

# Globethics Repository

The logo for Globethics, featuring the word "Globethics" in white, sans-serif font centered within a solid blue rectangular background.

## God's Sovereignty as the Centre of Faith

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Bernhardt, Reinhold
Publisher	Globethics.net
Rights	Creative Commons Copyright (CC 2.5)
Download date	2026-07-10 03:17:10
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/173789">http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/173789</a>

## 2

# **GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AS THE CENTRE OF FAITH: PREDESTINATION AND PROVIDENCE**

*Reinhold Bernhardt, Switzerland*

The heart of Calvin's theology can be summed up in three words: "Glory to God". These words stand at the end of his "Institutes of the Christian Religion", which can be regarded as a large-scale commentary on this axiom: "*Soli Deo Gloria*" – "to God alone the glory". Calvin's whole theological thought, and also his activity in leading the church, can be understood as a development of this principle of the sovereignty of God.

This is an invitation: glory should be given to God. Wherever in Calvin's eyes this offering of glory is refused, he reacts with a sharp contradiction. That explains the basic polemical character which appears in his writing and the militant attitude in his action. With radical zeal he wants to defend the glory of God: in a letter to Nikolaus Zurkinden in Berne, who like Castellio was an advocate of the idea of tolerance, Calvin writes in 1559 (the year in which the third edition of the "Institutes" appeared): "Where the glory and truth of my God are at stake I had rather rage than not be angry, so that the affront with which his holy majesty is stained does not rebound on my head."

Calvin developed his doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of God at a time when absolutism in political practice and philosophical theory was

## *40 Calvin Global*

developing. In 1532 Machiavelli published his book "The Prince", in which he calls on the prince to set himself even above ethical norms if it serves his unlimited exercise of power for the common good. In 1576 Jean Bodin's "Six Books on the State" would appear, in which the sovereign's claim to omnipotence is given a philosophical foundation. In the intervening period, when an absolutist ideal of rule was forming at the European courts – also in France, towards which Calvin's gaze was always directed – Calvin developed his theology of the glory of God.

The discovery of the individual who takes his fate into his own hands was a characteristic of the Renaissance and Humanism. In his study "The Culture of the Renaissance in Italy", in 1860 Jacob Burckhardt wrote: in the (Italian) Renaissance "the subjective arises with full force: the human being becomes a spiritual individual and recognises himself as such." (1966, 123).

Calvin's theology represented a resonance with this. Over against the glorification of the individual and the emphasis on the individual's freedom, creative power and sovereignty Calvin set the glorification of God. So to some degree he applied the human ideal of Renaissance humanism to God, but he also restricted it exclusively to God, and thus criticised the high value attached to the human personality based on itself. To all the absolutising of man he opposed the absolutism of God. However, here lie also the beginnings of criticism of a worldly rule which provides itself with divine predicates. Thus the ground is laid for the development of the political right to resistance in Calvinism and an impulse is provided for the development of democratic forms of state.

Calvin's doctrines of predestination and providence are to be understood against this basic background. They correlate with his emphasis on God's omnipotence and sole rule of all. The doctrine of predestination is about the question of a human being's eternal salvation or damnation. The doctrine of providence relates to what happens in the world and the way in which human beings live their lives.

In what follows I want first to portray the basic features of these two doctrines and each time sketch out a position through which Calvin saw it threatened and which accordingly he contested fiercely. Then we shall have to ask where and in what way these teachings can still claim validity for Christian thinking today.

## **1. Predestination**

In Chapter 21 of Book Three of the "Institutes" Calvin gives a concentrated definition of the concept: "By predestination we understand God's eternal ordinance by virtue of which he resolved what according to his will should become of every human being. For human beings are not all created with the same determination, but to one is assigned beforehand eternal life and to the other eternal damnation. Thus just as the individual is created for one or other purpose, so... he is predestined to life or death" (III, 21, 5).

For Calvin this doctrine of double predestination (*"gemina praedestinatio"*) arises first out of an experience, secondly out of the theological axiom I have already mentioned and thirdly out of existential distress.

