62. Predestination

Eternal Election by Which God Has Predestined Some to Salvation, Others to Destruction

From: *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559)

Calvin initially wrote this book in 1536 to instruct novices in the “new” faith, but partly also to clarify matters in his own mind. He dedicated it to the king of France who, he hoped, would see that this faith was not really new at all, but rather the original and authentic Christianity, and for that reason would put an end to the persecution of Calvin’s French followers. In the following years, as his thought developed, Calvin continually revised and expanded the work. The book thus went through five major editions, all written in Latin and also translated by Calvin into French. The last Latin edition appeared in 1559.

Calvin’s project in this work was inseparably related to his commentaries on Scripture. Its purpose, he said in the last edition, was to prepare church leaders for the study of the “sacred volume.” It paves the way for such study by giving the reader an idea of what to look for in Scripture and organizing what is found there. Thus, Calvin believed, this book is an “indispensable prerequisite” if one wants to rightly and more easily understand the Bible.

If Luther was the polemical genius of the Reformation, Calvin was its systematic genius. His Institutes presents the reader with a theological “system.” This means, first, that Calvin translates what he understands to be the revealed truths of the Bible from the alien thought-forms of the ancient Near East into thought-forms understandable to sixteenth-century Christians. It means that these truths are arranged into a logical and coherent pattern, and interpreted with a view to their internal consistency. And it means that the central and most fundamental belief of the Christian religion, as Calvin understands it, is allowed to “control” the interpretation of all the rest. The result is a supremely “systematic” statement of Christian belief, one that is fully deserving of a place alongside the great theological systems of Thomas Aquinas, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Karl Barth. A large part of Calvin’s fame rests on this achievement.

The book is often heavy going for beginners. However, as many generations of theologians have found, it rewards patient study. It is divided into four sections. Book I deals with God as creator (included here are sections on the knowledge of God and Scripture); Book II treats God as redeemer (sections on original sin and Christ); Book III focuses on the grace of Christ (sections on the Holy Spirit, the Christian life, and predestination); and Book IV takes up the topic of the external means of grace (sections on the church, the Lord’s Supper, and civil government). By including selections from each of the four parts, I hope to enable readers to glimpse the full scope of Calvin’s system.

1. Necessity and Beneficial Effect of the Doctrine of Election; Danger of Curiosity

In actual fact, the covenant of life is not preached equally among all men, and among those to whom it is preached, it does not gain the same acceptance either constantly or in equal degree. In this diversity the wonderful depth of God’s judgment is made known. For there is no doubt that this variety also serves the decision of God’s eternal election. If it is plain that it comes to pass by God’s bidding that salvation is freely offered to some while others are barred from access to it, at once great and difficult questions spring up, explicable only when reverent minds regard as settled what they may suitably hold concerning election and predestination. A baffling question this seems to many. For they think nothing more inconsistent than that out of the common multitude of men some should be predestined to salvation, others to destruction. But how mistakenly they entangle themselves will become clear in the following discussion. Besides, in the very darkness that frightens them not only is the usefulness of this doctrine made known but also its very sweet fruit. 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.

much the ignorance of this principle detracts from God’s glory, how much it takes away from true humility, is well known. Yet Paul denies that this which needs so much to be known can be known unless God, utterly disregarding works, chooses those whom he has decreed within himself. “At the present time,” he says, “a remnant has been saved according to the election of grace. But if it is by grace, it is no more of works; otherwise grace would no more be grace. But if it is of works, it is no more of grace; otherwise work would not be work” [Rom. 11:5–6]. If - to

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make it clear that our salvation comes about solely from God’s mere generosity - we must be called back to the course of election, those who wish to get rid of all this are obscuring as maliciously as they can what ought to have been gloriously and vociferously proclaimed, and they tear humility up by the very roots. Paul clearly testifies that, when the salvation of a remnant of the people is ascribed to the election of grace, then only is it acknowledged that God of his mere good pleasure preserves whom he will, and moreover that he pays no reward, since he can owe none.

