

Calvin on the Sovereignty of God

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He was a frequent contributor to theological journals and is the author of *Christian Baptism* (1952), *Divorce* (1953), *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (1955), *Principles of Conduct* (1957), *The Imputation of Adam's Sin* (1960), *Calvin on the Scriptures and Divine Sovereignty* (1960), and *The Epistle to the Romans* (1968).

No treatment of the subject of God's sovereignty has surpassed in depth of thought, in reverence of approach, and in eloquence of expression that which we find in the last three chapters of Book I of the *Institutes*. It is sufficient to be reminded of one or two of the classic statements which we find in these chapters to appreciate anew the intensity of Calvin's faith in the all-pervasive and over-ruling providence of God. "So it must be concluded," he says, "that while the turbulent state of the world deprives us of judgment, God, by the pure light of his own righteousness and wisdom, regulates these very commotions in the most exact order and directs them to their proper end."¹ Or, again, it is Calvin who has given us the formula which has become in many Reformed circles a household word for thankfulness, resignation, and hope. The necessary consequences of the knowledge that God governs all creatures, including the devil himself, for the benefit and safety of his people, are "gratitude in prosperity, patience in adversity, and a wonderful security respecting the future."²

¹ *Inst.*, I, xvii, 1.

² *Inst.*, I, xvii, 7.

What then for Calvin does the sovereignty of God mean? I suppose that no Christian in the catholic tradition, not to speak of the evangelical and Reformed traditions, will formally deny the sovereignty of God. For to say that God is sovereign is but to affirm that God is one and that God is God. But we may not be misled by the formal use of vocables. It is possible for us to profess the sovereignty of God and deny it in the particulars in which this sovereignty is expressed, to assert a universal but evade the particularities. It is precisely in this respect that Calvin's doctrine of the sovereignty of God is to be assessed and appreciated.

The Sovereignty of God in Decree

That Calvin regards everything that occurs as embraced in the eternal decree of God lies on the face of his teaching at every point where he finds occasion to reflect on this subject. While repudiating the Stoic doctrine of necessity, arising from a perpetual intertwining and confused series of causes contained in nature, he is insistent that God is the arbiter and governor of all things "who, of his own wisdom, from the remotest eternity, decreed what he would do, and now by his own power executes what he has decreed. Whence we assert, that, not only the heaven and the earth and inanimate creatures, but also the deliberations and volitions of men are so governed by his providence that they are directed exactly to their destined end"³ and thus nothing happens fortuitously or contingently. "The will of God is the supreme and first cause of all things, because nothing happens but by his command or permission."⁴ And in his extensive tract on *The Eternal Predestination of God*, dedicated on January 1, 1552, he says to the same effect that "the hand of God no less rules the internal affections than it precedes the external acts, and that God does not perform by the hand of men those things which he has decreed without first working in their hearts the very will which precedes their acts."⁵

It is of greater relevance to us in the theological situation in which we are placed today to understand and assess the position which Calvin espoused and defended on the question 358; cf. E.T. by Henry Cole: *Calvin's Calvinism*, London, 1927, p. 243. It is regrettable that Cole unnecessarily embellishes his translation. I have often given my own renderings which brings to focal and acute expression his doctrine of the eternal decree. It is that concerned with the question of election and reprobation. It is of interest that in his earliest commentary, that on the Epistle to the Romans, dedicated at Strassburg on October 18, 1539, he provides us with his thought on this question at a comparatively early age. It is well for us to take heed to Calvin's own advice that "the predestination of God is indeed a labyrinth from which the mind of man can by no means extricate itself." But we are not for that reason to avoid every thought of it. For "the Holy Spirit," he says, "has taught us nothing but what it behooves us to know . . . Let this then be our sacred rule, to seek to

³ *Ibid.*, I, xvi, 8.

⁴ *Idem.*, John Allen's translation.

