

March 4, 2009

Calvin's *Institutes* II.2.1–21

Here we come near to the heart of the human predicament. We often refer to this as “the bondage of the will.” But Calvin knew that the human will is terrifyingly free—free to sin in countless different ways. Or, as he learned from Augustine, “the will is indeed free but not freed: free of righteousness but enslaved to sin” (II.2.8). This raises the question of how people can caricature Calvin as having been free of humor. But perhaps his is an acquired taste.

The irony is that such a dire description of the human predicament brings with it the concomitant good news of the glorious grace of God made known to us in the gospel of Jesus Christ. If our problem were ignorance, a little teaching would help. If our problem were simple immorality, a little moral exhortation would do. But since our problem is utter and terrible lostness, a complete inability to turn away from our miserable selves and back to God, the only answer is that God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves, and for this we are eternally grateful.

Calvin has already set forth his understanding of human being as created with a soul consisting of two faculties, the understanding that distinguishes between good and evil and the will that chooses the good and rejects the evil (I.15.7). He has already set forth the fall of humanity and the consequent corruption of this created nature (II.1.1–11). He will yet set forth the saving work of Jesus Christ (II.16.1–19) and the eternal grace of God that drives that (III.21.1–7). In this week’s readings, Calvin examines in detail the crippling loss of freedom of choice occasioned by the fall (II.2.1–21); this, of course, has the effect of establishing beyond any question our utter neediness for salvation initiated and accomplished from outside and beyond us.

Calvin realized that most ancient philosophers, too many of the theologians before him (all but Augustine), and even the common masses had presumed that human beings have free will. It was bad enough that they failed to define free will clearly. Far more problematic, according to Calvin, was that they failed to take into account the corruption of the will brought about by the fall. They thought about human beings apart from the teachings of Scripture and without regard to sin, as if their natural, created faculties were still intact and capable of functioning as intended. This, however, Calvin understood no longer to be the case.

Of course, Calvin admitted, human beings have freedom of choice. The problem is that after the fall, we no longer have the freedom to choose between good and evil. All that remains to us is the ability to choose among various evils. And this, Calvin realized, could hardly be called freedom! Such free will is no free will at all. After the fall, humans are not capable of choosing the good, or turning toward the good, or turning toward God, or willing the good in regard to salvation. Those are no longer possible. We were free, and we freely sinned, so that we are responsible for sin. But having sinned, we are no longer free not to sin or not to be sinners. We cannot, by an act of our will, cease to sin, and we certainly cannot undo the past and decide never to have been sinners. That is not an option.

The point Calvin derives from many passages of Scripture is this: “[W]hoever is utterly cast down and overwhelmed by the awareness of his calamity, poverty, nakedness, and disgrace has thus advanced farthest in knowledge of himself. . . . [N]o one is permitted to receive God’s blessings unless he is consumed with the awareness of his own poverty” (II.2.10). To assert that the will is well would be to forfeit salvation; to realize that the will is ill would be to accept healing from the hand of the Master: “[T]he confession of our humility has a ready remedy in his mercy” (II.2.11).

So it is that the understanding has been weakened and corrupted, and “the will, because it is inseparable from man’s nature, did not perish, but was so bound to wicked desires that it cannot strive after the right” (II.2.12). This we call the bondage of the will. We may still freely choose evil, but we may not freely choose the good. If we could, we would not need Christ, and Christ’s death would have been unnecessary and unwarranted. Since that is too horrible to contemplate, surely our sickness is as severe as Calvin depicts. And in realizing this, we give God all the glory.

Grace and Peace,

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