



TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

CALVIN'S MISSIONAL VISION AND LEGACY

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AND C. JEFFREY ROBINSON SR.

To the Ends of the Earth: Calvin's Missional Vision and Legacy

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“For God So Loved the World”

JOHN CALVIN’S MISSIONAL EXEGESIS

Calvin as a Biblical Theologian

The great delight of John Calvin’s heart was studying and teaching Holy Scripture. Above all else, he was a student and preacher of God’s Word. While Calvin’s critics—and they have been myriad—have accused him of everything from inventing predestination to insisting upon the damnation of infants, one accusation that sticks is that Calvin was a lover of the Bible. In his commentaries, theological writings, and sermons, Calvin sought to say what the Bible says. Where God’s Word speaks to an issue, Calvin sought to address it. From his own voluminous written analysis of Scripture, Calvin sought to go as far and high and wide and deep as God’s Word—but no further. Thus, he wrote much about salvation, sin, eternal damnation, God’s sovereignty, prayer, the wrath of God, reprobation, and yes, predestination; he wrote and preached and taught about these topics—controversial and noncontroversial—because the Bible addresses them all.

One senses the depth of his affection for the Bible in the preface to his commentary on the book of Psalms, written toward the end of his life in 1557:

If the reading of these my commentaries confer as much benefit on the Church of God as I myself have reaped advantage from the composition of them, I shall have no reason to regret that I have undertaken this work. . . . The varied and resplendid [i.e., resplendent] riches which are . . . contained in this treasury it is no easy matter to express in words; so much so, that I well know that whatever I shall be able to say will be far from approaching the excellence of the subject.¹

Calvin's commentaries were, as David L. Puckett points out, an extension of his spoken ministry as a doctor of theology and were mostly taken from lectures delivered to ministerial candidates.² Calvin published his first biblical commentary on the Pauline epistle of Romans in 1540 during his ministry in Strasbourg. After completing the Romans commentary, Calvin took a six-year hiatus from publishing his expositional works. But between 1546 and 1551, Calvin was prolific, publishing verse-by-verse expositions of 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, 1 and 2 Peter, James, 1 John, and Jude.³ Over the next four years, through 1555, Calvin published his two-part commentary on Acts, a commentary on John, and a harmony of the Synoptic Gospels. The only New Testament books for which Calvin did not release commentaries were 2 and 3 John and Revelation.⁴ Calvin published his lectures on the Old Testament after completing the series on the New Testament and was in the midst of his work in the prophet Ezekiel when his diseased body forced the Reformer to his deathbed in 1564.⁵

¹ Preface to John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), xxxv–xxxvi.

² David L. Puckett, “John Calvin as Teacher,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 13, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 47.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 106–7.

⁵ *Ibid.* For a table outlining Calvin's teaching and preaching schedule between 1555 and 1564, see Andrew Buckler, *Jean Calvin et la mission de l'Eglise* (Lyon: Editions Olivétan, 2008), 217.

Calvin was also a systematic theologian. When he was twenty-six years old, he drafted the first edition of what would become his magnum opus, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Five Latin editions followed the first, 1536 edition, culminating in the final edition in 1559. Nearly five hundred years later, Calvin's *Institutes* is considered by many to be one of the finest systematic theologies ever written, and it remains the most influential and complete defense of the Reformation to arise from the pen of the magisterial Reformers. Calvin scholar John T. McNeill argued that Calvin's *Institutes* is "one of the few books that have profoundly affected the course of history."⁶ Similarly, the American church historian Philip Schaff wrote, "This book is the masterpiece of a precocious genius of commanding intellectual and spiritual depth and power. It is one of the few truly classical productions in the history of theology, and has given its author the double title of the Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas of the Reformed Church."⁷ B. B. Warfield saw the *Institutes* as "supplying for the first time the constructive basis for the Reformation movement," a work that, for the first time in the history of the church, "drew in outline the plan of a complete structure of Christian Apologetics."⁸

While most think of Calvin's *Institutes* as a tour de force of Reformed thought (an accurate assessment), it is also a work that pulsates with concern for a lost and dying world, a world that profoundly needs to hear the message of God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ. Yes, the *Institutes* expounds in great detail the Bible's teaching on predestination and election, as expected since Calvin found those doctrines clearly established in the Bible; but it does so with a full awareness and expression of both the absolute sovereignty of God and the full responsibility of humanity. Thus, Calvin makes plain that the chief end of gospel proclamation and theological engagement is its service in the *missio dei*, the mission of God: to glorify himself through the salvation of sinful mankind. Thus,

⁶ John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 119.

⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 8:329.

⁸ B. B. Warfield, "The Knowledge of God," in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. 5, *Calvin and Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 30.

election is secret and beyond humankind’s ability to know. This being the case, we must pray for the conversion of all people, as Calvin wrote:

The prayer of the Christian ought to be conformed to this rule in order that it may be in common and embrace all who are his brothers in Christ: not only those whom he presently sees and recognizes as such, but all people who dwell on earth. For what the Lord has determined regarding them is beyond our knowing, except that we ought to wish and hope for the best for them.⁹

Calvin was a theologian whose theology animated and did not undermine such praying for the salvation of all people, which will be the focus of a section later in this chapter.

