

An Exposé on Reformed Theology (RT) and Calvinism (CV), Part 3

Calvinism - From Heaven or From Men?

Barry O'Dell

Upon being questioned about the source of His authority, Jesus responded to the chief priests and elders, “I also will ask you one thing, which if ye tell me, I in like wise will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men” (Matt. 21:24-25)? In matters of faith and practice, this is the question of questions! In the last edition of FCGN, it was noted that one of the leading voices of these religious errors, RC Sproul, openly acknowledged the following: “And so the doctrine of total depravity describes and defines a particular view of original sin that has its roots in the teaching of St. Augustine. And, remember, that Augustine was the patron saint of the monastery where Martin Luther was reared in the faith and where he taught at Wittenberg. He was an Augustinian monk, and also Augustine was the most revered mentor of John Calvin, so that the thinking of Augustine had an enormous influence in the shaping of the doctrine of the Protestant Reformation.” The link for this admission is here provided (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RvUpynqAow>). While Sproul passed away in 2017, he still speaks today about the origins of total depravity and original sin. As one of the “leading voices” of RT/CV, it is not insignificant that we know that he knew the origins of this unjust and arbitrary system of belief. Is there any evidence, apart from Sproul’s admission, that Augustine was the originator of this system? And, if so, what should we do with it? Also, if he is the originator of it, he did not live until the 4th and 5th centuries. Did every other student of Scripture miss something before he came along? In regard to the doctrines of RT/CV and their connections with Augustine, one man wrote, “Within Christianity, theological truth is not primarily measured by its antiquity, but by its conformity to Scripture, logic, and then with a consideration of tradition. The 500-year-old theology of John Calvin was directly derived from Augustine who strayed from the foundation of traditional patristic theology over a thousand years prior to Calvin.”¹ In his “A Treatise on the Eternal Predestination of God” that was published in 1522, John Calvin wrote, “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.” John Calvin has been telling us, in his own words and for 500 years, the source of his doctrine! As one continues to read that document, Calvin repeatedly referenced Augustine! If you would like to do that, here is a link (<https://www.covenanter.org/reformed/2016/5/17/a-treatise-on-the-eternal-predestination-of-god>). Here is a simple question that must be answered - Reformed Theology and Calvinism: from heaven or from men? John Calvin, the man who systematized what we typically call TULIP, told us 500 years ago that his own doctrine could have been summarized from the teachings of Augustine. RC Sproul, a leading voice in RT/CV in the late 20th and early 21st century, told us the same thing! Why not take them at their word?

**Why does it matter?
Who cares?!!**

Who is Augustine and why does it matter to us today? Augustine was a man who lived from 354-430 in Northern Africa. He is often referred to as “Saint” Augustine. In his early life he joined a sect known as the Manicheans. Manichaeism was a religion that promised salvation through special knowledge (Gnosticism) and it also taught that the physical body is evil and the spirit is good. Manichaeism taught that man’s free-will was lost at the “fall” and he became totally depraved. Just a quick question - does any of this sound familiar?!! Does it not sound “Calvinistic?” After ten years, Augustine left Manichaeism, but the doctrines they taught stayed with him and helped to form his erroneous theology. He would go on to write *City of God* (AD 413-426) and *Confessions* (AD 400) that speak of his childhood, his time in Manichaeism, and his “conversion to Christianity.”

Here is the most important question to answer - why does it matter? Who cares?! In brief, it matters because the doctrines Augustine espoused, later to be expounded upon by John Calvin (1509-1564), still impact people today. Have you ever heard of “sinful nature?” In regard to sin, have you ever heard anyone say, “I just couldn’t help it!” Within the churches of Christ we are being told that the only way we can overcome our “sinful flesh” is to “get baptized and get the

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gift of the Holy Spirit.” If you have heard or read these sentiments, you have heard or read Calvinism! Better yet, you’ve heard Augustinianism. While many are familiar with John Calvin, it is probably safe to say that not as many are very well acquainted with Augustine and his evolution of beliefs. This subject matters because there are things being taught from pulpits and classrooms that directly contradict the word of God.

