

Living space

God's predestination and our room to move

What remains of our freedom if all is predestined? What remains, when everything has been determined beforehand, and even our (eternal) destiny has been fixed? What is our input? If God predestines our share and lot, is not our freedom breached? Are not people then at His arbitrary disposal?

It should not surprise us that these kinds of questions are asked by people who are used to hearing: “that is your own choice, you decide, you are your own boss.” When God comes into the picture, it's a different story. He is the God who commands, who elects and rejects, who follows His own plan. On the one hand there is human responsibility, on the other there is divine sovereignty. How do human freedom and divine freedom relate to each other? If man's freedom to choose is emphasized, what remains of divine election? If God's freedom to choose is accentuated, what room is there for human input?

Quite early on, Calvin busied himself with such questions, especially as he was very soon reproached that his doctrine of election and reprobation left no room for human responsibility.¹ Has Calvin not saddled us with a system of predestination that continues to oppress us? Is our freedom not being seriously curtailed?

Since these sort of questions are constantly being raised in churches, I decided to read for myself what Calvin wrote on this subject.² In this article, I pass on a reading-experience of what Calvin wrote in, among others, the Institutes.³

An intense relationship

Life in God is as lively as it can be. The more you get to know God, the more impressed you are how personal God is in His dealings with individual persons. Predestination is an intensive form of God's providence. It evidences particular care and attention. It reveals how intense God's relationship is with people. See, God had already set His sights on people before the creation of this world (Ephesians 1:4)! Before the foundation of the world, He was already involved with His people. That displays the Creator's close involvement. He cannot be separated from His creatures, nor does He desire to be. This is even true for those who in the end prove to be reprobates. God did not desert them, nor did He carelessly pass them by. He was closely involved with them, even and especially when they rejected Him. That is a vehement and dynamic event (Hebrews 12:14-17). So predestination is not about a static and unbending entirety and a silent eternity, but about a dynamic dealing, a divine interest in tangible, actual life. Human choices certainly do matter. They are included in God's immense decision-making process (Philippians 2: 12-13). Every suggestion of divine arbitrariness is a lack of appreciation of His divine intention.

Boundaries and living space

Here we clearly reach the boundary of our understanding. No one can aspire to the height of the Creator. It is impossible for us to see everything from a heavenly perspective, knowing the present, overseeing the past. We are incapable not least because our thoughts move so very slowly compared to the speed with which God's thoughts are racing (Isaiah 55: 8-9)! How could we ever keep up with Him and follow Him in His eternal thought processes? Save yourself the trouble, and do not attempt to enter the throne-room of God's decision-making.

By respecting these boundaries, you receive space. Humanly speaking, you receive all the room you need, because you may see things from a human perspective. So do not make things difficult for yourself with speculations about God's eternal plan. You will get lost in a labyrinth. Just be concerned with your own territory, which is that of human responsibility: considering, deliberating, reflecting,

deciding. That all matters, and is of real importance. It creates space to leave what is concealed to the Lord (Deuteronomy 29: 29).

In this way we can unreservedly pray, "Our Father", by which we include all people. He is the Father of all creatures. What God has decided about all those people is not our business, and is out of our reach. Yet we must wish the best for all.

Two poles

The way Calvin continually moves between two poles is striking. He always keeps God's honour in mind. Yet he also wishes to take full account of man's wellbeing. That tension keeps it exciting. On the one hand he wishes to prevent God being deprived of His glory. Be aware that you are standing before God! Acknowledge His freedom, greatness, goodness and His rights. God is God! Whoever knows God is also connected to His divine glory. Imagine if God depended on what people think and do and wish...Fortunately God is not bound to human opinions and judgments. Moreover, humans are incapable of commanding God's love through their dignity or behaviour. God is completely free in His loving choices. It is God's glory to keep certain things concealed (Proverbs 25: 1-2).

Yet at the same time, justice must also be done to His creatures. Not every initiative is taken away from them. Calvin has no time for human indifference, laziness, apathy or resignation. The eternal God respects human dignity. You can even say that it relates to His glory as their Creator. It is definitely not the case that man must give up his dignity. A certain amount of curiosity is allowed, as long as it stays within the boundaries. Man must know his place as creature, but may question God (Job 42: 7ff). Pride is crushed, but our human input is not ignored. Man must not pretend to be more than he is, but not less either.

