



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 159

John Calvin – John Calvin was born in Noyon, France, in 1509. At fourteen Calvin was enrolled at the University of Paris, to study Latin and theology, with a view to becoming a priest, however due to some issues his father had with the church, he was enrolled in the University of Orleans to study law. Sometime between 1528 and 1533 Calvin was converted from medieval Catholicism to the biblical faith in Christ, embracing the doctrines of the Protestants. Due to hostilities towards the Reformers Calvin left France and at the request of fellow Reformers he ended up staying in Geneva, Switzerland, in order to help reform the city. Except for a brief exile, Calvin remained in Geneva for the rest of his life, preaching and teaching the Bible, and defending Protestant Reformation doctrines. In 1536 Calvin published the first edition of his magnum opus, the “Institutes of the Christian Religion,” recognized as perhaps the most significant systematic theology ever written. In addition, Calvin wrote commentaries on most of the books of the Bible, exegetically explaining the Word of God and its application.

Much like Luther, Calvin’s theology, specifically with regard to the sovereignty of God, fall of man, the nature of sin and fallen man, divine predestination and regeneration, was highly influenced by and in keeping with the teachings of Augustine. Calvin agreed that even after the fall man has the capacity to think and reason, but that capacity has been profoundly marred by sin, and thus with respect to spiritual matters he is unable to understand, choose or do anything good. He writes that fallen man under the bondage of sin is “deprived not of will, but of soundness of will.” Like Augustine, Calvin affirmed that natural man is deprived of liberty. Like Luther, he made a distinction between necessity and compulsion. He went on to explain that fallen man based on his nature is by necessity, not compulsion, inclined to evil and thus can do nothing but sin. It is only by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit that a fallen man can be freed from his bondage to sin, where man’s nature, mind, will and heart are changed, from evil to good, being turned to God. Calvin taught that this grace of God is monergistic and irresistible.

Jacobus Arminius – Jacobus or James Arminius was born in Oudewater, Netherlands, in 1560. He was a student at the University of Leiden from 1576 until 1582, studying Liberal Arts and theology. In 1582 he began theological studies in Geneva under Theodore Beza, a French Reformed theologian and pastor, John Calvin’s disciple and staunch successor. The doctrines of the Reformation were popular in the Netherlands in the 1550s. Arminius highly esteemed and respected the works of Augustine and Calvin. In 1587 Arminius became a pastor at a Dutch Reformed church in Amsterdam. In 1589 while attempting to defend Calvinistic predestination, through greater study Arminius found himself doubting the doctrine of unconditional predestination, and over the years developed views regarding divine grace and human freedom which departed from the Reformed tenets of Calvin and Beza. Despite some opposition, in 1603 Arminius joined the theological faculty at the University of Leiden, and remained a teacher until his death. Serious questions were beginning to be raised with regards to Arminius’s theology. As his views became more public, tensions within the Reformed Church grew, and intense controversy broke out between Arminius and his opponents over the next few years, with no satisfactory resolution.

After his death, Dutch adherents of Arminius’s teachings became known as the Remonstrants, who presented their “Five Articles of the Remonstrance” to the government in 1610, outlining Arminius’s theological ideas, in opposition to Calvinistic doctrines. The five articles of the Remonstrants were: conditional election, universal atonement, total depravity, resistible grace, uncertainty regarding the perseverance of the saints. Controversy and debate over these doctrines grew, until finally in 1618 a national synod was convened at Dordrecht, known as the Synod of Dort, to consider this matter. The Synod unanimously condemned the articles of the Remonstrants, answering each with counter articles, known as the Canons of Dort, reaffirming and defending Reformed doctrines and standards. Their answer later became popularized as the “Five Points of Calvinism,” that is: unconditional election, limited atonement, total depravity, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints.