

John Calvin and A Lesson From Sudoku

Sam A. Smith

Sudoku has become popular in the last few years. Almost everyone has seen people sitting in coffee shops or fast food restaurants penciling in the numbers. Since I am an early riser, and since I usually take my breakfast at a local restaurant, I have become an avid “sudoku spectator.” (I say “spectator” because I never bother with the puzzles myself.) As I was reading in one of Calvin’s works the other day, it occurred to me that there is an amazing parallel between sudoku and Calvin’s view of redemptive history (I am referring specifically to the eschatological aspect of redemptive history).

As you know, if you are into sudoku, every proper puzzle has a unique solution—that is to say, every box can only contain a certain number. Generally, the procedure for solving a puzzle is to find spaces where there are enough “givens” to determine which number (or possible numbers) fit in the intersecting blank spaces. Each number that is found then becomes part of the pool of clues (along with the givens) to find the numbers for the remaining spaces. Of course, the givens can’t be changed; and every given constrains the number of possible solutions. I haven’t done the math myself, but I’m told that in a 9 x 9 grid, the minimum number of givens to make a unique combination (i.e., a puzzle in which every square can only have one specific number) is seventeen. Of course, since all proper sudoku puzzles have unique solutions, they must all have at least seventeen givens. (Some puzzles are not actually “proper puzzles,” and may have less givens.) The interesting thing about givens is that each additional given further constrains the puzzle, until finally there can be but one solution. When my wife first introduced my 93-year-old mother-in-law to sudoku, mom took to it like a duck takes to water. Well, it turned out that mom had her own theory about how to solve these puzzles. She would put a number in a space if she could see that it didn’t conflict with any other intersecting numbers. Any experienced sudokist (I assume that’s what they are called) would tell you that such a method is unlikely to produce the correct solution. Why? – Because while you might be able to put a lot of numbers on the grid quickly that way, sooner or later you’ll hit a “roadblock,” because eventually you find that your “solution” isn’t a solution at all because it conflicts with a given (and givens cannot be changed). We were finally able to explain that with 5,472,730,538 possible combinations in the standard puzzle, guessing could prove to be a lengthy process. She’s very sharp and caught on quickly. How, you may ask, does this relate to John Calvin? Well, I must say that I picked Calvin simply because I happened to be reading Calvin at the moment. I could have picked Augustine, Luther, or any number of other theologians, including countless contemporary examples.

Calvin, like many before him, espoused a view of redemptive history that is essentially spiritual. According to Calvin, the earthly in the Old Testament prefigures the spiritual in the New Testament. Hence, the earthly worship and the earthly promises and expectations in the Old Testament really speak of spiritual truths using earthly examples and figures. Of course, one can adduce some very good reasons why God might have revealed spiritual truth in just such a way. As I was reading in his *Institutes* (Book 2, chap. 11), I couldn’t help but be impressed with the elegance of Calvin’s explanation of the differences between the two Testaments. It all seemed to fit, and for every statement, Calvin supplied a seemingly good reason why the numbers could fit where he had put them. But in looking at his solution (or rather, his partial solution, for he never finished the puzzle) there seemed to be a problem; there was one part of the puzzle where Calvin’s solution could not be made to fit with a given. The given that didn’t jive with his solution was the book of Revelation. Let me explain.

Who is to say that the earthly promises of the Old Testament are not to be understood as spiritual truth in earthly form? While God cannot lie, he certainly could have made earthly promises that could only be fulfilled spiritually. That isn't lying—so I am assured by a great host of imminent theologians. If I promise you a penny for your trouble, and then give you a million dollars, surely I cannot be accused of any injustice! If God promised Israel an earthly land and kingdom, and then gives both them and the Gentiles eternal life in heaven in unspeakable glory, who could accuse God of lying simply because he did more than he promised? (This is, of course, the general truth theorem undergirding realized eschatology and replacement theology.) By God's design, the puzzle of redemptive history is constrained to the requirements of the givens; and the book of Revelation is the final given in the puzzle. Unfortunately Revelation does not accommodate Calvin's solution, no matter how well the numbers might seem to fit otherwise. Again, let me explain.

If it is true that the physical and earthly promises in the Old Testament betoken a spiritual fulfillment revealed in the New Testament, why is it that Revelation, the capstone of the New Testament, describes the heavenly as being fulfilled in the form of the earthly—precisely the opposite idea? Consider just two “givens” we encounter in Revelation. First, Jesus is going to return to this earth to judge his enemies and to rule upon the earth (1:7; 19:11-20:3 note the consistency with Zechariah 14:1-12 and Matthew 24:29-31 and 25:31-46). Second, the New Jerusalem, which is the heavenly city, is said to descend out of heaven to the earth where it will remain forever (21:1-2,10). This is no small contradiction to Calvin's thesis—which, of course, was also Augustine's thesis, and the thesis of the dualistic Gnostics before him. [Realized eschatology can be traced back to the influence of antic cosmic dualism, which took root in the 2nd century church. See my paper: “The Non-Christian Antic cosmic Roots of Amillennialism,” available at: www.biblicalreader.com/btr.] Calvin worked his puzzle almost to the end, writing commentaries on every other book of the New Testament, but he produced no commentary on Revelation. Why? —Because unlike Augustine who used the “dual hermeneutic” to cheat on his puzzle (applying an alternate set of rules for interpretation of eschatological prophecy), Calvin was above that; he simply left the puzzle unfinished, realizing that nothing he had said could be made to fit with the book. Martin Luther experienced the same problem, and became so frustrated that he tried to erase this given, calling into question the source and canonicity of Revelation. The general tack in modern history among those who are intent on forcing a spiritual interpretation of eschatological scripture is to simply annul the constraints imposed by Revelation; this is usually handled in two ways. The first is to question whether anything can really be known from Revelation. Of course such an approach raises serious questions about the inspiration of the book; for why would God have given the church an inspired book that is incomprehensible? The second approach is to reinterpret Revelation (e.g. “Is that given a ‘5’ or a ‘6’?”); and there are countless ways to accomplish this—everything from structural theories (like the “recapitulation theory”) to symbolic interpretation. The fact is, if someone is intent on altering a given, you can't stop them. But we all have to decide what we think about the legitimacy of such “solutions.”

It's true, I don't particularly like sudoku; but I love the lesson it illustrates, that no matter how good any solution may appear up to a point, unless it fits all of the “givens” (which cannot be changed), it cannot be the solution to a proper puzzle. In the puzzle of redemptive history there can be only one correct view of the kingdom of God that jives with all of the biblical “givens,” and that view is neither replacement theology, nor realized eschatology, but the simple, consistent, unadorned premillennialism of the Old and New Testaments. Sadly, too many Christians, including a great many scholars, never work enough of the puzzle to see that amillennialism (and postmillennialism) are nothing more than failed

attempts at solutions that can never fit with the biblical givens. However, one day, perhaps soon, the correct solution is going to be published. ...I can hear the groaning already.

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