

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 23 – Part 1

THE REFUTATIONS OF THE FALSE ACCUSATIONS WITH WHICH THIS DOCTRINE HAS ALWAYS
BEEN UNJUSTLY BURDENED

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: In this chapter Calvin addresses several criticisms of the doctrine of predestination.

Criticism 1: That God would choose people for salvation but not for damnation. This, for Calvin, makes no sense for several reasons. First, if God elects people to one, then God needs to elect people to the other. Second, if there was a chance people could earn salvation or choose to be saved, then election would mean nothing. Third, because God has all power then God must “*not simply pass over people but condemn them for no other reason than he wills to exclude them (the non-saved) from the inheritance which he predestines for his children*” (pg. 347). The image Calvin uses to justify this view is the Potter/clay analogy from Jeremiah. We, as the clay, have no right to tell the potter what to do with his creation. The potter can save the clay or throw it away. Calvin continues with this concept when he references the Apostle Paul who speaks of God creating “vessels for wrath” and “vessels for mercy” (Romans 9:22) (pg. 948).

Criticism 2: This doctrine makes God into a tyrant. “*They first ask, therefore, by what right the Lord becomes angry at his creatures who have not provoked him by any previous offense; for to devote to destruction whomever he pleases is more like the caprice of a tyrant than the lawful sentence of a judge*” (pg. 949). Calvin finds this argument wicked. It is wicked because as human beings, he writes, we forget that “*...God’s will is so much the highest rule of righteousness that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous*” (pg. 949). In other words, once again, who are the clay to argue with the perfect potter? If God wants to act this way, then that is what is good and right. In addition, Calvin reminds his readers that because all those people chosen for damnation are sinners anyway, then they are getting no more than what they deserve.

Criticism 3: This doctrine takes away guilt and responsibility from human beings. The argument is “*But if man was created by God’s providence to this condition, that he should afterward do all that he does, then he should not be blamed for what he cannot avoid and undertakes by God’s will*” (pg. 954). Once again, Calvin responds to this critique but asserting that since God is perfect, and not only foresees human events, but directs them, then God’s directions must be perfect as well. He even goes so far as to argue that God caused Adam to sin. If this were not so, then God would not be omnipotent, but would instead be a mere observer of worldly events. At this point, Calvin tries to hedge his bets however when he states, “*Accordingly, man falls according as God’s providence ordains, but he falls by his own fault*” (pg. 957). In other words, God is in control but Adam gets the blame because God could not cause evil.

Reflection: What Calvin does in this section is make the case that any critique of predestination is a critique of God, and not of doctrine. Calvin is so convinced that his reading of the scriptures on this matter is so perfect, that God and doctrine are one in the same. So even when he cannot find a way to explain away the critique, he simply falls back on the “if God did it,” it must be good. By so doing he admits (though he would not say so) that there are serious flaws in his theology.

Questions:

1. Which of these criticisms is most/least appealing to you?
2. How do you explain how a good creation went bad?
3. Where does mystery play a role in how you understand salvation?