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PREDESTINATION IN THE "INSTITUTES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION," 1536-1559¹

No more Biblical theologian was ever given to the Church than the great French Reformer, John Calvin. The doctrine of predestination occupies a prominent place in his system, primarily because he found it so clearly revealed in Holy Scripture.² Truth shone forth from its pages, emancipating his soul from superstition, sacerdotalism and sacramental magic, and guaranteeing a personal assurance of salvation, independent of human intervention. The official Church called upon the sinner to achieve his own salvation, offering him assistance in the task by means of sacraments and indulgences; and apart from the Church there could be no salvation. Bible in hand, Calvin replied that apart from divine election there could be no salvation, and that this salvation depended on no human doings or deservings but on the unmerited mercy of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Asked how he had discovered the principle of universal gravitation, Sir Isaac Newton replied: "By constantly thinking about it." Calvin attained his clear conception of predestination by constantly thinking about it, and looking for it everywhere in the sacred Scriptures and in his own personal experience. Conversely, much misapprehension of the doctrine is surely due to isolating it from its setting in the world and in the Word of God.

I.—GENERAL PREDESTINATION. Calvin teaches a general predestination concerning all creatures and things, temporal and eternal, civil and ecclesiastical. "All events whatsoever are governed by the secret counsel of God. With regard to inanimate objects, although each is possessed of its peculiar properties, yet all of them exert their force, only in so far as directed by the immediate hand of God" (*Institutes*, I, i. 16).³ This universal predestination and preappointment may be

¹ A paper read at the International Congress of Calvinist Theology, held at Geneva in June, 1936.

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concluded from His (1) *Prescience*. "All things always were, and ever continue, under His eye; to His knowledge there is no past or future, but all things are present" (III, xxi. 5). They were known by Him as future ἀπ' αἰῶνός (Acts xv. 18), and came into existence by His determination; in fact, the reason why He knew that they would be, is because He determined that they should be. (2) *Providence* also implies this universal predestination. "The government of the world places the doctrine of providence beyond dispute" (I, v. 11). Eternal predestination, in this sense, is another name for eternal providence, the execution of which is actual providence in time.

II.—PARTICULAR PREDESTINATION relates to particular persons, and things, spiritual and eternal. Christ is its chief object, "a bright mirror of free election, lest it should give any trouble to us the members, viz. that He did not become the Son of God by living justly, but was gratuitously presented with this great honour, that He might make others partakers of His gifts" (Augustin, *de Correptione et Gratia*, xv.; quoted *Institutes*, III, xxii. 1). He was pre-ordained (προέθετο: Romans iii. 25) to be Mediator of the Covenant of Grace, propitiation for sin, Redeemer of His Church and Judge of all. Angels (1 Tim. v. 21) and men are also objects of predestination, which consists of two parts, viz. election and reprobation.

(1) The *objects* of election are not all men, for this would nullify the idea of choice, but "a great multitude", chosen out of all nations, consisting of particular persons, e.g. Jacob, Rufus and Clement, whose names are inscribed in the Lamb's book of life (Rom. ix. 13, xvi. 13; Phil. iv. 3). Objectors frequently stumble at the conception of the salvation of a tiny minority of mankind, but this numerical proportion is by no means essential to the doctrine, and has been expressly repudiated by such definitely Calvinistic divines as Hodge and Warfield.

(2) The *act* of election is irrespective of faith, sanctity or good actions as causes or conditions, but is according to the divine will, which is sovereign and immutable. "God has always been at liberty to bestow His grace on whom He would. Not to enquire in what respect Abraham's posterity excelled others, if it be not in worth, the cause of which has no existence out of God, let them tell why men are better than oxen or asses. God might have made them dogs" (III, xxii. 1). Faith is a fruit of

election, hence it is termed "the faith of God's elect" (Tit. i. 1). Sanctity is a means provided by election; we are chosen "that we should be holy" (Eph. i. 4), not vice versa; "created in Christ Jesus unto good works" (Ibid. ii. 10).