The experience is simply that there are people (and have been at all times), who do not give God the glory, who do not submit to his word and do not obey his commandments; just as Paul had to cope with the experience that the majority of the Jews – God's chosen covenant people – showed themselves so closed to the fulfilment of the covenant in Christ. How can that be if – and now comes the theological axiom, which for Paul as for Calvin must not be called into question – God is the all-determining reality, specifically also in respect of the relationship between God and human beings? Nothing happens without God's will, Calvin writes in the chapter on providence (I, 16,3). That also relates to everything that happens in the world in general and the question of salvation and damnation in particular. Disposal of these lies solely in God's

## 42 Calvin Global

hand. It is impossible for the Reformers, as it is for Augustine, to think that the grace of God is in any way dependent on the efforts of human beings, that a human being can influence the sovereign disposition of God even in the slightest way through their faith and the way in which they live their life – whether positively or negatively. In order categorically to reject this possibility he insists that God's control over salvation is fixed from eternity.

In order to establish the basic Reformation conviction of the exclusiveness of the grace of God in the appropriation of salvation, Calvin fights against all forms of so-called Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism, which assume the possibility or even necessity of a human contribution to God's saving action. Erasmus had required that human beings must be allowed at least enough freedom of will for them "to be able to turn towards what leads to eternal blessedness or turn away from it".<sup>1</sup> Luther sharply rejected this. There is no free will in matters which concern the relationship with God. Human will is not to some degree neutral, so that it can incline towards the good as to the evil. It is deformed by the original sin which lies over the human race and must first of all be given a new orientation by God. "Non agunt, sed aguntur" – "We do not act but are acted on," Luther wrote.<sup>2</sup> The human being is not master of his own will, yet follows this will and thus is responsible for his action. But he cannot influence his position before God with his deformed will. He cannot turn to God of his own accord. He cannot even want to – *non possit!*

Thus the doctrine of predestination correlates with the Reformation doctrine of justification with its *sola gratia* principle. According to this, the heart of man which is intrinsically crooked can be opened only when God turns to him in grace. First and only because God turns to human

---

<sup>1</sup> Erasmus, Desiderius, *De libero arbitrio diatribē sive collatio* (Selected Works 4, ed. W. Welzig), Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1969, 2006<sup>3</sup>, 1-195: quotation Ib10.

<sup>2</sup> WA 5,544, 11; 1,73, 26.

beings in grace can they turn to him. But election has its ground in nothing other than God himself – just as creation (“from nothing”) is grounded in God alone.

If this were not the case, if the divine decision were dependent on human behaviour (perhaps in the way in which God had already foreseen this behaviour), then he would have to make a contribution to his salvation and he could never be certain whether his merit achieved by being well-pleasing to God were sufficient. He would live in constant uncertainty about salvation. That precisely is the existential distress which Calvin – like Luther - deeply felt and which Calvin countered with his doctrine of the eternal decree of God. Therefore the issue here is ultimately a promise of the certainty of salvation. Faith is not the condition to be fulfilled in order to gain God’s election but the first and most important gift of the election performed by God before all time. It thus becomes to some extent an indicator of one’s own predestination to salvation.

On 14 November 1551 the Geneva pastors under the leadership of Calvin wrote a letter to their Zurich colleagues. It stated: “About this we are sufficiently united, that we are justified through faith”; but God’s mercy first seems to be firmly grounded in the fact that we can recognise faith as a fruit of his acceptance of us in free grace; but that he accepts us comes from his eternal election.” To safeguard the fact that the acceptance of human beings by God is a pure act of God’s grace, the Geneva pastors appeal to the eternal election.

The sovereignty of grace – that is the theological axiom from which the doctrine of predestination is derived. It is not itself the axiom, as Alexander Schweizer had asserted when he called Calvin’s doctrine of predestination the “central dogma” of his theology.<sup>3</sup> That is already evident from the position that the doctrine of predestination occupies in the

---

<sup>3</sup> Schweizer, Alexander, *Die protestantischen Centraldogmen in ihrer Entwicklung innerhalb der reformirten Kirche*, Zurich: Orell Füssli, 1854/56.

## 44 *Calvin Global*

Institutes. In the first edition of 1536 it is still part of the doctrine of providence and is not yet developed there as double predestination. The idea of election is bound up with ecclesiology. In the later editions Calvin then detaches the notion of predestination from the doctrine of providence and assigns it to soteriology, whereas the doctrine of providence is attached to the doctrine of creation. But even after being made independent in this way, predestination occupies more of a marginal position. In the sermons and letters, too, the Reformer does not speak of this theme very often and not on his own initiative. He would not have devoted himself to the theme "had he not been driven by the enemies of the grace of God," he wrote in "*De predestinatione*" (14).