⁵ *De Aeterna Dei Praedestinatione*, in *Opera* (Brunswick, 1870), VIII, col.

know nothing concerning it, except what Scripture teaches us; when the Lord closes his holy mouth, let us also stop the way, that we may go no further.”⁶

While Calvin thus properly cautions us to be silent when God closes his own sacred mouth and to seek to know nothing but what God teaches us in Scripture, he at the same time upbraids that false modesty that suppresses the doctrine of Scripture and pleads caution as an excuse to refrain from subscribing to its witness. This kind of caution he brands as preposterous; the honor of God is not to be protected by the pretended modesty which refuses to listen to what God has revealed. When God has spoken we cannot remain ignorant without loss and harm.⁷ What Calvin is maintaining in these contexts is the free and absolute sovereignty of God in the discrimination that exists among men in respect of election, on the one hand, and reprobation, on the other. In the matter of election he insists that “the salvation of believers depends on the eternal election of God, for which no cause or reason can be rendered but his own gratuitous good pleasure.”⁸ “Inasmuch as God elects some and reprobates others, the cause is not to be found in anything else but in his own purpose.”⁹ It would be unnecessary and unduly burdensome at this time to show how Calvin rejects the subterfuge of appeal to foreknowledge in order to evade the force of the emphasis which Scripture places upon the pure sovereignty of God’s election of some and rejection of others. Suffice it to quote one word of his in this connection. “The foreknowledge of God, which Paul mentions, is not a bare prescience, as some unwise persons absurdly imagine, but the adoption by which he had always distinguished his children from the reprobate.”¹⁰

In connection with election Calvin fully recognizes that this election was in Christ. Nothing, however, could be more remote from Calvin’s thought than to suppose that this fact in the least interferes with the pure sovereignty and particularism of the election itself. On the contrary, he says expressly that this is the confirmation that “the election is free; for if we were chosen *in* Christ, it is not of ourselves.”¹¹ And the practical import for us of this truth is that no one should seek confidence in his own election anywhere else than in Christ. “Christ, therefore, is both the clear glass in which we are called upon to behold the eternal and hidden election of God, and also the earnest and pledge.”¹² Referring to John 17:6, he says, “We see here that God begins with himself (*a se ipso*), when he condescends to elect us: but he will have us to begin with Christ in order that we may know that we are reckoned among that peculiar people.”¹³ “Election, indeed, is prior to faith, but it is learned by faith.”¹⁴

⁶ *Comm. ad Rom.* 9:14; *cf.* E.T. by John Owen.

⁷ *Cf. De Aeterna Dei Praedestinatione*, as cited, coll. 263f.; E.T., pp. 34f.

⁸ *Ibid.*, col. 270; E.T., p. 44.

⁹ *Comm. ad Rom.* 9:14.

¹⁰ *Comm. ad Rom.* 8:29; E.T. by John Owen.

¹¹ *Comm. ad Eph.* 1:4.

¹² *De Aeterna Dei Praedestinatione*, as cited, col. 318; *cf.* E.T., p. 132.

¹³ *Ibid.*, col. 319; *cf.* E.T., p. 133.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, col. 318; *cf.* E.T., p. 183.

As respects reprobation we are required to ask, in the main, two questions. The first question concerns what has been called its ultimacy. In the esteem of Calvin, is the passing over or rejection of the non-elect as eternal and as sovereign, in that sense as ultimate, as the choosing of the elect to eternal salvation? It appears to me that the frequency and the clarity with which Calvin deals with this question leave no doubt that the answer must be affirmative. It needs to be appreciated that his long dissertation on *The Eternal Predestination of God* was directed chiefly against the thesis of Pighius that the origin of reprobation was God's foreknowledge that some would remain to the last in contempt of divine grace and so the wicked deprive themselves of the benefit of universal election. Pighius denied that certain persons were absolutely appointed to destruction.¹⁵ It is on this background that we must understand Calvin's repeated assertions to the contrary. He appeals to Augustine who, "tracing the beginning of election to the gratuitous will of God, places reprobation in his mere will likewise."¹⁶ "There is," he continues, "most certainly an inseparable connection between the elect and the reprobate, so that the election, of which the apostle speaks, cannot consist unless we confess that God separated from others certain persons whom it pleased him thus to separate."¹⁷ "It is indeed true that the reprobate bring upon themselves the wrath of God by their own depravity, and that they daily hasten on to the falling of its weight upon their own heads. But it must be confessed that the apostle is here treating of that difference which proceeds from the secret judgment of God."¹⁸

