

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 3 – Chapter 24 – Part 1

ELECTION IS CONFIRMED BY GOD'S CALL

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 wants to expand the concept of predestination (God chooses our eternal destination for us) and election (God elects us for salvation) by discussing the calling of the elect. In a sense, the election of God (i.e., who is elected) is a secret contained within the heart of God. But God makes this election a felt reality through calling people to God's own self. *"Although in choosing his own the Lord already has adopted them as his children, we see that they do not come into possession of so great a good, except when they are called"* (pg. 965). This calling is what Calvin refers to as "effectual," meaning that when God calls, those who are the elect will respond. *"But everyone who has learned from the Father not only is able to come but also comes"* (pg. 965). What this means is that human beings sense God's love and grace calling them into a life-changing relationship. So the invisible election becomes a visible reality. Even so, Calvin wants to be sure people understand that calling and response are God's work and not ours.

*"...but it is false to say that election takes effect only after we have embraced the gospel, and election takes its validity from this"* (pg. 967-8).

The question becomes then, how do we know if we are of the elect? How do we know that we are saved? Calvin argues that we find our assurance not in feelings, but in focus. If our focus is upon Jesus Christ, then we can know that we have been chosen and called by God. *"But if we have been chosen in him (Jesus), we shall not find assurance of our election in ourselves; and not even in God the Father, if we conceive him as severed from his Son. Christ then is the mirror wherein we must, and without self-deception may, contemplate our own election"* (pg. 970). Calvin explains this by focusing on passages from the Gospel of John such as John 3:16, *"Whoever believes in him may not perish"* (pg. 971) as a way of bringing assurance.

This leads to one of Calvin's most important aspects of the doctrine of predestination/election; that once we are elected and called, we will never be lost to God. Calvin understands that things happen in people's lives that cause them to doubt that God still loves us. It is in those moments when people are to remember that God has given them perseverance. He writes that *"Christ bestows upon his own the certainty that their election is irrevocable and lasting"* and that *"Christ...has taken under his protection all whom the Father wishes to be saved"* (pg. 971). In other words, we are to set aside all anxiety about our salvation and believe that there is nothing in all of creation that can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ (Romans 8).

**Reflection:** One of the gifts of predestination/election is that it allows people to have confidence in their salvation. In Calvin's view, salvation was never a sure thing. People had to worry about being good enough, believing the right things, or having done enough good works in order that their salvation might become a reality. Calvin's offer of election/calling/perseverance offered a sense of peace that followers of Christ could take hold of, because their salvation was based in God's work in Christ, and not in their own human striving or perfection.

Questions:

1. How have you responded to God's call in Jesus upon your life?
2. Have you ever wondered if God's love for you is real? How did you reassure yourself that it was?
3. What confidence do you find in knowing that when God takes hold of you God will never let go?