

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 and unconditional election.... (*Boettner, 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 predestination 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!

Author Unknown

Society of Evangelical Arminians