

# Calvin's Calvinism

By David Clarke

The following article was compiled to answer a question posed by a visitor to the Baptist church, that I had attended for a number of years regarding Calvinism. The question put to the church was whether it subscribed to the doctrine of predestination as expressed by John Calvin in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

The visitor found the idea that people were chosen for salvation before the foundation of the world unacceptable.

I chose to remain silent at the time because I knew that my personal view on the subject differed from the church's stance.

However, I was amused by the visitor's response when I mentioned that the Baptists were a "broad church." His retort was to compare the Baptists to the Church of England, asserting that its broadness had led to its downfall.

I took the opportunity to review Calvin's *Institutes*, particularly Book 3, Chapter 21. I also explored references to Martin Luther, Augustine's debate with Pelagius, the Articles of the Church of England, the First London Baptist Confession of Faith, and the Articles of Religion of the Berton Strict Baptists—the church I joined in 1976.

All of these sources align with my personal belief in predestination as taught by Calvin and other Reformers. In order to assist this view I recommended Dr. John Gill's sermon, **The Doctrine of Predestination Stated and Set in the Scripture Light**, and enclosed the relevant references at the end of this document.

## Observations

Upon examining the Reformers' views on predestination, I noticed that the debate between the Reformers and Pelagianism centered on the nature and effects of Adam's fall. I conclude that a proper understanding of Adam's fall and the death he experienced is essential for teaching the necessity of Christ's atoning death.

Similarly, the debate between Augustine and Pelagius arose from their differing interpretations of the nature of the death that was both threatened and experienced by Adam, as well as its effects.

Likewise, the eschatological debate between CBV and IBV stems from

the same underlying dispute. A correct understanding of this death leads to a proper comprehension of Christ's substitutionary death and atonement.

## **THE INSTITUTES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION**

### Relating to Predestination

In *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin extensively discusses the doctrine of predestination. He asserts that certain individuals are chosen in Christ for salvation before the foundation of the world. This concept is central to his theology, particularly in Book Three, Chapter Twenty-One, titled:

“Of the Eternal Election, by Which God Has Predestined Some to Salvation, and Others to Destruction.”

Calvin teaches that God, by His sovereign will, elected some to eternal life and left others in their sin. This decision was not based on foreseen merit, but solely according to God's divine purpose and grace.

He supports this with passages such as Ephesians, Chapter One, Verses Four and Five:

“He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love, He predestined us for adoption to Himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will.”

Calvin emphasizes that election is rooted in Christ, as the mediator and head of the elect. The elect are predestined to be conformed to Christ's image, while the reprobate are left to divine justice.

This doctrine underscores God's absolute sovereignty and the unmerited nature of grace, rejecting any notion that human works influence God's eternal decree.

Key Excerpts from *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*

### **On God's Eternal Election Before Creation**

\*”Scripture clearly proves that God, by His eternal and immutable

counsel, determined once for all those whom it was His pleasure to admit to salvation, and those whom He willed to doom to destruction.

We maintain that this counsel, regarding the elect, is founded on His free mercy, without respect to human worth.

While those whom He dooms to destruction are excluded by a just and incomprehensible judgment.”\*

(Book Three, Chapter Twenty-One, Section Seven)

## **CHOSEN IN CHRIST BEFORE THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD**

\*”Paul teaches that the grace bestowed on us is eternal, because we were predestined and elected in Christ before the world began.

Hence, this grace was prepared for us before we sought it, before we were born, or before the world itself existed.”\*

(Commentary on Ephesians, Chapter One, Verse Four. Cross-referenced in The Institutes, Book Three, Chapter Twenty-Two, Section One.)

## **CHRIST AS THE FOUNDATION OF ELECTION**

\*”God has chosen us in Christ, and in such a way that all the benefits of salvation are deposited in Him as in a treasury.

Nor can they be conferred upon us except through His mediation.”\*

(Book Three, Chapter Twenty-Four, Section One.)

## **LUTHER’S VIEW ON PREDESTINATION**

Martin Luther also addressed predestination, though with a different emphasis from Calvin. While Luther affirmed divine election, he was less systematic and more pastoral, focusing on its implications for faith rather than constructing an elaborate theological framework.

His most detailed discussion appears in *The Bondage of the Will*, written in response to Erasmus's defense of free will.

Luther believed that, due to the Fall, humans lack free will in spiritual matters and depend entirely on God's grace for salvation.

Unlike Calvin, who emphasized double predestination—both election and reprobation—Luther primarily focused on the election of the saved and was more reluctant to speculate about the fate of the damned.

Key Excerpts from *The Bondage of the Will*

## **GOD'S FOREKNOWLEDGE AND ELECTION**

\*"God foreknows nothing contingently, (God does not know things as uncertain or dependent on external factors.) In other words, God's knowledge is not based on possibilities or chance but on certainty. but... He foresees, purposes, and does all things according to His own immutable, eternal, and infallible will.

