

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 1 – Chapter 17 - Part 1
HOW WE MAY APPLY THIS DOCTRINE TO OUR GREATEST BENEFIT

Chapter 17 applies Calvin's doctrine of providence, meaning God being in control of the world and everything in it, to a variety of topics. In many ways this chapter defines what it means to be Calvinistic; that nothing happens without the direct action of God.

Summary: Calvin opens this chapter with three observations (pg. 210); that God's providence needs to be considered as working in the future as well as in the past; that God can work directly or through secondary causes to bring about God's desired outcome; and that providence shows God's concern for the entire human race, and especially for the church. These observations are necessary according to Calvin because people assume that they have freedom to determine outcomes because God's control of people and events is often hidden. (pg. 211) We are also to rest assured that even in the most difficult of times and events when "*everything seems confused and mixed up*" (pg. 211) that "*God, out of the pure light of his justice and wisdom tempers and directs these movements in the best conceived order to right end.*" (pg. 211) In other words, God's control will assure us that all things will turn out according to God's plan, which means the best outcome for humanity.

At this point Calvin has to deal with one of the most difficult aspects of his doctrine of Providence and that is, the issue of human responsibility. The dilemma is, if everything happens exactly as God declares it will happen, how can human beings be held responsible for their actions? Calvin begins by saying that those who believe in God's providence will neither "*murmur against God on account of their adversities in time past, nor lay blame for their own wickedness upon him...*" (pg. 214) Even so he knows that people have implied that the doctrine of providence nullifies prayer (God will do what God is going to do regardless of prayers), allows humans to commit or ignore evil (people do what God makes them do) or to ignore planning for the future (again because God has everything already planned). (pg. 215)

Calvin's deals with these issues in two ways. First he states that "*...he who set limits to our life has at the same time entrusted us with its care.*" (pg. 216) This means that somehow even though all that happens, happens according to God's plan, that we as human beings still have a part to play. We are to plan for the future. We are to be careful rather than foolish. He writes, "*...the Lord inspired in men the arts of taking counsel and caution, by which to comply with his providence in the preservation of life itself.*" (pg. 216)

Second Calvin implies that while God controls human actions, human beings control the intent of those actions, which is what makes them culpable. He states, "*...yet he (God) by no means commands us to do them (evil things); rather we rush headlong, without thinking what he requires, but so raging in our unbridled lust that we deliberately strive against him.*" (pg. 217) And even though God uses evil to accomplish good, Calvin intones that "*...we shall not say that one who is motivated by an evil inclination, by only obeying his own wicked desire, renders service to God.*" (pg. 217) The key is motivation. A Biblical example would be Babylon. Even though Babylon was doing what God wanted (conquering Judah), they had the wrong motivation (power) in so doing and so were guilty of sin.

Reflection: From my perspective, Calvin's argument does not work. It does not work because there are some actions (human trafficking, the Holocaust, etc.) which are evil in and of themselves. To attribute them to God in any way, shape or form violates all that Jesus taught, lived and died for. They also do an injustice to the loving, covenant faithfulness of God and God's compassion for the poor and marginalized. In my opinion either God allows some freedom or is the author of sin. I choose freedom.

Questions:

1. What do you think of Calvin's use of motive as a way out of this dilemma?
2. Do you believe that there are actions which are fundamentally evil?
3. How would you balance God's guiding providence and our responsibility?