

A Brief History of Predestination in the Writings of John Calvin

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It may seem a bit bold for a Lutheran professor serving a Presbyterian seminary to attempt to offer his colleagues and friends an article on a Calvinist specialty. I assure you that my intentions are honorable. Lutherans are as interested in predestination as Reformed theologians, if in a somewhat different way, and what Calvin said is interesting to us, too! We, also, have pressing reasons for trying to understand exactly what Calvin wrote and why.

But more than that, I offer this “history” conscious of the truism that outsiders often see and raise questions that insiders don’t notice, and often helpfully so. It may be that a history of predestination in Calvin hasn’t been thought about recently, and that such a history may stimulate some reflection. If predestination can be preserved as a point of conversation and fruitful thought and not just an article to be believed, it is more likely to do the work it needs to do in the life of faith.

Development of a Doctrine

The doctrine of predestination has become such a defining article of faith for the shape of Reformed theology that its importance, if not centrality, for John Calvin is accepted without further reflection. In other words, Calvin is understood to have built systematically upon the understanding that God by his inscrutable will has irrevocably chosen some for eternal salvation and others for eternal damnation, and this, from the beginning of Calvin's ministry. For those who assume this, it may come as a mild shock to con-

* Mark Nygard completed this article in 2012 when he was the director of Graduate Studies at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo.—Ed.

sider that it might not always have been so, that there might have been a time in Calvin's life when the article was not well articulated, that it might have experienced considerable change in importance and implications over the period of Calvin's work.

Calvin himself offers wonderful resources to the scholar interested in examining this possibility through his successive revisions of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, with editions in Latin in 1536, 1539, 1543, 1550, and 1559, and in French by his own hand in 1541, 1545, 1551, and 1560.¹ It would appear to be a straightforward task to trace the course of Calvin's thought on predestination through his continuous editing of the *Institutes*, but translation issues complicate the task for the non-Latin reader. Though the definitive 1559 Latin edition has been rendered into English and published many times, the only other edition to be so honored is the 1536 Latin edition, translated by Ford Lewis Battles in 1975. A translation of the 1539 Latin edition by Battles still remains unpublished and inaccessible after his death.² Fortunately for this project, the 1541 French edition established by Jacques Pannier and published in 1961, was available.³ And, though it breaks the simplicity of the method, *Calvin's First Catechism* of 1538, translated by Ford Lewis Battle and published with commentary by I. John Hesselink in 1997, provides valuable information during the early years of development. It is the intent of this essay to document briefly the major changes in Calvin's articulation of the doctrine of election using the English translation of the 1536 *Institutes*, the English translation of the 1538

¹ François Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of his Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1950, 1963), 112–20. Wendel cites uncertain evidence that the 1560 French edition may show signs of other hands as well (118–19).

² Richard C. Gamble, "Preface," *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1539: Text and Concordance*, ed. Richard F. Wevers (Grand Rapids: The Meeter Center for Calvin Studies at Calvin College and Seminary, 1988), I:vii.

³ Wendel remarks that the Latin 1539 edition was actually completed in the final months of 1538. Since the French 1541 is a translation of this 1539 Latin, it reflects his thinking in late 1538, soon after the appearance of his *Catechism*, not three years later as the publication date would suggest. See Wendel, *Calvin*, 113.

Catechism, the French 1541 *Institutes* based on the 1539 Latin edition, and the English translation of the 1559 *Institutes*, drawing such conclusions as we may about its role in Calvin's theology.

Predestination in the 1536 *Institutes*

Battle's English translation of Calvin's first edition of the *Institutes* requires 211 pages (not counting the dedicatory) and on the order of 125,000 words to present five chapters, entitled "The Law," "Faith," "The Sacraments," "The Five False Sacraments," and "Christian Freedom," but no "Predestination."⁴ Wendel notes that, in fact, predestination is mentioned only twice, and both of them in the chapter on Faith in the subsection on the Apostles' Creed.⁵ In the first, more extensive mention under Article Three of the Apostles' Creed on the Church, approximately 4 of the 24 paragraphs assigned to discuss the creed and approximately 1,800 words serve to distinguish the true Church of God's elect from the reprobate (one mention), delineate the gifts and the blessings that the elect may expect, and inspire the confidence they should have in the good will and faithfulness of the electing God.⁶ The discussion is followed by issues of excommunication and church discipline. The second mention is, by contrast, quite a peripheral one. In arguing for a more symbolic understanding of the descent into hell as Christ's experience of the dread of God's judgment, Calvin has cause to mention the hope of believers (not elect) and the hopelessness of the reprobate: only 53 words in all and no full treatment in any case.⁷ It would thus seem that only about 1½% of the 1536 *Institutes* is clearly concerned with predestination, and that Calvin has no cause to bring it up in his treatment of other matters.

