Calvin on Predestination, Providence, and the Church

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Preface

What exactly did John Calvin teach about predestination and providence? There are few Christians in history who have been so admired by supporters and despised by opponents as the Reformer of Geneva. Calvin’s doctrines have been caricatured. The real Calvin is found in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* as well as in his many commentaries on treatises. Learn why Calvin believed in predestination and the original ways in which he defended the doctrine. In chapter two, Jerome Bolsec’s challenge of Calvin’s doctrine of predestination is examined as well as what the results of the Bolsec controversy were for Geneva and the Reformed churches. Chapter three looks at Calvin’s doctrine of predestination which was accused of producing a God who is the author of evil. Calvin defends his doctrine against this charge and argues that it is the sovereignty of God in providence that provides the Christian with great comfort in trials. In the last chapter, there is a birds-eye view of Calvin’s doctrine of the church. Learn how Calvin broke with the medieval view of the nature and power of the church.
Chapter 1

Calvin’s Defense of Predestination

Part 1: Calvin’s Doctrine of Predestination

Introduction

John Calvin developed the doctrine of predestination in his Institutes of the Christian Religion, his Commentary on Romans, and his treatise entitled “A Treatise on the Eternal Predestination of God.”

Part 1 is a description of the main elements of Calvin’s doctrine of predestination. The emphasis will be on Calvin’s treatise and his defense of Augustinianism over against Pighius and Georgius.

Part 2 will focus on the nature of Calvin’s defense of predestination and his manner of argumentation. Since the treatise on predestination is Calvin’s most elaborate and lively defense of his position over against the objections of his Semi-Pelagian opponents, we have chosen to concentrate upon it. In this work we find many interesting ways in which Calvin defends predestination.

In Part 1 the main elements of Calvin’s doctrine of predestination are presented. First, the relevance of the Fall is tied in with predestination. Secondly, the doctrines of election and reprobation are developed in some detail. Thirdly, Calvin’s response to the universalism of Pighius and Georgius will be examined.
Calvin’s Infralapsarianism

It is appropriate that we begin writing about Calvin’s doctrine of predestination with a look at his doctrines of the Fall and original sin. This is because he presents his views on predestination within the context of infralapsarianism. He seems to assume that the decree of election logically follows the decree of the creation and Fall.

In his treatise entitled “The Eternal Predestination of God” infralapsarianism is assumed throughout. A number of times Calvin speaks of God electing men out of the fallen race of mankind. There is no hint of supralapsarianism. It does not appear that the distinction between the two theories had even entered into Calvin’s mind. For he certainly does not use technical language that would show an awareness of the distinction between the supralapsarian and infralapsarian schools that later developed.

That Calvin presupposes infralapsarianism comes out in a number of quotations from Augustine. In discussing Augustine’s views, Calvin speaks in an infralapsarian manner. For example, Calvin quotes Augustine speaking in an infralapsarian way about men who fall away from the faith. This falling away shows that “such were never separated from the general mass of perdition by the foreknowledge and predestination of God.”

Here Augustine assumes that the truly elect were separated from the mass of fallen men.

Calvin later speaks of Augustine’s views with approbation. He does when he states that Augustine teaches men how they are to reverence God

Where he shows that God chose out of the condemned race of Adam those whom He pleased, and reprobated those whom he pleased.

So Calvin operates under the assumption that God chose some men out of the fallen race of mankind. Therefore he is teaching a form of infralapsarianism and it is consistent when examining Calvin’s predestination to begin with his doctrine of the Fall and then to work


2 Ibid., p. 130.
toward his teaching on election.

**God Created Man Good**

Calvin emphasizes that God created Adam good. The culpability for the Fall therefore rests on Adam’s shoulders, for he chose to sin. Calvin writes that Adam “fell by his own full free will, and by his own willing act.”\(^3\) So although Adam had been created perfectly righteous he “fell on his own accord and willingly” and brought condemnation upon all mankind.\(^4\) Adam was responsible for his sin.

One of the greatest objections brought against Calvin was that he made God the author of sin. This is because Calvin taught that God not only foreknew the Fall but that He had ordained it.

Calvin carefully develops how Adam was responsible but yet that Adam’s choice was ordained by God. The reason why Adam was guilty for the Fall was because he “of his own will and accord, deprived himself” of perfect righteousness and “gave himself up to the service of sin and Satan.”\(^5\) Calvin argues that to establish the guilt of Adam, all that is needed is that his sin was a “voluntary transgression.”

Calvin also defines the nature of Adam’s freedom and the freedom to sin that fallen mankind possesses. He states that men do not sin “from any outward impulse or constraint, but knowingly and willingly from the spontaneous motion of the heart.”\(^6\)

So while Calvin claimed that “whatever happened to, or befel [sic], Adam was ordained of God” he also maintained Adam’s full responsibility.\(^7\)

**Man is Totally Depraved**

Calvin taught that all men by nature inherit the pollution of sin. This means that man is totally depraved and dead in sin. Calvin writes that

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Scripture everywhere declares that man, being the captive, the servant, and the slave of the devil, is carried away into wickedness of every kind with his whole mind and inclination, being utterly incapable of understanding the things of God, much less of doing them.\textsuperscript{8}

Fallen man is spiritually blind. Calvin says that it should be no surprise that men do not believe the gospel. He states that “the wisdom of Christ is too high and too deep to come within the compass of man’s understanding.”\textsuperscript{9} Man cannot know the gospel or exercise faith in Christ.

Because man is dead in sin he is unable to merit any favor with God by good works or obtain salvation by exercising faith in Christ.

**God would be Just in Condemning all of Fallen Mankind**

The result of the Fall is that all men are condemned in Adam. Since all men sinned in Adam they are guilty for his sin.

Calvin expends a lot of energy teaching that God would be absolutely just in condemning the entire fallen human race to eternal punishment.

Calvin accuses his opponents of attempting to develop their views of justice on the basis of human thought. They claimed that God was unjust if he predestinated some to life and rejected others. Calvin writes, agreeing with Augustine “that the justice of God is by no means to be measured by the short rule of human justice.”\textsuperscript{10}

God is perfectly just in electing and reprobating others because all men by nature deserve to be condemned. It is an act of free grace when God chooses to save some.

Calvin compares God’s justice in forgiving some guilty sinners to a man forgiving a fellow man’s debt to him. For example, if two men owe a debt to a third, the third man has the right to forgive the debt of the one and still require the other to pay. Likewise God has the right to forgive one person out of pure grace and leave the other person to divine justice.

\textsuperscript{9} *Ibid.*, p. 82.
Calvin’s Doctrine of Double Predestination

We now turn to the doctrine of predestination. While the Roman Catholic theologians based the salvation of man upon the exercise of his autonomous free will, Calvin instead based it upon God’s free election. He repeatedly uses the term “free election.” This shows the importance of the term. Speaking of Augustine, Calvin states that he traced

Their salvation to God’s free election, by which he plainly means that the sole cause of their not perishing with the rest of mankind was because they were freely elected of God.\(^{11}\)

Calvin gives a number of definitions of predestination. In the *Institutes* he writes:

We call predestination God’s eternal decree, by which he determined with himself what he will to become of each man. For all are not created in equal conditions, 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 predestinated to life or death.\(^{12}\)

This definition points to the fact that Calvin teaches the doctrine of double predestination.

Calvin also teaches that predestination is personal--certain individuals are predestined to life while others to death. The example of Jacob and Esau is a prime illustration of the fact that predestination is specific and individual. Klooster states “The decree of election makes a distinction between individuals where there is none by nature.”\(^{13}\)

Predestination is one “eternal decree” of God that includes both election and reprobation. Reid sums up Calvin’s position when he concludes with disfavor that Calvin is teaching double predestination:

\(^{13}\) *Ibid.*, p. 36.
The conclusion must be drawn that Calvin regarded the relation of election and of reprobation as symmetrically related to the will of God, that election and reprobation are correlatives standing in an identical relation to God’s will and equally expressing it. We are thus led to the forbidding doctrine of *predestinatio duplex*.

Calvin finds the unity of the decree of predestination in that God is seeking His own great glory. That goal is served by both election and reprobation. Reid states that Calvin therefore does not properly teach that God has two wills, one for election and another for reprobation:

> It is only we, because of our defective understanding who may speak of the will of God “in two sorts”. His ultimate will has an object only His own glory, and this is equally served by election and by reprobation.

Since election and reprobation both serve the glory of God they are in some sense parallel. Yet in other ways the two decrees are to be distinguished.

They differ in that those who are ordained to life reveal God’s gratuitous love while those who are reprobated reveal God’s justice in condemning fallen mankind. Reid explains how the two “sorts” of decrees differ:

> To the gratuitous love with which the elect are embraced there corresponds on an equal and common level a just severity toward the reprobate.

This reveals the basic distinction which Calvin makes between election and reprobation. Election reveals the free grace of God while reprobation reveals His justice.

Another way in which the two decrees are not parallel has to do with the role of Christ in the decrees. While it is true that the elect

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are chosen in Christ, it is wrong to say that the reprobate are reprobated in Him. This reveals the preeminence of election in the decree of predestination.\(^{17}\)

The decree of reprobation serves election. In the history of the work of redemption, the lives of sinful men and nations do serve the good of the church.

Reprobation also serves election in that the free grace of God stands out in all of its beauty in contrast to God’s just severity revealed towards the reprobate. So the reprobation of some serves to reveal the glory of God’s free mercy extended to the elect.

Calvin’s central interest in the doctrine of predestination therefore has to do with the doctrine of election. His defense of the doctrine of reprobation is only secondary to his positive development of election. That is not to say that he did not spend a lot of time defending reprobation; he did. But that was because he understood that the doctrine of election could properly be believed when reprobation was also understood.

Election and reprobation are also distinguished from each other in another sense. This is because while there is a proximate cause of reprobation there is no proximate cause of election.

Calvin argues that the ultimate cause of reprobation is not sin. It is also not found in God’s foreknowledge of sin. Rather the ultimate cause is God’s sovereign will.\(^{18}\)

Sin is not the ground for the ultimate discrimination between the elect and reprobate. This is evident from the fact that all men sinned in Adam and that they all deserve condemnation. Calvin taught that sinful action was the cause of reprobation only with respect to the condemnation aspect of reprobation. That is, reprobate men really deserve the condemnation that they receive through the decree of reprobation because of their sin and guilt.

But the ultimate ground for reprobation is found in the sovereign will of God. This is the only explanation. For God did not predestinate men based on any goodness found in them. Calvin points out that in the instance of Jacob and Esau the apostle clearly teaches that they were loved and hated before they had been born and had done good or evil. So the cause of election and predestination is not found in human willing, but in the will of God.

Calvin points out that there is no proximate cause for

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\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 60-62.
election. This is because God did not elect men based upon anything good in them. Rather they were elected in Christ.

**God is the First Cause**

The Semi-Pelagian opponents of Calvin defined free will in the libertarian sense. They taught that man has the power to do other than what he actually does. According to their position, man was able by his own free will to choose to believe in Christ. This places man in autonomy from God. Therefore he is the first and ultimate cause of his actions.

Calvin, in sharp contrast to this, taught that God was alone the first cause of everything that occurs. He writes:

> The sum of the doctrine of the thus reviled one is, that God, in wondrous ways and in ways unknown to us, directs all things to the end that He wills, that His eternal WILL might be the FIRST CAUSE of all things.\(^{19}\)

Calvin calls himself the one “reviled” because his enemies claimed that since he made God the first cause of everything, this meant that God was the author of sin. Calvin denies this conclusion. He quotes other men as authorities and points out that while they agreed with Calvin that God was the first cause, they never made God the author of sin. He writes:

> But when Calvin, and before him Luther and Bucer, and antecedently to them, Augustine, the other godly teachers, testify that the will of God is the supreme cause of all things that are in the world; it was the farthest possible from the mind of each of them, and of them all, to entangle God in any shadow of fault.\(^{20}\)

In his commentary on Ephesians, Calvin distinguishes between the causes involved in predestination using Aristotelian distinctions. He does not use this language in the *Institutes* but the same idea is there. He wrote:


The efficient cause is the good pleasure of the will of God; the material cause is of Christ; and the final cause is the praise of His grace…, The formal cause [is] the preaching of the Gospel, by which the goodness of God flows out to us.\textsuperscript{21}

Since the efficient cause of predestination is the will of God there is no room for human autonomy in the work of salvation.

**God’s Sovereignty is Incomprehensible**

Calvin says that it is incomprehensible to him how it is possible that “God wills that which may seem to us inconsistent with His nature.”\textsuperscript{22} He confesses ignorance. He thinks that it is wrong for men curiously to pry into the solution to his problem. Calvin declares aloud that the why? Of God’s works is not to be audaciously or curiously pried into; but that, on the contrary, as the counsels of God are a mighty deep, and mysteries that surpass the limits of our comprehension, it becomes a man rather to adore them with reverence than to investigate them with presumption.\textsuperscript{23}

What Calvin says here is very much in line with his exegesis of Romans 9:20 where Paul responds to those who question the sovereign will of God:

\begin{quote}
Nay but, O man, who art thou that replies against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?
\end{quote}

It is impossible to overemphasize the stress which Calvin puts on these words. It is of critical importance that man has no right to judge God or poke curiously into His secret will. God does not need to justify Himself to men. Rather they must know that He is infinitely righteous and just and because of that everything that He does is perfectly good.

For this reason Calvin distances himself from some of the

School Men who attempted to separate the power of God from His wisdom. Some scholastics argued that God possessed absolute justice and therefore whatever He did was inherently just. This in effect made God into an omnipotent tyrant.

