

Calvin and Augustine

Introduction

When Roman opponents charged the Protestant Reformers with innovation, or introducing novelties into traditional Christian doctrine, John Calvin rebutted the charge with a two-pronged argument. First, he pointed out the abominable innovations that *they* had introduced over the centuries. Second, he proved that so far from being an innovation, Protestant theology was a return to that of Holy Scripture, endorsed by the very same Church Fathers whom Romanists themselves revered.

Among the many of these venerable men to be conscripted, Aurelius Augustine (354-430) proved to be his strongest ally. By 1559, the date of the final form of his *Institutes*, Calvin quotes or alludes to Augustine's writings eight times more than to those of any other author.

In this article, we shall examine Augustine's first impact on Calvin, Augustine's appearances in Calvin's works, Calvin's disagreement with Augustine and where Calvin goes beyond Augustine.

Augustine's First Impact on Calvin

Sometime before 1532, Calvin read Augustine's treatise *On the Spirit and the Letter*. We know this because in his commentary of the same year on Seneca's work *On Clemency*, he explicitly refers to it. What attracted him was its teaching on grace, which strongly resembles that of Martin Luther's *Bondage of the Will*: left to himself, fallen man is capable only of doing evil. To do good is to love God, which is possible only by receiving irresistible grace.

In the first edition of his *Institutes* (1536) Calvin alludes to Augustine about seventy times, though not on the issue of the human will and divine grace. This appears, however, in the second edition of the *Institutes* (1539), where Calvin explains why the

tenth commandment, 'Thou shalt not covet', forbids even the desire to commit those sins already forbidden in the previous commandments. It is, says Calvin, because this desire, over which we have no control, underlies and precedes every act of our will. Only love for God, formed in the heart by His saving grace, can overcome it. "The way to this realization," adds Calvin, "was first opened to me by Augustine." From this time on, Calvin always identifies Augustine's doctrine of grace with his own.

Augustine in Calvin

1. On Grace

In his study *Augustine in the Work of John Calvin*, Luchsius Smits reckons on 1,700 explicit references and 2,400 unreferenced quotations or paraphrases. While some of these are drawn from Augustine's *Letters*, *Enarrations on the Psalms* and *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, most are from his anti-Pelagian writings, especially the one entitled *On Corruption and Grace*. We can see why. Pelagius taught that God gives grace in response to man's good will, which is free to accept or reject it. On the contrary, retorted Augustine, man's will is now so radically depraved that it can do nothing but sin. The only cure is God's free grace, sovereignly bestowed on whomever *He* wills.

As this teaching forms the backbone of Calvin's doctrine of salvation, it served his purposes well. "All the ecclesiastical writers," he ruefully observes, "*with the exception of Augustine*, have spoken so ambiguously or inconsistently on this subject that no certainty is attainable from their writings." Accordingly, we find him repeatedly drawing on the Church Father to confirm his claim. For example, "Augustine does not hesitate to call the will a *slave*;" man "is not made free from sin except by the grace of the Saviour;" only "the will (not the free will of man, but the will freed by God) obeys" His holy law.

How thankful we should be that at the heart of the European Reformation Calvin saw the value of the North African bishop's

teaching of a thousand years earlier. That it cost the Church Father much mental suffering is clear from his admission that “in solving this problem I expended much labour on behalf of the free choice of the human will, but the grace of God triumphed.” The verdict that “Reformation theology [especially Calvin’s] may justly lay claim to Augustine’s doctrine of grace” is a true one, “but we do not think it is true because Augustine said it - rather that what we find Augustine says is found in Scripture, which on this topic he expounds masterfully.” (N.Needham)

2. On Predestination

Augustine crops up too in Calvin’s teaching on Predestination. Only a few pages into his reply to the Romish Pighius, Calvin claims that Augustine “does not differ from me one pin’s point.” In fact, he adds modestly, “Augustine is so completely of our persuasion that if I should have to make written profession, it would be quite enough to present a composition made up entirely of excerpts from his writings.” Particularly beautiful, observes Calvin, are Augustine’s remarks on the election of the man Christ Jesus to be eternally united to “the Saviour of the world Himself, the adorable Son of God.” From Him, “our glorious Head” and “Fountain of all grace,” the “stream of electing grace” flows down to “all His members,” according to the measure appointed by God.

Two of Augustine’s thoughts on Predestination especially embedded themselves in Calvin’s mind. One is his oft-quoted remark: “men are not chosen *because* they believe, but . . . *that they might* believe.” The other is a metaphor that became one of Calvin’s chief tools in restraining speculation on divine truths. The answer to the question as to “why one believes, and another does not,” is, says Augustine, “a profound abyss.” Let those who dare tread near it “beware of the awful precipice.”