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975, 1986).

⁵ Wendel, *Calvin*, 265.

⁶ Calvin, *Institutes* (1536), 58–61.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

A closer analysis of the predestinarian section under the Church suggests these characteristics in the 1536 *Institutes*.

1. It is pre-creation, “before the foundation of the world.”⁸
2. It is universal, including angels, the deceased, and all nations: “in order that all may be gathered in,” though this “all” refers to the elect.⁹
3. It is sanctifying: it renders the elect holy.¹⁰
4. It causes an order of salvation: choosing, calling, justifying, sanctifying, glorifying.¹¹
5. Some members of the Church “in whom He has worked His own powers” are not members of the elect.¹²
6. Likewise, some elect have not yet become part of the visible Church.¹³
7. The elect cannot perish, for their foundation is sure.¹⁴
8. The body of the elect, the Church, will not pass away from the earth.¹⁵
9. It is not for us to investigate why, “breaking into the depths of the majesty.”¹⁶
10. It is not for us to investigate who is the elect.¹⁷
11. Yet there are sure marks given by Scripture by which the reprobate may be known “insofar as [God] wills us to recognize them.”¹⁸
12. It remains only for us to believe the declared promise of absolution, for “by faith we possess Christ and all that is his.”¹⁹

Clearly, the primary question being addressed here is what is the nature of the church, not who will be saved. The entire dis-

⁸ Ibid., 58.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 59.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 60

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 61.

¹⁹ Ibid.

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cussion is thus set in a basically ecclesiological context, not a soteriological one.

Predestination in the 1538 *Catechism*

The English translation of Calvin's *Catechism*, a shorter document, requires only 31 pages (not counting the introduction) and on the order of 15,000 words to present 33 articles of faith, the thirteenth of which is entitled Predestination.²⁰ It is noteworthy that it now has an article of its own. Not only so, but with approximately 500 words it comprises roughly 3% of the text and is located more strategically after three articles on the Law leading to an article on faith in Christ, but before four articles describing that faith. By every outward indicator it would appear that predestination has risen in the attention that it receives.

There are internal signs as well. Now, two years after predestination was alluded to in the first *Institutes*, these characteristics are highlighted in the *Catechism*:

1) God's Word bears fruit only in those predestined to be God's children before the foundation of the world.

2) God's Word is the stench of death unto death to those who were condemned by the same plan of God.

3) It is not for us to know why he has willed this. This will bring only anxiety and trouble.

4) It is rather for us to acknowledge God's justice and holiness in it.

5) Condemnation of all would be just; the salvation of some is pure mercy.

6) The elect are vessels of mercy. The reprobate are vessels of wrath.

7) We are to focus on the proclamation where his mercy is made clear.

²⁰ I. John Hesselink, *Calvin's First Catechism: A Commentary* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).

8) What we seek in election is eternal life. We receive it in faith in Christ, the mirror of God's will and the seal of his election.²¹

Here, instead of a single mention on the third page, the concept of the reprobate is brought to the beginning of the article and treated in parallel fashion with that of the elect. Apology for the doctrine is made midway through the article by introduction of Paul's "vessels of wrath" language to justify God's decision even if he were to condemn the entire race. And, in a separate phenomenon, the effects of predestination for the individual are not probed: its rendering holy, its causing the order of salvation, calling, justifying, and glorying. The doctrine is presented separately from its earlier assuring function.²² Neither, likewise, are the consequences for consideration of the church in its visible and invisible aspects pursued.

Predestination in the 1541 French Translation of the *Institutes*

By 1539 the *Institutes* had grown apace, and Calvin's 1541 translation of them reflects that growth. At 360,000 words on 1,189 pages, the volume is almost three times as long as its 1536 predecessor.²³ The number of chapters has expanded from five to seventeen, of which the eighth, "De la prédestination et providence de Dieu," sits squarely in the center after justification by faith and consideration of the scriptures, but before prayer and the sacraments. Its 75 pages contain approximately 22,500 words, now well over 6% of the text, and make it one of the longer articles of faith in this edition, ranking it up there with such critical articles as the third on the law and the sixth on justification by faith. It is

²¹ Ibid., 17. The entire article fits on a single page.

