RESEARCH PAPER

on

The Contribution of John Calvin and the Effects of Calvinism on the Modern Christian Church

CHHI 525 LUO (Fall 2012)

History of Christianity II

Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary

James B. Testerman

December 13, 2012
# Table of Contents

I. Thesis Statement ........................................................................................................... 3

II. Introduction .................................................................................................................. 3

III. Body .................................................................................................................................. 4

   The Formation of Calvin’s Ideology as a Byproduct of His Early Life ....................... 4-5
   Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* ............................................................. 5-6
   Sixteenth Century Critics and Controversies .............................................................. 6-7
   The Doctrine of Predestination .................................................................................... 7-9

   TULIP ............................................................................................................................... 9
   Total Depravity ................................................................................................................ 9
   Unconditional Election .................................................................................................. 9-10
   Limited Atonement ....................................................................................................... 10
   Irresistible Grace .......................................................................................................... 10-11
   Perseverance of the Saints ........................................................................................... 11

   Modern Controversies ................................................................................................. 11-13
   Was Calvin a “Calvinist?” ............................................................................................. 13-15

IV. Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 15

V. Bibliography .................................................................................................................. 16
Thesis Statement

The effects of John Calvin’s teaching, pastoral and theological ministry resonate throughout the corridors of history and just as in the sixteenth century, his systematic theological framework continues to be a source of debate and division among Christians worldwide. The purpose of this paper is to delve into the tenets of Calvinism and determine if John Calvin would recognize the modern version of his ideology or if it has morphed into an entity that is no longer a true representation of the Great Reformer of Geneva.

Introduction

With the possible exception of Martin Luther, no Protestant leader in the Sixteenth century left a more indelible mark on Western culture than did Calvin.\(^1\) While Luther was considered the “wild boar that trampled the Lord’s vineyard”\(^2\), Calvin was the “careful thinker who bound the various Protestant doctrines into a cohesive whole.”\(^3\) Calvin’s theological convictions have historically caused much academic discussion, dissention and controversy, and the modern evangelical church is currently experiencing resurgence in the adherence to the soteriological doctrines of the Great Reformer of Geneva.

The Calvinistic TULIP acrostic; Total depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace and Perseverance of the Saints, while not entirely comprehensive of Calvin’s doctrine of predestination, encompasses much of his interpretation of Scripture and an outline of his personal theology. Adherence to this system known as “5-point Calvinism” has sparked a renewed controversy amongst churches which are increasingly taking a Reformed stance with regard to soteriological and theological understanding.

\(^3\) Ibid., 77.
Body

The Formation of Calvin’s Ideology as a Byproduct of His Early Life

John Calvin was born in the small village of Noyon, France on July 10, 1509. By that period in history, Martin Luther had already delivered his first lectures to the University of Wittenberg and the Protestant Reformation was just a few years away from becoming a reality. Calvin studied in Paris, and became acquainted with humanism, as well as the conservative reaction to it.\(^{4}\) In 1528, he received his Master of Arts degree; and shortly thereafter his father determined that he should abandon his ecclesiastical endeavors in exchange for an education in law. Calvin studied law in Orleans and Bourges, being mentored and instructed by two of the most famous jurists of the day, Pierre de l’Estoile and Andrea Alciati.\(^{5}\)

In 1531, with his interest in humanism growing, he returned to Paris to follow courses at the new trilingual College Royale.\(^{6}\) His first book, a commentary on a classical treatise, Seneca’s *On Clemency* was written in good humanist fashion, but his humanist interest eventually waned.\(^{7}\) In 1534, when his father died, Calvin decided to finish his theological studies, and it was around this time that he determined himself to leave the Catholic Church and join the Protestant cause.\(^{8}\)

It was in 1536 that Calvin arrived in Geneva, he found a city that had experienced the Reformation and were dealing with the political and administrative vacuum that was left by the expulsion of the Catholic Church and its ruling elite.\(^{9}\) William Ferel, a Protestant preacher had outlawed the Mass, demanding that the Catholic clergy either convert to Protestantism or face

\(^{4}\) Ibid., 78.
\(^{5}\) Ibid.
\(^{7}\) Ibid.
\(^{8}\) Ibid.
expulsion from Geneva. Upon Ferel’s continual requests, Calvin stayed in Geneva to institute a new church order, focusing on the spiritual independence of the church from state interference. Among Calvin’s triumphs in Geneva were the reorganization of the church and the founding of the Genevan Academy in 1559, which became the international center for theological scholarship.

Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

Among commentaries, books, sermons and other writings, Calvin is known as a prolific writer, publishing over fifty works, many of which are still seminal for Christian education and thought. According to McGrath “Calvin’s distinct and greatest contribution to the consolidation and diffusion of the Reformed variant of Protestantism was a book that transformed for the fortunes of that movement, liberating it from its earlier geographical and cultural imprisonment”; the book was the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Written and published in 1536, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* was Calvin’s most influential written work. Modeled after Luther’s catechisms of 1529, it includes within its six chapters a commentary on the Ten Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed, and some “disputed matters of theology.”

The full effect of *The Institutes* on Protestantism was not felt until the second edition with many revisions made by Calvin. Increasing from six chapters of the original publishing, Calvin strengthened his theological treatise by adding eleven more chapters. Of these seventeen chapters, Calvin outlines the basic tenets of Christianity; the doctrine of God, Trinity, penitence,
justification by faith, providence and predestination, human nature, and the correlation of the Old and the New Testaments.\textsuperscript{14}

Calvin continued refining and adding to \textit{The Institutes} throughout the years, until the final edition of 1559 contained eighty chapters, divided into four separate books.\textsuperscript{15} It is this final edition of \textit{The Institutes} that serve as Calvin’s basis for his theology, has been described as:

“The 1559 Institutes not only represents the crowning achievement of Calvin’s career but also stands as the founding model of reformed systematic—if it can be called either ‘Reformed’ or ‘systematic’—it provides the best starting point for a rhetorical reading of Calvin by a modern-day scholar with systematic theological interests.”\textsuperscript{16}

Calvin presented \textit{The Institutes} as an authoritative guide to proper and correct biblical interpretation. McGrath quotes Calvin’s response to his most influential works, “My object in this work is to prepare and train students of sacred theology for the study of the word of God that they may have an easy access into it, and be able to proceed in it without hindrance.”\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{Sixteenth Century Critics and Controversies}

Throughout Calvin’s years in Geneva, there was never a lack of theological controversy. He frequently disputed in writing, and often in person with many individuals that Calvin would categorize as Epicureans, Libertines, Anabaptists, Nicodemites, Sorbonnists and Sophists.\textsuperscript{18}

Among the Protestants, the main division between Luther and Zwingli had been the presence of Christ in communion, and Calvin, following the lead of Martin Bucer, took an intermediate position on the matter.\textsuperscript{19} Calvin believed that while Christ is present during Communion, it was spiritual; meaning that the presence of Christ is not merely symbolic or a

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., 94.  
\textsuperscript{17}McGrath, 94.  
\textsuperscript{18}Steinmetz, 18.  
\textsuperscript{19}Gonzalez, 85.
devotional exercise, but a “true divine action for the church that partakes of the sacrament.”\(^{20}\) It was in 1552 that Joachim Westphal issued a treatise against Calvin, declaring the Reformer’s views on Communion as “surreptitiously making their way into traditionally Lutheran territories”, and sided with Luther’s views of the Eucharist.\(^{21}\)

**The Doctrine of Predestination**

Perhaps the most controversial tenet of Calvin’s belief came under fire centered on his theological promulgation of the doctrine of predestination. In *The Institutes*, Calvin attempted to establish the essential Protestant beliefs in a thematic way based on Scripture alone. As of the publication of the *Institutes* in 1536, predestination did not appear as an independent doctrine, it evolved over time, prayer and study. Calvin repeats the Augustinian argument that “since all are unworthy to be saved, election is wholly gratuitous.”\(^{22}\) This doctrine of predestination, along with the subsequent idea of “double predestination” are perhaps the most divisive beliefs in all of evangelical orthodox theology; the belief that God “predetermines” who goes to Heaven and who spends eternity in hell. “Double Predestination” according to critics violates the nature of God while to the adherent it validates the absolute Sovereignty of God.