3. On Reprobation

For his teaching on Reprobation, too, Calvin draws from his favourite Church Father. “Again, in another place he [Augustine] says: ‘Who created the reprobate but God? And why? Because He

willed it. Why did He will it? Who art thou, O man, that repliest against God?”

4. On Perseverance

No less valuable to Calvin is Augustine's explanation as to why the saints persevere: "Augustine . . . teaches that the security of our salvation stands in that [free and gratuitous] will [of God] also, and in nothing else in another work, he maintains more fully that perseverance is freely bestowed on the elect, from which they can never fall away." Those who do fall away "could not have been of this number of the elect," for they were never separated "from the general mass of perdition" by "the predestination of God," and therefore were never called "according to His purpose." Such "mighty works of God [election, calling and perseverance], so gloriously and exquisitely perfect in every instance," all come to pass according to His "all-foreseeing appointment." And so, Calvin concludes, "I have gladly extracted these few things out of many like them in the writings of Augustine," to refute Pighius's false charge that Calvin taught a doctrine different to his.

5. On the Jews

Calvin's teaching on the place of the Jews in the divine economy is compatible with, if not derived from, that of Augustine. While rejecting the Church Father's justification of co-ercion to convert pagans and reclaim schismatics, he readily accepts Augustine's policy that when gentle persuasion fails with the Jews, they are to be left in peace and treated kindly. This is because they are God's ancient people, whom He has not entirely cast away.

Calvin also endorsed Augustine's belief that Jewish Old Testament faith was placed on and fulfilled in Christ, who has with-held faith from them only temporarily, so that salvation could pass to the Gentiles. Their original calling, however, is irrevocable, and their future conversion "will be unique and unprecedented."

Calvin against Augustine

1. Biblical Exegesis

That Calvin was no mere systematizer of Augustine's theology is evident from his avowed rejection of some aspects of his thought. In Biblical Exegesis, for example, he found Augustine too prone to subtleties. "Augustine," he writes, "is in matters of dogma unquestionably superior to all others. But in seeking . . . the religious meaning of Scripture he becomes overly subtle and commensurably less solid and reliable." Doubtless it was his ancient mentor's penchant for allegorizing that irritated Calvin most, as he himself adhered strictly to the grammatico-historical method.

2. Prayers for the Dead

No such gentleness appears, however, in Calvin's rejection of Augustine's belief in the efficacy of prayers for the dead and in choosing burial sites close to the tombs of martyrs. Prayers for the dead, he thunders, are works of Satan, reared on the delusive doctrine of Purgatory. This is flatly opposed to God's predestination to heaven or hell. In mitigation, however, Calvin concedes that on this point Augustine speaks with a halting voice.

3. The Nature of Sin

A more profound and far-reaching difference is seen in Calvin's rejection of Augustine's teaching on the nature of sin. This is that sin is not an entity but "the privation of good." God is good, he says, the works of His hands are good, but ever since Adam's fall evil exists in men's hearts as the absence of goodness, just as darkness is the absence of light. To be sure, Augustine continues, its effects on man are devastating - it confuses and blinds his mind, hardens his heart and strips him of all ability to choose what is good. Yet all this amounts only to a negative - the absence of goodness.

Calvin too traces these devastating effects to a negative - man's depraved nature. But, observing sin's aggressive and corrosive

power, he views man's heart as both "a fountain" and "a factory" of evil. Sin, he asserts, is not the fruit of ignorance in man (a Platonic notion that Augustine may have retained from his pre-conversion days), but of insolent defiance of God and unwarranted pride in his own imagined ability. Calvin's rejection of Augustine's view probably accounts for his refusal to make one single reference to his treatise *On the Nature of the Good*, where this teaching appears most explicitly. Nevertheless, his objection is stated mildly: "I shall not assert with Augustine that in sin or evil there is nothing positive."

4. The Damnation of Unbaptized Infants

Calvin's most emphatic rejection of Augustine is reserved for his deplorable notion that the souls of infants who die unbaptized are suffering in hell. The Church Father's admission that "when it comes to the pain of infants, believe me, I am in terrible straits," failed to lessen Calvin's abhorrence for this teaching. Even when Augustine places infant suffering among "the mildest of all" the pains of hell, Calvin stands firm. This teaching, he protests, "is madness." Why so? Because God has promised to be "the God of our seed after us." "He adopts our children and keeps them for His own before they are born . . . This promise includes their salvation," and "ought to be sufficient to assure us" of it, for "they have the right of adoption in the covenant [of grace] by which they come into communion with Christ."

5. The Church and Sacraments

Calvin's departure from Augustine's doctrine of the Church needs no extensive proof. The Presbyterianism of Reformed Geneva, in which all ministers were equal and all believers formed the Body of Christ, was light years away from the sacerdotal hierarchy and clerical exclusiveness of Rome. While these were not Augustine's creation, they are the full-grown tree whose seed the great 'Church Doctor' sowed.