In his commentary on Romans 9 Calvin likewise says: "That our mind may be satisfied with the difference which exists between the elect and the reprobate, and may not inquire for any cause higher than the divine will, his [Paul's] purpose was to convince us of this — that it seems good to God to illuminate some that they may be saved, and to blind others that they may perish: for we ought particularly to notice these words, *to whom he wills*, and, *whom he wills*: beyond this he allows us not to proceed."¹⁹ "It is indeed evident that no cause is adduced higher than the will of God. Since there was a ready answer, that the difference depends on just reasons, why did not Paul adopt such a brief reply? But he placed the will of God in the highest rank for this reason, — that it alone may suffice us for all other causes. No doubt, if the objection had been false . . . a refutation would not have been rejected by Paul. The ungodly object and say, that men are exempted from blame, if the will of God holds the first place in their salvation, or in their perdition. Does Paul deny this? Nay, by his answer he confirms it, that God determines concerning men, as it seems good to him . . . for he assigns, by his own right, whatever lot he pleases to what he forms."²⁰

¹⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, coll. 259f.; E.T., pp. 27f.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, col. 267; cf. E.T., p. 41.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, col. 270; cf. E.T., p. 45.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, col. 288; cf. E.T., pp. 76f.

¹⁹ *Comm. ad Rom.* 9:18; E.T. by John Owen.

²⁰ *Comm. ad Rom.* 9:20; E.T. by John Owen.

These quotations are sufficient to show that no doubt can be entertained respecting Calvin's position that the differentiation that exists among men finds its explanation in the sovereign discrimination which God in his eternal counsel was pleased to make and that the passing by and rejection of the reprobate, in respect of differentiation and the diverse destiny entailed, are correlative with the election of those appointed to salvation. The sovereign will of God as the highest and ultimate cause is just as rigorously posited in reprobation as it is in election. And if the formula, "the equal ultimacy of election and reprobation" is intended to denote this precise consideration, then there can be no room for hesitation in asserting that Calvin would have subscribed to that formula.

On the other hand, in respect of ultimacy, if the question is that of consequent destiny, there likewise needs to be no doubt but that for Calvin ultimate and irreversible perdition is coextensive with the decree of reprobation. It is scarcely necessary to adduce evidence in support of this conclusion. The way in which Calvin discusses the whole question of reprobation would be nullified as to its relevance and necessity if reprobation did not have as its implication eternal destruction, or election eternal salvation. But one or two quotations may be offered to confirm this conclusion. "As the blessing of the covenant separates the Israelitic nation from all other people, so the election of God makes a distinction between men in that nation, while he predestinates some to salvation, and others to eternal condemnation."²¹ "Paul teaches us, that the ruin of the wicked is not only foreseen by the Lord, but also ordained by his counsel and his will; and Solomon teaches us the same thing, — that not only the destruction of the wicked is foreknown, but that the wicked themselves have been created for this very end — that they may perish (Prov. 16: 4)."²²

The second question that arises in connection with reprobation is one that must never be overlooked. If we do not take account of this consideration we fail to appreciate the radical distinction that obtains between the predestination to life, which belongs to election, and the foreordination to death, which inheres in reprobation. Calvin insisted, as we have found, and insisted rightly, that in the differentiation between election and reprobation we must seek for no higher or more ultimate cause than the sovereign will of God and that the pure sovereignty of God's good pleasure is the origin and explanation of reprobation no less than of election. But there is a factor in reprobation that does not enter into the salvation which is the fruit of election. This factor is that reprobation cannot be conceived of apart from the everlasting condemnation which it involves and condemnation always presupposes guilt and ill-desert. Guilt and ill-desert attach themselves to us. And, therefore, reprobation must never be conceived of apart from the ground or basis which resides in us for the condemnation that reprobation entails. In a word, the ground of condemnation is sin and sin alone. And sin is ours and ours alone. So reprobation always finds in men themselves a basis which never can be applied to the salvation which is the issue of election. To reiterate, the ground of the discrimination that exists among men is, as Calvin has maintained, the sovereign will of God and that alone.

