

Week 6 Book III: Providence [Book I] and Predestination

1. 1.16; 1.17.1-11 God's Sovereign Providence
2. 3.21.1-3, 7; 3.22.1-3, 7, 11; 3.23.1-3, 5, 7-8 Election and Reprobation
3. 3.24.4-8, 15-17 Predestination

1. Providence

Indeed, those as much defraud God of his glory as themselves of a most profitable doctrine who confine God's providence to such narrow limits as though he allowed all things by a free course to be borne along according to a universal law of nature. For nothing would be more miserable... (1.16.3)

God does not sit idle in heaven.: 'bare foreknowledge' (1.16.4) is not acceptable picture because it teaches that God 'only watches over the order of nature' (1.16.4).

Fatalism?

'And so he [Prov. 29:13 cf 22:2] urges the poor to patience; because those who are not content with their own lot try to shake off the burden laid upon them by God' (1.16.6)

- 1) not simply a part of a series of causes and effects in nature, as in the Stoics'
- 2) there is no room for 'chance'. (1.16.8)

Can we talk of 'chance'?

those things, which it is certain take place by God's will, are *in a sense fortuitous*. (1.16.9, my italics)

After setting up a hypothetical scenario in which a merchant is killed by robbers, Calvin asks

a Christian .. will regard as fortuitous by nature, as it is; yet he will not doubt that God's providence exercised authority over fortune in directing its end. (1.16.9)

A Practical Doctrine

(i) *Shows personal sin? But hidden will.*

yet we see how Christ claims for the Father's secret plan a broader justice than simply punishing each one as he deserves. (1.17.1)

(ii) 'But we must so cherish moderation that we do not try to make God render account to us, but so reverence his secret judgments as to consider his will the truly just cause of all things.'
(1.17.1) *Why should we work if we believe God's providence determines all that happens?*

This means that we are not at all hindered by God's eternal decrees either from looking ahead for ourselves or from putting all our affairs in order, but always in submission to his will. (1.17.4)

'I have therefore already remarked that God's providence does not always meet us in its naked form, but God in a sense clothes it with the means employed.' (1.17.4)

(iii) *God responsible for sinful actions? Providence 'clothed' with 'inferior causes'.*

Calvin uses the (Augustinian) analogy of a corpse smelling by the road side. It is clear to all that the hot sun is causing the stench, yet no one says the sun smells. The evil is in the human heart and God is not infected by it when he uses it to his own goals.

(1.17.5-7)

(iv) Patience in Adversity.

Calvin illustrates the effect with the examples of Joseph towards his brothers; Job towards the Chaldeans; and David towards Shimei (Gen 45:5; 50:20; Job 1:21; 2 Sam 16:11, in 1.17.8)

(v) Gratitude in Blessed times

And, indeed, he will not, just because he thinks those from whom he has received benefit are ministers of the divine goodness, pass them over, as if they had deserved no thanks for their human kindness; but from the bottom of his heart will feel himself beholden to them... In short, for benefits received he will reverence and praise the Lord as their principal author, but will honor men as his ministers... (1.17.9)

(vi) Assurance in Fearful Times

‘go through the city streets, you are subject to as many dangers as there are tiles on the roofs.’ (1.17.10) ‘For as he justly dreads fortune, so he fearlessly dares commit himself to God. His solace, I say, is to know that his Heavenly Father so hold all things in his power...’ (1.17.11)

Conclusions

1. Trouble may be connected to sin and remind us to think afresh of our need to repent, but we cannot simplistically equate trouble to a particular sin, or assume trouble means that someone is an exceptional sinner. God’s hidden will is thinking in bigger terms than our limited view.
2. Providence does *not* stop us planning and preparing. Providence often come ‘clothed’ not ‘naked’ to us in the form of ‘inferior causes’. The details of planning are interactions with these inferior causes.
3. Similarly, providence does not remove responsibility. Just because God providentially controls all things does not make him responsible for sin, any more than the sun is contaminated by the smell of a rotting corpse.
4. For the believer providence has two benefits. While ‘inferior causes’ are not neglected, God’s providence is to be recognised beyond them, so:
 - a. We can recognise God working through those who harm us. This can free us from the desire for revenge.
 - b. We show gratitude to God in all events, but also to those who help us (and it is right to ask and look for help) as they are God’s providence ‘clothed’ or ‘inferior causes’.
 - c. Providence frees us from fear. There are so many things that can potentially go wrong in life, but God is providentially in control of them. When we fear, then is the time to remember this doctrine.