They who shut the gates that no one may dare seek a taste of this doctrine wrong men no less than God. For neither will anything else suffice to make us humble as we ought to be nor shall we otherwise sincerely feel how much we are obliged to God. And as Christ teaches, here is our only ground for firmness and confidence: in order to free us of all fear and render us victorious amid so many dangers, snares, and mortal struggles, he promises that whatever the Father has entrusted into his keeping will be safe [John 10:28–29]. From this we infer that all those who do not know that they are God’s own will be miserable through constant fear. Hence, those who by being blind to the three benefits we have noted would wish the foundation of our salvation to be removed from our midst, very badly serve the interests of themselves and of all other believers. How is it that the church becomes manifest to us from this, when, as Bernard rightly teaches, “it could not otherwise be found or recognized among creatures, since it lies marvelously hidden . . . both within the bosom of a blessed predestination and within the mass of a miserable condemnation?”

But before I enter into the matter itself, I need to mention by way of preface two kinds of men. Human curiosity renders the discussion of predestination, already somewhat difficult of itself, very confusing and even dangerous. No restraints can hold it back from wandering in forbidden bypaths and thrusting upward to the heights. If allowed, it will leave no secret to God that it will not search out and unravel. Since we see so many on all sides rushing into this audacity and impudence, among them certain men not otherwise bad, they should in due season be reminded of the measure of their duty in this regard.

First, then, let them remember that when they inquire into predestination, they are penetrating the sacred precincts of divine wisdom. If anyone with carefree assurance breaks into this place, he will not succeed in satisfying his curiosity and he will enter a labyrinth from which he can find no exit. For it is not right for man unrestrainedly to search out things that the Lord has willed to be hid in himself, and to unfold from eternity itself the sublimest wisdom, which he would have us revere but not understand that through this also he should fill us with wonder. He has set forth by his Word the secrets of his will that he has decided to reveal to us. These he decided to reveal insofar as he foresaw that they would concern us and benefit us.

2. Doctrine of Predestination to Be Sought in Scripture Only

“We have entered the pathway of faith,” says Augustine, “let us hold steadfastly to it. It leads us to the king’s chamber, in which are hid all treasures of knowledge and wisdom. For the Lord Christ himself did not bear a grudge against his great and most select disciples when he said: ‘I have . . . many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now’ [John 16:12]. We must walk, we must advance, we must grow, that our hearts may be capable of those things which we cannot yet grasp. But if the last day finds us advancing, there we shall learn what we could not learn here.”

If this thought prevails with us, that the Word of the Lord is the sole way that can lead us in our search for all that it is lawful to hold concerning him, and is the sole light to illumine our vision of all that we should see of him, it will readily keep and restrain us from all rashness. For we shall know that the moment we exceed the bounds of the Word, our course is outside the pathway and in darkness, and that there we must repeatedly wander, slip, and stumble. Let this, therefore, first of all be before our eyes: to seek any other knowledge of predestination than
what the Word of God discloses is not less insane than if one should purpose to walk in a pathless waste [cf. Job 12:24], or to see in darkness. And let us not be ashamed to be ignorant of something in this matter, wherein there is a certain learned ignorance. Rather, let us willingly refrain from inquiring into a kind of knowledge, the ardent desire for which is both foolish and dangerous, nay, even deadly. But if a wanton curiosity agitates us, we shall always do well to oppose to it this restraining thought: just as too much honey is not good, so for the curious the investigation of glory is not turned into glory [Prov. 25:27; cf. Vg.]. For there is good reason for us to be deterred from this insolence which can only plunge us into ruin.

