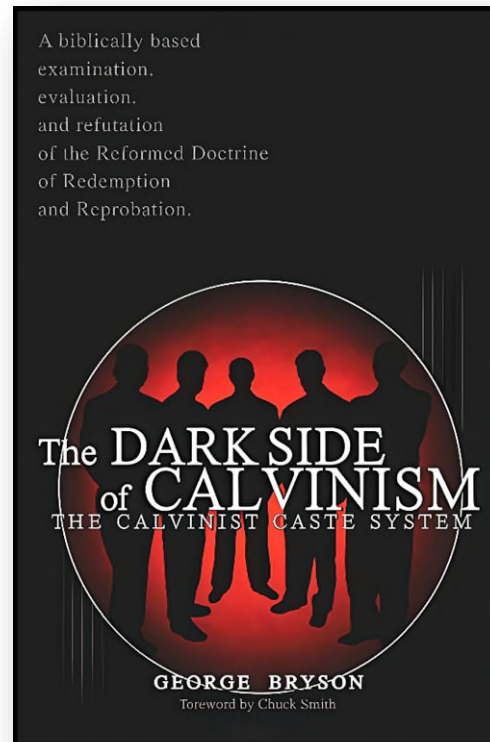


## THE AUGUSTINIANISM OF CALVINISM

Although the five points of Calvinism are most closely associated with the sixteenth century Protestant Reformer John Calvin (and for good reason), they did not originate with him. Calvinists would, first and foremost, contend that the five points faithfully represent the teaching of the New Testament in general, and of the apostle Paul in particular. Obviously, I do not agree with this contention. I do, however, agree with Calvinists when they point out that Calvin was not the first notable figure in church history to champion the views that led to what is today the Calvinist or Reformed system of theology. Just as the *Synod of Dort*, which first formally presented these points as the five points of Calvinism, was a Calvinist synod, so John Calvin was an Augustinian.

This is especially true with regard to the later Augustinian view of predestination and its bearing upon the salvation of the elect and the damnation of the reprobate. Norman Geisler makes the point that Augustine held two contradictory views, reflecting a change of thought over time. According to Geisler, it is the views of Augustine in the latter part of his Christian life that had such an influence on Calvin and many other Calvinists down through the centuries. This is especially so with regard to the Reformed view of salvation and damnation.<sup>59</sup> Lawrence Vance makes the case that Augustine was at once both the father of Roman Catholicism and of Reformed Theology.<sup>60</sup>

Because of Augustine's association with the Roman Catholic Church, there are some uninformed Calvinists who believe that Calvin was not influenced by Augustine and that to make this connection is nothing more than a smear tactic on the part of anti-Calvinists. Calvin's repeated references to Augustine, however, reveal that he gave a lot of weight to what Augustine taught and was in fact echoing Augustine on the most central tenets of Reformed doctrine. Because some Calvinists object to the assertion that Calvin relied upon Augustine to develop and defend his doctrinal distinctives, I will quote from a wide variety of leading Calvinists to establish this statement. Herman Hanko, as non-Roman Catholic as one can be, says:



In fact, our fathers at Dordrecht knew well that these truths set forth in the Canons could not only be traced back to the Calvin Reformation; they could be traced back to the theology of Saint Augustine who lived almost a millennium before Calvin did his work in Geneva. For it was Augustine who had originally defined these truths. Calvin himself, again and again, pays tribute to the work of Augustine and points out that what he is saying has been said before him by the Bishop of Hippo. The Synod of Dordrecht was conscious of this.<sup>61</sup>

In agreement, Loraine Boettner says:

It was Calvin who wrought out this system of theological thought with such logical clearness and emphasis that it has ever since borne his name. He did not, of course, originate the system but only set forth what appeared to him to shine forth so clearly from the pages of Holy Scripture. Augustine had taught the essentials of the system a thousand years before Calvin was born, and the whole body of the leaders of the Reformation movement taught the same. But it was given to Calvin with his deep knowledge of Scripture, his keen intellect and systematizing genius, to set forth and defend these truths more clearly and ably than had ever been done before.<sup>62</sup>

Calvinist theologian, R. Laird Harris, also agrees when he points out that:

Although Calvin gave the Reformed doctrine its most thorough formulation, the theology had long been held. Calvin would have been the first to deny its novelty. ... Indeed Calvinism is often called Augustinianism.<sup>63</sup>

Boettner went so far as to say:

The Reformation was essentially a revival of Augustinianism ... ,<sup>64</sup>

J.I. Packer echoes this sentiment saying:

The Reformation was an Augustinian Revival.<sup>65</sup>

Edwin Palmer explains:

