

Copyright Abingdon Press, 2013

# ***Calvin vs. Wesley***

***Bringing Belief in Line with Practice***

**by**

**Don Thorsen**

**Abingdon Press**

**2013**

## Contents

Preface

Abbreviations

Chapter 1 Introduction: Christians Live More Like Wesley than Calvin

Chapter 2 God: More Love than Sovereignty

Chapter 3 Bible: More Primary than Sole Authority

Chapter 4 Humanity: More Freedom than Predestination

Chapter 5 Grace: More Prevenient than Irresistible

Chapter 6 Salvation: More Unlimited than Limited

Chapter 7 Spirituality: More Holiness than Mortification

Chapter 8 Church: More Catholic than Magisterial

Chapter 9 Ministry: More Empowering than Triumphal

Chapter 10 Conclusion: Bringing Belief in Line with Practice

Appendix: More ACURA than TULIP

Index

## Preface

For a long time, I have thought that Christians live remarkably similar to the way that John Wesley described Christianity and Christian living. However, Christians do not often understand or appreciate his insights into biblical teaching and the real-life ways that Christians live. It seems as if Wesley was very good at describing the Christian life in *practice*, but he was not as persuasive at describing it in *theory*. This is unfortunate. The incongruence became clear to me when I read a critique of Wesleyan spirituality by Glenn Hinson, who said, “Wesleyan thought has always come out better in practice than in theory.”<sup>1</sup>

My background is Wesleyan. I grew up in a Free Methodist Church, though I cannot say that everything I heard and observed was very Wesleyan. I attended Stanford University, which was certainly not Christian, much less Wesleyan. Then I attended Asbury Theological Seminary, where I first received extended theological and ministerial training in Wesley and Methodism. However, it was not until I did graduate studies in theology at Princeton Theological Seminary—a Reformed institution of higher education—that I became convinced of Wesleyan theology. Thereafter, I pursued doctoral studies in Wesley and Methodist studies at Drew University, where I earned my Ph.D. in Theological and Religious Studies.

Over the years, I have met many Christians outside the Wesleyan tradition. Very often they lived more like the way that Wesley described the Christian life than was reflective of their own theological tradition. In particular, I thought this to be true of Christians I met from the Reformed tradition that followed the theological leadership of John Calvin. Although they claimed to be Calvinist, they lived more like Wesley. In fact, I argue that the majority of Protestant Christians with whom I am familiar, including those from Reformed traditions, live in

---

<sup>1</sup> E. Glenn Hinson, “A Contemplative Response,” in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, edited by Donald L. Alexander (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1988), 129.

practice more like the way that Wesley viewed God, the Bible, salvation, spirituality, the church, and ministry.

In this book, I have endeavored to explain why I think this is true, and to promote Wesley's beliefs, values, and practices. I consider them to be powerfully instructive for living lives that are both biblically based and practically relevant for people: individually and socially, spiritually and physically, ecclesiastically and ministerially. It is my hope that others will come to agree with me.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction: Christians Live More Like Wesley than Calvin

Although John Calvin profoundly influenced the development of Christianity, John Wesley did a better job than Calvin of conceptualizing and promoting Christian beliefs, values, and practices as described in the Bible and as lived by many Protestant Christians. This claim may surprise some people because Calvin is more often thought to speak theologically on behalf of Christianity, especially Protestant Christianity. Ironically, despite professed appeal that Christians make to Calvin's theology, they often live in practice more like the teaching, preaching, and ministries of Wesley.

In this book, I want to emphasize how well Wesley understood and embodied biblical Christianity; I do not intend to put down Calvin. On the contrary, Wesley agreed with Calvin on many matters of Christianity. For example, Wesley famously said the following about his agreement with Calvin on the matter of justification by grace through faith:

I think on justification just as I have done any time these seven and twenty years, and just as Mr. Calvin does. In this respect I do not differ from him a hair's breadth.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, if you—the reader—hope to find a methodical attack upon Calvin in this book, then you will be disappointed. Moreover, if you consider yourself a convinced Calvinist, then you may dislike this book. After all, preferring one person's theology over that of another is enough to upset some people personally as well as theologically. And this book decidedly falls on the side of Wesleyanism rather than that of Calvinism. Although I appreciate Calvin's contributions to Christianity, I argue that Wesley's theological understanding of the Bible and its application to Christian living are superior to those of Calvin.

