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INTRODUCTION

‘Theodore Beza? Who’s he? Why should I care about him?’

I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been asked that question over the years. Ever since I first ran across him in my doctoral studies some fifteen years ago and developed some interest in him, that’s what I’ve heard from people time and time again. (Or at least that’s the way I’ve interpreted many a quizzical look when his name comes up.) That’s a shame. Everyone knows something about Martin Luther (he nailed up the ninety-five theses and said some mean things about Jews) and John Calvin (he stressed predestination and burned a heretic in Geneva). Beyond that, they know some facts about Augustine of Hippo (he was embarrassed about sex) and Jonathan Edwards (he preached a sermon saying that God holds us over the pit of hell like a spider dangling on a string). And of course they’re aware of Billy Graham and his role in evangelicalism in the twentieth century. But, Theodore Beza?, you ask, Who’s he?

Well, I’m glad you asked. I’m taking the opportunity in the book to answer that question. In just a short period of time, you should be able to say a few things about this man who in his day was one of the luminaries of the Protestant world, who took the reins of the beleaguered Calvinistic movement after its namesake’s death, and who influenced English-speaking Protestantism more than you might imagine. He may not have been a giant like Calvin, but he was certainly bigger than most of us are. He’s worth getting to know. I hope you agree as you



not only read my interpretation of Beza but also get acquainted with some of his more important works.

Let me tell you why I think you will benefit from reading this book. That's another way of telling you why I'm writing it. Here are the three reasons.

In the first place, Theodore Beza's example of loving the Lord Jesus Christ and trusting Him in the midst of tremendous difficulties is worth our investigation. As believers struggle to hold onto the Lord's goodness in the turmoils of life, it is good for us to have the examples of other frail, sinful, weak-faithed believers who persevered. Beza did just this, and he did it in spite of severe hardship. Knowing some of the details of Beza's life story and seeing his attempts to solidify the faith against doctrinal attacks, as well as noting his perseverance in the faith, should inspire Christians to greater faithfulness today. The 1500s were not an easy century in which to live. No electricity or indoor plumbing. Rudimentary medicine and ill-conceived notions of hygiene. Add to that military attacks and resurgent Catholicism which was out to gain back souls and territory from the Protestants. Beza struggled through tumultuous times.

Additionally, for over a century now Beza has been regularly maligned by both historians and theologians. The usual tack has been to identify him as the change agent from John Calvin's biblical orientation to a philosophical and scholastic trajectory that led to 'Calvinism'. Calvin was good, or at least we appreciate the fact that he was trying to be biblical. But we know that Beza (even though we probably haven't even read one word of him!) was bad, or so it is claimed. He morphed Calvin's thought into a rigid, philosophical, non-biblical system. In the process of this gross over-generalization, however, Beza's theological and pastoral contributions have almost always been overlooked. The result has been a portrait of Beza that may make sense to his interpreters but which, in reality, is foreign to the man himself. His ideas and his actual words are almost never considered when making this assessment. In this book I hope to introduce you to the real Beza, not a figment of other people's imaginations.

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There is also the reality, in the third place, that we live in a time of a revival of interest in Calvinistic theology and history. What better way could there be to enter into the discussion of Calvinism than by reading about ‘the Calvinist’ himself? Given Beza’s prominent role in the historical and theological rise of Calvinism, and given the fact that Beza has almost never been evaluated carefully enough in these discussions, this book should serve those wanting to better understand what Calvinism is all about. The answer might surprise you!

Before we jump into trying to understand Theodore Beza, let me lay out our plan. Chapter two will briefly place Beza in his historical context. He lived and breathed, prayed and preached in a particular setting. It will help us both to understand him better and to appreciate him more if we understand the times in which he lived and ministered. Following this historical introduction, chapter three will attempt to get into the mind and heart of Beza. Here I will try and lay out what I think Beza saw as the reason for all of his work, the thing that drove him to labor as he did. Chapter three will thus serve as a kind of theological introduction to Beza.

Next will follow the five main chapters of the book, each one dealing with a work of Theodore Beza that explains an important facet of his thinking. Chapter four will summarize Beza’s *Confession*, a comprehensive treatise covering all of Christian theology. More importantly, we will see here that, according to Beza, the purpose of theology is to glorify God and to save sinners. The gospel is at the heart of Beza’s theology. This is also true of the Bezan theology of predestination, to which we turn in the fifth chapter. Here we will interact with misconceptions of his thought and look in detail at a major apology for the doctrine of double predestination. As we’ll notice, even here Beza doesn’t move far away from the gospel, although he doesn’t shy away from some of the harder truths for us to comprehend from Scripture. In this defense of predestination, Beza shows himself to be a pastor whose concern is for his readers. He eagerly helps them to apply this doctrine to their lives, especially

trying to show them where they can find hope if they're worried about the reality of their salvation.

The sixth chapter follows logically from the fifth. It also has to do with facets of Beza's understanding of God's sovereignty and its interplay with true human responsibility. Here we will look at a unique treatise by Beza on the plague, known as the Black Death, which first appeared in Europe in the fourteenth century. The treatise specifically addresses the questions of whether or not the plague was contagious and whether or not Christians should flee when the plague struck. Beza pastorally, and masterfully, here deals with the intersection of God's providence and human choice. Chapter seven addresses a different issue that arose from consideration of Beza's doctrine of God's sovereignty. Could Christians have certainty of their salvation if God had chosen people for salvation and damnation before the creation of the world? Unwilling to leave people with no hope, Beza here pastorally and sensitively helped hurting Christians to gain assurance of salvation. Chapter eight completes our study of Beza's thought by listening in on him while he prayed. Beza composed a little book of prayers for his own use, and we will look at both his doctrine of prayer expressed here and some of his selected prayers. In hearing him pray, we will come to a fuller understanding of who Theodore Beza was. A short concluding chapter will help us to synthesize what we have seen in the book up to this point. Like Beza would want us to do, we will conclude especially by asking some questions of application.

There is certainly more that could be said about Beza. The endnotes will guide you to other works should you desire further interaction with this fascinating reformer. For a compilation of most of Beza's writings, you can consult a bibliography of most of his works put together by Frédéric Gardy and Alain Dufour.¹ In another book I have arranged a bibliography of most of Beza's

1. Frédéric Gardy and Alain Dufour, *Bibliographie des Oeuvres Théologiques, Littéraires, Historiques et Juridiques de Théodore de Bèze* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1960).



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works (including English translations alongside the original Latin and French versions) as well as a chronological listing of Beza's writings where I also tried to categorize them according to five different types (humanistic, polemical, doctrinal, biblical, and pastoral).²

Now, though, let's try to understand a little bit about who Theodore Beza was. Hopefully after reading this book you'll be able to differentiate the man from the myth.

2. Shawn D. Wright, *Our Sovereign Refuge: The Pastoral Theology of Theodore Beza* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004), pp. 235-9, 279-83.