The chapter will examine the fruit of Calvin’s labors as an exegete of the Bible, as a theologian, and as a preacher of Scripture, with particular attention to Calvin’s commentaries, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and his sermons. The key “problem” texts of Scripture that have led opponents of Calvin to brand him “anti-missional” and “non-evangelistic” will be analyzed, as well as Calvin’s approach to such matters as the universal call of the gospel in light of his doctrine of predestination. The picture that will emerge will reveal an approach to Scripture and theology that was clearly pro-missions and pro-evangelism. While Calvin was a first-generation Reformer concerned more directly with purifying the church than birthing a worldwide missions movement, his interpretation of the Bible and understanding of theology were consistent with a free and uninhibited proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of the lost.

First, this chapter will examine the so-called “universal” texts that many have used through the ages to expose Calvin as a theologian at odds with missions and evangelism. We will also examine the most prominent among the so-called Calvinistic texts that address salvation in terms of election and predestination, such as

⁹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), quoted in Elsie McKee, “Calvin and Praying for ‘All People Who Dwell on Earth,’” *Interpretation* 63, no. 2 (April 2009): 130.

Ephesians 1 and Romans 9, among others. In addition to Calvin's sermons and the *Institutes*, the research will also draw from some of Calvin's important polemical works, including his debates with Albert Pighius (c. 1490–1542), Sebastian Castellio (1515–1563), and others on predestination, the bondage of the will, and the providence of God.

Calvin on the "Universal" Texts

Many of Calvinism's critics view the "all" passages in Scripture as the Achilles' heel of the system of theology most closely associated with the teaching of John Calvin. The logic goes like this: If the Bible says that God desires the salvation of every single person without exception, and he invites every single person without exception to receive saving grace, then Christians who believe doctrines such as election, predestination, and particular atonement cannot honestly call on sinners to repent and trust in Christ for salvation. In an attempt to refute Calvin's theology, many call upon what they consider an indicting series of "Arminian" verses, including Ezekiel 18:23, Matthew 23:37, John 3:16, 1 Timothy 2:4, and 2 Peter 3:9, to show such inconsistent thinking within Calvinism. One such critic was the late William Estep, the American Baptist historian quoted in the introduction to this work, who argued thus against Calvinism: "Calvinism appears to deny John 3:16, John 1:12, Romans 1:16, Romans 10:9–10, Ephesians 2:8–10, and numerous other passages of scripture that indicate . . . that salvation comes to those who respond to God's grace in faith."¹⁰ While Calvin is usually best remembered for his articulation of the biblical doctrine of predestination, the Reformer did not see a call to the unconverted as inconsistent with the doctrines of God's secret choosing of a people before the foundation of the world. For the sake of biblical chronology, let us begin in the Old Testament with two texts in the prophet Ezekiel.

¹⁰ William Estep, "Calvinizing Southern Baptists," *Texas Baptist Standard* (March 26, 1997). This article was substantially reprinted as "Doctrines Lead to 'Dunghill' Prof Warns," *The Founders Journal* 29 (Summer 1997), accessed September 14, 2013, <http://www.founders.org/journal/fj29/article1.html>.

“Have I Any Pleasure in the Death of the Wicked?”

In his comments on Ezekiel 18:23 (“Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?”), Calvin affirmed that there is one sense in which God, according to his eternal will, desires the salvation of all men and women even while God predestines every person who will ever be saved.¹¹ This text, Calvin argued, makes clear that God calls all people without exception to salvation. During Old Testament times, the prophets called God’s people to repentance and faith, and the call was without respect of persons. In the same way, the gospel goes forth to all people without exception in the new covenant. Though Calvin certainly affirmed election and predestination, there is nothing in those doctrines that hinders the prophet or preacher from demanding universal repentance.

In this text, Calvin argued that Ezekiel is calling people to repentance, and, while aware of the reality of predestination, the prophet is not speaking of God’s secret purpose of election. Thus, Calvin maintained, there is no contradiction between the two doctrines—God’s general call to sinners and his choosing of a people for salvation—both of which clearly appear in the Bible. Calvin chose to let the biblical tension between divine election and the free offer of the gospel stand without trying to solve what he calls elsewhere “an unfathomable mystery.” While many throughout history will refuse God’s overtures of grace, thus confirming God’s secret election of some to salvation, Calvin saw no reason whatsoever to withhold the offer of God’s redeeming love in Christ from any person. If one genuinely repents, God will receive him, Calvin asserted.

