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Catholic and Protestant Diversity of Doctrines and Anxieties stemming from 16th Century

I. The **Augustinian Catholic** paradigm

Faith is where you begin on the road to God: you believe what you are taught by the authority of Scripture and Church.

Understanding is where you want to end up: seeing God with your mind's eye, which makes you blessed or ultimately happy (beatific vision).

Love is the motive force that gets you there: it is the longing and desire to be united with what you love ("my love is my weight," *Confessions* 13:9).

Merit is a term that describes your increasing worthiness as you get closer to God: love for God not only brings you to God, it makes you worthy of being with God.

Salvation is the same as ultimate blessedness (i.e. in pictorial terms, "heaven"): strictly speaking, we are not yet saved in this life (as Augustine will put it, we are saved "in hope" but not yet "in reality"--*in spe* but not *in re*).

II. **Luther's** Criticism

Merit is something we never have before God (would you dare stand before the Judgment Throne of God and tell Him you think you *deserve* heaven?)

Faith alone makes us worthy before God, by uniting us with Christ, who alone is worthy.

Love for God is thus not our desire to come to a God with whom we are not yet united, but our gratitude and rejoicing in a God who has already given himself to us through his Word received by faith.

Good Works necessarily follow from faith; they do not earn merit, though God in his mercy is pleased with them.

Knowledge of God consists not in seeing him but in hearing his Word and believing it (hence the contemplative ideal of seeing God with the intellect, shared by Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas, drops out of Protestantism).

III. **Calvin's** Innovations

Calvin shares Luther's critique (II) but adds some new things that are decisive for later Protestantism (and make Calvin more distinctively Protestant than Luther is).

Justification (being made just or righteous in God's sight) is **forensic**: we do not become inherently just or worthy but are declared just by the forgiveness of our sins.

Justification happens when you are converted, which is only once in life (in contrast to Luther and Catholics, for whom conversion to God and justification happens every time you repent and are forgiven--which should happen frequently).

You are **born again** (regenerated) through this conversion (not through baptism, as in Luther and Catholicism).

Once you are justified, you are **saved**, and you know it.

Since all who are saved are predestined for salvation, this means **you can know you are predestined** for salvation.

This is Calvin's radical innovation: not the teaching of predestination (which is shared by Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther) but the teaching that you can (and should) *know* you are predestined.

IV. Distinctively **Protestant** Anxieties

The new logic of Calvinism is: **because justification happens only once, I can know whether I am predestined.** For justification happens by faith alone, and I can know whether I have been converted to the faith of Christ.

How do I know (the issue of "**assurance of salvation**")? The dominant answers in the Calvinist tradition are: by looking at the good works in my life as fruits of the Spirit, by knowing that I have had a genuine conversion experience, or by experiencing faith or Christ or the work of the Holy Spirit within me.

What about the fact that some people who believe later give up faith in Christ? (This had been the main reason why the Augustinian tradition before Calvin had assumed that no one could know they were predestined to salvation: I have faith now, but nothing I do *now* can guarantee that I won't renounce the faith of Christ in the time between now and my death).

The Calvinist answer: those with true faith may **backslide**, but are guaranteed never to abandon the faith permanently (the doctrine of "perseverance of the saints" or "**eternal security**" or "once saved, always saved").

This means that those who permanently abandon the faith of Christ never had **true saving faith** to begin with.

Hence the great Calvinist (or Puritan) anxiety is: do I have true faith, or am I just fooling myself, *thinking* that I believe but not really believing deep in my heart? How can I tell the difference?

Revivalism in America is in part a way of answering this question. But it answers the question (usually) by abandoning Calvin's doctrine of predestination in favor of a strong doctrine of Free Will: it is ultimately up to us whether we accept Christ or not (in contrast to the strong Augustinian doctrine of grace shared by Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, according to which our faith is a gift of God, so our salvation is ultimately up to God, not us).