²¹ *Comm. ad Rom.* 9:11; E.T. by John Owen.

²² *Comm. ad Rom.* 9:18; E.T. by John Owen.

But the ground of the damnation to which the reprobate are consigned is sin and sin alone.

Calvin has not failed to recognize this distinction. We have an intimation of this in his statement: “In the salvation of the godly nothing higher must be sought than the goodness of God, and nothing higher in the perdition of the reprobate than his just severity.”²³ It is that term “just severity” (*justa severitas*) that points to the exercise of judicial infliction in the matter of reprobation, that is, the execution of just judgment. It indicates that the judicial enters into the concept of reprobation. And he does not permit us to be in any doubt as to what he means by “just severity.” He has his own way of enunciating this truth, and the import is clear. “It is indeed true,” he says, “that here is the proximate cause of reprobation, because we are all cursed in Adam.”²⁴ And when he inveighs against the clamor of the ungodly he says: “being not content with defending themselves, they make God guilty instead of themselves; and then, after having devolved upon him the blame of their own condemnation, they become indignant against his great power.”²⁵ Again he says that although the secret predestination of God is the first cause and “superior to all other causes, so the corruption and wickedness of the ungodly afford a reason and an occasion for the judgments of God” (*locum materiamque praebet Dei judicii*).²⁶ “The ungodly are indeed, on account of their evil deeds, visited by God’s judgment with blindness; but if we seek for the source (*fontem*) of their ruin, we must come to this, that being accursed by God, they cannot by all their deeds, sayings, and purposes, get and obtain anything but a curse.”²⁷

So it is quite apparent that Calvin does not think of reprobation as taking effect apart from the curse that rests upon sin. Sin is the proximate cause of damnation, and no man can justly plead that punishment executed is the consequence of aught but that for which he is to be blamed. It is therefore “just severity.”

So Calvin is fully cognizant of the judicial aspect of reprobation. We should not be doing justice to Calvin, however, were we to overlook the contexts in which these references to sin as “the proximate cause of reprobation” occur. The term “proximate cause,” of itself, advises us that there is a more ultimate cause and this is stated in the same sentence to be “the bare and simple good pleasure of God” in electing and reprobating by his own will. When he speaks of “the blame of their own damnation,” which men seek to load upon God, it is in a context in which the accent falls upon the fact that “those who perish have been destined by the will of God to destruction” and that the will of God holds the first place in salvation and perdition. And when he admits that the pravity and wickedness of the ungodly provide the material for God’s judgments, yet he protests that it is to invert all order to set up causes “above the secret predestination of God.”²⁸ What may we infer

²³ *Comm. ad Rom. 9:11*; E.T. by John Owen.

²⁴ *Idem.*

²⁵ *Comm. ad Rom. 9:19*; E.T. by John Owen.

²⁶ *Comm. ad Rom. 9:80.*

²⁷ *Comm. ad Rom. 11:7*

²⁸ *Comm. ad Rom. 9:30.*

as to the reason for this jealousy with respect to the sovereign will and good pleasure of God? There can be but one answer.

When Calvin establishes the judicial factor in reprobation, he is bound to reckon with the fact that the *reason* why some are consigned to the curse, which we all inherit from Adam, and others are predestined to salvation is simply and solely the sovereign will of God. After all, ill-desert is not the reason for the discrimination, though it is the ground for the condemnation executed. And it is the note of secret predestination that is uppermost in Calvin's thought at these points, because this is the only explanation why the reprobate are left to reap the curse which their evil deeds deserve and for which they have no answer before God. This is why we are compelled to take account of the ultimacy, even in the matter of the judicial or penal aspect of reprobation, of the sovereignty of God's will, a sovereignty which is not one whit less sovereignly differentiating at the point of reprobation than it is at the point of election to life.