3. The Second Danger: Anxious Silence about the Doctrine of Election

There are others who, wishing to cure this evil, all but require that every mention of predestination be buried; indeed, they teach us to avoid any question of it, as we would a reef. Even though their moderation in this matter is rightly to be praised, because they feel that these mysteries ought to be discussed with great soberness, yet because they descend to too low a level, they make little progress with the human understanding, which does not allow itself to be easily restrained. Therefore, to hold to a proper limit in this regard also, we shall have to turn back to the Word of the Lord, in which we have a sure rule for the understanding. For Scripture is the school of the Holy Spirit, in which, as nothing is omitted that is both necessary and useful to know, so nothing is taught but what is expedient to know. Therefore we must guard against depriving believers of anything disclosed about predestination in Scripture, lest we seem either wickedly to defraud them of the blessing of their God or to accuse and scoff at the Holy Spirit for having published what it is in any way profitable to suppress.

Let us, I say, permit the Christian man to open his mind and ears to every utterance of God directed to him, provided it be with such restraint that when the Lord closes his holy lips, he also shall at once close the way to inquiry. The best limit of sobriety for us will be not only to follow God’s lead always in learning but, when he sets an end to teaching, to stop trying to be wise. The fact that they fear danger is not sufficiently important that we should on that account turn away our minds from the oracles of God. Solomon’s saying is familiar: “It is the glory of God to conceal the word” [Prov. 25:2, Vg.]. But since piety and common sense show that this is not to be understood indiscriminately of everything, we must seek a distinction, lest under the pretense of modesty and sobriety we are satisfied with brutish ignorance. Moses clearly expresses this in a few words: “The secret things,” he says, “belong to . . . our God, but he has manifested them to us and to our children” [Deut. 29:29, cf. Vg.]. We see how he urges the people to study the teaching of the law only on the ground of a heavenly decree, because it pleased God to publish it; and how he held the same people within these bounds for this reason alone: that it is not lawful for mortal men to intrude upon the secrets of God.

4. The Alleged Peril in the Doctrine Dismissed

Profane men, I admit, in the matter of predestination abruptly seize upon something to carp, rail, bark, or scoff at. But if their shamelessness deters us, we shall have to keep secret the chief doctrines of the faith, almost none of which they or their like leave untouched by blasphemy. An obstinate person would be no less insolently puffed up on hearing that within the essence of God there are three persons than if he were told that God foresaw what would happen to man when he created him. And they will not refrain from guffaws when they are informed that but little more than five thousand years have passed since the creation of the universe, for they ask why God’s power was idle and asleep for so long. Nothing, in short, can be brought forth that they do not assail with their mockery. Should we, to silence these blasphemies, forbear to speak of the deity of Son and Spirit? Must we pass over in silence the creation of the universe? No! God’s truth is so powerful, both in this respect and in every other, that it has nothing to fear from the evilspeaking of wicked men.

So Augustine stoutly maintains in his little treatise The Gift of Perseverance. For we see that the false apostles could not make Paul ashamed by defaming and accusing his true doctrine. They
say that this whole discussion is dangerous for godly minds - because it hinders exhortations, because it shakes faith, because it disturbs and terrifies the heart itself - but this is nonsense! Augustine admits that for these reasons he was frequently charged with preaching predestination too freely, but, as it was easy for him, he overwhelmingly refuted the charge. We, moreover, because many and various absurdities are obtruded at this point, have preferred to dispose of each in its own place. I desire only to have them generally admit that we should not investigate what the Lord has left hidden in secret, that we should not neglect what he has brought into the open, so that we may not be convicted of excessive curiosity on the one hand, or of excessive ingratitude on the other. For Augustine also skillfully expressed this idea: we can safely follow Scripture, which proceeds at the pace of a mother stooping to her child, so to speak, so as not to leave us behind in our weakness. But for those who are so cautious or fearful that they desire to bury predestination in order not to disturb weak souls - with what color will they cloak their arrogance when they accuse God indirectly of stupid thoughtlessness, as if he had not foreseen the peril that they feel they have wisely met? Whoever, then, heaps odium upon the doctrine of predestination openly reproaches God, as if he had unadvisedly let slip something hurtful to the church.