²² The final sentences of consolation have their reason in Christ, not election. In fact, the reader is urged not to think further about predestination but to rely on Christ.

²³ Jean Calvin, *Institution de la Religion Chrestienne* (1541), ed. Jacques Pannier. In *Oeuvres Complètes de Calvin* (Paris: Société d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres," 1961).

hard not to mark a radical and rapid evolution of attention towards election during this time.

It is also clear that by this time Calvin had encountered objection to and controversy about his position, because the first order of business after the introduction is setting up defenses. On the one hand one must not seek with inordinate curiosity and temerity to enter the “Sanctuary,” the “Labyrinth,” “the secrets” of God’s will. On the other hand one must not “seek to bury all memory of predestination” as a “perilous thing.”²⁴ He now needs to argue in various ways for its correct use as scripturally appropriate, not only here at the beginning, but again and again as he proceeds,²⁵ citing examples from the Old Testament,²⁶ diverse scripture from the New Testament,²⁷ and the church fathers, favorably or unfavorably as needed.²⁸ These arguments and defenses compose a considerable part of the new material offered in French in 1541 and are the most striking addition to it.

Not until the fifth page is the doctrine defined and an examination of its aspects begun. Quite simply, “We name predestination the eternal counsel of God whereby he has determined that which he wants to do with each person. For he has not created them all in the same condition, but has ordained some to eternal life and others to eternal damnation.”²⁹ Unprecedented is this upfront definition that, in systematic fashion, puts the scandal first

²⁴ Ibid., III:58–59. All translations from the French in this paper are my own.

²⁵ Ibid., III:65, 67.

²⁶ Ibid., 88 for Abraham, 67, 71–72 for Esau and Jacob, 68–69 for Manasseh and Ephraim, 68, 70 for Moses in Exodus 33:19, 88 for Isaiah 65:1, 102 for Moses and Pharaoh, 119 for Ahab [perhaps rather Jehoshaphat is meant] before the lying prophet Micaiah, 120 for Joseph and his brothers, 120 for Job, 121 for Jeremiah and the coming calamity, and 129–30 for God’s choice of Jonah to preach at Nineveh. A striking omission yet at this time is Job, which is cited (112), but not developed fully.

²⁷ Important verses cited by Calvin in this edition are, of course, Ephesians 1 and Colossians 1 (pp. 64), but also Romans 9–11, Paul on the potter, Peter, Paul, and James on God not respecting status, Acts 10, and John 6, 10, and 17.

²⁸ Ibid., 69 for Ambrose, Jerome, and Origen, 70–71 for Thomas Aquinas, 69, 76, 87 for Augustine.

²⁹ Ibid., III:62.

(actually, second, to its defense!). A new word is used to emphasize it, “immutable,” or unchanging.³⁰ The concept is not new, but where in 1536 it assured the faithful of the steadfastness of God’s promise, the context is now human perplexity at God’s sovereign decision.

A new theme emerges early on when Calvin writes that Christians are encouraged to respond to the fact of election with lives that “demonstrate and witness to their election.”³¹ Three years earlier the elect would not have been expected to have formulated the shape of their Christian lives in terms of election. The fact that this is now being lifted up as “a vocation of the elect” shows again the new emphasis it is receiving.

Predestination in the 1559 *Institutes*

The ultimate statement of Calvin’s theology is his final Latin edition of the *Institutes*, published 18 years after the works cited above, and it is this edition that is universally used in Reformed churches today. Now grown to 1,486 pages in the recently published Westminster John Knox edition, it holds on the order of 650,000 words, making it almost twice the size of the 1539/1541 editions. The volume is now broken into four major sections, or “books,” subdivided into 80 chapters, and further subdivided into 1,263 subsections, or “paragraphs.”³² In the third book, four or these chapters, XXI through XXIV, or 49 paragraphs, comprising approximately 29,000 words, are devoted specifically to election themes. In addition, two chapters with about 12,000 words on Providence have been moved to Book I (Chapters XVII and XVIII) to be treated with other material on the doctrine of God. In addition, four chapters of Book II (Chapters II through V) or about 38,000 words, treat the converse of the doctrine considered from below with emphasis on the bondage of the human will and the helplessness of humankind without God’s help. Repeated ref-

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 63.

³² Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960, 2006).

erences to predestination and related concepts occur throughout all this material. Taken together, it constitutes well over 10% of the entire volume. Thus, predestination and election considerations stand not only as a block of material solidly in the heart of Books Three and Four in material on the way in which Christ is received and God's invitation is given, but also as significant chapters and portions of chapters throughout the books on creation and redemption as well. One may say it permeates the *Institutes* in a broader sense, having become a general awareness that connects many doctrines of faith throughout the work.

Of the four chapters on election as such, one is devoted entirely to proving the doctrine from scripture and the church fathers, and another to refuting diverse accusations made against the doctrine.³³ Even in the other two chapters, apologies for the doctrine break forth, such as the same two initial objections that opened the 1541 French edition in Chapter XXI,³⁴ and an aside on Judas as not being counterevidence in Chapter XXIV.³⁵ It might be said that the doctrine is now mature, hardened and seasoned, as it were, by the attacks of its enemies, and defended and buttressed against almost every conceivable objection.

The definition of predestination offered in the 1541 French edition is preserved, perhaps, word for word.³⁶ There is in fact much that is recognizable in the 1559 edition from its 1541 predecessor. Wendel even suggests that the main lines of the doctrine were set in place in the 1539 edition and that modifications after that time are not a "hardening of his doctrine," but "in reality reducible to some new definitions and some more extended Biblical quotations."³⁷ Surely there is much truth in this.

Yet, some "new definitions" are noteworthy. The case of Israel is taken to illustrate a kind of two-tiered election not remarked before, in which by a first stage a nation is chosen as his heritage, and by a second "more limited" stage, particular individuals of

³³ *Ibid.*, II:932–64, that is, in Book 3, Chapters XXII and XXIII.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, II:922–25.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, II:975–76.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, II:926. See footnote 29, above.

³⁷ Wendel, *Calvin*, 269.

the nation are chosen. Calvin considers the value of the first election, but makes it clear that it is the second election of individuals to eternal salvation that makes election so certain that it is without doubt the “actual election.”³⁸

Structurally parallel to this is Calvin’s distinction between God’s general and special calling. With the former the call of the Gospel goes forth to all people without distinction, but it does not do its work in them all. “The other kind of call is special, which [God] deigns . . . to give to the believers alone, while by inward illumination of his Spirit he causes the preached Word to dwell in their hearts.”³⁹ Certainly, this is a distinction that fits the theological structure in which a predestining God chooses whom the Word will illumine.

Conclusion

It seems clear from our brief survey of four of Calvin’s works, three from the beginning and one from the conclusion of his ministry, that his doctrine of predestination was not a static thing over the years of his ministry. On the contrary, it shows continual growth and increasing richness. In particular, we have observed the following indications:

1. The space given to the concept in the *Institutes* increased from 1½% in the 1536 edition to over 10% in the 1559 edition.
2. The prominence of the concept increased from a relatively minor and casual service of another doctrine in one part of one chapter in the 1536 edition, to a titled section in the 1538 edition, to a multi-chaptered treatment in its own right and permeation of other subject matter in the 1559 edition.
3. Predestination changed in function from an ecclesiastical use in the 1536 edition, helping to define the Church, to a more soteriological function as early as the 1541 edition, something to which believers may bear witness by their actions.
4. It grows in boldness. Where in the 1536 edition the concept of reprobate was mentioned only twice, by 1541 the scandal

³⁸ Calvin, *Institutes* (1559), II:928–30.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, II:974.

of arbitrary separation of the reprobate from the saved is systematically “in your face” by clear definition and early treatment.

5. Its context is increasingly the perplexity that confronts it at every turn, as demonstrated by the growing volume of supporting evidence from scriptures and the fathers and by the careful parrying of every conceivable objection.

The fact of the change is not in question. The evidence for that, even in such a short paper, is striking. Yet the change was sketched with only the broadest strokes using only a fraction of the data available, and that in translation. It would appear to be a fruitful field of research to consider the other sources in the original languages and to attempt to make some judgments about the connection between the growth of the doctrine in Calvin’s theology and its effects on Calvin and his community. No finer data could we ask for.