(3) The *means* and the *end* are both certain to the elect. "It is only when the salvation of a remnant is ascribed to gratuitous election, we arrive at the knowledge that God saves whom He wills of His mere good pleasure, and does not pay a debt, a debt that can never be due. Nor have we elsewhere any sure foundation for confidence" (III, xxi. 1). The ultimate end of all this, with respect to God, is His glory, the glory of His divine perfections, of His wisdom in devising such a scheme, of His justice, grace and mercy in redemption and salvation through Jesus Christ.

III.—REPROBATION. "There could be no election without its opposite, reprobation. . . . Those whom God passes by He reprobates, and for no other cause but because He is pleased to exclude them from the inheritance which He predestines to His children" (III, xxiii. 1). The decree of reprobation is the reverse aspect of predestination. Considered negatively it is termed (1) *Preterition*, i.e. non-election, the divine act of passing by the non-elect (*οἱ λοιποὶ*: Rom. xi. 7). Considered positively it is designated (2) *Predamnation*, the divine decree to punish men for sin. God created man neither to save nor to damn him, but for His glory. "The Lord hath made all things for Himself, yea, even the wicked for the day of evil" (Prov. xvi. 4), i.e. He has appointed all things for His glory, and the reprobate in particular to the day of judgment for their sins. Calvin devotes a chapter to a discussion of various objections to the doctrine (III. xxiii.). Preterition, he argues, cannot be unjust, since it puts nothing into its objects, but leaves them exactly as it finds them. Moreover, if it is not unjust for God to condemn men for sin, it cannot be unjust for Him to decree to condemn them for sin, which is all that is meant by the term predamnation.

FATHERS AND SCHOOLMEN.¹ It would be a relatively easy task to compile a catena of patristic and scholastic testimony

¹ The general history of the doctrine was dealt with at the Congress in a paper entitled "Predestination in History" by Prof. D. Maclean, D.D., which appeared in the July, 1936, issue of THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY.

to the doctrine of predestination. J. B. Mozley sees "no substantial difference between the Augustinian and Thomist, and the Calvinist doctrine of predestination" (*Treatise on the Augustinian Doctrine of Predestination*, p. 393). It is sometimes stated that, after Augustine and Bernard, nobody seems to satisfy our Reformer. Toplady indeed declared that "the ingenious native of Aquino was by no means a consistent predestinarian" (I, v.), and even Warfield speaks of the "semi-semi-Pelagianism which . . . the genius of an Aquinas systematized" (*The Plan of Salvation*, p. 41), although elsewhere he distinguishes between "the views of Augustinianizing Thomists and the semi-Pelagianizing Jesuits" (*Studies in Theology*, p. 117). Calvin himself, while he complains of the refinements of Lombard and Aquinas, seems to consider them generally orthodox on the subject. "Longiore intervallo a recentioribus sophistis differo" (II, ii. 6).¹

In regard to Aquinas, our Reformer merely objects to his *treatment* of the matter. "Nor let us be detained by the *subtlety* of Thomas, that the prescience of merit is the cause of predestination, not indeed in respect of the predestinating act, but that on our part it may in some sense be so called" (III, xxii. 9). On the principle that the end includes the means, Thomas argued that the predestination of the individual to eternal life included in it the confirming of all necessary graces and qualifications as *effects*, not *causes*, of predestination, for which no cause could be assigned but God's sovereign will and pleasure. (The effects were understood to be contingent.) "Praescientia meritorum non est causa vel ratio praedestinationis . . . Manifestum est quod id quod est gratiae est praedestinationis effectus" (*Summa Theologica*, I, xxiii., 5). "Calvin's reflections on the schoolmen, then, do not appear to prove any substantial difference on the subject of predestination, grace and freewill, between himself and the Augustinian part of the schoolmen" (J. B. Mozley, *op. cit.*, p. 401).²

¹ Père R. Garrigou-Lagrange in his recently published treatise on *La Prédestination des Saints : Doctrine de St. Thomas comparée aux autres systèmes théologiques*, endeavours to differentiate sharply between the Thomist and Calvinist doctrines of predestination (pp. 136 sqq.), but he is obviously not in a position to admit their substantial identity. Pascal, in a similar dilemma, attempted to distinguish between Augustine and Calvin in his *Lettres Provinciales*.

