

Modern History Sourcebook: John Calvin: On Predestination

John Calvin's great theological work, the Institutes of the Christian Religion was published, and expanded, in a number of Latin and French editions. (In fact it was among the first serious texts to be published in French). The text below is from the chapter on predestination. The emphasis on this doctrine (which was also held by Luther) became one of the distinctive marks of Calvinism. THE covenant of life not being equally preached to all, and among those to whom it is preached not always finding the same reception, this diversity discovers the wonderful depth of the Divine judgment. Nor is it to be doubted that this variety also follows, subject to the decision of God's eternal election. If it be evidently the result of the Divine will, that salvation is freely offered to some, and others are prevented from attaining it---this immediately gives rise to important and difficult questions, which are incapable of any other explication, than by the establishment of pious minds in what ought to be received concerning election and predestination---a question, in the opinion of many, full of perplexity; for they consider nothing more unreasonable, than that, of the common mass of mankind, some should be predestinated to salvation, and others to destruction. But how unreasonably they perplex themselves will afterwards appear from the sequel of our discourse. Besides, the very obscurity which excites such dread, not only displays the utility of this doctrine, but shows it to be productive of the most delightful benefit. We shall never be clearly convinced as we ought to be, that our salvation flows from the fountain of God's free mercy, till we are acquainted with His eternal election, which illustrates the grace of God by this comparison, that He adopts not all promiscuously to the hope of salvation, but gives to some what He refuses to others. Ignorance of this principle evidently detracts from the Divine glory, and diminishes real humility. But according to Paul, what is so necessary to be known, never can be known, unless God, without any regard to works, chooses those whom He has decreed. "At this present time also, there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then it is no more of works; otherwise, grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then it is no more grace; otherwise, work is no more work." If we need to be recalled to the origin of election, to prove that we obtain salvation from no other source than the mere goodness of God, they who desire to extinguish this principle, do all they can to obscure what ought to be magnificently and loudly celebrated, and to pluck up humility by the roots. In ascribing the salvation of the remnant of the people to the election of grace, Paul clearly testifies, that it is then only known that God saves whom upon which there can be no claim. They who shut the gates to prevent anyone from presuming to approach and taste this doctrine, do no less injury to man than to God; for nothing else will be sufficient to produce in us suitable humility, or to impress us with a due sense of our great obligations to God. Nor is there any other basis for solid confidence, even according to the authority of Christ, who, to deliver us from all fear, and render us invincible amidst so many dangers, snares, and deadly conflicts, promises to preserve in safety all whom

the Father has committed to His care. Whence we infer, that they who know not themselves to be God's peculiar people will be tortured with continual anxiety; and therefore, that the interest of all believers, as well as their own, is very badly consulted by those who, blind to the three advantages we have remarked, would wholly remove the foundation of our salvation. And hence the Church rises to our view, which otherwise, as Bernard justly observes, could neither be discovered nor recognized among creatures, being in two respects wonderfully concealed in the bosom of a blessed predestination, and in the mass of a miserable damnation. But before I enter on the subject itself, I must address some preliminary observations to two sorts of persons. The discussion of predestination---a subject of itself rather intricate---is made very perplexed, and therefore dangerous, by human curiosity, which no barriers can restrain from wandering into forbidden labyrinths, and soaring beyond its sphere, as if determined to leave none of the Divine secrets unscrutinized or unexplored. As we see multitudes everywhere guilty of this arrogance and presumption, and among them some who are not censurable in other respects, it is proper to admonish them of the bounds of their duty on this subject. First, then, let them remember that when they inquire into predestination, they penetrate the inmost recesses of Divine wisdom, where the careless and confident intruder will obtain no satisfaction to his curiosity, but will enter a labyrinth from which he will find no way to depart. For it is unreasonable that man should scrutinize with impunity those things which the Lord has determined to be hidden in himself; and investigate, even from eternity, that sublimity of wisdom which God would have us to adore and not comprehend, to promote our admiration of His glory. The secrets of His will which He determined to reveal to us, He discovers in His word; and these are all that He foresaw would concern us or conduce to our advantage.

