THESES ON ELECTION, JESUS CHRIST, AND ASSURANCE IN CALVIN AND BARTH

Thesis 1: Election does not profit the elect until it is manifested to them by God’s call, which is of two sorts. The publication of the gospel in Scripture and its preaching by the church constitute a general call, while the illumination of individuals by the Spirit constitutes a special call that is productive of faith. This duality of calling does not mean, however, that God has a double will. (*Institutes*, 3.24.1-3, 8-9, 15-17)

We have had reason to reflect a number of times on the way in which Calvin distinguishes between the objective and subjective aspects of salvation. For Calvin, the objective aspect that Christ accomplished can be preached to the sinner only as a salvation in which such a one could potentially participate, but not in any sense as one in which such a one already does participate. A further step is needed, and that step is supplied by the Holy Spirit’s awakening of the individual to faith and establishing union with Christ. Because Calvin’s understanding of faith has such a strong cognitive aspect, a point upon which we have already had occasion to reflect, the “who” and “when” under consideration must be tied to the proclamation of the gospel. Only those who have encountered the gospel can be awakened, and those who are awakened are so awakened by means of encounter with the gospel. But, this cannot be just any encounter with the gospel. As Calvin’s famous estimate goes, even in his Geneva only 20-percent of the populace will respond to a sermon “with the ready obedience of faith” (3.24.12).

What makes the difference as to whether one responds positively or not to the preaching of the gospel is the illumination of the Spirit. While the gospel is proclaimed to any who can physically hear, the indiscriminate or general call to salvation there embodied remains ineffectual. But, when one who is elect hears the gospel, and when it is time for such a one to make the transition from unbelief to belief, “the inward illumination of [the] Spirit…causes the preached Word to dwell in their hearts” (3.24.8), which is to say that the Spirit creates faith in the elect and unites them with Christ. The doctrine of election is the depth-grammar that lies behind this work of the Spirit, establishing who will be thus awakened and when such awakening will occur. Calvin
parses the relation between election, effectual calling, and the Spirit’s illuminating work – although he does not use precisely these terms – through the images of fountain, pipe, and water (cf. 3.24.3). Election is the fountain from which an individual’s salvation springs, effectual calling is the pipe through which it comes to the individual, and the faith-creating work of the Spirit is the water that flows from the fountain and through the pipe.

This notion of duality in calling – a general calling offered to all and a special effectual calling of the elect – could lead one to assume that God has two wills, one whereby he wills that all people should be saved (1 Tim 2.3-4) and one whereby he wills that only the elect should be saved. As to the language of “all,” Calvin interprets such passages to be “concerned with classes of men, not men as individuals” (3.24.16). This is the beginning of an explanation concerning the appearance of a double will in God, but Calvin has more to say. He reads the content of the general call not as an indiscriminate offer of the gospel, but as an offering of salvation to any who would repent and accept it. “But only those whom [the Holy Spirit] has illuminated do this” (3.24.17). So, in the end, Calvin affirms that “although to our perception God’s will is manifold, he does not will this and that in himself;” it is, then, incumbent upon us “to recognize how wonderfully he wills what at the moment seems to be against his will” (ibid). Such sophistry, as Calvin might call a similar move in one of his opponents, plays into Barth’s concern – which we will encounter later – that Calvin’s electing God and that God’s electing are ultimately unknown and unknowable.

**Thesis 2:** There is a right way to seek assurance of one’s election, and there is a wrong way. The wrong way consists of investigating one’s election in a way that bypasses Scripture and one’s calling, while the right way focuses on these things. *(Institutes, 3.24.4-7)*

While it is true to say that one’s election only bears salvific fruit after one has been effectually called, it is false to say that one is not elect prior to this. In other words, effectual calling reveals one’s status as already elected, but it does not establish that status. Because of this relation, one’s
effectual calling can serve as assurance of one’s salvation. If one has truly been awakened to faith, then one can be confident in one’s election. One’s assurance is threatened, however, when one looks not to one’s effectual calling – and the gospel on which it is founded – but tries instead to penetrate into the inner recesses of God’s will to determine from that vantage point whether or not one is elect. Thus, when it comes to assurance, Calvin advises us “to begin with God’s call, and to end with it” (3.24.4). If one does this, Calvin is confident that one will find the doctrine of election to be soothing to one’s conscience, giving one peace through confidence of one’s salvation.