The formula, "the equal ultimacy of election and reprobation" is not one that, in my judgment, is most felicitous because it is liable, by reason of its brevity, to obscure the penal, judicial, and hell-deserving ingredient which must enter into the concept of reprobation. But we must not affirm less than the equal ultimacy of the pure sovereignty of God's good pleasure in election and reprobation and that the sovereign discrimination that is exemplified in election is brought to bear upon reprobation at the point of its judicial execution as well as at the point of preterition. This I believe is the precipitate of Calvin's thinking on this topic, and I am not able to regard it as other than the precipitate of biblical teaching.

We should not, however, be giving a fair transcript of Calvin's teaching on this subject if we omitted to make mention of his warning. "Proud men clamour, because Paul, admitting that men are rejected or chosen by the secret counsel of God, alleges no cause; as though the Spirit of God were silent for want of reason, and not rather, that by his silence he reminds us, that a mystery which our minds cannot comprehend ought to be reverently adored, and that he thus checks the wantonness of human curiosity. Let us then know, that God does for no other reason refrain from speaking, but that he sees that we cannot contain his immense wisdom in our small measure; and thus regarding our weakness, he leads us to moderation and sobriety."²⁹ "And far be it from any one of the faithful to be ashamed to confess his ignorance of that which the Lord God has enveloped in the blaze of his own inaccessible light."³⁰

The Sovereignty of God in His Providence

The providence of God embraces all events, past, present, and future, and applies to the evil as much as to the good, to sinful acts as much as to the holy acts of men and angels. Unsanctified sense is liable to conceive of providence as consisting simply in the

²⁹ *Comm. ad Rom. 9:20*; E.T. by John Owen.

³⁰ *De Aeterna Dei Praedestinatione*, as cited, col. 316; E.T., p. 128.

unfolding of potencies and virtues implanted in the world at its creation and so the utmost of its adoration is to perceive the wisdom, power, and goodness of God in the work of creation. It conceives of God as a mere spectator. For the believer the presence of God appears no less in the perpetual government of the world than in its origin. Perhaps the most distinctive emphasis in this connection is Calvin's insistence that providence does not consist in a general motion or superintendence but that all events whatsoever are governed by the secret counsel and directed by the present hand of God (*oculto Dei consilio gubernari ... praesenti Dei manu diriguntur*). Calvin does not deny but rather asserts that created things are endowed with properties and laws which operate according to their nature. Yet they are only instruments into which God infuses as much efficacy as he wills and according to his own will turns to this or that action. The sun, for example, "the godly man does not regard as the principal or necessary cause of those things which existed before the creation of the sun but only an instrument which God uses, because he so wills, since he could dispense with it and act directly without any more difficulty."³¹ God made the sun to stand still (Josh. 10:13) to testify that "the sun does not daily rise and set by a secret instinct of nature but that he himself governs its course to renew the memory of his fatherly favour towards us."³² God's omnipotence is not a vain, idle, and, as it were, slumbering potency but a vigilant, efficacious, and operative agency constantly exerted on every distinct and particular movement (*ad singulas et particulares motus*). Not a drop of rain falls and no wind ever blows but at the special command of God (*speciali Dei jussu*).³³ Every year, month, and day is governed by a new and special providence of God (*nova et speciali Dei providentia temperari*).³⁴ Chance and fortune do not belong to a Christian man's vocabulary. Events are often fortuitous to us because their order, reason, end, and necessity are hid in the counsel of God and are not apprehended by the mind of man. But they are not fortuitous for God — they proceed from his will.

This insistence upon the ever-present and ever-active will of God in each particular movement obviously rules out the notion of bare permission. But Calvin takes pains to reflect on this subterfuge. It is particularly in connection with the sinful acts of Satan and of wicked men that the postulate of bare permission appears to offer escape from the allegation that the presence of the will and agency of God would be inconsistent with the responsibility and guilt which devolve upon the perpetrators of iniquity. In Calvin's esteem, this resort to the idea of permission is only to evade the difficulty. For "that men can effect nothing but by the secret will of God nor can they be exercised in deliberating anything but what he has previously with himself decreed and determines by his secret direction is proved by innumerable and express testimonies."³⁵ "Whatever is attempted by men, or by Satan himself, God still holds the helm in order to turn all their attempts to the execution of his judgments."³⁵ So it is nugatory and insipid to substitute for the

³¹ *Inst.*, I, xvi, 2.

