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CALVINISM AND AMERICA

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Dr. David T. Crum is an Assistant Professor of History at Truett-McConnell University. In addition to the B.S. degree, Dr. Crum holds two M.A. degrees (Theological Studies and History, respectively) and the earned Doctor of Philosophy degree in Historical Theology.

The Protestant Reformation changed Europe, giving birth to religious freedom and redefining what it meant to be a Christian. Once discovered by Europeans, the New World and all of its land played an essential role in the continued advancement of religious liberty. While Catholic settlement dominated modern-day South and Central America, Englishmen, and other Europeans, many of whom were descendants of reformers within the Protestant Reformation, sought refuge in a new territory focused on Christian liberty.

From the Pilgrims to the Puritans, a mass migration of Europeans continued, leading to a unique Christian colonization of North America. While it would be irresponsible to state that every family migrated because of religious freedom, historians still acknowledge the fundamental fact that religious liberty and persecution of Christians played a monumental part in the forming of America.

Within the original colonies, Puritanism dominated New England and even parts of the southern settlements. The religious atmosphere in the former colonies of the time of the Great Awakening remained closely associated with the Reformation, more specifically, the teachings of John Calvin. Any study of early America must recognize the impact of Calvin and reformed thought in the country's history, including the settlement of the colonies and ultimate involvement and victory in the American Revolution.

Settlement and Early American Ideals

The earliest European settlers had deep roots in the Reformed faith. Quoting historian George Bancroft, Presbyterian Loraine Boettner

(1901-1990) wrote, “Calvinism came to America in the Mayflower... the Pilgrims Fathers were Calvinists in their faith according to the straightest system.”^[1] To properly understand the impact of the Protestant Reformation on settlement in the New World, one must comprehend the religious fight endured by the Reformers, which in many locations in Europe resulted in death or burning at the stake.

Calvin’s teachings dominated his town of Geneva, which some scholars argue the earliest Americans sought to emulate. Lutheran theologian Harold L. Senkbeil argues, “The popular piety of Evangelicalism has assumed the central role in America.”^[2] Adding, “Some have deliberately set about completing John Calvin’s dream of building a society governed only by Christian principles.”^[3] Calvin unmistakably emphasized grace in salvation but also underscored regeneration and sanctification. The Puritans perhaps best embodied this religious zeal, mimicking the teachings of Calvin.

Both the historical and theological fields of academia regularly attack and criticize Puritans, but they often misunderstand them. Accused of being legalists, they stressed God’s grace and mercy but also underlined God’s sovereignty and always maintained an admiration for their Creator. They believed in freedom but limited the concept of freedom to salvation in Jesus Christ. Referencing Geneva and early Puritans, R.C. Reed (1851-1925) wrote:

It is a familiar fact that the city of Geneva could not at first endure the severity of morals which Calvin had tried to enforce, and for this reason

expelled him. He was soon recalled, however, and Geneva became an asylum for those who loved righteousness. Both his teaching and his spirit found a home in the hearts of the Puritans in England. Their name is the imperishable memorial of the scrupulous sanctify of their lives.^[4]

These same Puritans and their descendants settled in America. Calvinists discovered New England and formed communities throughout the colonies. Reed explained where their settlements occurred, “Puritans to New England, the Dutch Calvinists to New York and Pennsylvania, the Scotch-Irish to the Valley of Virginia, and the Huguenots to the Carolinas.”^[5] N.S. McFetridge (1842-1886) taught similarly, “This great American nation, which stretches her vast and varied territory from sea to sea, and from the bleak hills of the North to the sunny plains of the South, was the purchase chiefly of the Calvinists, and the inheritance which they bequeathed to all liberty-loving people.”^[6] Senkbeil maintains, “In the rich soil of the colonial work ethic and the fierce spirit of independence, Calvinism grew and flourished.”^[7] Adding, “Certainly the founding fathers of American religion held to traditional Calvinist teachings.”^[8] From the creation of Harvard to Yale, educational institutes prescribed to Calvinistic thought.