Calvin gives all this a further christological focus, but we will return later to the question of precisely what it means for Calvin to call Christ the “mirror” of our election (cf. 3.24.5). This is the absolutely basic question pertaining to our assurance of faith, as Zachman and Barth both indicate in their own ways.

It is necessary at present, however, to point out the seeds of the so-called “practical syllogism” that would be developed in Reformed theology, even if only to be ignored in many quarters as Barth points out. Calvin maintains that our assurance is based solely in our faith, here spoken of in terms of effectual calling, and therefore solely in the Spirit’s work within us. In more christological language, the Spirit has joined us to Christ. But, Calvin can easily turn around and exhort his readers as follows: “Let us therefore embrace Christ” for “we shall be numbered among his flock if we hear his voice” (3.24.6). Now, it is clear that Calvin means very little by this ‘if’ except to encourage his readers to godliness. But, such language might suggest that the quality of our hearing can be a way in which to judge, perhaps even quantitatively, whether one is elect. Such a thing does not seem to occur to Calvin – this is what Barth calls Calvin’s “happy inconsistency” (Church Dogmatics 2.2, 113) – but the seed of such a move is clearly present.

**Thesis 3: Nothing distinguishes the elect from the heathen before their effectual calling.** *(Institutes, 3.24.10-11)*
Calvin attempts in this material to further safeguard the gratuitous character of salvation. This functions with reference both to justification and election. First, with reference to justification: if one’s transition from unbelief to belief was simply the natural outworking of a “seed” already present within, then one’s justification – it might be argued – is predicated in some sense upon something possessed naturally rather than something alien that is given by grace and received by faith. Second, and with reference to election: the seed of election idea could imply (1) that there is some difference in nature between the elect and the reprobate, thereby calling into question all sorts of things including original sin and total depravity; and, concomitantly, (2) that God’s predestinating choice is really only foreknowledge of those who would possess this seed. Each and every of these implications would throw a major kink into Calvin’s thinking and, as far as he was concerned, Scripture’s teaching. Furthermore, by removing any hint that it is possible to discern the elect in any way prior to their effectual calling, Calvin prevents one’s past from providing any assurance of one’s election. There is absolutely nothing by which to distinguish between the elect and the reprobate prior to the former’s effectual calling. The elect “do not differ at all from the others except that they are protected by God’s especial mercy from rushing headlong into the final ruin of death” (3.24.10). In other words, the elect do not die until they have been effectually called. The implications of such a notion for the salvation of those who die in infancy before receiving their effectual calling – and we must remember here that Calvin’s does not believe in baptismal regeneration – seem not to have occurred to Calvin.

**Thesis 4:** Just as God has a plan for the elect and brings them to salvation through their effectual calling, so he has a plan for the reprobate and brings them to their destruction. Both of these plans are executed by the same external means. *(Institutes 3.24.12-14)*

This material ranks with some of the most questionable in Calvin, although it must be admitted that he is driven to it by his understanding of Scripture and especially by key passages in Exodus and
Ezekiel. These passages speak, respectively, of God hardening Pharaoh’s heart and confirming Israel in their rebellion against him. This suggests to Calvin the – as far as I can see – altogether nonsensical notion that the reprobate who are, to recall his metaphor from last week, dead in their sins and utterly unable to achieve salvation in any way must be further confirmed in their sin. Such comes about through encounter with the very same external means as is involved in the effectual calling of the elect, namely, the proclamation of the gospel. As Calvin puts it: “That they may come to their end, [God] sometimes deprives them of the capacity to hear his word; at other times he, rather, blinds and stuns them by the preaching of it” (3.24.12). The problematic point is that the reprobate never had any such capacity to be removed, although Calvin’s fuzziness with reference to the possibility of natural knowledge of God fits with their need to be blinded. In any case, Calvin might have been more consistent by speaking here not of an active and additional hardening, but of the outworking of reprobation in the reprobate’s life.