5. Predestination and Foreknowledge of God; the Election of Israel

No one who wishes to be thought religious dares simply deny predestination, by which God adopts some to hope of life, and sentences others to eternal death. But our opponents, especially those who make foreknowledge its cause, envelop it in numerous petty objections. We, indeed, place both doctrines in God, but we say that subjecting one to the other is absurd.

When 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. We call predestination 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 to death.

God has attested this not only in individual persons but has given us an example of it in the whole offspring of Abraham, to make it clear that in his choice rests the future condition of each nation. "When the most high divided the nations, and separated the sons of Adam . . . the people of Israel were his portion, . . . the cord of his inheritance" [Deut. 32:8–9f.; cf. Vg.]. The separation is apparent to all men: in the person of Abraham, as in a dry tree trunk, one people is peculiarly chosen, while the others are rejected; but the cause does not appear except that Moses, to cut off from posterity any occasion to boast, teaches that they excel solely by God’s freely given love. For he declares this the cause of their deliverance: that God loved the patriarchs, “and chose their seed after them” [Deut. 4:37]. More explicitly, in another chapter: “Not because you surpassed all other peoples in number did he take pleasure in you to choose you, . . . but because he loved you” [Deut. 7:7–8f.; cf. Vg.]. Moses quite frequently repeats the same declaration: “Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven, . . . earth, and all that is in them. Only he delighted in your fathers and loved them, and chose you their seed” [Deut. 10:14–15; cf. Vg.]. Likewise, elsewhere, sanctification is enjoined upon them because they have been chosen as his “special people” [Deut. 7:6]. And in another passage love is again declared the reason for his protection [Deut. 23:5]. Believers also proclaim this with one voice: “He chooses our heritage for us, the glory of Jacob, whom he has loved” [Ps. 47:4]. For all who have been adorned with gifts by God credit them to his freely given love because they knew not only that they had not merited them but that even the holy patriarch
himself was not endowed with such virtue as to acquire such a high honor for himself and his descendants. And in order more effectively to crush all pride, he reproaches them as deserving no such thing, since they were a stubborn and stiff-necked people [Exod. 32:9; cf. Deut. 9:6]. Also, the prophets often confront the Jews with this election, to the latter’s displeasure and by way of reproach, since they had shamefully fallen away from it [cf. Amos 3:2].

Be this as it may, let those now come forward who would bind God’s election either to the worthiness of men or to the merit of works. Since they see one nation preferred above all others, and hear that God was not for any reason moved to be more favorably inclined to a few, ignoble - indeed, even wicked and stubborn - men, will they quarrel with him because he chose to give such evidence of his mercy? But they shall neither hinder his work with their clamorous voices nor strike and hurt his righteousness by hurling the stones of their insults toward heaven. Rather, these will fall back on their own heads! Also, the Israelites are recalled to this principle of a freely given covenant when thanks are to be given to God, or when hope is to be aroused for the age to come. “He has made us and not we ourselves,” says the prophet, “we are his people and the sheep of his pastures” [Ps. 100:3; cf. Ps. 99:3, Vg.]. The negative, which is added to exclude “ourselves,” is not superfluous, since by it they may know that God is not only the Author of all good things in which they abound but has derived the cause from himself, because nothing in them was worthy of so great honor.