II. "We are come into the way of faith," says Augustine; "let us constantly pursue it. It conducts into the king's palace, in which are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. For the Lord Christ Himself envied not His great and most select disciples when He said, 'I have many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now.' We must talk, we must improve, we must grow, that our hearts may be able to understand those things of which we are at present incapable. If the last day finds us improving, we shall then learn what we never could learn in the present state." If we only consider that the word of the Lord is the only way to lead us to an investigation of all that ought to be believed concerning Him, and the only light to enlighten us to behold all that ought to be seen of Him, this consideration will easily restrain and preserve us from all presumption. For we shall know that when we have exceeded the limits of the word, we shall get into a devious and darksome course, in which errors, slips, and falls, will often be inevitable. Let us, then, in the first place, bear in mind, that to desire any other knowledge of predestination than what is unfolded in the word of God, indicates as great folly, as a wish to walk through unpassable roads, or to see in the dark. Nor let us be ashamed to be ignorant of some things relative to a subject in which there is a kind of learned ignorance. Rather let us abstain with cheerfulness from the pursuit of that knowledge, the affectation of which is foolish, dangerous, and even fatal. But if we are stimulated by the wantonness of intellect, we must oppose it with a reflection calculated to repress it, that as "it is not good to eat much honey, so for men to search their own glory, is not glory." For there is sufficient to deter us from that presumption, which can only precipitate us into ruin. III. Others, desirous of remedying this evil, will have all

mention of predestination to be as it were buried; they teach men to avoid every question concerning it as they would a precipice. Though their moderation is to be commended, in judging that mysteries ought to be handled with such great sobriety, yet, as they descend too low, they have little influence on the mind of man, which refuses to submit to unreasonable restraints. To observe, therefore, the legitimate boundary on this side also, we must recur to the word of the Lord, which affords a certain rule for the understanding. For the Scripture is the school of the Holy Spirit, in which, as nothing necessary and useful to be known is omitted, so nothing is taught which is not beneficial to know. Whatever, therefore, is declared in the Scripture concerning predestination, we must be cautious not to withhold from believers, lest we appear either to defraud them of the favor of their God, or to reprove and censure the Holy Spirit for publishing what it would be useful by any means to suppress. Let us, I say, permit the Christian man to open his heart and his ears to all the discourses addressed to him by God, only with this moderation, that as soon as the Lord closes his sacred mouth, he shall also desist from further inquiry. This will be the best barrier of sobriety, if in learning we not only follow the leadings of God, but as soon as he ceases to teach, we give up our desire of learning. Nor is the danger they dread, sufficient to divert our attention from the oracles of God. It is a celebrated observation of Solomon, that "it is the glory of God to conceal a thing." But, as both piety and common sense suggest that this is not to be understood generally of every thing, we must seek for the proper distinction, lest we content ourselves with brutish ignorance under the pretext of modesty and sobriety. Now, this distinction is clearly expressed in a few words by Moses "The secret things," he says, "belong unto the Lord our God; but those things which are revealed belong unto us, and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law." For we see how he enforces on the people attention to the doctrine of the law only by the celestial decree, because it pleased God to promulgate it; and restrains the same people within those limits with this single reason, that it is not lawful for mortals to intrude into the secrets of God. IV. Profane persons, I confess, suddenly lay hold of something relating to the subject of predestination, to furnish occasion for objections, cavils, reproaches, and ridicule. But if we are frightened from it by their impudence, all the principal articles of the faith must be concealed, for there is scarcely one of them which such persons as these leave unviolated by blasphemy. The refractory mind will discover as much insolence, on hearing that there are three persons in the Divine essence, as on being told, that when God created man, He foresaw what would happen concerning him. Nor will they refrain from derision on being informed that little more than five thousand years have elapsed since the creation of the world. They will ask why the power of God was so long idle and asleep. Nothing can be advanced which they will not endeavor to ridicule. Must we, in order to check these sacrileges, say nothing of the Divinity of the Son and Spirit, or pass over in silence the creation of the world? In this instance, and every other, the truth of God is too powerful to dread the detraction of impious men; as is strenuously maintained by Augustine, in his treatise on the Perseverance of the Faithful. We see the false apostles, with all their defamation and accusation of the true doctrine of Paul, could never succeed to make him ashamed of it. Their assertion, that all this discussion is dangerous to pious minds, because it is inconsistent with exhortations, shakes their faith, and disturbs and discourages the heart itself, is without any foundation. Augustine admits, that he was frequently