² In a paper at the Second International Congress of Calvinists in 1934, Prof. A. Lecerf of Paris, showed that, *pace* Victor Monod (*Le problème de Dieu*) and Henri Bois (*La Philosophie de Calvin*), our Reformer was no Scotist, and indeed he himself expressly repudiates a fundamental Scotist conception when he writes: "We give no countenance to the dream of certain papist theologians touching the *potentia absoluta* of God" (III, xxiii. 2).

THE REFORMERS. The Augustinian character of Reformed theology is a fact that has generally impressed itself upon serious students of the subject, and is admitted by candid Roman Catholic writers such as Calvin's Jesuit biographer Kampschulte. Indeed, the Reformation may be described, if not defined, as a return to Augustine.

Luther, an authentic Augustinian, speaks of predestination as early as 1517-18 in his Heidelberg theses, and his developed doctrine is declared in his famous reply to Erasmus entitled *De servo arbitrio*, which appeared in 1525.¹

In the previous year *Bucer* affirmed the *duplex praedestinationio* as axiomatic in his *Grund und Ursache*. Calvin wrote: "Principalement, j'ai voulu suivre Bucer, homme de sainte mémoire."²

Zwingli treats the subject of predestination at length in his *De providentia Dei*, published in 1530, which bears the significant subtitle: "The sovereign good orders and disposes of all things necessarily (*necessario universa curat et disponit*)."

THE FIRST EDITION OF THE "INSTITUTES", 1536. Prof. Abel Lefranc writes: "It is a remarkable fact, which proves eloquently the continuity of the French Reformer's religious thought, that from 1536 to 1564, the date of his death, the doctrine of the *Institutes* scarcely underwent any change" (*Institution*, 1st French edition of 1541, reprinted 1911: Introduction). Calvin added, developed and defined, but had nothing to retrench or retract. In the first edition the doctrine of predestination is found complete, although it is not there expounded directly by itself. Complete because its constitutive elements are present, viz. negation of human merit, certainty of salvation, and divine sovereignty, and it is the last which gives force to the other two.³

(1) *Negation of Merit*. At the close of the chapter on the law, Calvin speaks of justification and salvation, and explains that neither the one nor the other can be attributed to the deserts of the sinner. We are made "heirs of the celestial

¹ An English translation of this important work is published by The Sovereign Grace Union, under the title *The Bondage of the Will*.

² Dr. A. Lang, of Halle, demonstrated our Reformer's indebtedness to Bucer in an article entitled "The Sources of Calvin's *Institutes* of 1536", published in the April, 1936, issue of THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY.

³ This classification is derived from Prof. Emile Doumergue's monumental treatise, *Jean Calvin: Les Hommes et les Choses de Son Temps* (tome IV), to which the present paper is largely indebted.

kingdom by divine bounty and not by any other means (nostra arte)”. “In Christ we have been elected from all eternity, before the foundation of the world, without any merit on our part, but according to the purpose and good pleasure of God (secundum propositum beneplaciti Dei).” “We have been thus grafted into Christ and, by this insertion (inserti), . . . we have in Him all things (omnia), and in ourselves nothing (nihil).”

(2) *Certainty of Salvation.* Apropos of the article of the Apostles’ Creed: “Credo in . . . sanctam ecclesiam catholicam,” he defines the Church as “universus electorum numerus”, the election of which took place by an act of divine bounty before the foundation of the world, and took place in Christ so that He is the head of the elect (tanquam unius corporis caput). “Those who are truly elected, cannot be lost. Their election is so certain, so assured, that it cannot be shaken or destroyed, etiam si tota orbis machina labefactetur, concidere ipsa [salus] et corruere non potest. For the election of God can no more fail or vary than His eternal wisdom.”