He also bids them be content with God’s mere good pleasure, in these words: “O seed of Abraham his servant, sons of Jacob, his chosen ones!” [Ps. 105:6; 104:6, Vg.]. And after having recounted the continuing benefits of God as the fruit of election, he finally concludes that he acted so generously because “he remembered his covenant” [Ps. 105:42]. With this doctrine the song of the whole church is in accord: “Thy right hand . . . and the light of thy countenance gave the land to our fathers, for thou didst delight in them” [Ps. 44:3]. Now we must note that where “land” is mentioned, it is a visible symbol of the secret separation that includes adoption. David elsewhere urges the people to the same gratitude: “Blessed is the nation whose God is Jehovah, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage!” [Ps. 33:12]. And Samuel arouses them to good hope: “For God will not forsake you for his great name’s sake, since it has pleased him to create you a people for himself” [1 Sam. 12:22f.]. In this way, David also arms himself for battle when his faith is assailed: “The blessed one whom thou hast elected . . . will dwell in thy courts” [Ps. 65:4; cf. 64:5 Vg.]. Moreover, because the election, being hidden in God, was confirmed by the first liberation, as well as by the second and other intermediate benefits, the word “to elect” is applied to this effect in Isaiah: “God will have mercy on Jacob and will yet elect out of Israel” [Isa. 14:1f.]. In describing the time to come, the prophet says that the gathering together of the remnant of the people, whom he had seemed to forsake, will be a sign of the stability and firmness of his election, which at that very moment had seemingly failed. When he also says in another place, “I have elected you and not cast you off” [Isa. 41:9], he emphasizes the ceaseless course of the remarkable generosity of his fatherly benevolence. The angel in Zechariah expresses this more clearly: “God . . . will yet elect Jerusalem” [Zech. 2:12]. It is as though he, by more harshly chastening, had rejected her, or as though the exile had been an interruption of election. Yet election remains inviolable, although its signs do not always appear.

6. The Second Stage: Election and Reprobation of Individual Israelites

We must now add a second, more limited degree of election, or one in which God’s more special grace was evident, that is, when from the same race of Abraham God rejected some but showed that he kept others among his sons by cherishing them in the church. Ishmael had at first obtained equal rank with his brother, Isaac, for in him the spiritual covenant had been equally sealed by the sign of circumcision. Ishmael is cut off; then Esau; afterward, a countless multitude, and well-nigh all Israel. In Isaac the seed was called; the same calling continued in Jacob. God showed a similar example in rejecting Saul. This is also wonderfully proclaimed in the psalm: “He rejected the tribe of Joseph, and chose not the tribe of Ephraim but chose the tribe of Judah” [Ps. 78:67–68; cf. LXX and Ps. 77:67–68, Vg.]. This is several times repeated in
the sacred history, the better to reveal in this change the marvelous secret of God’s grace. By
their own defect and guilt, I admit, Ishmael, Esau, and the like were cut off from adoption. For
the condition had been laid down that they should faithfully keep God’s covenant which they
faithlessly violated. Yet this was a singular benefit of God, that he had deigned to prefer them to
the other nations, as the psalm says: “He has not dealt thus with any other nations, and has not
shown them his judgments” [Ps. 147:20, cf. LXX].

But I had good reason to say that here we must note two degrees, for in the election of a whole
nation God has already shown that in his mere generosity he has not been bound by any laws
but is free, so that equal apportionment of grace is not to be required of him. The very inequality
of his grace proves that it is free. For this reason, Malachi emphasizes Israel’s ungratefulness
because, while not only chosen from the whole human race but also separated out of a holy
house as his own people, they faithlessly and impiously despise God, their beneficent Father.
“Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?” he asks. “Yet I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau” [Mal.
1:2–3; Rom. 9:13]. For God takes it for granted that, as both had been begotten of a holy father,
were successors of the covenant, and in short, were branches of a sacred root, the children of
Jacob were now under extraordinary obligation, having been received into that dignity; but after
the firstborn, Esau, had been rejected, and their father, who was inferior by birth, had been
made heir, God accuses them of being doubly thankless, and complains that they were not held
by that double bond.

