

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 3 – Chapter 21 – Part 1  
ETERNAL ELECTION, BY WHICH GOD HAS PREDESTINED SOME TO SALVATION  
AND OTHERS TO DESTRUCTION

In chapters 21-24 Calvin discusses various aspects of his most well-known doctrine, that of predestination. This was/is the doctrine for which Presbyterians and other Reformed churches are known. It is also, perhaps, the most disturbing doctrine that Calvin offers and knowing this (even in his day), he spends considerable time explaining and defending it. Please note that it is a doctrine to which few Presbyterians hold today for a variety of reasons, some of which will be discussed in the reflection sections of these articles.

**Summary:** The most basic understanding of predestination can be found in its name; that individuals are assigned one of two destinations previous to their birth; these two destinations being heaven or hell. The basis for predestination is God's electing (choosing) some people for salvation and others for damnation. Calvin explains it this way. "...it is plain that it comes to pass by God's bidding that salvation is freely offered to some while others are barred from access to it...that he (God) does not indiscriminately adopt all into the hope of salvation but gives to some what he denies to others" (pg. 921). Calvin understands the difficulty many people have with this doctrine and so goes to great lengths to first defend it and then to clarify it. We will begin with Calvin's defense of the doctrine.

First he wants to make clear that we can never understand God's reasoning behind this doctrine. *"First then let them remember that when they inquire into predestination, they are penetrating the sacred precincts of divine wisdom. If anyone with carefree assurance breaks into this place, he will not succeed in satisfying his curiosity and will enter a labyrinth from which he can find no exit"* (pg. 922-3). Calvin goes farther when he writes, *"For it is not right for man unrestrainedly to search out things that the Lord has willed to be hid in himself..."* (pg. 923). What this implies is that even Calvin, himself, cannot explain the reasoning behind this doctrine...and that in fact we ought not to try to explain it, but rather to simply accept it.

Second, the doctrine ought to be accepted and taught because it is based in Scripture. *"If this thought prevails with us, that the Word of the Lord is the sole way that can lead us in our search for all that it is lawful to hold concerning him (God), it will keep us and restrain us from all rashness...for scripture is the school of the Holy Spirit in which nothing is omitted that is both necessary and useful to know..."* (pg. 923-4). Calvin will spend some time explaining the basis for the doctrine (we will cover this in the next article) but for now he wants people to understand why he is insisting that such a complex, and for many, dark doctrine needs to be discussed at all; which is that it reflects his understanding of scripture. And that to not proclaim it will leave Christians without a complete understanding of the surety of their salvation (more about this later). His response to his critics is blunt. *"They say that this whole discussion is dangerous for godly minds because it hinders exhortation, because it shakes faith, because it disturbs and terrifies the heart itself, but this is nonsense...whoever then heaps odium upon the doctrine of predestination openly reproaches God, as if he (God) had unadvisedly let slip something hurtful to the church"* (pg. 925-6).

**Reflection:** Calvin based his entire theology upon the belief that God is all powerful, meaning that God controls everyone and everything, including salvation. Thus, the only explanation for the lack of belief in Jesus on the part of some people and the belief in Jesus on the part of others, is that God has declared it to be so. This is difficult for many of us to understand, or agree with, for a variety of reasons, especially that of our sense that we are people who can make choices; choices including whether to believe or not to believe in God and to follow Jesus Christ.

Questions:

1. What is your initial impression of predestination? Why?
2. What do you think about accepting a doctrine that cannot be fully explained?
3. Do you believe disagreeing with Calvin is tantamount to disagreeing with God? Why or why not?