³² *Idem.*

³³ *Ibid.*, I, xvi, 7.

³⁴ *Idem.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, I, xviii, 1.

providence of God a bare permission. The very “conceptions we form in our minds are directed by the secret inspiration of God to the end which he has designed” (*arcana Dei inspiratione ad suum finem dirigi*).³⁶

It is obvious what questions arise in connection with this doctrine. And Calvin was well aware of the objections and faced up squarely to their apparent validity. There is, first of all, the question of authorship. Is not God, therefore, the author of the crimes which the instruments of iniquity conceive and perpetrate? At certain points Calvin does speak of God as author and cause. According to Scripture God “himself is said to give men over to a reprobate mind and cast them into vile lusts, because he is the principal author (*praecipuus autor*) of his own righteous vengeance, and Satan is only the minister of it.”³⁷ Again he says: “And I have already sufficiently shown that God is called the author (*autor*) of all these things which these censors wish to happen merely by his idle permission.”³⁸

There are, however, certain qualifications which must be appreciated if we are to assess these statements correctly. Calvin is equally emphatic to the effect that God is not the *author* of sin. With respect to Adam’s fall he says expressly, that although God ordained the fall of Adam, “I so assert it as by no means to concede that God was the author.”³⁹ “But *how* it was that God, by his foreknowledge and decree, ordained what should take place respecting man, and yet so ordained it without his being himself in the least a participator of the fault, or being at all the author (*autor*) or the approver of the transgression; *how* this was, I repeat, is a secret manifestly far too deep to be penetrated by the human mind, nor am I ashamed to confess our ignorance. And far be it from any of the faithful to be ashamed to confess his ignorance of that which the Lord envelops in the blaze of his own inaccessible light.”⁴⁰

Furthermore, Calvin will allow for no equivocation on the principle that in those operations which are common to God and men God is free from all fault and contracts no defilement from men’s vices. No one has expended more care than Calvin in developing the distinction in respect of the motive, reason, and end by which men are actuated in the commission of sin and the motive, reason, and end by which God makes the vices of men to fulfil his holy purposes. “So great is the difference,” he says in quoting from Augustine, “between what belongs to the human will, and what to the divine, and between the ends to which the will of every one is to be referred, for approbation or censure. For God fulfils his righteous will by the wicked wills of wicked men.”⁴¹ There is a complete disparity between the wills of wicked men and the will of God which is operative in the same event. When men sin they do not perform evil actions with the motive or design of promoting the will of God but because they are inflamed with the

³⁶ *Ibid.*, I, xviii, 2.

³⁷ *Idem.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, I, xviii, 3.

³⁹ *De Aeterna Dei Praedestinatione*, as cited, col. 315; cf. E.T., p. 126.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, col. 816; cf. E.T., p. 128.

⁴¹ *Inst.*, I, xviii, 3.

violence of their own passions and deliberately strive to oppose him. “God only requires of us conformity to his precepts. If we do anything contrary to them, it is not obedience, but contumacy and transgression... they [men] can lay no blame upon God, for they find in themselves nothing but evil, and in him only a legitimate use of their wickedness.”⁴² There is thus a coincidence of the wicked wills of wicked men and the holy will of God. Both are operative in and converge upon the same event, and yet God contracts no defilement from the perversity which is the instrument of his holy designs. The difficulty this may pose for our understanding arises from the fact that “because of the weakness of our mind we do not comprehend how in different respects (*diverso modo*) he does not will and wills the same thing” (*nolit fieri et velit*).⁴³

It is not only, however, the disparity that exists between the wicked wills of men and the holy will of God, as both converge upon the same event, but also the disparity that exists within the will of God. There is a twofold aspect to the will of God. And there is the *disparity* between the decretive will and the preceptive will, between the determinations of his secret counsel that certain events will come to pass and the prescriptions of his revealed will to us that we do not bring these events to pass. It cannot be gainsaid that God decretively wills what he preceptively forbids and decretively forbids what he preceptively commands. It is precisely in this consideration that the doctrine of God’s sovereignty is focused most acutely with its demands for our faith and reverence. If I am not mistaken it is at this point that the sovereignty of God makes the human mind reel as it does nowhere else in connection with this topic. It should be so. It is the sanctified understanding that reels. And it is not the mark of intelligence to allege or claim a ready resolution of the apparent contradiction with which it confronts us. How can God say: this comes to pass by my infallible foreordination and providence, and also say to us: this thou shalt not bring to pass?

