

The Catholic and Protestant Roots of Anglicanism

Saint Barnabas's Church, Falmouth MA

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Session #4: Calvin's *Institutes of Religion*

1. For John Calvin (1509-1564), when faith claims us, we are claimed by the testimony of God through biblical testimony. Like a stigmatism, we then realize that we have been blind to the presence of God that has always been with us.
2. Calvin focuses like a laser beam upon God's majesty. Only in the light of God's grace do we comprehend the destructive power of Adam's fall and original sin. Far from seeking God, depraved humans run hell-bent away from divine love to create factories of idols. Yet God chooses the elect and works through them, not out of merit but because God chooses whom God chooses.
3. Like God's majesty, Calvin places great emphasis upon God's providence. With little room for contingency—or chance—in life, we live each day as though governed by the special providence of God. God's providence gives guidance to the elect while it compels the reprobate to obedience. This world view also fuels later notions of manifest destiny.
4. One of Calvin's great contributions can be found in his 'principle of accommodation.' In His revelation, Calvin argues, God adjusts to the capacities of the human mind and heart. God uses metaphors to reveal Himself, not as He is in His self, but in forms adapted to our capacity. God paints a portrait, so to speak, that we are capable of understanding. Like a great orator, God chooses words and images that respect the limitations of the audience. Revelation, therefore, should be seen as an act of divine condescension in which God uses language—"baby talk"—that we can handle. As a result, no human incapacity prevents us from hearing God's Word. Also, Scripture can never be reduced to a final—or fundamentalist—interpretation.
5. Modern theology presumes that anything we say about God begins with ourselves and our human experience of God. Calvin, on the other hand, argues that God alone presents God. We do not begin with our anthropological selves, but we witness to God's being God.

6. Among Christian theologians, Calvin places perhaps the highest premium on divine (as opposed to human) agency. The Word of God has its own authorization, we do not verify it. We cannot reduce God's majesty to our anthropomorphic projection and human manipulation. We do not make our way to God; rather, the Commander claims us and makes His way to us. We are sentries who become—by God's grace—signals of hope in the world.
7. Contrary to common belief, Calvin does not spend great time or energy speculating upon the doctrine of predestination. Yet, Calvin accepts the fact that life is unfair and that the gospel is not preached equally to all or received equally by all. Our role, according to Calvin, is not to peer unduly into the mysteries of God. We have no right to hold God accountable. God's freedom is not constricted by our feeble sense of propriety. We never know who is among the elect or reprobate. Later Calvinists, however, will place greater stress upon predestination and our status (or lack thereof) among the elect. This soul-search quest for 'assurance' will become a dominant theme of Protestant spirituality and community life.
8. Jacob Arminius (1559-1609) critiques Calvin on human autonomy and free will. Arminius rejects Calvin's biblical teaching of total depravity of human nature. Arminius denounces the doctrine of unconditional election. Arminius argues that we cannot possess assurance of our ultimate salvation; we must say Yes to God's offer of salvation. Arminius promotes the value and worth of human morality and ethical choice. Arminius sees faith as a human decision to accept Christ, as opposed to Calvin's doctrine of sovereign election of fallen humanity.
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10. Seventeenth-century Puritans continue to develop Calvin's theology of providence and theological determinism in polemic opposition to Arminius, Pietists and some Anglicans. Creation and providence are inseparably enjoined, and each day is governed by God's special providence. Providence does not relieve us of our human responsibility, but without the certainty of providence, life would be unbearable. Providence also compels the reprobate to obedience,

even as it provides assurance to the Saints.

11. Jacob Arminius critiques Calvin on human autonomy and free will. He rejects a biblical teaching of the total depravity of human nature and denounces the doctrine of unconditional election. Arminius embraces the theory of human free will and sees a biblical foundation for it. Christ's atonement only makes salvation possible, and Christians cannot possess any assurance of ultimate salvation. Correct operation of human reason and will is prerequisite to reception of grace. Arminius embraces sense of human autonomy and the value and worth of human morality. Faith is the human decision to receive Christ, not a merciful gift of God. This theology critiques Calvin's doctrine of God's sovereign grace and sets the foundation of later Methodism. This anti-deterministic view argues that we are chosen in light of our belief.
12. But Calvinists and later Puritans further develop Predestination. Calvin rejects any notion that life is fair: the gospel is not preached equally to all. There are limits to what we can claim to know about God's actions; we never know who is elect or reprobate. God chooses us in freedom; we don't choose God. Originally, Predestination is a doctrine of consolation: if we are seeking God, we likely already are among the elect. Predestination beats down sinful pride in us, with no basis for boasting. God's freedom and power are not constricted by our sense of propriety. God is not under our human control or manipulation. Gospel preached to all, but not all hear it: secret, horrible decree. This view sets up the Quest for Assurance.

Calvin	Arminius
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Total human depravity • Unconditional Election • Limited Atonement • Irresistible Grace • Perseverance of the Saints <p>[Five Articles of Synod of Dort in 1629]</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free-Will or Human Ability • Conditional Election • Universal Redemption or General Atonement • Holy Spirit can be Effectually Resisted • Falling from Grace
Salvation accomplished by power of God alone. Elect claimed in irresistible manner and are passive in it. Those not claimed cannot repent and be converted.	Salvation accomplished by combined efforts of God (who initiates) and humanity (who responds). Those who live under claim of gospel may comply or resist.
The entire process of election, redemption, regeneration is work of God and is by grace alone. God, not humanity, determines.	Human will plays a decisive role. We have a choice to resist or effect conversion.