

CHURCH HISTORY AND CALVINISM

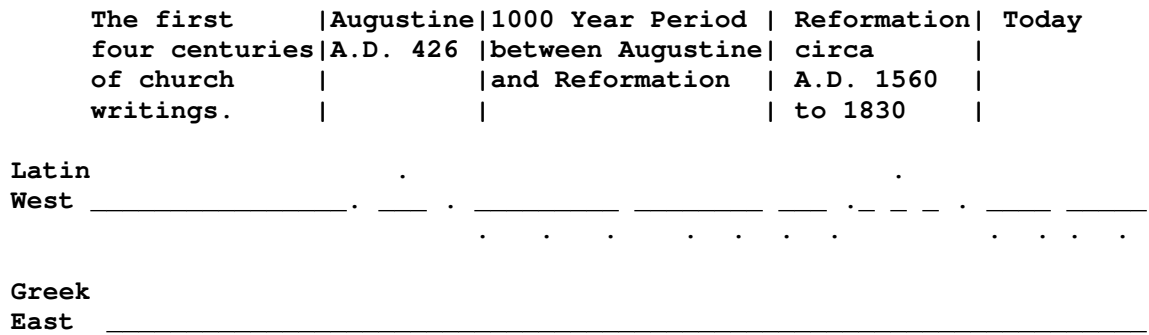
“Historically, the church has been predominantly Calvinistic.” (from the preface of the book, “Calvinism Hyper-Calvinism and Arminianism,” by Talbot and Crampton)

Answer:

Although *early Protestantism* was predominantly Calvinistic, *the church as a whole*, over the past 20 centuries, has been predominantly Arminian. Church history has two branches, *Greek* and *Latin*, with the Greek branch being also called the *eastern orthodox* branch and the Latin branch being called the *western catholic*.

Classical Calvinism has had virtually no following in the Greek branch of church history. Only in the Latin (catholic) branch, from which came Protestantism, can Calvinism claim a place for itself. And even in the Latin branch, Calvinism only peaked twice in the west, and only for a relatively short time. It began with Augustine around A.D. 426, when it peaked for a while and then declined. It peaked again at the time of the Reformation, when the Reformers looked to Augustine’s writings to reform the Latin Church. But, within a generation after the Reformation, Protestantism was already returning to Arminianism. The Synod of Dort had to convene as early as 1618 to try to stop the spread of Arminianism. Today, Arminianism is the majority report within Protestantism. As one Calvinist has put it, “It is only rarely that we now come across those who can be called Calvinists without reserve” (Boettner)

Overall then, Arminianism has been the most constant theology in the west with Calvinism peaking twice, and the east has been exclusively Arminian. The line graph below is a general picture of this. Arminianism is represented by a line ____ while the dots . . . are used to represent Calvinism.



Graph Interpretation

The graph shows that the first four centuries in the west **and** the east were “Arminian,” as indicated by the initial parallel straight lines. The east and west continued in parallel up until about A.D. 426 when Augustine introduced “Calvinism,” which shifted the west away from its parallel position with the east. The Greek Church remained unchanged during the Latin Church’s Augustine-period.

Shortly after the Augustinian period, “Calvinism” declined to a minority viewpoint in the west, as indicated by the dots going below the line, and it remained a minor viewpoint (dots remain below the line) until the Reformation (a period of nearly 1000 years). And so, after a relatively brief Calvinistic interruption caused by Augustine, the west was again primarily Arminian for 1000 years. However, admittedly, “Arminianism” had become changed in the Latin Church, as compared to the Greek, because Augustine’s doctrine of original sin had been added. This change in “western-Arminianism” is depicted by the *dashed* line that continues the western track. By contrast, the eastern track, which was not influenced by Augustine, is depicted by a continuous solid straight line.

In response to moral and political corruption’s that occurred within Roman Catholicism, a call for reform began to be heard in the Latin west. It was during this call for reform that Reformers, especially Martin Luther and John Calvin, sought to restore **Augustine’s** teaching to the fore. It can be argued that a better model for reform would have been *the period of east-west church agreement* that was before Augustine. But Augustine was the model they used, and so Augustinianism, now called “Calvinism,” peaked for a second time in the Latin west, but only within Protestantism. The earlier pattern within the Latin Church of a brief rise in Calvinism followed by a substantial decline, was also repeated in Protestantism. For, after a relatively brief rise to prominence, Calvinism declined to being a minor, and almost obscure viewpoint, even within Protestantism.

Quotations From Calvinist Authors Which Confirm The Graph

Next are some quotations from well known *Calvinist authors* which implicitly confirm that Calvinism has *not* been the predominant theology of the church:

1. The First Four Centuries Before Augustine:

It may occasion some surprise to discover that the doctrine of Predestination was not made a matter of special study until near the end of the fourth century. The earlier church fathers [in both east and west] placed chief emphasis on good works such as faith, repentance, almsgiving, prayers, submission to baptism, etc. They of course taught that salvation was through Christ; yet they assumed that man had full power to accept or reject the gospel...*They taught a kind of synergism in which there was co-operation between grace and free will...*This cardinal truth of Christianity [as the Calvinists call it] was first clearly seen by Augustine....he went **far beyond** the earlier theologians, [by having taught] an unconditional election. (Lorraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, pg. 365, emphasis and brackets added)