The deeper problem here, however, is how it can be accepted that God actively sends some to eternal torment (or so Calvin thought) in a way that is parallel and, as Barth might say, ‘balanced’ against the way in which the elect are set on the path to eternal blessedness. Calvin characteristically warns those who might be inclined to wonder about such that “he who here seeks a deeper cause than God’s secret and inscrutable plan will torment himself to no purpose” (3.24.12). We are left, then, simply with appeal to God’s unknowable predestining decision. This is fine in some respects, but it raises significant problems for Calvin in terms of maintaining how all this can be just. How can God justly condemn people to hell for their sins if they never even had a shot at avoiding it because of some decision God made before the fact? Calvin tries to have it both ways, that is, he tries to say both that the reprobate deserve it because of their sin and that this just happens to be the way God determined things: “The fact that the reprobate do not obey God’s Word when it is made known to them will be justly charged against the malice and depravity of their hearts,
provided it be added at the same time that they have been given over to this depravity because they have been raised up by the just but inscrutable judgment of God to show forth his glory in their condemnation” (3.24.14). Even though Calvin does all he can to maintain the former point about the wickedness of the reprobate, the way in which he sets up predestination as the logically superior moment – such as when election is called the fountain from which effectual calling flows – would suggest that reprobation is ultimately dependant not upon one’s wickedness but upon God’s decision. Just as one’s salvation has an eternal origin and does not depend on a consideration of works, so one’s condemnation has an eternal origin and does not depend on a consideration of works.

Given such a position, where everything depends on a choice God made about you in eternity, it is not hard to understand how one’s assurance of salvation could be badly shaken thereby. One can do one’s best to cleave to the experience of one’s effectual calling, and the conviction that one is a member of Christ’s flock, but there must always be a nagging question about this eternal decision in the back of one’s mind. This question can be put to rest one of two ways. First, a ‘practical syllogism’ might be developed whereby the fruits of one’s union with Christ are thought to be empirically identifiable and can thus be taken as proof of one’s election. This is the path tread by many who followed Calvin. Second, Calvin’s understanding of predestination might be thoroughly overhauled. This is the path taken by Barth, and it is to the Church Dogmatics that we now turn.

Thesis 5: Barth notes the dogmatic location of the doctrine of election in Calvin’s theology, and registers some warnings about its basis in Calvin’s thought. As per Barth’s reading, Calvin builds the doctrine – in fact if not intention – on the questionable foundations of pedagogic usefulness and experience. (Church Dogmatics 2.2, 37-41, 85-7)

While dogmatic location should not be the final word on a particular theologian’s treatment of a doctrine, it always pays to understand why a particular doctrine is located in a particular place. Let
us then, like Barth, note the dogmatic location of Calvin’s doctrine of election. Book 3 of the *Institutes* first introduces us to the union that the Spirit establishes between Christ and ourselves by creating faith in us. Calvin then provides an account of sanctification that culminates in a discussion of the Christian life as self-denial. Next, and as we saw last week, justification is treated. Following this, Calvin treats Christian freedom and prayer before turning in Chapter 21 to the doctrine of election, which occupies him for the remainder of the Book except for the final chapter on the eschatological resurrection.

