

John Calvin's View of Reprobation, and His Erroneous Fundamental Assumption.

By Robert Shank

Calvin considered reprobation a positive decree. “By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestinated to life or to death” (3:21:5). “We say, then, that Scripture clearly proves this much, that God by his eternal and immutable counsel determined once for all those whom it was his pleasure one day to admit to salvation, and those whom, on the other hand, it was his pleasure to doom to destruction. We maintain that this counsel, as regards the elect, is founded on his free mercy, without respect to human worth, while those whom he dooms to destruction are excluded from access to life by a just and blameless but at the same time, incomprehensible, judgment” (3:21:7). “Now if, in excuse of themselves and the ungodly, either the Pelagians, or Manichees, or Anabaptists, or Epicureans (for it is with these four sects we have to discuss this matter), should object the necessity by which they are constrained, in consequence of the divine predestination, they do nothing that is relevant to the cause” (3:23:8). In the same paragraph, however, he writes, “Moreover, though their perdition depends on the predestination of God, the cause and matter of it is in themselves.”

Thus, according to Calvin, by eternal decree before creation, God “determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man.” Some He “preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation,” without regard to anything in man, either of the elect or of the reprobate—“they do nothing that is relevant to the cause.” And yet, somehow, “the cause and matter of [the perdition of the reprobate] is in themselves.”

It cannot be questioned that men, as guilty sinners, are deserving of perdition. But according to Calvin's view of reprobation, the guilt of the reprobate is a consequence rather than a cause. For if by eternal decree God unconditionally “preordained” specific men to eternal damnation without respect to anything in them, but simply because “it was his pleasure to doom them to destruction,” it cannot be true that “the cause and matter” of their perdition is to be found within the reprobate themselves, as Calvin asserts, because God's decree was antecedent to any act of man. According to Calvin's definition of election and reprobation, the guilt of the reprobate is, itself, the direct consequence of God's positive decree of reprobation. God created the reprobate for no other purpose than guilt and everlasting damnation, and the real “cause and matter” of their perdition is to be found in God's decree, rather than “in themselves,” as Calvin asserts.

Calvin becomes involved in the same sort of contradiction in his consideration of the fall of angels. He writes: “Paul gives the name of elect to the angels who maintained their integrity. If their steadfastness was owing to the good pleasure of God, the revolt of the others proves that they were abandoned. Of this no other cause can be adduced than reprobation, which is hidden in the secret counsel of God” (3:23:4). Obviously, this makes the revolt of the angels the direct consequence of an act of God. According to Calvin, the whole company of angels were going along in a business-as-usual sort of way when—bang! God suddenly sprang the trap under some of them by withdrawing His sustaining grace and “abandoning” them to perdition. This was

simply “owing to the good pleasure of God,” and “no other cause can be adduced than reprobation, which is hidden in the secret counsel of God.”

But elsewhere in his Institutes, Calvin declares that “. . . at their first creation they were the angels of God, but by revolting they both ruined themselves and became the instruments of perdition to others. . . . Everything damnable in [Lucifer] he brought upon himself by his revolt and fall. Of this Scripture reminds us, lest, by believing that he was so created at first, we should ascribe to God what is most foreign to his nature. For this reason Christ declares (John viii. 44) that Satan, when he lies, ‘speaketh of his own,’ and states the reason, ‘because he abode not in the truth.’ By saying that he abode not in the truth, he certainly intimates that he once was in the truth, and by calling him the father of lies, he puts it out of his power to charge God with the depravity of which he was himself the cause” (1:14:16).

Thus, on one page, there is “no other cause” for the fall of angels except “the good pleasure of God” in suddenly withdrawing His sustaining grace from some and “abandoning” them to perdition, while continuing to secure the “steadfastness” of others who “maintained their integrity.” On another page, however, there is no other cause than that which we may find in the angels themselves, who, without provocation or necessity or excuse, wickedly revolted against God and His divine will.

It is difficult to read at length from Calvin without concluding that he was a master at eating his cake and having it too. The left hand giveth, and the right hand taketh away. Calvin’s difficulty stemmed from the fact that he labored under an erroneous fundamental assumption. His cardinal error was his failure to acknowledge that the will of God has more than a single aspect, which led to his consequent denial that God desires to have all men to be saved. It is apparent from his writings that Calvin reasoned thus: If God truly wished all men to be saved, then all men would be saved. But most men are not saved. Therefore, we must conclude that God does not wish all men to be saved. Calvin’s logic is unassailable; but it is based on the erroneous assumption that the will of God has but a single aspect.