Calvin objects that this view does not vindicate God, rather it divorces His justice from His wisdom. Calvin is firm in upholding the perfect wisdom and righteousness of God in all of His decrees. God is vindicated because everything that He does is most wise. Calvin argues that God’s omnipotent will can never be separated from His eternal wisdom.

Calvin’s argument comes down to this: God is the supreme cause who is infinitely righteous, therefore men must know that everything that He wills is righteous. He does not attempt to answer the deep question concerning how God can be sovereign and yet not be responsible for sin. He claims to have a learned ignorance. He says elsewhere:

And let us not be ashamed to be ignorant of something in this matter, wherein there is a certain learned ignorance.

**Election not Based on Foreknowledge**

Calvin carefully distinguishes his view of election from that of Pighius and Georgius. They taught that election was based on God’s foreknowledge of what His free creatures would choose to do. Since God foreknew that a certain man would choose for Christ, God elected that man to receive the reward of eternal life. Calvin writes:

By thus covering election with a veil of foreknowledge, they not only obscure it but feign that it has its origin elsewhere.

Pighius and Georgius were teaching the Semi-Pelagian view that election was based on foreseen works. Because of this the focus of

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Calvin’s attack is on the notion that man is able to do good works.

In defense of this position, Calvin refers to Augustine who had taught that the word “foreknowledge” in Scripture was not to be so widely separated from predestination as the opponents of sovereign grace taught. They claim that foreknowledge is mere knowledge of what will occur in the future. Augustine instead argued that by “foreknowledge” “we are to understand the counsel of God by which He predestinates His own unto salvation.”

In defense of his position Calvin exegetes portions of I Peter. Calvin writes that it is ridiculous to “pin the eternal election of God upon the merits of men” as his opponents do in their interpretation of I Peter. Calvin responds that Peter everywhere ascribes election to God alone.

He notes that with the words from I Peter 1:2; “elect according to the foreknowledge of God,” the apostle is placing the decree of God as the one cause “above all other causes” of the believer’s election. Peter is not comparing men with men so that some by their goodness merit being elected. In addition Calvin refers to I Pet. 1:20 where we read; “who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world.” He states that the idea is that Christ was preordained to be the Saviour of His people by the “eternal counsel of God.”

He also quotes from the Apostle Paul who writes, “God hath not cast away His people, which He foreknew.” Here the foreknowledge of God can be nothing else than his eternal predestinating love for His elect.

Pighius and Georgius connect their doctrine of foreknowledge with their notion of a general gospel offer. The two men differ in their specific approaches to the issue but are united in their view that men reject the gospel independently of the sovereign will of God. Since God sees who will reject the gospel and who will accept it, he is able to elect the latter.

Reid explains Pighius’ views:

Pighius in the main is concerned to maintain that, while the benefits of election are universally offered, the wicked deprive themselves of them independently of the will and

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29 Ibid., p. 48.
30 Ibid., p. 49.
Two important points are taught. First, God universally offers salvation to all men. Secondly, the reception of those benefits is ultimately dependent upon the will of man.

Georgius denies that men believe because they are elect. Reid states:

Georgius, on the other hand, is disposed to hold to universalism, while maintaining that the offer of salvation is on the evidence of Scripture made upon the basis not of election but of belief, not to the elect but to believers.

Georgius’ universalism involves the idea that God loves all men and desires to save “every man jack” (as Gill would later describe this position). In addition, Georgius taught a universal atonement. The result is that he distinguishes “believers” from the “elect” since the latter is a term that Calvin uses for believers who were ordained to believe.

 Guards against Universal Grace

In his development of the doctrine of election, Calvin rejected the notion of a universal or common grace. This is important because there are some who think that they can develop a consistent Calvinism while retaining belief in some sort of universal grace.

Calvin argues against Pighius’ view that God planned to save all men. Pighius had attempted to show “that salvation was ordained for all men without distinction or difference.” In defense of this he quotes Psalm 145:9 which reads, “The Lord is good to all.” According to Pighius this meant that God loved all men and had ordained all of them to eternal life.

This same text has been used in support of the doctrine of common grace which teaches that God in his grace and favor gives many good things to reprobate men.

Calvin rejects this interpretation. He argues that this passage is referring to the whole of the creation. Therefore it is ridiculous to

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32 Ibid., p. 11.
talk about a grace that all creatures--even animals receive.

**Not a Universal Offer**

Pighius also taught that the offer of grace was universal in the gospel. Calvin describes Pighius’ position which is similar to what is today called the “well-meant gospel offer”:

> But he, at the same time, holds fast the fiction that grace is offered equally to all, but that it is ultimately rendered effectual by the will of man, just as each one is willing to receive it.\(^{34}\)

Calvin teaches that grace is not offered equally to all because this would imply that every man would have the ability to receive it. Therefore grace is offered in the gospel only to the elect.

Pighius is also criticized for believing in a universal invitation to salvation. Calvin writes:

> The fiction of Pighius is puerile and absurd, when he interprets grace to be God’s goodness in inviting all men to salvation, though all were lost in Adam.\(^{35}\)

It is impossible that God should invite all men to salvation when he has according to His secret will ordained only the elect to salvation.\(^{36}\)

Today, many think that the gospel cannot be appropriately preached if the well-meant gospel offer is not maintained. Calvin’s opponents thought that the gospel could only be preached if there was a universal offer of salvation. Calvin denies that this is necessary. He thinks that a particular offer is consistent with the universal proclamation of the gospel.

Calvin did deal with the objection that according to his views preaching was useless. It is interesting that the objection made against him by Pighius and Georgius that preaching was impossible according to an Augustinian view of predestination is the same time of objection made today against those who deny the well-meant gospel offer. The precise arguments that Calvin used against his

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semi-Pelagian opponents are the same ones that someone like Hoeksema, who denied the well-meant gospel offer, could make against his Christian Reformed opponents.

Election Must be Preached

Calvin in no way considers the debate between Augustinianism and Semi-Pelagianism to be an academic wrangling with no practical consequences. He takes the disagreement very seriously and considers it a discussion about which the people of God should be aware in order that God might be honored.

He sharply reacts to those who played down the importance of the doctrine of election for the Christian life. Some claimed to believe in election but they taught that it should not be preached to the common people. The reason for this silence was that the doctrine would lead to licentious living. According to this reasoning, the debate over election was of relative importance because the doctrine should not be preached anyway.

Calvin’s response is that predestination must be preached in order that “he who ‘hath ears to hear’ the free grace of God might glory in God, and not in himself.”

In the context where this reply is given, Calvin argues from Augustine why election must be preached. First it is evident that the Apostle Paul taught the doctrine of election while “also retaining the faithful under the discipline of a godly life.” If Paul could teach these two truths side by side, Calvin asks

Why should these men of our day think they act rightly in the matter of their teaching by keeping themselves shut up in silence within the strong tower of invincible truth…?

Benefits of Preaching Election

The doctrine of election must not be hid. In contrast Calvin says that the doctrine must be drunk by those who have ears to hear.

The eternal relevance of the doctrine of election is that it is by drinking from its wells and believing in it that the man of God would

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37 Ibid., p. 148.
38 Ibid., p. 148.
39 Ibid., p. 148.
live. Calvin writes:

Wherefore, let him that receiveth not the truth reject it; but let him that heareth and understand the truth, receive it and drink it, and drink and live!\textsuperscript{40}

Calvin teaches that the doctrine of election must be known in order that we might have spiritual life. The doctrine is of such critical importance that Calvin connects Jesus’ words about having spiritual ears to hear with hearing this doctrine.

Election can only be believed by men whose ears are open by the Spirit. Its reception is evidence of a spiritual man. Negatively, the rejection of election is a sign of a heart that is spiritually blind to the things of God.

The truth of God’s sovereign election must therefore be preached in order that the elect might hear the truth and live. This is because man is saved by alone trusting in the merits of Christ for his salvation.

\textbf{In Conclusion}

Part one has looked at Calvin’s defense of the doctrine of predestination. A number of things stand out.

First, Calvin develops his views within the infralapsarian system and therefore teaches that God chose the elect out of the mass of fallen mankind. This allows him to emphasize the fact that all men by nature deserved condemnation. Therefore God was not unjust in choosing to reveal His grace and mercy to some in distinction from others.

Secondly, Calvin very importantly develops the truth that God is the first cause of everything that occurs. Some seem averse to using causal language in the controversy between Augustinians and Semi-Pelagians. But Calvin’s repeated use of terms like “ultimate cause”, “proximate cause”, and “first cause” show that causal language is very important for distinguishing between Calvinism and Arminianism.

Thirdly, Calvin does very important work in relating election to reprobation. He correctly teaches that there is a parallelism between election and predestination when he defends the doctrine of

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 148.
double predestination. This is important because double predestination is the only consistent and defensible form of predestination. This allows him to teach that reprobation is a decree of God and not something that merely occurs, according to some sort of Semi-Pelagian conception of a divine “permissive will.”

Calvin also presents useful distinctions between election and reprobation. One example of this is his point that while man’s condemnation because of the Fall is the proximate cause of reprobation, that on the other hand there is no proximate cause of election. This provides Calvin with a strong defense against any doctrine of works righteousness. He can teach that God chose the elect in Christ not based on any human merit but only according to His sovereign good pleasure.

Fourthly, Calvin does a nice job of showing that the Scriptures do not teach that election is conditional upon Divine foreknowledge of human merit. He demonstrates that the Scriptures teach that men are elect because God first chose them.

Finally, Calvin’s defense is to be praised for the connection he makes between the doctrine of predestination and the necessity of preaching the gospel. He rightly rejects the theory of a universal offer of the gospel because he knew that it was inconsistent with sovereign grace.

Calvin also rightly emphasized the importance of preaching the doctrine of election. He knew that the doctrine was of great consolation for the humble Christian. In addition, he taught that through “drinking” of this doctrine the elect would find life. And only when this doctrine was preached would the people of God ascribe all of the glory to God for their salvation.

Part 2: The Nature of Calvin’s Defense of Predestination

Introduction

Calvin argues against his opponents in intriguing ways. Calvin’s method of argumentation is especially interesting in his treatise “On the Eternal Predestination of God” because in this treatise he is at his apologetic best. He uses a wide variety of methods to dispose of his opponents. Part two of this essay will focus
on the nature of Calvin’s defense of divine sovereignty in this treatise.

Use of Rhetorical Prose

Something must be said about Calvin’s use of prose. It had been popular in the Middle Ages to do theology in a very scientific manner. The *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas is a good example of the Scholastic method of theology. This method was scientific, precise, and exhaustive. The theologian developed his views using a pedagogical question and answer format.

Calvin abandons Scholasticism. He writes in flowing prose. His style is fresh. Indeed books have been written about Calvin’s prose and his use of rhetoric. He is also famous for his magisterial handling of the Latin and French languages.

Calvin’s prose is readable and interesting. In addition he knows how to argue in convincing ways. He has an arsenal of theological, spiritual, rhetorical, and logical methods of argumentation which he puts to use.

A Shifting of Audiences

Calvin uses an interesting rhetorical device in his writings. He was writing for a very wide audience. He knew that Catholics, Lutherans, and others throughout Europe would read his writings. For this reason at various points in the text he directly addresses members of these different groups. Many instances of this are found in the *Institutes* as well as his *Treatise of the Eternal Predestination of God*.

For example, Calvin makes a basic distinction between addressing men who oppose predestination and those who believe it. At an early point in the treatise on predestination Calvin confronts those who object to divine sovereignty. Calvin admonishes Semi-Pelagians by directly addressing them with the second personal pronoun:

It is intolerable to you, and hateful, that the power and works of God should exceed the capacity of your own mind; and yet you will grant to an equal the enjoyment of his own mind and judgment. Now, will you, with such madness as this, are to make mention of the adorable God? What do you really think of God’s glorious Name? And will you vaunt that the apostle
is devoid of all reason, because he does not drag God from his throne and set Him before you, to be questioned and examined?41

Calvin often switches his intended audience. One moment he is addressing reprobate men while in the next he speaks to Pighius.

Calvin speaks directly to the humble Christian. Responding to Pighius, Calvin seems to reach a point where he realizes that certain men are unteachable on the subject of predestination--like Pighius they are hardened in heresy. So he turns to true believers and says:

At the present moment, let all those who are willing to be taught in the school of God hear what the apostle plainly, and without any ambiguity, really says and means.42

With these words Calvin establishes a rapport between himself and the godly and explains the Scriptures to them knowing that they will bow before the truth.

**Dependence upon Augustine**

Two things stand out in Calvin’s defense of predestination with respect to his dependence upon authority. The ultimate source of his theology was the Holy Scriptures, yet he also quoted heavily from Augustine.

To an astonishing degree Calvin depends upon Augustine in his defense of predestination. Protestants tend to think of Calvin as being more original in his development of Calvinism than he actually was. Theologians have castigated him for this doctrine while leaving Augustine’s name unmentioned as if Calvin alone was its awful source! But beyond a doubt Calvin owed an incalculable debt to Augustine.

In his treatise on predestination, Calvin depends upon Augustine at almost every important point. Again and again he quotes from Augustine in responding to Pighius, Georgius, and Bolsec.

Calvin used this method for a number of reasons. He wanted

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to teach that his doctrines were ancient and found in the greatest of all the patristic. We do not properly understand the weight that tradition played in the Middle Ages. Because the Medievals leaned so much upon tradition, the Scholastics had not done much development of theology but had been content to quote the fathers.

