

Insofar as there has been much misunderstanding and controversy concerning John Calvin's doctrine, especially that on predestination, it seemed fitting to explain the essence and origins of this great reformer's teaching on the subject. Nearly all scholars today know and acknowledge Calvin's widespread influence as a biblical teacher. Many laypersons today commonly associate Calvin's name with the doctrine of predestination, as if he had invented the idea. To be sure Calvin expounded predestination more thoroughly than most other theologians that come to mind, however he did not create the doctrine or formulate his teaching without heavy dependence on Scripture and secondarily on other previous theologians. John Calvin's teaching on predestination emphasized God's grace and man's dependence on the Almighty for salvation. He based this doctrine firmly on what he believed to be his best personal interpretation of Scripture and with the aid of historical interpretations, especially St. Augustine's.

John Calvin was born in 1509 in a French town called Noyon.¹ His father initially set him up for the priesthood, but acquiring an aversion to many Roman Catholic teachings

¹ Foxe, John, Foxe's Bood of Martyrs, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), 84.

by his interpretation of Scripture, he began to study law at the University of Paris.² There Calvin diligently studied the Scriptures and gained a small following of his classmates. Calvin, after finishing school, wrote his *magnum opus* the Institutes of the Christian Religion, by which he won instant international fame as a theologian. Events unfolded to make him the head preacher in reformed Geneva, Switzerland. Calvin taught there most of his life until his death in 1564.³ The fruit of his teaching spread around the world, providing the basic doctrine and structure for thousands of churches across the whole European continent including the French Huguenots, Dutch and German Reformed churches, English Puritans, and Scottish Presbyterians.

Calvin's approach to biblical scholarship was one of total submission to God's word. He felt that any addition to doctrine of human philosophy that was not rooted in the word of God was vain and misleading. Calvin sought to decipher the meaning of Scriptures without consideration of what negative reactions humans might have to its clearest message because he believed that the Scriptures constituted the inerrant word of God. Calvin believed that all human

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 87.

intellect was tainted by sin and that any person therefore who wanted to discern God's truth had to abandon his own preconceived notions if the sense of the Scriptural text seemed to contradict them. Thus Calvin says:

If true religion is to beam upon us, our principle must be, that it is necessary to begin with heavenly teaching, and that it is impossible for man to obtain even the minutest portion of right and sound doctrine without being a disciple of Scripture. Hence the first step in true knowledge is taken, when we reverently embrace the testimony which God has been pleased therein to give of himself.⁴

This quotation illustrates Calvin's humble approach to the interpretation of Scripture. While many theologians speculated as to God's nature and character, John Calvin affirmed an unwavering loyalty to the written Scriptures in all teaching. He believed that a Bible teacher should diligently search the meaning of the mysteries that God revealed in Scripture while remaining completely silent on the mysteries that God chose to leave out altogether.⁵ By this approach Calvin opposed teachers who chose to ignore controversial or difficult issues in the Scriptures. According to Calvin they deprived God's flock of edifying truth that the Father intended His people to know. On the other hand Calvin criticized those who philosophically explored questions about God's will, nature, and character

⁴ Calvin, John, Institutes of the Christian Religion, trans. Henry Beveridge, (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), Book I vi 2.

⁵ Ibid, Book III xxi 1.

outside of what Scripture testified.⁶ He regarded them as harmful troublemakers whose minds rebelled against God's sovereign truth to lead the church astray through insolent questions.⁷

The focus of all of Calvin's teaching was God. Calvin taught that Almighty God, the Creator of heaven and earth, deserved all glory and credit for everything in existence. God purposefully worked out all things according to His sovereign will before the foundation of the world.⁸ Calvin did not teach that God actively operated to accomplish all things, as if He were the author of both good and evil, but that God had nonetheless decreed all things that would ever come to pass according to His will. What God did not personally operate into existence He sovereignly allowed according to His purposes.⁹ God did not create sin, but He nonetheless planned the advent of sin according to His unsearchable will and for His glory.¹⁰ The central message of Calvin's teaching on God was that He was in sovereign control of the universe He created, and that He neither did nor allowed anything without a specific purpose.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, Book I xvi 9.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, Book III xxiii 7.

According to Calvin God created man in His image to serve Him eternally. At creation man had the ability to choose either good or evil.¹¹ Man was free to serve God or to turn against Him. Man in his created state was a finite expression of God's glory and the attributes with which God had endowed him glorified the Creator.¹² At one moment the first man, Adam, chose to rebel against his Creator by disobeying His command.¹³ From the moment that sin first conceived in the first created man all of the glorious faculties with which God had created him became tainted by sin.¹⁴ Man's rebellion separated him from God so that all of his thoughts were continuously wicked without the glory of the divine presence apparent in him. Calvin taught that no part of the human body, soul, or spirit remained untainted by sin.

According to Calvin, the whole human race from the time of Adam's fall inherited an innate sinfulness.¹⁵ To support this inherited wickedness Calvin cited the Psalmist, "I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me."¹⁶ Every person was born in sin according to Calvin, and was therefore incapable of living

¹¹ Ibid, Book I xv 8.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid, Book II i 4.

¹⁴ Ibid, Book II ii 12.

¹⁵ Ibid, Book II i 5.

