

# John Calvin

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## Calvin on Predestination

It is a mistake, though an extremely common one, to regard predestination as the centre point of Calvin's theology. No doubt, he taught and expounded on the doctrine. But it must ultimately be understood as a correlate of his broader corpus, centred rather in *union with God* by nexus of the ultimate Mediator as we broached in the last unit.

Calvin's understanding of predestination must also be construed as something with an entirely *pastoral* trajectory. Considering the fierce debate that typically surrounds that matter of predestination in the theologies of the past five centuries, it is ironic that Calvin meant the doctrine to be more of a *comfort* to the believing community—a comfort borne of the security of one's ultimate destiny that naturally attends the doctrine,<sup>1</sup> in which one can be assured that he or she is, and ultimately will be, 'saved.'



Inside the Cathedrale St-Pierre in Geneva, where Calvin preached from 1536 to 1564.

Similarly, it must be recognized that Calvin was hardly novel in his predestinarian expositions. Calvin, like Luther, largely followed Augustine who Calvin cites supportively and specifically by name in more than 300 instances throughout the *Institutes*, a figure greatly multiplied if we include the many more casual allusions and general facility with Augustinian corpus. It was Augustine, by virtue of his protracted disputes with Pelagius, who first gave rise to the systematic defence and exposition of predestination. Calvin even invokes Thomas Aquinas favourably (and the Schoolmen broadly) in this regard, defending the notion that human 'freedom of decision' depends upon the choosing agent being presented with rational options, presented externally to the choosing mind (II.2.26). He also cites Aquinas' own exposition of predestination, though disagrees with him concerning the logical 'ordering' of the decree, to wit, Thomas' notion that predestination is directed to Divine grace which subsequently imbues the recipient with the ability to *merit glory*.<sup>2</sup> Calvin argues, rather, that Divine predestination of the elect to glory itself, is prior to one's predestination to saving grace (III.22.9). Calvin also disagrees with Aquinas concerning one's surety of his or her own predestination. Calvin understands predestination to have 'utility' in assuring the elect of the security of their salvation and knowledge of their redemptive status (III.2.11; 21.1), whereas Aquinas denied that anyone may truly know whether he or she is numbered among the elect (ST, I.q23.a1).

<sup>1</sup> That is, the believer exhibiting the true "marks" of Christian faith (III.3.16) and, more broadly, is a faithful adherent to a church that also bears such "marks" of authenticity (IV.1.9).

<sup>2</sup> See the *Summa Theologia*, I.q23.a5.

Even so, Calvin's overall conception of predestination is remarkably similar to that of Aquinas, such that *both* of them must be regarded as decidedly predestinarian theologians. This is an important point to remember in any study of the history of the doctrine.

## Predestination to Salvation and Reprobation

Like Aquinas, Calvin taught that predestination applies to *both* salvation *and* reprobation, construing the former to be a conferral of grace and glory to the redeemed, and a 'permission' to the latter to fall into sin and thus receive the punishment of damnation.<sup>3</sup> This 'horrible decree' (*decretum horribile*) of reprobation, as Calvin called it (III.23.7), is hardly something which he expounded with delight. Reprobation is the 'dreadful' side of Calvin's doctrine of election in which God, before the foundation of the world, destined some for eternal damnation according to the immutable counsel of His will. No doubt, Calvin clearly taught the doctrine. But that he took any sort of self-serving pleasure in it is demonstrably false by a reading of the salient passages in the *Institutes*. Calvin firmly believed that the human mind could only go so far in understanding the very Christian doctrines that the Bible nevertheless admonishes us to accept. Concerning the *decretum horribile*, he accepted it as biblical, but in terms of fully comprehending it in juxtaposition with God's goodness, he conceded that 'Here the most loquacious tongues must be dumb' (III.23.7). Surely, Calvin was directing this comment as much toward himself as he was others. Throughout the *Institutes*, he expresses a perennial concern over being too garrulous and speculative in theology. Thus, the *decretum horribile* may be regarded as something which Calvin strongly felt the Christian must acknowledge and submit to, while nevertheless maintaining a certain humility toward it and an ignorance of its mysterious machinations.

## The Pastoral Concern

As already alluded to, Calvin's concern over predestination was primarily pastoral. He argues that: 'We shall never be clearly persuaded as we ought to be, that our salvation flows from the wellspring of God's free mercy until we come to know his eternal election, which illumines God's grace by this contrast: that he does not indiscriminately adopt all into the hope of salvation but gives to some what he denies to others . . . How much the ignorance of this principle detracts from God's glory; how much it takes away from true humility, is well known' (III.21.1). Elsewhere, Calvin writes that, 'Should it be objected, that believers have no stronger testimony to assure them of their adoption, I answer, that though there is a great resemblance and affinity between the elect of God and those who are impressed for a time with a fading faith, yet the elect alone have that full assurance which is extolled by Paul, and by which they are enabled to cry, Abba, Father. Therefore, as God regenerates the elect only for ever by incorruptible seed, as the seed of life once sown in their hearts never perishes, so

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<sup>3</sup> On Aquinas' overall predestinarian teaching, see especially Question 6 of the *Questiones Disputatae de Veritate*, and the *Summa Theologia*, I.q.23.

he effectually seals in them the grace of his adoption, that it may be sure and steadfast' (III.2.11).