Following Calvin’s death in 1564, his successor, Frenchman Theodore Beza continued Calvin’s pattern and spent the next forty years dominating Geneva religion and refining Calvin’s systematic theology.\(^{23}\) Beza was more systematic than Calvin and came to conclusions that were not explicitly outlined in Scripture; things that he determined were entailed by the things that were in Scripture, predestination being one of these positions.\(^{24}\)

\(^{20}\) Ibid.
\(^{21}\) Ibid.
\(^{22}\) Steinmetz, 47.
\(^{23}\) Hill, 264-265.
\(^{24}\) Ibid., 265.
Calvin believed in the doctrine of predestination, the idea that everything that people do is a predetermined work of God, and used Romans 8:28-29 as a context; logically this view led him to view double predestination as the rational theological bookend. Beza went beyond Calvin, believing that God “planned this division of humanity into the saved and the damned even before humanity first sinned (a doctrine known by the term ‘prelapsarianism’).”25 This ideology therefore made Adam’s sin as part of God’s entire plan for humanity, which embraced both the salvation of some and the damnation of the rest. Hill believes that “where Calvin had sought to restate the Bible’s teachings in a more systematic way, Beza went further, seeking to answer questions that are raised but not answered by the biblical text.”26

Jacobus Arminius, a distinguished Dutch professor and pastor, whose theological training was entirely Calvinistic under Beza, would eventually become the leader of the anti-Calvinist movement known as the Remonstrants.27 Through his interaction with Dirck Koornhert, a theologian who rejected much of what Calvinism proposed, especially the doctrine of predestination, along with much introspective meditation, Arminius began to believe the Calvinistic tenets to be false.28 This debate between Calvinist theology and that of Arminius became known as the “Arminian” controversy.

Arminius believed that humans had the power to resist or respond to the Grace of God; leaving the decision to accept or reject the free gift of the grace of God up to the individual. Calvinism taught the doctrine of Irresistible Grace, meaning that whoever is elect of God cannot

25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Gonzalez, 229.
28 Ibid.
resist the “transformative work of grace.” Arminius, to the contrary, believed that while God offered grace, it was never forced upon the individual.

With the controversy heating up, a meeting took place in the Lowlands of Netherland from 1618-1619 known as the Synod of Dort; the “Calvinist response to Arminianism.” It was at Dort that the Remonstrants were condemned as “proto-Catholics” and the orthodox Reformed faith was defined in five doctrines, remembered through the use of the acrostic, TULIP.

**TULIP**

Due to spacial limitations, it would be impossible at this juncture to go into great detail with regard to the five tenets of Calvinism’s TULIP as affirmed by the Synod of Dort. However, a brief description and rationale will be offered as a foundational basis of understanding this theological system.

**Total Depravity**

The T in TULIP stands for total depravity. Scripture teaches that because of Adam’s fall, the entirety of mankind has been rendered unable to positively respond to God without Divine Intervention. Humans are now “in Adam” (1 Cor. 15:22) and are a race of rebels not only incapacitated by our sins, but actually “dead in sin” (Eph. 2:1, 5); not merely damaged by the effects of the fall, but corpses who require God’s spiritual resurrection in order to enjoy a relationship with Him. God’s grace makes us His own (Eph. 2:1-7) and believers are made into new creations (2 Cor. 5:17) and make a new humanity (Eph. 2:15).

**Unconditional Election**

---

29 McGrath, 268.
30 Ibid., 269.
31 Hill, 269.
33 Ibid.
Unconditional Election states that if mankind is totally depraved and unable to come to God, nothing merits God’s choice to offer salvation to mankind. If God chooses to save humans, the reason for doing it lies in God, not in man. The Apostle Paul says that God “saved us and called us according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began” (2 Tim. 1:9). Calvinists refer to this verse, along with Ephesians 1:4-5 to support the idea that before the foundations of the world, “God chose to save some to be his children from among the mass of sinful humans, and he did this not in accordance with their works but in accordance with his own purpose.” Therefore nothing in sinful man “conditions” God choice.

**Limited Atonement**

The third tenet of Calvinism, limited atonement, is perhaps the most widely debated of all of the system’s ideologies. This tenet proposes that Christ’s death is sufficient for all the sins of the world; however it was only intended to save only those Father predetermined to be saved. Since Jesus does not work at cross-purposes with the Father, He would not “waste” His blood on those who are destined for destruction (Prov. 16:9). Since Jesus knows the Father’s will perfectly, He knows from the start who belongs to the Father and who does not (John 10:14-16, 25-29), as well as knowing who the Father is drawing and whom He is not (John 6:44, 65). It would be inconsistent for Jesus to atone for the sins of those whom He knew would not be drawn, who does not belong to the Father, and who will not be saved.

