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Andrew M. Davis

Teaching Notes

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John Calvin on the Doctrines of Election and Predestination



The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance. Psalm 16:6

I. Eternal Election, By Which God Has Predestined Some To Salvation, Others To Destruction

[*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 3, Chapter 21]

A. The Importance of Predestination Excludes Both Presumption and Reticence in Speaking of It

We have three great benefits from deep and proper meditation on election and predestination:

- 1) God is most glorified
- 2) We are most humbled
- 3) We are most secure

Any contrary presentation of the origin of our salvation will diminish all three: God will have lesser glory, we will be more prideful and we will be more insecure. Thus it is vital to study election and predestination.

B. Predestination Defined and Explained In Relation To the Israelite Nation, and To Individuals

1. Predestination and Foreknowledge of God; The Election of Israel

- a. A common dodge on this topic is to make God's election and predestination subservient to his foreknowledge
- b. They argue in this way: "God knew ahead of time who would believe in Jesus, and he chose them ahead of time based on that foreknowledge."
- c. Calvin vigorously rejects this understanding
- d. Calvin's definition of predestination

We call predestination God's eternal decree, by which he compacted with himself what he willed to become of each man. For all are not created in equal condition; rather, eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others. Therefore, as any man has been created to one or the other of these ends, we speak of him as predestined to life or to death. (*Institutes*, 3.21.5)

- e. God's predestination extends both to individuals and to whole nations
- f. God's election of Israel as a nation is well attested to in the Old Testament
- g. The election of Israel as a nation was in no way because of their merits as a people!!
- h. Calvin chooses this moment to prove unconditional election again:
- i. This gracious, unconditional national election was the basis for much thankfulness

2. The Second Stage: Election and Reprobation of Individual Israelites

We must now add a second, more limited degree of election, or one in which God's more special grace was evident, that is, when from the same race of Abraham God rejected some but showed that he kept others among his sons by cherishing them in the church. Ishmael had at first obtained equal rank with his brother, Isaac, for in him the spiritual covenant had been equally sealed by the sign of circumcision. Ishmael is cut off; then Esau; afterward, a countless multitude, and well-nigh all Israel. In Isaac the seed was called; the same calling continued in Jacob. (*Institutes*, 3.21.6)

- a. God's lavishing of his grace is free, unconstrained by the creature

But I had good reason to say that here we must note two degrees, for in the election of a whole nation God has already shown that in his mere generosity he has not been bound by any laws but is free, so that equal apportionment of grace is not to be required of him. The very inequality of his grace proves that it is free. (*Institutes*, 3.21.6)

- b. Malachi uses this freedom of God's grace to rebuke Israel for base ingratitude for their election

Malachi 1:2-3 "I have loved you," says the LORD. "But you ask, 'How have you loved us?' "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" the LORD says. "Yet I have loved Jacob, ³ but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals."

3. The Election of Individuals As Actual Election

- a. Individual election is the fullest explanation of God's purpose in election

Although it is now sufficiently clear that God by his secret plan freely chooses whom he pleases, rejecting others, still his free election has been only half explained until we come to individual persons, to whom God not only offers salvation but so assigns it that the certainty of its effect is not in suspense or doubt. (*Institutes*, 3.21.7)

- b. What is the relationship between nations and individuals in election?

God's unchangeable plan, by which he predestined for himself those whom he willed, was in fact intrinsically effectual unto salvation for these spiritual offspring alone. But I advise my readers not to take a prejudiced position on either side until, when the passages of Scripture have been adduced, it shall be clear what opinion ought to be held (*Institutes*, 3.21.7)

4. Summary Survey of the Doctrine of Election

As Scripture, then, clearly shows, we say that God once established by his eternal and unchangeable plan those whom he long before determined once for all to receive into salvation, and those whom, on the other hand, he would devote to destruction. We assert

that, with respect to the elect, this plan was founded upon his freely given mercy, without regard to human worth; but by his just and irreprehensible but incomprehensible judgment he has barred the door of life to those whom he has given over to damnation. Now among the elect we regard the call as a testimony of election. Then we hold justification another sign of its manifestation, until they come into the glory in which the fulfillment of that election lies. But as the Lord seals his elect by call and justification, so, by shutting off the reprobate from knowledge of his name or from the sanctification of his Spirit, he, as it were, reveals by these marks what sort of judgment awaits them. (*Institutes*, 3.21.7)

II. Confirmation of This Doctrine From Scriptural Testimonies

[*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 3, Chapter 22]

A. Election Is Not from Foreknowledge of Merit, but Is of God's Sovereign Purpose

1. Election vs. Foreknowledge of Merits

... generally these persons consider that God distinguishes among men according as he foresees what the merits of each will be. Therefore, he adopts as sons those whom he foreknows will not be unworthy of his grace; he appoints to the damnation of death those whose dispositions he discerns will be inclined to evil intention and ungodliness. (*Institutes*, 3.22.1)

