

Ministerial Interns

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Thoughts to Share

## Is Calvinism Biblical Theology?

Several weeks ago I watched a debate between Doug Wilson and Steve Gregg on “Is Calvinism Biblical?” Doug Wilson is one of the leading theologians in the Theonomy Movement on which I shared material couple months ago. Steve Gregg is a Calvary Chapel minister, and teaches in a small Calvary Chapel Bible College. The debate was conducted on the usual arguments of the difference between Calvinism and Arminism. Steve Gregg clearly did the better presentation.

Calvinism is the most taught theology in today’s “Protestant” world. John MacArthur, John Piper, Charles Stanley, Charles Swindoll, Rick Warren, Mark Dever, Tim Keller are among Calvinist teachers today. The Southern Baptist Convention is experiencing major discord because Calvinism is now the thing to teach, and increasingly Southern Baptist ministers are labeling themselves as “Reformed.” The Puritans were Calvinist. Presbyterians descend from Scottish Calvinists. Most early Baptists were Calvinist. All “Reformed Churches” are Calvinist.

To ask “Is Calvinism Biblical Theology?” raises the possibility that Calvinism is not Biblical. What I want to focus on today is the history of Calvinism. Where did Calvin get his theology? If there is a precursor to his theology, where did he get his theology?

Calvin himself teaches that his theology was derived from Augustine. Calvin taught “In a word, Augustine is so wholly with me, that if I wished to write a confession of my faith, I could do so, with all fulness and satisfaction to myself, out of his writings.” [*A Treatise on the Eternal Predestination of God*] But there is more: Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk. This means the two leading theologians of Protestantism, Calvin and Luther, built their systems of doctrine from Augustine. Since that is the case, from where did the fourth century Augustine develop his theology?

You can easily gain the understanding that during the first four centuries, the church was in a doctrinal war with the pagan, non-biblical philosophies of that time. These pagan philosophies were heavily debated by the leading Christian leaders, and many of the early church

leaders were swayed by those philosophies. The four most important, are Stocism, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, and Manichaeism. All four have in common extremely deterministic understandings of human nature. Augustine strayed from Biblical Theology and followed after pagan ideas. For five hundred years the churches insistence of a biblical foundation was thrown off by Augustine who built his pattern on the deterministic teachings of Stocism, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, and Manichaeism.

Calvin is mentioned in reference to the TULIP system of theology. What is important to see is that Augustine invented the five points of Calvinism that comprise TULIP: **T**otal depravity, **U**nconditional election, **L**imited Atonement, **I**rresistible grace, and **P**erseverance of the saints. The most important of these was total depravity (with human loss of free will resulting in total inability to respond to God). This then required unconditional election (God unilaterally must give the gift of faith) and perseverance of the saints (since God's gifts are perfect). Irresistible grace and limited atonement were logical deductions from the three major doctrinal shifts.

Before his conversion to Christianity by the teaching of Ambrose, Augustine came into the church with decades of being taught and teaching those four deterministic philosophies of Stocism, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, and Manichaeism. For approximately the first fifteen years of his ministry, Augustine was faithful to the teaching of Ambrose, and all the other Christian preachers. Then about 410 AD, he reverted to his earlier deterministic philosophies. While I haven't examined the idea yet, there is a possibility that having to choose between the demands of the Roman Catholic church of that time, and having to break the significant relationship he had with his concubine of over thirteen years, he felt himself bleeding and torn apart by her having to leave his life. He felt as if all choices were taken away. His only way out was through the deterministic pagan philosophies he one taught.

And, it's important to recognize that all the Christian preachers at that time were totally opposed determinism that Augustine reverted to. Consider. A few of the most noted are:

### **1st century**

Apostle Paul of Tarsus (died c. 60-65)

Apostle James, Son of Zebedee

Apostle Simon Peter  
Apostle John, Son of Zebedee  
Deacon Philip  
Deacon Stephen the Protomartyr  
Papias of Hierapolis (c. 60 - c. 130)  
Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35 or 50 , between 98 and 117)  
Polycarp (c. 69 - c. 155)  
Clement of Rome (c. 96)  
Tatian (c. 96)

## **2nd century**

Valentinus (c. 100 - c. 160)  
Quadratus of Athens (124/125)  
Basilides (died c. 132)  
Aristides the Athenian (died c. 133 or c. 140)  
Aristo of Pella (c. 140)  
Marcion (c. 110 - c. 160)  
Justin Martyr (c. 110 -c. 165)  
Hegesippus (c. 110 - 180)  
Melito of Sardis (died c. 180)  
Athenagoras of Athens (c. 133 - c. 190)  
Dionysius of Corinth ( c. 171)  
Heracleon (c. 175)  
Apollinaris Claudius (c. 177)  
Ptolemy (c. 180)  
Pantaenus (died c. 200)  
Irenaeus of Lyons (died c. 202)  
Apollonius of Ephesus (c. 180 - c. 210)  
Serapion of Antioch (died 211)  
Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 -211 or 216)  
Bardaisan (154 -222/3)  
Tertullian (c. 160 - c. 220)  
Origen (c. 184 - c. 253)

## **3rd century**

Minucius Felix (2nd or 3rd century)  
Caius, Presbyter of Rome (early 3rd century)  
Hippolytus of Rome (c. 170 - c. 236)  
Origen of Alexandria (c. 184 - 254)

Sabellius (c. 215)  
Cyprian (c. 200 - c. 258)  
Novatian (c. 200 - 258)  
Paul of Samosata (c. 200 - c. 275)  
Dionysius of Alexandria (died 265)  
Gregory Thaumaturgus (c. 213 - c. 270)  
Methodius of Olympus (died c. 311)  
Lucian of Antioch (c. 240 - 312)  
Lactantius (c. 240 - c. 320)  
Aphrahat (c. 280 - c. 345)  
Athanasius of Alexandria (296-373)

### **4th century**

Ephrem the Syrian (c. 306-373)  
Hilary of Poitiers (c. 310 - c. 367)  
Arnobius of Sicca (died c. 330)  
Basil of Caesarea (c. 330 - 379)  
Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330 - c. 395)  
Gregory Nazianzus (329-389)  
Ambrose (337/340 - 397)  
John Chrysostom (347-407)  
Jerome (347-420)  
Theodore, bishop of Mopsuestia (c. 350 – 428)  
Augustine (354-430)  
Cyril of Alexandria (c. 376 - 444)  
Nestorius (c. 386 - c. 451)

Over 70% of the extant writings of that list opposed the deterministic teachings of Stoicism, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, and Manichaeism, and preached extensively on free will in opposition. Augustine completely threw off his Christian foundation of biblical theology, and substituted human philosophy in its place.

Does “Free Will” exist? Yes, if you follow this reasoning: a dog tied by rope to a horse drawn wagon has freedom. The dog may choose to trot along freely, or be dragged by the cart.