---

<sup>2</sup> John Wesley, *Works* 21, *Journal* 14th May 1765, Letter to John Newton. (Note: A period is added after the word "Mr," which does not appear in the original letter.) Although Wesley agreed with much of what Calvin believed, Wesley also disagreed with much of it.

Be that as it may, If you want to learn about differences between Wesley and Calvin, then you will learn much about the beliefs, values, and practices of the two church leaders, as well as why I consider Wesley more adept in understanding and applying biblical Christianity than Calvin. Moreover, if you want to understand why Wesley notably led one of the largest revivals in church history and why Wesleyan, Methodist, Holiness, Pentecostal, and other Christians continue to be profoundly influenced by him today, then you will certainly want to continue reading this book.

As Protestant Christians, Wesley and Calvin agreed with one another more than they disagreed. Both claimed to follow the heritage of biblical Christianity. Both claimed to follow the ancient creeds and teachings of key patristic writers; for example, they believed in divine creation, the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation, salvation, resurrection, eternal life, and so on. They had noteworthy disagreements with Roman Catholic interpretations of the creeds and patristic writers, but they tended to agree about why they disagreed with Catholics.<sup>3</sup> Finally, both claimed to be part of the resurgence of Christianity found in the Reformation and the Protestant traditions that followed them. Certainly both Wesley and Calvin were and continue to be foundational representatives of Protestantism. Thus, if for no other reason than to better understand the whole of Christianity, both Wesley and Calvin should be studied.

There exist differences, to be sure, between Wesley and Calvin. Otherwise, why would there be such divergent theological and church traditions descending from them? And, for the sake of distinguishing between the two men, it is important to note key points of contrast. Their differences represent crucial areas of disagreement that continued among Christians who followed them. Just as Wesley would consider some of the beliefs, values, and practices of Calvin to be wrong, so Calvin would think that Wesley was wrong. Wesley did not think that such differences precluded Calvin from being considered biblical and orthodox, but he did consider them crucial to spiritually fruitful Christian living. Perhaps if Calvin had had the opportunity to evaluate Wesley's beliefs, values, and practices, then he might have said the

---

<sup>3</sup> Be aware that more Catholic traditions exist than only the Roman Catholic Church. But in most cases I use the word Catholic to refer to the beliefs, values, and practices of the Roman Catholic Church.

same about Wesley. We do not know, however, since Calvin lived two centuries prior to Wesley, and it is anachronistic—that is, historically out-of-place—to speculate.

During his lifetime, Wesley openly disagreed with followers of Calvin, though such disagreements did not preclude Wesley from ministering alongside them. Most notably, he disagreed with the Calvinist theology of George Whitfield. Whitfield had been a longtime friend of Wesley. Just as Wesley introduced Whitfield to the value of small group meetings and holy living, Whitfield introduced Wesley to the value of outdoor preaching and evangelism. Whitfield traveled to the American Colonies where he helped to spearhead the First Great Awakening. In Britain, Wesley led the Methodist revival, which similarly contributed to the spiritual renewal of the English speaking world of the eighteenth century. Despite their public debate, both men affirmed and honored the ministries of one another to the amazement of those who observed them—Christians and non-Christians alike.

So talking about what Wesley got right and Calvin got wrong does not imply a knockdown, drag out fight among Christians. But it does suggest an opportunity to see how the two leaders disagreed with one another, and why people follow the spiritual leadership of Wesley rather than that of Calvin. Indeed, one of the theses of this book is that a surprising number of those who claim to be Calvinist really live more like Wesley. Have Calvinists thought sufficiently through the implications of Calvin's theology relative to the way they actually live as Christians? As the subtitle of this book suggests, studying Wesley will help Christians in "bringing belief in line with practice."

## **Theory and Practice**

I think that one of the most difficult things in life for people to do is to live consistently, without hypocrisy. Many people, no doubt, would agree with that statement. But, ironically, they may agree with it for reasons different than I intend. Most often they think that they possess correct beliefs and values, but that they repeatedly fall short in living up to them in practice. For example, people may have a great conception of a healthy diet, but they lamentably fall short of following it, or people may understand how to budget their money, but for the life of them cannot live within it. The same thing holds true for them spiritually: People may imagine how they think they ought to live, based upon the Bible or other Christian values,

but they repeatedly fall short of it. Usually such short-fallings are attributed to sin or the devil, and that may be the case. But it is not always our *practice*—our thoughts, words, and actions—that have fallen short; we may also be living lives deficient in theological *theory*, holding religious beliefs and values that weaken our Christian lives, rather than strengthen us.