Calvin asserts biblical truth to contradict this:

When Paul teaches that we were chosen in Christ "before the creation of the world" [Ephesians 1:4a], he takes away all consideration of real worth on our part, for it is just as if he said: since among all the offspring of Adam, the Heavenly Father found nothing worthy of his election, he turned his eyes upon his Anointed, to choose from that body as members those whom he was to take into the fellowship of life. Let this reasoning, then, prevail among believers: we were adopted in Christ into the eternal inheritance because in ourselves we were not capable of such great excellence. (*Institutes*, 3.22.1)

And again:

This Paul also notes, in another passage, when he urges the Colossians to give thanks because God has made them fit to share the inheritance of the saints [Colossians 1:12]. If, to make us fit to receive the glory of the life to come, election precedes this grace of God, what will God find in us now to move him to choose us? (*Institutes*, 3.22.1)

2. Election before Creation and Not Associated With Foreknowledge Of Merit

Ephesians 1:3-6 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will-- ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.

That the proof may be more complete, it is worthwhile to note the individual parts of this passage [^{<490104>}Ephesians 1:4-5], which, coupled together, leave no doubt. Since he calls them “elect,” it cannot be doubted that he is speaking to believers, as he also soon declares; therefore those who misinterpret the word “elect” as confined to the age when the gospel was proclaimed disfigure it with a base fabrication. ^{F613} By saying that they were “elect before the creation of the world” [Ephesians 1:4], he takes away all regard for worth. For what basis for distinction is there among those who did not yet exist, and who were subsequently to be equals in Adam? Now if they are elect in Christ, it follows that not only is each man elected without respect to his own person but also certain ones are separated from others, since we see that not all are members of Christ. Besides, the fact that they were elected “to be holy” [Ephesians 1:4b] plainly refutes the error that derives election from foreknowledge, since Paul declares all virtue appearing in man is the result of election. Now if a higher cause be sought, Paul answers that God has predestined it so, and that this is “according to the good pleasure of his will” [Ephesians 1:5b]. By these words he does away with all means of their election that men imagine in themselves. For all benefits that God bestows for the spiritual life, as Paul teaches, flow from this one source: namely, that God has chosen whom he has willed, and before their birth has laid up for them individually the grace that he willed to grant them. (*Institutes*, 3.22.2)

3. Elected to be Holy, Not Because Already Holy

- a. To say that God chooses us because He saw that we would be holy inverts Paul’s order
- b. Paul ascribes our eventual holiness to the election and work of God in Christ

For when it is said that believers were chosen that they might be holy, at the same time his suggested that the holiness that was to be in them originated from election. (*Institutes*, 3.22.3)

- c. Ephesians 1 also ascribes God’s ultimate motive as this: “*to the praise of His glorious grace*”...this is yet more evidence of the sovereignty of God in salvation

4. Romans 9-11, and Similar Passages

- a. Calvin begins with Romans 9 and unfolds his argument from that passage

Romans 9:6 It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.

... if the will of God, the cause of which neither appears nor ought to be sought outside of himself, distinguishes some from others, so that not all the sons of Israel are true Israelites, it is vain to pretend that every man’s condition begins in himself (*Institutes*, 3.22.4)

- b. Jacob and Esau

Romans 9:10-13 Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. ¹¹ Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad-- in order that

God's purpose in election might stand: ¹² not by works but by him who calls-- she was told, "The older will serve the younger." ¹³ Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

Suppose we admit that Jacob was chosen because he had worth arising out of virtues to come; why should Paul say that he had not yet been born? Now it would have been rash to add that he still had done no good, for this answer will be ready: nothing is hidden from God, and so Jacob's godliness was present before him. If works obtain grace, God's reward for them ought rightly to have been already established before Jacob's birth, just as if he had grown up. But the apostle proceeds to resolve this difficulty, and teaches that the adoption of Jacob comes not from works but from God's call. In treating of works he does not bring in future or past time; he decidedly sets them over against God's call, wishing by establishing the one skillfully to refute the other. This is as if he said: "It is what God pleased that is to be considered, not what men brought of themselves." Finally, from the words "election" and "purpose" it is certain that all causes that men commonly devise apart from God's secret plan are remote from this cause. (*Institutes*, 3.22.4)

5. The Case of Jacob and Esau Refutes the Argument from Works

Romans 9:11-13 before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad-- in order that God's purpose in election might stand: ¹² not by works but by him who calls-- she was told, "The older will serve the younger." ¹³ Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