blamed, on these accounts, for preaching predestination too freely; but he readily and amply refutes them. But as many and various absurdities are crowded upon us here, we prefer reserving every one to be refuted in its proper place. I only desire this general admission, that we should neither scrutinize those things which the Lord has left concealed, nor neglect those which He has openly exhibited, lest we be condemned for excessive curiosity on the one hand, or for ingratitude on the other. For it is judiciously remarked by Augustine, that we may safely follow the Scripture, which proceeds as with the pace of a mother stooping to the weakness of a child. that it may not leave our weak capacities behind. But persons who are so cautious or timid, as to wish predestination to be buried in silence, lest feeble minds should be disturbed,-with what pretext, I ask, will they gloss over their arrogance, which indirectly charges God with foolish inadvertency, as though He foresaw not the danger which they suppose they have had the penetration to discover. Whoever, therefore, endeavors to raise prejudices against the doctrine of predestination, openly reproaches God, as though something had inconsiderately escaped from Him that is pernicious to the Church. V.

Predestination, by which God adopts some to the hope of life, and adjudges others to eternal death, no one, desirous of the credit of piety, dares absolutely to deny. But it is involved in many cavils, especially by those who make foreknowledge the cause of it. We maintain, that both belong to God; but it is preposterous to represent one as dependent on the other. When we attribute foreknowledge to God, we mean that all things have ever been, and perpetually remain, before His eyes, so that to His knowledge nothing in future or past, but all things are present; and present in such a manner, that He does not merely conceive of them from ideas formed in His mind, as things remembered by us appear present to our minds, but really beholds and sees them as if actually placed before Him. And this foreknowledge extends to the whole world, and to all the creatures. Predestination we call the eternal decree of God, by which He has determined in Himself what would have to become of every individual of mankind. For they are not all created with a similar destiny; but eternal life is fore-ordained for some, and eternal damnation for others. Every man, therefore, being created for one or the other of these ends, we say, he is predestinated either to life or to death. This God has not only testified in particular persons, but has given a specimen of it in the whole posterity of Abraham, which should evidently show the future condition of every nation to depend upon His decision. "When the Most High divided the nations, when he separated the sons of Adam, the Lord's portion was His people; Jacob was the lot of His inheritance." The separation is before the eyes of all: in the person of Abraham, as in the dry trunk of a tree, one people is peculiarly chosen to the rejection of others: no reason for this appears, except that Moses, to deprive their posterity of all occasion of glorying, teaches them that their exaltation is wholly from God's gratuitous love. He assigns this reason for their deliverance, that "He loved their fathers, and chose their seed after them." More fully in another chapter: "The Lord did not set His love upon you, nor choose you, because you were more in number than any people; but because the Lord loved you." He frequently repeats the same admonition: "Behold, the heaven is the Lord's thy God, the earth also, with all that therein is. Only the Lord had a delight in thy fathers to love them, and He chose their seed after them." In another place, sanctification is enjoined upon them, because they were chosen to be a peculiar people. And again, elsewhere, love is asserted to be the cause of their