We hold, then, that God does not will the death of a sinner, since he calls all equally to repentance and promises himself prepared to receive them if they only seriously repent. If any one should object—then there is no election of God, by which he has predestinated a fixed number to salvation, the answer is at hand. The prophet does not here speak of God’s secret coun-

¹¹ For an examination of Calvin’s thoughts on the “two wills of God,” see below.

sel, but only recalls miserable men from despair, that they may apprehend the hope of pardon, and repent and embrace the offered salvation. If anyone again objects—this is making God act with duplicity, the answer is ready, that God always wishes the same thing, though by different ways, and in a manner inscrutable to us. Although, therefore, God's will is simple, yet great variety is involved in it, as far as our senses are concerned. Besides, it is not surprising that our eyes should be blinded by intense light, so that we cannot certainly judge how God wishes all to be saved, and yet has devoted all the reprobate to eternal destruction, and wishes them to perish.¹²

A similar verse that appears several chapters later in Ezekiel seems to stand at odds with the eternal decrees of God: "As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?" (Ezek. 33:11). In the *Institutes*, Calvin understood both Ezekiel 18:23 and 33:11 as setting forth the grace of God in the midst of Israel's spiritual adultery. The prophets, whose messages Calvin ultimately interpreted through a christological lens, promise the light of God's grace to even the darkest of rebels. God's promises are good news of mercy to God's people in both the old and new covenants. For Calvin, grace and not sin will have the final word:

The prophets are full of promises of this kind, which offer mercy to a people [Israel] though they be covered with infinite crimes. What graver iniquity is there than rebellion? . . . Surely, there can be no other feeling in him who affirms that he does not desire the death of the sinner, but rather that he be converted and live [Ezek. 18:23, 32; 33:11]. Accordingly, when Solomon dedicated the Temple, he intended it also to be used so that thereby the prayers offered to obtain pardon of sins might be answered.¹³

¹² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, trans. Thomas Myers (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 247, word order slightly modernized.

¹³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2:1038 (4.1.25).

“For God So Loved the World, That He Gave His Only Son”

The Ezekiel passages are often quoted in refutation of Calvin’s doctrine of predestination, but the most prevalent verse employed against Calvin and Calvinism is typically the first passage a child learns in Vacation Bible School, John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” This is undoubtedly the text most often quoted to refute Calvinistic expressions of the doctrines of election and predestination. Calvin, however, as the original “Calvinist,” did not stumble over the collective or universal words in the text. Contrary to popular opinion about the Reformer, he affirmed both God’s universal love for humanity and the universal offer of the gospel that must be made to all sinners without exception:

The whole substance of our salvation is not to be sought anywhere else than in Christ, and so we must see by what means Christ flows to us, and why he was offered as our Savior. Both points are clearly told us here—that faith in Christ quickens all, and that Christ brought life because the heavenly Father does not wish the human race he loves to perish.¹⁴

The phrase “whoever believes” is often used as proof that Calvin’s theology of God’s sovereign choice in salvation is fallacious; a consistent follower of Calvin’s theology should not invite all sinners to salvation, some insist. Calvin, however, had no such scruples with the language, but affirmed the universal invitation of sinners to Christ in his comments on John 3:16:

The outstanding thing about faith is it delivers us from eternal destruction. For he [John] especially wanted to say that although we seem to have been born for death deliverance is offered to us by faith in Christ so that we must not fear the death

¹⁴John Calvin, *The Gospel according to St John 1–10*, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 73.

which otherwise threatens us. And he has used a general term, both to invite indiscriminately all to share in life and to cut off every excuse from unbelievers. Such is also the significance of the term “world” which he had used before. For although there is nothing in the world deserving of God’s favor, he nevertheless shows he is favorable to the whole world when he calls all without exception to faith in Christ, which is indeed an entry into life.¹⁵

Has Calvin abandoned his belief in divine election? Certainly not. After examining the word “world” in John 3:16 and establishing the general call of the gospel, which goes out to all indiscriminately, Calvin set forth the Bible’s position on the complementarity of God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. Many may be called to repent and believe in Christ through gospel proclamation, but only those whom God enables to come to Christ will do so, as Calvin was quick to point out: “Let us remember that although life is promised generally to all who believe in Christ, faith is not common to all. For Christ is open to all and displayed to all, but God opens the eyes only of the elect that they may seek him by faith.”¹⁶ For Calvin, John 3:16 spoke not of the extent of God’s love, but of the degree and nature of such divine love: God loves the world he has created in spite of its sin, rebellion, and rejection of him. Calvin understood “world” to refer to all of humanity, including the Gentiles, and no longer exclusively to the Israelites of the old covenant.¹⁷ It is to this world that God sends his only begotten Son as Redeemer.¹⁸ Those who interpret “world” to mean every individual person who has ever lived take the phrase differently than Calvin and many other interpreters in the history of the church.¹⁹

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ See D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 205: “Jews were familiar with the truth that God loved the children of Israel; here God’s love is not restricted by race. Even so, God’s love is to be admired not because the world is so big and includes so many people, but because the world is so bad; that is the customary connotation of *kosmos* (‘world’). The world is so wicked that John elsewhere forbids Christians to love anything in it (1 Jn. 2:15–17). There

For Calvin, John 3:16 was not an impediment to subscription to the biblical doctrine of election and the simultaneous proclamation of the gospel to all people without exception.