Man is not deprived of his choices, and his will is not switched off. Why then should one not speak of a free will? (It is tempting to do that. Be aware that freedom of choice is one of man's favourite idols). Calvin however thought that speaking of free will is risky because it can give the impression that man is autonomic, that he is able to function without God, as though a human being could stake out an area to which God has no access. Then we again do injustice to God's glory. Nevertheless, this does not erode the reality that God leaves people living space and room to move.

Starting point

Where one person embraces the message of the gospel, another heartily rejects it. How is that possible, two such completely opposite reactions? Is it all predestined? Are God's choices so fixed that it is no longer of any consequence what people do or think? Calvin did not wish to have such a system forced on him, let alone have us believe it. His reasoning does not originate from within a system of election and rejection. Nor does he take his starting point from God's eternal decree. What foolishness that would be! How could one ever begin there? God does not direct his Word at people in the capacity of elected and rejected, but in the quality of created and sinner (John 6:41-66). Here too Jesus has very real and living people in mind: people who exercise their wills, who decide, act, rejoice or reject etc. From within a living reality He concludes what man is: how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing (Matthew 23:37). The conclusion of reprobation, in the meaning of being destined to be rejected, is therefore always made with hindsight.

From Calvin's pastoral letters, it becomes apparent that he was dealing with people's insecurity (which could even become an obsession) whether they could call themselves God's children. He therefore does not tire of explaining that one must never start looking for certainty in an eternal decision, but that one's security is in God's calling in His Word, which reaches the sinner in time, no more and no less. That calling is at the same time a summons to surrender oneself to His promising words (Rom. 8:28-30). Human responsibility is fully included. Our starting point is never God's eternal choice, nor the human choice. The starting point is the promising Word of Christ, which calls on us to receive salvation through faith. That keeps it exciting, and it stays exciting. We start from a personal and living relationship, not from a philosophical or dogmatic speculation.

Christ-centred

God's election is as lively as it can be – one is brought into contact with divine love. God's free and loving choice can never be conceived outside of Christ as a Person and the relationship with Him (1 Peter 1:18-21). Whoever discusses the eternal decree of predestination apart from Him is talking into empty space. Election in Christ can therefore never be fatalistic. It is not an abstraction, and is not available apart from Christ.

To stay with the image of the heavenly throne-room in which God's decisions are made: Christ is not simply a messenger confirming that a decision has been made in the divine throne-room, as if that decision could be taken without reference to Him, and He merely makes the announcement. No, the divine choices are revealed and made public in Christ Himself as a Person. Calvin calls up another image, originating from Augustine, in which Christ is the mirror of predestination. All our reflections bring us no closer; only in a living encounter with Christ can we say anything meaningful about predestination. That electing love can only be experienced and responded to in connection with Him.

It is touching to see how Calvin writes about the actual encounter between God and man in Christ. In Christ, the heart of God and the heart of man find their rest. God's glory and the wellbeing of human dignity are joined in Him. Christ Himself lived constantly in the field of tension between both these poles, and in the tension of the loving choices that His father makes (John 6:36-37).

Awesome decision

But what about divine reprobation? Calvin does not stop repeating that he wishes to be led by God's Word, and that it is not his own invention (Romans 9-11; 1 Peter 2:8). One cannot get around the fact that God's choice also has a negative aspect. In this one again encounters the freedom of God's sovereignty. He is completely free in His choices. Calvin himself speaks of an awful decision (*decretum horribile*), a decision that makes you shudder. Not in the meaning of revolting, but of awesome. This experience takes place in the relationship with God.

Does God then leave no room for human decisions? Is His will so forceful that He curtails men in their freedom? Is their fate decided, with no regard for their human will and dignity? In this case also, the human will is not ignored. On the contrary, God continues to hold men responsible, and addresses them concerning their choices (e.g. Gen. 4: 6). The tension now rises. One sometimes gets the impression that God does it all here, and man has no freedom left. God withholds the influence of His Spirit from men, so that they are left to their own unwillingness (Rom. 1: 25-32). And that so as to give his grace all the more worth. Even with regard to the reprobate, God brings glory to Himself in relationship with the human being.