Calvin also could depend upon Augustine so much because Augustine had dealt with most if not all of the basic objections that were brought against him. Augustine’s genius had been displayed in his acute analysis of Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism. He had seen to the heart of the matter and had responded to the basic rationalistic objections against predestination. So Calvin could quote him at numerous points against his opponents.

**Scripture the only Source of the Doctrine of Election**

What stands out in Calvin’s defense of Augustinian soteriology is his reliance upon the Word of God. We might say that the distinguishing methodology of Calvin’s defense of predestination is that he relies only upon the Scriptures for the truth. He writes:

> For our wisdom ought to be nothing else than to embrace with humble teachable ness, and at last without finding fault whatever is taught in Sacred Scripture.\(^{43}\)

The Scriptures play two important roles in Calvin’s development of election. First, it is the only source for true knowledge. Secondly, it defines the limits of our knowledge with respect to predestination.

It cannot be assumed that late Medieval theologians would automatically depend upon the Scriptures alone for doctrine. The Roman Catholic theologians were insistent on the authority of tradition. Added to this dependence upon tradition was the development of scholasticism. This led to a rationalistic approach to theological questions.

Calvin in contrast develops the doctrine of predestination and divine sovereignty on the basis of the Scriptures. That was his intention. He wrote:

> Let this then be our sacred rule, to seek to know nothing

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concerning it, except what Scripture teaches us: when the Lord closes his holy mouth, let us also stop the way, that we may not go farther.  

Calvin wants to avoid all speculation. He writes:

No one can be more averse to paradox than I am, and in subtleties I find no delight at all.

It is ironic that Calvin has been accused of developing a speculative and unbiblical theology.

**An Exegetical Defense**

Calvin’s defense is first and foremost exegetical. His development of the doctrine of election flows out of his explanations and interpretations of Scripture. The Reformation liberated the reformers from the allegorical exegesis of the past. It opened the way to a literal, common-sense reading of Scripture. Calvin is a biblical theologian.

Calvin is very effective in his use of the Scriptures. We shall look at just one example of this when he contrasts Pighius’ views with what the Apostle Paul teaches. This example occurs when Calvin is discussing Pighius’ interpretation of Romans 9 and what it means that God creates some vessels to honor and some to dishonor. Pighius explains this passage to teach that an elect person is chosen to be a vessel of honor because of his merit. He states:

Thus, in order that Jacob might be a vessel of mercy, his soul had purified itself, on which account he was deservedly made a vessel unto honor; and it was thus that God, having a respect unto this self-purification, which He foreknew, loved and chose the patriarch before he was born.  

Calvin then shows the silliness of this interpretation by saying: “So Pighius. Now hear Paul.” He quotes from Ephesians 2:10 where

Paul says “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” Calvin explains:

Paul, therefore, who, with all soberness of mind, glories in being a wise master-builder, lays the foundation of all salvation in the free grace of God alone.  

Calvin goes on to show more points of contrast between Pighius and Paul. This methodology is successful because of the clarity of the apostle’s teaching about election.

The point is that Calvin lets the scriptures speak for themselves. He is interested in letting them shine forth in their clarity and perspicuity.

The first commentary that Calvin wrote was on the Epistle to the Romans. The exegetical work in this commentary laid the groundwork for the doctrine of predestination developed in his Treatise on Predestination and in the Institutes. So Calvin’s defense of predestination was primarily exegetical.

The Use of Humor and Sarcasm

Some historians have painted Calvin as a humorless theologian. They have grounded his doctrine of predestination in a serious and unhappy personality. It is questionable whether a theologian should use sarcasm to attack an opponent. After all, it was rare that the prophets or apostles used sarcasm against the enemies of God.

What we should consider surprising is Calvin’s reserve in attacking his enemies personally. He was tame compared to his opponents and other of his contemporaries. Calvin’s theology was on the whole a very positive presentation of the truth. His strengths were in logic and in clarity of reasoning. He used these powers to develop a positive Christian theology as is seen especially in the Institutes. So Calvin was not a vitriolic or immoderate writer.

But he did use sarcasm and humor at times. For example, he points out that Pighius’ misinterpretation of Psalm 145 leads to the logical conclusion that all things, including dogs and asses are ordained to eternal life. This is because the Psalmist is talking about  

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48 Ibid., p. 174.
the Lord being good with respect to all His works. Calvin ends with biting words, comparing Pighius to asses and dogs: “But why should not Pighius thus fight for his brethren?”

Calvin’s humor is displayed when he demonstrates the absurdities of opponents. For example, when he discusses Pighius’ view that God elects men based on their merits, Calvin responds by teaching that God is no respecter of persons. He then mentions one of Pighius’ arguments. Pighius contends that the blessed mother of Christ was chosen on account of her own merit, as is proved (he says) from her own song, “Who hath regarded the lowliness of His handmaiden.”

Calvin shows the absurdity of this contention. He responds:

Such are Pighius’ PROOFS that the election of God is founded on the merits of men, and that it is not sovereign and free, because he chose, in the case of Mary, that which was mean and contemptible!

Not only is Pighius’ proof erroneous, but Calvin shows the silliness of trying to base election upon the merit of someone who does not possess any!

Calvin provides humorous names for his opponents. In “A Brief Reply” Calvin responds to Jerome Bolsec who attacked his treatise on predestination. He, of course, views Bolsec as an enemy of the truth, yet Calvin calls his opponent “our holy champion.” Calvin writes:

Having blathered forth his revilings till he was tired, our holy champion draws a little nearer, affirming that some men in these perilous times,…[assert] that Adam sinned by the will of God,…[and] by His actual impulse.

Calvin portrays Bolsec as a quixotic figure who imagines himself to

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49 Ibid., p. 88.
50 Ibid., p. 110.
51 Ibid., p. 110.
52 Ibid., p. 194.
be a defender of the faith.

Calvin was not amused with heretical men abusing holy ministers of the gospel. He writes of Bolsec:

Finding himself now entered into a boundless field, he exults and raves, leaving no kind of abuse whatever unuttered, that he might distress the minds of godly ministers, whose virtues, I would to God, he could imitate, even in a hundredth degree.\(^{53}\)

Calvin implies that it is wrong to abuse godly men but that strong words can be used against enemies of the truth. He calls Pighius and Georgius “a pair of unclean beasts by no means badly matched.”\(^{54}\) We do not have space to discourse on the ethics of such language. But we can note that Jesus called Herod a “fox.”

Calvin does not shy away from using powerful language, humor, or sarcasm. To a certain extent this is expected given the historical context within which he was writing. He was not involved in relaxed theological disputes. Men were being killed and armies were being sent out because of the Reformation doctrines. It was a violent era, and it sometimes called for violent words. Therefore, Calvin deserves some sympathy for how he responded to his calumniators.

**Accuses His opponents of setting up Straw-men**

A problem that Calvinists have endured throughout the centuries is that their enemies have distorted their views to better attack them. Semi-Pelagians characterize Calvinism as teaching that God was the author of sin.

In logic, it is called “setting up a straw-man” when one mischaracterizes another person’s view and replaces it with an erroneous position that is easily shot down. Calvin’s opponents claimed that he taught that God was the author of sin. This position is a caricature of Calvin’s doctrine and a terrible heresy. God is infinite holiness and it is utter blasphemy to claim that any sin is found in Him. Calvin responded to Bolsec:


\(^{54}\) *Ibid.*, p. 27.
Now, what means the barking of this dog about God being made the author of sin? The fact is, that this fellow fabricates monsters in his own imagination that he might get the fame of fighting with them.\textsuperscript{55}

Calvin states that his opponent has no right to conclude that divine sovereignty makes God into the one who actually sins. Calvin is careful to distinguish divine sovereignty from the fiction which its enemies create to abuse it.

**The Mystery of Election reveals its Veracity**

Calvin gives an interesting argument against Pighius who claimed that all men are loved by God. He asks where the mystery in theology is if Pighius is right. He thinks that Pighius’ doctrine of God’s universal love and man’s ability to choose for salvation can easily be understood by common sense. He says “What would there be that common sense could not receive?”\textsuperscript{56}

Calvin responds that the truth of election and reprobation is indeed a deep mystery. It is profound and “more deeply concealed than the human mind can penetrate.”\textsuperscript{57} Surprisingly, Calvin argues that because the truth is beyond human understanding that is proof of its veracity. He writes:

But when you hear of a mystery surpassing all human understanding, you may at once conclude that all solutions of men, derived from common natural judgment, and which might avail in a profane court of justice, are frivolous and vain.\textsuperscript{58}

At first glance it seems surprising that Calvin would say this. For surely the doctrines of Semi-Pelagianism are mysterious in a sense. It is incomprehensible how God could be God and yet man could possess libertarian freedom. So from that point of view the error is more mysterious than the truth because it is illogical, paradoxical, and irrational.

\textsuperscript{58} *Ibid.*, p. 72.
But from another point of view Calvin is right. It is true that in the light of the profound truths revealed in the Scriptures the silly rationalistic objections against Augustinianism lose their force. Arguments against sovereign grace that come from proud rational thought do seem “frivolous and vain” when viewed in the light of the profound and magnificent doctrine of election revealed in the Scriptures.

A Spiritual Controversy

Calvin does not assume that he can himself convince men of predestination. He always views the controversy as a spiritual one. Ungodly men do not believe the truth because they are spiritually blind. Calvin calls Pighius “this blind instructor” and demonstrates this blindness in his analysis of Pighius’ worthless exegesis. Pighius is compared to a wild beast who has escaped from his cage and is rushing wildly about in his attempts at exegesis. Calvin declares:

Nor do any others ever possess “eyes” to see God, or His truth, but those whose minds God Himself enlightens by His Spirit.

Calvin speaks of the fact that God hardens and blinds the hearts of men so that they do not see the truth. He is teaching the important point that controversies in theology take place in a spiritual realm where arguments are not won by mere reason and argumentation but by the enlightening influence of the Holy Spirit.

In addition to the enemies of predestination being spiritually blind, Calvin does not hesitate to designate them reprobate men. He describes Pighius as a “vessel of wrath” and states that even while he attacks God and truth he is under condemnation:

Pighius, however, will one day stand before the tribunal of that God of whom Paul declares, “That he will manifest His power upon the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction.” Nay, our opponent even now feels, under the sense of the eternal destruction which awaits him,…This miserable mortal (I say)

59 Ibid., p. 152.
60 Ibid., p. 152.
is even now experiencing how true that word is, “That God overcometh when He is judged.” (Ps. 51:4).\textsuperscript{61}

The opponents of election are not merely Christians who misunderstand the truth. They are not fellow Christians with a watered-down version of Christianity. They are heretics who are under condemnation in this world and that to come.

**The Dispute is Important: It Concerns the Glory of God**

Calvin views the debate between himself and Semi-Pelagians as an important dispute. The importance of the dispute is found in that Semi-Pelagianism causes man to glory in himself and thereby to dishonor God. The doctrine of election must be taught in order that men might give to God the glory that He alone deserves.

Not only does the end result of a denial of election mean that man glories in himself, but also the denial of election involves arguments that blaspheme God. That Semi-Pelagians, including Pighius, blaspheme God in their attack on the doctrine of election is evident in the insults that they hurl against the God whom Calvin teaches. Calvin writes that Pighius says:

> If God (argues this worthless and daring mortal) created any men for destruction, He is not worthy of being loved.\textsuperscript{62}

Calvin notes that this insult is not ultimately an insult to himself and Augustine who taught election, but it is a daring blasphemy against God Himself. He says:

> This miserable mortal feels now, and all his fellows will hereafter feel, the effects of those reproaches which they hurl at God from their foul and profane mouths.\textsuperscript{63}

Such insults against the glory of God will fall back “with all their weight, upon the heads of those who utter them.”\textsuperscript{64}

It is evident that Calvin views the truth of election to be of

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., p. 109.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., p. 151.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., p. 151.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., p. 151.
fundamental importance for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Without the doctrine, men glory in themselves and blaspheme God. But when the doctrine is preached and believed then men will give glory to the true God.

**In Conclusion**

Calvin’s defense of predestination is successful as well as lively. A number of things stand out in his defense.

First, his dependence upon the Scriptures alone as the source of theological truth makes his development of the truth possible.

Secondly, his defense is interesting due to his lively use of rhetoric and humor. He wrote in an engaging prose style and even used sarcasm at times to show the extent to which his opponents went in their defense of heresy.

Thirdly, the defense is important in that Calvin realizes that it occurs within a spiritual realm. He views his opponents as enemies of God and truth.

Fourthly, Calvin’s defense is outstanding in that he understands the importance of the dispute. In his time as well as today there are many who want to play down the relevance of controversies between Augustinians and Semi-Pelagians. Calvin knew that the life and health of the church depended upon a clear understanding of sovereign grace.

Finally, Calvin correctly grounded the importance of the debate in the glory of God. He saw that sovereign election had to be believed and taught in order that God alone might receive the glory for His work of salvation.


Chapter 2

The Bolsec Controversy

Jerome Bolsec was a former Carmelite monk. He had been born in Paris, but had become a monk in Italy. He began to doubt Catholicism and threw aside his cowl when he got in trouble with the authorities. Apparently he was speaking “too freely respecting the Catholic Church.”65 He fled to the Duchess of Ferrara who had helped other Reformed priests. He married while he was in Ferrara and then moved in 1550 with his wife to Veigy, a small town near Geneva.