This placement suggests two things. First, it suggests that Calvin’s doctrine of election has something of a practical weight. It is found here after sanctification and justification because it is what ultimately lies behind them, and when one has already been introduced to the former, the latter must necessarily be included to round off the treatment. In this sense it reinforces the gratuitous character of salvation, and thus – as Barth rightly points out (cf. *CD* 2.2, 37-8) – has a pedagogic function as well as aesthetic appeal. While there is nothing inherently wrong with this, Barth is right to point out that Calvin gets perhaps too much satisfaction from this point. Second, and much more nefarious as far as Barth is concerned, is the way in which Calvin repeatedly appeals to experience in elucidating this doctrine (cf. *Institutes*, 3.24.1 *et al*). On Barth’s reading, and I think he is substantially right on this point, Calvin allows his observations of how some accept the gospel and some reject it to unduly color his interpretation of Scripture on this doctrine. Scripture finally functions as an explanation for this otherwise demonstrable ‘fact,’ rather than as that which establishes all pertinent ‘facts.’ The end result is that “the electing God” in Calvin’s doctrine comes “to resemble far too closely the electing, and more particularly the rejecting theologian” (*CD* 2.2, 41).
Thesis 6: The fundamentally important aspect of any doctrine of election is how that doctrine accounts for Jesus Christ. While Calvin calls him the “mirror” of election, it makes a big difference precisely what is reflected in that mirror. (*Church Dogmatics* 2.2, 65-6, 106-15; *Institutes* 3.24.5)

Calvin certainly wants to affirm that, when it comes to our assurance of election, we ought not to look to ourselves but to Christ. But, what precisely is reflected in this mirror? Is God and God’s electing decision reflected in Christ, or is it simply our faith that is reflected there? It must be admitted that the main line in Calvin is the latter. For instance, it is not election in general that one contemplates in Christ, but one’s own election. Calvin’s admonition is that one should look to Christ and rest on the confidence given by faith that we are united with Christ. And yet, this is only “sufficiently clear and firm testimony” (*Institutes* 3.24.5), not absolutely so. It cannot be absolutely so because the actual content of God’s electing (and rejecting) decree is never revealed to us. What is revealed is the means by which the salvation posited by that electing decree is achieved – i.e., Jesus Christ – but not the electing itself. Jesus is simply the place where God “announces salvation to all men indiscriminately” (ibid, 3.24.17). The content of the eternal decision where God “ordained from eternity those whom he wills to embrace in love, and those whom upon whom he wills to vent his wrath” (ibid) is never revealed. And, in this sense, the God who does this electing is consequently never revealed. This is what Barth means when he calls Calvin’s electing God “a *Deus nudus absconditus*” (*CD* 2.2, 111).

Christ as the mirror of our election in Calvin is simply the place where we see the possibility of salvation presented, and where we can evaluate the state of our own faith. Neither consideration in and of itself is very comforting. But, there is another line in Calvin, and this is the one that Barth picks up in his own work. In a highly significant but brief comment, Calvin exhorts us not to look to God the Father for our assurance of election “if we conceive him as severed from his Son” (*Institutes* 3.24.5). Barth refuses to do precisely this, whereas Calvin – while his instincts were
good – could not carry through on them. To put it in Barthian terms, Calvin conceives of Christ as the chiefly elected human who secures salvation for the remainder of the elect. While he wants us to think of God the Father as he is revealed in Christ, by locating the eternal decision of election behind Christ’s back, as it were, he has made this theoretically impossible. This is the issue that van Buren repeatedly points to when he suggests in numerous places in *Christ in Our Place* (cf. 22, for example) that Calvin tended at critical moments to unduly separate the divine and human natures in Christ.