Calvin deplored the fact that his opponents “. . . refer to the distinction between will and permission, the object being to prove that the wicked perish only by the permission, but not by the will of God.” “But why do we say that he permits, but just because he wills?” (3:23:8). Certainly anything within His permission is within God’s will. But this does not establish the fact that His will has but a single aspect. All that occurs in the universe is within the permissive will of God. Neither men nor angels nor devils can go beyond the limits of God’s permissive will. But it is by no means true that all that occurs is in accord with the perfect will of God.

One may argue that, since the world is filled with greed, lust, violence, debauchery, hatred, and impenitence, God evidently wishes it to be so and is well pleased. But the Scriptures declare otherwise. Although God allows these things to exist in the world, He has revealed His displeasure and wrath with respect to all such things and has commanded all men to repent. Thus it is evident that there are two aspects of the will of God with respect to sin: His permissive will allows it; but His perfect will forbids it and will bring all sin into judgment.

There are two aspects of the will of God for men with respect to salvation. Numerous Scriptures reveal God’s perfect will to “have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (I Tim. 2:4);; but the fact that not all men are saved reflects God’s permissive will. If a man is

saved, it is in accordance with God's perfect will that all men should be saved; if a man is lost, it is in accordance with God's permissive will that men, being free moral agents rather than mere puppets, may refuse to obey Him. The latitude between God's perfect will and His permissive will is the area within which men function with freedom as responsible moral intelligences, accountable before God in solemn judgment. God is at work in humanity "bringing many sons unto glory" (Heb. 2:10) through the redemptive process rooted in His grace and wrought in Christ. But as moral intelligences created in His image, men must of their own free will concur in God's redemptive process if they are to share His everlasting glory as His sons. The fact that men are responsible, as free moral agents, is a corollary of the fact that the will of God has two aspects, rather than one.

The fact that the will of God has two aspects, rather than one, is fully apparent in numerous passages of Scripture. Consider the following: "If any man wills to do His will, he shall know. . ." (John 7:17). "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father . . ." (Matt. 7:21). "But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel [boulē, purpose] of God for them, being not baptized of John" (Luke 7:30). According to the Scriptures, men may choose to do God's will, or not to do His will. Since everything that happens is necessarily within the bounds of God's will, yet (according to the Scriptures) much that happens is contrary to the will of God, it is evident that the will of God has two aspects, rather than one.

Calvin does assert that God has "a double will" (3:24:17). But he means only that God has one will for the elect and another for the reprobate, both of which are simply corresponding manifestations of the one immutable will of God. (But if His will has but a single aspect, God is necessarily insincere; for He is ostensibly angry toward impenitent sinners with whom he secretly must be pleased, since they are but fulfilling His immutable will for them.) Calvin's assumption that the will of God has but a single aspect involved him in a fundamental error which warped both his theology and his interpretation of the Scriptures.

Much of Calvin's exposition of the Scriptures is excellent, including his interpretations of the warnings against apostatizing and the exhortations to persevere. He insists that believers must persevere in faith if they are to remain in grace. He frankly acknowledges that the Scriptures declare that some do actually fall from grace (reprobate Christians whose faith and experience of grace, by divine decree, are intended to be only temporary). He rightly asserts that the elect will persevere in faith and continue in grace to ultimate final salvation. But he views the perseverance of specific individual men as the consequence of election, rather than as a condition. Therefore, he is under the necessity of denying that God desires to have all men to be saved. For if God desires to have all men to be saved, then perseverance must necessarily be a condition, rather than a consequence, of election. Hence, his interpretations of the explicit declarations of Scripture that God wills to have all men to be saved, and that Christ died for all men, are ingenious and artificial. The reason is apparent: had he accepted the obvious meaning and import of such simple categorical declarations of Holy Scripture, his definition of election and the whole logic of his theology would have disintegrated. Calvin therefore rejected the face value of numerous passages of Scripture, in the interest of his theology, which he was able to substantiate by appealing to selected proof passages and by assigning ingenious interpretations to some of the most explicit declarations in the Holy Scriptures.

An example of Calvin's interpretation of passages incompatible with his theology is found in his comments on I Tim. 2:4-6. He writes that "[Paul] demonstrates that God has at heart the salvation of all, because he invites all to the acknowledgment of his truth." (John Calvin, Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, p. 54.) Having made such a concession (in full accord with the obvious meaning of Paul's words), Calvin immediately begins his retraction by asserting, "This belongs to that kind of argument in which the cause is proved from the effect." In other words, since many are not saved, it cannot be true that God really wishes all men to be saved. Conceding that "if 'the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone that believeth' (Rom. I, 16), it is certain that all those to whom the gospel is addressed are invited to the hope of eternal life," Calvin yet insists that only "they whom God makes partakers of his gospel are admitted by him to possess salvation"—who are, of course, only such as have the good fortune of having been included in God's "secret election." We must not believe, therefore, that God really desires that all men should come to the knowledge of the truth and be saved. Paul's simple statement must be "interpreted" to bring it into conformity with Calvin's theology. According to Calvin, God "invites all to the acknowledgment of His truth," but He makes sure that only the right ones answer His universal invitation. He has taken all necessary steps to ensure that none of the wrong ones shall obey his righteous command to all men everywhere to repent or answer His gracious invitation to "whosoever will."

