

Calvin, *Against the Libertines*

John Calvin, *Treatises Against the Anabaptist and Against the Libertines*, trans. and ed. Benjamin Wirt Farley, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1982. Read “Against the Fantastic and Furious Sect of the Libertines Who Are Called ‘Spirituals,’” pp. 187-326.

Note 1: It was John Leith who encouraged Ben Farley to do this translation, and it is John Leith to whom this book is dedicated.

Note 2: There is a full listing of the twenty-four chapters, by number and title, in the table of contents, pp. 7-8. There is also a helpful outline of the work given in the Editor’s Introduction, p. 174.

Note 3: For our purposes, the historical question of whether Calvin accurately represents those against whom he writes (as discussed in the Editor’s Introduction) is not particularly important. We are not so concerned with their position as with the position which Calvin puts forth. Moreover, while I certainly encourage you to read the entire document, Chapters 13-16 will be particularly important.

Preface

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“Heretics are not only like thieves or wolves, but are much worse. For since they corrupt the holy Word of God, they are more like poison, murdering poor souls under the pretext of grazing them and providing them with good pasturage.” (p. 188)

3. On the Similarity Between the Libertines and Several Early Heretics 195

“Everything Christians hold concerning eternal life and the resurrection is but a fable to them.” (p. 199)

11. On the First Article of Libertine Doctrine: That There Is Only One Immortal Spirit. With a Statement Explaining How This Is Contrary to the Truth of Scripture 230

“It is time to consider the inference[s] that can be deduced from this wretched sect’s general articles of faith. To begin with, **they maintain that there is only one divine spirit that exists and indwells every creature.** In saying this they eradicate the essence and nature of both human souls and angels.” (p. 230, emphasis added) That is to

say, if God is in all things, so that they have no spirit of their own, the understanding of creation as God bringing something other than himself into existence is undermined and denied.

13. On the Libertine View That a Single Immortal Spirit Comprises Everything. And What Pestilence Is Hidden Under This View 238

“After creating a single spirit among themselves, by means of which they destroy the nature of both the angels of heaven and the devils of hell, as well as human souls, the Libertines maintain that this single spirit constitutes everything. **By this they...mean that everything in the world must be seen directly as His doing.**

“In making this claim they attribute nothing to the will of man, no more than if he were a stone. And they cast aside every distinction between good and evil, since nothing can be badly made in their view, seeing that God is its author.” (p. 238, emphasis added)

“If you concede this point, then we must either attribute sin to God or dissolve the world of sin, inasmuch as God does everything. Thus, any distinction between good and evil is eliminated. From which it follows that it is illicit of us to find anything wrong, seeing that everything is the work of God. **Hence men can do whatever they wish without hesitation**, no only because they are beyond any danger of sinning, but because to restrain desire would be to limit God.” (p. 239, emphasis added)

“Now it should be noted that three accursed consequences follow from this article. The first is that if this is the case there would be do difference whatsoever between God and the devil, as in fact the God whom they invent for us is an idol worse than the devil of hell [see chapter 14]. The second is that men would no longer have a conscience for abstaining from evil, but like beasts would follow their sensual appetites, without any discretion [see chapter 15]. The third is that we would be unable to make any judgments, for it would be necessary to find everything good, whether lechery, murder, or stealing, and the worst crimes that we can imagine would have to be viewed as laudable works [see chapter 16].” (p. 241) In short, pantheism leads to immorality.

14. On How We Ought to Understand the Providence of God by Which He Does Everything, and How the Libertines Confound It All When Speaking of It. The First Consequence of the Preceding Article 242

“God, when it comes to governing the world, works in a threefold manner.

“**First of all, there is a universal operation by which He guides all creatures according to the condition and propriety which He had given each when He made them.** This guidance is nothing other than what we call ‘the order of nature.’ For whereas unbelievers only recognize in the arrangement of the world what their eyes see and thus view nature as a design of essence that rules over all, we are compelled to give this praise

to the will of God, as it alone governs and moderates all things.” (pp. 242-243, emphasis added)

“The second way or manner in which God operates in His creatures is that He causes them to serve His goodness, righteousness, and judgment according to His present will to help His servants, to punish the wicked, and to test the patience of the faithful, or to chastise them in His fatherly kindness.” (pp. 243-244, emphasis added)

“Consequently, what pagans and the illiterate attribute to fortune we must assign to the providence of God, not simply because of this universal power, of which we have spoken, but because of a special ordinance by which He guides all things in accordance with what He deems to be expedient.” (p. 244)

“Therefore, let us adopt this resolution: that prosperity and adversity alike, rain, wind, sleet, hail, good weather, abundance, famine, war, and peace are all works of God’s hand; and that creatures who constitute secondary causes are only means by which he fulfills His will; and consequently He commands and uses them as it pleases Him in order to bring them to that end which He has ordained should come to pass.” (p. 245)

The Libertines conclude that creatures no longer act for themselves, for they believe that God acts in them and is in them. In fact, they make no distinction between God and the devil.

“This is owing to their failure to recognize two exceptions which are essential. The first is that Satan and evildoers are not so effectively the instruments of God that they do not also act in their own behalf. For we must not suppose that God works in an iniquitous man as if he were a stone or a piece of wood, but He uses him as a thinking creature, according to the quality of his nature which He has given him. Thus when we say that God works in evildoers, that does not prevent them from working also in their own behalf.” (p. 245)

“The second exception for which these wretches have no regard is the enormous diversity between God’s work and that of an evil man’s when God makes use of it as an instrument. For the wicked man is motivated either by his avarice, or ambition, or envy, or cruelty to do what he does, and he disregards any other end. Consequently, according to the root which motivates his heart and the end toward which he strives, his work is qualified and with good reason is judged bad.