God “Desires All People to Be Saved and to Come to the Knowledge of the Truth”

If John 3:16 is the most popular “anti-Calvinism” passage, 1 Timothy 2:4 may rank as a close second. In his 2001 book *Chosen but Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election*, Christian apologist Norman Geisler attempted to reconcile the biblical tension between the doctrine of election and the Arminian view of libertarian free will. In it he argued, “From the time of the later Augustine this text has been manhandled by extreme Calvinists.”²⁰ He accuses the eminent Puritan exegete John Owen (1616–1683) of holding a typical but “dubious view” in which “all here does not mean all. His tactic is to divert the issue to other passages where ‘all’ does not mean the whole human race.”²¹

It is noteworthy that Owen followed Calvin in his interpretation of this text. For Calvin, the immediate context of 1 Timothy 2:1 helped determine to whom Paul is referring in verse 4 when he writes of God’s willing “all people to be saved.” Paul is speaking not of every single person in history without exception, but of all types of people, including “kings and those in high positions.” So of whom is Paul speaking in verse 4? Like Owen after him, Calvin said that “the present discourse relates to classes of men, and not to individual persons; for his sole object is, to include in this number princes and foreign nations.”²² In a sermon on 1 Timothy 2:3–5, Calvin told his congregation that “St. Paul’s meaning is, not that God will save every man, but that the promises which were given to but one people, are now extended to the whole world,” meaning,

is no contradiction between this prohibition and the fact that God does love it. Christians are not to love the world with the selfish love of participation; God loves the world with the selfless, costly love of redemption.”

²⁰ Norman L. Geisler, *Chosen but Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2001), 201. Geisler refers to those who hold to all five points of the Canons of Dort as “extreme Calvinists.”

²¹ *Ibid.*, 202.

²² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 54–55.

salvation has come to the entire global community, composed of the Bible's two ethnic categories of people, Jews and Gentiles.²³ While Paul's words here do not mean that God wills the salvation of every single person in world history, still Calvin was certain that the apostle's words are by no means inconsistent with the truth that all who believe will be saved. God will save all kinds of people, whether royalty or commoners, and he will bring to himself people from every nation and ethnicity on earth:

We must not restrain his fatherly goodness to ourselves alone, nor to any certain number of people. . . . For he showeth that he will be favourable to all. . . .

The gospel is called the mighty power of God, and salvation is to all them that believe: yea, it is a gate of paradise. It follows then, if through the will of God the gospel be preached to all the world, there is a token that salvation is common to all.²⁴

Like the Bible, Calvin in his theological writings, commentaries, and sermons was comfortable using the language of universality regarding the necessity of proclaiming the gospel worldwide to all people without distinction.

But where does all this leave the evangelist and missionary? Calvin saw no contradiction between 1 Timothy 2:4 and a full and free offer of the gospel. The command of God is for all human beings everywhere to repent and be reconciled to God, and thus the limiting of "all people" in 1 Timothy 2:4 does nothing to undermine the necessity of preaching the gospel "promiscuously." As Calvin argued:

But I say nothing on that subject, because it has nothing to do with this passage; for the Apostle simply means, that there is no people and no rank in the world that is excluded from salvation; because God wishes that the gospel should be proclaimed to all without exception. Now the preaching of the gospel gives

²³ John Calvin, *Selected Sermons from the Pastoral Epistles* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 2012), 97.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

life; and hence he justly concludes that God invites all equally to partake of salvation.²⁵

Calvin anticipated the challenge that 1 Timothy 2:4 appears to hold for his view of predestination and dealt with the argument that the text renders impossible his view of God’s eternal decrees. Paul is addressing all classes of humans and not persons as individuals, he asserted:

Hence we see the childish folly of those who represent this passage to be opposed to predestination. “If God,” they say, “wishes all men indiscriminately to be saved, it is false that some are predestinated by his eternal purpose to salvation, and others to perdition.” They might have had some ground for saying this, if Paul were speaking here about individual men; although even then we should not have wanted [i.e., lacked] the means of replying to their argument; for, although the will of God ought not to be judged from his secret decrees, when he reveals them to us by outward signs, yet it does not therefore follow that he has not determined with himself what he intends to do as to every individual man.²⁶

In other words, Calvin seems to intimate that the one proclaiming the gospel must see every individual person as potentially “savable,” while leaving the secret things of God’s decrees to God himself, as Moses admonished the Hebrews in Deuteronomy 29:29, “The secret things belong to the LORD.”

“The Lord Is . . . Not Wishing That Any Should Perish, but That All Should Reach Repentance”

In his response to Geisler’s attempt at a *via media* between Calvin and Arminius on the nature of the will, James R. White correctly surmised that 2 Peter 3:9, perhaps above all others, is the verse the opponents of Calvin’s theology of sovereign grace most often use to

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, 54.

disprove it: "This is surely the most popular passage cited (almost never with any reference to the context) to 'prove' that God could not possibly desire to save a specific people but instead desires to save every single individual person, thereby denying election and predestination."²⁷

