

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 3 – Chapter 21 – Part 2  
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 predestination 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:** Calvin begins this section by recapping the meaning of predestination. *“No one who wishes to be thought religious dares simply deny predestination by which God adopts some to hope of life, and sentences others to eternal death...(predestination is) God’s eternal decree, by which he agreed with himself what he wills to become of each man. For all are not created in equal condition, 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 predestined to life or death”* (pg. 926). In other words, predestination is the doctrine that God chooses to save some people and condemn others before the beginning of time.

Calvin defends this doctrine by first examining the scriptures and pointing to God’s election of Israel *“...in the person of Abraham, as in a dry tree trunk, one people is particularly chosen, while the others are rejected”* (pg. 927). Calvin goes on to quote Moses (through the Torah) that *“...the holy patriarch (Abraham) himself was not endowed with such virtue as to acquire such a high honor for himself and his descendants”* (pg. 927). Calvin continues his defense of these actions by pointing out that God both elected and rejected individual Israelites. *“We must now add a second, more limited degree of election, or one in which God’s more special grace was evident, that is when from the same race of Abraham, God rejected some but showed that he kept others among his sons...”* (pg. 929). Scripture therefore, per Calvin, shows God electing and rejecting both people groups/nations and individuals.

The next step in Calvin’s discussion is to offer assurance and certainty to those who are elect, that they are in fact elected, not just temporarily, but eternally by God. *“Although it is sufficiently clear that God by his secret plan freely chooses whom he pleases, rejecting others, still his free election has been only half explained until we come to individual persons, to whom God not only offers salvation but so assigns it that the certainty of its effect is not in suspense or doubt”* (pg. 930). He continues *“...yet in the members of Christ, a far more excellent power of grace appears, for, engrafted to their Head, they are never cut off”* (pg. 930). What Calvin is indicating here is that election to salvation, regardless of anything an individual might do or not do, links that individual to Christ and salvation forever. This is the concept of “once saved, always saved.”

Predestination is summarized once again. *“As, then, scripture clearly shows. We say that God once established by his eternal and unchangeable plan those whom he long before determined once and for all to receive into salvation and those whom, on the other hand, he would devote to destruction”* (pg. 931).

**Reflection:** What I would argue that Calvin misses about the election of Abraham/Israel is that God elected him/them in order to bless all the nations of the earth; that God did not elect them in order to reject all others from the blessings that God wants to bestow upon creation. Calvin takes a very narrow view of election (only the elect are blessed) rather than a broad view of election (in which all people are blessed through God’s people).

Questions:

1. What do you think of Calvin’s Old Testament scriptural basis for predestination?
2. What do you think of the concept of election as seen in “once saved always saved”?
3. Do you have a narrow or wide view of election? Why?