

Major Christian Doctrinal Systems

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Calvinism

This theological system takes its name from John Calvin of France who built his teachings on the foundation of Augustine. It places strong emphasis on the sovereignty of God, the utter depraved condition of sinful men and especially on the doctrine of predestination. Its teachings are in accord with classic orthodoxy (the Trinity, the deity of Christ and the authority of the Word of God). Its emphasis in the area of the Gospel and salvation differs from other systems. It exalts the elective action of God and denies any place for every man to choose the Lord Jesus as Savior. It is a particular critic of Arminianism and labels those who disagree with them as being part of works-basis salvation. It is also strongly opposed to Pelagianism, which was declared heretical. The system has been widely praised for its influence on moral life, education and the development of outstanding leaders. It produced the Puritans, the Huegenots in France, the Scottish Covenanters and others. On the other hand, it persecuted and even killed dissenters (like Servetus) and had a tyrannical role as chief governing role in Geneva, which ultimately failed.

The theological system has been stated in five major points, expressed by the acronym T.U.L.I.P. They are as follows:

1. Total Depravity of man. This goes beyond stating that man is a sinner, corrupted at the core (true). It states that he is so corrupted that he is incapable of exercising saving faith, if not among those God has elected for salvation (unacceptable to most believers).

2. Unconditional Election of some to salvation apart from any action of choosing on their part. This seems to deny the possibility of man's choosing to obey the Gospel. Thus it has been called fatalism. Calvinists deny this. They say the reason for this action is the will of God Himself, not impersonal fate.

3. Limited atonement. This means that Christ only died for the elect, contrary to I John 2:2. A high percentage of contemporary advocates do not accept this calling themselves 4-point Calvinism.

4. Irresistible grace. This means that since the grace of God has predestined believers to salvation. They cannot face to respond to the Gospel offer. This appears to contradict the many verses which indicate that "all day long I (God) have stretched out my hand to a disobedient and gainsaying (contradicting) people" (Rom. 10:21).

5. Perseverance of the saints. This means that a true believer can not lose his salvation, called eternity security (John 10:27-30). The Calvinists believe he is secure because of his eternal election to salvation. The conclusion of eternal security is correct. The Calvinist's reason appears doubtful on the basis of many verses.

In summation, Calvinist theology is sound on the great basics of the faith. The five point system, gathered by selective citations and human deduction, is questionable. It was never taught by the Lord Jesus or His apostles, but was a later development.

Dispensationalism

This is a theological system that substantially prevails among most evangelical Bible schools and at least three major evangelical seminaries. The word “dispensation” means a period of time in which God governs man in differing ways from age to age. An example would be God’s dealing with man during Old Testament times in contrast to His dealing during New Testament times. Therefore, virtually every professing Christian believer is in at least two dispensations.

The word “dispensation” occurs in Ephesians 1:10 which reads, “the dispensation of the fullness of times, He might gather together in one all things in Christ”. In Ephesians 3:2, it speaks of “the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you”. It is called a mystery revealed through Paul. Obviously, it refers to “the church age” and the Gospel centered in Christ. The “mystery” message had been “hidden in God” from the beginning of the world” (Eph. 3:9). Obviously, there is a Biblical basis as seen previously. Although it was not formally brought together in a systematic way until the mid or late 19th century, it became full-fledged in the 20th century. The beginning is associated with J.N. Darby and the so-called Plymouth Brethren. It became popularized by the Scofield Reference Bible, using Isaac Watt more than Darby. Prominent evangelical preachers proclaim it (Ironside, McGee, etc.). It was an early influence on Billy Graham.

It was and is strongly attacked, particularly by Amillennialists and highly placed academics. Liberals attacked it because it championed literal meaning of

Scriptures. This means its plain, normal sense, including figures of speech. It does not deny the facts stated; nor, is it a “woodened literalism” or “letterism”. It is objective, consistent and unifying for the totality of Scriptures. It did not “spiritualize” or allegorize” the stated truths, bring about, a complete change of meaning.

Objectors alleged the following items:

1. It taught two ways of salvation, by law and by grace. This is false. Dispensationalism simply noted the differences between the Old and New Testament governing principles of man by God. It also distinguished Israel from the church. There was grace in the Old Testament, but also commands to obey. There are rules of conduct in the New Testament “age of grace”. Man is not saved to live as he pleases. In both Testaments, forgiveness for sins came because of blood sacrifice. In the Old Testament, there were symbols of Christ’s work. In the New Testament, Jesus was revealed as the fulfillment, “the Lamb of God who took away the sins of the world”

2. It is recent in discovery, therefore suspect. The answer is whether it rests on Biblical statements, whenever the date was widely discerned. In fact, elements are seen in writings of the church leaders (Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria). Poriot listed seven dispensations in 1719 and Isaac Watts listed five (1674-1748).

3. It is a separatist movement and inherently divisive. Certainly, theological systems of ideas have always caused disagreements even divisions. The Protestant Reformation divided the Christian world but what

believer would object to this movement in the light of Rome's abuses (sale of indulgences, ect.). It is not using to separate from doctrinally liberal groups which deny the inspiration and authority of Scriptures, as well as major doctrines of faith.