The context of the passage is not salvation, but the second coming of Christ and the terrible day of final judgment. As Calvin pointed out in his commentary on 2 Peter, the context and audience are key to a proper interpretation of this disputed verse. Throughout 2 Peter the apostle refers to his intended audience, which, according to the opening verse in chapter 1, is "those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ." Thus, the intended audience is those who have or would come to salvation through Christ. It is noteworthy that Calvin did not blunt the force of 2 Peter 3:9 for the purpose of evangelizing the lost. Despite the focus of some on the seeming contradiction between Peter's words here and the doctrine of election, this passage, Calvin argued, actually calls all people without exception to repentance and faith in Christ:

[Peter] checks extreme and unreasonable haste [for the day of resurrection] by . . . [saying that] the Lord defers his coming, that he might invite all mankind to repentance. . . . There is no reason why we should any longer complain of tardiness [in God] . . . who in the best manner regulates time to promote our salvation. And as to the duration of the whole world, we must think exactly the same as of the life of every individual; for God by prolonging time to each, sustains him that he may repent. . . . He does not hasten the end of the world, in order to give to all time to repent.

This is a very necessary admonition, so that we may learn to employ time aright, as we shall otherwise suffer a just punishment for our idleness.

²⁷ James R. White, *The Potter's Freedom: A Defense of the Reformation and a Rebuttal of Norman Geisler's "Chosen but Free"* (Amityville, NY: Calvary, 2000), 145.

. . . So wonderful is his love toward mankind, that he would have them all to be saved, and is of his own self prepared to bestow salvation on the lost. . . . God is ready to receive all to repentance, so that none may perish. . . . Every one of us, therefore, who is desirous of salvation, must learn to enter in by this way.²⁸

In his comments on this passage, Calvin raised the issue that has cloaked 2 Peter 3:9 in controversy and provided an answer that may surprise many who erroneously believe Calvin to have been an opponent of evangelism and missions:

It may be asked, if God wishes none to perish, why is it so many do perish? To this my answer is, that no mention is here made of the hidden purpose of God, according to which the reprobate are doomed to their own ruin, but only of his will as made known to us in the gospel. For God stretches forth his hand without a difference to all, but lays hold only of those, to lead them to himself, whom he has chosen before the foundation of the world.²⁹

Calvin’s comments brought to the fore an issue that has been much debated within the church since the advent of the Reformation: Does God, in the Bible, engage in double-talk when he makes it clear in some places (such as 2 Peter 3:9) that he desires every person in human history to be saved, but says in others, such as Ephesians 1, that he chooses all who will be saved before the foundation of the world? In other words, are there “two wills” in God? How did Calvin deal with this biblical tension? The context of 2 Peter 3:9 is an excellent location from which to examine Calvin’s take on this knotty question before examining other “universal” texts.

Calvin and the “Two Wills” of God

A crucial piece of the puzzle that provides a full picture, and thus full understanding, of Calvin’s soteriology is the Bible’s

²⁸ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. and ed. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 419.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 419–20.

two-dimensional depiction of the will of God, the so-called “two wills of God.”³⁰ This doctrine is key to understanding how the Bible can affirm in texts such as Ezekiel 13:23, 33:11, 1 Timothy 2:4, and 2 Peter 3:9 that God desires the salvation of all people, while at the same time the Bible expresses in unambiguous terms God’s particular love in electing and predestining those whom “he chose . . . in him before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). Does God choose or do we choose? Does God want all people saved or not?

The theology of the magisterial Reformers, including Calvin, answered yes to both questions! This doctrine helps us understand the biblical complementarity between the general call of the gospel and predestination, as Calvin expressed it. Contemporary Bible scholar John Piper defines the doctrine this way: “[Scripture teaches] the simultaneous existence of God’s will for ‘all to be saved’ (1 Tim. 2:4) and his will to elect unconditionally those who will actually be saved.”³¹ This doctrine is fully biblical and is by no means a sign of “divine schizophrenia or exegetical confusion,” argues Piper; it “does not contradict biblical expressions of God’s compassion for all people, and does not nullify the sincere offers of salvation to everyone who is lost among all the peoples of the world.”³² Calvin, following his theological father, Augustine (354–430), would have agreed. Calvin did not invent the doctrine of the “two wills” of God. In his debate with Dutch Roman Catholic theologian Albert Pighius in *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, and in the *Institutes* and other works, Calvin quotes from Augustine’s *Enchiridion* in defense of the doctrine. Moreover, the “two wills” of God is standard teaching in the historic Reformed tradition following the Protestant Reformation.

This issue rose to primacy for Calvin in his somewhat protracted

³⁰ On Calvin’s teaching on the two wills, see also Richard A. Muller, “A Tale of Two Wills? Calvin, Amyraut, and Du Moulin on Ezekiel 18:23,” in *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 107–25.

³¹ John Piper, “Are There Two Wills in God?,” in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 107.

