

Examining Calvinism Part 1

History of Calvinism

Introduction

This morning we are beginning a series of messages called examining Calvinism.

Why should we examine this subject? Why stir up trouble? Can't we just all get along?

Calvinism has been making a resurgence in the last 20 years. In 2009, Time Magazine identified the New Calvinism as one of the 10 Ideas Changing the World Right Now.

Some of the extreme forms of Calvinism have been causing problems in the Body of Christ. For example, some 5-point Calvinists try to make proselytes of other Christians to their point of view. Many 5-point Calvinists feel that their way is not only the right way but is the only way. Many churches and denominations have been adversely affected by aggressive promoters of extreme Calvinism.

But before we begin our examination, I need to start with a disclaimer.

Disclaimer

Baskin-Robbins is known for its slogan "31 flavors of ice cream." Actually, the company has introduced more than 1,300 flavors since 1945.

Question: How would you describe the flavor of Baskin-Robbins' ice cream?

Response: Which flavor?

Question: How would you define Calvinism?

Response: Which flavor of Calvinist are you talking about?

Problem: There are nearly as many flavors of Calvinism as Baskin-Robbins has flavors of ice cream.

Example #1:

Types of Calvinism – A Comprehensive List

- 1) Total hyper-Calvinism
- 2) Partial hyper-Calvinism
- 3) Ultra-High Calvinism
- 4) Regular High Calvinism
- 5) Moderate Calvinism
- 6) Lower Moderate Calvinism
- 7) Lower Calvinism
- 8) Lowest Calvinism
- 9) Amyraldism (4 point Calvinism)

What is a hyper-Calvinist? Anyone farther up the Calvinistic ladder than you.

What is an Arminian? Anyone farther down the Calvinistic ladder than you (ex. Norman Geisler).

Example #2:

Question: Should babies be baptized?

- Most Baptist Calvinists do not baptize infants.
- Most Presbyterian Calvinists baptize infants.

Example #3:

Question: Is the doctrine “once saved, always saved” scriptural?

- Most Baptist Calvinists believe in “once saved, always saved.”
- Some Reformed Calvinists claim that doctrine is from the pit of hell. A.W. Pink:

We have no sympathy whatever with the bald and unqualified declaration “Once saved always saved.” (A W Pink, *Eternal Security*)

There is a deadly and damnable heresy being widely propagated today to the effect that, if a sinner truly accepts Christ as his personal Saviour, no matter how he lives afterwards, he cannot perish. That is a satanic lie, for it is at direct variance with the teaching of the Word of truth. Something more than believing in Christ is necessary to ensure the soul’s reaching heaven. (As quoted by Iain H. Murray in *The Life of Arthur W. Pink*, 248-249)

In this series of messages, we will have to use some generalizations. But as soon as you do that, you are accused of misrepresenting Calvinism. We will try to represent Calvinism as best we can. But it is practically impossible to represent every flavor of Calvinism that exists.

Introducing TULIP

The five points of Calvinism are often defined by using the acronym TULIP. In the weeks ahead, we will go through each of these 5 points examining in detail. As an introduction, I would like to briefly consider each of these points from the view of a “higher” Calvinist and a “lower” Calvinist.

Total Depravity—Higher/Extreme Calvinism

Extreme Calvinism defines total depravity as total inability. They mean the elimination of all human ability to understand or respond to God. The effects of sin destroyed man’s ability to accept God’s gift of salvation. The human will is in bondage to sin and cannot respond to the call of God unto salvation. Fallen man is unable to choose the gift of salvation. The sinner does not have a “free will” because he is a slave to sin.

Total Depravity—Lower Calvinism

Lower Calvinism teaches that man’s depravity is “total.” All humans are born in sin with Adam’s sin nature. There is no part of man’s nature that was not affected by sin. Man is totally depraved, and unable to change his inherit sin nature. But total depravity does not mean total inability. Man’s will is free to choose the gift of salvation. Even though man has a free will, he has no capacity for saving himself. God graciously draws people to Himself, but free will is the means by which salvation is received.

Unconditional Election—Higher/Extreme Calvinism

Extreme Calvinism equates predestination and election. God predestines those who will be saved and those who will be lost. This predestination is based exclusively upon the will of God and has nothing to do with the response of man.

Unconditional Election—Lower Calvinism

Lower Calvinists agree that salvation is an unconditional gift. The question is not whether there are any conditions for God giving salvation; but whether there are any conditions for man receiving salvation. Election is unconditional from the vantage point of the Giver, but there is one condition for the receiver. Faith is the condition for receiving salvation.