Moreover we must reflect that the doctrine of predestination was not formed by Calvin. It derives from a passage of Paul in Rom. 8:29-30<sup>4</sup>, was developed by Augustine into an independent piece of doctrine, occurs in mediaeval theology, for example in Thomas Aquinas, and in all the Reformers, even in Bullinger,<sup>5</sup> who criticised Calvin in this respect. Calvin took over the doctrine of eternal election but he sharpened it and the conflicts were kindled by the way in which he sharpened it.

Paul had not spoken of a predestination to damnation, i.e. he did not teach double predestination. Augustine spoke of not being elected, and so in substance knew of the idea of a double predestination, but did not use this term explicitly.<sup>6</sup> Aquinas, too, uses the term "predestination" only for predestination to salvation but began from the assumption that there must therefore also be an indirect divine repudiation.<sup>7</sup> According

---

<sup>4</sup> "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified." See also Eph.1:3-6; 1 Peter 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> Cornelis P. Venema, Heinrich Bullinger and the Doctrine of Predestination. Author of "the other reformed tradition"?, Grand Rapids MI 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. his writing "De predestinatione sanctorum".

<sup>7</sup> E.g. in STh Ia 23, 83.1.

to him God allows human beings to fall away from salvation and thus bring the verdict of damnation upon themselves. Here God's permission is imagined as an active desire of God. Calvin simply stated more clearly that God is also free to decree damnation – and he spoke of this clearly above all in the time of humanism. Thus it became the stumbling block.

The notion of a negative election to damnation, the idea that God whose goodness Calvin praised so highly and of whom Luther had said that he was a glowing oven full of love,<sup>8</sup> gives human beings over to repudiation from eternity – that was offensive even for Calvin, so that he speaks of a “terrible decree” (HIII/23, 7H)

The doctrine of condemnation to eternal damnation was for Calvin only the necessary consequence of the doctrine of predestination, but not its real intention. The intention was to glorify God's grace and to assure believers of it, not to threaten non-believers.

Looked at precisely, Calvin did not depict the act of election as the cutting off of a mass which is to some degree indeterminate, which is then divided into two groups, one on the left and one on the right. In his understanding, election is not an alternative decision, not a twofold act of pardoning and repudiation, but a pure act of grace. An act of repudiation is not at all necessary, for all human beings are rejected and thus destined to damnation, because Adam's original sin lies on all. In his impenetrable grace God now raises some from this “*massa perditionis*” and thus saves them from the doom of sin and the punishment that thus threatens. So we must distinguish between the one act of grace and the twofold predestination which follows, both for the elect and the non-elect.

But even if the act of election is a sheer act of grace, the question of the righteousness of God still arises – the theodicy question. Why has God chosen some and not others? Calvin sharply rejects this question.

---

<sup>8</sup> WA 10/III, 56a, 2f.

## 46 Calvin Global

The Geneva Reformer writes off any accusation against God as “the impudence of a dog which barks at God’s righteousness but can do nothing about it” (I, 17,5).

In Romans 9.13 Paul already referred to the sovereign preference for Jacob over Esau described in Malachi 1.2f. The question “Why?” is forbidden – as it was also forbidden to Job, who had to recognise the sovereignty of God. “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted” (Job.42.2). God’s decree is unfathomable.

Yet according to Calvin the believer can, may and should rely on this in trust. For this God is not a numinous power, nor an arbitrary ruler whose actions are incalculable; he is not a hidden, unknown God but the reliable God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who has led his people out of captivity in Egypt and given them land and good instructions for living in this land. He is the just and gracious Father of Jesus Christ. He can be recognised from that. – It is there that his nature is evident: that he is a kind and gracious God, a God who wants his providence to rule over all creation. That is the theme of the doctrine of providence, to which I now want to turn.

## 2. Providence

According to Calvin, God allows the same sovereignty to prevail in his action in the world as prevails in his action in salvation.<sup>9</sup> Here too Calvin emphasises that God is omnipotent and active everywhere: “God’s rule happens in such a way that he guides all individual events and thus everything comes from his determinate counsel” (I, 16,4-6). Nothing happens without God’s will.