In addition, I argue that Christians may live better than they think, that is, better than they value what it is they think that they believe. For example, some people eat more healthily than they can describe theoretically or scientifically (not all people, mind you, but for some this is the case). Likewise, some people are better at handling their budget and money, or handling their time schedule and work responsibilities better than they could articulate in a formal, logical, or schedule-like manner. In fact, some people are relatively unaware of what they do, including what they do well. And, they would be better off if such people had greater insight into what they actually believe and value. Because each of us has particular gifts, talents, and skills, some things just come more easily—perhaps consciously or unconsciously—than it does for others. In such cases, people would benefit from greater self-awareness or self-knowledge of what drives them spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, and relationally. To be sure, some people might be distraught if they discovered that their most cherished ideas do not fit their practice. But throughout this book I argue that the examined life far outweighs the unexamined life, and that people would do well to have their beliefs and values more similar than dissimilar with how they live in practice.

A repeated theme throughout this book is that Wesley provides a better understanding of Christianity and the Christian life in *practice*, than Calvin does in *theory*. In other words, Wesley better captured the biblically described way that Christians live their lives, clarifying their spiritual challenges, hopes, and successes than did Calvin. Because Wesley was not a systematically-oriented theologian, as was Calvin, his theology has at times been belittled as being inferior to Calvin's theological logic and comprehensive system of belief. It is not that Wesley did not use logic, critical thinking, and persuasive argumentation; he just did not develop a system of theology per se. But Wesley did have a well-conceived and consistently lived theology.



Calvin's theological strength was also his greatest weakness. Life, including Christian life, is not necessarily something best described as a system—a logically constructed interconnection of beliefs and values. Such a description may be more applicable to rationalist philosophy or Christian scholasticism than to the Bible and to life. While systematic theology is rationally appealing and, especially in Western society, culturally respectable, Wesley's less systematic, more practically oriented approach to theology is more appropriate. This appropriateness is especially true when it comes to describing the dynamics of biblical Christianity in general, and in particular, of life in the Spirit—the Holy Spirit of God.

According to Wesley, one of the problems with a systematic approach to theology is that it may view Christianity too narrowly in terms of what fits into the system, and what does not. For example, throughout his life, Wesley felt wrongly accused by Calvinists of advocating works-righteousness, when consistently Wesley advocated justification by grace through faith. Late in life, Wesley believed the problem was due—in part—to the all-or-nothing tendency of those who subscribe to systematic theology. He said:

I was in this perplexity...when a thought shot across my mind, which solved the matter at once: "This is the key: Those that hold, 'Every one is absolutely predestinated either to salvation or damnation', see no medium between salvation by works and salvation by absolute decrees." It follows, that whosoever denied salvation by absolute decrees, in so doing (according to this apprehension) asserts salvation by works.<sup>4</sup>

Wesley recognized that those who develop systems of Christian theology are heavily invested in logically rejecting beliefs and values that differ or perhaps challenge their system, even if affirming the system betrays some biblical and common sense evidence. It is not that Wesley was illogical and incoherent in developing his beliefs and values. After all, Wesley was a Fellow at Oxford University, taught logic, and used critical thinking skills in crafting his writings. But his beliefs and values were not developed into a systematic whole that required apologetics and polemics in order to preserve a system-like view of Christianity; Wesley's beliefs and values were more flexible, built upon a dynamic understanding of the ongoing presence of God's Holy Spirit in the lives of people.

---

<sup>4</sup> John Wesley, "Thoughts on Salvation by Faith," *Works* (Jackson ed.), XI:492-493—check reference??? Also, if this is the first reference to the Jackson edition, then add its bibliographical information (see n. 3).

