

Lesson 34 The Beliefs of John Calvin

Comparing Luther and Calvin

- “Just as Luther’s central doctrine was justification by faith, so Calvin’s was the sovereignty of God. Both reformers had an overwhelming sense of the majesty of God, but, Luther’s served to point out the miracle of forgiveness, while Calvin’s gave the assurance of the impregnability of God’s purpose.” (Shelley, 257)
- “Calvin shared with Luther the four central Protestant beliefs, but he was born a generation after Luther in a different land and was a far different sort of person.” (Shelley, 257)

Comparing Luther and Calvin

- “Luther was a peasant, a monk, and a university professor; Calvin a scholar and lawyer called to a turbulent public ministry in a flourishing business community. Naturally they were impressed by different needs and emphasized different Christian solutions. Their foundations were the same, but the structures of doctrine and practice they erected at Wittenberg and Geneva were different in many important respects.” (Shelley, 257)
- “If Luther’s ultimate text was “the just shall live by faith,” Calvin’s was, “They will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Calvin saw the old doctrine of predestination—taught by Paul, Augustine, and Luther—as a source of religious devotion.” (Shelley, 261)

Calvin's Central Doctrine

- “The Calvinism the students imbibed flowed from Calvin’s central belief in the absolute sovereignty of God. ‘God asserts his possession of omnipotence,’ he wrote, ‘and claims our acknowledgement of this attribute.’ God is the ‘Governor of all things.’ In his own wisdom, from the remotest eternity, he decreed what we would do, and by his own power, he executes what he has decreed.” (Shelley, 260)
- “He held God to be the creator and sustainer of the universe and to be sovereign in it. He declared God to be omnipotent and that governing heaven and earth by His providence, He so overrules all things that nothing happens without His counsel.” (Latourette, 753)
- “By God’s providence Calvin meant not an idle Deity Who sits by and watches what takes place under the operation of the general laws which He has ordained, but One Who concerns himself with every individual, Who holds the helm and overrules all events so that not even a sparrow falls to the ground apart from His will.” (Latourette, 753)

Calvin's Central Doctrine

- “Calvin boldly faced the problem of whether, if nothing occurs apart from God’s will, God is responsible for evil and why, if wicked men do evil by the decree of God, as the Scriptures in many instances maintain, even in the crucifixion of Christ, God should hold them responsible.” (Latourette, 753)
- “Here, as in many places he cited Augustine. He held that God is completely free from any taint of injustice or wrong and that, while He had ordained the evil deeds which men do, the latter are fully to blame. Calvin does not resolve the mystery of the paradox but exhorts to a meek acceptance of what is taught in the Bible.” (Latourette, 753)

Calvin's Central Doctrine

- We have already studied the connection between Augustine and Calvin in Lesson 17.
 - Boettner—“Augustine had taught the essentials of the system a thousand years before Calvin was born.”
 - Shedd—“Calvin and Augustine easily rank as the two outstanding systematic expounder of the Christian system since Saint Paul.”
 - Singer—“The main features of Calvin's theology are found in the writings of Saint Augustine.”
 - Talbot and Crompton—“Augustine was so strongly Calvinistic, that John Calvin referred to himself as an Augustinian theologian.”
 - Alvin Baker—“There is hardly a doctrine of Calvin that does not bear the marks of Augustine's influence.”
 - Warfield—“The system of doctrine taught by Calvin is just the Augustinianism common to the whole body of the Reformers.” (quoted in Vance, 17, 34-35)

Calvin's Central Doctrine

- “Howbeit, to prove conclusively that Calvin was a disciple of Augustine, we need look no further than Calvin himself. You can't read five page in Calvin's *Institutes* without seeing the name of Augustine. As Wendel writes of Calvin: “He makes St. Augustine his constant reading, and feels on an equal footing with him, quotes him at every opportunity, appropriates his expression and regards him as one of the most valuable allies in his controversies. Calvin called Augustine by such titles as “holy man” and “holy father.”” (Vance, 35)
- The Calvinists are not the only ones who appeal to Augustine for their system of theology, for as Sir Robert Anderson says: “Nearly all the errors prevalent in Romanism can be traced back to Augustine.” (Anderson, 95)
- “Augustine was first and foremost a Roman Catholic. All Calvinists, if they are honest, admit this. Warfield concedes that Augustine was “in a true sense the founder of Roman Catholicism.” (Vance, 18)