This bombshell knocks 'free will' flat and utterly shatters it."\*

(Section: The Sovereignty of God.)

## **SALVATION BY GOD'S WILL ALONE**

\*"If God works in us, the will is changed, and being gently breathed upon by the Spirit of God, it again wills and acts from pure willingness and inclination.

But if God does not work in us, the will remains evil, captive, and unwilling."\*

(Section: The Will's Bondage.)

## **DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CALVIN AND LUTHER** Scope of Predestination

Calvin: Emphasizes double predestination—some are elected for

salvation, others are predestined to damnation.

Luther: Focuses primarily on the election of the saved, leaving the fate of the reprobate as part of God's hidden will.

### **Emphasis and Purpose**

Calvin: Systematic, doctrinal, and Christ-centered.

Luther: Pastoral and focused on comforting believers in their faith.

### **Free Will**

Both reject human free will in spiritual matters, emphasizing divine grace alone.

#### Role of Christ

Calvin: Explicitly ties election to Christ as the mediator.

Luther: Focuses more on Christ's atoning work on the cross rather than His role in eternal election.

### AUGUSTINE'S INFLUENCE ON PREDESTINATION

Augustine of Hippo significantly shaped the doctrine of predestination, particularly in *On the Predestination of the Saints* and *The City of God*.

He argued that fallen humanity is incapable of choosing God without divine grace. His key teachings include:

#### Election Before the Foundation of the World:

"This grace of God, by which the elect are saved, was given to them before the world was made."

#### Sovereign Grace, Not Human Merit:

"God, in crowning our merits, crowns nothing else but His own gifts."

## Mystery of Reprobation:

Augustine avoids speculation on why some are not chosen, urging humility before God's will.

## THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND ON PREDESTINATION

The Church of England addresses predestination in Article Seventeen of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion (1571):

“Predestination to Life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby He hath constantly decreed by His counsel secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom He hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation.”

Unlike Calvinism, it does not explicitly affirm reprobation, reflecting an Augustinian approach tempered by pastoral concerns.

## THE FIRST LONDON BAPTIST CONFESSION (1646)

Particular Baptists affirmed predestination in Article Five of The First London Baptist Confession, declaring:

\*”God, in His infinite power and wisdom, disposes all things to their appointed end.

That neither good nor evil befalls any by chance or without His providence.

And that whatsoever befalls the elect is by His appointment, for His glory and their good.”\*

This aligns with Calvinistic teachings while emphasizing divine sovereignty in all things.

## Conclusion

The doctrine of predestination has been a central theme in Christian theology, evolving from Augustine to the Reformers.

Calvin systematized it with double predestination.

Luther approached it pastorally.

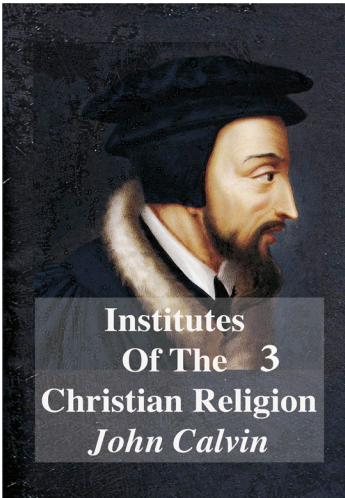
The Church of England and Baptists adopted variations that balanced divine sovereignty with pastoral care.

Across all traditions, predestination remains a testament to God's grace and eternal purpose in salvation.

### **HYPER LINK REFERENCES**

You may freely access and download these PDF volumes by liking the blue text title of the work.

#### **[THE INSTITUTES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION](#)**

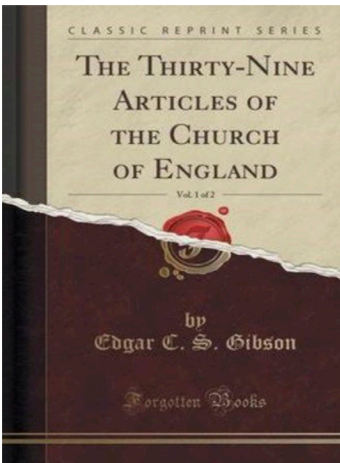


John Calvin first published *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in 1536. This initial edition was relatively short. Over the next two decades, Calvin expanded and revised the work multiple times, with the final and most comprehensive edition published in 1559.

The *Institutes* became one of the most influential theological works of the Reformation, systematically outlining Protestant beliefs and Calvin's understanding of Christian doctrine.

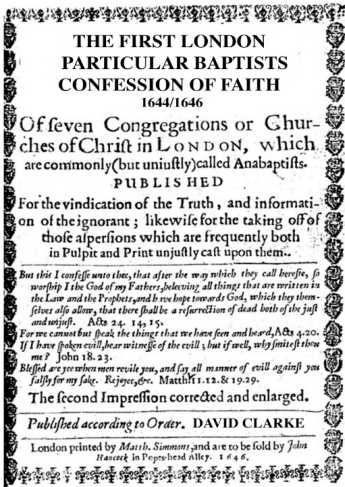
See BOOK 3, Chapter 21.