Many people often refer to Jonathan Edwards as one of the last Puritans. Edwards, along with another Calvinist, George Whitfield, receives credit for stirring up an eagerness for religious liberty in the colonists, eventually leading to the American Revolution. The logic states that genuine freedom is found only in Jesus Christ, not in any human, whether they are a king or political leader. Kings oppressed beliefs, while Jesus’ teachings laid freedom within the Scriptures and Christian living. Reed taught, “Calvinistic belief is

to free the soul in which it finds lodgment from the fear of man, and to brace it for rendering unswerving allegiance to God.”[9]

The Fight for Freedom

Although a variety of Christians from several faiths served in the American Revolution, an impressive number of Calvinists fought for independence. Boettner shared, “It is estimated that of the 3,000,000 Americans at the time of the American Revolution, 900,000 were of the Scotch or Scotch-Irish origin, 600,000 were Puritan English, and 400,000 were German or Dutch Reformed. In addition to this the Episcopalians had a Calvinistic confession in their Thirty-Nine articles; and many French Huguenots also had come to this western world.”[10]

In a sense, the colonists viewed their own revolution as a continuation of the Protestant Reformation. How could religious freedom centered on Christ exist under a monarchy? For Christianity to flourish, the colonists felt the absolute freedom of political matters connected to religious liberty needed to be the foundation of their land. Acknowledging God’s sovereignty and His role in such matters, William P. Breed (1816-1889) commented, “Nations are armies, each soldier free, but God is the commander. All the world’s on a stage, and all the men and women are merely players, but God wrote the play, and he determines the entrance and exits of the actors and maintains sovereign control over their actions.”[11] Breed rightly pointed out the providential emphasis on Calvinism, which connects God’s sovereignty and absolute control and determination of historical and current events. R.C. Reed similarly wrote, “A republican state took their rise about the same time in Geneva; and from that day this Calvinism has ever been

identified with the cause of liberty, or the rights of man.”^[12]

The Founding Fathers knew their history and held discussions of their rights, often commenting on past Biblical accounts of the Israelites. Breed shared the logic of Patriot John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister, “It is as creatures of God, created in the image of God, that man possess those inalienable rights. And as the God of the Bible is their only source, the religion of the Bible is their only effective conservator.”^[13] R.C. Reed, quoting German Leopold von Ranke, argued, “Calvin is virtually the founder of America.”^[14] From the battle of Bunker Hill to the formation of the Declaration of Independence, several colonists adopted Calvin’s ideals, as taught by Ranke, to fight for freedom. Reed commented on the declaration, “The first declaration of independence was put forth by the Presbyterians of Mecklenburg, N.C. and the first religious body to speak out in favor of separation from Great Britain was the Presbyterian Synod of Philadelphia.”^[15]

Using the teachings of Romans 13 and Colossians 1, Calvinists felt comfort in their pursuit of freedom. If their nation respected and acknowledged God, Calvinists believed God would provide freedom from England and bless their nation. John Clover Monsma (1890-1970) agreed writing, “God institutes governments through the instrumentality of the people... For the Calvinist, it is extremely easy to respect laws and ordinances of the government... the government is God’s servant. That means that as MEN, all government officials stand on an equal footing with their subordinates; have no claim to superiority in any sense whatever.”^[16] The misuse of the Romans’ and Colossians’ teachings is possible, specifically

leading to the notion that Christians must adhere to all governmental laws, even those not in alignment with the Christian faith. However, such reasoning is a grave error; as Jesus taught, one only submits to humans' laws when such guidelines do not jeopardize His teachings. Here, the colonists were creating a brand-new nation, forming its religious and human liberty ideals. Their justification for a rebellion derived from their Christian faith and principles being challenged and even in jeopardy at the hands of English rule. McFetridge argued, "The various bodies of dissenters, mainly Calvinists, which had settled in the colonies, had been driven away from their fatherland, not by the persecutions of the Romish Church, but by the tyranny of British sovereigns and the tolerance of the Anglican Church."[17] McFetridge wrote, "The Calvinists, from their religious principles and by the free constitution of their churches, were naturally arrayed against monarchy when monarchy meant despotism."[18]

Strongly adhering to Calvin's teachings on God's sovereignty and involvement in wars, American Calvinists found comfort in the idea of providence and preordination. Calvin specifically taught:

He (God) bids us to live chastely and refrain from all violence. However, when wars break out in the world, when there is bloodshed and countless acts of rape, will we say when these occur that God failed in his counsel to consider what was right? Do we think that he would let fortune prevail, as if he were asleep in heaven, or was enjoying a delightful rest? What a blasphemous idea! It would be like making God into an idol... If God did not determine everything in this world and keep Satan and all his evildoers in check, we would most certainly be doomed to perish a

hundred times every minute of the day. Moreover, unless we realize that wars and similar things are judgments which God uses to punish our sins, we would surely not be brought to repentance.[19]

Many colonists and patriots cleaving to Calvinism saw the American Revolution as a punishment to England, in their eyes viewing the English as nothing more than adherents to similar teachings of the Papacy. The Lord's will did play out, and in fact, determined American independence.