Calvin's Central Doctrine

- “Not only can nearly all the errors of Romanism be traced to Augustine, but Protestantism as well, for the Reformation, as Warfield declared, “was just the ultimate triumph of Augustine’s doctrine of grace over Augustine’s doctrine of the Church.” The Reformed take his errors on election and the Roman Catholics his other heresies, although the Reformers had some of his Roman errors as well. That is why Warfield acknowledges that Augustine was “both the founder of Roman Catholicism and the author of the doctrine of grace which it has been the constantly pursued effort of Roman Catholicism to neutralize.” (quotes found in Vance, 21)

Calvin's Central Doctrine

- The connection between Augustine and Calvin is undeniable and compelling even for prominent theologians from other denominational traditions. Consider the following quotations from the great Baptist preaching Charles Spurgeon:
 - “Calvin got his Calvinism from Augustine.”
 - “There is no such thing as preaching Christ and him crucified, unless you preach what now-a-days is called Calvinism.”
 - “Calvinism is the gospel and nothing else.”
 - “The longer I live the clearer does it appear that John Calvin's system is the nearest to perfection.” (quotes found in Vance, 21)

Calvin's TULIP

- “The Five Point of Calvinism are the sum and substance of the Calvinistic system: the distinguishing mark which separates Calvinists from all other Christians. This is stated in no uncertain terms by all Calvinists. Boettner says, “The Calvinistic system especially emphasizes five distinct doctrines. These are technically known as the Five Points of Calvinism, and they are the main pillar on which the superstructure rests.” (Vance, 55)
- Like Calvinism in general, the claim is made from the Five Point of Calvinism that they are nothing but biblical and historic Christianity. Duncan asserts that “Christ taught the doctrines which have come to be known as the five points of Calvinism.” Coppes declares, “God’s plan of salvation revealed in the Scriptures consists of what is popularly known as the Five Points of Calvinism.” (Vance, 55)

Calvin's TULIP

- Consider the following quotations of other prominent Calvinists:
 - Custance—“So there they are: the Five Points of Calvinism, the five great asseverations of the Pauline-Augustinian—Calvinistic system of Reformed Faith which together constitute a satisfying, defensible, coherent, and thoroughly Biblical confession that is realistic with respect to man’s powers, position, and need, and honoring to God in its unqualified adherence to the principles of sovereign grace.”
 - Hodge—“The great scheme of doctrine known in history as the Pauline, Augustinian, or Calvinistic, taught, as we believe, in the Scriptures, developed by Augustine, formally sanctioned by the Latin Church, adhered to by the witnesses of the truth during the Middle Ages, repudiated by the Church of Rome in the Council of Trent, revived in that Church by the Jansenists, adopted by all the Reformers, incorporated in the creeds of the Protestant Churches of Switzerland, of the Palatinate, of France, Holland, England, and Scotland, and unfolded in the standards framed by the Westminster Assembly, the common representative of Presbyterians in Europe and America.” (quoted in Vance, 55)

Calvin's TULIP



- The Five Points of Calvinism are commonly given under the acronym TULIP.
 - T = Total Depravity
 - U = Unconditional Election
 - L = Limited Atonement
 - I = Irresistible Grace
 - P = Perseverance of the Saints
- While Calvin articulated the doctrines contained in the five points before his death in 1564 at the age of 54, they were not neatly packaged in their current form until the Canons of Dort in 1619. (Vance, 57-58)