Bolsec then set up a medical practice, even helping some prominent friends of John Calvin. It would have been better for Bolsec if he would have concentrated on the care of the body, than have turned to the care of the soul. Unfortunately he began to argue theology in Geneva. He aroused controversy by his radical denunciations of “Calvin’s God as a hypocrite and liar, as a patron of criminals, and as worse than Satan.”66 The Venerable Company, the company of pastors in Geneva, took him to task in March of 1551 and John Calvin, soon after this, met with him in an attempt to change his

mind.

Before long Bolsec was again before the consistory for a second offense. When he was questioned concerning his views, he first stated that he believed that a certain number were elected, but that no one was reprobated. He also claimed that election was conditional on faith. But it is reported that when he was pressed, he admitted that he believed that all men are elected.

Bolsec’s opposition to the doctrine of election taught in Geneva reached an apex when he interrupted a sermon by John de St. Andre on October 16, 1551 after the preacher inferred reprobation from John 8:47. This passage reads: “He that is of God heareth God’s words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God.” The preacher explained the passage in these words: “All those who are not of God, resist him to the end, because God affords the grace of obedience to his elect alone.”

Bolsec stopped the preacher and argued that men are not saved because they are elected, but that they are elected because they have faith. He called Calvin’s position that “God decides the fate of man before his birth” “false and godless.”

Stebbing describes the scene:

As the preacher uttered this remark, a man suddenly started up from the midst of the congregation, and combated with unbecoming vehemence the doctrine which had been thus advocated.

Bolsec claimed that Calvin’s view had originated in the modern writer Laurentius Valla who had taught that God was the cause of evil and sin.

Unfortunately for Bolsec, Calvin entered the church as Bolsec was castigating his theology. Both Farel and Calvin were present and afterwards spoke against Bolsec’s views. An important part of Bolsec’s polemic was his claim that there was no ancient church father who had taught Calvin’s doctrine. He claimed that Calvin was leading them “to believe that St. Augustine had been of [his] opinion;

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67 Ibid., p. 616.
68 Ibid., p. 616.
70 Ibid., p. 131.
but neither he nor any of the ancient doctors held it.”\textsuperscript{71}

Calvin reportedly overwhelmed Bolsec’s position by logic, the Scriptures, and quotations from Augustine. Wendel writes:

Calvin made a spiritual reply ‘adducing besides numerous evidences from the Scriptures, endless quotations from St. Augustine so exactly that it seemed as if he had read and studied them that very day’.\textsuperscript{72}

The people in the church felt embarrassed for Bolsec. However the witnesses of this scene noticed that Bolsec himself did not appear taken back in the least.

An officer of the law was in the church and had witnessed Bolsec’s disturbing of the peace, in interrupting the sermon, so he promptly arrested him. The immediate issue that was before the magistrates was not whether Bolsec’s views were heretical, but whether a person had the right to interrupt a sermon. But the ministers of Geneva also presented seventeen articles against Bolsec’s theology to the Council.

An Anti-Calvin Bias by Historians

Jerome Bolsec’s attack on Calvin’s view of predestination and the consequences of it seem ordained to elicit the anti-Calvin bias of many historians. This is due to the fact that most historians are semi-Pelagian and for this reason, if they are not supportive of Bolsec, they are at least antagonistic to Calvin’s doctrine of predestination. Historians seem to view this controversy more in political than theological terms. Walker is an example. In his sparse comments about Bolsec, he claims that this attack by Bolsec was one on “the very foundations of Calvin’s authority, for his sole hold on Geneva was as an interpreter of the scriptures. If he was not right in all, he was thoroughly discredited.”\textsuperscript{73} Walker continues: “Calvin was thus holding his power with difficulty” in 1553.\textsuperscript{74} This assumes that

\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 90,91.
\textsuperscript{74} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 355.
Calvin held power or was trying to hold it. Philip Holtrop is the most recent exponent of the idea that Calvin used his controversy with Bolsec for political reasons.

But the fact of the matter is that Calvin did not develop his views on predestination at this point to defeat Bolsec. In the first edition of the *Institutes*, he had already set this idea forward. The controversy was primarily theological because Calvin understood better than anyone that salvation by grace alone can be defended only with an Augustinian view of predestination. Therefore Calvin’s fundamental attempt in the Bolsec controversy was to set forth his defense of the heart of the Reformation. Martin Luther agreed that the main issue between himself and the Roman Catholics (and Erasmus) was the matter of free will or predestination. There were political ramifications in this controversy, but they were secondary to the theological controversy.

In his defense, Bolsec claimed that he had supporters in Bullinger and Melanchthon. The Consistory advised the Council to confer with the other churches in the Swiss confederation concerning Bolsec’s views. They sent five articles to the other cantons which contained in substance an explanation of Bolsec’s views as teaching that election was conditional on faith and that grace was universal. The Council asked the other churches to respond and condemn Bolsec’s views if they found them heretical. Calvin was to be surprised by the response. He seems to have expected that the other churches would agree with him on this fundamental issue.

Only two cantons came out in support of Calvin and condemned Bolsec’s views. Notably the city of Neuchatel responded with a critique of Bolsec’s views. This condemnation of Bolsec was influenced by the fact that the most influential pastor there was Calvin’s intimate friend Farel. But the majority of the cantons either did not condemn Bolsec’s views, cautiously supported them, or urged a policy of toleration on the issue.

Bullinger did not support Calvin’s view of predestination. He wrote to Calvin that many people did not like Calvin’s doctrine of predestination as it was set forth in the *Institutes*. He pressed Calvin to be moderate in his judgment of Bolsec. Bullinger wrote to Calvin, that contrary to the idea that God desires to save only the elect “According to the meaning of the apostle, God wills the happiness of
all men.” Here we find the same difference in opinion as between Herman Hoeksema and the Christian Reformed Church and Gordon Clark and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church on the issue of the well-meant gospel offer. This shows that the controversy over whether God desires to save all men goes back to the Reformation, and it also indicates what Calvin’s views were on this subject. Bullinger claimed that Bolsec erred in interpreting Zwingli to teach the “necessity of sin.” But Calvin could devastatingly reply to him:

> You say that my manner offends many excellent persons. But, between ourselves, Zwingli’s little book is filled with so many hard passages, that it far surpasses my weak comprehension.76

The influential Basel and Bern churches also did not condemn Bolsec. Myconius in Basel did not respond in a forceful manner either way. He rather pointed out the agreement that existed between Bolsec and Calvin.

The Bern church advocated toleration of Bolsec. They stated that it is easier to convince a man of the truth by charity rather than by force. They pointed Calvin to the fact that the issue of predestination is a deep mystery over which many men struggle because of the many passages that seem to teach the universal grace of God.

Nevertheless Bolsec was banished from Geneva. He was warned that if he should return he could expect a whipping. Bolsec then moved to Bern where he had found supporters, but after causing controversy there, he was exiled. He then left for France where he attempted to enter the ministry in the Reformed Churches. But it seems that he was unsuccessful, so he continued his wandering ways. In time he returned to the Roman Catholic Church. Within this church he found ready acceptance since he was semi-Pelagian and a bitter opponent of Calvin. A portion of the last years of his life he spent writing slanderous biographies of Calvin and Beza. His biography of Calvin, which accused Calvin of every sin imaginable, was used for hundreds of years by Roman Catholic and anti-Calvin polemicists to defame his character and memory.

Melanchthon’s dissatisfaction with Calvin’s critique of Bolsec was significant. Bolsec was partially correct when he claimed

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76 Ibid., p. 139.
that Melanchthon supported him. It seems clear that Bolsec’s views were closer to Melanchthon’s synergism than Calvin’s monergism. Melanchthon in private letters censured Calvin’s defense of the “Stoic doctrine of necessity.” He gave his support to the moderation of the other Swiss.

Calvin wrote a tract against Bolsec’s views. He dedicated it to the Council and called it the *Congregation on Eternal Election*. This document was approved by the Geneva church, but not by the other Swiss Churches. This was first written because communion was drawing near in Geneva and the pastors wanted to present a united front to the people. They wanted Calvin’s views on predestination clearly set forth in order that the people might understand the truth and so that any who had been infected with Bolsec’s error might not “pollute the sacrament.”

The introduction to this document shows the positive effect of the controversy. From our perspective hundreds of years later we can rejoice in this controversy because it led John Calvin and the Reformed Church in Geneva to a clearer understanding of predestination. It was an unknown Genevan pastor who wrote the introduction to the *Congregation*. He draws the conclusion that the Bolsec controversy was good because it led to the pastors having a Friday service in which they could clearly set forth the doctrine of predestination to the people. The controversy also allowed the common people clearly to see the truth that predestination is before faith. It is interesting that this pastor thinks that predestination is something that the common people can clearly believe. Today modern pseudo-Calvinists argue against getting lost in the labyrinth of election, as if election is something incomprehensible.

Bolsec is referred to as “this monkish quack doctor” who has attempted to put things into disarray. The men with whom Bolsec found support are not painted with a very pleasant brush, but are described as enemies of godliness and morality. The unknown pastor writes:

> This vagabond--impudent beyond measure, if there ever was a shameless man in the world--had already drawn some

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accomplices (for such sows find an adequate number of bedfellows).  

Calvin begins his response to Bolsec by presenting the Bible passages that teach predestination. He first discusses Ephesians 1:3-6 where Paul teaches that God elected a church in Christ. Calvin explains that God elected us not because of any merit on the part of humans, but “according to his own free purposes.”

He then discusses Romans 8:28-30 where we read that God chose His people according to His own purpose. Calvin explains that this purpose refers to the “immutable counsel” of God whereby He has elected a church. The purpose of God comes to expression in the calling wherein God “efficaciously and powerfully” draws his elect to himself.

Calvin studies Galatians 4:9 in which Paul claims that God knew the Christians before they knew him. Calvin writes:

Saint Paul acknowledges that men have known God by faith. But in order that human beings might understand that this does not proceed from themselves, he restrains himself and adds, “since you have been known by him.”

Calvin adds to these passages John 6:44 where we read that “no one can come to Christ unless the Father draws him.” He concludes with a study of Romans 9:6-20 where Paul clearly teaches the doctrine of predestination. Calvin notes how Paul talks about “willing” and “running” to show that man does not contribute to his salvation.

Calvin then deals with various objections to predestination. He realizes that some think that God is charged with injustice if he is said to have elected some. These objectors think that God is unjust in saving some and hating others. But Calvin points them to the words of Paul in Romans 9 who asks such men who they are to reply in such a way to God. Men must remember that they are men and God is God. God is the potter and men are the clay, so why does the clay dare speak against its maker? The almost humorous thing is that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{Ibid.}, p. 697.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, p. 699.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, p. 701.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, p. 702.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, p. 709.
\end{itemize}
these objectors were all worried about believers in predestination judging men, but here Calvin turns things around and shows that these people are judging God when they find a problem with election.

Calvin argues that predestination is consistent with human freedom and dignity. He also argues that the holy life is not made unnecessary by predestination. Calvin ties in election with the purpose of that election, which is that the elect might be holy.

In the concluding sections of this treatise, Calvin argues from the Scriptures for the doctrine of reprobation. He then deals with the supposedly “universal” texts in the Bible. He interprets I Timothy 2:4 to teach that God does not will the salvation of all men head for head, but that he wills the salvation of all classes.  

Calvin concludes by saying that God’s “will is the necessity of all things.” He makes clear that this does not make God the author of sin. Rather God wills everything in a just and right manner.

In this writing, Calvin sets forth his view of election as he had developed it in his *Institutes*. One has to be totally blind not to see that this doctrine plays a fundamental role in the Reformation doctrine that salvation is by grace alone, apart from any human works. Therefore one can easily explain the importance that Calvin gave to this doctrine in terms of the theological importance of the doctrine. It was not for political reasons that Calvin wrote against Bolsec; it was because he viewed Bolsec as teaching a fundamentally Roman Catholic doctrine of grace. Calvin was not “out to kill” Bolsec as Philip Holtrop claims; rather he was out to purge the Swiss Reformed churches of free-will theology.

The end result of the Bolsec controversy was that the Genevan church was solidly established in the doctrine of predestination. Calvin’s development of double predestination led to the almost universal acceptance of this doctrine by the later Reformed “scholastic” theologians. The stand that the pastors of Geneva took against Bolsec culminated in the Synod of Dort and the Westminster Assembly where Calvin’s doctrines became the confessional positions of the Dutch Reformed and English Reformed churches.

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Works Cited


Chapter 3

Calvin’s Doctrine of Providence

Introduction

Calvin begins his discussion of the doctrine of the providence of God by connecting providence with the doctrine of creation. Calvin states that we cannot even understand God as Creator unless we also know Him as the Governor and Preserver of the world. He writes:

For unless we pass on to his providence--however we may seem both to comprehend with the mind and to confess with the tongue--we do not yet properly grasp what it means to say: “God is Creator.”

It “would be cold and barren,” says Calvin, if we believed that God created the worlds and then was finished with His work. God may not be viewed as a “momentary Creator.” Then we would not worship Him for the divine power which shines forth in His continual work of providence. God’s glory demands that we worship

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87 Ibid., p. 197.
Him as the infinite Creator, but also as the God of providence who sustains and guides all things.

Calvin writes that even “carnal sense” goes beyond viewing God as Creator to realizing that “there is an energy divinely bestowed from the beginning, sufficient to sustain all things.” Even the pagans recognized the existence of the power of providence.

Calvin states that if the carnal minds of the philosophers saw that God continued to preserve and to govern the creation, how much more is it fitting that Christians should worship God as their Preserver and Governor.