Those who emphasize systematic theology are heavily invested in arguing propositionally that their beliefs and values are right, and that other propositional beliefs and values are wrong, or at least denounce them as slippery-slope arguments that eventually reveal their wrongness. Systematizers do not readily admit that Christian beliefs, values, and practices may vary from person to person, and from church to church. They focus more on what can be rationally proved to be right-or-wrong, consistent-or-inconsistent, regardless of commensurability with real-life circumstances, questions, and concerns. However, from Wesley's perspective, system-making and proposition-based apologetics and polemics too often fail to capture the Spirit-led vitality of what he called "religion of the heart"—a concept too categorically unsystematic and Spirit-oriented for Calvinists.<sup>5</sup>

Calvin, of course, spoke of the Holy Spirit and of mysteries involved with Christianity. It is not as if he did not account for such paradoxes of faith. Calvin was intellectually aware and astute with regard to historic theological disputation. But for Calvin, the rational unity of his theology superseded the vagaries of individual experiences of faith, hope, love, and other Spirit-led encounters with God and others. To be sure, mysteries and paradoxes existed in Calvin's theology, but they were considered inconsequential relative to the excellences of the explanatory power of his systematic theology.

In the ancient church, the phrase *complexio oppositorum* (Latin, 'the complex of opposites') was used to describe theological affirmations that seemingly hold together contradictory propositions. For example, because God is ultimately thought to transcend all human descriptions (even biblical descriptions), there exists necessarily a degree of mystery or paradox regarding Christian descriptions of God, who immanently interacts with people. The same complexity could be said to be true of the theology of Calvin (or of any Christian theologian, for that matter). After all, Calvin systematically portrayed God and all matters related to God in a way that honored the transcendence of God, while at the same time doing

---

<sup>5</sup> John Wesley, "Preface," §6, *Sermons on Several Occasions: In Three Volumes*, vol. 1, in *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, edited by Albert C. Outler, editor-in-chief Frank Baker (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 1.103-104. Hereafter references to these volumes will be referred to as *Works* (Bicentennial ed.); both Wesley's numbering will be included as well as the volume and page references, when applicable.

justice to the immanent presence and relationality of God. Because Christians “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7), attempts to explain God fully have been eschewed, including Calvin. Despite this complexity, Christians have also been confident of a degree to which God and God’s decrees may truthfully be understood and communicated to others. Calvin represents one of the more confident theologians in terms of the certainty with which doctrinal pronouncements can be made about God and the works of God. That does not mean that sophistication and nuance are not important in studying Calvin; they are. But more than most, Calvin thought that God and all matters related to God could be pronounced with confidence, even if it means that there are some questions and concerns that Christians ought to avoid, since they do not fit into the systematic whole.

With regard to Wesley, I argue that, despite his more practical approach to theology, Wesley better understood, responded to, and gave leadership to the challenges that people face. These challenges include the way the Holy Spirit leads, guides, and empowers them, and how people need to be faithful in how they live in response to God, the Bible, and to loving their neighbor as themselves. Calvin’s partiality for system-making, after all, is not the highest Christian value, and making it so loses more of the dynamic of Christian life than reason and logic contribute. Again, this does not mean that rationality, reason, and logic are unimportant; it just means that they ought not to be given higher value than faith, hope, and love, which are more relational than rational in nature. And relationships, after all, can be rather messy or inexact when it comes to describing them, including our relationship with God. This does not mean that Christians ought not to try adeptly to understand God, ourselves, our relationships, and other religious matters. But there needs to be greater willingness to investigate the messiness of Christianity, including all its mysteries and paradoxes, than not to do so.

Wesley wisely knew the need to hold in tension opposites often held apart. William Abraham describes Wesley and his theology in the following way:

Wesley’s significance as a theologian rests fundamentally on his ability to hold together elements in the Christian tradition that generally are pulled apart and expressed in isolation. Thus he integrates contrasting emphases that are vital to a healthy and comprehensive vision of the Christian faith.

Consider the following disjunctive pairs: faith, works; personal devotions, sacramental practice; personal piety, social concern; justification, sanctification;

evangelism, Christian nurture; Bible, tradition; revelation, reason; commitment, civility; creation, redemption; cell group, institutional church; local scene, world parish.<sup>6</sup>

As a result of Wesley's practical and integrative approach to understanding biblical Christianity, his theology was existentially relevant and applicable, even if not always stated with the precise categorization of systematic theology.

### **In Praise of Calvin**

John Calvin (1509-1564) was undeniably one of the most influential Christian leaders of all time, and not just of the Protestant Reformation. Along with Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli, Calvin was one of the towering figures of the spiritual resurgence of Christianity in Continental Europe during the sixteenth century. He was a prodigious writer, who most notably lived and worked in Geneva, where he gave leadership to the Swiss churches that initiated the Reformed tradition of Protestantism. Following the theological and ecclesiastical leadership of Zwingli and William Farel, Calvin regularly preached and taught in the Genevan churches. He was an apologist for Protestantism, and Calvin's writings served to establish the Reformed movement, which separated from the ecclesiastical and political authority of the Roman Catholic Church. He was also polemical, at times, when he considered it necessary to challenge ideas and actions that he considered heretical or a threat to the Reformed tradition.