³² *Ibid.*

debate over predestination with Pighius.³³ Pighius was a key defender of medieval Roman Catholic doctrines during the Reformation, preparing a memorandum, for example, on the divorce of Henry VIII and also articulating a defense of papal infallibility. His defense of the freedom of the will, *On the Free Choice of Man and Divine Grace* (1542), contained an attack on Calvin. In the Reformer’s response to Pighius, published at Geneva in 1552, a decade after Pighius’s death, Calvin upbraided his opponent for failing to understand both the conditionality of the promises of salvation and the two aspects of God’s will. While God wills all to be saved in one sense and not in another, Calvin assured Pighius that God demands repentance and faith from all individuals, and that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved:

So again with the promises which invite all men to salvation. They do not simply and positively declare what God has decreed in his secret counsel but what he is prepared to do for all who are brought to faith and repentance. But, it is alleged, we thereby ascribe a double will to God, whereas he is not variable and not the least shadow of turning falls upon him. What is this, says Pighius, but to mock men, if God professes to will what he does not will? But if in fairness the two are read together: I will that the sinner turn and live, the calumny is dissolved without bother. God demands conversion from us; wherever he finds it, a man is not disappointed of the promised reward of life. Hence, God is said to will life, as also repentance. But the latter he wills, because he invites all to it by his word. Now this is not contradictory of his secret counsel, by which he determined to convert none but his elect. He cannot rightly on this account be thought variable, because as lawgiver he illuminates all with the external doctrine of life, in this first sense calling all men to life. But in the other sense, he brings to life whom he will, as Father regenerating by the Spirit only his sons.³⁴

³³For Calvin’s debate with Pighius, see André Pinard, “La notion de grâce irrésistible dans la *Response aux calomnies d’Albert Pighius de Jean Calvin*” (PhD thesis, University of Laval, 2006).

³⁴John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 106, capitalization modernized.

Calvin went on to warn Pighius against putting God in the dock on matters that the finite human mind is not able to grasp fully. Since the identity of the elect is privy to God alone, ministers are obligated to obey the command to preach the Word:

But why some profit and others do not, far be it from us to say that it is the judgment of the clay and not the potter. . . . Since we do not know who belongs to the number of the predestined and who does not, it befits us to feel as to wish that all be saved. So it will come about that, whoever we come across, we shall study to make him a sharer of peace.³⁵

Calvin and the Reformation reasserted the principle of *sola Scriptura*—the Bible alone as the sole authority for the life of faith and doctrine for Christians. Thus, in the *Institutes*, in his sermons, and in his theological writings such as the debate with Pighius, Calvin insisted that he believed in such a complex expression of the will of God for the simple reason that the Bible teaches it. Calvin also emphasized this point in his debate with the Frenchman Sebastian Castellio over God's providence. Castellio had been a colleague of Calvin until a difference of opinion over the canonicity of the Song of Solomon in 1545—Castellio denied it—whereupon Castellio moved to Basel. He later wrote a scathing criticism of Calvin after Geneva executed the anti-Trinitarian Michael Servetus (c. 1511–1553). Castellio drew up fourteen articles in the form of questions, attacking Calvin's theology of predestination and providence. Each of Castellio's questions was framed by ostensibly taking excerpts directly from the writings of Calvin, excerpts which the Reformer rejected as representative of his thought. Calvin felt he had been misquoted and thoroughly misinterpreted by Castel-

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 138. Cf. I. Howard Marshall, "Universal Grace and Atonement in the Pastoral Epistles," in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1989), 56: "To avoid all misconceptions it should be made clear at the outset that the fact that God wishes or wills that all people should be saved does not necessarily imply that all will respond to the gospel and be saved. We must certainly distinguish between what God would like to see happen and what he actually does will to happen, and both of these things can be spoken of as God's will. The question at issue is not whether all will be saved but whether God has made provision in Christ for the salvation of all, provided that they believe, and without limiting the potential scope of the death of Christ merely to those whom God knows will believe."

lio and responded with a work published in 1558. Calvin accused Castellio of seeking to rationalize God and bring him down to a human level. The absolute providence of God and related doctrines such as election and the “two wills” demonstrate the human inability to fully comprehend the character or ways of God, Calvin argued.

Regarding the “two wills,” which Castellio saw as leaving God as the author of sin and evil, Calvin stated:

If the same apostle with good reason exclaims that his [God’s] ways are inscrutable (Rom. 11:33), why am I not allowed to marvel at his secret will even though it is concealed from us? In the book of Job there are many splendid eulogies that celebrate the wisdom of God so that mere mortals may learn not to measure God’s wisdom by their own understanding. . . . Will you reproach David for the same foolish reports about God’s judgments, when he acknowledged them to be a deep abyss? (Ps. 36:7). From every prophet and apostle I hear the same thing: that the counsel of God is incomprehensible. I embrace by faith without reserve what they declare and what I believe and confidently declare.³⁶

Do Calvin’s “two wills” saddle God with a self-contradiction as Castellio and some modern-day evangelicals have argued? Contemporary Reformed theologian Wayne Grudem helps us answer the conundrum in a Calvinistic manner:

Even in the realm of human experience, we know that we can and will carry out something that is painful and that we do not desire (such as punishing a disobedient child or getting an inoculation that temporarily makes us ill) in order to bring about a long-term result that we desire more than the avoidance of short-term pain (to bring about the obedience of a child, for example, or to prevent us from getting a more serious illness). And God is infinitely greater and wiser than we are. Certainly