2. Predestination: Election and Reprobation

Definition: ‘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.’ (3.21.5A sweet fruit: ‘A baffling question this seems to many... But how mistakenly they entangle themselves will become clear... Besides in the very darkness that frightens them not only is the usefulness of this doctrine made known but also its very sweet fruit.’ (3.21.1)

Necessary conclusion: ‘We shall never be clearly persuaded, as we ought to be, that our salvation flows from the wellspring of God’s free mercy until we come to know his eternal election, which illuminates God’s grace by this contrast...’ (3.21.1)

True humility: ‘Paul clearly testifies that, when the salvation of a remnant of the people is ascribed to the election of grace, then only is it acknowledged that God of his mere good pleasure preserves whom he will, and moreover that he pays no reward, since he can owe none.’ (3.21.1)

There are two opposite dangers, to avoid:

- 1) speculation: (3.21.1)
- 2) Excessive reservation: (3.21.3)

Not Mere Foreknowledge: ‘covering election with a veil of foreknowledge’ (3.22.1)

‘They are foreknown, not as our opponents imagine that he foreknows, from an idle watchtower, what he does not himself carry out...’ (3.22.6)

Some of the biblical evidence:

Ephesians 1:4-5 and Colossians 1:12: The purpose of this divine willing is that they are ‘to be holy’ shows that this holiness is the result of election not its basis. (3.22.2)

2 Timothy 1:9: should we say, “Since he foresaw that we would be holy, he chose us,” and you will invert Paul’s order’ (3.22.3).

God ‘does not bind himself by a set law to call all men equally.’ (3.22.10)

‘Do you not see how Paul attributes both [election and reprobation] to God’s decision alone?’ (3.22.11)

‘election itself could not stand except as set over against reprobation’ (3.23.1)

Objections [Appendix available with more details]

1. *Makes God a Tyrant* (3.23.2-5)

God is the measure of good, not arbitrarily but from his own nature. So Calvin is saying is if we are calling God unfair, by what standard are we doing this? Can a standard be found to trump God’s notion of what is good?

2. *Removes guilt and responsibility from humanity* (3.23.6-9)

God is good, God is omnipotent, God is deeper than we can fathom, and God has decided to do it this way. ‘For, of those things which it is neither given nor lawful to know, ignorance is learned; the craving to know, a kind of madness.’ (3.23.8)

3. *God is not impartial* (3.23.10-11)

Where Scripture talks of God’s impartiality it is that God does not judge by human standards; nothing to do with predestination.

4. *Makes us careless about holiness* (3.23.12)

Blatantly unscriptural and a rationalistic application of predestination. the 'inferior causes' are important. God works through providence 'clothed', including holiness pursued.

5. *Makes exhortations in preaching pointless* (3.23.13-14)

This contrary to the example of Christ and the apostles. That is enough for Calvin.

3. The Practical Application of the Doctrine / Election in Life

'When the call is coupled with election in this way Scripture sufficiently suggest that in it nothing but God's free mercy is to be sought. For if we ask whom he calls, and the reason why, he answers: whom he had chosen.' (3.24.1)

'two kinds of call', and using the terms 'general call' and 'special call' (3.24.8)

Subjective question concerning the doctrine of election, that is assurance

Error to avoid: 1. 'make man a co-worker, to ratify election by his consent'; 2. 'make election depend upon faith, as if it were doubtful and also ineffectual until confirmed by faith.' (3.24.3)

Assurance found in Scriptures: 'In the meantime, I do not deny that to be assured of our salvation we must begin with the Word, and that our confidence ought to be so intent as to call upon God as our Father.' (3.24.3)

It is dangerous wanting

'to find out what decision has been made concerning himself at God's judgment seat. For then he casts himself into the depths of a bottomless whirlpool to be swallowed up; then he tangles himself in innumerable and inextricable snares; then he buries himself in an abyss of sightless darkness. (3.24.4)

Predestination is 'pleasant sailing', a comforting doctrine, so long as you do not steer for this rock, which is utterly devastating

First, if we seek God's fatherly mercy and kindly heart, we should turn our eyes to Christ, on whom alone God's Spirit rests. If we seek salvation, life, and the immortality of the Heavenly Kingdom, then there is no other to whom we may flee, seeing that he alone is the fountain of life, the anchor of salvation, and the heir of the Kingdom of Heaven... No matter how much you toss it about and mull it over, you will discover that its final bounds still extend no farther. (3.24.5)

Conclusion

God is said to have ordained from eternity those whom he wills to embrace in love, and those upon whom he wills to vent his wrath. Yet he announces salvation to all men indiscriminately. I maintain that these statements agree perfectly with each other. For by so promising he merely means that his mercy is extended to all, provided they seek after it and implore it. But only those whom he has illuminated do this. And he illumines those whom he has predestined to salvation. (3.24.17)