“But God’s intention is completely different. For His aim is to exercise His justice for the salvation and preservation of good, to pour out His goodness and grace on His faithful, and to chastise those who need it. Hence that is how we ought to distinguish between God and men; by separating in the same work His justice, His goodness, and His judgment from the evil of both the devil and the ungodly.” (p. 246)

“The third form of God’s operation consists in the fact that He governs His faithful, living and reigning in them by His Holy Spirit. For inasmuch as we are corrupted by original sin, we are like a dry and barren ground that cannot produce any

good fruit. For our judgment is perverse; our will is rebellious against God, inclined and give to evil; in sum, our entire nature is vicious.

“Being such, not only do we not have the power to apply ourselves to good, but still more, as Saint Paul says, we are incapable of conceiving a single good thought, rather all our sufficiency must come from Him. Consequently, it is He who works in us ‘both to will and to work’; it is He who illumines us that we might come to His knowledge; it is He who draws us up; it is he who creates new hearts in us, softening our hardness; it is He who inspires us to pray; it is he who gives us the grace and the strength to resist all fo Satan’s temptations; it is He who causes us to walk in His commandments.

“Nevertheless, we must note the nature of our choice and will. For although they are both depraved by sin, our Lord reforms them and changes them from evil into good. Thus whatever we are able to discern, to will, and to do belongs to a natural gift. But whatever we cannot choose, desire, or but do wrong is the result of the corruption of sin. What we will to do well and have the power to effect comes from the supernatural grace of the Spirit, which regenerates us in a divine life.

“That, accordingly, in how God works in His children. For in abolishing their perversity he guides them by His Spirit into obedience.” (pp. 247-248, emphasis added)

15. On the Second Consequence Which Follows from Saying That God Does Everything, That Is, That One’s Conscience Need No Longer Be Concerned About Anything 250

“We have said above that if one attributes everything to God, as the Libertines do, and says that man does nothing, then conscience ceases to be a matter of importance. For this would not keep one from sinning, but rather would curtail the work of God.

“...In fact, it is the principal end toward which they strive, that is, to put consciences to sleep, in order that without worrying each person can do whatever comes to him and whatever his heart desires. As if God had give His law in vain for discerning between good and evil.” (p. 250)

“One might ask if we can ever do anything against God’s will. I think not. **But the whole of the matter is that we ought not to inquire into His providence, which is a secret to us, since we know what He wants of us and what He approves and condemns.**” (p. 253, emphasis added)

16. On the Third Consequence Which the Libertines Deduce from the View That God Does Everything, That Is, That It Is Not Lawful to Condemn Anything 254

“After they have relaxed the reins on each other for each to do what seems best to him under the pretext of being led by God, they deduce from this same principle that it is wrong to pass judgment.” (p. 254)

“This is a sound and useful doctrine, that as there is only one spiritual lawgiver, viz., God, so He alone is competent to judge our souls. Nevertheless, this is not to say that His judgments, which He has already rendered, are no longer valid. Hence when we judge lechery, larceny, blasphemy, drunkenness, and ambition to be evil things, we are not making a judgment of our own, but are only ratifying what God has rendered.”

“These riffraff, on the contrary, in pretending not to want to judge, make themselves judges superior to God...

“Now these mad dogs, under the pretext of saying that we ought not to judge, revoke all the decisions that God has made and published and say that all the condemnations that He has ever passed are without effect.

“Now there is a vast difference between not judging out of hypocrisy and not judging at all.” (pp. 256-257)

Conclusion of the Present Book

p. 325

“Let us be warned to pursue our calling in fear and anxiety, to take the trouble to learn from good and useful doctrine, having above all this end: that we hunger to know nothing except what it has pleased God to reveal to us in his Scripture. Let us not subject the sacred Word of God to our judgments or lusts, but rather let us align ourselves entirely with what it says to us.” (p. 325)

Note 4: The names which Calvin calls his opponents are colorful, remarkable, delightful, and full of the confidence of being right: wolves, thieves, poison, mortal pests, ignorant, vermin, scum, swine, mad dogs, scoffers, fiends, wild beasts, madmen, rascal, stupid ass, seducer, and serpents. Calvin apparently felt no compulsion toward that courtesy which seeks to maintain a shallow and false unity of the church by refusing to identify enemies of the faith as such.

Discussion Questions:

1. What did Calvin accomplish by this exposition of the doctrine of providence?
2. What did Calvin not accomplish by this exposition of the doctrine of providence?
3. Is Calvin’s exposition of the doctrine of providence faithful to scripture?
4. How does Calvin’s exposition of the doctrine of providence compare with the history of theology on the same, particularly the Reformed tradition as embodied in *The Book of Confessions*? See especially:

“The Scots Confession,” Chapter One, “God” (3.01)

“The Heidelberg Catechism,” “Of God the Father” (4.026–.028)

“The Second Helvetic Confession,” Chapter 6, “Of the Providence of God” (5.029–.031)

“The Westminster Confession of Faith,” Chapter V, “Of Providence” (6.024–.030)

“Westminster Short Catechism,” Questions 8, 11-12 (7.008, .011–.012)

“Westminster Larger Catechism,” Questions 14, 18-20 (7.124, .128–.130)

5. Is Calvin’s exposition of the doctrine of providence liable to the criticisms made by Karl Barth?

6. How does Calvin’s exposition of the doctrine of providence compare with what Leith has to say about providence? See especially:

Basic Christian Doctrine, Chapter 6, “Providence”, p 81 ff.

Reformed Imperative, Chapter 4, “God’s Providing, Ordering, and Caring”

7. How does Calvin’s exposition of the doctrine of providence affect our faith?

8. How does Calvin’s exposition of the doctrine of providence affect our lives?

9. How does Calvin’s exposition of the doctrine of providence affect our preaching?

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