Limited Atonement—Higher/Extreme Calvinism

Extreme Calvinism teaches that Christ died only for the elect and not the whole world. They reason that if Christ died for the whole world, then everyone would be saved which is contrary to scripture—a heresy known as universalism. Extreme Calvinists reason that: “If God the Father elected some to everlasting life, then it must follow that Christ died for them only and not for all men.” Many Extreme Calvinists defines the “world” as meaning “the elect.” For God so loved the world (of the elect) that He gave His only begotten Son ...”

Limited Atonement—Lower Calvinism

Lower Calvinism agrees with John Calvin who wrote, “Christ suffered for the sins of the whole world, and in the goodness of God is offered unto all men without distinction, His blood being shed not for part of the world only, but for the whole human race.” God sent the Son into the world that the world through Him might be saved (Jn. 3:17). That’s why Jesus is referred to as the Savior of the world (Jn. 4:42; 1 Jn. 4:14). In dying for the whole world, Christ tasted death for every man (Heb. 2:9). Jesus is truly the Savior of all men (1 Tim. 4:10). Atonement is unlimited in scope in that the offer of salvation is for all men. Atonement is limited in effect in that only believers are truly saved. This is known as Amyraldism or 4-point Calvinism. According to our chart, this is the lowest form of Calvinism. Most Calvinists would claim that this is not true Calvinism, but rather it is Arminianism.

Irresistible Grace—Higher/Extreme Calvinism

According to Extreme Calvinism, the Holy Spirit extends to the elect a special inward call that inevitably brings them to salvation. This internal call cannot be rejected. Extreme Calvinists reason: “All sinners who hear the gospel are commanded to repent and believe. But this they cannot do, because they are dead in trespasses and sins. Then God, through the operation of the Holy Spirit, creates within his elect the power to do what he commands. The divine and sovereign act of regeneration effected by the Holy Spirit precedes the human activity of repentance and faith.” Extreme Calvinism’s consistency and logic requires the doctrine of irresistible grace. Because of [1] total inability, [2] God the Father elected certain ones to salvation, [3] God the Son died for only the elect, therefore [4] God the Spirit regenerates the elect so they can believe the gospel.

Irresistible Grace—Lower Calvinism

Lower Calvinism teaches that saving faith is the God-ordained means for regeneration, and not the result of regeneration. Regeneration or the new birth takes place at the moment a person trusts in Christ and not before they trust in Christ. The scriptural order is first faith

and then life. Putting regeneration before faith is putting the cart before the horse. God's Word consistently conditions justification and/or eternal life on faith, not vice versa. According to Lower Calvinism it is possible to resist prompting of the Holy Spirit.

Perseverance of the Elect—Higher/Extreme Calvinism

Extreme Calvinism teaches that the elect will be faithful to the end and will not die in a sinful state. As a result, you can never be sure if you are one of the elect until you have actually persevered until the end and die in faith. Many (but not all) Extreme Calvinists reject the teaching of "once saved always saved" stating that this doctrine is from the pit of hell.

Perseverance of the Elect—Lower Calvinism

Lower Calvinism teaches preservation of believers as opposed to perseverance of the elect. The Biblical doctrine of Eternal Security teaches that the believer will be preserved by the grace of God. No believer will ever be lost (even if they die in a sinful state). The believer is eternally secure. Lower Calvinists believe in assurance of salvation while on earth whereas many Extreme Calvinists teach that no one can know 100% for sure that they are saved.

As you can see, there are many differences between the flavors of Calvinism. In a series like this, it would be impossible to cover each subtle distinction between all varieties of Calvinism.

Personally, I have no problems with how 4-point Calvinism defines the petals of TULIP. However, I choose not to call myself a Calvinist. The label Calvinists has way too much baggage. Many people associate the name Calvinist with the extreme forms of Calvinism. I do not want to spend hours trying to define and defend the flavor of Calvinism that describes my position. For me, it is much easier to avoid the label altogether.

Our purpose in this series is not to bash Calvinism. There are many sincere believers who are Calvinists. However, there are some flavors of Calvinism that are seriously flawed! Our purpose is to shed some light on those areas of Extreme Calvinism that are flawed. Our goal in this series is to warn against some of the extreme teachings on the higher end of the Calvinistic flavor scale.

Example: If the elect are guaranteed salvation, then why evangelize the lost?

Hyper-Calvinism: You should not evangelize the lost.

Lesser-Calvinists: We evangelize the lost because 1) God commanded it and 2) we do not know who are "the elect."

The Marrow Controversy 1700's Church of Scotland. Scottish Church General Assembly composed of Hyper-Calvinists rule against the Lower Calvinists who were evangelizing the lost. They accused them of the heresy of Universal Atonement.

