

Calvin's Doctrine of Predestination

Adore with astonishment the secret counsel of God, through which, those which seemed good to Him are elected, and the other rejected![1]

That was our believer / theologian's approach to predestination. He prostrated his mind and heart before the God of the Word; and because he heard God speaking so clearly of His eternal predestination, Calvin believed it, taught it, and preached it! Calvin practiced Sola Scriptura!

That reforming principle demanded predestination; and it delivered us from bondage to Rome's semi-Pelagianism! Predestination, you see, is both the fountain of grace and the death knell to human merit; predestination is what gives us the other great solas of the Reformation: grace alone, in Christ alone, through faith alone, to God's glory alone. GRACE ALONE! That is the triumphant cry of the Reformation. Calvin took us to its source – the eternal predestination of God. He drove his peg into that mighty truth and anchored us in the free grace of God.

Calvin's doctrine of predestination stands at the very heart of the Confessions of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches.[2] The doctrines of grace, or five points of Calvinism,[3] have rightly become the common-places for biblical Christianity.

Calvin's Doctrine Outlined

First off, let's glance at Calvin's big picture. Calvin locates predestination in the eternal covenant between God as Father and God the Son appointed to the office of Mediator. He writes in the Institutes: The elect are said to have been the Father's before he gave them to his only begotten Son. – the Father's gift is the beginning of our reception into the sure and protection of Christ's. [T]he whole world does not belong to its Creator except that grace rescues from God's curse and wrath and eternal death a limited number who would otherwise perish. But the world itself is left to its own destruction, to which it has been destined!

That is the pattern of Calvin's thought, a pattern from which he never deviates.

- Calvin's definition of Predestination

In his treatise on eternal predestination (1552) over against a certain Albertus Pighius, who, in Calvin's words, – attempted – to establish the free-will of man, and to subvert the secret counsel of God, by which He chooses some to salvation and appoints others to eternal destruction. – He writes: Now, if we are not really ashamed of the Gospel, we must of necessity acknowledge what is therein openly declared: that God by His eternal goodwill (for which there was no other cause than His own purpose), appointed those whom He pleased unto salvation, rejecting all the rest; and that those whom He blessed with this free adoption to be His sons He illumines by His Holy Spirit, that they may receive the life which is offered to them in Christ; while others, continuing of their own will in unbelief, are left destitute of the light of faith, in total darkness. (Calvin's Calvinism, p.31)

To deny predestination was, in Calvin's judgment, to – be ashamed of the gospel. – In fact, for Calvin, without predestination there can be no gospel: – Let us take away election, – he says, – and what shall there remain? As we have declared, we remain altogether lost and accursed.[4]

- Calvin taught double predestination

Calvin never uses this terminology, however. He would have thought it a redundancy to speak of double predestination![5] He believed that the one cannot exist without the other. Many, as if they wished to avert a reproach from God, accept election in such terms as to deny that anyone is condemned. But they do this very ignorantly and childishly, since election itself could not stand except as set over against reprobation. (Institutes, 3.23.1)

- Calvin held election and reprobation to be equally absolute and unconditional[6]

Modern moderate Calvinism, embarrassed by absolute sovereignty and fearing lest the whole truth be too offensive to those of universalist persuasion, is strangely silent regarding reprobation, or else it leaves the impression that reprobation is based upon foreseen sin. Calvin had no time for such finagling: – That they were fitted to destruction by their own wickedness, – he wrote, – is an idea so silly that it needs no notice – (CC, p.76). Rather, it must be confessed by all that – [the] difference made between the elect and the reprobate – proceeds from the alone secret will and purpose of God (CC, p.77).

To the objection that such an exercise of sovereignty makes God a tyrant, Calvin replies: With Augustine I say: the Lord has created those whom He unquestionably foreknew would go to destruction. This has happened because He has so willed it. But why He so willed it is not for our reason to enquire, for we cannot comprehend it (CC, p.32). For Calvin, God's will is so much the highest rule of righteousness that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous (Institutes, 3.23.2). Indeed, reprobation itself – has its own equity, unknown indeed, to us, but very sure. – [7]

- Calvin's understanding of foreknowledge

His opponents, like the universalists of our day, "barked and yapped" about God choosing and rejecting on the basis of foreseen faith and free-will. In Calvin's judgment, "such kind of men have no drop of the fear of God" (Sermons on Election and Reprobation, p.38). To present God as limited and reactive was, to Calvin, a form of blasphemy.[8] "God foresees future events only by reason of the fact that he decreed that they take place" (Institutes, 3.23.6).