On the surface, Calvin's doctrine of the Sacraments bears little resemblance to Augustine's, partly owing to the latter's ambiguous

language, from which his benighted mediaeval disciples found it easy to substitute an *ex opere operato* doctrine for his scantily-expressed belief in the need for heart involvement. Yet, while his teaching on Baptism appears to make the outward action a means of union to Christ, the Church Father speaks most strongly against those who partake of the Supper without a cordial love for Christ.

Had Augustine's doctrine of the Church been as sound as his teaching on Grace, the entire Reformation movement would have been a great revival of Augustinianism.

Calvin beyond Augustine

In the wise providence of God, Augustine received just those gifts that were required for the successful defeat of Manicheism, Donatism and Pelagianism, the most influential heresies of his day. [Strictly speaking, Donatism was a schism rather than a heresy.] His dialectic skill, knowledge of classical philosophy and experience in rhetoric admirably fitted him for this major contribution to the preservation of Biblical truth in the Church.

Calvin's superior training in law, fluency in both Biblical languages [Augustine was weak in Greek and ignorant of Hebrew], grasp of Church History, phenomenal memory for the works of the Church Fathers and Mediaeval Schoolmen, and ability to absorb and methodize the Reformed teaching of his contemporaries, gave him several advantages over his patristic mentor. In his philological expertise, systematizing tendency and remarkably practical outlook on life, he found assets that took him far beyond Augustine's theological horizon.

In four areas, at least, Calvin went far beyond the venerable Church Father: the Trinity, the Threefold offices of Christ, the Holy Spirit and Practical Christian Living.

1. The Trinity

Augustine's tedious treatise on the Trinity wanders speculatively through the fields of human analogy. Page after page is spent trying to work out similarities between the Divine Trinity and various earthly "trinities," all to no avail. The dear man's highly convoluted thinking leaves his readers mentally exhausted without being in any way better informed. At times, he almost despairs himself of ever arriving at a full and satisfying doctrine of the Trinity. In view of the incomprehensible eternity and infinity of God, his panting after perfect understanding was bound to fail.

By contrast, Calvin prefers "not to go beyond the simple statements of Scripture on the matter" (Louis Berkhof), expressly rejecting "the propriety of borrowing similitudes from human things." Without one drop of speculation, Calvin can assure us that "those who readily and implicitly attend to the Divine Word" will have "stable ground on which they may confidently rest." Consequently, he is content to draw out the inherent properties of each Person - the Father begetting, the Son begotten and the Spirit proceeding from both - recognized by the Western Church, and to show the part played by each in the great work of man's salvation.

2. The Threefold Offices of Christ

The title of Mediator is dominant in Augustine's Christology, yet he explains the mediating role of the Redeemer largely in terms of His revealing God to man, making the otherwise unintelligible God intelligible to us. Even his demonstrations of the suitability of Christ to be the Mediator between God and men - "because He is God with the Father" and "human among human beings" - are not well expressed. Yet as he thought his way through the Pelagian controversy, Augustine's view of Christ's mediatorial work took on new theological significance. "The most splendid light of predestination and grace," he writes, "is the Saviour Himself, the Mediator Himself . . . Christ Jesus." His incomparable grace as the God-Man makes Him unique, while the very structure of His Person as God manifest in the flesh is the supreme "manifestation of the grace of God" to us. Yet nowhere in his exposition does

Augustine expand this fine teaching into a study of Christ's exercise of His three offices.

This privilege was reserved for Calvin. From the outset he is decidedly Augustinian: "It deeply concerned us that He who was to be our Mediator should be very God and very man." This arrangement "flowed from the divine decree," so that "what was best for us, our most merciful Father determined."

Yet Calvin cannot leave the matter there. Because "there was never any promise of a Mediator without blood," God the Son became a Priest for us, propitiating the Father by sacrificing Himself as the voluntary victim of divine justice.

His kingly office is exercised chiefly from heaven, in ruling and defending His people. Armed with "eternal power," He effectively secures "the perpetuity of the Church" and "a blessed immortality" for each believer. That same power guarantees the ultimate overthrow of "the devil, the world, and everything that can do us harm."

As our Prophet, He employs His Word, as taught by His Spirit, to lead His elect into the knowledge of God, themselves, their Redeemer and His great salvation.

All three mediatorial offices Christ "received from the Father," was anointed to by the Spirit, and performed perfectly Himself. This is only one instance of each Person of the Godhead concerning Himself with our salvation. Augustine never saw these truths clearly, despite his insatiable quest for ultimate knowledge.

3. The Holy Spirit

Of the Church Fathers, it was given to Basil to investigate the Person of the Holy Spirit, though he did so almost exclusively in terms of His relationship to the Father and the Son.