Hyper-Calvinists cannot sing "I Love to Tell the Story!"

With that being said, lets consider a bit of the history of Calvinism.

The Importance of Root Systems

Understanding the root system of trees can save property owners both time and money.

In the Fall of 2017, Hurricane Irma hit Florida causing significant property damage throughout the state. Thankfully, our property here in Central Florida was spared the worst of the damages. However, some of our residents were without water for a while because of a fallen tree. The tree's root system was wrapped around a water line. When that tree fell, it broke a main line that

supplied water to the residents on that block. After repairs were made, the folks living there were under a “boil water order” because of possible contamination to the water. Had the residents there known about the root system of that tree, measures could have been taken to avoid the damage caused by the fallen tree.

Root systems are important not only in the physical world, but also in the realm of theology. Tracing the historical roots of Calvinism gives us a better understanding about the foundation on which this system of theology was built.

The Birthplace of Calvinism

Who started the theological system known as Calvinism? That question seems like a “no brainer.” Since Calvinism derives its name from the Reformer John Calvin, he must have started it, right? At least that seems to be the common opinion of the so-called experts.

The Encyclopedia Britannica’s article on Calvinism defines it as:

“The theology advanced by John Calvin, a Protestant reformer in the 16th century, and its development by his followers. The term also refers to doctrines and practices derived from the works of Calvin and his followers that are characteristic of the Reformed churches.”

According to Joel R. Beeke, President of Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, “Calvinism is rooted in the sixteenth-century religious renewal in Europe that we refer to as the Protestant Reformation.”

However, church historians paint a much different picture. The actual roots of Calvinism did not begin with the Protestant Reformation. The truth is that the roots of Calvinism go back 1,000 years before John Calvin was even born. Those roots are firmly embedded in the teachings of Augustine, Bishop of Hippo (A.D. 354-430).

Dr. Ken Wilson is one of the leading scholars on the life and teachings of Augustine. He received his doctorate while attending The University of Oxford in the United Kingdom. His doctoral thesis was entitled *Augustine’s Conversion from Traditional Free Choice to ‘non-Free Free Will’: A Comprehensive Methodology*. Dr. Wilson states, “The 500-year-old theology of John Calvin was directly derived from Augustine who strayed from the foundation of traditional patristic theology over a thousand years prior to Calvin.”

Paul Helm, a Reformed theologian, coined the term “Augustinian-Calvinism” for his view in the book “The Augustinian-Calvinist View” in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*. Obviously, Helm recognizes the connection between Calvinism and Augustine.

Reformed theologian B. B. Warfield said, “The system of doctrine taught by Calvin is just the Augustinianism common to the whole body of the Reformers.”

Even John Calvin, himself, attributed his system of theology to Augustine. Calvin wrote, “Augustine is so wholly within me, that if I wished to write a confession of my faith, I could do so with all fullness and satisfaction to myself out of his writings.”

Calvin quoted Augustine over 400 times in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. It has been stated that one of every four pages in Calvin’s *Institutes* contains quotes from Augustine. Reformed theologian C. Matthew McMahon wrote, “Calvin, for this reason, would deem himself not a Calvinist, but an Augustinian.”

Without a doubt Calvinism finds its roots in the theology of Augustine.

The Origin of TULIP

The five points of Calvinism are often defined by using the acronym TULIP. Calvinism's TULIP took center stage at the Second Synod of Dort in 1618-1619 in opposition to Arminian theology. However, Calvin credits Augustine as the original architect of these five points of Calvinism.

Dr. Ken Wilson explains:

Augustine invented the five points of Calvinism that comprise TULIP: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints.

Augustine's development of TULIP did not happen overnight. It began with his understanding of the total depravity of man. The Church Father's prior to Augustine taught total depravity. But Augustine redefined total depravity to mean total inability. For Augustine, total depravity meant that lost mankind no longer had a free will and could not respond to God in faith.

That was the first domino to fall in his development of TULIP. Since man no longer had a free will by which he could respond to God in faith, God had to give him the faith to believe.

This required unconditional election which was the second domino to fall in the creation of TULIP.

The third domino had to do with the perseverance of the elect. Not only did God give faith to the elect in order to believe, He also had to give the elect the gift of perseverance.

Unlike the Calvinism of today, Augustine taught that a person could be given the gift of initial faith, but unless they were also given the gift of perseverance, they could be eternally lost.

The final dominos in the line of TULIP were limited atonement and irresistible grace which completed the foundation of the five points of Calvinism.