**Irresistible Grace**

Building on the premise that fallen mankind is unable to come to God independently, and that if left to their own desires, humans would resist God forever. The graciousness of God is

---

34 Ibid., 135.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 135-36.
seen clearly in this tenet of Calvinism; as God changes the will of the “dead” and rebellious sinner, turning their hearts towards Him and placing a love for Him in their inner spirits (Jer. 31:31-34). Boyd says “God’s grace is irresistible because God changes the wills of those who would otherwise resist it.”

**Perseverance of the Saints**

Perseverance of the Saints, also known as “eternal security” means that if someone is elected, called and changed by His irresistible grace, that person cannot “fall away”. This member of the elect will struggle and perhaps lapse into sin, but they will persevere in their faith until they eventually receive their Heavenly reward. Jesus assures His followers that they cannot be “snatched” out of the Father’s hand (John 10:28-29), and that believers are “kept safe” by the power of God (1 Peter 1:4-5; Jude 1). Boyd sums up the overall theme of TULIP, saying that the “New Testament teaching on salvation begins with the grim but realistic teaching of the total depravity of humans and ends with the glorious proclamation of the eternal security of the believer.”

These five tenets were affirmed at the Synod of Dort in 1619, and became the official stance of the Reformed churches, and Arminianism was condemned as heretical.

**Modern Controversies**

There is a modern growing debate surrounding the increase in Reformed and Calvinistic viewpoints espoused from evangelical pulpits, particularly within the framework of the Southern Baptist Convention churches. In September 2006, *Christianity Today* published an article by

---

37 Ibid., 136.  
38 Ibid.  
39 Ibid.  
40 Ibid.  
41 Ibid.  
42 Gonzalez, 233.
Collin Hansen entitled “Young, Restless and Reformed: Calvinism is Making a Comeback—and Shaking up the Church.”  

The cover of the magazine included a young man wearing a T-shirt with the words “Jonathan Edwards is my Homeboy”; and the focus of the magazine was the resurgence of Calvinistic beliefs and Reformed theology among many young Baptist ministers. The debate amongst Baptists is not as overt as the Calvinists and Remonstrants of the days of the Synod of Dort, but it is just as divisive.

However, it must be determined what one means by Calvinism. Various types of Calvinism appear as a result of “many Calvinisms rather than one monolithic ‘Calvinism’.”

There are some Baptist who claim to be Calvinistic in their soteriology, but not Calvinistic in the Reformed sense of the word. Richard A. Muller, former member of the Calvin Theological Seminary faculty rejects the notion that Baptists who call themselves Calvinists simply because they affirm the five-tenets of Calvinist soteriology. Muller says:

“I once met a minister who introduced himself to me as a ‘five-point Calvinist.’ I later learned that, in addition to being a self-confessed five-point Calvinist, he was also an anti-paedobaptist who assumed that the church was voluntary association of adult believers, that the sacraments were not means of grace but were merely ‘ordinances’ of the church, that there was more than one covenant offering salvation in the time between the Fall and the eschaton, and that the church could expect a thousand-year reign on earth after Christ’s Second Coming but before the end of the world. He recognized no creeds or confessions of the church as binding in any way. I also found out that he regularly preached on the ‘five points’ in such a way as to indicate the difficulty in finding assurance of salvation: He often taught to his congregation that they had to examine their repentance continually in order to determine whether they had exerted themselves enough in renouncing the world and in ‘accepting’ Christ. This view of Christian life was totally in accord with his conception of the church as a visible, voluntary association of ‘born again’ adults who had ‘a personal relationship with Jesus.’ In retrospect, I recognize that I should not have been terribly surprised at the doctrinal context or at the practical application of the famous five points by this minister—although at the time I was astonished. After all, here was a person, proud to be

---


a five-point Calvinist, whose doctrines would have been repudiated by Calvin. In fact, his
doctrines would have gotten him tossed out of Geneva had he arrived there with his
brand of ‘Calvinism’ at any time during the late sixteenth or the seventeenth century.
Perhaps more to the point, his beliefs stood outside of the theological limits presented by
the great confessions of the Reformed churches—whether the Second Helvetic
Confessions of the Swiss Reformed church or the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg
Catechism of the Dutch Reformed churches or the Westminster standards of the
Presbyterian churches. He was, in short, an American Evangelical.”