¹⁶ Psalm 51:5.

without sin. Calvin commented on historical interpretations by expressing his agreement with Augustine. He says, "The orthodox, therefore, and more especially Augustine, labored to show, that we are not corrupted by acquired wickedness, but bring an innate corruption from the very womb."¹⁷ Calvin did not teach that man was completely corrupted, as to say that there was no remaining part of man that retained any usefulness, but that man was *extensively* sinful so that every part of his being was radically corrupt. That is to say that although God's glory remained to be seen in some measure in man's body and intellect¹⁸, yet it and every other part of the human being was also radically sinful so that a person could not think, do, or say anything pleasing to God.

Calvin taught that man's sinful nature made it impossible for anyone to love God or to believe in Him on his own. He quoted the Scriptures where it says, "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one."¹⁹ Given the wicked state of God's degenerated creatures, which He made to serve Him, God would be completely just to damn every person forever. God's justice required that a

¹⁷ Calvin, The Institutes, Book II i 5.

¹⁸ Ibid, Book II iii 3.

¹⁹ Job 14:4.

creature rebelling against Him pay the penalty of endless separation from His glorious presence.²⁰

According to John Calvin God was extremely merciful to create a way for men to be saved through faith in His Son Jesus.²¹ God desired to save a people for Himself from before the creation of the universe. God sent His Son Jesus, equally God and man, to pay the penalty of sins for those on whom God chose to show mercy. Since man in his extensively sinful state was completely unable to be acceptably just before God, no amount of "good works" could earn God's favor. Only by faith in Jesus could sinners partake in Jesus' work of redemption for them to be right with God. Calvin derived this conclusion from the Scriptures, including one verse that says,

Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work.²²

Upon reading verses like this one Calvin concluded that salvation by grace through faith excluded all human works from salvation, including an initial human "choice."

Calvin taught that no sinful heart could ever believe in Jesus on its own because man was spiritually dead in

²⁰ Calvin, The Institutes, Book II, iii 1.

²¹ Ibid, Book II xvi 1.

²² Romans 11:5-6.

sin.²³ Although fallen man still had some freedom to make various choices in common life, no one had the ability to believe unto salvation without a divine work of the Holy Spirit on his heart. Calvin believed that God freely offered salvation to all through His Son Jesus²⁴ but that no one could believe to access this gift because of man's wicked rebellious heart. As the apostle Paul wrote, "There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God."²⁵ Man did not naturally desire to believe. He did not seek God. He did not want to serve God in this sinful state. No one could believe unless regenerated by a sovereign work of grace on his sinful heart.

Those whom God regenerated would partake of eternal life through faith in Jesus.²⁶ Faith was purely a grace of God as a result of God's operation to quicken the human spirit. Those who were once spiritually dead now lived in their hearts to serve God, liberated from the power of sin which previously prevented them. Once God had given someone spiritual life they invariably responded by embracing His grace, now being enlightened. The Holy

²³ Calvin, The Institutes, Book II ii 19.

²⁴ Calvin, John, Commentary on II Peter, trans. Calvin Translation Society, *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, II Peter 3:9.

²⁵ Romans 3:10.

²⁶ Calvin, The Institutes, Book III iii 1.

Spirit continually worked faith in the hearts of the elect and once regenerated a person could never truly turn away from God.

John Calvin taught that before God created the world He had chosen to give faith to some and not to others by His sovereign will. As the apostle Paul wrote, "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will,"²⁷ This predestination was the unconditional election, the first cause of salvation according to Calvin. No one who truly believed had to despair of his salvation, for faith was a sure sign of God's election. According to Calvin's doctrine God had predestinated every individual to either eternal life or perdition. There were no accidents with God. God operated in the hearts of His elect to give them faith while sovereignly allowing the rest to continue in their natural unbelief unto righteous judgment. Some of Calvin's students called this doctrine "Double Predestination" while others termed it "Unconditional Election."

²⁷ Ephesians 1:4-5.

Calvin derived his teaching of predestination from the Scriptures. He quoted Jesus where He says, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me."²⁸ Calvin cited Augustine as a secondary source where the Church father said, "There is no place for the vain argument of those who defend the foreknowledge of God against the grace of God, and accordingly maintain that we were elected before the foundation of the world, because God foreknew that we would be good, not that he himself would make us good."²⁹ Here Augustine declares that God's predestination is not according to some foreseen human work or choice, but simply according to His holy will. Calvin agreed.

Calvin taught that faith and good works were signs that signified God's election of an individual. God's elect were not yet completely delivered from sin in their lives, and struggled against it continuously. Calvin taught that God's elect were saved by faith alone and that the Holy Spirit worked in a chosen person's life toward holiness as a gradual process.³⁰ According to Calvin only the reborn individual could know for sure whether he were chosen by God. No one could truly judge another's faith from mere externals, and personal holiness varied on such a

²⁸ John 6:37

²⁹ Calvin, The Institutes, Book III xxii 8.

³⁰ Ibid, Book III xiv 1.

wide continuum between true believers, because of its progressive nature, that works alone could not prove or disprove another's election with any certainty. For Calvin predestination was a reason for humility before God. Since faith was purely a gift from God, no one could boast in a personal choice to serve their Creator or exalt themselves over others that still lived in sin. The credit was God's alone.

John Calvin taught from a perspective of strict biblical authority. He derived his theological interpretations from studying God's word and also consulted previous theologians like Augustine in particular. Calvin believed that man had been radically corrupted by the fall and was completely incapable of following God without a divine work of grace upon his heart. Calvin's doctrine on predestination did not bar anyone from salvation, if they believed, but rather taught believers to rely completely on God as the source of their faith and eternal life.

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