Augustine's Journey into Gnosticism

Augustine was born in the Roman community of Tagaste. The town was located in a river valley about 40 miles from the Mediterranean in Africa. He was born into a family of a respectable class within the Roman society. Although money was tight at times, Augustine's parents provided him with a good education.

At the age of 11, Augustine was sent to school at Madauros, a town just south of Tagaste. It was known for its educational institutes and for its pagan influence. There Augustine became very familiar with Latin literature as well as pagan beliefs and practices. He was educated in Greek philosophies such as Stoicism and Neoplatonism. Unfortunately, some of these pagan beliefs remained with him even after he was converted to Christianity. According to his own testimony, Augustine gave credit to Neoplatonism for his conversion to Christianity. He was also influenced by Stoicism after becoming a Christian.

Augustine moved to Carthage at the age of 17 in order to continue his education in rhetoric. While living in Carthage, Augustine lived a hedonistic lifestyle. He frequently visited the brothels of Carthage and developed a relationship with a young woman named Floria Aemilia. For fifteen years, she was his concubine. During that time, she bore him a son named Adeodatus.

While in Carthage, he became a follower of a Gnostic religion called Manichaeism. He remained under the teaching of this sect for about 9 years. The Gnostics were determinists. They believed that every event occurring in history was predetermined. People were predetermined for either heaven or hell. Gnostics were also dualists. They believed that everything physical was evil and everything spiritual was good.

The Manicheans were considered to be the pinnacle of Gnosticism. They taught that there were two gods. One was a good god and the other was an evil god. The evil god created the wicked physical world. As a result, the physical body was evil, and the spirit was good. To give birth to a physical child was considered to be a sin since another evil human being had been brought into the world. The Manichean god, pre-determined that individuals before birth were either to be numbered among the elect or to be damned independently of human choice. In Manichaeism, the “enslaved will” does not have the capacity to choose. According to the Manicheans, the wicked physical world and the good spiritual world were in constant war with each other. The Manicheans taught that evil would continue to triumph over the material body until the soul was released from the flesh by death. Manichaeism allowed Augustine to continue his licentious lifestyle. The Manicheans taught that man was powerless to overcome evil while he was held captive by the material body. To Augustine, this explained why he could not control his sexual appetites.

Augustine Versus the Church Fathers Regarding Divine-Determinism

Augustine was converted to Christianity around August 386 A.D., at the age of 31. For the first 26 years of his Christian life, Augustine followed the traditional view of the early Church Fathers regarding the sovereignty of God and free will of man. The Church Fathers taught a general sovereignty of God. But they denied that God micromanages every single event of life down to the infinitesimal detail. They strongly opposed the deterministic doctrines being taught by the Manichean Gnostics. The Gnostic god of this pagan group was “non-relational.” According to Manichean doctrine, this god unilaterally chose the elect for salvation and the non-elect for damnation based upon his own desires. The early Church Fathers who lived before Augustine refuted this deterministic view and condemned its pagan Gnostic origins.

The connection between Gnosticism and Augustinian-Calvinism are unmistakable when the belief system of Gnosticism is compared to Calvinism’s TULIP. For example, Dr. Wilson wrote:

The essential element in order to be categorized as a ‘Gnostic’ is the belief that a rival evil god created the evil cosmos composed of physical matter. Gnostics were cosmic dualists, meaning that everything composed of physical matter was evil and everything non-physical (spiritual) was good. Humans are born evil because they possess a physical body. Therefore humans are damned at birth. Valentinus, a Gnostic, taught God offered the message of salvation to every human equally; however, only the predetermined elect were empowered by god to accept that invitation. The Gnostic god unilaterally restored right reason to the helplessly corrupted human will through a gift to the mind (Corp. Herm. 4.4; 6,68.36; 6,69.31–32; DH.5.3).

Comparison of Gnosticism and Calvinism:

Gnosticism: Humans are born evil because they possess a physical body. Therefore, humans are damned at birth.

Calvinism: Because of Adam's sin, man has inherited Adam's guilt and as a result born reprobate—damned for hell.

Gnosticism: Only the elect were predetermined by the Gnostic god to accept the invitation of salvation.

Calvinism: God predetermined that certain individuals would be elected for salvation before the foundation of the world.

Gnosticism: Only the elect were empowered by the Gnostic god to accept the invitation of salvation.

Calvinism: The Holy Spirit irresistibly draws the elect to Christ which inevitably results in salvation.

Gnosticism: The Gnostic god unilaterally restored right reason to the helplessly corrupted human will through a gift to the mind.

Calvinism: God regenerates the elect sinner and then gives them the gift of faith to believe the gospel.