(3) *Divine Sovereignty.* Treating of the providence and sovereignty of God, Calvin declares God to be “Creator omnium omnino rerum, . . . who, by His omnipotence operates all things (omnia operatur in omnibus) and, by His providence, directs all things (omnia moderatur), from whom proceeds all that happens, joy and sorrow, prosperity and adversity, all, except sin (excepto peccato), . . . and all this, not because of any merit whatever, . . . but by a paternal benevolence, of which the sole cause is His bounty.”

THE SECOND EDITION, 1539. Chapter viii. of this edition is entitled: “Of the Predestination and Providence of God,” and follows those dealing with repentance, justification and Christian liberty. The argument proceeds from a self-evident fact to an explanation revealed in the Word of God, and then from the particular doctrine of predestination to the general doctrine of providence.

“The covenant of life is not preached equally to all, and among those to whom it is preached, does not always meet with the same reception. This diversity displays an admirable secret of divine judgment, . . . whence issue great and difficult problems, which cannot be solved otherwise than by teaching the faithful that which they ought to hold concerning

election and predestination. For it is necessary in the first place to explain in what sense they should understand that some are predestinated to salvation and others to damnation. Then subsequently it must be declared how that the world is governed by the providence of God, since all that happens depends on His ordinance.”

THE FINAL EDITION, 1559. The development of the doctrine between 1539 and 1559 owes much to the objections raised by Bolsec, Pighius, Melanchthon and Castellion.

Our Reformer replied to his calumniator, *Bolsec*, by a brief and incisive “congregation”¹ or lecture, in which the doctrine is related to the idea of providence under the trilogy noted above, viz. negation of merit, certainty of salvation, and divine sovereignty.

Pighius wrote a treatise on freewill in 1542, to which Calvin replied in 1543, and more fully in 1552, when he published the *Consensus genevois*, or *Traité de la prédestination éternelle de Dieu, . . . aussi de la providence*. “It is chiefly in the Genevan *Consensus*”, writes Warfield, “that we find the fullest statement of Calvin’s doctrine of predestination which has a claim to symbolical authority. . . . The *praedestinatio gemina* is made the very core of the doctrine” (*Studies in Theology*, p. 134).

Melanchthon differed from the French Reformer on several points, notably on the question of freewill and predestination. Calvin refers to these differences in his famous preface to *Melanchthon’s Loci*, published in 1546.

After the mild opposition of *Melanchthon*, came *Castellion*, distinguished most of all by the violence of his invective. It was in controversy with *Castellion*, however, that Calvin arrived at the complete identification of predestination and divine sovereignty. “Predestination”, he declares, “as the sacred Scriptures teach, is the free counsel of God by which He governs the human race and every part of the world, according to His infinite wisdom and incomprehensible justice” (*Opuscules*, p. 1,778; *Opera IX*, p. 287).

These discussions were the prelude to the final edition of the *Institutes*, that of 1559. The chapters on predestination will be

¹ *Congrégation faite en l’Eglise de Genève par M. Jean Calvin, en laquelle la matière de l’élection éternelle de Dieu fut sommairement et clairement par lui déduite*, included in *Calvin, Homme d’Eglise*, a volume published under the auspices of the Committee of the Quatercentenary of the Reformation at Geneva, 1936.

found at the close of the third book, "an evident proof", says Prof. E. Doumergue, "that predestination is not the *foundation* on which Calvinistic theology is reared, but the *keystone* which sustains the edifice". At the moment of the publication of the definitive edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin preached a course of sermons on St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, in which he observed: "There are two principal reasons why this doctrine should be proclaimed and why it has great utility for us. . . . One is that God may be magnified, as He deserves; the second is that we may be certified of our salvation, in order that we may invoke Him as our Father, in full liberty. If we have not these two things, woe unto us, for we have neither faith nor religion."¹ Calvin's two reasons are surely valid for us to-day.

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¹ *Deuxième sermon sur l'épître aux Ephésiens: Opera* LI, p. 262