- That leads us to Calvin's doctrine of election He writes: Scripture clearly shows, we say, that God once established by his eternal and unchangeable plan those whom he long before determined once for all to receive salvation "this plan was founded upon his freely given mercy, without regard to human worth". Now among the elect we regard the call as a testimony of election. Then we hold justification another sign of its manifestation, until they come to glory in which the fulfillment of that election lies (Institutes, 3.21.7). Calvin emphasized three things about this election:

- Election is in Christ

Calvin sees God as turning His eyes upon Christ, arrayed in His threefold office (Institutes, 2.15.1-6), as the complete basis of salvation for the elect (Institutes, 3.22.2).[9] Four points of emphasis appear. First, God has made Christ to be the "fountain of life, the anchor of salvation, and the heir of the Kingdom of heaven" (Institutes, 3.24.5). Second, election incorporates particular sinners into Christ's salvation. Third, "God had no regard to what we were or might be, but our election is founded in Jesus Christ" (Sermons on Election and Reprobation, p.55). And fourth, God opens His fatherly mercy and kindly heart to His elect in Christ.[10]

Election, then, is the eternal aspect of union with Christ. The elect are placed in Him eternally in order that they might be united to Him in time, by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.[11] Out of this truth Calvin draws the sweet doctrine of Christ as the mirror in whom believers must find the assurance of their own election. If we seek God's fatherly mercy and kindly heart, we should turn our eyes to Christ "for we have a sufficiently clear testimony that we have been inscribed in the book of life if we are in communion with Christ. (Institutes, 3.24.5)

- Election is, therefore, completely unconditional

It would not be possible to overemphasize just how completely Calvin repudiated conditional election. This is what Calvin preached: Paul would frustrate whatsoever men might bring of themselves, and show that nothing has dominion herein, but the only mercy of GOD! "So then, let us not pretend that we can either will or run: but it behooveth that God find us as lost, and that he recover us from that bottomless pit, and that he separate us from them with whom we were lost, and to whom we were alike (Sermons on Election and Reprobation, p.42).

That "grace" is ultimately rendered effectual by the will of man, he writes, is a "fiction" (CC, p.46). "To make of election," he writes, "is altogether absurd, and utterly at variance with the word" (CC, p.45).

- Election is the singular fountain of grace "all benefits that God bestows for the spiritual life" flow from this one source: namely, that God has chosen whom he has willed, and before their birth has laid up for them individually the grace that he willed to grant them. (Institutes, 3.22.2)

Following the divine logic of Romans 8:29-30, Calvin traces grace from unconditional election like a stream from its fountain-head. At times he follows it down to us from eternal predestination, through effectual calling, to justification; and he shows us that it must issue, without fail, in glorification! (Institutes, 3.21.7). At other times he teaches us to trace grace back upstream from faith, to effectual calling, and from calling to Christ in whom is our adoption by the Father. This is how he put it: God calls and justifies, in His own time, those whom He predestinated to these blessings before the foundation of the world. (CC, p.112)

Effectual calling is a testimony and sign that manifests election (Institutes, 3.21.7), and "faith is the special gift of God, and by that gift election is manifested to, and ratified in, the soul that receives it" (CC, p.97). Furthermore, any glimmer of holiness in the saints is referred, "to the election of God, as waters are traced to their fountain" (CC, p.154). Salvation is, therefore, the working of God's purest grace "from beginning to end!

This says something about Calvin's understanding of grace.

Grace, in Calvin's mind, always "delivers" God's children into Christ's hands and possession (CC, p.51). Much of Calvin's mention of a "common" or general kindness of God manifest in His providential dealings with all His creation. But whenever Calvin's context has anything to do, even remotely, with salvation or the gospel, he has grace hooked into predestination. For Calvin, when it comes to salvation, the idea of grace flowing to those whom God has passed by and left outside Christ as objects of His righteous hatred "was a falsehood to be demolished.[12] Calvin sees a predestinating God "the omnipotent volitional being" who is eternally putting forth His favour to Christ and those particular sinners He has chosen to eternal life in Him. He sees grace as God's purposeful, personal, irresistible, saving favour.[13]

And it also says something about Calvin's view of what is God's purpose, or desire, with the preaching of the gospel.

Calvin refutes Pighius' idea that God sends the gospel to be preached to all men because He desires the salvation of all men.[14] What Calvin writes in response applies to any and every hint of universalism. "The great question," he says, "is

here: Did the Lord by His eternal counsel ordain salvation for all men?â€•[15] Obviously not â€“ predestination unfolded in providence proves otherwise. Therefore he concludes: the mercy of God is offered equally to those who believe and to those who believe not, so that those who are not divinely taught within are only rendered inexcusable, not saved. (CC, p.95)

Calvin did not believe that the gospel is sent to all because God desires the salvation of all! He withstood that idea. Calvin believed that God desires salvation of all the elect, and because they are scattered among the reprobate, He causes His gospel to be heard by all men. He believed that the outward call is the means by which God saves His elect by grace, and brings the reprobate to their appointed end in the way of their own wicked unbelief (Institutes, 3.24.12). Godâ€™s desires are never unfulfilled.