For Muller, to be a genuine Calvinist one must affirm the other belief such as the baptism
of infants, the identification of sacraments as means of grace, as well as embracing amillennial
eschatology; “without these” Muller says, “the remaining famous five make very little sense.”
From the perspective of a true Calvinist, such as Muller, Baptists are modified Calvinists at best.
Since most Southern Baptist Churches, in accordance to the Baptist Faith and Message, do not
allow infant baptism, as well, they tend to be pre-millennial dispensationalists, and view
communion and baptism as ordinances rather than sacraments; it should be obvious that the
“Reformed” Baptist churches are “reformed” with regard to their soteriological view only.

While many within the Baptist body of believers leans toward the position of the Synod
of Dort, known as “Particular Baptists”, others known as “General Baptists” lean towards the
position of the Remonstrants. The conversation between the two must find a place of mediation
and fellowship, where there can be a difference of viewpoint, while maintaining a spirit of unity
amongst the Body of Christ.

Was Calvin a “Calvinist?”

Kevin Kennedy has authored an essay entitled “Was Calvin a Calvinist?” in which he
reviews the findings of the Synod of Dort and questions whether the Great Reformer of Geneva

---

46 Ibid., 428.
would agree with their understanding of his theological principles.\textsuperscript{47} Kennedy proposes that just as modern Lutheranism and Augustinianism are not necessarily accurate representations of the teachings of those particular theologians, the “system of doctrine popularly referred to as Calvin\textit{ism} does not necessarily reflect the thinking of John Calvin himself.”\textsuperscript{48}

Reformed theology, the theological tradition known as Calvinism gleans from many sources other than Calvin, including Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer, Heinrich Bullinger, and the aforementioned Beza. Kennedy believes that simply calling the system “Calvinism” is not only inaccurate and misleading, but it also “obscures the fact that Reformed theology owes its existence to many significant churchmen and theologians.”\textsuperscript{49} Considering that the Synod of Dort articulated and affirmed the points of the TULIP acrostic more than a half century after Calvin’s death, it is completely possible that the theological system that the evolved ideologies of Dort affirmed were a vast departure from the original interpretations and convictions of John Calvin.

The claim that Calvin did not hold to a view of limited atonement has persisted over the years; and many have argued that Calvin “taught that Christ died for the sins of the entire world.”\textsuperscript{50} Kennedy reveals that Calvin “employs universal language” in \textit{The Institutes}, and feels that because of this, Calvin believed that Christ died for the salvation of the whole human race and the redemption of humanity; rejecting a limited atonement view.\textsuperscript{51}

Kennedy believes that if Calvin adhered to the doctrine of limited atonement, one would not expect him to find him “intentionally universalizing scriptural passages that theologians from the later Reformed tradition claim are, from a simple reading of the text, clearing teaching that

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 193.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 196.
Christ died only for the elect.” As well, one would not expect Calvin, if he were a proponent of limited atonement to refute the claims that Christ died for all of humanity while he was engaged in polemical debates with Roman Catholics, and claiming that unbelievers who reject the gospel are rejecting an “actual provision that Christ made for them on the cross.”

**Conclusion**

While Calvin used his incredible scholarship and sound hermeneutics to develop a systematic theology that was scripturally supported and biblically based, it appears that his original conclusions were distorted and enhanced by many successors. These changes by followers of Calvin’s theological system were not always in accord with the Great Reformer’s beliefs. Simply by looking at one tenet of the TULIP acrostic, limited atonement, it becomes apparent that John Calvin’s personal and systematic theology does not resemble the “evolved” form of what is today regarded as Calvinism. Jonathan Hill’s view that Beza’s re-interpretation of Calvin’s view of predestination and double-predestination (pre-lapsarianism) lends to this conclusion as well. It is therefore the conclusion of this researcher that Calvin’s Calvinism is not entirely in correlation to the modern “Reformed Calvinist” ideology. As well, it seems that with the inconsistencies between Muller’s “true Calvinist” and Baptist “modified” Calvinists, it appears that many are simply “uniformed” rather than “Reformed.”

---

52 Ibid., 195.
53 Ibid.
Bibliography