³⁶ John Calvin, *The Secret Providence of God*, ed. Paul Helm, trans. Keith Goad (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 96–97.

it is possible for him to will that his creatures do something that in the short term displeases him in order that in the long term he would receive the greater glory. To say that this is a "self-contradiction" in God is to fail to understand the distinctions that have been made so that this explanation is not contradictory.³⁷

In the end, Calvin said we must understand the vast chasm that separates our understanding of how God's will should operate and how God understands himself. Again referencing Augustine approvingly, Calvin wrote: "There is a great difference between what is fitting for man to will and what is fitting for God. . . . For through the bad wills of evil men God fulfills what he righteously wills."³⁸

In his lengthy exposition of the doctrine of election in the *Institutes*, Calvin anticipated objections to his expression of the doctrine, objections that placed God's decrees at odds with the free and full call of the gospel. The apostle Paul is a model, Calvin argued, for holding on to a full articulation of God's electing, predestining grace without letting go of the continuing validity of the Great Commission. Paul, after all, was a committed church planter and preached the gospel fully and freely during his missionary travels, and the critics of election would be hard-pressed to match Paul's zeal to see wicked hearts transformed by grace: "What a plain and outspoken preacher of free election Paul was. . . . Was he therefore cold in admonition and exhortation? Let these good zealots compare their earnestness with his: theirs will be found ice compared with his intense fervor."³⁹

Paul, he says, sees no such contradiction:

Those moderately versed in Paul will, without long proof, understand how aptly he harmonizes those things which they pretend disagree. Christ commands us to believe in him. Yet when he says, "No one can come to me unless it is granted him

³⁷Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 332.

³⁸Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:234 (1.18.3).

³⁹*Ibid.*, 2:961 (3.23.13).

by my Father,” [John 6:65], his statement is neither false nor contrary to his command.⁴⁰

Calvin thus held firmly to the doctrine of predestination with one hand while clinging to the continuing validity of the Great Commission in the other. He did so because the Bible seems to do the same.

“Come to Me, All Who Labor and Are Heavy Laden”

Calvin saw Christ’s call to sinners for salvation as being universal. There was nothing in his theology that stood as a barrier to the free offer of the gospel, as he makes plain in his comments on Matthew 11:28–30 (“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light”): “We must attend to the universality of the expression; for Christ included all, without exception, who labor and are burdened, that no man may shut the gate against himself by wicked doubts.”⁴¹ While Calvin believed that relatively few among those whom Christ invites to salvation will be converted, nevertheless the free offer of the gospel brings “the relief which he promises” through “the free pardon of sins, which alone give us peace.”⁴²

The Teaching of Ephesians 1

In a sermon series on Ephesians 1:4–6 that Calvin preached in his exposition of this Pauline letter in 1558 and 1559, the Genevan theologian’s doctrine of predestination takes a decidedly more pastoral tone as he sets forth in bold relief both God’s absolute choice of his elect and the duty of every person to follow after the one true God. In the third sermon, Calvin especially dealt with the existential question that arises from anxious souls pondering the doctrines of predestination and election for perhaps the first time: What if

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, trans. William Pringle, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 44.

⁴² Ibid.

I am not elect? In a loving but firm pastoral tone, reminiscent of the apostle Paul, Calvin sought to undermine a possible refuge of the unbeliever, asserting boldly that election and predestination provide no excuse for unbelief:

Many fanciful people say, "Ho! as for me, I shall never know whether God has elected me and, therefore, I must still remain in my perdition." Yes, but that is for want of coming to Jesus Christ. How do we know that God has elected us before the creation of the world? By believing in Jesus Christ. I said before that faith proceeds from election and is the fruit of it, which shows that the root is hidden within.⁴³

Faith is the title deed that God's elect receive to show that they were chosen and owned by God before the salvation of the world, a truth that does not override the responsibility of everyone to repent and follow Jesus.

Many charge Calvin with disbelieving "Whosoever will!" But look at the words he spoke his congregation in this sermon:

Whosoever then believes is thereby assured that God has worked in him, and faith is, as it were, the duplicate copy that God gives us of the original of our adoption. God has his eternal counsel, and he always reserves to himself the chief and original record of which he gives us a copy by faith.⁴⁴

Predestination is the theological caboose and not the engine that pulls salvation along the tracks of God's grace, Calvin argued in essence, and is a doctrine for the spiritually mature; it is not to be presented up front to babes who lack understanding. God has revealed this doctrine not to make souls anxious, but to drive them to their knees in humble worship because, as Calvin averred, God owes no one salvation, only wrath for rejecting the Creator. Ephesians 1, which espouses one of the Bible's most debated doctrines, should not promote further speculation into the

⁴³ John Calvin, *John Calvin's Sermons on Ephesians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1998), 47.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

purposes of God, Calvin said, but should induce humility in the believer.⁴⁵

The doctrine of predestination does not serve to carry us away into extravagant speculations, but to beat down all pride in us and the foolish opinion we always conceive of our own worthiness and deserts and to show that God has such free power, privilege and sovereign domain over us that he may reprobate whom he pleases and elect whom he pleases; and thus, by this means, we are led to glorify him and further to acknowledge that it is in Jesus Christ he has elected us in order that we should be held fast under the faith of his gospel.⁴⁶