(To be continued)

Rev. Chris Connors

The Evangelical Presbyterian, January 2010 FOOTNOTES

1. Calvin, Calvinâ€™s Calvinism, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: RFP, 1987), p.84. â€œLet those who thus come to Christ remember that they are â€“vesselsâ€™ of grace, not of merit.â€•

2. The Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 3 reads: I. God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.

II. Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions; yet hath he not decreed any thing because he foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions.

III. By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death.

IV. These angels and men, thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number is so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished.

V. Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen in Christ unto everlasting glory, out of his free grace and love alone, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto; and all to the praise of his glorious grace.

VI. As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath he, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, foreordained all the means thereunto. Wherefore they who are elected being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ; are effectually called unto faith in Christ by his Spirit working in due season; are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power through faith unto salvation. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.

VII. The rest of mankind, God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice.

VIII. The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men attending the will of God revealed in his word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election. So shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God, and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation, to all that sincerely obey the Gospel. 3. Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Perseverance of the saints.

4. Sermons on Election and Reprobation, (New Jersey: Old Paths Publications, 1996), p.39

5. Calvinâ€™s Calvinism, p.45. â€œThere is, most certainly and evidently, an inseparable connection between the elect and the reprobate. So that the election, of which the apostle speaks, cannot consist unless we confess that God separated from all others certain persons whom it pleased Him thus to separate. Now, this act of God is expressed by the term predestinating.â€•

6. Calvinâ€™s Calvinism, p.75. â€œâ€¦according to His sovereign and absolute willâ€• â€“ that is Calvinâ€™s maxim.

7. Institutes, 3.23.9 And he insists, at the same time, that it is perverse for sinners to suppress the cause of their condemnation, which is nothing other than their own sin, in order to cast the blame upon God. Calvinâ€™s point is that no sinner shall ever arrive in hell, except it be in that he walked all the way there in his own sin.

8. Institutes, 3.21.5. Calvin had a higher view of God. He saw the God of Scripture to be infinite, eternal, omnipotent, self-sufficient, sovereign. Thus his extended definition of foreknowledge as it is in God: â€œWhen we attribute foreknowledge to God, we mean that all things always were, and perpetually remain, under his eyes, so that to his knowledge there is nothing future or past, but all things are present. And they are present in such a way that he not only conceives them through ideas, as we have before us those things which our minds remember, but he truly looks upon them and discerns them as things placed before him. And this foreknowledge is extended throughout the universe to every creature.â€•

9. â€œâ€¦since among all the offspring of Adam, the Heavenly Father found nothing worthy of his election, he turned his eyes upon his Anointed, to choose from that body as members those whom he has to take into the fellowship of life. Let this reasoning, then, prevail among believers: we were adopted in Christ into the eternal inheritance because in ourselves we were not capable of such great excellenceâ€• (Institutes, 3.22.1).

10. A further point of emphasis in Calvin is adoption. Election and adoption are almost synonymous in his mind. Election

is the eternal adoption of children by the Father, who opens His heart to them in and through Christ. This is the way Calvin views the relationship of the "covenant." The covenant relation is filial and the relationship it affords is filial love communion.

11. Institutes, 3.1.1. Thus, when Calvin explains how the elect receive the grace of Christ, he begins with the work of the Holy Spirit as the bond that unites us to Christ.

12. Calvin's Calvinism, p.75. "When Pighius holds that God's election of grace has no reference to, or connection with the hatred of the reprobate, I maintain that reference and connection to be a truth. Inasmuch as the just severity of God answers, in equal and common cause, to that free love with which He embraces His elect."

13. Calvin's Calvinism, p.150. How? "Does He bind their bodies, I pray you, with chains?" asks Calvin, "Oh, no! He takes hold of their hearts within; He moves their hearts within; and draws them by those, now, new wills of their own which He has Himself wrought in them."

14. Calvin's Calvinism, pp.93-94. Pighius objects: special and particular election is false, "because Christ, the Redeemer of the whole world, commanded the Gospel to be preached to all men, promiscuously, generally, and without distinction. But the Gospel is an embassy of peace, by which the world is reconciled to God, as Paul teaches. And, according to the same holy witness, it is preached that those who hear it might be saved."

15. Calvin's Calvinism, p.95. "It is quite manifest that all men, without difference or distinction, are outwardly called or invited to repentance and faith. It is equally evident that the same Mediator is set forth before all, as He who alone can reconcile them to the Father. But it is as fully well known that none of these things can be understood or perceived but by faith, in fulfillment of the apostle Paul's declaration that "the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth;" then what can it be to others but the "savour of death unto death?" as the same apostle elsewhere powerfully expresses himself."