God as a mere Creator is a cold and barren thought. In contrast, the Creator as the God of Providence cares for and sustains the entire creation. And especially God as Father of His elect cares for them by “his fatherly favor.”

In this chapter we shall look at the most prominent aspects of Calvin’s doctrine of providence. Calvin’s development of God as Preserver and Governor of the creation is examined in the first part. Part two looks at Calvin’s doctrine of general providence in distinction from the popular view of Semi-Pelagianism. In Part three the two basic objections made against Calvinism are presented, along with Calvin’s response to them. Part four looks at the hidden and secret nature of providence in Calvin’s theology and explains the reason why Calvin emphasizes this. In the final part we look at the comfort that Calvin believes the doctrine of providence affords the child of God.

Part 1: God as Preserver and Governor

In the Institutes, Calvin begins his exposition of providence in two important ways. He defines divine providence in terms of God’s two-fold work of being Preserver and Governor (Institutes I.16.1). He first describes God as the Preserver of creation. Secondly, he views God as the Governor of the world who directs all things to their proper goal.

In his treatise on The Secret Providence of God, Calvin defines providence. It is

That all-active and all-concerned seatedness on His throne

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88 Ibid., p. 197.
89 Ibid., p. 198.
above, by which He governs the world which He himself hath made. So that God, as viewed in the glass of His providence, is not only the Maker of all things in a moment, but the perpetual Ruler of all things which He hath created.\textsuperscript{90}

He adds to this definition that God “holds and continues a peculiar care of every single creature that He has created.”\textsuperscript{91}

Providence is “not an unconcerned sitting of God in heaven, from which He merely observes the things that are done in the world.”\textsuperscript{92} Providence does not merely mean that God “maintains and preserves that order of nature which He had originally purposed in Himself.”\textsuperscript{93}

Providence means that God is Preserver of the creation. God upholds it by causing it to continue to exist. Calvin teaches that the continuing existence of the entire creation depends upon the power of God. Commenting on Psalm 104:5 Calvin writes:

We are very base, indeed, if, taught by such undoubted a proof, we do not learn that nothing in the world is stable except in as far as it is sustained by the hand of God.\textsuperscript{94}

Calvin states that if the “secret power of God” did not uphold the world “it would be swallowed up every moment.”\textsuperscript{95}

Some theologians, like Jonathan Edwards, have talked about a “continuous creation” to emphasize that God upholds the world. Calvin comes close to this language:

In the propagation of living creatures, we doubtless see continually a new creation of the world.\textsuperscript{96}

\textsuperscript{91} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 224.
\textsuperscript{92} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 224.
\textsuperscript{93} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 224.
\textsuperscript{95} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 149.
\textsuperscript{96} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 168.
Through the spoken word God upholds the world. Calvin, when speaking of how God keeps the oceans from overflowing the world, says:

How is it that we have not thereby been swallowed up together, but because God has held in that outrageous element by his word?  

The work of preservation is the work of the Triune God. The Father speaks the Word. Calvin also speaks of the activity of the Holy Spirit. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that the world is upheld. He writes about God that “by his Spirit he keepeth us in life, and uphold us.” So the Triune God preserves the world by the Father speaking the Word and sending forth His Spirit.

Calvin states that faith ought to penetrate more deeply into providence than the carnal sense of the heathen. The Christian must conclude that God is “also everlasting Governor and Preserver.” He explains that God as the God of providence means that not only does He drive

The celestial frame as its several parts by a universal motion, but also in that he sustains, nourishes, and cares for, everything he has made, even to the least sparrow.

Calvin here uses the language of the philosophers when he talks about God being the cause of “universal motion.” Elsewhere he speaks of God being the “first cause” of everything that exists. Everything that occurs finds its origin in God’s eternal counsel of providence.

God not only upholds the universe, but He governs it. God governs human history so that all things work towards a certain goal. Calvin does not explicitly state what that one goal is in his treatment of providence. But the implication is that the goal is the glory of God in Jesus Christ as the Head of the church and as the one who gathers together in one the whole creation. Calvin writes that each creature is

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97 Ibid., p. 152.
99 Calvin, Institutes, p. 197.
100 Ibid., p. 197,198.
adapted to this end:

Let us know that all creatures above and below are ready to obey, that he may apply them to any use he pleases. From this we gather that his general providence not only flourishes among creatures so as to continue the order of nature, but is by his wonderful plan adapted to a definite and proper end.\textsuperscript{101}

So God guides both sinful men and the entire creation to the goal which He has decreed in His counsel of providence.

But God’s providence especially guides the church. Calvin writes that providence

Strives to the end that God may reveal his concern for the whole human race, but especially his vigilance in ruling the church, which he deigns to watch more closely.\textsuperscript{102}

Unfortunately, Calvin does not develop the implications of the truth that God’s providence is designed to rule the church in the section on providence in the \textit{Institutes}.

However, Calvin probably expects the reader to be able to tie together the doctrine of providence with what he elsewhere teaches about God’s goal and work in predestination.

\textbf{Part 2: The Doctrine of General Providence}

Calvin teaches that providence is comprehensive. It extends to every particular event that occurs in the world. God’s governance includes both the choices of men and the evils that occur in the world.

Calvin rules out certain views of providence. He disagrees with the Greek philosophers who merely thought that God “is the first agent because he is the beginning and cause of all motion.”\textsuperscript{103}

He also disagrees with the connected idea that God originally created the laws of nature and how He can stand back while the creation follows these laws. This error teaches that God allows “all things by a free course to be borne along according to a universal law

\textsuperscript{101} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 206,207.
\textsuperscript{103} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 200.
of nature.”¹⁰⁴

These errors lead to the pagan idea that things happen by chance. Calvin writes “we must know that God’s providence, as it is taught in Scripture, is opposed to fortune and fortuitous happenings.”¹⁰⁵

**The Semi-Pelagian explanation of General Providence**

Calvin admits that the doctrine of chance was popular in ancient times. But it was also wide-spread in his day. The popular doctrines of Semi-Pelagianism assumed that certain things happened by chance. Calvin writes:

What we ought to believe concerning providence is by this depraved opinion most certainly not beclouded, but almost buried.¹⁰⁶

Semi-Pelagianism emptied providence of its meaning in two ways. First, it made a distinction between general and special providence. Secondly, it taught its favorite doctrine--free will.

Semi-Pelagians attempted to avoid the implications of the doctrine of providence by making a distinction between general and special providence. They claimed that special providence did not occur, although general providence did.

They defined special providence as the view that God directs all of the actions of His individual creatures. General providence is the idea that God controls certain of the major events that occur in history.

Calvin explains general providence:

For now I propose to refute the opinion (which almost universally obtains) that concedes to God some kind of blind and ambiguous motion, while taking from him the chief thing: that he directs everything by his incomprehensible wisdom and disposed it to his own end. And so in name only, not in fact, it makes God the Ruler of the universe because it

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deprives him of his control.\textsuperscript{107}

Calvin emphasizes that the God of a mere general providence is not the Ruler of the world. Many events in the world happen apart from His control, and therefore by chance.

Semi-Pelagians rejected special providence because they believed in free will. They thought that belief in free will was necessary to defend human responsibility. Calvin recognizes that free will is the main reason why his opponents introduce contingency and chance into the world. He states that the theory of universal providence teaches:

That nothing hinders all creatures from being contingently moved, or man from turning himself hither and thither by the free choice of his will.\textsuperscript{108}

The Semi-Pelagians attempted to retain a doctrine of providence while holding to free will. They did this by claiming that God does not govern the actions of men by His determination, but by His might.\textsuperscript{109} This is because God’s power gives impetus to the choice that originates in man. Man governs himself, but God provides the power. Calvin explains:

And they so apportion things between God and man that God by His power inspires in man a movement by which he can act in accordance with the nature implanted in him, but He regulates His own actions by the plan of His will.\textsuperscript{110}

The result of this doctrine of providence is that men exist in a world where many things occur apart from the will of God. Man determines to a large extent what occurs in the world.

\textbf{Semi-Pelagian “General Providence” implies an Impotent God}

Calvin has an important objection to this view of providence. He has an important insight when he connects the doctrine of

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., p. 202.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., p. 202.
providence with God’s perfection of omnipotence. He does this to show that Semi-Pelagianism implied that God was not omnipotent.

Calvin writes:

And truly God claims, and would have us grant him, omnipotence—not the empty, idle, and almost unconscious sort that the Sophists imagine, but a watchful, effective, active sort, engaged in ceaseless activity.\textsuperscript{111}

The “Sophists” are the medieval scholastics who taught Semi-Pelagianism. They claimed that God foresaw events, but that He did not decree them. Calvin argues that this God is not exercising omnipotence. The very concept of omnipotence means that God is all-powerful, not in the abstract, but in actuality.

The “Sophists” and Calvin’s opponent, Bolsec, taught a doctrine of providence that limited providence to some events. Contrary to them, Calvin writes:

Not, indeed, an omnipotence that is only a general principle of confused motion, as if he were to command a river to flow through its once-appointed channels, but one that is directed toward individual and particular motions.\textsuperscript{112}

God is not merely omnipotent in that He possesses a potentiality for exercising divine might. Rather God is

Deemed omnipotent,…because, governing heaven and earth by his providence, he so regulates all things that nothing takes place without his deliberation.\textsuperscript{113}

\textbf{Calvin’s view of General Providence}

Calvin does not reject the terminology of his opponents. He also distinguishes at times between a general and special providence. But he is not tied to this distinction. Even though he refers to special providence as “God’s singular providence,” he feels free to describe providence merely in terms of “general providence.”

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 200. \\
\textsuperscript{112} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 200. \\
\textsuperscript{113} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 200. 
\end{flushright}
The Semi-Pelagians had invented a distinction based on erroneous assumptions. So Calvin uses the term “general providence” to cover “special providence.” By this he implies that it is wrong to make an absolute distinction between general and special providence.

First, let us look at a passage where Calvin speaks of special providence to argue that God does control particular events. In this context Calvin wonders how a Christian can doubt that special providence occurs. He writes:

But they wrongly conceal and obscure by this excuse that special providence which is so declared by sure and clear testimonies of Scripture that it is a wonder anyone can have doubts about it.\textsuperscript{114}

Calvin gives a number of Scriptural examples that demonstrate that God controls specific events in the world. For example, God in His Law declares in Leviticus 27:3-4 that “as often as he waters the earth with dews and rain he testifies to his favor.”\textsuperscript{115} In contrast, God’s vengeance is shown when He sends hail and storms.

At a certain point in the Institutes, Calvin discards the term “special providence” and only talks about “general providence.” He develops His doctrine of providence using this term.

Calvin notes that David speaks of general providence when he praises God for giving “food to the young of the ravens which call upon him” in Psalm 147:19.

It is wrong to restrict divine providence to specific acts. The words of Christ about God’s providence over the sparrow show that general providence is comprehensive. Calvin writes:

It is childish, as I have already said, to restrict this to particular acts, since Christ says, without exception, that not even a tiny and insignificant sparrow falls to the ground without the Father’s will.\textsuperscript{116}

Calvin provides numerous instances of God’s general providence at

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., p. 203.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., p. 204.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., p. 204.
work.

In beautiful passages Calvin exalts the glory of God as revealed in His providence. One example is his discussion of God’s providential government of the wind. Referring to Psalm 104:3-4, Calvin writes:

Yet from it I infer that no wind ever arises or increases except by God’s express command. Otherwise it would not be true that he makes the winds his messengers and the flaming fire his ministers, that he makes the clouds his chariots and rides upon the wings of the wind, unless by his decision he drove both clouds and winds about, and showed in them the singular presence of his power.  

Calvin makes it clear that God’s general providence of all creatures mans that He guides them towards a goal. God has a specific intent in the actions of all His creatures.

General providence extends to the choices of humans. Calvin appeals to Augustine who ruled out free will based on the providence of God. Augustine concludes

That nothing is more absurd than that anything should happen without God’s ordaining it, because it would then happen without any cause. For this reason, he excludes, the contingency that depends upon men’s will.

Calvin, with Augustine, teaches that God’s will is the “first cause of all things.”

So the doctrine of general providence is all comprehensive. God preserves and governs each creature according to His counsel of providence and guides them towards the goal that He has determined for them.

**Part 3: Two Basic Objections against Calvinism**

Jerome Bolsec and Michael Servetus heaped calumnies on

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117 Ibid., p. 206.
118 Ibid., p. 208.
119 Ibid., p. 208.
Calvin’s doctrine of providence. They brought two charges against Calvin. First, they claimed that he was teaching the doctrine of fatalism. Secondly, they argued that he made God the author of sin.

In the *Institutes* and his treatise entitled *The Secret Providence of God*, Calvin defends himself against these two charges. Calvin recognizes that these two objections were the historic objections of Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism to Augustinianism.