---

<sup>9</sup> I have dealt with Calvin’s doctrine of providence at greater length in Bernhardt, Reinhold, *Was heisst “Handeln Gottes”? Eine Rekonstruktion der Lehre von der Vorsehung Gottes*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1999, second edition in the series “Studien zur systematische Theologie und Ethik”, Vol.55, Berlin: LIT-Verlag, 2008, ch. II B.

But that does not mean that God's action nullifies human action. Calvin refuted such theological determinism as vigorously as on the other side the position he labels as "epicurean". What he means is all those philosophers and theologians who in his eyes restrict God's omnipotence and activity everywhere and thus "dream up a pointless and idle God" (I/16,4). Calvin has in view those who in the tradition of Aristotle speak of God as the ground of realisation of being (*primum movens*), but say that he does not bring about individual events in the world. In his time he encounters this position above all among those from the circle of the humanists who want to give the course of the world a certain dynamic of its own, allow human beings a relatively free shaping of their wills and make room for the activity of non-divine contingent forces such as fortune or chance. Calvin surveys all of these with biting polemic: "the world has always been filled with this plague" (ibid). Objecting tersely that "not one drop of rain falls without God's certain command" (I/16,5).

But much as it is the case that nothing happens without the will of God, so for Calvin on the other hand it is true that human action too does not happen without human will. Therefore the blame for evil is to be put not on God but on human beings. Calvin uses an illuminating comparison to resolve this apparent contradiction between God's activity in all things and the attribution of guilt to human beings. God is like the sun, whose light and warmth are good beyond doubt. But if the sun shines on rotting flesh, it will stink. Yet one cannot say that the rays of the sun are the material cause of the stink. They merely conjure up the stink from the rotting flesh (I/17,5). Thus it is the natural, "fleshly" man who stinks to heaven – and God's sunlight simply brings out this stink. God is active in all things, yet he is not the author of sin. The sin lies in human beings.

Zwingli went even further than Calvin in his doctrine of providence. Even more consistently than Calvin he had advocated the idea of the ab-

## 48 *Calvin Global*

solute sovereignty of God, for example in his writing "*De providentia*" of 1530. For him it followed from the conviction that God is active everywhere that God must also have caused sin and evil. Calvin explicitly distances himself from Zwingli on this question. In a letter to Bullinger in 1552 he writes that to make God the author of sin is blasphemous.<sup>10</sup> "To express myself confidentially, Zwingli's book is so full of hard paradoxes that it is very far removed from the moderation that I observe." So Calvin understood his position to be a moderate one.

This distancing from Zwingli can also be understood against the background that the same accusation had been made against him as he made against Zwingli. Hieronymus Bolsec in particular in 1551 charged that Calvin's emphasis of God's omnicausality led him to declare God the author of sin and evil and thus to relieve human beings of the guilt of sin. To this Calvin objects that God ordained the fall but is not its author. The human being – Adam – brought it about and must therefore be made responsible for it.

### 3. Critical evaluation

Even if Calvin does not want – like Zwingli – to draw the conclusion of theological determinism from his basic conviction of the absolute sovereignty of God, his theology of the glory of God is in danger of correlating the greatness of God with the lowliness, indeed the nothingness, of human beings. What seems to me to be problematical is not the image of God with its strong emphasis that God is omnipotent and "omni-active" but its connection with an image of humanity which is deeply governed by Augustine's doctrine of original sin. Now this reading of the problem likewise affects Luther and Zwingli, if not more so. For Calvin – as also for Augustine and Luther – man is under the yoke of sin to such an extent that "of himself, of his nature, he can neither

---

<sup>10</sup> CO XIV, 253.

strive for the good nor struggle over it" (II, 4,1). In human beings everything is extinguished "which belongs to the blessed life of the soul. This includes faith, love of God, love of neighbour and striving for holiness and righteousness; (also) the health of the mind and the uprightness of the heart (i.e. will) is lost (II, 2,12). In his sharp reckoning with Calvin in 1936 Stephan Zweig wrote: "In order to raise the divine as high as possible above the world Calvin immeasurably deeply demotes the earthly; in order to give the idea of God the utmost dignity, he robs the idea of human beings of its rights and dishonours it." If for Zweig Calvin also becomes the surface on which his own experiences with the National Socialist regime's rule of violence are projected, he does see very clearly this connection between the emphasis on the sovereignty of God and contempt for human nature.