What will those who assign some place in election to works, either past or future, use for a pretext to obscure these things? For this is directly to evade the apostle's contention that the distinction between the brothers depends not upon any basis of works but upon the mere calling of God, because it was established between them before they were born. (*Institutes*, 3.22.5)

God could foresee nothing good in man except what he had already determined to bestow by the benefit of his election, he does not resort to that absurd disorder of putting good works before their cause. (*Institutes*, 3.22.5)

For we have it from the words of the apostle that the salvation of believers has been founded upon the decision of divine election alone, and that this favor is not earned by works but comes from free calling. (*Institutes*, 3.22.5)

6. Jacob's Election Not to Earthly Blessings

a. Calvin entertains whether or not the Apostle Paul twisted Scripture to suit his purposes

i) The blessing of Jacob *seems* to have been for merely earthly purposes... the blessings of the firstborn

Genesis 27:28-29 May God give you of heaven's dew and of earth's richness-- an abundance of grain and new wine. ²⁹ May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you. May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed."

b. But Calvin says the Apostle Paul looks deeper

[Paul] saw what they cannot bear to consider: that God willed by an earthly symbol to declare Jacob's spiritual election, which otherwise lay hid in his inaccessible judgment seat. For unless we refer the right of primogeniture granted him to the age to come, it would be an empty and absurd kind of blessing, since from it he obtained nothing but manifold hardships, troubles, sad exile, many sorrows, and bitter cares. Therefore, when Paul saw without doubt that by outward blessing God testified to the blessing, spiritual and unfading, that he had prepared in his Kingdom for his servant, he did not hesitate to seek in the outward blessing evidence to prove the spiritual blessing (*Institutes*, 3.22.6)

c. Romans 9:15-16 make it so plain that God is not scouring the individual to find something of worth in us on the basis of which He will bless us

Romans 9:14-16 What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! ¹⁵ For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." ¹⁶ It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.

And what does this mean, I ask? It is simply the Lord's clear declaration that he finds in men themselves no reason to bless them but takes it from his mercy alone [Romans 9:16]; therefore the salvation of his own is his own work. Inasmuch as God establishes your salvation in himself alone, why do you descend to yourself? Since he appoints for you his mercy alone, why do you have recourse to your own merits? Seeing that he confines your thought within his mercy alone, why do you turn your attention in part to your own works? (*Institutes*, 3.22.6)

B. Answers to Opponents of This Basis of Election, Which Also Is Reprobation

1. Christ's Witness Concerning Election (John 6)

John 6:37-39 All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.

John 6:44-45 "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. ⁴⁵ It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me.

Now let the sovereign Judge and Master give utterance on the whole question. Detecting such great hardness in his listeners that he would be almost wasting words before the crowd, in order to overcome this hindrance he cries out: "All that the Father gives me will come to me" [John 6:37]. "For this is the will of the Father,... that whatever he has given me, I should lose nothing of it." [John 6:39.] Note that the Father's gift is the beginning of our reception into the surety and protection of Christ. (*Institutes*, 3.22.7)

Christ insists upon this point alone: even though the desertions of vast multitudes shake the whole world, God's firm plan that election may never be shaken will be more stable than the very heavens. The elect are said to have been the Father's before he gave them his only-begotten Son. (*Institutes*, 3.22.7)

They ask whether (they are elect) by nature. No, those who were strangers he makes his own by drawing them to him. Christ's words are too clear to be covered up with any clouds of evasion. "No one," he says, "can come to me unless the Father... draws him... Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me." [John 6:44-45.] If all men in general bowed the knee before Christ, election would be general; now in the fewness of believers a manifest diversity appears. (*Institutes*, 3.22.7)

Whence it comes about that the whole world does not belong to its Creator except that grace rescues from God's curse and wrath and eternal death a limited number who would otherwise perish. But the world itself is left to its own destruction, to which it has been destined. Meanwhile, although Christ interposes himself as mediator, he claims for himself, in common with the Father, the right to choose. (*Institutes*, 3.22.7)

To sum up: by free adoption God makes those whom he wills to be his sons; the intrinsic cause of this is in himself, for he is content with his own secret good pleasure. (*Institutes*, 3.22.7)

2. The Church Fathers, Especially Augustine, On God's "Foreknowledge"

- a. Calvin addresses the question of certain quotes from Ambrose, Origen, Jerome, and Augustine implying that God gives grace to those whom he foresees will use it wisely
- b. Calvin especially displayed Augustine's commitment to unconditional election in his controversy with Pelagius

Calvin's quotation of Augustine: "Here, surely, is rendered void the reasoning of those who defend God's foreknowledge against God's grace, and therefore say that we were chosen before the establishment of the world because God foresaw that we would be good, not that he himself would make us good. He who says 'You did not choose me, but I chose you' [John 15:16] does not speak of foreseen goodness." (*Institutes*, 3.22.8)

Calvin: Then that saying of Augustine remains true: "God's grace does not find but makes those fit to be chosen." (*Institutes*, 3.22.8)

3. Is Not Election Joined To God's "Foreknowledge" Of Man's Merits In So Far As Free Grace Makes Just Such Merits Possible?