**First Objection: Augustinianism is Fatalism**

First, let us look at the charge of fatalism. Calvin argues that this is a caricature of his and Augustine’s doctrine of providence. He writes:

Those who wish to cast odium upon this doctrine defame it as the Stoics’ dogma of fate. This charge was once hurled at Augustine. Even though we are unwilling to quarrel over words, yet we do not admit the word “fate,” both because it is one of those words whose profane novelties Paul teaches us to avoid [I Tim. 6:20], and because men try by the odium it incurs to oppress God’s truth. Indeed, we are falsely and maliciously charged with this very dogma.\(^{120}\)

What did Stoicism teach? It taught that everything in the world happened by blind necessity. No divine mind governed the occurrences of the world. There was a necessary connection between the causes and effects in the physical world so that the present state of the world would necessarily cause specific future events. Calvin describes the dogma of the Stoics: he says that they

Contrive a necessity out of the perpetual connection and intimately related series of causes, which is contained in nature.\(^{121}\)

Stoicism contrasts with Calvin’s doctrine of providence which makes God the ruler and governor of the world. God decrees everything that will happen and then carries out His decree in time. Fatalism has no goal, but the God of providence guides the creation


toward an appointed end.\textsuperscript{122}

Fatalism teaches that what occurs must happen necessarily of its own “peculiar nature” and because of the causes exerted upon it. This differs from Calvin’s view of the necessity of events. Events are not necessary either “unconditionally” nor of their own “peculiar nature.”\textsuperscript{123} It is true that the events that “God has determined must necessarily so take place.”\textsuperscript{124} But they are only necessary in the sense that God has freely chosen to bring them about.

The doctrine of fatalism implies that men need not bother exercising prudence in their actions. For example, if someone knows that something bad is going to happen to him, then there is no sense in trying to avoid it.

Calvin’s opponents thought that if he was right, then people did not need to worry about their salvation. If God was going to predestinate certain men to salvation, then they will necessarily be saved. Men need not labor hard in the Christian life--for it will not change anything. Calvin writes:

If the Lord has indicated the point of our death, they say, we cannot escape it. Therefore it is vain for anyone to busy himself in taking precautions.\textsuperscript{125}

Calvin gives an example his opponents might use. Consider a man who avoids taking a certain road because he is afraid of being murdered by thieves. So he tries to save his life by remedying the situation--taking an alternate route. The objector says:

Now either all these remedies which attempt to correct God’s will are vain; or else there is no fixed decree of God that determines life and death, health and disease, peace and war, and other things that men, as they desire or hate them, so earnestly try by their own toil to obtain or to avoid.\textsuperscript{126}

The conclusion is this: If God has decreed everything that occurs in His counsel of providence, since what He has decreed will actually

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., p. 207.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., p. 215.
take place, men might as well cancel all of their plans about the future.

**Calvin’s Response: Providence does not rule out Prudence**

Calvin’s response is that providence does not rule out men exercising prudence. He refers to the words of the wisest of men, King Solomon. He states:

> But with respect to future events, Solomon easily brings human deliberations into agreement with God’s providence. For just as he laughs at the dullness of those who boldly undertake something or other without the Lord, as though they were not ruled by his hand, so elsewhere he says: “Man’s heart plans his way, but the Lord will direct his steps.” [Prov. 16:9]^{127}

So God’s counsel of providence does not hinder men from making plans.

God has provided means by which our lives should be preserved. God gives men wisdom so that they are able to exercise counsel or foresee danger. Speaking of the Semi-Pelagians who accuse him of fatalism, Calvin says:

> These fools do not consider what is under their very eyes, that the Lord has inspired in men the arts of taking counsel and caution, by which to comply with his providence in the preservation of life itself.\(^ {128}\)

So men must exercise prudence because God’s counsel of providence includes that men by means of prudence should be preserved.

**Second Objection: Augustinianism makes God the Author of Sin**

The second argument against Calvin’s doctrine of providence is the charge that he makes God the author of sin. Calvin calls this “the great objection of our adversaries.”\(^ {129}\)

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127 Ibid., p. 215, 216.
128 Ibid., p. 216.
129 Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 248.
He explains the objection:

If all things are done (say they) according to the will of God, and men can do or design nothing, but as He wills or ordains, God must be the author of all evils.\(^{130}\)

**The Semi-Pelagian doctrine of a Permissive Will**

The Semi-Pelagians claimed that God was not the author of sin in their system because He merely permitted humans to sin. They thought that the language of permission helped them avoid the alleged error of Calvinism.

Calvin admits that in ordinary language we can distinguish between what it means “to permit” something and “to command” something. But in this theological controversy, the distinction is not useful. The question is whether God is merely an “unconcerned and idle spectator” of “all the things that are done upon earth” or whether He “rules, overrules and governs, by His Divine command, every single action of the sons of men?”\(^{131}\)

Calvin then asks a question that is devastating to his opponents: “Does God permit things to be done willingly or unwillingly?”\(^{132}\) This question demonstrates that Calvin’s opponents had only attempted to side-step the basic question at issue with their term “permission.”

Calvin answers the question:

That God permits unwillingly is positively denied by Psalm cxv. 3: “The Lord hath done whatsoever He willed” (or, “whatsoever He hath pleased”). If, therefore, God permits willingly, to represent Him as sitting on His throne as a mere unconcerned and unengaged spectator, is utterly profane.\(^{133}\)

Since God willingly permits what occurs, it follows that God determines by His counsel what occurs. Then God is the active Ruler and Governor of the earth, and the Semi-Pelagians had no reason to accuse the Augustinians of teaching some doctrine which makes God


the author of sin. For according to their own view, God is the active Ruler who decrees all things. And surely they do not believe that God who permits events to occur in this way is responsible for sin.

Talk of a permissive will means nothing different from believing in a decretive will, for God must willingly permit events. And willing permission cannot be distinguished from God decreeing all things.

Semi-Pelagians think that their doctrine of permission makes it so that God is not responsible for evil. But a person who allows and permits another person to push a child in front of a bus is responsible for the child’s death just as well as the person who actually pushes the child. Therefore the Semi-Pelagian position must also explain how God can permit or allow evil and yet not be responsible for evil.

**Calvin’s Response to the Objection**

Calvin claims that an ancient distinction must rightly be understood to understand why God is not the author of sin. He writes:

> The distinction which formerly prevailed in the schools, and is now everywhere current, is perfectly true, provided it be rightly understood—“that the evil of the punishment, but not the evil of the fault, proceeds from God.”

So “evil” must be understood in two senses. There is an evil of punishment and an evil of fault.

God is the cause of evil in the sense of the word meaning punishments that God righteously brings upon sinful men. Calvin writes that “the praise of punishment must, of necessity, be ascribed to God.” Just as a “judge is praised who cleanses his hands by the execution of the wicked person” God is to be praised when he brings evils upon sinful men.

But God is not the author of evil understood as sinful actions. The evil of the fault--the guilt of the evil intention cannot be ascribed to God.

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134 Ibid., p. 248.
135 Ibid., p. 249.
136 Ibid., p. 249.
Calvin unequivocally states that the fault of an evil act must be ascribed to man.\textsuperscript{137} Man is the author of sin.

God is not the author of sin, because everything that He wills is righteous. His decrees are always pointed toward a righteous goal that glorifies His great name.

God decrees that a man should commit a sin, but God wills it out of righteous motives. Meanwhile, man performs the act out of sinful motives and contrary to Gods’ righteousness.

Calvin agrees with Augustine on this matter. He quotes the Bishop of Hippo who explains the possibility of God willing an event righteously while a man performs it evilly. Augustine says:

In point of oneness or agreement, there is sometimes a mighty difference between men and God in the matters of His righteous acts and judgments. As when, for instance, God willeth righteously that which men will evilly, and when God righteously willeth not that which men evilly will not.\textsuperscript{138}

The end or goal of an action determines whether it is good or evil. Since everything God wills is righteous He is never the author of evil. God wills that men perform evil because He can through their evil work out good. Calvin writes:

Nor, as the God of goodness, would He permit a thing to be done evilly, unless, as the God of Omnipotence, He could work good even out of the evil done.\textsuperscript{139}

In his commentary on Genesis 50:20, Calvin explains how God has decreed that Joseph should be sold into captivity, but that the sinful acts were performed by the brothers of Joseph. God had a good end in mind--the salvation of the covenant people from starvation. The brothers instead had evil motives and goals in mind.\textsuperscript{140}

Therefore God is vindicated, and men are shown to be responsible for their sins. God is not the author of evil.

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., p. 249.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., p. 252.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., p. 290.
Part 4: The Secret and Hidden Nature of Providence

Calvin’s discussion of providence is permeated by the theme that providence is hidden and secret. The hidden nature of providence explains why men are tempted to believe that things occur by chance. Men cannot see the causes of events. Therefore, they assume that they are fortuitous.

Calvin develops the idea that providence is hidden to show why men are tempted to think that God is not in control. He thinks it is important to teach that God’s providence is secret, otherwise men will expect to see the first cause of events.

The Christian would lose faith in providence if he expected to know why everything happened. Then when confronted by upheavals or sufferings he would be tempted to think that God was not in control.

One reason why the Christian should not expect to see the first cause and reason for things is that God works invisibly by His providence. So the Christian should not expect to see God’s Word and Spirit at work in providence--for they are invisible to the eye of man.

The language that Calvin uses to refer to the secret nature of providence shows the importance that he gives to this theme. He describes a variety of things as secret or hidden. Let us go through the Institutes and note all of the references that Calvin makes the hidden nature of providence.

Calvin speaks once of “hidden providence,” once of “secret providence,” twice of “secret inspiration,” five times of a “secret plan,” once of a “secret impulse,” once of a “secret stirring of God’s hand,” once of God’s will as “hidden and fugitive,” twice of “secret judgments,” once of “hidden judgments,” once of the “incomprehensible plan” which is a “deep abyss,” once of a “hidden will,” once of “secret things,” once of a “secret command,” once of a “secret direction,” and once of “secret promptings.” The sheer number of these occurrences demonstrates that Calvin takes himself to be talking about something that is important.

Why does Calvin refer to providence as hidden? The answer is found in the problem that faces mankind. It seems that things occur by chance.
Calvin explains why men are tempted to believe in fortune. Many times in God’s acts of providence “the causes of the events are hidden.” Calvin, Institutes, p. 211. Man does not realize that God was the first cause of the events:

So the thought creeps in that human affairs turn and whirl at the blind urge of fortune; or the flesh incites us to contradiction, as if God were making sport of men by throwing them about like balls. Calvin, Institutes, p. 211.

Calvin thinks that it is because of the “sluggishness” of the human mind that we speak of things happening by chance. Our minds are so “far beneath the height of God’s providence” that we cannot see why events occur. Calvin, Institutes, p. 208.

Calvin writes:

But since the order, reason, end, and necessity of those things which happen for the most part lie hidden in God’s purpose, and are not apprehended by human opinion, those things which it is certain take place by God’s will, are in a sense fortuitous. Calvin, Institutes, p. 208.

Calvin even finds examples in the Bible where the hidden providence of God leads to language that at first glance seems to deny providence. For example, in Ecclesiastes 9:11 we read:

I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happened to them all.

Calvin comments on this:

The term “fate” is often repeated in Ecclesiastes, because at first glance men do not penetrate to the first cause, which is deeply hidden. Calvin, Institutes, p. 209.
God’s secret counsel alone has the knowledge of what He will bring about in the history of the world. Men cannot see God at work, so fortuitous events seem to occur to men.

Men cannot know what will happen in the future. Therefore men hold future events “in suspense, as if they might incline to one side or the other.” Yet the Christian, while also in suspense of future events, remains fixed in his heart “that nothing will take place that the Lord has not previously foreseen.”

The Christian is tempted at times to think that chaos reigns. Calvin paints a picture of disorder:

When dense clouds darken the sky, and a violent tempest arises, because a gloomy mist is cast over our eyes, thunder strikes our ears and all our senses are benumbed with fright, everything seems to us to be confused and mixed up.

Men are tempted to make human judgments about the secret providence of God when they see this confusion. They think that they have the right to examine God’s plans “and to pass as rash a sentence on matters unknown as they would on the deeds of mortal men.”

By faith the Christian knows that while chaos might appear in the world, “all the while a constant quiet and serenity ever remain in heaven.” God is directing everything in the world with these seemingly disorderly events “in the best-conceived order to a right end.” Therefore the Christian is led to reverence the hidden providence of God because he knows that it reveals the infinite wisdom of God at work. Calvin writes:

Yet his wonderful method of governing the universe is rightly called an abyss, because while it is hidden from us, we ought reverently to adore it.

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146 Ibid., p. 209.
147 Ibid., p. 209.
148 Ibid., p. 211.
149 Ibid., p. 212.
150 Ibid., p. 211.
151 Ibid., p. 211.
152 Ibid., p. 213.
Calvin quotes Basil the Great with favor, who said that “fortune” and “chance” were “pagan terms, with whose significance the minds of the godly ought not to be occupied.”

Calvin also refers to Augustine’s attitude towards the language of “chance.” Augustine speaks about how he is grieved for having often mentioned “Fortune” in his book Against the Academics. He says that he did not mean by “Fortune” some “goddess or other to be understood by this name, but only a fortuitous outcome of things in outward good or evil.”

Augustine then defends the right of Christians to use certain language that is derived from the word “fortuna” like “haply,” “perchance,” “mayhap,” “perhaps,” or “fortuitously.” He says that Christians should “have no scruple about using” these words.

Nevertheless, Augustine believes that it is a bad habit to talk about fortune; Christians should not say “fortune willed this” but “God willed this.”

Augustine explains that when he spoke of things happening by fortune he assumed that they were “also ruled by a secret order.” The ordinary meaning of the term “chance occurrences” when used by himself and Christians only refers to those things “of which the reason and cause are secret.” For these reasons, Calvin also allows that the Christian can in some sense speak about things being fortuitous.

The secret nature of the providence of God means for the Christian that he must not expect to see the first cause of events. He can speak of things being fortuitous only in the sense that their first cause is not seen.