One of his greatest legacies was the writing of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which Calvin first published with six chapters in 1536. Throughout his lifetime, Calvin revised the *Institutes* several times, sometimes expanding its length and other times adding chapters. He published his final edition in 1559, and it contained eighty chapters that were divided into four volumes or books. Generally speaking, the first book dealt with God and creation; the second book dealt with Jesus Christ and redemption; the third book dealt with the Holy Spirit and justification by faith; and the fourth book dealt with the church and ministry. It is difficult to calculate how significant the *Institutes* has been in shaping countless lives and congregations for half a millennium. In a single publication, Calvin was able to distill his basic theological beliefs, moral values, and ministerial practices. If anyone wanted a single publication to which

---

<sup>6</sup> William J. Abraham, *The Coming Great Revival: Recovering the Full Evangelical Tradition* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 67.

they could turn in order to understand the essence of the Reformed theology, then the *Institutes* provided a single source of his understanding of it. If an individual Christian or church could turn to only one corpus, other than the Bible, for articulating their faith, then Calvin's *Institutes* represented a comprehensive, systematic compendium of beliefs, values, and practices that could be used as an authority among Protestant Christians.

Along with the *Institutes*, Calvin encouraged people to study the Bible commentaries he wrote. Calvin published exegetical commentaries on almost all of the New Testament and much of the Old Testament.<sup>7</sup> The commentaries helped people to study the Bible more in depth as they endeavored to understand Christianity in a post-Catholic, post-Holy Roman Empire context. In addition, Calvin published sermons, created catechisms, and even wrote hymns for the worship and nurture of those in churches. To further serve people, Calvin instituted a place of Christian education, which included a *Collège* for the instruction of children, and an *Académie* for the advanced education of people. He sent out pastors as missionaries, especially to his home country of France, and oversaw the *Consistoire* ( or Consistory), which served as an ecclesiastical court for deciding upon matters of Christian belief, values, and practices, even exercising the authority to censure, excommunicate, and more with regard to those deemed heretical. To these accomplishments, others could easily be added, including the influence Calvin had upon the expanding Protestant movement throughout Continental Europe and Britain. Understandably, Calvin never saw the full extent of his influence, since it continues to grow to this day.

### **In Praise of Wesley**

John Wesley (1703-1791) lived approximately two centuries after Calvin. In many ways, their social, political, and church contexts were dramatically different, and these differences must be kept in mind when comparing the two leaders. During his lifetime, Calvin was more involved with establishing the church of Geneva against centuries of Roman Catholic power, which was political as well as ecclesiastical. On the other hand, Wesley was more involved with renewing the Church of England—the Anglican Church—that he argued had lost its spiritual

---

<sup>7</sup> List Calvin's commentaries???

vitality. Calvin wanted to defend zealously and argue clearly for the Reformed tradition, whereas Wesley wanted to evangelize and fashion effective means of spiritual formation. Of course, Wesley and Calvin were also similar in ways. Both were resolutely biblical; both were dedicated to the well-being of the church; and both endeavored to spread their beliefs, values, and practices.

Wesley was an ordained Anglican minister, who served as a missionary, an Oxford Fellow, and eventually—with his brother Charles—one of the co-founders of Methodism. Methodism was a Christian renewal movement that served to revive people in Britain as well as the newly established United States of America. Methodism functioned like an order within the Anglican Church with Methodist societies that met midweek, and with class-meetings and select bands that provided small accountability groups for the promotion of holy living and ministry. He appointed itinerant ministers who traveled widely to support Methodist societies, including men and women who served as local lay ministers. Wesley promoted evangelism, missions, and various social ministries. In addition to creating schools and orphanages for children, he advocated on behalf of prison reform and the abolition of slavery.

Although Wesley may be best known for his leadership in Methodism, he was also a prolific writer. As a minister, he wrote many sermons, compiling more than 150 into his *Sermons* along with *Notes* that contained doctrinal standards of the Methodists. In addition, Wesley published *Notes on the New Testament*, a thirty-two volume collection of his prose writings, and a series of *Journals* that spanned almost fifty years of his life. Wesley did not write a systematic theology; instead, he claimed to speak “*ad populum*—to the bulk of mankind—to those who neither relish nor understand the art of thinking, but who notwithstanding are competent judges of those truths which are necessary to present and future happiness.”<sup>8</sup> Consequently, Wesley published multiple volumes of Christian literature that continue to be used by Christians and churches.

## **Comparing Wesley and Calvin**

---

<sup>8</sup> John Wesley, “The Preface,” §2, *Works* (1.103-104).

In comparing Wesley and Calvin, I do not intend to discuss all of their beliefs, values, and practices. Instead, I plan to focus on some of the key differences between them and implications of those differences in how they understood the church and ministry. This approach will still highlight key theological affirmations of both Wesley and Calvin. Readers may be assured that they will study the essence of both men's understanding of God, humanity, sin, salvation, the church, and ministry. Not every doctrine will be studied, but a great breadth of their beliefs, values, and practices will be discussed.

I will focus primarily on the writings of Wesley and Calvin, rather than upon secondary literature about them. This will be easy since both men were prolific authors. I will bring in secondary literature about the two men when it is appropriate, especially when it has to do with their respective historical contexts. But I mostly will focus on the primary literature of Wesley and Calvin.

I plan to avoid later developments of "Calvin-ism" and "Wesley-anism" as they developed after the time of the respective men. To be sure, we sometimes hear more about Calvinism and the Reformed traditions than about Calvin, and more about Wesleyanism and the Methodist traditions than about Wesley. These offshoots can reveal a great deal about their founders, sometimes revealing insights or implications about which the founders were unconcerned or, perhaps, unaware. Other times the followers of Calvin and Wesley—Calvinists and Wesleyans—misrepresent and even distort the ideas of the founders. Although such information can be of help in understanding Calvin and Wesley, it will not be the focus of this book. Instead I will focus on the original writings of the two leaders.

### **More Than, Less Than**

In evaluating Wesley and Calvin, my approach will be to talk about them with regards to how they view different beliefs and values of Christianity, especially those that directly impact the lives of Christians. Thus, I will begin by discussing how they view God and the Bible, since these are basic to the Christian life. I will proceed by talking about how Wesley and Calvin viewed humanity, grace, salvation, and spirituality. Finally, I will talk about how they viewed the church and other issues related to ministry.

I will spend more time talking about the writings of Wesley and Calvin than about their interpretive treatments of the Bible *per se*. This may disappoint some readers, since they want to look more closely at how each man dealt with particular biblical passages. Some of those passages will, of course, be investigated. However, both Wesley and Calvin claimed that their beliefs, values, and practices were based primarily on the Bible. It is not a matter of whether one was more biblical than another; both were thoroughly knowledgeable of the Bible and built their respective theologies upon it. They simply did not agree with one another's interpretation, and so the focus of this book will be more upon comparing and contrasting their biblical understandings than upon doing biblical exegesis *per se*.

Comparisons will reveal that Wesley and Calvin have more in common than not. However, it is the differences that will be focused upon more often, not because I want to be contentious but because it is the way that must be followed in order to contrast the two and to highlight their distinctiveness—what makes them stand out among others in church history. Without doubt, some of the differences became major points of contention among Protestants. Some of the theological debates arose during the life of Calvin; by the time of Wesley, there definitely debates occurred. Even during the life of Calvin, such debates ended in far more than hurt feelings; excommunication, banishments, and even executions occurred. Today debates over the same kinds of issues about which Wesley and Calvin disagreed continue to divide Christians. So the comparison of Wesley and Calvin is not a moot historical reminiscence without contemporary relevance. On the contrary, Christians ought to be aware of the theological issues involved so that they may become more informed as well as able to decide for themselves about the topics of debate. Although we may find it difficult to decide, the issues are too important to ignore. In fact, who we find to be more persuasive—Wesley or Calvin—may have far reaching implications for how we live as Christians and minister in churches.

In comparing Wesley and Calvin, my approach will be to show emphases between the beliefs, values, and practices of the two Christian leaders. I will try to avoid setting up either/or comparisons, though in some instances it is unavoidable. Such dualistic thinking or “either/or-ism,” as I call it, can damage accurate descriptions of the views of both Wesley and Calvin.



