

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 24 – Part 2

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: Calvin begins this section with a look at what he calls “general and special calling.” To understand the difference between the two, Calvin quotes the Gospel of Matthew (22:2), where Jesus says, “*Many are called but few are chosen.*” What this means is that many people will hear the Gospel and respond (general calling) but only certain people will respond and be saved by the message (special calling). An example of general calling might be a revival where people attend, respond to the message but soon turn away from following Jesus. An example of special calling would be someone attending the same revival, who professes Christ as Lord and Savior, but then continues in the faith, becoming aware that they are among God’s elect.

Having noted the difference, Calvin does not want people to be afraid that they can lose their salvation (afraid that they only have general and not special calling). He disagrees with Pope Gregory the Great (540 CE to 604 CE) who stated that we can only be aware of our (general) calling but not our election (special calling) and therefore “*...exhorts all men to fear and trembling...*” (pg. 975). Calvin believes the opposite, that we can know that we have special calling because “*...predestination rightly understood, brings no shaking of faith but its confirmation*” (pg. 976). The bottom line for Calvin is that he does not want anyone who has faith in Christ to be afraid that they are not saved.

The special calling that makes us aware of our election is not something that comes to every person in the same way or at the same time. Calvin puts it this way. “*The elect are gathered into Christ’s flock by a call not immediately at birth, and not all at the same time, but according as it pleases God to dispense his grace to them. But before they are gathered unto that Supreme Shepherd, they wander scattered in the wilderness common to all; and they do not differ at all from others except that they are protected by God’s special mercy...*” (pg. 976). What this means for Calvin is that there is a moment in which our special calling from God is revealed and we understand ourselves to be among the elect. He takes a dim view of those who believe in a progressive sense of salvation and “*...imagine that some sort of seed of election was sown in them from birth itself...*” (pg. 97). What Calvin wants people to understand is that election is not a seed that grows inside us, but that it is (at whatever age) a radical reframing of a person’s life. He refers to it as a divine deliverance (pg. 977).

Reflection: As I have said before, I would imagine that many of us are bothered by Calvin’s doctrine of predestination (God saving some and condemning others). Even so, Calvin’s view of God is one that shows God to be merciful and loving. This mercy and love are shown in God’s special calling, as God reaches into people’s lives, changes their hearts and helps them to see that they are loved and beloved by God. It is hard for me to imagine such a loving God choosing to condemn men and women without giving them an opportunity to experience the love that God offers. The bottom line for me is that God is love...and would not withhold love from anyone for any reason.

Questions:

1. Was there a moment in your life when you realized that you were loved by God? What was that like?
2. Have there been moments in your life when you wondered if God still loved you? How did you deal with those times?