Sadly, the nation's influence and connection to Calvinism quickly disappeared not long after the Second Great Awakening. While the intentions were pure and justified, the creation of a separation of church and state complicated matters as the years progressed. A nation so deep in Christian and Calvinistic teachings slowly became more secular and hostile to Christianity, all while abandoning the principles that the patriots fought so earnestly for. The tenets of Calvinism still exist in a country that seems to be ever-changing, though the admiration and respect for God from most Americans appear to have dissipated.

Conclusion

Calvin's teachings played a role in establishing the United States and inarguably pushed the colonists toward independence in both fighting and verbiage found in the Declaration of Independence. Calvin emphasized human freedom, freedom from man-made religion, and absolute control. People found autonomy in Jesus Christ. McFetridge concluded, "It was Calvinistic France and Calvinistic America that were going forth in loving unity to fight on Western soil for the cause of human freedom." [20]

Studying history, there is no difference between Biblical accounts of ancient Israel's adherence or disobedience to the Lord and His ways. Joshua knew this well, acknowledging that not only his family (Joshua 24:15) must serve the Lord, but His people (Joshua 24:18) needed to as well if they were to expect God's blessings.

Colonial Calvinists respected the teachings of God, and the independence of mankind was found only in Him. Likewise, it would be a mistake to deny the blessings that God has bestowed upon some of the great Protestant nations in the world. While those days might have ended or seem to be headed in an undesirable direction, the Lord provided for and allowed success for nations such as England and the United States. J.C. Ryle (1816-1900) argued, "What makes Scotland, the United States, and our own beloved England, the powerful, prosperous countries that they are at present, and I pray God they may long continue? I answer in one word: Protestantism, a free Bible and a Protestant ministry, and the principles of the Reformation."[21]

While Americans may slightly disagree with Ryle's definition of Protestantism in American and English history, Ryle correctly placed an emphasis on the idea of *Sola Scriptura* and the connection of religious liberty to the Reformation. The American Revolution, in the eyes of the early Calvinist Americans, was nothing short of a continuation of the Reformation, in which they sought the same outcome: freedom from government and monarchy.

Lessons continue from both the Reformation and the American Revolution. The most profound is that God is an active Creator who desires history to be

written in His accord. Furthermore, it is never too late for any nation to bow down to the Lord and reform their country. Calvinism is not dead, and in certain parts of the globe, the same principles the Puritans and American Calvinists fought for are still thriving. The Lord is sovereign, and creation can only find comfort in His providence.

[1] Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1932), 382.

[2] Harold L. Senkbeil, *Sanctification: Christ in Action*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1989), 13.

[3] Ibid.

[4] R.C. Reed, *The Gospel as Taught by Calvin*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 137.

[5] Ibid., 138.

[6] N.S. McFetridge, *Calvinism in History*, (Philadelphia: Westcott, 1882), 60.

[7] Senkbeil, *Sanctification: Christ in Action*, 20.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Reed, *The Gospel as Taught by Calvin*, 139.

[10] Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 382.

[11] William P. Breed, *Presbyterians, and Its Services in the Revolution of 1776*, (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board Publishing, 1875), 3.

[12] Reed, *The Gospel as Taught by Calvin*, 142.

[13] Breed, *Presbyterians, and Its Services in the Revolution of 1776*, 14.

[14] Reed, *The Gospel as Taught by Calvin*, 149.

[15] Ibid., 146.

[16] John Clover Monsma, *What Calvinism has Done for America*, (Collingwood: Trieste Publishing, 2017), 6.

[17] McFetridge, *Calvinism in History*, 61.

[18] Ibid., 81.

[19] John Calvin, *The Doctrine of Election*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2022), 183.

[20] McFetridge, *Calvinism in History*, 96.

[21] J.C. Ryle, *Five English Reformers*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1960), 92.

In David T. Crum

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