Does Scripture teach that man has a nature that has been corrupted to the core by the sin of Adam? If such were the case, why was there no mention of it by God when the curses were pronounced? The serpent was cursed (Gen. 3:14-15). The woman was cursed in terms of child birth and subjugation to the male (Gen. 3:16). The man was cursed because the ground would bear thorns and thistles and his work would become more difficult. Ultimately, man would die (Gen. 3:17-19). The death of Genesis 2:17 was physical death, not a spiritual death that would lead to a corrupted nature in mankind at large. Adam and Eve sinned, were cast out of the garden, and were kept from the tree of life. Why? Let the Bible explain: “*And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden cherubims, and a flaming*

sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life” (Gen. 3:22-24). Not one thing was said about a change in the nature of mankind. In fact, Scripture says that God gives the spirit (Ecc. 12:7), that He is the “*Father of spirits*” (Heb. 12:9), and that sin and death is in direct relation to one’s personal desires and giving in to them (Jas. 1:13-15). It would be truly puzzling to hold to this system of belief and then try to teach what Jesus taught was necessary in order to become a part of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:1-5; Mk. 9:33-37). The doctrines of RT/CV are admitted, by their own adherents and leaders, to have originated with Augustine. Why do so many pretend that it is a doctrine found in Scripture? Why, in light of passages such as Ezekiel 18 and Jeremiah 31:27-30, do people hold to doctrines that mislead people to believe that all of human nature was spiritually corrupted by the sin of Adam? Why is it that some of our own “preachers” will misuse Romans 3:10-18 to berate Christians as nothing more than sinners who cannot help it because they have a sinful nature? In fact, Romans 3:19 tells us the target of those verses - “*those who are under the law.*” Too many are married to a theology rather than being devoted to the truth of Scripture. The doctrines of RT/CV contradict the revealed will of God and to hold to them, in any form, is to be out of line with Scripture!

Footnote

1. Ken Wilson in “*The Foundation of Augustinian Calvinism,*” pg. 1 of the introduction. Published in 2019 by Regula Fidei Press.

About Faith

Tony Brewer - Riverview church of Christ - New Brunswick, Canada

Faith is an interesting and much debated topic. As such, it seems to be misunderstood by many. I believe the problem comes from a misunderstanding of the different usages of the term across the New Testament, the moment when faith is actualized, and the fact that faith is a gift from God.

Faith Defined.

There are three usages of the term “faith” in the New Testament. In order to fully understand faith, one must have a good understanding of the dichotomy of use across the New Testament. There is faith as a system, faith as a matter of conscience or scruple, and faith as an individual’s personal faith, which can be divided into two uses - one’s personal saving faith and one’s mental assent.

Paul spoke of the system of faith, the gospel system when he wrote of “*one faith*” (Eph. 4:5). Jude also wrote of “*the faith which was once delivered*” in verse three of his letter. This system of faith was promulgated on the first day of Pentecost after the resurrection of Jesus. We can also see the term used in this way in

Galatians chapters two and three. Also, the book of Romans draws heavily on the juxtaposition of the law of Moses and the system of faith under which Christians now live.

Paul also used the term “faith” as a matter of conscience or scruple in his letter to the Romans. Evidently there were Christians with baggage left over from their particular systems of faith from which they were converted. Whether being converted from Judaism or Paganism, Christians had scruples based on the traditions from those respective systems that had to do with holy days and diets, amongst other things. Paul gave the admonition that if one has an issue of personal liberty or conviction to keep it to oneself before God and do not bind it on others. If you have a liberty, do not noise it abroad and if you have a conviction, do not violate your own conscience or scruple (Rom. 14:22-23).

Peter wrote about our personal faith, speaking of it being tried as if by a refiner’s fire (1 Pet. 1:7). The

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Hebrew's writer paints a picture of what our personal faith should look like lived out recorded in its eleventh chapter aptly named, Faith's Hall of Fame. Our personal faith lived out looks like taking action based on a conviction and belief. The conviction is that God exists and rewards those who diligently seek Him (Heb. 11:6). Every example in Faith's Hall of Fame is of those who took action based on their conviction and often died for it. In the same vein of personal faith, James used faith and belief, as in a mere mental assent, in the second chapter of his letter. Chapter two of James begins with the premise of faith without works is dead and unprofitable (Jam. 2:14). He illustrated the premise by using a person in need and not being given anything but well wishes (Jam. 2:15-16). He further illustrated this by noting one might believe (mental assent) there is one God, but that puts them on even ground with the demons (Jam. 2:19). Then, in the very next verse, he makes the point that "*faith without works is dead*" (Jam. 2:20). From the aforementioned we know that James was juxtaposing faith (action one takes on one's convictions and beliefs) with faith (a mere mental assent) by saying one might say they have faith, but he can *show* his faith *without saying* he has faith by his works (action he takes based on his conviction and belief) (Jam. 2:18). Thus, we have seen the usage of "faith" as a mere mental assent of believing something without any action based on that belief juxtaposed with "faith" as action based on conviction and belief.

