

DID THE EARLY CHRISTIAN FATHERS TEACH CALVINISM?

by Jack Cottrell

QUESTION: Some say that the doctrines of Calvinism did not begin with John Calvin, nor even with Augustine (died A.D. 430). Rather, they claim that the TULIP doctrines are present throughout the writings of the church fathers from the beginning. One Calvinist who says this is Michael Horton, in an appendix to his book, *Putting Amazing Back into Grace* (Baker, 2002). What do you say about this?

ANSWER: I have read a large portion (not all) of the pre-Nicene, Nicene, and post-Nicene fathers, and have done so with my Calvinist and non-Calvinist sensors on full alert. I believe that my conclusion is valid, that the Calvinist TULIP doctrines originated with Augustine and thus were not present in the pre-Augustinian fathers.

I surveyed the texts cited by Horton, and I saw nothing that moves me to change my mind. It is not easy to evaluate the texts that he cites from the church fathers, since he gives no bibliographical data other than a writer's name and an approximate date. He does not say what English translation he is using, and he seems to have made no attempt to check the translation against the original Greek or Latin version.

I decided to do some checking myself. Under the cited texts that allegedly support "unconditional election," Horton quotes Clement of Rome, claiming that Clement's letter was written in A.D. 69 (several decades earlier than most scholars would put it). Part of the quote says, "Seeing then that we are the special elect portion of a Holy God, let us do all things that pertain unto holiness."

I found this in chapter 30 of Clement's letter. The Greek says, *hagiou oun meris hyparchontes poiēsōmen ta tou hagian mou panta*. The fact is that there are no Greek words corresponding to "special elect" in this statement of Clement. The whole concept of election is read into this quotation. Also, we should note that the context of the statement has nothing to do with election.

Another citation from Clement, in support of perseverance of the saints (the P doctrine), is given thus by Horton: “It is the will of God that all whom He loves should partake of repentance, and so not perish with the unbelieving and impenitent. He has established it by His almighty will. But if any of those whom God wills should partake of the grace of repentance, should afterwards perish, where is His almighty will? And how is this matter settled and established by such a will of His?”

I had a very difficult time trying to find the section from which this quote supposedly comes. The closest I saw is in chapter 8. Here Clement cites several OT texts where God declares his desire for wicked Israel to repent, especially using Isaiah 1. Then Clement says, “Desiring, therefore, that all His beloved should be partakers of repentance, He has, by His almighty will, established....” The text ends here; it does not say what God has established; the translation I used adds the words, “these declarations,” i.e., the OT quotations. The Greek text reads: *pantas oun tous agapētous autou boulomenos metanoias metaschein estērizen to pantokratorikō boulēmati autou*. The “quotation” as cited by Horton does not even come close to what the original is saying. To say that it supports “perseverance of the saints” is pure fantasy; it also ignores the context.

Another ancient document cited several times by Horton is the so-called Epistle of Barnabas, which he dates as A.D. 70 and attributes to “Paul’s sidekick” in the Book of Acts. (Few scholars, if any, agree with this.) He cites this statement from Barnabas as supporting “Human Inability” (i.e., Total Depravity): “Learn: before we believed in God, the habitation of our heart was corrupt and weak.” This translation seems to be correct, but the only thing it establishes is that “Barnabas” believed that the hearts of men are depraved, which is not the same as TOTAL depravity. The citation thus proves nothing.

Horton says the following quote from “Barnabas” teaches Unconditional Election thus: “We are elected to hope, committed by God unto faith, appointed to salvation.” I could find this statement nowhere in the Epistle of Barnabas. But even if it were

there, the description of Christians as “elected” is not Calvinism; this is fairly common NT language. The Calvinist twist is to add the word unconditional, and there is nothing of this nature in the alleged quote which Horton attributes to Barnabas.

To cite one more quote, Horton says this statement from Barnabas shows that he believed in Irresistible Grace: “God gives repentance to us, introducing us into the incorruptible temple.” This translation seems to be correct, but again, this is saying nothing more than what is affirmed in the Bible, i.e., that God gives to us the opportunity to repent. (See my book, *The Faith Once for All*, pp. 199-200.) To say Barnabas is hereby affirming the Calvinist doctrine of irresistible grace not only reads too much into the statement; it also ignores the context of it.

It is extremely poor scholarship to lay out a string of quotations, as Horton does, with little documentation, with apparently no checking of the wording against the originals, and with no consideration of the contexts of the statements. It is also important to take account of the overall teachings of these writers, which will put the cited quotations into perspective. E.g., while the church fathers certainly speak of Christians as being “elect” or as being predestined to salvation, it is clear from their overall teaching about the subject that they believed God predestines according to his foreknowledge. (See my earlier Facebook note, “When Did Calvinism Begin,” published in early June 2011.)

As a theological student, when I first read the apostolic fathers, I made notations in the margins of all the passages that contradict the doctrines of Calvinism. The margins of my old Lightfoot edition are full of the letters T, U, L, I, and P, indicating statements that show that these writers did NOT believe in the five points. These are the kinds of statements that Horton’s list ignores.