In defense of his theology, Calvin asserts that "all" does not mean all, but rather only some men of each of all classes. He declares that in affirming that God wills to have all men to be saved, ". . . 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 life; and hence he justly concludes that God invites all equally to partake salvation. But 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." (Ibid., p. 54 f.) In other words, when Paul declared that God "wills to have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth," he really meant only that God wills to have some men of each of all nations and classes, including a few kings, to be saved and to come to the knowledge of His truth.

Again, Calvin writes, "The universal term all must always be referred to classes of men, and not to persons. . . ." (Ibid., p. 57.) such an assumption is necessary for the defense of Calvin's theology. And it does seem a modest concession for Calvin to ask, in view of the fact that the whole of his elaborate theology is at stake. But we wonder why Paul depended so much on "interpreters" instead of simply saying that God desires to have some men of each of all different classes to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth, and that Jesus gave Himself a ransom for some men of each of all classes.

Elsewhere Calvin writes, "By this [Paul] assuredly means nothing more than that the way of salvation was not shut against any order of men; that, on the contrary, he had manifested his mercy in such a way that he would have none debarred from it" (3:24:16). But of course Calvin does not really mean that God actually "had manifested his mercy in such a way that he would have none debarred from it." Such a statement contradicts his theology. For according to Calvin, most men were created for the specific purpose of being forever barred from the mercy of God. Calvin therefore means only that God has barred the reprobate from His mercy, not on the basis of "class" or "order of men," but rather as specific individuals whom He created for perdition and

for whom His mercy was never intended. Against any who might be reluctant to accept his “interpretation” of such a simple categorical statement of Scripture and his necessary definition of the word all as only some men of all classes, Calvin fumes, “For if they persist in urging the words, ‘God hath included all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all’ (Rom. xi. 32), I will, on the contrary, urge that it is elsewhere written, ‘Our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased’ (Ps. cxv.3)” (3:24:16). To Calvin, of course, belongs the exclusive right to define “whatsoever God hath pleased” to do.

“Hence we see the childish folly,” writes Calvin, “of those who represent this passage [I Tim. 2:4-6] to be opposed to predestination [i.e., to Calvin’s particular hypothesis of election and reprobation]. ‘If God,’ say they, ‘wishes all men indiscriminately to be saved, it is false that some are predestinated by his eternal purpose to salvation, and others to perdition [i.e., unconditionally]. 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 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.” (Ibid., p. 54.)

Thus, all in the same breath, Calvin declares that “God has at heart the salvation of all . . . yet it does not therefore follow that he has not determined with himself what he intends to do as to every individual man”—some of whom He created for salvation, and others for perdition. Again, as so often with Calvin, the left hand giveth, and the right hand taketh away. “God has at heart the salvation of all [and] invites all to the acknowledgment of his truth.” But He also has at heart the everlasting perdition of men whom He created for no other purpose or destiny—men to whom, from before creation, He utterly denied all prospect of arriving at the acknowledgment of His truth and salvation. “God has at heart the salvation of all”—and the damnation of most! Without regard to anything in men, God is pleased to consign to everlasting perdition many whose salvation He “has at heart.” Why? Perhaps to confirm the logic of Calvin’s theology.

Calvin resorts to similar exegetical artifice in his interpretation of passages which affirm that Christ died for all mankind. For example, according to his interpretation of I John 2:2, John did not mean that Jesus is actually the propitiation “for the sins of the whole world.” Instead, he meant only that He is the propitiation for the sins of the elect wherever they may happen to be throughout the whole world, and in whatever generation they may happen to live on earth. “. . . the design of John was none other than to make this benefit common to the whole Church. Then under the word all or whole, he does not include the reprobate, but designates those who should believe as well as those who were then scattered through various part of the world. For then is really made evident, as it is meet, the grace of Christ, when it is declared to be the only true salvation of the world.” (Calvin, Commentaries on the Catholic Epistle. p. 173.)

It must have come as an amazing revelation to John’s readers to learn that Jesus Christ is the propitiation for the sins of the elect quite as much in one part of the world as in another, and as much in one generation as in another. What nonsense! But of course John’s simple statement must be properly “interpreted”. The logic of Calvin’s theology demands a limited atonement. (In his introduction to Eerdman’s edition of the Institutes, John Murray writes, “[Calvin’s] exegesis, in a word, is theologically oriented.” That is only too true, in a sense which Murray did not mean. The profound pity is that Calvin’s theology was not exegetically oriented.)