Faith Actualized.

Considering the actualization of personal faith, that is, action one takes based on conviction or belief (which is often referred to as saving faith or the faith without which it is impossible to please God) one must simply turn to the words of Jesus recorded by John. "*It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me*" (Jn. 6:44). Having a proper understanding of the term "faith" we can know that once one has learned of the Father the next step, if one is faithful, will be submit to Jesus ("cometh" action), thusly, resulting in a faithful individual. The moment faith is actualized is when one learns of God through teaching or reading the Word, believes, and takes action on that belief. The actualization of personal, saving faith is really that simple. The only question that remains is what role does God play in the actualization of one's faith?

The Gift of Faith.

For one to say that one's personal faith is not a gift from God is to depart from Scripture. Does faith's being a gift mean that God, the Holy Spirit, has to

regenerate our heart miraculously? Does faith's being a gift from God mean that God the Father bestows our faith unto us upon our miraculous regeneration? If you will allow me to approbate words of our brother, Paul, "*GOD FORBID!*" We are saved by grace through faith...it is the gift of God (Eph. 2:8). Grace and faith are gifts, but in what way? I believe Peter sheds some light on the gift of faith: "*Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently: Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you*" (1 Pet. 1:22-25) Notice the responsibility of action, "*ye have purified.*" The state of being purified is identified as being born again. However, it is not some miraculous power of or from the Holy Spirit. Rather, it is by the Word. Further, it is the Word which is the means whereby the gospel (system of faith)

is preached unto the individual. We have a kind of order of operations that fits perfectly with John 6:44-45. One hears or learns of God through the Word, believes or is convicted by that Word, and then one purifies himself by being born again of that Word. If we cannot see how our faith is a gift from God delivered unto us by the Word I do not believe there is much hope for us.

Now, we can debate about what being born again means, (I believe one is born again when one is buried with Christ and raised to walk again in newness of life) but what cannot be debated is our responsibility of action to facilitate that state of being by obedience. It cannot be the case that we are gifted in a miraculous way a saving, personal faith. We MUST demystify the Bible. God has made it so very simple. Learn of Him to believe that He exists, then be born again of the Word through obedience to that Word.

There is so much confusion concerning salvation and when one receives one's faith. It is evident to this writer that we must stop considering our personal faith as "received," but start considering our personal faith as being actualized. The idea of an actualized faith is in alignment with simple, easily understood teachings of Scripture and it shines a light in the darkness of the foolish mysticism of man-made religion and dogma. May we endeavor to always understand the different usages of the term "faith" when your personal faith is actualized and our responsibility in the process, and the fact that our faith is a gift from Almighty God.

***"We must demystify the Bible.
God has made it so very simple."***

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The Churches of Christ

- Bible only (2 Pet. 1:3)
- Name of Christ (Rom. 16:16)
- Began in Jerusalem (Isa. 2:2-3; Acts 2:1-4)
- Established by Jesus (Matt. 16:18)
- Purchased with Jesus' blood (Acts 20:28)
- Married to Christ (Rom. 7:4)
- Established in the 1st century (Acts 2:47)
- Jesus the Head of the One Body (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:4; 5:23)
- Added to the church by God (Acts 2:41, 47)

Salvation

- Saved by grace, though faith (Eph. 2:8-9)
- Not by faith alone (Jas. 2:14-26)
- Not by grace alone (Matt. 7:21)
- Belief and baptism (Mk. 16:16)
- Repentance and baptism (Acts 2:37-38)
- Belief, confession, and baptism (Acts 8:37-38)
- Hear, belief, baptism (Acts 18:8)
- Faith and baptism (Gal. 3:26-27)
- Baptism does save us (1 Pet. 3:21)

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Editor - Barry O'Dell - Office Phone - (870) 625-3217