Transplanted Calvinistic Faiths: Presbyterian, Congregational, & Reformed Churches
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While chapter one of the Reformation is sometimes launched by a consideration of the accomplishments of Martin Luther, chapter two frequently begins with a biographical sketch of another highly influential leader, John Calvin. Four of the eight largest Protestant churches in colonial America (excluding the Calvinist Baptists) were of Calvinistic origin, and approximately half of all active church members living in the English mainland settlements would fall under this same classification. Although the percentage of Calvinists has declined since the birth of this nation, throughout the history of this country many Americans have belonged to religious communities whose historical roots can be traced back to John Calvin, including the Presbyterian Church, the Congregational societies (most having united with other denominations, forming the United Church of Christ), the Dutch Reformed Church (which evolved in the United States into the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church), the German Reformed Church (which became part of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and then merged with the Congregational Christian churches in forming the United Church of Christ), the French Reformed Church (Huguenots who tended to be assimilated into other faiths) and the Free Magyar Reformed Church in America (whose roots stem back to Calvin by way of Hungary). Although many members of these denominations have revised a few of the basic teachings unfolded by John Calvin, most have remained orthodox and generally endorse the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of the Synod of Dort as proper expressions of the biblical faith.

Although John Calvin was of French heritage and was twenty-six years younger than Luther, in a number of respects his early life resembled that of the celebrated German reformer. Born on 10 July 1509 in Noyon, a city located about fifty-eight miles northeast of Paris, Calvin gained distinction as a student, but his early formal education was even more comprehensive than that received by Luther. After concentrating on theology and graduating in law, Calvin studied humanities, including exceptional training in Greek and Hebrew. Like Luther, a major turning point in Calvin’s life occurred shortly after he concluded that men are saved solely by the grace of God. Calvin’s sudden conversion probably occurred sometime during the years 1532 to 1534, but no French political leader rescued this critic, as Duke Frederick aided Luther. After a brief imprisonment in Noyon, the young reformer fled into Switzerland where the reaction against the traditional faith had fragmented into various forms of Protestantism.

Like Luther, Calvin popularized his beliefs by publishing influential works which described and then defended his religious convictions. Calvin’s most celebrated apology was the Institutes of the Christian Religion which originally appeared in Basel in March 1536, when Calvin was in his mid-twenties. This book, one of the most influential works published not only during the era of the Reformation but during the history of mankind, enabled the brilliant Frenchman to become one of the world’s foremost religious leaders. Although revised editions of the Institutes continued to be printed until 1559, the original work contained the basic beliefs of this theologian and was acknowledged by many as the most comprehensive and systematic popular presentation of Reformation theology that had been included under one cover.

Many beliefs popularized by John Calvin harmonized with Martin Luther’s teachings. Calvin’s indebtedness to the German reformer was apparent when he employed in his first edition of the Institutes references from Luther’s Catechism and Babylonian Captivity of the Church. In addition to agreeing with Luther’s basic position concerning God’s sovereignty, the imputation of the original sin to all mankind, man’s depravity, limited atonement, and the idea that good works are the fruit of faith rather than a means of salvation, Calvin also endorsed the major theological concepts in the three Reformation treatises of 1520: priesthood of believers, two sacraments, justification by faith alone, and the Bible as the sole source for religious truths.

Although the two famous reformers shared many religious convictions, Calvin did not attempt to employ the writings of Luther as an authoritative source. He disagreed with Luther on a few key issues. For example, Luther decided that if a practice was not mentioned and was not specifically forbidden in the Bible, it might be adopted by Christians. Meanwhile, Calvin believed that a pattern of religious behavior should not be endorsed by Christians unless it was sanctioned by the Bible. Consequently, more ritual appeared in the worship of many Lutherans than in most Calvinistic congregations.

Two specific differences in the basic theologies of Luther and Calvin centered on their views concerning the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. While Luther insisted that baptism was necessary for salvation, Calvin argued that if faith alone was essential then baptism could not be regarded as necessary. That does not mean that Calvin did not encourage his followers to be baptized. Like Luther, Calvin suggested that infants should be baptized, in part as a sign and seal of the covenant of grace.

Calvinists held that circumcision had been instituted as a sign of the covenant that God would bless the faithful children of Abraham. Circumcision, they continued, was replaced by baptism, so parents should have their infants baptized as a
sign that God would bless the children of the elect as he had agreed to bless the descendants of Abraham. Children as well as their believing parents are included in this covenant of grace and hence are entitled to that sacrament.

