Theological Research Paper: John Calvin’s Understanding Of Baptism

Thesis Statement

John Calvin has been a topic of hot debate for numerous years. His doctrine of baptism alone has left biblical scholars in heated debates as to whether or not his beliefs align with biblical content. The purpose of this paper is to delve into John Calvin’s understanding of baptism, including his perspective on infant baptism, followed by critiques of his position, as well as a personal reflection on his doctrine.

Introduction

John Calvin was a French religious leader and reformer in the early 1500s. He began his service to the Catholic Church as a child at the age of twelve. Since his father was the secretary to the bishop of Noyon, this was decided early in his life. He went on to eventually earn a law degree at his father’s encouragement. At this time, the ideas of Martin Luther were becoming increasingly popular and Protestant opposition to the church was growing. Calvin fled Paris in 1534, leading him to write down a complete description of his beliefs, which later became one of his greatest works. [1] In 1536, Calvin penned what is regarded as the most famous book on Protestantism ever, the Institutes of the Christian Religion, which he continued to work on until he died in 1564. [2] [1: Cottret, Bernard. Calvin: A Biography. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000.] [2: Bouwsma, William J. John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.]

After leaving his homeland for good, Calvin began traveling through Geneva, Switzerland, where he was elected to the preaching office. Calvin was banned from Geneva due to a council operating as the government banning Catholicism and all immoral behavior. It didn’t take long for disgust at the behavior of the people to set in, and Calvin was invited back, with a promise of complete cooperation in restoring order. [3] At this point, Calvin began his work to organize the Reformed church. New regulations were approved by the council, and pastors and elders were given the right to use necessary means to control public behavior. This included searching homes, banishing people from the city, forcing attendance at sermons, and banning immoral behavior, such as gambling, drinking, dancing, and immodest dress. [4] Punishment ranged from fines, to banishment, and then ultimately the death penalty. During this time, Calvin continued to update and revise the Institutes, as well as Geneva’s laws. Calvin’s ideas began to spread throughout Europe due to the order and cleanliness observed by visitors. [5] [3: Wellman, Sam. John Calvin: Father of Reformed Theology. Ulrichsville, OH: Barbour, 2001.] [4: Wellman, 2001.] [5: Bouwsma, 1988.]

Calvin and Baptism

Although the institute of Baptism is recognized almost universally in the Christian Church, the understanding of this sacrament has been the topic of much debate throughout history. [6] During the Protestant Reformation, this debate was in full force between Roman Catholics,

Radicals, and Magisterials. John Calvin was considered a second generation magisterial reformer, and his doctrine fell somewhere in the middle between the Catholics and the radical reformers. Catholics believed that baptism removes Original sin, regardless of each person's faith. The Anabaptists, which were radical reformers, rejected infant baptism, claiming it was unbiblical and a corrupt practice. They remained that baptism was only for those that have faith at the time of baptism. [7] [6: McGrath, A.E., Christian Theology: An Introduction. 5th Ed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2010.] [7: McGrath, A.E., Reformation Thought: An Introduction. 2nd Ed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993.]

It is worth noting that Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion contain over fifty pages dedicated to the sacrament of baptism. It is here that Calvin describes baptism as "the sign of initiation by which we are received into the society of the church, in order that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God's children." [8] Calvin viewed the sacraments as signs that are multifaceted, with two distinct functions: acting as a seal from God and as a testimony of piety from the believer. [9] He felt as though they were not only a sign of a work of God, but also a response to God. His view highlights the importance of the sacraments as being a give and take process initiated by the covenantal relationship between people and God. In other words, baptism is a way of serving our faith before God, and serving our confession before men. He speaks in the Institutes of this dual purpose of baptism as being Calvin remained that in order for a sacrament to be effective, it must be accompanied by not only the Holy Spirit, but also faith. [10] He goes on to note that baptism is the "token and proof" of at least the following three things: our cleansing from sin, our mortification and renewal in Christ, and our union with Christ. [11] In regards to our cleansing from sin, Calvin states that our baptism "is like a sealed document to confirm to us that all our sins are so abolished, remitted, and effaced that they can never come to his sight, be recalled, or charged against us." [12] He adds, "Therefore, there is no doubt that all pious folk throughout life, whenever they are troubled by a consciousness of their faults, may venture to remind themselves of their baptism, that from it they may be confirmed in assurance of that sole and perpetual cleansing which we have in Christ's blood." [13] Calvin then elaborates on our mortification and renewal in Christ by stating that another benefit of our baptism is that "it shows us our mortification in Christ, and new life in him." [14] Calvin references Romans 6:3-4 and Colossians 2:11-12 as support of his belief. Calvin then combines the cleansing of sin and the renewal in Christ by adding, "Thus, the free pardon of sins and the imputation of righteousness are first promised to us, and then the grace of the Holy Spirit to reform us to newness of life." [5] Simply said, Calvin is saying that baptism is the outward seal and sign of not only forgiveness, or justification, but also of sanctification, which is our dying to sin in Christ and our newness in Him. Finally, he mentions the "advantage" our faith receives of "its sure testimony to us that we are not only engrafted into the death and life of Christ, but so united to Christ himself that we become sharers in all his blessings." [16] Calvin is saying that we are baptized into Christ Himself, not just into certain benefits of his redemptive work. [8: Calvin, J., Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion. 2 Vols, Library of Christian Classics Vol. XX-XXI, edited by J. T. McNeill, translated by F. L. Battles. Philadelphia: Westminister, 1960.] [9: McGaughey, D.H., "Baptism in the Protestant Reformation" Restoration Quarterly. 1958: 99-114.] [10: McGaughey, "Baptism," 105.] [11: Calvin, Calvin: Institutes, 4.14.9,15.] [12: Calvin, Calvin: Institutes, 1304.] [13: Calvin, Calvin: Institutes, 1306-1307.] [14: Calvin, Calvin: Institutes, 1307.] [15: Calvin, Calvin: Institutes, 1307.] [16: Calvin, Calvin: Institutes, 1308.]

Calvin also viewed the sacrament of baptism as a gift that must be received in faith or it will not be received at all. With this distinction between the promise and the reception, Calvin was able

to explain why some receive the salvation of baptism and some not at all. [17] Interestingly enough, his doctrine fails to elaborate on the issue of whether or not baptized babies have the faith needed to receive the gifts of baptism. Calvin felt as though the main point of baptism is to receive the sacrament as a covenant of forgiveness, salvation, and new life. [18] He views it almost as a document of sorts, that signifies to us that our sins are abolished, remitted, and can never be charged against us. [19] [17: W.B. Evans, “Calvin, Baptism and Latent Efficacy Again: A Reply to Rich Lusk” P 32/1 (Spring 2006): 40.] [18: Calvin, Calvin: Institutes, 4.15.1] [19: Calvin, Calvin: Institutes, 4.15.1]

- I. What was his stance on baptism-adult and infant
- II. What are popular beliefs on baptism
- III. What does the Bible say about Baptism
- IV. What do critics of his beliefs say