V. Varieties of Anxiety

Anyone who is worried about whether we have eternal security ("once saved, always saved?"), whether I truly believe, whether I am truly born again, etc., is thinking within the distinctively Protestant pattern of doctrine established by Calvin and shared by the revivalist tradition of American evangelicalism (which arose as a kind of rebellion against Calvinism and therefore shares many of its key features).

Lutherans and Catholics don't have this set of anxieties, as you can see by asking one of them whether she is born again. If she knows her theology, she will answer, "Of course. I was baptized." (This is the doctrine of "**baptismal regeneration**"--you are born again through baptism). A person who believes this has no need to go to a revival to get "saved"!

If you ask her, "how do you know you're saved?" (assurance of salvation) the answer is, "I don't. None of us are eternally saved yet, for as long as we are in this life we can always commit mortal sin, abandon the faith, turn away from Christ, etc." Thus Augustine, for instance, says outright that "we are not yet saved" in this life.

Calvinists and revivalists are not the only Christians who have anxieties (there's no escaping anxiety in this life). But different traditions have different anxieties:

The Calvinist anxiety is: am I really saved? do I truly believe? or am I fooling myself?

The revivalist anxiety is a variant of this: was my conversion experience genuine? or, is my faith still as real as it was then?

The Catholic anxiety is: am I in a state of grace (i.e. not in a state of mortal sin, which kills the new life in Christ that I received in baptism)?

And **the Lutheran anxiety** is: can I hold on to Christ in the face of the assaults of the devil and my own sin and unbelief?

VI. Why I take Luther's view

Believing that you are born again in baptism is not an *alternative* to salvation by faith. It is precisely a form of faith in Christ, in whose name I was baptized. For it was Christ himself, using his minister as a mouthpiece, who baptized me, saying "I baptize you in the name of the Father, *and the Son* [i.e. Jesus Christ] and the Holy Spirit." To believe in this word is to trust in Christ alone for my salvation.

I do not think we ultimately know God by understanding him with the mind's eye or intellect (i.e. I think Augustine was wrong on this, following Plato rather than the Bible). Even in the kingdom of heaven, **we know God by believing his word**. For that is how you know trustworthy people: by believing what they have to say for themselves.

I think Luther's anxiety is the right one to have. It means I don't know whether I will ultimately be saved, for I cannot know whether God will continue to give me the gift of faith for the rest of my life. It is a gift that must be received anew every day, and that is enough to be anxious about--fighting each day against my own unbelief and sin. For all believers, being sinners, are also unbelievers. (As Luther says, all sin is unbelief. And all those who are justified are still sinners at the same time.)

That is why the anxiety, "is my faith real?" is the wrong one to have. *Of course* my faith is not real, or at least not as real as it ought to be. I must constantly confess the sin of unbelief

(as in: "I believe; help my unbelief!" Mark 9:24). The point is I only have to confess that sin one day at a time, and keep turning to Christ in faith every day. Tomorrow will worry about tomorrow (Matt 6:34) and that's a mercy.

The Calvinist logic of assurance of salvation:

1. Whoever believes (in Christ) is saved
 2. (This logically implies: If you believe, then you are saved)
 3. I believe
- Therefore I am saved.

According to this logic, in order to be assured of my salvation I must know that I believe. **But I don't know for sure that I believe.** What I know is that my faith is weak and inadequate, a whole lot smaller than a mustard seed. So the Calvinist logic of assurance does not help me. When you ask me whether I have true faith, my response is to confess my unbelief.

The Lutheran logic of the Gospel:

1. God said, "I baptize you in name of Father, Son & Holy Spirit" 2. (Baptism means being born again in Christ)
 3. God does not lie
- Therefore, I am born again in Christ, have new life in him etc.

In both sets of logic, the real challenge is the last premise (underlined). Whereas in the Calvinist logic I have to believe that "I believe," in the Lutheran logic all I have to believe is "God does not lie." I find the Lutheran premise a whole lot easier to believe than the Calvinist one. I'd rather believe in God's Word than in my own faith! That seems to me a firm foundation, and unlike the Calvinist logic it actually strengthens my weak faith. That's why I go with Luther rather than Calvin.