Most of the criticisms of the system are really directed against ultra-dispensationalism, an extreme of the basic ideas of dispensationalism, a basis under the leadership of E.W. Bullinger (1837-1913). They thought the church only began with Paul's revelation of "the mystery of the church". Only what he wrote is to be considered definitive for us in the church. Though differing in ideas about when the church began (Acts 13:41), the key point may be when Paul "turned to the Gentiles". The Scripture indicated that the church began at Pentecost (Acts 2, 11:15, I Cor. 12:13) and was functioning before Paul's conversion. Before that he persecuted the church.

Most dispensationalists today recognize seven periods of time, in which God's governing of man takes differing forms. These are:

1. Innocence - From Adam in his first state, having only one prohibition (Gen. 1:28-3:41).
2. Conscience of decisions as being right or wrong after the Fall of man (Gen. 4:1-8:14) See Romans 2:15.
3. Civil Government - from Noah's time until the Patriarchs (Gen. 8:15-11:9).
4. Promise, the covenant with Abraham to the giving of the law to Moses at Sinai.
5. Mosaic law, God's commands to Israel to show them the major areas on sin (613 commandments), to convict them, not save them (Exodus 18:28).

6. Grace, the age of the church in which Jews and Gentiles are equally welcomed into the Body of Christ (Eph. 3:16, Gal. 3:28), extending from Pentecost to the Rapture (I Thess. 4:16-17).

7. Millennium, from Christ's coming in glory (the Revelation) until the final rebellion of man against God. Rev. 20:2-7 shows this as a historical period, not an allegorical symbol. The end is described in Rev. 19:17-21.

The end times theology (eschatology) of dispensationalists centered in the pre-tribulation, pre-millennial coming of Jesus to earth as Judge. It distinguishes His coming "for the saints" (the rapture) from the coming "with the saints" (the revelation). It explores Daniel's 70 weeks prophecy (Dan 9:24-27). It explains the Tribulation as "the time of Jacob's trouble" (Jer. 30:7) and divides it into two parts (42 months, 1260 days and two and a half times) being the last part. Above all, it takes Scripture literally in its plain, normal, non-allegorical meaning.

Arminianism

The system takes its name from Jacob Arminius (1560-1609) of Germany as a revolt against the doctrines of Calvinism (Reformed theology), especially its teaching that God preordains the few to salvation apart from any choice by man in the matter. The chief defect of this system, among several, is that it denies that a true believer, not someone with a false profession, is eternally saved as seen in such verses as John 10:27-29. This also called eternal security. Calvinists teach that this is a works-based salvation because unless a man “hangs on to salvation” and does good deeds he would lose it or never be able to have true assurance of salvation. Any deviation from a Calvinist definition of predestination and election is labeled Arminianism and its therefore heretical. Arminians, and others also, believe that God’s foreknowledge takes into account man’s choosing in His elective decree (I Peter 2:2, Romans 8:29). Strict Calvinists do not believe this is so.

Arminius at first supported Calvin but was gradually drawn to the opposite persuasion. He came to believe that God offered grace to all men and his election of believers came in the foreknowledge of man’s choosing to believe and accept the gospel offer made to “whosoever will”. Gradually the system became more comprehensive after the death of its namesake. The succeeding Arminians, particularly in Holland, became known as Remonstrants. In 1610 they encoded five articles in opposition to Calvinism. Briefly stated, they were:

1. By God's decree He ordained His Son to die for all the human race and to save those who persevere to the end in obedience to the Lord (Col. 1:23)
2. Christ died for the entire human race, not just the elect few. See I John 2:2.
3. Man can of himself in free will do or think anything good, He needs the grace of God.
4. The grace of God is resistible but man can change in the course of life.
5. Those "grafted into Christ" and partaking of the Holy Spirit (perhaps using Heb. 6:4-5), can fight against Satan, sin, the world and his own flesh to obtain victory by the grace of God.

The synod of Dort, being Calvinistic, condemned these articles and the supporting Remonstrants were deposed from the ministry. Yet the system survived.

Unfortunately the heretical Socinians and Semi-Pelagians sometimes joined with them.

The Wesleyan Arminians, taking its name from John Wesley, became the chief exponents of Arminian ideas in both the British Empire and USA. It developed into the Methodist denomination, which was then quite evangelical but it now almost entirely liberal in its doctrines. There is a minority, especially the Good News movement which remains orthodox in its beliefs. The control of liberal bishops over Methodist churches suppresses any challenge to their authority.

Antinomianism

This system exaggerates the antithesis between faith and works. Faith is emphasized so strongly that good deeds lose by importance in the believer's life. Since "Jesus paid it all" we don't need to be concerned about turning from sin or pursuing godly living. The first traces of these ideas are found in Gnostic teaching which dropped the whole moral sphere of our present life as believers. The later exposition of these ideas came from Agricola who clashed with Melanchthon in 1537 about them. Agricola is quoted as saying that "all who had anything to do with Moses should go to the Devil, for Moses ought to be hanged". For this he was rebuked by Martin Luther. It is one thing to reject the keeping of the Mosaic Law for purposes of salvation. It is another matter to reject the true purpose of the Law, conviction of sin, as having any contribution to make in preparing a soul to come to Christ as our "schoolmaster" (Gal. 3:24).