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JOHN CALVIN

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REV. R. A. WEBB, D. D.,
Louisville, Ky.

CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF INFANT SALVATION.

REV. R. A. WEBB, D. D. LL. D,
Kentucky Theological Seminary.

By appointment of the last Assembly, I appear with a brief in defence of Calvin against the charge of teaching the actual damnation of some infants who die in their infancy.

The accusation has been so widely and industriously circulated that its truthfulness, with many, passes as a matter of course, too well known to be disputed, too obvious to be contradicted.

While Luther was essentially a "breaker," and Protestantism is an everlasting debtor to him for shivering ecclesiastical medievalism, and emancipating the religious mind; it was devolved by Providence upon Calvin to indoctrinate the Reformation, and give to the movement that system of evangelical truth—those principles and convictions—necessary to sustain it and save it from final collapse. Protestantism is no stronger than Calvinism, and the Reformation will last no longer than Calvinism endures.

If, therefore, the name of the great Genevan—the theologian of the Reformation—can be cleansed of any aspersion, by what rises only to the rank of a plausible exculpation, one would naturally expect a grateful Protestant world to accept it with joy, and acclaim it with delight. The spirit which could be pleased with a cloud

upon his great and serviceable name is nothing short of inscrutable.

It is sought to sustain this charge against Calvin in two ways. It is held, first, that certain quotations from his writings warrant the charge that the consciously and avowedly held that some infants, dying in infancy, are finally lost. Then it is held, in the second place, that infant damnation is a logical and necessary implicate of his theological system.

Now Calvin certainly taught the doctrine of Predestination, and with it classified all mankind as elect and reprobate. From such a conclusion he did not shrink, but boldly avowed it and defended it.

It is also indisputable that Calvin held that Predestination determined destiny, and that there was no way by which any person could escape the fate fixed for him by divine decree.

And it is equally certain that he taught that Predestination was eternal, antedating the birth of every human being; and consequently that all infants make their advent into the world, either as elect infants or as non-elect infants. From such a conclusion neither he nor his disciples recoil.

We are compelled then to consider his views, first as to elect infants, and then as to non-elect infants.

ELECT INFANTS.

Concerning elect infants, dying in infancy, it is undeniable that Calvin taught two things: (1) the fact of their salvation, and (2) the mode of their salvation.

As to the *fact* of their salvation we have this explicit assertion in his own language:

"Now, it is certain that some infants are saved; and that they are previously regenerated by the Lord is beyond all doubt."—*Institutes*, Book IV., Chap. XVI., Sec. 17.

There are other supplementary quotations which could be made just as explicit upon this point; but this is categorical enough to satisfy any fair mind, and there is nothing in his writings which any one adduces in support of the contention that Calvin taught the damnation of any elect infant. Indeed no one has the hardihood to bring such an accusation against him.

But Calvin not only taught the fact of the salvation of all elect infants; he also showed the *mode* in which they are saved; and thus differentiated himself from the theology of his day, and laid down immortal principles for all Protestant theology. He says:

"But, however this may be, we consider it as clear, beyond all controversy, that not one of the elect is called out of the present life, without having been previously regenerated and sanctified by the Spirit of God. . . . We deny that it ought to be concluded from this (that the word is in the instrument of conversion), that infants cannot be regenerated by the power of God, which it is as easy to him as it is wonderful and mysterious to us. Besides, it would not be safe to affirm, that the Lord cannot reveal Himself in any way so as to make himself known to them."—*Institutes*, Book IV., Chap. XVI., Sec. 18.

"If any of those who are the objects of divine election, after having received the sign of regeneration, depart out of this life before they have attained years of discretion, the Lord renews them by the power of His Spirit, incomprehensible to us, in such a manner as He

alone foresees will be necessary.”—*Institutes*, Book IV., Chapter XVI., Sec. 21.

In these quotations, and in other places, he distinctly rejects the Pelagian view, which, denying original sin, grounded the salvation of dead children in their supposed innocence and sinlessness; and he also rejects the prevailing Romish view which grounded it in the baptism of such as had received that ordinance.

As against both Pelagians and Romanists, Calvin predicated infant salvation upon their election by the Father, their redemption by the Son, and their regeneration and sanctification of the Spirit. Such a program made the salvation of the infant, *as an infant*, possible. Calvin is entitled to the praise of having shown this originally and clearly.