While Calvin understands Jesus Christ as the elected human, Barth understands him to be both the elected human and – most importantly – the electing God. For Barth, the very first work of God *ad extra* is the election of Jesus Christ. This means that the eternal Son who becomes incarnate as Jesus Christ has his being, at least insofar as his being is turned toward us, as a being in anticipation of this incarnation (*logos incarnandus*) even when the Son is not yet enfleshed (*logos asarkos*). This human history which God has elected to hypostatically unite to his own second mode of being is now determinative of what it means for God to be God with respect to his creation. Furthermore, it means that his history – Jesus Christ – is the first, last, and only thing that God has to say concerning his saving will for humanity. Thus, when we look to Christ for assurance of our election, we truly find it because in Christ we see that God is altogether and fundamentally for us (*pro nobis*). Finally, the “us” here must be understood as referring not only to elect individuals as opposed to rejected individuals, but to the entirety of humanity. Unlike Calvin, when Barth reads “all” in the New Testament, he takes it to mean all, full stop. Barth is able to deploy such an account of election because he was doggedly determined to avoid conceiving of the Father as severed from his Son, Jesus Christ. To say that Christ is the mirror of election on Barth’s account is to affirm that in Christ we see the electing God and know the content of that election, namely, that “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son” (*John* 3.16).
Thesis 7: Barth’s doctrine of election is elaborated in both discontinuity and continuity with previous Reformed accounts of predestination. There are four ‘points of contact’ for this continuity-in-discontinuity: (1) faith, (2) grace, and assurance under the aspects of (3) perseverance and (4) knowledge. *(Church Dogmatics 2.2, 325-40)*

(1) Barth is perfectly willing to grant the point to the Reformed tradition that “the elect are those who…believe” (326). This is where the continuity lies. But, he refuses to admit that the one who believes is fundamentally different from the one who does not, i.e., the former is elect and the latter is reprobate. Rather than speak of those who do not believe, then, Barth speaks rather consistently of those who do not *yet* believe. On Barth’s account of election, the one who believes and the one who does not yet believe share the objective status of elected and reconciled to God in Jesus Christ: “In faith [the believer] realises the possibility which objectively is the only one for [the unbeliever] too. The believer cannot possibly recognise in the unbelief of others a final fact” (327).

(2) The Reformed have always pointed to the doctrine of predestination as a final safeguard against understanding salvation as anything other than entirely gracious. Barth does not seek to undermine this, and affirms in his own doctrine the entirely gratuitous nature of the salvation wrought for us in Jesus Christ. But, that is just the point. Whereas the older Reformed tradition emphasized the grace shown to the elect, it did so by introducing a dubious distinction whereby there is no grace shown to the reprobate. In this way, Barth maintains, they failed to understand the grace in question as “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” (329).

(3) Calvin is to be credited for advancing the view whereby those once truly awakened by the Holy Spirit through their effectual call to saving faith in and union with Christ are preserved in that state. Once God has made the decision of election, his mind does not change (cf. 332). Barth certainly wants to affirm this. The problem, as we have seen before, is that the election in question is one that is hidden from us and thus our assurance is undermined by a lack of knowledge, despite
this powerful teaching of preservation. It is the question of knowledge as it relates to assurance that Barth picks up in his fourth and final point here.

(4) This is the issue to which we have repeatedly turned. It is really the crux of the matter. How can I know that I am elect? Barth credits Calvin for maintaining three crucial points in answering this question: (i) election’s fruit in one’s life cannot take center stage in such considerations; (ii) when they are considered, these fruits ought not be separated from faith and the work of the Holy Spirit, which are the source of such fruit; and (iii), such fruits ought not be separated from consideration of Jesus Christ and the forgiveness of sin promised in him and in the objective Word. Passing over Barth’s interesting and penetrating treatment of how things went wrong in the Reformed tradition on these points, Barth nonetheless affirms that such fruits have an important place in our assurance of salvation. It is of vital import that one should serve as a witness to oneself of one’s election. But, there are a further three points to keep in mind here: (i) bearing witness to one’s own election is nothing more or less than bearing witness to Jesus Christ as the electing God and elected human being, and one’s own election in Christ; (ii) the witness to oneself in question “can have absolutely nothing to do with self-examination and self-evaluation” (339-40) but instead has to do with proclamation of the gospel to one’s neighbor; and (iii), insofar as one is assured of one’s election in these ways, one recognizes that there is “a mysterious correspondence (even identity), not between the hidden counsel of God and the condition of [one’s] own piety and morality, but between the election of Jesus Christ and the miracle of the actual fulfillment of [one’s] faith” attested in the fact that one is “enabled to be the bearer and recipient (and messenger) of this witness” (340).