The “Predestination of God Is Indeed . . . a Labyrinth”

In his exposition of Romans 9, Calvin admitted that the “predestination of God is indeed in reality a labyrinth, from which the mind of man can by no means extricate itself.”⁴⁷ But the tendency of fallen minds is to seek to solve all mysteries pertaining to God, as Calvin wrote:

So unreasonable is the curiosity of man, that the more perilous the examination of a subject is, the more boldly he proceeds; so that when predestination is discussed, as he cannot restrain himself within due limits, he immediately, through his rashness, plunges himself, as it were, into the depth of the sea.⁴⁸

Paul anticipates this reality in Romans 9, Calvin said, and seeks to deal with objections to God’s secret election of individuals to salvation by showing that God is depicted as simultaneously hardening Pharaoh’s heart and inviting all people to repent and believe the gospel. That we are unable to reconcile these truths, Calvin believed, owes to our fallen inability to fully understand God’s Word and not to a contradiction found in it.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, trans. and ed. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 353.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 353–54.

“As Many as Were Appointed to Eternal Life Believed”

A key text for the Calvinist tradition has been Acts 13:48, “And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.” Indeed, there is little ambiguity in the phrasing, and few other conclusions can be drawn from the grammatical construction than the priority of ordaining before believing; those who believe in Christ have been chosen or ordained unto eternal life by God in the secret counsel of his will before time began. This is precisely Calvin’s interpretation in his commentary on the passage.

For it is a ridiculous cavil to refer this unto the affection of those which believed, as if those received the gospel whose minds were well-disposed. . . . Neither does Luke say that they were ordained unto faith, but unto life; because the Lord predestinates those who are his unto the inheritance of eternal life.⁴⁹

The text, Calvin asserted in no uncertain terms, roots saving faith in election. Nevertheless, as he did in many other places in his works, Calvin warned the unrepentant not to blame their rejection of God on the fact that they may not be chosen; election is no alibi for unbelief, he argued.⁵⁰ From a human perspective, salvation comes not to those who are elect, but to those who trust in Christ. Thus, the lost must not worry over whether they are elect or not, but rather, they should flee at once to Christ. As Calvin said:

Again, because many entangle themselves in doubtful and thorny imaginations, while . . . they seek for their salvation in the hidden counsel of God, let us learn that the election of God is therefore approved by faith, that our minds may be turned unto Christ, as unto the pledge of election, and that they may seek no other certainty save that which is revealed to us in the

⁴⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Henry Beveridge, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 555, modernized.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:557.

gospel; I say, let this seal suffice us, that “whosoever believes in the only-begotten Son of God has eternal life” [John 3:36].⁵¹

Hardly the words of one with no apparent concern for those who stand outside of God’s grace.

“For We Know, Brothers Loved by God, That He Has Chosen You”

Some have accused Calvin of looking for signs of regeneration before calling on sinners to repent and believe in Christ. The English hyper-Calvinist movement of the eighteenth century that left Calvinistic Baptist and Congregationalist churches in a deep freeze preached this message. Hyper-Calvinist preachers tended to emphasize God’s secret will (“Who is among the elect?”) to the detriment of God’s revealed will (the free offer of grace). Fearful of calling on the reprobate to do something that they lacked the ability to do, hyper-Calvinist ministers refused to invite sinners to flee to the cross of Christ for rescue.

Some of Calvin’s more theologically naive critics have accused the Reformer of holding the same error. Calvin, however, repeatedly warned against seeking to “look behind the veil” of God’s counsel with regard to the doctrine of election. In 1 Thessalonians 1:4–5 (“For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction”), Calvin made clear that a Christian’s knowledge of his own election comes only after repentance from sin and faith in Christ have been exhibited.

Thus, from the side of humanity’s experiential perspective, election is akin to the caboose of soteriology and not its engine. Commenting on 1 Thessalonians 1:4–5, Calvin warned:

It is to be observed . . . that the election of God, which is in itself hid, is manifested by its marks [i.e., repentance and faith]—

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, modernized.

when he gathers to himself the lost sheep and joins them to his flock, and holds out his hand to those that were wandering and estranged from him. Hence a knowledge of our election must be sought from this source.⁵²

Still, faith flows from God's secret election, and since it is a doctrine revealed in Scripture, it must not be rejected: "As, however, the secret counsel of God is a labyrinth to those who disregard his calling, so those act perversely who, under the pretext of faith and calling, darken this first grace, from which faith itself flows."⁵³ Election comes first in God's gracious interaction with his human creatures and manifests itself in faith and effectual calling, Calvin argued, but the reality of election is known only by its fruit in a given Christian. Thus, Calvin made clear throughout all his written works and sermons that the outward call of salvation should be extended to every person within earshot of the proclamation of the Bible.

⁵² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, trans. and ed. John Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 241.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

CALVINIST MISSIONARIES.

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