NON-ELECT INFANTS.

While it is thus indisputably true that Calvin did thus avow and explain the salvation of all elect infants, dying in infancy, what did he hold concerning the fate of non-elect infants? Did he hold that there were any such infants? Did he hold that any such infants die in infancy? Did he hold that any such infants are finally damned? These are the questions over which there is debate and controversy.

Concerning the first of these questions, Calvin certainly held that there were reprobate infants, for he distinctly taught that reprobation was eternal and antenatal, and consequently that all reprobate persons make their advent into this life as reprobate.

He certainly taught that all reprobate persons are finally lost. But he did not teach that any reprobate persons are lost *as infants*. He did not teach that any

reprobate persons die in infancy. He did explicitly teach that some elect infants die in infancy and are saved as infants; but he did not teach that any reprobate infants die in infancy and are damned *as infants*.

But his accusers charge that this is precisely what he did teach, namely, *that some reprobate infants die in infancy and are damned as infants*. To prove this accusation they undertake to quote his language, and then to support the quotations by showing that the doctrine is a logical implicate of his system of theology.

I shall undertake to show that neither the quotations, nor the system, warrant this accusation of the most illustrious genius Protestantism has ever produced.

Concerning non-elect infants. To appreciate Calvin's position a distinction must be drawn between *condemnation* and *damnation*.

Condemnation is the pronouncement of sentence; damnation is the execution of that sentence. It is the office of the judge to condemn—to pronounce the criminal worthy of death; it is the office of the sheriff to carry that sentence into execution—to inflict the penalty assessed by the court. A longer or shorter time may intervene between the imposition of the sentence and the execution of the same.

Now Calvin taught, unmistakably, that a judgment of condemnation, predicated upon their original sin, was passed upon all non-elect infants; but he does not teach that that sentence was executed upon any non-elect infant while in its infancy, during the period of its moral minority.

They are condemned when infants; they are executed only as adults. They are condemned on account of original, or Adamic, sin; they actually perish only on account of actual, or personal, sin.

This is the distinction which many of his critics overlook. They hear him say that this class of infants are guilty, depraved, condemned, and reprobate; and then, unwarrantably, leap to the conclusion that he must have held that the judgment of death is executed upon some non-elect infants *while infants*.

Calvin teaches infant condemnation, but he nowhere teaches infant damnation.

He asserts that all persons who are not the subjects of God's saving grace will finally be lost, but he explicitly, and throughout, teaches that all the reprobate "procure"—(that is his own word)—"*procure*" their own destruction; and they procure their destruction by their own personal and conscious acts of "impiety," "wickedness," and "rebellion."

Now reprobate infants, though guilty of original sin and under condemnation, cannot, while they are infants, thus "procure" their own destruction by their personal acts of impiety, wickedness, and rebellion. They must, therefore, live to the years of moral responsibility in order to perpetrate the acts of impiety, wickedness and rebellion, which Calvin defines as the *mode* through which they procure their destruction.

While, therefore, Calvin teaches that there are reprobate infants, and that these will be finally lost, he nowhere teaches that they will be lost *as infants*, and *while they are infants*; but, on the contrary, he declares that all the reprobate "procure" their own destruction by personal acts of impiety, wickedness and rebellion. Consequently, his own reasoning compels him to hold (to be consistent with himself), that no reprobate child can die in its infancy; but all such must live to the age of moral accountability, and translate original sin into actual sin.

Calvin's critics seek to fasten the charge of infant damnation upon him in two ways: (1) By quoting certain detached sentences from his writings, and (2) and chiefly, by charging that it is a logical implicate of his theology.

QUOTATIONS.

Concerning all these citations, I make the following general remarks:

(1) They are relatively few in number; too few to justify the conclusion that Calvin consciously avowed the dogma of infant damnation. Calvin's writings number more than fifty volumes, some of them dogmatic, some exegetical, some controversial, some epistolary. His critics have searched his multitudinous pages for language which could be quoted in proof of the charge that he taught the doctrine of the damnation of infants. With all their diligence and zeal they have been able to point out less than a dozen sentences, or parts of sentences, in the thousands of pages which he wrote, which even seem to support their charge.

