclesiastes, or the Preacher. Solomons Sermon Made to the people, teaching every man howe to order his life, so as they may come to true and everlasting happines. With a Paraphrase, or short exposition thereof, made by Theodore Beza* (Cambridge: n.p., n.d.), on Eccl 5:8.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, C4-C5.

<sup>51</sup>Beza, *Canticles*, 246-47.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>53</sup>Beza, *Job*, on Job 1:6.

<sup>54</sup>Beza, *Houshold Prayers*, in the prayer  
“To obtain the gift of faith.”

<sup>55</sup>Beza, *Tabula*, in *The Potter and the  
Clay*, 58.

<sup>56</sup>Beza, *Canticles*, 36-37.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 358.

<sup>58</sup>Beza, *Houshold Prayers*, K3v-K4v.