Part 5: Providence a Comfort for the Christian

The doctrine of providence provides unspeakable comfort for the child of God. In sharp contrast, the man who believes in chance will experience unhappiness and terror. Calvin writes:

\[\text{Ibid.}, \text{ p. 207.}\]
\[\text{Ibid.}, \text{ p. 207.}\]
\[\text{Ibid.}, \text{ p. 207.}\]
\[\text{Ibid.}, \text{ p. 208.}\]
\[\text{Ibid.}, \text{ p. 208.}\]
\[\text{Ibid.}, \text{ p. 208.}\]
Ignorance of providence is the ultimate of all miseries; the highest blessedness lies in the knowledge of it.\textsuperscript{159}

The man who believes that God does not govern evil will be terrified about the future. Calvin gives the reason why men who believe in chance should be anxious. He says:

Innumerable are the evils that beset human life; innumerable, too, the deaths that threaten it.\textsuperscript{160}

Man is endangered on every side by disease, fierce animals, serpents, as well as poisonings or robberies. Calvin states:

Now, wherever you turn, all things around you not only are hardly to be trusted but almost openly menace, and seem to threaten immediate death.\textsuperscript{161}

If God has “exposed man, the noblest of creatures, to all sorts of blind and heedless blows of fortune,” it is reasonable and to be expected that man would live in fear of one of the terrible events that often happen to others, happening to them.\textsuperscript{162}

The pagan who believes in fortune or the Semi-Pelagian who denies providence will live in a world of fear and misery. He will live in terror. In times of trouble he will lose all hope. He will think that there is no sense or meaning to the troubles that assault him. He will consider himself exposed to the whims of Satan.

Calvin states that the unbeliever has “uncontrolled and superstitious fears.”\textsuperscript{163} The believer is also tempted by fears in the face of danger. We are timid because:

Whenever creatures threaten us or forcibly terrorize us we become as fearful as if they had some intrinsic power to harm us, or might wound us inadvertently and accidentally, or there

\textsuperscript{159} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 225.
\textsuperscript{160} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 223.
\textsuperscript{161} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 223.
\textsuperscript{162} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 223.
\textsuperscript{163} Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, p. 201.
were not enough help in God against their harmful acts.\textsuperscript{164}

But the children of God can control their fear. They know that nothing can happen except what their Father decrees. They can “safely rest in the protection of him to whose will are subject all the harmful things which, whatever their source” they may fear.\textsuperscript{165}

The doctrine of providence means that the saint does not need to live in terror of the furies of Satan and wicked men. Calvin writes about providence that:

\begin{quote}
We know that it is the chief and only guider of all things which are done in the world, that the devil and all the wicked are kept back with God's bridle, lest they should do us any harm; that while they rage fastest, yet are they not at liberty to do what they list, but have the bridle given them, yet so far forth as is expedient to exercise us.\textsuperscript{166}
\end{quote}

God holds the bridle of Satan and ungodly men, so they are not able to run wild in the world. God only allows them to do as much as is “expedient to exercise” the church.

The doctrine of providence is of comfort to the believer because he knows that His Father is caring for him. Calvin, referring to God’s care of Job, writes:

\begin{quote}
Thus, also, it is his care to govern all creatures for their own good and safety.\textsuperscript{167}
\end{quote}

Calvin states that God takes special care of His children. He refers to Christ’s words in Matthew 10:31 where He speaks of how we are of greater value to God than sparrows. Calvin comments: “We ought to realize that God watches over us with all the closer care.”\textsuperscript{168}

Calvin then asks the beautiful question: “What else can we wish for ourselves, if not even one hair can fall from our head without his

\textsuperscript{164} Ibid., p. 201.
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid., p. 201.
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., p. 219.
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., p. 219.
God’s care especially extends to the church. Calvin states:

But, because God has chosen the church to be his dwelling place, there is no doubt that he shows by singular proofs his fatherly care in ruling it.\textsuperscript{170}

We conclude by looking at a moving passage where Calvin speaks of three benefits that the doctrine of providence afford the child of God. He writes:

Gratitude of mind for the favorable outcome of things, patience in adversity, and also incredible freedom from worry about the future all necessarily follow upon this knowledge.\textsuperscript{171}

When the saint receives something good, he knows that it comes from the very hand of God. Therefore he will express appreciation to God. When trouble comes, the saint knows that it is for his good. He will patiently bear the trouble, because he knows that it comes from the hand of his Father who is either testing or chastising him. Finally, the saint can live with an “incredible freedom from worry about the future.” With confidence he rests in his Father who holds the future in His hands. The saint knows that God will work everything for his good and for the good of the church. What unspeakable consolation!

\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., p. 219.  
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid., p. 219.  
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., p. 219.
Works Cited


Chapter 4

Calvin’s Doctrine of the Church

Introduction

Calvin’s doctrine of the church was a watershed in the history of dogma. He stood between all of the errors developed in Medieval Catholicism and a Reformed Church which developed a Biblical ecclesiology.

Among the Protestant theologians, Calvin most clearly and logically developed the Biblical doctrines of the church in contrast to the errors developed in both the ancient and medieval church.

The Romanist doctrine of the church had become firmly entrenched as it had gradually developed in the Middle Ages. Many errors were found in the medieval church. First, the church was identified with the hierarchical leadership of the institution of the Roman Catholic Church. Secondly, tradition became more important than the Word for determining right ecclesiology. Third, the papacy with its servile hierarchy replaced the original offices of minister, elder, and deacon. Fourthly, the sacraments had been corrupted.

Calvin was not alone in attacking Romanist ecclesiology, but
he was its most cogent critic. His work was both destructive and positive. We do not have space to deal at length with Calvin’s ecclesiology. We will focus first on his attack on the institution of the papacy and his identification of Rome as the false church. Then we will look at his view of the nature of the church, the marks of the true church, and the sacraments.

**Calvin’s Intent in the Institutes**

Calvin’s intent was to bring the church back to the ecclesiology of New Testament Christianity. He sought a return to the teachings of the early church. He writes:

> We are to call back godly readers from those corruptions by which Satan, in the papacy, has polluted everything God had appointed for our salvation.  

Calvin makes it clear that ecclesiology is a salvation issue. Book Four of the *Institutes* indeed has a title which indicates that the church as ordained by God is for the salvation of the church: “The External Means or Aims by Which God Invites Us Into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein.” Calvin was convinced that deviation from God-appointed rules would cause and had caused spiritual devastation.

Calvin’s “plan of instruction” is to discuss the issues in ecclesiology in this order: “the church, its government, orders, and powers; then the sacraments; and lastly, the civil order.”

**The Nature of the Church**

The essence of the church is the body of the predestined, according to Calvin. The key to understanding the church is found in an ecclesiology based upon the church as the fellowship of true believers who worship God rightly.

**The Visible/Invisible Church**

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Calvin did not deny that the church comes to expression in the institute. But the church is fundamentally the spiritual body of Christ—the body of the elect. This distinction between the visible and invisible church was controversial. Historically Roman Catholic dogma had identified the church exclusively with the visible institute—especially the hierarchy of office-bearers in the church.

Calvin writes that:

Sometimes by the term “church” if [the scriptures] means that which is actually in God’s presence, into which no persons are received but those who are members of Christ by sanctification of the Holy Spirit.  

Augustine had taught that according to God’s secret predestination there are many sheep who are without the church and many wolves that are within.

The True Church

Roman Catholic theologians argued that the Reformation churches were false churches because they were schismatic. They claimed that the unity of the church was found in the visible institute of the Roman Catholic Church and therefore separation from it meant leaving the one true church.

In response to this, Calvin developed his doctrine of the true and false church. He found the true church where the truth was preached and the sacraments properly administered. Rome taught that the true church was the one that existed in union and obedience to the see of St. Peter in Rome.

Calvin believed that the unity of the church was not found in the institution of the papacy, but rather in the episcopacy of Christ. Calvin drew upon the authority of Cyprian for support of his position. He writes that “Cyprian, also following Paul, derives the source of concord of the entire church from Christ’s episcopate alone.”

Calvin states that if a church has the marks of true doctrine and the faithful administration of the sacraments, then “there, it is not

174 Ibid., p. 1021.
175 Ibid., p. 1022.
176 Ibid., p. 1047.
to be doubted, a church of God exists.”

Calvin compares Rome with the apostate kingdom of Judah to show that the church is not essentially found in an apostate hierarchy. He shows that it is ridiculous to believe that the true church is found in a hierarchy of false priests who worship pagan gods in Jerusalem. Likewise the true church is not found in the ungodly hierarchy of Rome.

The religious leaders of Judah had abandoned the true worship of God and did not teach God’s law to the children. However, the church was sustained in Judah among the remnant that worshipped God aright. The issue is clear: Is the church found in the hierarchy of the false priests or among those who truly worship God?

Calvin states that the Romanists give the same response as the apostate Jews did. When the Jews were rebuked for ungodliness and idolatry by the prophets:

They boasted gloriously of Temple, ceremonies, and priestly functions, and measured the church very convincingly, as it seemed to them, by these.

In the same way the Romanists boast of the “outward appearances” of their church.

The Romanists are refuted by the same argument which the prophet Jeremiah used against Israel. Calvin states that the prophet “combated the stupid confidence of the Jews” when he said:

Let them not boast in lying words, saying, ‘This is the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord’. [Jer. 7:4]

God only recognizes His temple where His Word is preached and obeyed.

Since God is not bound to persons and places, He was not bound to false priests anymore than He is bound to Rome and to the supposed chair of St. Peter.

In ancient Judah there were times when the Temple was profaned and as a result God did not dwell there with His people.

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177 Ibid., p. 1023.
178 Ibid., p. 1043.
179 Ibid., p. 1043.
Calvin asks the question:

If that Temple, which seemed consecrated as God’s everlasting abode, could be abandoned by God and become profane, there is no reason why these men should pretend to us that God is so bound to persons and places, and attached to external observances, that he has to remain among those who have only the title and appearance of the church [Rom. 9:6].  

At the center of Calvin’s doctrine of the true church is the idea that the church can only exist where the Word of God exists. The church is founded alone upon God’s Word.

There is no reason why people should have a difficult time in finding the true church. Apparently people during Calvin’s lifetime thought that it was hard to identify the true church which they must join. Calvin believed that the search was simple.

This is because the pure light of the gospel is blinding. The preaching of the apostolic doctrine is the highly visible sign of the true church. Calvin quotes from Paul who taught in Ephesians 2:20 that the church was founded upon the “teaching of apostles and prophets.” Speaking of the visible mark of the apostolic doctrine, he states:

Why do we willfully act like madmen in searching out the church when Christ has marked it with an unmistakable sign, which, wherever it is seen, cannot fail to show the church there; while where it is absent, nothing remains that can give the true meaning of the church.  

Since Christ alone rules in the church by His Word, it is foolish to think that the church must submit to those who rule by physical force with false doctrines.

It is notable that Calvin did not make Christian discipline one of the marks of the true church. But this is not because he played down its importance. If there was anyone who promoted the godly exercise of the keys of the kingdom, it was he. It might be that he did

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180 Ibid., p. 1044.
181 Ibid., p. 1046.
182 Ibid., p. 1046.
not include this as a mark of the true church because he subsumed it under the pure preaching of the Word. He assumed that where the Word was preached, the preaching itself would be a means of discipline.

The False Church

Calvin identified the Roman Catholic Church as the false church. He taught that when a church departed from the gospel that it died as certainly as a man who had been mortally wounded. Since heresy has infected Rome, the true church no longer exists there. Calvin writes:

As soon as falsehood breaks into the citadel of religion and the sum of necessary doctrine is overturned and the use of the sacraments is destroyed, surely the death of the church follows—just as a man’s life is ended when his throat is pierced or his heart mortally wounded.  

But, can the Roman Catholic Church be still called a “church”? The Roman Church can be called a ‘church’, because the Old Testament prophecies in Daniel point ahead to the fact that the Antichrist will sit in the “Temple of God.” Since this temple is the church, the Antichrist did not come to destroy the church, but rather to profane it “by his sacrilegious impiety.” He would reside in what was called the “church.” Calvin writes:

However, when we categorically deny to the papists the title of the church, we do not for this reason impugn the existence of churches among them.

Notice what Calvin does and does not say. He states that the Roman Catholic Church is not a true church, but that however there are true churches within the false church.

The identification of the papacy with the Antichrist plays an important role in Reformation theology. Calvin describes the church under the reign of the papal Antichrist: It is

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183 Ibid., p. 1041.
184 Ibid., p. 1052.
Afflicted by his inhuman domination, corrupted and well-nigh killed by his evil and deadly doctrines, which are like poisoned drinks....In them, briefly, everything is so confused that there we see the face of Babylon rather than that of the Holy City of God.\textsuperscript{185}

But even in the midst of this carnage, Calvin finds true churches. He writes:

I call them churches to the extent that the Lord wonderfully preserves in them a remnant of his people, however woefully dispersed and scattered, and to the extent that some marks of the church remain.\textsuperscript{186}

But Calvin concludes this discussion by denying that any congregation or the “whole body” of the Romish church has “the lawful form of the church.”\textsuperscript{187}

The Orders

At the heart of Calvin’s fight against Roman Catholic ecclesiology is his attack on the legitimacy of the institution of the papacy. Calvin uses the church fathers in his attack upon the papacy. He re-asserts views that had been buried. The Reformation was in many ways a return to the fathers. Calvin especially draws upon the ecclesiology of Cyprian and Augustine.

