

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 22

CONFIRMATION OF THE DOCTRINE FROM SCRIPTURAL TESTIMONIES

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: the first portion of this chapter deals with the refutation of the belief that election is God's response to what God sees in the future; meaning God can see that certain people become good enough to be chosen by God or choose God on their own. *"For generally...persons consider that God distinguishes among men according as he foresees what merits there will be. Therefore, he adopts those whom he foreknows will not be unworthy of his grace; he appoints to the damnation of death those whose dispositions he discerns will be inclined to evil intention and ungodliness"* (pg. 932).

Calvin argues against this belief by quoting the Apostle Paul. *"When Paul teaches that we were chosen in Christ 'before the creation of the world' (Ephesians 1:4a), he takes away all consideration of real worth on our part..."* (pg. 933). He continues, *"Besides the fact that they were elected to be 'holy' (Ephesians 1:4b) plainly refutes the error that derives election from foreknowledge, since Paul declares that all virtue appearing in man is the result of election"* (pg. 934). The argument works like this. One can only become holy by being elected to be holy by God. Therefore, one cannot become holy and then be elected by God. *"Therefore you can safely infer the following: if he chose us that we should be holy, he did not choose us because he foresaw that we would do so"* (pg. 935).

Calvin continues his defense by looking at God choosing Jacob over Esau. The biblical story is that Esau was the eldest child of Isaac and therefore destined to be the one given the blessing of God which had originally come to Abraham. Even so God ignores the rules and chooses Jacob to be the one who receives the blessing. Calvin puts it this way. *"Jacob therefore, is chosen and distinguished from...Esau by God's predestination, while not differing from him in merits"* (pg. 938).

The next line of defense for Calvin, comes from the Gospel of John. He quotes Jesus *"'All that the Father has given me will come to me' (John 6:37). 'For this is the will of the Father...that whatever he has given me, I should lose nothing of it.' (John 6:39)...the elect are said to have been the Father's before he gave them to his only-begotten Son"* (pg. 940). Following these arguments, he once again sums up predestination with, *"...by free adoption God makes those whom he wills to be his sons; the intrinsic cause of this is in himself, for he is content with his own secret good pleasure"* (pg. 941).

This chapter is concluded with Calvin once again stating his position (all are called to repent, but only some are chosen by God to do so) buttressed by quotations from Augustine, the Apostle Paul, *"Those whom he (Jesus) has foreknown and predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son"* (Romans 8:29) and John, *"The sheep follow the shepherds voice, but strangers will not follow"* (John 10:4-5, pg. 945).

Reflections Calvin once again cherry picks passages intended to prove his point. Many of these passages can be read in a variety of ways (metaphorically, etc.) and so do not necessarily prove that God elects and chooses people for salvation/damnation out of some sort of secret divine will. What most of these passages do show however is that God is the initiator of all human/divine relationships and once those relationships are begun, God never abandons them.

Questions:

1. Where do you see God at work initiating a relationship with you?
2. Where and how do you see God maintaining that relationship?
3. What does it mean to you to be a child of God?