We see here that, for Calvin, the matter of predestination concerns both the glory of God (via the believer's unmitigated gratitude for his or her salvation, and its attendant humility), as well as the believer's surety that he or she is the recipient of God's mercy and favour. Far from being an irresponsible philosophical meandering into speculative theology, Calvin portrays both of these as entirely pastoral concerns. Predestination leads simultaneously to humility and assurance.

## Predestination Defined

But what is predestination? Calvin defines it as 'God's eternal decree, by which he compacted with himself what he willed to become of each man. For all are not created in equal condition; rather, eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others. Therefore, as any man has been created to one or the other of these ends, we speak of him as predestined to life or death' (III.21.5). Predestination, then, is completely unconditional. It is not, as some taught (e.g., semi-Pelagianism), the product of Divine foreknowledge of future merit, nor of anything whatsoever presently seen in a human life. Further, it is a Divine decree effective from all eternity and, thus, is absolutely sure *in time*.

### *Predestination as Asymmetrical*

Of course, Calvin also argues, as we've seen, that the inverse of eternal election to salvation, *reprobation*, is also predestined: '... those whom God passes over, he condemns; and this he does for no other reason than that he wills to exclude them from the inheritance which he predestines for his own children' (III.23.1). An important distinction here, however, is the manner in which predestination to salvation is said to be *active*, while predestination to damnation is entirely *passive* (preterition). That is, the manner in which the elect and the reprobate are predestined is not symmetrical, but asymmetrical. This bodes against so-called 'double predestination' in which both salvation and reprobation are *actively* predestined. The elect are actively or positively predestined, through grace, to eternal life; while the reprobate are *negatively* 'passed over.'

All human beings, Calvin consistently taught, are under the curse of sin, stemming from the primordial Fall. Hence, all are justly and condignly deserving of damnation. Similar to the manner in which a king can choose to grant clemency to one prisoner, while simultaneously choosing to withhold such favour from another (as he is under no obligation to do so), so too is God just and within the province of his own sovereign predilection to do the same with created humanity.

Of course, Calvin anticipates that this asymmetry will nevertheless still appear unjust to some, if not arbitrary and capricious. On what basis does God make such a determination? Calvin answers that:

... it is very wicked merely to investigate the causes of God's will. For his will is, and rightly ought to be, the cause of all things that are. For if it has any cause, something must precede it, to which it is, as it were, bound; this is unlawful to imagine. For 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. When, therefore, one asks why God has so done, we must reply: because he has willed it. But if you proceed further to ask why he so willed, you are seeking something greater and higher than God's will, which cannot be found. Let men's rashness, then, restrain itself, and not seek what does not exist, lest perhaps it fail to find what does exist (III.23.2).

### **Faith as a Gift of Grace**

For these reasons, Calvin taught strenuously that faith itself was, from beginning to end, an unmerited gift. As the human will is held captive by its bondage to sin, it cannot free itself from such a condition without the monergistic (or unilateral), regenerating grace of God: 'Because of the bondage of sin by which the will is held bound, it cannot move toward good, much less apply itself thereto; for a movement of this sort is the beginning of conversion to God, which in Scripture is ascribed entirely to God's grace' (II.3.5).

Humans sin willingly because it is in their nature to do so. Again, we are not sinners because we sin, we sin because we are sinners. However, those whom God regenerates by an act of the Spirit receive a *new* inclination of the will—to adore God (*religio* and *pietas*) and to desire to obey His commands. Such regenerating grace, then, which gives rise to faith and '... is a free gift of God, [so that] it follows that when we, who are by nature inclined to evil with our whole heart, begin to will good' (II.3.8).

### **Predestination to Justification**

Despite the new inclination to the good by virtue of monergistic regeneration, Calvin, like Luther, also affirmed the 'forensic' nature of justification by faith alone. Thus, true Christians remain sinners who are nevertheless also justified by God through the merits of Christ: 'Justified by faith is he who, excluded from the righteousness of works, grasps the righteousness of Christ through faith, and clothed in it, appears in God's sight not as a sinner but as a righteous man. Therefore, we explain justification simply as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favour as righteous men. And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness' (III.21.2).

Thus, for Calvin, predestination to salvation has both objective and subjective benefits—summed up in union with God, by faith, in Christ, the mediator and expiator of sin. Objectively, fallen sinners are made righteous through justification; subjectively, Christians are given new inclinations, a new direction of the will, are brought successively into fuller union with God, and are consummated with God in eternal life upon death.

**The Text:** Our reading selection comes from the *Institutes*, Book III, chs. 21-24. In these four chapters, Calvin deals at length with the thorny doctrine of predestination, attempts to adduce proofs of it from Scripture and the patristical writings (esp. Augustine), while focusing both on a pastoral concern for the doctrine through an elucidation of its perceived benefits. Lastly, Calvin deals with the confirmation and assurance of election and predestination by virtue of God's call upon the elect.

### Further Reading

Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Donald McKim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

David C. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

François Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*. Reprint of 1963 edition: Durham: Labyrinth Press, 1987.

### Questions for consideration

1. In what way was Calvin's doctrine of predestination pastorally oriented?
2. In what manner is Calvin's doctrine of predestination similar to and/or different from Augustine? Aquinas?
3. In what sense is Calvin's doctrine of predestination active/passive?
4. How does Calvin's understanding of predestination relate to his understanding of theological anthropology (e.g., original sin).
5. Did Calvin teach that one could know they are predestined?