2. *The 1000 year Period after Augustine up to the Reformation:*

Augustine's doctrine of sin and grace was adopted as the anthropology of **the Western Church**, though **its acceptance was never general even there....**It may be said that the most important leaders of the Church remained true to the most practical parts of Augustinian anthropology **for two or three centuries after Augustine.** (Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, p. 138, emphasis added)

Following Augustine there was retrogression rather than progress....From the time of Augustine until the time of the Reformation [1000 years!] very little emphasis was placed on the doctrine of Predestination. (Boettner, p. 367)

3. *From the Reformation Until Now:*

"The Reformation was essentially a revival of Augustinianism ..." (Boettner, p. 367)

From the time of the Reformation up until about one hundred years ago [1837] these doctrines were boldly set forth by the great majority of the ministers and teachers in the **Protestant** churches... **It is only rarely that we now come across those who can be called "Calvinists without reserve."** (Boettner, p. 3, emphasis and brackets added)

Conclusion

In view of the fact the first 400 years were *not* Calvinistic, and in view of the fact there was "retrogression rather than progress" for the Calvinist position over the next 1000 years, and in view of the fact Calvinism is "rarely" encountered today; and in view of the fact Calvinism is a form of Latin-Augustinian-catholicism *peculiar to the west* and absent in the Greek branch of the church, and so not universal to the church, and since **only Arminianism** is common to both the Latin and the Greek churches, and so universal to the church, we must question the claim above that church history is predominantly Calvinistic. We instead assert that *Church history has been predominantly Arminian!*

Calvinism Was Taught First By Augustine

*It may occasion some surprise to discover that the doctrine of Predestination was not made a matter of special study until near the end of the fourth century. The earlier church fathers placed chief emphasis on good works such as faith, repentance, almsgiving, prayers, submission to baptism, etc. They of course taught that salvation was through Christ; yet they assumed that man had full power to accept or reject the gospel...They taught a kind of synergism in which there was co-operation between grace and free will...[Calvinistic Predestination] was first clearly seen by Augustine...he went **far beyond** the earlier theologians [and] taught unconditional election. (Lorraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, p. 365, emphasis added)*

Answer:

Although the Calvinist author above intended to say that Augustine discovered a lost teaching of the apostles, his words serve to confirm that (1) unconditional election first emerged in the church about 400 years later than the apostles (2) that unconditional election can be traced to a single influential individual (Augustine), and that (3) unconditional election went “far beyond” the teachings of all those who went before. His words should also prompt one to ask, “How did free will become the universal teaching of the church for the first 400 years, in the first place?” Indeed, what would it take for “free will” to overcome the alleged lost teaching of unconditional election so that free will became the universal teaching of the church for 400 years? And where is the evidence that something like that even happened?

What, for example, are the names of the champions of unconditional election (before Augustine) who initially opposed this alleged free will heresy? And who is the leader of the free will movement that caused unconditional election to become lost for 400 years? Why is it one can not find any single individual to blame for the teaching of free will in the church? And why is it one can only find *an entire church* that teaches free will? And why is it that even Augustine himself taught free will from the time of his conversion until the time he “discovered” his new teaching? And why is it that Augustine, “discovered” this lost teaching *alone* in his private study, with no sects there already holding out for a return to unconditional election long before Augustine began his study?

In short, there is no historical evidence that unconditional election was ever taught before Augustine! There is only evidence that it started with Augustine. The only “proof” that unconditional election was lost by the church for four centuries and then found by Augustine, if it can be called proof, is Augustine’s own newly discovered interpretation of scripture! And that is not “proof” since every passage in question is capable of a *conditional*, free will, interpretation.

It would be one thing if the verses cited by Calvinists required their interpretation. But they do not. In every case, the verses cited by them had been understood in harmony with free will by the early church before Augustine. And even now after the Calvinists have had 1500 years to refine their arguments, they are no better off, but actually worse off, as far as arguments from scripture go. One example that keenly illustrates this is Romans 9. For centuries Calvinists have appealed to Romans 9 as their strongest proof text. But look at what one of their own authors says today on that:

There has been much discussion about the meaning of Romans 9 to 11. *It is being accepted **more and more** that this passage is not concerned primarily with establishing a locus de praedestinatione as an analysis of individual election or rejection, but rather with certain problems that arise in the history of salvation....*It is clear that the redemptive-historical point of view is of decisive significance for the exegesis of Romans 9 to 11....After Paul has drawn our attention to God's free mercy and grace he speaks of God's acts against Pharaoh...It is clear that Paul does *not* want to direct our attention to the individual fate of Pharaoh, but that he speaks of him in order to show his place in the history of salvation [on earth, b.yates], and it is certainly not permissible - as Calvin did - to draw conclusions here regarding the "example" of stubbornness because of God's eternal decree, and regarding the rejection of the wicked. (G. C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977 reprint, pp. 210-213, italics and brackets added for emphasis)

And so after 1500 years of arguments, things are not improving for the Calvinist interpretation since even Reformed theologians are saying "more and more" that Romans 9 is *not* teaching what Calvinists have claimed in the past.

In sum, the Calvinists have their interpretation of this or that verse but they do not have proof that their interpretations are required. On the other hand, the historical evidence shows that the early church teaching on free will was not the result of a movement that overcame unconditional election, but that free will was simply the teaching of the church from its very beginning. The beginning of free will in the church cannot be traced to any specific time, place, person, or movement. Yet, the time, place, person, and the movement that started unconditional election can all be specifically traced to Augustine. Yes, Mr. Boettner, Calvinism *was* first taught by Augustine!