Although I side with Wesley, rather than Calvin, I try to be fair to the views of both men so that comparisons are genuine, rather than contrived. It is not fair to set up a “straw person,” so to speak, which does not accurately describe the views of Calvin, just to knock it down. On the contrary, I think that there are enough genuine differences between Wesley and Calvin so that contrasts do not need to be manufactured. If readers think that I err in presenting Calvin—or Wesley, for that matter—then I apologize and am willing to be corrected. However, I think that my presentation of both men is overall accurate and fair. At least, it has been my intent to be as accurate and fair as possible.

For example, in talking about how Wesley and Calvin viewed God, both of them believed in the sovereignty of God. Both believed that God is all-powerful, and both believed that God is loving. It is not that they do not believe in these things about God; it is more about how they believe them. Wesley, I argue, puts more emphasis on the love of God than upon the power of God, and Calvin puts more emphasis on the power of God than upon the love of God. This does not mean that Wesley never talks about the power of God, and that Calvin never talks about the love of God. So, one may find individual references in Wesley and Calvin that seem to contradict what I say about them. However, individual references from either Wesley or Calvin do not necessarily refute my theses. (Likewise, individual references from the Bible used to support either Wesley or Calvin do not necessarily refute my theses, since both leaders appealed to the same Bible and verses; Wesley and Calvin just interpreted them differently.) Again, the contrasts between Wesley and Calvin are sometimes more a matter of emphasis (or prominence, accent, flavor) than of binary, either-or thinking with regard to comparing them.

Emphases, of course, are difficult to establish. In doing so, I will present quotes from both Wesley and Calvin in order to make my points. Such references are not intended to be slam-dunk proof of my theses, utilizing eisegesis (proof-texting) rather than exegesis of the writings of the two leaders. Instead, they are intended to represent accurately the theologies of Wesley and Calvin. This book is not intended to be an exhaustive academic survey, but it does intend to be reasonable in representing essential beliefs, values, and practices of both leaders, which would be born out through more extensive study of Wesley and Calvin.

Each chapter begins by talking about Calvin’s views of a subject. I continue by talking about Wesley’s views, and then compare and contrast the two. In each chapter I draw out implications of the beliefs and values of each man, since their implications are as important as their rational, propositional, or confessional value. Right belief (or what some refer to as “orthodoxy”: Latin, *ortho*, ‘right’ + *doxy*, ‘glory, teaching, belief’) has long been considered foundational to Christianity, but so have other dimensions of it. Other Christian values include right action (“orthopraxy”), a right heart (“orthokardia”), and a right society (“orthosocietas”).<sup>9</sup> Christianity ought not to be understood one-dimensionally; it is holistic, embracing the whole of God’s creation and redemptive work in the world. Throughout the book, I will discuss these ideas as ways for developing a broader, more relevant and effective way of understanding God, Christianity, and the ways God intends for us to live, based upon biblical teaching as well as historic Christianity and personal experience.

### **Appendix: TULIP and ACURA**

In the Appendix, I will talk about the so-called five points of Calvinism, which arose in the century after Calvin passed away. In the Netherlands, debate festered among the followers of Calvin and the followers of James Arminius, all of whom were part of the Reformed tradition of Protestantism. At the Synod of Dort, Arminius’ followers—the Remonstrants—expected to debate their differences with the governing Calvinists, but ended up being condemned for their beliefs. Points of disagreement became known as the “five points of Calvinism,” which in English have been summarized with the acrostic TULIP. The acrostic stands for (1) total depravity, (2) unconditional election, (3) limited atonement, (4) irresistible grace, and (5) perseverance of the saints. It is debatable, of course, whether the five points of Calvinism accurately represents the views of Calvin. The Synod of Dort debate will not be addressed in this book until the Appendix, but the substance of the issues will appear as Calvin discussed them in his writings.

Although Calvinists today often refer to the five points of Calvinism as a shorthand way to distinguish between their beliefs, values, and practices from those of others, I do not think

---

<sup>9</sup> Some scholars describe Wesley’s references to a right heart (orthokardia) as right affections or tempers (orthoaffectus) or right passions (orthopathia).

that all self-described Calvinists live in accordance with them. That is why some followers of Calvin call themselves four-point, three-point, two-point, and—in some instances—1.5-point Calvinists, or less! One wonders if, when the followers of Calvin follow so few points reflective of his systematic theology, why they would continue to call themselves Calvinist? After all, so much of Calvin's views as well as those who follow him rely upon the logical interconnectedness between the theological components of his system of beliefs.

