Calvinism’s Roots

“Calvin got it from Augustin, who was a Manicheaist (whom other early church fathers confirmed and condemned)”

The answer to Gnosticism about the physical resurrection needs to be two-fold: Scripture definitely rejects Gnosticism at several points, and necessarily so – for without Christ’s physical, bodily resurrection – we would still be in our sins (1 Corinthians 15:14). However, many in the general umbrella of “Christianity” today believe the body is evil, that flesh is born into sin, “totally depraved”. Now most of these same believers will say they certainly believe in a bodily resurrection – a glorified, perfected, “cleansed” resurrection of the physical body – but their initial belief in the “evilness of flesh” is actually Gnostic, not Christian, and thus would benefit from a Scriptural rebuttal.

Is the Calvinist spouting Gnostic philosophy when he says that we are born into sin (i.e. total depravity)? Or, do we become sinful the first time we transgress God, independent of our physical body? And does it matter?

Calvinism gets its name from John Calvin, a theologian from France who ended up in Geneva Switzerland and popularizing the concepts of Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints (or, TULIP – later donned “Calvinism”).

Calvin lived in the 16th century, far removed from the beginning of the church. So, is Calvinism an entirely new idea? No, about 1100 years before Calvin, the famous theologian Augustine wrote several works, including *Predestination of the Saints* and *The City of God*. In these books, Augustine forms the earliest-known ideas of a predetermined-elect that Christ died for, and everybody else dying as “just punishment” for being born totally depraved.

Later, John Calvin would adopt and popularize these ideas to what is now known as Reformed Theology. Reformed Theology found its original home in Presbyterianism, whom John Calvin founded. From Presbyterianism came the Baptists, which is why there are still a significant (and recently growing) number of Calvinists in the Baptist ranks.

So, what did Augustine write, and did it have origins in Gnosticism instead of the early church faith?

In his book *Enchiridion* on page 103, Augustine writes, “that no man is saved unless God wills his salvation”. *Also, in that same book, page 269, Augustine writes, “*…those whom in His justice He has predestined to punishment,” and “those whom in His mercy He has predestined to grace.”

In his book *Predestination of the Saints* Section 17.34, Augustine writes, “God does not choose us because we believe, but that we may believe.”

In his book *The City of God*, section xiii, page 3, Augustine writes, “Adam and Eve in punishment for their sin “became a natural consequence in all their descendants”.  Moreover, it is not just a corrupted physical nature that we have inherited from Adam, but our… “human nature was so changed and vitiated that it suffers from the recalcitrance of a rebellious concupiscence….”

Where did Augustine come up with these ideas? They did not exist before him; no commentator of his era (or before him, or for long after him) took up his interpretation of Scripture. It laid dead for nearly a thousand years (does that seem odd?) before it was resurrected by John Calvin, who popularized it via the political power he enjoyed for most of his adult life in Geneva, Switzerland.

Augustine was a follower of an Iranian Gnostic cult called Manichaeism. He only became a Christian after Manicheans were outlawed in 382AD in the Roman Empire by Emperor Theodosius I and then declaring Christianity to be the only legitimate religion in 391AD. Not coincidentally, Augustine then became an ardent opponent of Manichaeism, by his own testimony in many of his books. It can be argued however, that while Augustine largely adopted a Christian understanding about creation, God, and Jesus, the piety and polity of Manichaeism never left his understandings.

Augustine’s influence from Manichaeism can be seen by looking at Manichaeist beliefs contrasted to his development of Christian theology:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **A Sample of Similarities of Manichaeism and Augustine’s Theology** | | |
| **#** | **Manichaeism** | **Augustine’s Theology** |
| 1 | “The Elect” – saved through severe ascetic vows only some were capable of fulfilling | “The Elect” – saved by God’s choice via unconditional election and irresistible grace |
| 2 | Origin of Evil - The existence of evil is from a flawed creation | Origin of Evil – The existence of evil is from Adam’s first sin (flaw) |
| 3 | Religious government – leader, 12 apostles, 72 Bishops, 360 Presbyters, the Elect, the Hearers | Religious government – Church Court, Bishops, Presbyters (eventually where his denomination – Presbyterianism – came from), the Elect, the Hearers (or church attendees not “regenerate” or “chosen”) |
| 4 | Christ was typically characterized as a physician | Must alliteration in Augustine’s literature to Jesus as a physician, healer, miracle worker |

It is the subtleties of Manichaeism that sometimes make it perceptibly similar, if not entirely dissimilar upon closer inspection:

1) Manichaeism was a form of Gnosticism that emphasized morality. This attracted Augustine initially; Augustine also appreciated the syncretistic nature of Gnosticism in the beginning, as he could apply classical or secular understandings of the world with its mystical, religious, and moral aspects.

2) Manichaeism had at its root much Christian language reinterpreted by this cult’s founder, Mani (216-277?AD). The names Jesus, Satan, Christ, etc. were common terms in Manichaeism’s vocabulary.

3) Manichaeism painted Jesus as a physician/healer in most of its writings about him. He was painted as compassionate with His power, something that attracted Augustine to this kind of Christ.