The second major difference in the theologies of Calvin and Luther pertained to the nature of the Lord’s Supper. While Calvin shared the Lutheran view that Christ was not sacrificed during the Mass and that the priest did not change the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, he rejected the German’s view that the body and blood of Christ were present, were truly distributed, and were partaken of by the communicants. Calvin also rejected the position advocated by Huldreich Zwingli, the Swiss reformer, who taught that the Lord’s Supper was taken purely in remembrance of the body and blood of Christ. Taking a position that stood between the view of Luther’s real presence and Zwingli’s memorial, Calvin suggested that during the Lord’s Supper Christ’s body remained in heaven but his spirit engulfed the bread and wine so that faithful communicants received Christ spiritually.¹

Included among the teachings of John Calvin was a description of church government which, in the view of the French reformer, was patterned after New Testament Christianity. He suggested that Christian leaders who directed the affairs of local churches should not only receive an internal call from God but should receive the approbation of the people. The name Presbyterian evolved from these elected elders who were called presbyters in Greek. Presbyterian churches today are still governed by a representative system which includes four ascending judicial bodies who administer the affairs of the church, including sessions (composed of a minister and ruling elders of one congregation), presbyteries (consisting of representatives, ministers, and lay elders from the local churches, who have power of supervising ministers and many activities of the congregations, including examining, ordaining, and installing ministers), synods (another representative body which supervises the presbyteries), and the general assembly (the highest judicial and legislative body which is also composed of clerical and lay delegates). After an unostentatious beginning as lecturer on the Bible and a temporary banishment, Calvin was invited to return to Geneva and eventually gained full control of the Reformation in that community. With the support of political leaders, he launched a successful revolution in religion, education, and government. By providing the church with a trained ministry, encouraging religious education among the people through regular Bible study in their homes, and by establishing a city of refuge for many oppressed in Europe, Calvin transformed this small Swiss village into what became known as the “City of God.” According to one of Calvin’s distinguished disciples, John Knox, Geneva became the most perfect school of life on earth since the days of the apostles.


After Calvin’s death, his views were summarized into what became known as the five points of Calvinism. Although some scholars insist that the famous “five points” are not an adequate representation of Calvin’s thought, they did become a capsule summary of the Calvinism that was transplanted to colonial America. These concepts amplify Calvin’s view of God’s complete sovereignty, including the doctrines of total depravity [humans are totally bound to sin], unconditional election or predestination [not based on God’s foreknowledge of who will respond to the call of salvation], limited atonement [Christ died only for the elect], irresistibility of grace [it is impossible to resist God’s call], and perseverance of the saints [one cannot fall from grace, once one has been called].

A second-generation Calvinist who disagreed with some of the principal teachings of the Geneva reformer was the controversial Dutch theologian James Arminius (1560-1609). According to Arminian theology, man was endowed with a free will which enabled him to accept or reject the gift of salvation. However, salvation depended not upon man’s will to be saved, for we are not free to perform righteous acts unless assisted by the grace of God.² In explaining this doctrine, many followers of Arminius proclaimed that God offers salvation to all men, but only those who accept this gift will be saved. Therefore man cooperates with God in the salvation experience.

The disciples of Arminius immortalized his name by developing their own five points in contrast to the five points of Calvinism. The orthodox Calvinistic concept that man was totally depraved was replaced with the view that (1) even though man inherited the original sin and was depraved, this depravity was not total, for man was endowed with free will which included the capacity to accept or reject the gift of salvation. The popular Calvinistic view of predestination was replaced by the doctrine that (2) the eternal decree of salvation refers to those who shall believe and persevere in the faith, implying that because of God’s foreknowledge he has predicted but not decreed the final fate of man. The Calvinist concept of limited atonement for only the elect was substituted with the belief that (3) Christ’s atonement was sufficient for all men, but only the faithful benefit from the act. And finally, irresistibility of grace and perseverance of the saints were denied in favor of the view that (4) men can reject the call by God and (5) man can fall or fail to persevere to the end.

From Geneva the religious convictions of John Calvin spread throughout western Europe. Eventually, the reformed faith became the national religion of the Netherlands and, under the leadership of John Knox, penetrated Scotland. In 1560 the Scottish Parliament abolished Catholicism and created a national church with a presbyterian system of government and confession of faith patterned after the teachings of John Calvin.

Calvinism not only became the established religion in the Netherlands and Scotland but also spread into England, Germany, Hungary, France, and other European nations. During the Puritan revolution in England, a Calvinist declaration of faith was drafted by a group of religious leaders gathered in Westminster Abbey. This creed, known as the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), was adopted as a proper expression of Christian belief by a vast majority of the Presbyterians; prior to the mid-nineteenth century, the theology expressed in this exposition of faith was also accepted by most Congregationalists. Moreover, with a few exceptions (such as the doctrine of baptism), this description of Christian belief served as a basis for many Calvinist Baptist creeds, such as the Philadelphia Confession of Faith in 1742.