Both Augustine and the Gnostics taught that fallen man did not have a free will. In contrast, the early Church Fathers taught that fallen man had a free will. They unanimously opposed the determinism being promoted by the Gnostics of their day.

Origen defended free choice and opposed the Gnostic teaching of Divine-Determinism.

Irenaeus opposed Gnostic determinism and compared it to Stoic determinism.

Clement of Alexandria opposed the Gnostic teaching that claimed faith was a gift of God. The Gnostics taught that certain persons were not capable of believing because they did not receive the gift of faith.

Dr. Wilson studied 84 pre-Augustinian authors who lived from 95-430 A.D. According to Dr. Wilson, "all of these early Christian authors championed traditional free choice."

Not even one early church father ... considered Adam's fall to have erased human free choice to independently respond to God's gracious invitation. God did not give initial faith as a gift. No Christian author embraced [Divine-Determinism] ... all considered it a Gnostic or Manichaean heresy.

When Augustine was converted to Christianity, he initially followed the teaching of the early Church Fathers, such as Irenaeus and Clement, regarding the free will of mankind. Augustine opposed the deterministic doctrine of Gnostic-Manichaeism in his early Christian life. He vigorously refuted the Manichean interpretation of scripture which was used to argue for determinism.

However, Augustine's theological worldview changed around 412 A.D. He adopted the determinism that he once opposed even though every church father before him taught that man had a free will. When Augustine began to debate the Pelagians he changed his theology. He started teaching that mankind lost their free will.

According to Augustine, fallen man does not have the ability to believe the gospel of his own free will. Rather, God must first regenerate fallen man and then give them faith in order to believe. But that in and of itself was not enough to guarantee final salvation. God also had to give the elect the gift of perseverance in order that final salvation might be attained.

As Augustine debated the Pelagians, he used the same passages of scripture used by the Manicheans to argue for determinism.

Augustine's early influences from Stoicism, Neoplatonism, and Manichaeism ultimately determined his final theology. His deterministic interpretations of scripture were a result of him reverting to his pre-Christian Manichaean roots.

The key scriptures cited in modern defenses of Reformed theology are the very ones used by the heretical Manichaeans in the fourth and fifth centuries and imported into Christianity by Augustine. Numerous scholars cite these scriptures and cite Augustine as proof for the validity of their Augustinian-Calvinist interpretations. They remain unaware of the pagan Stoic, Neoplatonic, and Manichaean origins of these highly deterministic interpretations of scripture.

Original Sin vs Original Guilt

The Church Fathers prior to Augustine taught "original sin." They believed that everyone born into this world has inherited the sin of Adam. In other words, all individuals are born into a sinful state.

In contrast to the Early Church Fathers, Augustine taught a doctrine called "original guilt." To say that fallen man is born into a sinful state and has inherited a sin nature, is much different than Augustine's concept of "original guilt." Augustine redefined the doctrine of "original sin" as taught by the Early Church Fathers. Rather than merely inheriting a sinful state from Adam, Augustine claimed that individuals inherited the guilt of Adam. For this reason, individuals born into this world inherited damnable guilt at birth.

Augustine invented this bizarre doctrine of original guilt in order to justify the baptism of infants. Since infants inherited damnable guilt when they were born, they needed some solution by which they could be saved. For Augustine, the solution was infant baptism.

Conclusion

We have briefly traced the historical roots of Calvinism which undeniably lead back to Augustine. Unfortunately, Augustine was seriously influenced by paganism which resulted in Calvinistic doctrines not taught by the Early Church Fathers.

The Gnostic-Manicheans were determinists who believed that every event occurring in history was predetermined. This concept led Augustine to develop a Divine-Determinism in which individuals were predetermined for either heaven or hell. While the Early Church Fathers taught the sovereignty of God in a general sense, not one of them taught the Divine-Determinism taught by Augustine.

The Manicheans believed that the physical world was evil therefore all children were born evil. They believed that children were damned at birth because they were physical. Augustine adopted the Manichean teachings of regeneration prior to believing as well as faith being a gift given to the regenerated individual. This Manichean concept was the foundation upon which Augustine built his doctrine of original guilt. In order to justify the baptism of infants, Augustine taught that babies who were baptized had their original guilt washed away by the waters of the baptismal

font. Augustine also taught that all non-baptized infants who die were damned to spend eternity in hell because of original guilt.

Most Calvinists today simply assume that their system of theology was founded upon the teachings of Calvin. They have no idea that the roots of their theological system sink deeply into the poisonous waters of paganism.

In the following weeks we will continue to examine some of the problematic doctrines of the more extreme forms of Calvinism.