4) Manichaeism took a unique view of the physical realm that seems to have an incredible parallel to Augustine’s developing doctrine of “original sin” and “total depravity”. Manichaeism did not say that the original creation was corrupt, but rather became corrupt when evil entered it, and therefore the spawns of this infected creation had an inherently evil, incapable nature. The few that could follow the very strict vows of Manichaeism were called the “elect”. Augustine viewed these few people as uniquely capable of adhering to these vows. Augustine never considered that he was capable, so he was a “hearer”, or “auditor” in this form of Gnosticism. A “hearer” or “auditor” could eventually raise spirit states, or levels of “heaven” as Manichaeism called them, but only through suffering through purgatory in the afterlife first to be “cleansed”. This very language and understanding of Manichaeism seemed logical and accurate and compatible to conventional Christian in Augustine’s mind, so he developed their cause and case over time.

However, Augustine’s contemporaries immediately saw what he was doing; they recognized the syncretism of Gnosticism affecting Augustine’s reasoning. They saw him take his classical and secular training in logic and thought development and blended this seemingly-innocent and accurate part of Manichaeism into his Christian doctrine. Again, Augustine denied all Manichaeism influence; however, his unique ideas in this area being universally rejected by his contemporaries show he was either 1) blind to it or 2) deliberately denying it in order to see the ideas survive.

Regardless of Augustine’s motives, we can see his ideas have had a profound impact. At the time, however, these ideas were dismissed and largely abandoned in Christian thought until the time of John Calvin. After Calvin’s ministry, they have spread and stayed prevalent ever since. Many Christians take these doctrines for granted, never critically examining their origin against Scripture’s original and opposite truths.

It is relevant to quote a few of Augustine’s contemporaries (or near-contemporaries) who noticed and condemned Augustine’s syncretism of Iranian Gnostic Manichaeism and his newfound Christian faith:

Julian, Bishop of Eclanum (386-455AD), said of Augustine’s writings: “[he] brought his Manichee ways of thinking into the church… and was denying St Paul’s clear teaching that God wills all men to be saved”.

Vincent of Lerins (?-445AD) said of Augustine’s writings: “…a most disturbing innovation, quite out of line with ‘orthodoxy'”.

Justin Martyr (100-165AD) said about free will in the early church doctrine: “God, wishing men and angels to follow His will, resolved to create them free to do righteousness. But if the word of God foretells that some angels and men shall certainly be punished, it did so because it foreknew that they would be unchangeably (wicked), but not because God created them so. So if they repent all who wish for it can obtain mercy from God.”

Justin Martyr seems to be addressing an early “heresy” in the church (these were common; most of the New Testament books were written to expose and get rid of various heresies). Undeniably, Justin Martyr was attempting to follow in the footsteps of the Apostles and their letters and Gospels that were circulating at that time.

Irenaeus of Gaul (130-200AD), in his Against Heresies, XXXVIII, said of free will along the lines of Justin Martyr above:

“This expression, ‘How often would I have gathered thy children together, and thou wouldst not,’ set forth the ancient law of human liberty, because God made man a free (agent) from the beginning, possessing his own soul to obey the behests of God voluntarily, and not by compulsion of God. For there is no coercion with God, but a good will (toward us) is present with Him continually. And therefore does He give good counsel to all. And in man as well as in angels, He has placed the [power](http://www.discerningtheworld.com/category/all-keywords-all-keywords/all-keywords-letter-p/power-force-control-energy/) of choice (for angels are rational beings), so that those who had yielded obedience might justly possess what is good, given indeed by God, but preserved by themselves . . .”

“If then it were not in our power to do or not to do these things, what reason had the apostle, and much more the Lord Himself, to give counsel to do some things and to abstain from others? But because man is possessed of free-will from the beginning, and God is possessed of free-will in whose likeness man was created, advice is always given to him to keep fast the good, which thing is done by means of obedience to God.”

The title of Irenaeus’ work tells us he was specifically attempting to squelch this heresy before it got out. However, just like Gnosticism lived on after the attempts of the letters of Paul to eradicate it (Colossians, Philippians) as well as the Apostle John’s efforts to do so (1 John and 2 John), so did the idea of original sin, total depravity, and the rest of this kind of rejected theology.

Athenagoras (2nd century) also spoke of free will in his Embassy for Christians, XXIV:

“Just as with men who have freedom of choice as to both virtue and vice (for you would not either honor the good or punish the bad; unless vice and virtue were in their own power, and some are diligent in the matters entrusted to them, and others faithless), so is it among the angels.”

|  |
| --- |
| **Calvinism might be named for John Calvin…** |
| But Calvin rightly gave credit to Augustine for his ideas. |

The quotations could go on for some time. The point to be made is that Augustine’s “new theology” was originally repudiated by the earliest church fathers, but just like Gnosticism itself, it kept living on. By the time of Augustine, he found a way to integrate it into his own theology, which would then lay dormant for nearly 900 years until Calvin picked it up and popularized it for “mass consumption” by many unaware believers.

Therefore, the case can be positively made from the beginning that the incorrect doctrine of original sin (being born with sin) and total depravity was fought by the earliest church fathers, Augustine’s own contemporaries rejected it, and finally it laid “dead” until Calvin picked it up later. Therefore, we can be confident that these doctrines do not reflect New Testament Christianity. Instead, we are not born “into sin”, but rather “able to sin”, and upon our first sin, we are guilty of it. All the same, we can choose God’s way; whether we do or not is our responsibility alone.