One of the major differences in the early beliefs of the English and Scottish Calvinists pertained to the proper form of church government. Many English Calvinists rejected the presbyterian system of government in favor of the belief that every congregation should be autonomous. According to Congregational polity (form of government), every local religious society should be given the responsibility of selecting its ministers, preparing a confession of faith, and directing its affairs without outside controls.

Early in the seventeenth century, Congregationalism was transplanted to America by the Separatists and Puritans. One of the most celebrated groups in early American history was the Pilgrims. These Separatists had withdrawn from the Church of England, worshipped contrary to the laws of England, and fled to the Netherlands, the only country where they knew they would be tolerated. Although toleration was extended to these English Calvinists, many were not satisfied with their new homeland. As they experienced assimilation into the Dutch culture, they complained of economic hardships. For these and other reasons, the Pilgrims decided to migrate to America. After a disquieting voyage on the historic Mayflower, they settled in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in December 1620. There these Pilgrim Separatists established America’s first Congregational Church.

Shortly after the Pilgrims arrived in America, Puritans who had been struggling in England to purify the established church from within commenced colonizing Salem, Boston, and many other communities north of Plymouth. After arriving in the new world, Puritan leaders adopted the reforms which they had been clamoring for in England, and established a church which was similar to that in Plymouth. While their local churches were called churches of Christ, eventually they, including the church in Plymouth, became known as the Congregational Church.

By employing the state as an active agent to promote their ideals, the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay acted in harmony with the popular beliefs of that age and welded a tight chain of religious uniformity around their society. As in Plymouth, only one religion was allowed to emerge in this colony. Then, by means of an expansion from Massachusetts into Connecticut, the “Bible Commonwealth” was extended to include the settlements at and near New Haven and along the Connecticut River. Throughout New England, except for Rhode Island, Congregationalism was the dominant religion during the colonial era. Though the number of churches outside of New England was small, Congregationalism was still the largest religious body in the English mainland colonies. In the mid-eighteenth century approximately one-third of all active church members living along the eastern seacoast were affiliated with this faith.

While English Calvinists were establishing churches in New England, Dutch Calvinists penetrated the Hudson River Valley and settled Manhattan and portions of Long Island. Prior to the English occupation of New Netherlands in 1664, the reformed faith was the only religion in what is today New York. For years after the English seized this province, the Dutch Reformed church remained a powerful influence in that section of the new world.

Presbyterianism followed Congregationalism and the Dutch Reformed faith to America. In the early eighteenth century, the great bulk of emigration to the English mainland colonies was from Germany, Scotland, and northern Ireland. Many of these immigrants were Calvinists who poured into the middle colonies, especially western Pennsylvania. Others migrated into western Maryland and Virginia and many made their homes in the Carolinas.

Colonial Presbyterians encountered many of the same problems which confronted the Lutherans and most early American Christians. After arriving in the new world, many Presbyterians scattered into the frontier and were unsuccessful in forming congregations. Lacking trained ministers and houses of worship, many Presbyterian settlers lost contact with organized religion. Historians have estimated that as many as 200,000 to 250,000 Scots and Ulster-Scots migrated to the English mainland colonies. Although a high percentage of these emigrants were Presbyterians, in 1776 less than 15,000 had been gathered into religious communities.

One of the most famous colonial Presbyterian leaders was Reverend Francis Makemie, known as the father of American Presbyterianism. In addition to preaching from New York to Georgia, Makemie helped establish the first presbytery in America in 1705. When this representative body gathered in Philadelphia, the American Presbyterian Church was organized. Twelve years later this body was divided into three presbyteries and a synod was formed, with its first meeting also being held in Philadelphia.

As Americans expanded west, Presbyterians and Congregationalists agreed not to compete under specified

3 In 1750 almost one-third of all religious societies (excluding Quaker congregations) were Congregational and only 11 of their 465 local churches were situated outside New England. Edwin Scott Gaustad, Historical Atlas of Religion in America (NY: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 167.

conditions. By the Plan of Union of 1801, many congregations in western America voted for a minister, selecting a spiritual leader from one of these two communions. During the first three decades of the nineteenth century, however, most people hired Presbyterian preachers, and subsequently many pioneers changed religious affiliations. Therefore, the Plan of Union curtailed the expansion of Congregationalism. As a consequence of continued immigration from Scotland and northern Ireland and more effective missionary programs than those sponsored by other Calvinist faiths, Presbyterianism grew much more rapidly in nineteenth-century America than did any other religious society whose historical roots stemmed back to the Geneva reformer.