But if God decides to reject someone, the reason for his rejection lies not with God but in man himself. The rejection is God's choice, but the reason lies in the refusal of man himself. The deepest reason is his own unwillingness, which is sealed and confirmed by God (Matt. 22:1-14). In all of this it is noticeable that Calvin tries to do justice both to God's sovereignty and to human responsibility. Reprobation too is unthinkable without a living and concrete relationship with man, who makes his own choices, has convictions, makes decisions and expresses feelings. Following other Reformers, Calvin distinguishes between necessity and coercion. As with the pharaoh of Egypt: seen from God's perspective, his rejection was necessary (Ex. 7:3ff). But He never forces man to do evil, and never imposes this on him. Even when the human will is attracted to evil, robbing man of his own freedom, man is never forced.

Calvin takes a modest stand. He is under no illusion that he understands and sees through it all. He cannot discern how divine will and human responsibility correspond. He believes that justice is done to both, but exactly how he does not fathom. He would rather profess a believing ignorance than an unbelieving denial.

Fencing

What struck me most was Calvin's illustration of a fencing match. Where do the borders lie between divine freedom and human freedom? The Creator challenges His children to cross swords. They are

given room to move in the playing field, and move constantly. Suddenly: parade - riposte, a thrust is guarded off, parry, and withdraw or return the thrust.⁴ God pushes man back onto his own territory, so that he does not traverse his borders, the limits set for him. He always remains in the playing field of his own opinions and limited judgments. By challenging him to a lively fencing match, God makes sure that man stays within the boundaries of his own territory.

We are invited to challenge that great space of divine compassion that Christ has unveiled – as long as we respect His divine freedom by having regard for His eternal dignity, and by acknowledging Him as the Creator who, in a divine way, also has regard for man's dignity.

Summary

- Eternal predestination is a special form of providence. God's eternal counsel does not curtail all human initiative. God's plan does not oppose concrete reality, but includes it.
- Two poles create tension. At one extent lies the glory due to God in his sovereignty, and at the other human dignity as creature, seeking man's wellbeing.
- People are not victims deprived of their wills. Nor do they have a 'free will' with which they can exclude God, as if He was dependent on what is determined by men.
- Man always inhabits a territory where he can exercise his own will, although he can never convert to faith by his own strength. That is only possible through the loving choice of God.
- In Christ, all lines converge. Speaking of predestination apart from Him is an impossible abstraction. In Christ, God and man truly meet.
- Divine sovereignty goes together with human responsibility. Even if we cannot fathom how this cooperation works (believing ignorance), this is not without reason, though is beyond our greatest understanding.

E. Brink

Lux Mundi 27 vol. 2

Since 1997, Rev. Egbert Brink has been minister of the Reformed Church (liberated) in Waddinxveen. He studied at the Theological University in Kampen and at the Faculté de Théologie Libre in Aix-en-Provence.

Notes:

¹ By the priest Albert Pigghius in the Netherlands, *De libero hominis arbitrio et divina gratia*, Coloniae 1542 et de arts Jérôme Bolsec.

²² *L'institution Chrétienne*, (éds. Kerygma 1978) I, 16-17; II, 2,3,4,5; III, 13,10,21,22,23,24. And various sermons, such *Ephesians 1:4* http://www.the-highway.com/Calvin_Eph3.html en Gal. 4:26-31 www.the-highway.com/Calvin_Gal4b.html. Also his commentary on *Matthew 23:37* (1555) and *John 6*.

³ This resulted in a lecture by me: 'La prédestination et la liberté humaine peuvent-elles faire ménage commun?' (Can predestination and human freedom go together?) at a conference on the meaning of Christian freedom in Aix-en-Provence in March 2007.

⁴ The parade is an action with the weapon, which prevents the attack from hurting the opponent. After a parade a riposte usually follows. The riposte is the attack following the parade. See J. van Eck, *Humanitas*, page 26.

Literature

A. De Quervain, *Calvin, Sein Lehren und Kampfen*, Berlin 1926.

A.D.R. Polman, *De praedestinatieleer van Augustinus, Thomas van Aquino en Calvin*, Franeker 1936.

François Wendel, *Calvin, sources et évolution de sa pensée religieuse*, Paris 1950.

J. Kamphuis, *Met Calvin in de impasse?*, Ermelo 1989.

H. Oberman, *De erfenis van Calvin. Groetheid en grenzen*, Kampen 1988.

J. van Eck, *God, mens, medemens. Humanitas in de theologie van Calvin*, Franeker 1992.

M. de Kroon, *De eer van God en het heil van de mens*, Leiden 1996.