

John Calvin for Everyone

The Institutes of the Christian Religion

Book 2 – Chapter 2 - Part 1

MAN HAS NOW BEEN DEPRIVED OF FREEDOM OF CHOICE AND BOUND OVER TO MISERABLE SERVITUDE

In this chapter Calvin will take up the debate about free will. He will argue that there is no such thing as free will and that we are totally unable to do anything good without God directing it.

Summary: Calvin, having in a previous chapter described the depths of sin to which humanity had fallen, writes, *“It remains for us to investigate more closely whether we have been deprived of all freedom since we have been reduced to this servitude; and if any particle of it (freedom) still survives, how far its power extends.”* (pg. 255) Regardless of the outcome of the discussion Calvin knows that there are disadvantages with whichever answer is selected (do we or do we not have free-will). If it is agreed that there is no free will then individuals will not try to do good. On the other hand if there is free will it will lead human beings *“into ruin through brazen confidence.”* (pg. 255)

Calvin begins by asserting that *“the philosophers hold as certain that virtues and vices are in our power...now we seem to do what we do, and to shun what we shun by free choice...if we do any evil we can shun it.”* (pg. 258) He continues by looking at the writings of the early church fathers who hold to a mixture of free will and dependence on God. Chrysostom (349-407 CE) argues that *“Just as we can never do anything rightly unless we are aided by God’s grace, so we cannot acquire heavenly favor unless we bring our portion.”* (pg. 259) Jerome (347-420 CE) writes that *“Ours is to begin, God’s to fulfill; ours to offer what we can, his to supply what we cannot.”* (pg. 259)

Before he proceeds further, Calvin defines free will by using a definition offered by another early church father Origen (185-253 CE). Origen defines free will as *“a faculty of the reason to distinguish between good and evil, a faculty of the will to choose one or the other.”* (pg. 261) Allowing that many of the early church fathers believed that human beings, even while needing God’s help, have some ability to choose between good and evil, Calvin then asks if this is true. In other words *“...whether man has been wholly deprived of all power to do good, or still has some power though meager and weak.”* (pg. 263)

Calvin begins answering this question by using the writings of Augustine (354-430 CE) who believed that human beings had no ability to do the good, unless the Holy Spirit set them free. Or, as Augustine frequently quoted Cyprian, *“We ought to glory in nothing, because nothing is ours.”* (pg. 266)

Reflection: Calvin is dealing with a question that is still being discussed today; do we human beings have free will (the unfettered ability to choose between good/right and evil/ wrong) or are our wills/choices influenced by forces beyond our control? Theologians, as we saw above, have been split over whether sin affects our ability to freely choose, and if it does, how much it does so. The vast majority of people I know disagree with this view and claim that they do have free will. They know that they do because they make choices. However, even setting theology and sin aside, there are disciplines ranging from psychology to sociology which argue that we do not have free will because we are conditioned by any number of factors, ranging from genetics to society to family that cause us to choose as we do. The outcome of this debate is not merely academic because it affects everything from criminal culpability (My client has committed this crime because of what happened to her as a child) to public policy (those people chose to be poor so we should not help them).

Questions:

1. Do you think you have free-choice? Why or why not?
2. What factors do believe influence you in the choices/decisions you make?
3. Do you believe that God’s grace is needed to make good choices? Why or why not?