Although prior to the late nineteenth century most Americans of Calvinistic heritage endorsed the five points of Calvinism, throughout the history of this family of churches some members have questioned the harsh implications of the doctrine of predestination. While orthodox Calvinists were emphasizing that God’s sovereignty meant that God’s will and not man’s will would be done, a few echoed Arminian expressions that man played a vital role in the salvation experience. This controversy over the nature of man’s agency was one of the major issues of debate in colonial America and the early republic. Before the Civil War most Calvinists were aligned against the so-called Arminian societies (such as the Freewill Baptists, Episcopalians, Quakers, Methodists, Disciples, etc.), but after Appomattox, the controversy became a major source of conflict among Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and members of other reformed churches.

By the early twentieth century most Americans of Calvinistic heritage had rejected the traditional view of predestination in favor of the concept of man’s agency. Although there is a vocal conservative minority in the United Church of Christ, most members of this denomination are currently known for their rejection of predestination and for their general acceptance of a contemporary theology. Meanwhile, Presbyterians are divided on many theological issues. Members of the United Presbyterian Church in the USA, currently the largest American body of Presbyterians, generally believe that man cooperates with God in the salvation experience. Slightly more than half might be classified as orthodox on most theological issues and approximately half endorse beliefs which reflect a reinterpretation of the classical Protestant theology. Nearly all members of this body have also endorsed the “Confession of 1967,” an exposition of faith which conveys, in the language of contemporary Americans, many of the ideas included in the Westminster Confession.

Although major modifications have occurred in the patterns of belief of most former Congregationalists and many Presbyterians, other Christians of Calvinistic heritage have made an attempt to preserve the doctrines described in their historic creeds. Many Presbyterians living in the South and most members of the Christian Reformed Church are currently known for their strict adherence to the basic concepts popularized by John Calvin, the influential founder of the reformed faiths.\[5\]

**Distinguishing Beliefs**

Prior to the twentieth century, one of the most distinguishing beliefs of the Presbyterians and most members of other reformed churches was acceptance of what were called the five points of Calvinism. These five doctrines which reflect the historic tradition of this movement are as follows:

First, **total depravity** is the belief that since all men inherit the original sin, man can perform no completely righteous acts in the eyes of God until his regeneration or conversion. Man is not considered totally bad but there is nothing in man that has not been infected by the power of sin. According to this dogma, man can perform no good deeds in the eyes of God until after his election or regeneration.

Second, **unconditional election or predestination** is the doctrine that by the decree of God some men and angels are predestined to everlasting life and others foreordained to everlasting death. The number is so certain that it cannot be increased nor diminished. The elected are redeemed by Christ and others are ordained to dishonor and wrath for their sin. Few American Presbyterians, however, have believed in double predestination as taught by Calvin, that God elected some men to heaven and others to hell. Most have held, as Luther taught, that God elects men to heaven but does not condemn men to hell. Today, most Presbyterians believe that man has the free will to accept or reject the gift of salvation when it is offered by God.

Third, **limited atonement** is the belief that while Christ died for the sins of all the world, only the elect or believers in Christ benefit (in terms of salvation) from his sacrifice.

Fourth, **irresistibility of grace** is another belief representing the historic tradition of the Presbyterian Church. According to this tenet, man cannot resist the gift of salvation offered by God. Some Presbyterians currently teach that man cannot resist responding positively if he truly perceives the grace of God in Christ. Man, some say, has the power to reject the gift but he cannot resist it.

Fifth, **perseverance of the saints** is the doctrine that if a man is truly converted he will not fall. Many Presbyterians of contemporary America teach that a man might waver and sin but he will not fall completely. It is sometimes asserted that if...
he appears to have fallen, he must not have been saved originally.

Two other beliefs of Presbyterians that represent their distinct historical tradition relate to the practices of observance of the Lord’s Supper and confirmation. While Presbyterians and other members of Reformed churches reject the Roman Catholic view of transubstantiation and the Lutheran concept of the presence of the total risen Christ, they also deny another popular belief that the Lord’s Supper is merely a memorial. Members of this faith teach that communicants experience Christ spiritually during this sacrament. While Christ’s body is in heaven, they generally affirm, his spirit is spiritually present with the bread and wine. Communicants, many explain, receive of Christ’s very being for their spiritual nourishment and growth in grace.

Presbyterians also believe that confirmation is a service in which a person acknowledges what was done at his baptism. In some Presbyterian churches pastors confirm members by the laying on of hands. In other churches members stand before the congregation, between the minister and ruling elders, and the minister reads words of admission and service.

Miscellaneous Beliefs

Nearly all Presbyterians and members of other reformed churches believe in the Trinity and incarnation. Orthodox Presbyterians also endorse the classical Protestant belief concerning the Bible as the sole norm of faith, angels, the fall, the atonement, life beyond the grave, and a priesthood of believers. Liberal Presbyterians (and most Congregationalists), meanwhile, reject many of the historical beliefs and endorse popular modern reinterpretations of the traditional religion.