

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 2 – Chapter 5

REFUTATION OF THE OBJECTIONS COMMONLY PUT FORWARD IN DEFENSE OF FREE WILL

In this chapter Calvin attempts to refute all of the arguments, both Biblical and logical, which had been offered up against his position that there is no free will, from the time of Augustine onwards.

Summary: Calvin understands clearly the arguments against his position that there is no free will (complete or even limited) and realizes that he must defeat them if his theological position of God's complete control of the world is to be established. What follows is a list of the arguments against his position and a summary of Calvin's responses.

First, "*necessary sin is not sin*" (pg. 316) (meaning that if God compels us to do something then it cannot be our fault). Calvin argues that since all human beings are fallen and corrupt the sin is still ours and not God's.

Second, "*reward and punishment lose their meaning*" (pg. 318) (meaning if all we do is directed by God we deserve neither punishment nor reward). Calvin argues that this is not so because punishment reminds sinful humans of their fallenness before God, and reward reminds them of the grace of God.

Third, "*all distinctions between good and evil would be obliterated*" (pg. 319) (meaning if all that we do is at God's command and God is all good then where is there a difference between good and evil). This does not work for Calvin because God shows the distinction in that God chooses some for life (good) and some for condemnation (evil).

Fourth, "*all exhortation would be meaningless*" (pg. 320) (asking why should scripture encourage us if encouragement has no effect). For Calvin exhortation from God, when not followed by the wicked will be a "*testimony against them.*" (pg. 321) For those who obey it will remind them that the Spirit is at work within them, and make them grateful that they can obey.

Fifth, "*Biblical promises suppose the freedom of the will*" (pg. 327) (meaning we need freedom to either choose or not choose our response to God's promises). Biblical promises for Calvin are only intended for those whom God equips to receive them.

Sixth, "*reproofs of scripture...lose their meaning*" (pg. 328) (meaning that God's reproofs of us only have meaning if we can freely choose to do the wrong for which we are to be reproofed). The core of Calvin's response here is that those who sin do not even feel or acknowledge their sins, thus a reproof is appropriate.

Seventh, "*God's "waiting" upon men's actions is held to suppose freedom of the will*" (pg. 332) (Those instances when God waits for the people's response to God's call supposes that God is waiting for an honest response from the people). Calvin writes that God's waiting is intended only to help us "*recognize our own nothingness.*" (pg. 333)

Reflection: As has been noted before, Calvin refuses to give human beings any agency, meaning any ability to choose whatsoever. This refusal does not allow him to give any credence to these arguments, all of which make both common and Biblical sense. What this demonstrates is the problem with trying to create (as Calvin is doing) a theology of absolute certainty (meaning without any ambiguity or mystery). The challenge before all of us is how to make sense of God, the universe and everything, while leaving some room for continuing questions, mystery and uncertainty.

Questions:

1. What are some of your unanswered questions about faith?
2. How do you try and make sense of God, the universe and everything?
3. How comfortable are you with mystery and ambiguity as part of your spiritual journey?