There is much fine teaching on the Holy Spirit in Augustine's *Homilies on the Gospel of John*. But his main contribution to this field of theology was directed against the Pelagians, who held that man's "free will is able by its own natural powers, *without the aid of the Holy Spirit*, to convert itself to God, to believe the Gospel, and to be obedient to the law of God, and thus, with its own voluntary obedience, to merit the remission of sins and eternal life." (George Smeaton)

Augustine countered this pernicious teaching by reminding his opponents that Christ expressly promised His Holy Spirit, "without whom we can neither love God nor keep His commandments." Though not exclusively, his thoughts on the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit, like his doctrine of Christ as Mediator, serves to buttress his doctrine of grace.

Calvin's much fuller treatment dwells extensively on the "secret operation of the Spirit," in uniting the elect to Christ; in sealing their salvation; in making them active members of His Body "by His grace and energy"; in giving them and increasing in them true saving faith; in witnessing within them as the Spirit of adoption; in leading them more and more into the truths of Scripture and the blessings of a holy life; and in fitting them for their life of glory in heaven. This teaching appears everywhere in Calvin's writings, and is summarized in the remark: "The increase, as well as the commencement, of everything good in us, comes from the Holy Spirit." It is with good reason that B.B. Warfield designates Calvin "the theologian of the Holy Spirit."

4. Practical Christian Living

Augustine's *Letters* abound with pastoral counsels designed to solve the practical problems that confronted his correspondents. So does that marvellous spiritual autobiography, the *Confessions*. Doubtless too his episcopal visits and contributions to the semi-monastic community he established with his co-presbyters and young disciples saw him issuing wise practical advice on Christian living. Yet apart from subsequent readers who may take his

counsel to heart, his influence in this sphere remained comparatively local. Augustine is not remembered for any sweeping moral changes in African society or the Western churches.

Calvin's practical influence, by comparison, has been immense. [True Biblical counsel meets us on page after page of his *Sermons, Letters* and *Ecclesiastical Advice*.] After a thorough study of his life, writings and the spread of Calvinism, B.B. Warfield concluded that he was "by way of eminence the practical Reformer," even "the practical genius of the Reformation." By this Warfield meant that Calvin set himself from the start "to organize Protestantism and to discipline it . . . In point of fact," Warfield continues, "Calvin found Protestantism a mob and transformed it into an army." This is no mere rhetoric. Apart from tentative efforts to establish congregational singing and promote catechetical teaching in the schools, Luther merely urged his fellow ministers to preach the Gospel, believing that everything else would take care of itself. Calvin introduced organization and discipline into the Genevan Church, and lived to see it lead to reform in the Genevan City State. As a by-product of his labours, Geneva became a notably moral community. No less an observer than John Knox testified: "In other places I confess Christ to be preached, but manners and religion to be so sincerely reformed I have not seen in any other place beside." Comments J.A. Wylie: "At Geneva, under Calvin, Christianity shone forth in the purity and splendour of its early days. This little town became, moreover, an asylum for the persecuted of all lands and a school of instruction for all nations. Here men could study the best models, and here they could learn the purest principles of the Gospel. The influence which Geneva then exerted was truly wonderful, nor is there anything like it in the history of the world." From Geneva this wholesome leaven spread to other nations, producing a vigorous Protestantism that stood and suffered for a free church in a free state. In Switzerland, France, Holland, the German Rhineland, Scotland, England, the United States of America and wherever a Reformed way of life was adopted, it was Calvinism that paved the way.

Conclusion

For a millenium after Augustine, Western Christianity became largely what its advocates took from him. The apostate Church of Rome built his doctrine of the Church into a formidable edifice of wealth and oppression. Some of its leading thinkers strove with every scholarly tool at their disposal to adjust their church to his teaching. These efforts did not cease until Augustinianism was absorbed into Protestantism at the Reformation and ousted by Semi-Pelagianism in the Roman Counter-Reformation.

But let us never forget that it was Augustine's theology of grace, hewn out of Holy Scripture, which formed the bedrock of Calvinism, a theology that takes all glory from man and gives it rightly to God. As B.B.Warfield says: "The distinguishing mark of Calvinism as over against all other systems lies in its doctrine of 'efficacious grace,' which, it teaches, is the undeserved, and therefore gratuitous, and therefore sovereign mercy of God, by which He efficaciously brings whom He will into salvation." The chief debt of the Reformers to Augustine, then, was their "sense of the importance of the fall and of the consequences of original sin, of the sheer scale of the damage to be repaired." They "discovered Augustine anew . . . With Luther and Calvin especially, emphasis was placed afresh on the impotence of man" and "the efficacy of grace." (Gillian Evans) This is the abiding legacy of both the Church Father and his Reformed successors.