With Calvin, as also with Augustine and Luther, the fact that human beings are first and foremost under grace, and that the natural human being is a creature of God – endowed with the highest honorific title, of being in the image of God – fades almost completely into the background. The excessive emphasis on the corruption of sin hardly leaves any room for the theological evaluation of the natural human being. God and human beings stand in an antithetical relationship to one another. The exaltation of God is not matched – as might suggest itself – by the greatness of God's creatures and works. Rather, "all human works, if they are regarded in and for themselves (are) nothing but filth and dirt; what is usually regarded as righteousness is with God sheer unrighteousness, what is regarded as purity is sheer pollution, what is claimed to be praise is sheer shame" (III, 12,4). There is nothing good in human beings themselves in their God-created natural state, gift of reason, corporeality and sensual nature. It is rotting flesh. All that is good is owed to the grace of God, which makes human beings new creatures.

Time and again Calvin praises the "*clementia Dei*", the loving-kindness of God. But in so doing he obscures this picture of God be-

## *50 Calvin Global*

cause he cannot think of the sovereignty of God as a sovereignty of universal grace. Thus, with the added emphasis that he gives to the Pauline and Augustinian motif of predestination, he comes into tension with Jesus' preaching of God: the message of unconditional grace which is for all human beings – precisely those who close themselves to it. The theme of this message is that it is not God who makes people lost; human beings have lost God and themselves in the way they direct their life, seek themselves and do not find themselves, because they seek themselves in themselves and not in the source of all life.

"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinner" (Mark 2.17). And to them – those who have lost themselves in life - he told the marvellous stories of the prodigal son, the lost sheep and the lost coin, to show them that God's grace is immeasurable. God seeks those who have lost themselves, goes to meet them and welcomes them with open arms. How deep is the gulf between this understanding of God and Calvin's notion that God abandons human beings to lostness (in an active way) according to an eternal decree? In the light of what is said in the gospels about the omnipotence of the love of God, I can think of election only as universal election in grace related to the whole of creation, not as an act of deliverance of individuals from the mass of the damned.

Here I follow the Leuenberg Agreement from 1973, which says: "In the Gospel we have the promise of God's unconditional acceptance of sinful man. Whoever puts his trust in the Gospel can know that he is saved and praise God for his election. For this reason we can speak of election only with respect to the call to salvation in Christ. Faith knows by experience that the message of salvation is not accepted by all; yet it respects the mystery of God's dealings with men. It bears witness to the seriousness of human decision and at the same time to the reality of God's universal purpose of salvation. The witness of the Scriptures to

Christ forbids us to suppose that God has uttered an eternal decree for the final condemnation of specific individuals or of a particular people.“

And so I can only agree with the clear opinion of Wilfried Härle, in which he states: “The notion of an (eternal) double predestination on the basis of which God chooses part of humankind and predestines another part to damnation can be designated in the light of the self-disclosure of God only as a misunderstanding which can be derived from an abstract understanding of the omnipotence of God, but never derived from the nature of God as love.”<sup>11</sup>

In fact – as Max Weber has stated – Calvin’s doctrine of predestination has features of a “pathetic inhumanity”.<sup>12</sup> Calvin is only partly to be blamed for this. He stood in the tradition of Augustine’s doctrine of original sin which I regard as an aberration in the history of theology – not only in terms of the history of its effect but above all because it depreciates the dignity of the creatureliness of human beings. At this point I cannot follow Calvin’s position but follow the way shown by him and the other Reformers back to the biblical tradition. The God who addresses me from here, the father-God who welcomes the “lost” son back with a great feast - to this God all glory is due: “*Soli deo Gloria*”.

---

<sup>11</sup> Härle, Wilfried, *Dogmatik*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter 1995, 2007, p. 506.

<sup>12</sup> Weber, Max, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (1900), Hamburg: Siebenstern Taschenbuch Verlag, 1965, p. 122. English translation: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism with other writings on the rise of the West*, New York : Oxford University Press, 2009.