Calvin was well aware of this question and he did not tone down the mystery with which it confronts us. He is constantly refuting, by appeal to Scripture, the objections which unbelief registers against this doctrine. Much of the argumentation in the last three chapters of Book I of the *Institutes* is concerned with it. It is of interest that the last work in which Calvin was engaged before his work was arrested by the hand of death was his exposition of the prophecy of Ezekiel. His work ended with Ezekiel 20:44. He did not even complete his exposition of the chapter. At Ezekiel 18:23, in dealing with the discrepancy between God’s will to the salvation of all and the election of God by which he predestinates only a fixed number to salvation, he says: “If any one again objects — this is making God act with duplicity, the answer is ready, that God always wishes the same thing, though by different ways, and in a manner inscrutable to us. Although, therefore, God’s will is simple, yet great variety is involved in it, as far as our senses are concerned. Besides, it is not surprising that our eyes should be blinded by intense light, so that we cannot certainly judge how God wishes all to be saved, and yet has devoted all

⁴² *Ibid.*, I, xvii, 5; E.T. by John Allen.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, I, xviii, 3.

the reprobate to eternal destruction, and wishes them to perish. While we look now through a glass darkly, we should be content with the measure of our own intelligence.”⁴⁴

I said previously that in this discrepancy the doctrine of God’s sovereignty comes to its most pointed expression. It is so, I submit, because the sovereignty of God bears upon us at no point more relevantly and with more irresistible sanction than in his command. Nothing underlines God’s sovereignty over us and his propriety in us, as creatures made in his image, as does his sovereign command. In his command his sovereignty is addressed to our responsibility and our responsibility defines our creaturehood as made in his image. And the command of God registers his supremacy and our complete subjection to him. The providence of God, as also his decretive will, is at no point exemplified and vindicated as to its all-inclusiveness more effectively than at the point where our responsible agency is exercised in violation of his command. There is, after all, the contradiction that we by sin offer to God’s sovereignty. It is the contradiction of the claim which his sovereignty demands of us and the contradiction of what is God’s good pleasure. But if the providence of God did not embrace that very contradiction, then there would be a sphere outside the realm of God’s providence and, therefore, outside the sphere of his sovereign control and direction. The simple upshot of that alternative would be that God would not be sovereign, and man in his sin would be able to command a realm impervious to God’s providence.

What a dismal perspective and prospect that alternative would offer to us! We must boldly maintain and profess the only alternative which Calvin so insistently asserted. In the realm of sin we do have the contradiction of God’s revealed and prescriptive good pleasure. But that very contradiction is embraced in the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God. And it is just because this is the case, it is just because the contradiction which sin offers to his sovereignty in command is embraced in the sovereignty of both decree and providence and does not create a realm impervious to his efficient foreordination and operation that the sovereign provisions of his grace invade that same realm and emancipate men from the contradiction itself and therefore from the curse, condemnation, thralldom, and misery which the contradiction entails. It is this doctrine of God’s sovereignty in the realm of sin that is the precondition of sovereignty in redemptive grace.

⁴⁴ *Comm. ad Ezek. 18:23*; E.T. by Thomas Myers. It is more probable that the Latin verb *velle*, translated on three occasions above by the English term “wishes,” should rather be rendered “wills.” The present writer is not persuaded that we may speak of God’s will as “simple,” after the pattern of Calvin’s statement. There is the undeniable fact that, in regard to sin, God *decretively* wills what he *preceptively* does not will. There is the contradiction. We must maintain that it is perfectly consistent with God’s perfection that this contradiction should obtain. But it does not appear to be any resolution to say that God’s will is “simple,” even in the sense of the Latin term *simplex*.