protection. It is declared by the united voice of the faithful, "He hath chosen our inheritance for us, the excellency of Jacob, whom He loved." For the gifts conferred on them by God, they all ascribe to gratuitous love, not only from a consciousness that these were not obtained by any merit of theirs, but from a conviction, that the holy patriarch himself was not endued with such excellence as to acquire the privilege of so great an honor for himself and his posterity. And the more effectually to demolish all pride, he reproaches them with having deserved no favor, being "a stiff-necked and rebellious people." The prophets also frequently reproach the Jews with the unwelcome mention of this election, because they had shamefully departed from it. Let them, however, now come forward, who wish to restrict the election of God to the desert of men, or the merit of works. When they see one nation preferred to all others---when they hear that God had no inducement to be more favorable to a few, and ignoble, and even disobedient and obstinate people---will they quarrel with him because he has chosen to give such an example of mercy? But their obstreperous clamors will not impede this work, nor will the reproaches they hurl against Heaven, injure or affect his justice; they will rather recoil upon their own heads. Lo, this principle of the gracious covenant, the Israelites are also recalled whenever thanks are to be rendered to God, or their hopes are to be raised for futurity. "He hath made us, and not we ourselves," says the Psalmist: "we are His people, and the sheep of His pasture." It is not without reason that the negation is added, "not we ourselves," that they may know that of all the benefits they enjoy, God is not only the Author, but derived the cause from Himself, there being nothing in them deserving of such great honor. He also enjoins them to be content with the mere good pleasure of God, in these words: "O ye seed of Abraham His servant, ye children of Jacob His chosen." And after having recounted the continual benefits bestowed by God as fruits of election, he at length concludes that He had acted with such liberality, "because He remembered His covenant." Consistent with this doctrine is the song of the whole Church: "Thy right hand, and Thine arm, and the light of Thy countenance, gave our fathers the land, because Thou hadst a favor unto them." It must be observed that where mention is made of the land, it is a visible symbol of the secret separation, which comprehends adoption. David, in another place, exhorts the people to the same gratitude: "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord; and the people whom He hath chosen for His own inheritance." Samuel animates to a good hope: "The Lord will not forsake His people, for His great name's sake; because it hath pleased the Lord to make you His people." David, when his faith is assailed, thus arms himself for the conflict: "Blessed is the man whom Thou chooseth, and causeth to approach unto Thee; he shall dwell in Thy courts." But since the election hidden in God has been confirmed by the first deliverance, as well as by the second and other intermediate blessings, the word choose is transferred to it in Isaiah: "The Lord will have mercy on Jacob, and will yet choose Israel;" because, contemplating a future period, He declares that the collection of the residue of the people, whom He had appeared to have forsaken; would be a sign of the stable and sure election, which had likewise seemed to fail. When He says also, in another place, "I have chosen thee, and not cast thee away," He commends the continual course of His signal liberality and paternal benevolence. The angel, in Zachariah, speaks more plainly: "The Lord shall choose Jerusalem again;" as though His severe chastisement had been a rejection, or their exile had been an interruption of election; which, nevertheless, remains inviolable,

though the tokens of it are not always visible. VI. We must now proceed to a second degree of election, still more restricted, or that in which the Divine grace was displayed in a more special manner, when of the same race of Abraham God rejected some, and by nourishing others in the Church, proved that He retained them among His children. Israel at first obtained the same station as his brother Isaac, for the spiritual covenant was equally sealed in him by the symbol of circumcision. He is cut off; afterwards Esau; lastly, an innumerable multitude, and almost all Israel. In Isaac the seed was called; the same calling continued in Jacob. God exhibited a similar example in the rejection of Saul, which is magnificently celebrated by the Psalmist: "He refused the tabernacle of Joseph, and chose not the tribe of Ephraim, but chose the tribe of Judah ;" and this the sacred history frequently repeats, that the wonderful secret of Divine grace may be more manifest in that change. I grant, it was by their own crime and guilt that Ishmael, Esau, and persons of similar characters, fell from the adoption; because the condition annexed was, that they should faithfully keep the covenant of God, which they perfidiously violated. Yet it was a peculiar favor of God, that He deigned to prefer them to other nations; as it is said in the Psalms: "He hath not dealt so with any nation; and so for His judgments, they have not known them." But I have justly said that here are two degrees to be remarked; for in the election of the whole nation, God has already shown that in His mere goodness He is bound by no laws, but is perfectly free, so that none can require of Him an equal distribution of grace, the inequality of which demonstrates it to be truly gratuitous. Therefore Malachi aggravates the ingratitude of Israel, because, though not only elected out of the whole race of mankind, but also separated from a sacred family to be a peculiar people, they perfidiously and impiously despised God their most beneficent Father. "Was not Esau Jacob's brother? saith the Lord: yet I loved Jacob, and I hated Esau." For God takes it for granted, since both were sons of a holy father, successors of the covenant, and branches from a sacred root, that the children of Jacob were already laid under more than common obligations by their admission to that honor; but Esau, the first-born, having been rejected, and their father, though inferior by birth, having been made the heir, He proves them guilty of double ingratitude, and complains of their violating this two-fold claim. VII. Though it is sufficiently clear, that God, in his secret counsel, freely chooses whom He will, and rejects others, His gratuitous election is but half displayed till we come to particular individuals, to whom God not only offers salvation, but assigns it in such a manner, that the certainty of the effect is liable to no suspense or doubt. These are included in that one seed mentioned by Paul; for though the adoption was deposited in the hand of Abraham, yet many of his posterity being cut off as putrid members, in order to maintain the efficacy and stability of election, it is necessary to ascend to the head, in whom their heavenly Father has bound His elect to each other, and united them to Himself by an indissoluble bond. Thus the adoption of the family of Abraham displayed the favor of God, which He denied to others; but in the members of Christ there is a conspicuous exhibition of the superior efficacy of grace; because, being united to their head, they never fail of salvation. Paul, therefore, justly reasons from the passage of Malachi which I have just quoted, that where God, introducing the covenant of eternal life, invites any people to Himself, there is a peculiar kind of election as to part of them, so that he does not efficaciously choose all with indiscriminate grace. The declaration, "Jacob have I loved," respects the whole posterity of the patriarch, whom the prophet