While many Calvinists concede that such a doctrine is manifestly unscriptural, a limited atonement remains an essential tenet of Calvin's theology. The "Five Pillars of Calvinism" are five in number, not four. But Calvinists who advocate a limited atonement have no moral right to assure any man that Christ died for him, personally. For according to their theology, their statement may, or may not be true; and in most instances it is not.

Calvinists who reject the erroneous doctrine of limited atonement, while more Scriptural, are correspondingly less logical. Quite inconsistent are moderate Calvinists who reject a limited atonement while advocating an unconditional election. Why should Jesus bear the sins of men who have no prospect of forgiveness and whose inevitable destiny, by decree of God, is eternal perdition? Why should God sacrifice His Son for men whom He does not desire to save and whom He does not love? Or, how is it true that God loves men whom he deliberately creates for no other end and purpose than everlasting estrangement from Himself? It is a strange "love" which creates men for naught but wrath. Or, if one insist that reprobation is "not a positive decree," as do some "Calvinists" (a thing impossible to establish, if election be unconditional), how is it true that God loves men whom He simply "passes by" while saving others no more deserving of His mercy? A God who "passes by" the mass of helpless sinners in casual unconcern is not unlike the priest and the Levite in our Saviour's parable. If it be protested that sinners have offended God and are undeserving of His mercy, let us ask whether our Saviour taught us to love our enemies and to forgive those who have offended us. Let us also ask whether, according to our Saviour's teaching, to love and forgive and to seek reconciliation would make us like God, or unlike Him (Matt. 5:43-48). The only claim the robbers' victim had on the good Samaritan was the character of the Samaritan himself—the spirit of love and brotherhood which he had toward his fellow men. The only claim guilty sinners have on the mercy of God is the gracious character of God Himself. That claim was enough to send Jesus to Golgotha and to a shameful death as the propitiation "for the sins of the whole world." The guilt of men who persist in disobedience is compounded many-fold by the fact that Jesus "gave himself a ransom for all" and God desires that none perish, but that all come to repentance and to the knowledge of His truth and saving grace.

Chafer, who rejects the doctrine of limited atonement, tacitly admits the inconsistency of contending for both unlimited redemption and unconditional election: "To the unlimited redemptionist, the seeming inequity of a judgment falling upon [the reprobate] after Christ has borne that judgment is but one more mystery which the finite mind cannot understand." (Lewis Sperry Chafer. Systematic Theology. Vol III. p. 188.) But the "mystery" and the inconsistency are not present for men who recognize that the will of God has more than a single aspect, and that the Scriptures present both an unlimited atonement and a conditional election (with respect to particular individuals). We can be consistent (and Scriptural) only as we recognize that the love which provided an infinite atonement "for the sins of the whole world" finds expression in God's sincere desire that none should perish, but that all should come to repentance and salvation. Conditional election is the inevitable corollary of unlimited redemption. "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them . . . [therefore] as though God did beseech you by us, we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God" (II Cor. 5:19,20).

It is true, as Calvinists delight to contend, that there is a hard core of logic at the center of Calvin's theology. But it is logic which proceeds on the erroneous assumption that the will of

God has but a single aspect, and which is totally invalid. It is therefore inevitable that, despite its core of logic, there should be much in Calvin's theology which is horribly illogical—a fact which Calvinists concede, but which they excuse on the plea that the frightful paradoxes are “mysteries” which our finite minds cannot comprehend. It is odd that men who glory in the “logic” of Calvin's theology are so ready to accept all that is grossly illogical in it. Even more distressing is the fact that they are quite ready to accept the many ingenious and artificial interpretations of simple, explicit statements of Holy Scripture which the defense of Calvin's theology requires.

Calvin's profound intolerance toward all who questioned any of his opinions was not merely the evidence of a vanity easily offended; it was a reflection of his sincere estimate of his Institutes of the Christian Religion: “I dare not bear too strong a testimony in its favour and declare how profitable the reading of it will be, lest I should seem to prize my own work too highly. However, I may promise this much, that it would be a kind of key opening up to all the children of God a right and ready access to the understanding of the sacred volume. . . . And since we are bound to acknowledge that all truth and sound doctrine proceed from God, I will venture boldly to declare what I think of this work, acknowledging it to be God's work rather than mine.” (Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. p. 22f.)

We would not question Calvin's sincerity in assuming his Institutes to be a comprehensive expression of holy truth quite free from error, and the indispensable key to understanding the Scriptures. But we deny the wisdom of sharing his assumption. It is cause for regret that, in the past four centuries, many have seemed to regard Calvin's Institutes, not merely as the expression of a system of theology, but actually as sort of infallible norm by which to judge all exegesis and doctrine. Such an assumption militates against the possibility of any really objective study of the Holy Scriptures and the formulation of a truly Biblical theology. “To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.” (Isaiah 8:20)

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