7. The Election of Individuals as Actual Election
Although it is now sufficiently clear that God by his secret plan freely chooses whom he pleases,
rejecting others, still his free election has been only half explained until we come to individual
persons, to whom God not only offers salvation but so assigns it that the certainty of its effect is
not in suspense or doubt. These are reckoned among the unique offspring mentioned by Paul
[cf. Rom. 9:7–8; Gal. 3:16ff.]. The adoption was put in Abraham’s hands. Nevertheless, because
many of his descendants were cut off as rotten members, we must, in order that election may
effectual and truly enduring, ascend to the Head, in whom the heavenly Father has gathered
his elect together, and has joined them to himself by an indissoluble bond. So, indeed, God’s
generous favor, which he has denied to others, has been displayed in the adoption of the race
of Abraham; yet in the members of Christ a far more excellent power of grace appears, for,
engrafted to their Head, they are never cut off from salvation. Therefore Paul skillfully argues
from the passage of Malachi that I have just cited that where God has made a covenant of
eternal life and calls any people to himself, a special mode of election is employed for a part of
them, so that he does not with indiscriminate grace effectually elect all [Rom. 9:13]. The
statement “I have loved Jacob” [Mal. 1:2] applies to the whole offspring of the patriarch, whom
the prophet there contrasts to the posterity of Esau. Still this does not gainsay the fact that there
was set before us in the person of one man an example of election that cannot fail to
accomplish its purpose. Paul with good reason notes that they are called the “remnant” [Rom.
9:27; 11:5; cf. Isa. 10:22–23]. For experience shows that of the great multitude many fall away
and disappear, so that often only a slight portion remains.

It is easy to explain why the general election of a people is not always firm and effectual: to
those with whom God makes a covenant, he does not at once give the spirit of regeneration that
would enable them to persevere in the covenant to the very end. Rather, the outward change,
without the working of inner grace, which might have availed to keep them, is intermediate
between the rejection of mankind and the election of a meager number of the godly. The whole
people of Israel has been called “the inheritance of God” [Deut. 32:9; 1 Kgs. 8:51; Ps. 28:9;
33:12; etc.], yet many of them were foreigners. But because God has not pointlessly
covenanted that he would become their Father and redeemer, he sees to his freely given favor
rather than to the many who treacherously desert him. Even through them his truth was not set
aside, for where he preserved some remnant for himself, it appeared that his calling was
“without repentance” [Rom. 11:29]. For the fact that God was continually gathering his church
from Abraham’s children rather than from profane nations had its reason in his covenant, which, when violated by that multitude, he confined to a few that it might not utterly cease. In short, that adoption of Abraham’s seed in common was a visible image of the greater benefit that God bestowed on some out of the many. This is why Paul so carefully distinguishes the children of Abraham according to the flesh from the spiritual children who have been called after the example of Isaac [Gal. 4:28]. Not that it was a vain and unprofitable thing simply to be a child of Abraham; such could not be said without dishonoring the covenant! No, God’s unchangeable plan, by which he predestined for himself those whom he willed, was in fact intrinsically effectual unto salvation for these spiritual offspring alone. But I advise my readers not to take a prejudiced position on either side until, when the passages of Scripture have been adduced, it shall be clear what opinion ought to be held.

**Summary Survey of the Doctrine of Election**

As Scripture, then, 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 into salvation, and those whom, on the other hand, he would devote to destruction. We assert that, with respect to the elect, this plan was founded upon his freely given mercy, without regard to human worth; but by his just and irreprehensible but incomprehensible judgment he has barred the door of life to those whom he has given over to damnation. 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 into the glory in which the fulfillment of that election lies. But as the Lord seals his elect by call and justification, so, by shutting off the reprobate from knowledge of his name or from the sanctification of his Spirit, he, as it were, reveals by these marks what sort of judgment awaits them. Here I shall pass over many fictions that stupid men have invented to overthrow predestination. They need no refutation, for as soon as they are brought forth they abundantly prove their own falsity. I shall pause only over those which either are being argued by the learned or may raise difficulty for the simple, or which impiety speciously sets forth in order to assail God’s righteousness. . . .