The name Calvinism has often been used, not because Calvin was the first or sole teacher, but because after the long silence of the Middle Ages, he was the most eloquent and systematic expositor of these truths.<sup>66</sup>

For these reasons and some others, Calvin gets the lion's share of credit for what he did with the teachings of Augustine. According to Boettner:

Inasmuch as it was Calvin who first formulated these principles into a more or less complete system, that system, or creed, if you will, and likewise those principles which are embodied in it, came to bear his name.<sup>67</sup>

Boettner explains the Reformed view of Calvin’s role in Calvinism as follows:

Calvin’s active and powerful intellect led him to sound the depths of every subject which he touched. In his investigations about God and the plan of redemption he went very far, penetrating into mysteries concerning which the average man seldom if ever dreams. He brought to light a side of Scripture which has as yet been very much in the shade and stressed those deep truths which in the ages preceding the Reformation had comparatively escaped notice in the Church. He brought to light forgotten doctrines of the apostle Paul and fastened them in their full and complete sense upon one great branch of the Christian Church.<sup>68</sup>

Spurgeon probably speaks for all authentic Calvinists when he says:

That doctrine which is called “Calvinism” did not spring from Calvin; we believe that it sprang from the great founder of all truth. Perhaps Calvin himself derived it mainly from the writings of Augustine. Augustine obtained his views, without doubt, through the Spirit of God, from the diligent study of the writings of Paul, and Paul received them of the Holy Ghost, from Jesus Christ the great founder of the Christian dispensation. We use the term then, not because we impute any extraordinary importance to Calvin having taught these doctrines. We would be just as willing to call them by any other name, if we could find one which would be better understood, and which on the whole would be as consistent with fact.<sup>69</sup>

William S. Reid, in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, says:

John Calvin, often regarded as “the systematizer of the Reformation,” was a second generation Protestant Reformer of the sixteenth century who brought together biblical doctrine systematically, in a way that no other Reformer before him had done ... all Reformed and Presbyterian churches look back to him as the founder of their biblical-theological doctrinal position. ... Although Calvin was the systematizer of the Reformation theology, since his day those who have accepted his structure of theology have continued to develop many of his ideas. During his own lifetime he himself developed his thought in the successive editions of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. With the writing of various Calvinistic confessions as the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Canons of Dort (1618), and the Westminster Confession and Catechisms (1647-48) additions to and further developments in theological thought have appeared.<sup>70</sup>

While Reformed Theology—the theology of Calvin and Calvinism itself—is often thought of as the theology of the Reformation, this is imprecise at best. In fact, church historian Bruce Shelly says:

Calvin’s leadership ... shaped a third reformation tradition. Today we call it Reformed or Calvinistic Christianity. It includes all Presbyterians, Dutch and German Reformed Churches, and many Baptists and Congregationalists.<sup>71</sup>

In fairness, I should point out that when Reformed denominations become liberal they lose their Calvinism along with their part in biblical Christianity. Thus, one could qualify the Calvinists among these groups as Evangelical or even Conservative Presbyterians, Congregationalists, etc. I should also point out that while there have always been Calvinist Baptists, variously called Reformed, Particular, or even Sovereign Baptists, etc., Baptists as a whole tend not to buy in to Reformed Theology. Still, in all of the mainstream Baptist denominations, there are those who are mounting a major effort to turn all Baptists (or as many as possible) into Reformed or Calvinist Baptists. Some even believe that a non-Reformed Baptist is not a true Baptist. One only needs to read *The Other Side of Calvinism* to see how wrong it is to equate Reformed Theology with the theology of mainstream Baptists.

## NOTES

**59** Norman Geisler, *Predestination and Free Will* (Downers Grove, 111.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 68.

**60** Vance, *The Other Side of Calvinism*, 37-68.

**61** Hanks, Hoeksema, and VanBaren, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, 10.

**62** Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 3-4.

**63** Charles F. Pfeiffer, Howard F. Vos, and John Rea, eds. *The Wyclijfe Bible Encyclopedia A-J*. R. Laird Harris, “Calvinism.” (Chicago, 111.: Moody Press, 1975), 293.

**64** Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 367.

**65** J. I. Packer, “The Love of God: Universal and Particular.” Schreiner and Ware, eds. *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, 420.

**66** Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, Foreword.

**67** Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 4.

**68** Ibid, 5.

**69** Spurgeon, *The Spurgeon Sermon Collection*, Vol. 2, 216.

**70** William S. Reid, “Calvinism,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1984), 186-188.

**71** Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas, Tex.: Word Publishing, 1995), 257.

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