Calvin agrees with Augustine’s exegesis of Matthew 16:16. While Rome claimed that the rock upon which Christ would build His church was Peter himself, Calvin states that the rock was Peter’s confession. The papacy claimed that Christ gave the keys of the kingdom only to Peter--to pass on to future popes.

Calvin, with approval, cites Cyprian, who taught that the keys were given to Peter to symbolize the unity of the church:

For so speaks Cyprian: “In the person of one man the Lord gave the keys to all, to signify the unity of all; the rest were the same as Peter was, endowed with an equal share both of

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid., p. 1053.
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid., p. 1053.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., p. 1053.
\end{flushleft}
honor and of power; but the beginning arose from unity that the church of Christ may be shown to be one.”

Augustine adds to this argument. He states that if Jesus said that He gave the keys to Peter alone, then “the church does not have them.” But if the church does possess the keys, then Peter was a symbol for the entire church.

Calvin refers to instances where Peter’s parity or even subjection to the other apostles is taught. In Acts 15:5-12 at the council of Jerusalem, Peter’s parity with the other apostles comes out. He

Listens to the others, and he not only lets them express their views, but leaves the decision to them; what they have decreed, he follows and obeys.

Peter was far from being above rebuke--or being infallible in doctrine, as would be required of the first pope. Calvin refers to Galatians 2:11-14 where Paul “recalls that when Peter did not act faithfully, he corrected him, and Peter obeyed his reproof.”

In addition, Calvin points out that Paul spent two chapters in Galatians defending his equality with Peter in the office of apostle.

The claims of the papacy also depend on the idea that Peter resided in Rome. Calvin states that there is no evidence for this. The New Testament is silent on the issue. Such silence speaks volumes. For example, when Paul writes to Rome, he does not send greetings to Peter. Later when Paul arrives in Rome, there is also no mention of Peter.

Calvin admits that Peter possibly died in Rome, but considering that he died during the Neronian persecution and the length of time that he spent in other pastorates--it is impossible that he could have been in Rome for any length of time. Calvin states that he “cannot be persuaded that he was bishop, especially for a long time.”

Our Reformer also mentions that the Spirit divided the

188 Ibid., p. 1106.
189 Ibid., p. 1106.
190 Ibid., p. 1108.
191 Ibid., p. 1108.
192 Ibid., p. 1115.
ministry of Peter and Paul. Peter was sent to the Jews while Paul to the Gentiles. Therefore, Roman Christians and the entire medieval church which was formed mostly of Gentiles should “pay more attention to Paul’s apostolate than to Peter’s.”

Calvin concludes:

Now, let the Romanists seek their primacy elsewhere than in God’s Word, where it finds precious little foundation!

But what is the papacy, then, if it is not where the successors of Peter are found? The explanation is that it is the expression of Antichrist. Calvin admits that some think that he is a slanderer and raider when he calls the pontiff “Antichrist.” But, he writes, “Those who think so do not realize they are accusing Paul of intemperate language.”

Paul wrote in II Thessalonians 2:4 that the Antichrist would sit in God’s temple. Elsewhere the Spirit revealed that the kingdom of Antichrist will “consist in boasting and blaspheming of God.” This infers that the Antichrist would exercise “tyranny more over souls than over bodies.” It also implies that the Antichrist will not wipe out either the name of Christ or of the church but rather misuses a semblance of Christ and lurks under the name of the church as under a mask.

The Apostle Paul also spoke of a falling away that would occur in the church. He wrote that the Antichrist would deprive God of His honor in glorifying himself. Calvin writes, “We ought consequently to follow this as the chief indication in searching out Antichrist.” Calvin adds:

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193 Ibid., p. 1115.
194 Ibid., p. 1116.
195 Ibid., p. 1144.
196 Ibid., p. 1144.
197 Ibid., p. 1144.
198 Ibid., p. 1144.
199 II Thessalonians 2:3.
200 II Thessalonians 2:4.
It is clear that the Roman pontiff has shamelessly transferred to himself what belonged to God alone and especially to Christ.\(^{202}\)

Therefore the Christian should have no doubt that the pope is “the leader and standard-bearer of that impious and hateful kingdom.”\(^{203}\)

**The Power of the Church**

The Roman Catholic Church had misunderstood and misused the powers of the church. For example, the church had interfered in political affairs. But Calvin’s central problem with it was its abuse of power that led to false doctrine and the use of the Inquisition against those who taught truth. The Romish church had replaced the power and authority of the Scriptures with mere human traditions.

Since the authority of the church does not extend to the secular state, Calvin taught that its power and authority was spiritual and limited to spiritual matters. He states that he will “speak only of the spiritual power, which is proper to the church.”\(^{204}\)

Calvin states that the power of the church has two aspects; doctrine and jurisdiction. The power of doctrine includes both the authority to decide dogmas and the authority to explain them.

Calvin believed that Christ is the only authority in the church. The only way that the church is built up is when ministers in the church “endeavor to preserve Christ’s authority for himself.”\(^{205}\) Christ’s authority must be defended while human tyranny has no place in the church.

Calvin emphasized that there is real power and authority in the church institute. But it is the power of Christ’s word. He implies that there is a tension between truly exercising this power, and, on the other hand, keeping it within its limits:

The power of the church is therefore to be not grudgingly manifested but yet to be kept within definite limits, that it may not be drawn hither and thither according to men’s

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The one authority in the church is the Word, which is the Word of Christ. In defense of this, Calvin begins chapter eight of Book IV in the *Institutes* with a discussion of the authority of Moses, the prophets, the apostles, and finally, Christ. Neither Moses, nor the prophets who were called to special offices in the church were given the authority to teach anything from themselves. They were only “endowed” to speak “in the name and Word of the Lord.” The Romanists taught that being in office allowed a person to bring human traditions and teachings to the flock. This contrasts with the office-bearers in Scripture, who, when called to their office were “at the same time enjoined...not to bring anything of themselves, but to speak from the Lord’s mouth.”

After Calvin has dealt with the authority of the apostles, the editor of the *Institutes* very nicely sums up Calvin’s doctrine against the Romanists’ manufacturing of doctrines, when he entitles a section: “Not even the apostles were free to go beyond the Word: much less their successors.” The apostles and prophets were “genuine scribes” of the Holy Spirit to whom God dictated His Word. Their successors, the ministers of the gospel, must only teach what the Spirit has once and for all revealed to the church. Calvin writes:

Yet this, as I have said, is the difference between the apostles and their successors: the former were sure and genuine scribes of the Holy Spirit, and their writings are therefore to be considered oracles of God; but the sole office of others is to teach what is provided and sealed in the Holy Scriptures.

As a result it is wrong for priests or popes to “coin any new doctrine.”

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The Sacraments

Calvin found a middle way between Luther and Zwingli with his doctrine of the Lord’s Supper. His doctrine of baptism is important because it avoids the baptismal regeneration of both the Romanists and Lutherans. His teachings on baptism and the Lord’s Supper would be incorporated into all of the Reformed creeds of the Reformation and post-reformation era.

In his doctrine of the sacraments, Calvin returns to the fathers, especially Augustine. He argues that Augustine did not teach transubstantiation or that the sacraments imparted grace to everyone who received them. He rejected the Scholastic doctrine that the sacraments worked *ex opero operato*.

Augustine had defined a sacrament to be “a visible sign of a sacred thing” or “a visible form of an invisible grace.” Calvin agrees with this definition, but gives a more complete one. A sacrament is “a testimony of divine grace toward us, confirmed by an outward sign, with mutual attestation of our piety toward him.” Calvin closely connects the idea of promise, or covenant, with a sacrament:

A sacrament is never without a preceding promise but is joined to it as a sort of appendix, with the purpose of confirming and sealing the promise itself, and of making it more evident to us and in a sense ratifying it.

The weakness of the saints makes it necessary that God make His promise evident to us in outward signs.

Like no one before him in the history of dogma, Calvin stressed the depravity and weakness in man and the accompanying necessity of God’s condescending grace. One marvelous instance is when Calvin is discussing the reason why God uses sacraments to strengthen our faith. He states:

By this means God provides first for our ignorance and dullness, then for our weakness.

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213 Ibid., p. 1277.
214 Ibid., p. 1277.
215 Ibid., p. 1278.
216 Ibid., p. 1278.
Calvin continues:

But as our faith is slight and feeble unless it be propped on all sides and sustained by every means, it trembles, wavers, totters, and at last gives away.\textsuperscript{217}

Chrysostom had pointed to the fact that our creature-hood is the reason why God speaks to us in visible signs. Calvin recalls that Chrysostom had said that

If we were incorporeal, he [God] would give us these very things naked and incorporeal. Now, because we have souls engrafted in bodies, he imparts spiritual things under visible ones.\textsuperscript{218}

Calvin writes that God, as our merciful Lord,

According to his infinite kindness, so tempers himself to our capacity that, since we are creatures who always creep on the ground, cleave to the flesh, and do not think about or even conceive of anything spiritual, he condescends to lead us to himself even by these earthly elements, and to set before us in the flesh a mirror or spiritual blessings.\textsuperscript{219}

It is significant that Calvin, however, closely guards against the idea that “the gifts set before us in the sacraments are bestowed with the natures of the things.”\textsuperscript{220} The physical bread and wine do not impart grace.

If there is one thing that Calvin is particularly insistent upon, it is the truth that the sacraments receive their meaning and sufficiency from the Word preached. Especially in the early Luther you also find this truth accented. Calvin believes that the Word must explain the sign. Apart from the preaching of the Word the sacrament is useless and graceless. The Romanists profaned the sacrament with their teaching that it was

\textsuperscript{217} Ibid., p. 1278.
\textsuperscript{218} Ibid., p. 1278.
\textsuperscript{219} Ibid., p. 1278.
\textsuperscript{220} Ibid., p. 1278.
Enough if the priest mumbled the formula of consecration while the people looked on bewildered and without comprehension.\textsuperscript{221}

Calvin returns to Augustine who said: “Let the word be added to the element and it will become a sacrament.”\textsuperscript{222} The word alone can consecrate the sacraments and work faith in the hearts of the elect.

Calvin rejected the Romanist idea that all partakers of the Lord’s Supper received grace. He identifies this view with that of the Sophists (the Scholastics) who taught that the sacraments had “some sort of secret power.”\textsuperscript{223} This heresy led men to seek justification merely through attending the Mass. Calvin believed that the Romanist view leads men “to repose in the appearance of a physical thing rather than in God himself.”\textsuperscript{224} This heresy “hurls souls headlong to destruction.”\textsuperscript{225}

Calvin agrees with Augustine that only the elect receive grace in the sacraments. They do not benefit a wicked man.\textsuperscript{226} Augustine had spoken against the idea that there was a common grace given to all of the Jews in the Old Covenant. He wrote concerning the Jews:

> Although the sacraments were common to all, grace was not common--which is the power of the sacraments.\textsuperscript{227}

Calvin uses this basic truth--that grace is particular in the sacraments, to develop correctly the doctrines of baptism and the Lord’s Supper that would become Reformed dogmas.

Calvin rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation. The Romanists believed that everyone who ate the physical bread of the Mass received grace. Calvin taught that only those who ate the elements spiritually, by faith, received grace. Calvin believed that Jesus was spiritually present in the Supper, while His physical body

\textsuperscript{221} Ibid., p. 1279.
\textsuperscript{222} Ibid., p. 1279.
\textsuperscript{223} Ibid., p. 1289.
\textsuperscript{224} Ibid., p. 1289.
\textsuperscript{225} Ibid., p. 1289.
\textsuperscript{226} Ibid., p. 1292.
\textsuperscript{227} Ibid., p. 1296.
was locally present only in Heaven.

**The Civil Government**

Calvin’s teaching on civil government would have influence especially in the Protestant countries where the Reformed faith would become the state religion.

The question that must be asked is: How did Calvin differ with Medieval Catholicism on the role of civil government?

Calvin defended certain views that had been taught by the papacy. The popes had taught the necessity of kings promoting Christianity within their realms.

In one long sentence Calvin combines a number of claims about the role of civil government. After discussing how government has the role of keeping people warm and fed, he writes:

> It does not, I repeat, look to this only, but also prevents idolatry, sacrilege against God’s name, blasphemies against his truth, and other public offenses against religion from arising and spreading among the people; it prevents the public peace from being disturbed; it provides that each man may keep his property safe and sound.\(^{228}\)

His conclusion about the role of government with respect to religion is that it: “In short, provides that a public manifestation of religion may exist among Christians.”\(^{229}\)

Calvin is very careful to distinguish his position from that of the Roman Catholics. He makes it clear that he does not give government the “duty of rightly establishing religion.” In his earlier writings he had taught that the establishing of religion was “outside of human decision.” He does not allow civil government to make rules which govern the nature of the church.\(^{230}\) This guards against monarchs usurping headship in the church.

In sum, Calvin’s importance in the history of dogma concerning civil government was that he made a clear distinction between the two kingdoms. There is the kingdom of the institute church in which Christ rules through ministers and elders. Then there

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is the state in which God rules through the kings and princes whom he appoints. The church does not have a right to interfere in civil government or claim that the laws of the realm do not apply to Christian office-bearers. The state may not make decisions “concerning religion and the worship of God.”

In Conclusion

Calvin’s ecclesiology was a response to the doctrines of Medieval Catholicism. He developed his views in line with the teachings of some of the church fathers and always under the sole authority of the Scriptures as the one rule of faith. Calvin’s doctrines of the church were important in the history of Protestant dogma because they were incorporated into the Protestant confessions and therefore became dogma for international Calvinism.

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231 Ibid., p. 1488.