- a. Calvin here refutes a subtle argument by Thomas Aquinas to this effect
- b. Calvin puts the predestination by God of the elect to final glory as the cause of predestination to grace, not the other way around... grace SERVES God's final end of having the elect in glory

4. The Universality of God's Invitation and the Particularity Of Election

- a. The question: isn't it duplicitous of God to invite the non-elect to a salvation they can never receive?
- b. Since God cannot be duplicitous, doesn't this refute the concept of predestination?
- c. Calvin says it seems these people are noble in seeking to protect the reputation of God; but actually it is an evasion of clear Scriptural texts, and such evasion can never be praiseworthy
- d. Calvin also says it is plain that all can be commanded to repentance and faith by outward preaching, and yet the graces of repentance and faith are not given to all
- e. Calvin cites Amos 4:7 and Amos 8:11 to show God's sovereign freedom in bestowing His blessings as He sees fit

Amos 4:7 I also withheld rain from you when the harvest was still three months away. I sent rain on one town, but withheld it from another. One field had rain; another had none and dried up.

Amos 8:11-12 "The days are coming," declares the Sovereign LORD, "when I will send a famine through the land-- not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD. ¹² Men will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the LORD, but they will not find it.

For he who threatens that while it will rain upon one city there will be drought in another [Amos 4:7], and who elsewhere announces a famine of teaching [Amos 8:11], does not bind himself by a set law to call all men equally. And he who, forbidding Paul to speak the word in Asia [Acts 16:6], and turning him aside from Bithynia, draws him into Macedonia [Acts 16:7 ff.] thus shows that he has the right to distribute this treasure to whom he pleases. (*Institutes*, 3.22.10)

Let this suffice for the present: although the voice of the gospel addresses all in general, yet the gift of faith is rare. (*Institutes*, 3.22.10)

- f. The reason is God's sovereign will to reveal His arm as He sees fit

Isaiah 53:1 Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

But it is not the prophet's intention to extenuate men's guilt when he teaches that the source of the blindness is that the Lord does not deign to reveal his arm to them [Isaiah 53:1]. He only warns that, because faith is a special gift, the ears are beaten upon in vain with outward teaching. (*Institutes*, 3.22.10)

... when Paul states that "we have been supplied with every spiritual blessing... even as he chose us from the foundation of the world" [Ephesians 1:3-4 p.], these riches are therefore not common to all, for God has chosen only whom he willed. This is why Paul in another place commends faith to the elect [Titus 1:1]: that no one may think that he acquires faith by

his own effort but that this glory rests with God, freely to illumine whom he previously had chosen. (*Institutes*, 3.22.10)

... faith is fitly joined to election, provided it takes second place. This order is elsewhere clearly expressed in Christ's words: "This is the will of my Father, that I should not lose what he has given. This is his will, that everyone who believes in the Son may not perish" [John 6:39-40, freely rendered]. If he willed all to be saved, he would set his Son over them, and would engraft all into his body with the sacred bond of faith. Now it is certain that faith is a singular pledge of the Father's love, reserved for the sons whom he has adopted. (*Institutes*, 3.22.10)

5. Rejection Also Takes Place Not On The Basis Of Works But Solely According To God's Will

Now a word concerning the reprobate, with whom the apostle is at the same time there concerned. For as Jacob, deserving nothing by good works, is taken into grace, so Esau, as yet undefiled by any crime, is hated [Romans 9:13]. If we turn our eyes to works, we wrong the apostle, as if he did not see what is quite clear to us! Now it is proved that he did not see it, since he specifically emphasizes the point that when as yet they had done nothing good or evil, one was chosen, the other rejected. This is to prove that the foundation of divine predestination is not in works. Then when he raised the objection, whether God is unjust, he does not make use of what would have been the surest and clearest defense of his righteousness: that God recompensed Esau according to his own evil intention. Instead, he contents himself with a different solution, that the reprobate are raised up to the end that through them God's glory may be revealed. Finally, he adds the conclusion that "God has mercy upon whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills" [Romans 9:18]. Do you see how Paul attributes both to God's decision alone? If, then, we cannot determine a reason why he vouchsafes mercy to his own, except that it so pleases him, neither shall we have any reason for rejecting others, other than his will. For when it is said that God hardens or shows mercy to whom he wills, men are warned by this to seek no cause outside his will. (*Institutes*, 3.22.11)