Wesley, on the other hand, did not disagree altogether with every part of the so-called five points of Calvinism. So it is inappropriate to compare Wesley and Calvin based upon this fivefold criterion. Nor is it accurate theologically to interpret Wesley as an Arminian, since the Calvinist-Arminian categories represent the debate that originated within the Reformed tradition of Continental Europe.

Wesley's theological background did not come primarily from Continental Europe and the magisterial Protestant Reformation of Luther and Calvin. It came more from the Anglican tradition, which theologically drew deeply from the *catholic* (or universal) traditions of Christianity, including Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches, which I refer to in this book as *Anglo-Catholicism*. After all, the word catholic first served to describe the universal, worldwide church, and not any particular branch of it. The word catholic prominently appeared in the Nicene Creed along with the words one, holy, and apostolic in description (or marks) of the church.

Not everyone is familiar with the term Anglo-Catholicism, and it may be confusing to Protestants who think—by definition—that they are supposed to oppose anything that smacks of “Catholic” or “Catholicism.” This kind of kneejerk reaction, however, is unfortunate because it overlooks so much of the historical influence that the Church of England had upon Wesley as well as upon many other Christians in the English-speaking world. Thus, in order to understand Wesley, one should not impose theological terms and doctrines representative of Reformed or even Arminian Christianity. Such an imposition will misunderstand and misrepresent his beliefs, values, and practices. Wesley's theological views arose within the broader context of Anglo-Catholic theological influences in Britain and not only of Continental Europe. In his later life, Wesley identified with Arminianism as being similar to his theological concerns, especially in

dispute with Calvinists. But the theology that shaped his ministries came more through the Anglo and catholic Christian traditions that preceded or paralleled the Continental Reformation.

This misunderstanding of Wesley's theological context especially confuses followers of Luther and Calvin, since the words, doctrines, and ministries of Wesley do not easily fit into the theological categories of the Continental Reformation. And, what people do not understand, they may all too quickly judge as being wrong or worse! But not all of Protestantism fits into Lutheran and Reformed (especially Calvinist) categories. Christians would be wise to consider a more historically and theologically complex understanding of Protestantism that does not always stem directly from Continental Europe. Thus, Anglo-Catholic categories must be given primary consideration in order to appreciate adequately the beliefs, values, and practices of Wesley.

If one insists on using the five points of Calvinism as the means by which to compare Calvin and Wesley, as historically and theologically inappropriate as it is, then the Appendix in this book may be of help to them. As already mentioned, one of the reasons why Calvinism is so appealing is because of its rational, systematic appeal. It is so logical that its basic beliefs can point-by-point be presented, and people are impressed by organized, sequential thinking on any topic. In my opinion, one of the reasons why people do not regard Arminian-oriented theologies (reflective of more ancient Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican theologies) more highly is because there is not a nice, neat acrostic with which to remember the views contrary to the five points of Calvinism. That is why I created an alternative acrostic: ACURA. It stands for (1) all are sinful, (2) conditional election, (3) unlimited atonement, (4) resistible grace, and (5) assurance of salvation.<sup>10</sup> The acrostic may sound clichéd. But it helps people remember differences between Calvin (and his followers) and those who disagreed. Among those who disagreed were Arminius, Wesley, and a host of other people, including many who lived long before Calvin. It is my hope that, as people read the Appendix, they will find that the substance

---

<sup>10</sup> I first suggested this acrostic in a book I wrote with Steve Wilkens entitled *Everything You Know about Evangelicals Is Wrong (Well, Almost Everything): An Insider's Look at Myths and Realities* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 212, n. 12.

of ACURA far better applies to how they believe and live than does TULIP, when they take the time to think about the theological issues involved.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Although this may be the first time you have read about John Calvin, what do you know about him and about his Calvinist followers?
2. What do you know about John Wesley and his Wesleyan followers, which include people from the Methodist, Holiness, and other traditions?
3. To what degree do your beliefs and values (theory) correlate with how you live (practice)? Why do you think that this is the case? How may your theory and practice become more complementary?
4. When you think of Christianity, how do you envision it: Is it more like a system? A way of life? Or some combination of them?
5. What is most important: Right beliefs? Right practice? Right heart? Right society? All equally, or is there an order in their value?
6. Although I will not discuss the comparison between Calvinism and Arminianism until the end of the book, have you heard about the “five points” of Calvinism and Arminianism discussed? What are your thoughts about them?