

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 23 – Part 2

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 4: The fourth criticism is that it makes it appear that God shows partiality toward some (those whom God saves). Calvin addresses this concerns by focusing on God's mercy. No human being, Calvin argues, is worthy of being saved. All people are sinners. The only thing that saves some is God's mercy which God "...ought to be free to manifest and express...where and when he pleases" (pg. 959). In addition, as the Apostle Paul points out in 1 Corinthians 1:26, this mercy is not offered to one class of people or another. "*Not many originally called were of noble birth, or wise, or distinguished*" (pg. 959).

Still Calvin hears the objections. "*If, they say, God finds them all guilty, let him punish all equally; if innocent, let him withhold the rigor of his judgment from all*" (pg. 959). Calvin responds, "*But they (those who object) so act toward him (God) as if either mercy were to be forbidden to him or as if when he wills to show mercy to he is compelled to renounce his judgment completely*" (pg. 959) The point Calvin is making is that God is both merciful and just. Thus, to make God choose either justice or mercy is asking God to deny God's own nature. He quotes Augustine, "*The Lord can therefore also give grace...to whom he will...because he is merciful, and not give to all because he is a just judge*" (pg. 959).

Criticism 5: The fifth criticism is that predestination will destroy all zeal for living a Godly life. "*For who can hear, they say, that either life or death has been appointed for him by God's eternal and unchangeable decree without thinking immediately what it makes no difference how he conducts himself since God's predestination can neither be hindered nor advanced*" (pg. 960). Calvin admits that there are many who believe just such a thing and have decided to ignore what God desires. Even so, he states that the purpose of our being chosen is to lead us to "*esteem his mercy*", to live a "*holy and blameless life*" (Ephesians 1:4) and to the "*pursuit of good*" (pg. 960).

Criticism 6: The sixth and final criticism is that predestination makes the preaching of God's invitation to faith, meaningless. In other words, why should anyone bother preaching the Good News of salvation when God has already chosen some to be saved and others to be lost. Calvin's response to this objection will be dealt with more completely in the next chapter. Here he simply reminds people that we are called to proclaim the Good News regardless of who may (the saved) or may not (the judged) hear.

Reflection: Once again, as with the previous two objections, Calvin cannot offer what many people would consider to be reasonable responses. He falls back on carefully chosen scriptures which support his doctrine, yet do not answer the objections. I would argue that these objections seem reasonable. If God is merciful and loves the world, why not show mercy to all? Why should people choose to live sacrificially as Jesus' followers, if God has already chosen them for life? I'm not sure Calvin is able to answer them, except to say, they do not fit his doctrinal point of view.

Questions:

1. What is your general impression of the criticisms?
2. Do Calvin's responses make sense to you? Why or why not?
3. Does predestination sound like "Good News" to you? Why or why not?