there opposes to the descendants of Esau. Yet this is no objection to our having in the person of one individual a specimen of the election, which can never fail of attaining its full effect. These, who truly belong to Christ, Paul correctly observes, are called "a remnant;" for experience proves, that of a great multitude the most part fall away and disappear, so that often only a small portion remains. That the general election of a people is not always effectual and permanent, a reason readily presents itself, because, when God covenants with them, He does not also give the spirit of regeneration to enable them to preserve in the covenant to the end; but the eternal call, without the internal efficacy of grace. which would be sufficient for their preservation, is a kind of medium between the rejection of all mankind and the election of the small number of believers. The whole nation of Israel was called "God's inheritance," though many of them were strangers; but God, having firmly covenanted to their Father and Redeemer, regards that gratuitous favor rather than the defection of multitudes; by whom His truth was not violated, because His preservation of a certain remnant to Himself, made it evident that His calling was without repentance. For God's collection of a Church for himself, from time to time, from the children of Abraham, rather than from the profane nations, was in consideration of his covenant, which, being violated by the multitude, He restricted to a few, to prevent a total failure. Lastly, the general adoption of the seed of Abraham was a visible representation of a greater blessing, which God conferred on the few out of the multitude. This is the reason that Paul so carefully distinguishes the descendants of Abraham according to the flesh, from His spiritual children called after the example of Isaac. Not that the mere descent from Abraham was a vain and unprofitable thing, which could not be asserted without depreciating the covenant; but because to the latter alone the immutable counsel of God, in which He predestinated whom He would, was of itself effectual to salvation. But I advise my readers to adopt no prejudice on either side, till it shall appear from adduced passages of Scripture what sentiments ought to be entertained. In conformity, therefore, to the clear doctrine of the Scripture, we assert, that by an eternal and immutable counsel, God has once for all determined, both whom He would admit to salvation, and whom He would condemn to destruction. We affirm that this counsel, as far as concerns the elect, is founded on His gratuitous mercy, totally irrespective of human merit; but that to those whom He devotes to condemnation, the gate of life is closed by a just and irreprehensible, but incomprehensible, judgment. In the elect, we consider calling as an evidence of election, and justification as another token of its manifestation, till they arrive in glory, which constitutes its completion. As God seals His elect by vocation and justification, so by excluding the reprobate from the knowledge of His name and the sanctification of His Spirit, He affords an indication of the judgment that awaits them. Here I shall pass over many fictions fabricated by foolish men to overthrow predestination. It is unnecessary to refute things which, as soon as they are advanced, sufficiently prove their own falsehood. I shall dwell only on these things which are subjects of controversy among the learned, or which may occasion difficulty to simple minds, or which impiety speciously pleads in order to stigmatize the Divine justice.

Source.

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halsall@murray.fordham.edu