Calvin's TULIP

- Being four years old when Calvin died and schooled in theology by Calvin's successor Theodore Beze, Jacobus Arminius was reared as a card carrying Calvinist. Later in life he rejected many of Calvin's main doctrines and articulated a contrary position that has come to be known as Arminianism. (Finck, 3)
- The followers of Arminius published his viewpoints in a document known as the "Remonstrance." This document established five points of Arminian doctrine. Those who were teaching Calvinist doctrine recognized that these five Arminian points were almost exactly the opposite of what Calvin had taught. (Finck, 3-4)

Calvin's TULIP

- According to Joel Finck, author of *The Power of God Unto Salvation*, Calvinism and Arminianism differ on the following points of doctrine:
- “First of all, Arminianism says that man has a choice whether or not to believe, whereas Calvinism teaches only those whom God chooses can believe.”
- “The second difference is, Arminianism teaches that foreknowledge is informative. This simply means, according to Arminian doctrine, that God looks ahead through time, sees who will believe and then picks them to be saved. Calvinism on the other hand, teaches that foreknowledge is determinative rather than informative. In other words, God knows in advance those to whom He will give faith. To the Calvinist, it is not a matter of looking ahead to see who will believe, but rather it is deciding in advance who will be given faith.”

Calvin's TULIP

- “A third difference, and a very major point, is that Arminianism teaches that salvation can be lost if a person stops believing. Calvinism teaches that salvation cannot be lost, because according to Calvinist doctrine, it was God who caused the person to believe in the first place, and God just keep causing him to believe; therefore, the saints remain saved because God give them perseverance to keep believing.”
- “The fourth difference is that Arminianism is the theology of the Methodist denomination. Also, the Pentecostal, Charismatic, and Mennonite groups today are basically Arminian in their doctrine, particularly in the area of loss of salvation.” (Finck, 4-5)

Calvin's TULIP

- Convening to settle the ongoing doctrinal dispute between the followers of James Arminius and John Calvin, the Synod of Dort was the largest synod ever held of the Reformed Churches. There were eighty-six members of the synod: sixty-one Dutch and twenty-five foreigners. The advice of the foreign delegates was sought to still the differences which had arisen in the churches of the Netherlands, but the dispute was strictly Dutch. (Vance, 59-60)
- “The Synod of Dort convened in November 1618. A month was spent on matter other than the Arminian controversy. Then on December sixth, the Arminians were allowed to make their first appearance to defend their doctrines.” (Vance, 60)
- As one might expect the deck had been stacked against the Remonstrants (term used by the Calvinists to describe the followers of Arminius). Philipp Schaff reports that the fate of the Arminians was decided beforehand. John Wesley remarked years later that Dort was as impartial as the Council of Trent. (Vance, 61)

Calvin's TULIP

- “The Synod of Dort closed in May, 1619, after 136 sessions. The Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism were officially adopted and the Canons of Dort were issued. . . The Canons consisted of four articles with a rejection of errors adjoined to each. There were issued not in Dutch, but in Latin, which was still the universal language in scholarly and scientific circles.” (Vance, 61-62)
- “The Canons of Dort actually contain five articles of doctrine: The Five Points of Calvinism, but appearing under four articles, the third and fourth being combined. The order is different from the TULIP designation: Unconditional Election is treated first, followed by Limited Atonement, Total Depravity and Irresistible Grace, and the Perseverance of the Saints. The TULIP acronym is an accurate, although brief, summation of the Cannons of Dort.” (Vance, 62)

Calvin's TULIP

- Calvinists maintain that if I does not ascribe to the doctrines outlined in the Canons of Dort they are automatically Arminian.
- “The difference between the Canons of Dort and all other creeds and confessions (Westminster) is that the Dort document deals with one specific thing: the Five Points of Calvinism; whereas all other creeds are of a general nature, covering all manner of subject and doctrines. It is the Five Points of Calvinism, as embodied in the Canons of Dort that remain the sum and substance of Calvinism.” (Vance, 64)

Works Cited

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- Latourette, Kenneth Scott. *A History of Christianity: Reformation to the Present*, Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 1953.
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