#### **[THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND 39 ARTICLES](#)**



The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England were first published in 1563 under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. They were finalized and given official approval in 1571, when clergy were required to subscribe to them. These articles served as the doctrinal foundation of the Church of England, defining its beliefs in relation to Catholicism and emerging Protestant traditions. See ARTICLE 17

## THE FIRST LONDON BAPTISTS CONFESSION 1646 SECONED EDITION

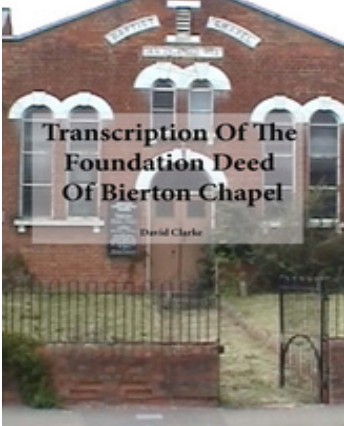


### III. That God Has Decreed

in Himself from everlasting touching all things, effectually to work and dispose them according to the counsel of His own will, to the glory of His name; in which decree appears His wisdom, constancy, truth, and faithfulness; Wisdom is that whereby He contrives all things; Constancy is that whereby the decree of God remains always immutable; Truth is that whereby He declares that alone which He has decreed, and though His sayings may seem to sound sometimes another thing, yet the sense of them does always agree with the decree;

## BIERTON STRICT AND PARTICULAR BAPTISTS ARTICLES OF RELIGION

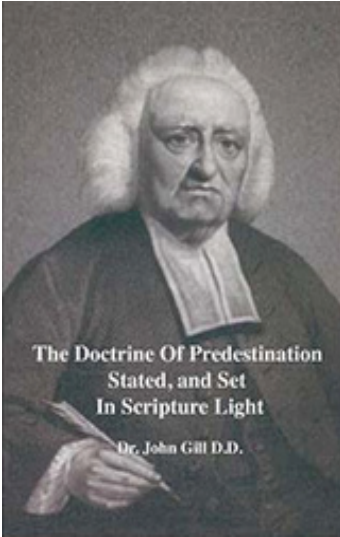
The Church I joined in 1976



“The Church” and the said persons believe and pledge themselves to the promulgation and support of the tenets or articles of faith herein after set forth, that is to say, 2. That Before the world began God did elect a certain number of the human race unto everlasting life and salvation whom He did predestine to the adoption of Children by Jesus Christ of his own free grace and according to the good pleasure of His will.

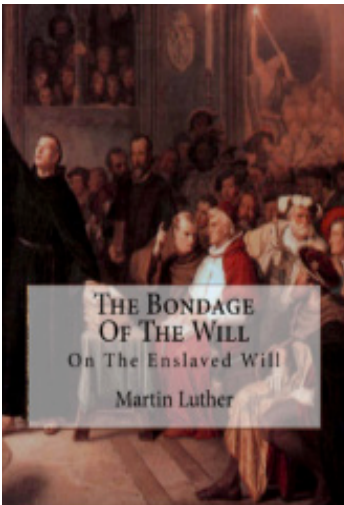


## THE DOCTRINE OF PREDESTINATION SET IN SCRIPTURAL LIGHT,



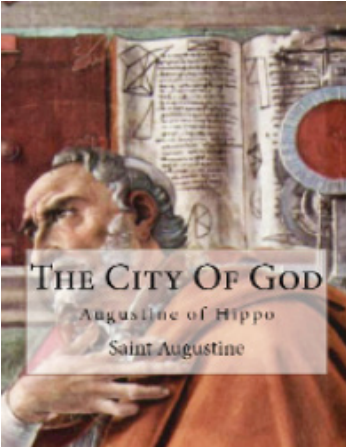
DR. JOHN GILL'S ANSWER TO MR. JOHN WESLEY ON THE SUBJECT OF PREDESTINATION In Opposition to Mr. Wesley's Predestination Calmly Considered, with a Reply to the exceptions of the said writer to The Doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints.

## THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL



Martin Luther published *The Bondage of the Will* (*De Servo Arbitrio*) in 1525. It was a response to *On Free Will* (*De Libero Arbitrio*), a work by Desiderius Erasmus, in which Erasmus defended human free will. Luther's treatise argued that human will is bound by sin and cannot contribute to salvation, emphasizing God's sovereignty and grace. This work became one of the key theological texts of the Protestant Reformation..

## THE CITY OF GOD



Augustine of Hippo wrote *The City of God* (*De Civitate Dei*) between 413 and 426 AD. It was not published all at once but rather in sections over several years. The work was written in response to the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410 AD and aimed to defend Christianity against pagan accusations that it had led to Rome's downfall.