(2) They were all passing utterances; mere *obiter dicta*; made while addressing himself to other topics; not one of them was written for the purpose of revealing his mind on the dogma of infant damnation. It is therefore unfair and illegitimate to hold him to a construction of language which he employed in the development of other subjects, and wrote when the fate of infants was not present to his mind.

(3) All these citations have a context; and when they are taken in connection with their immediate contexts,

and also in connection with the whole system of truth which he was inculcating, they are susceptible of a different interpretation from that which his opponents' put upon them.

When, therefore, we consider the relative fewness of these quotations, their purpose, occasion and contexts, it is clearly improper to hold Calvin responsible for the construction which his critics force upon them.

To test the charge that the doctrine of the damnation of infants, *as infants*, is inferable from the language which Calvin employed, I select a few of the most pronounced and oft-quoted passages for examination.

The first of these passages is taken from his *Institutes*, Book II, Chap. I., Sec. 7, as follows:

"And therefore infants themselves, as they bring their condemnation into the world with them, are rendered obnoxious to punishment by their own sinfulness, not by the sinfulness of another. For though they have not yet produced the fruits of their iniquity, yet they have the seed of it within them; even their whole nature is as it were a seed of sin, and therefore cannot but be odious and abominable to God. Whence it follows, that is properly accounted sin in the sight of God, because there could be no guilt without crime."

The subjects of these predications are not some infants, but all infants, elect and reprobate alike and co-equally. All mankind having sinned in Adam and fell with him in the first transgression, all infants "bring their condemnation into the world with them," "are rendered obnoxious to punishment by their own sinfulness," and "their whole nature is a seed of sin." This is but the assertion of the well known doctrine of original sin—the doctrine of the universal guilt and native depravity

of the entire race. It is but saying of all infants what David specifically said of himself. But surely the predication of the guilt and corruption of the entire race is not synonymous with the actual damnation of the entire human family, for he has asserted over and over again the salvation of some of the race. It is a *non sequitur* to reason from the universal condemnation of mankind to the actual damnation of some infants. Calvin does say, with Paul, that all are "by nature the children of wrath"—that all are guilty and corrupt and obnoxious to God—but he does not here say that any reprobate child dies in this state of condemnation and perishes as an infant in hell before the "seed" that is within him "produces the fruits of iniquity"—conscious actual sins.

A second favorite quotation of his accusers is made from his *Institutes*, Book IV., Chap. XVI., Sec. 17:

"It is certain that some infants are saved."

It is argued herefrom that if Calvin so explicitly said that "some infants are saved," he must have intended to indicate that some other infants are not saved. An affirmation about some is held to be equal to an antithetical denial about others.

In the place quoted, Calvin is arguing for the rite of infant baptism. He is replying to the objection that the ordinance ought not to be administered to babies because they cannot understand its import. He says: It is perfectly certain and undeniable that some infants are regenerated; neither we nor they understand how they are regenerated; but our ignorance of the *modus operandi* does not obliterate the fact; and, consequently, if they can be regenerated without their understanding the process, it would be legitimate to give them the baptismal sign of their regeneration, although they are unable to

understand and appreciate the ordinance. The whole context renders it perfectly certain that Calvin was not here saying that some infants are saved in order to imply that some are not.

Then Calvin's accusers bring forward his comment upon Ezek. xviii.: "As to infants they seem to perish not by their own fault but by the fault of another; but there is a double solution. Though sin does not yet appear in them, yet it is latent; for they bear corruption shut up in the soul, so that before God they are damnable." And to this they add a comment of like import upon Isa. xiv. 21: "When the Lord rejects the godless man with his offspring, there is certainly no expostulation which we can make with God. . . . This therefore is to be held for certain, that all who are destitute of the grace of God are included under the sentence of eternal death; whence it follows that the children of the reprobate, whom the curse of God follows, are subject to the same sentence."

There is a distinction perfectly obvious between *damnability* and *damnation*. One is a liability and the other is an actual execution. Calvin does say in these comments that all infants, elect and reprobate, are justly "damnable," not only because of their Adamic connection, but also because sin is "latent" in them, because of "the corruption shut up in the soul." But he does not say that any child, as a child and while a child, is actually *damned* before what is "latent" becomes manifest. Such an inference is a clear reading into his words what he did not say, and forcing his language to yield a meaning which he did not put into it.

It is literally and evangelically true that "all who are destitute of the grace of God are included under the

sentence of eternal death;" and it is likewise true that "the children of the reprobate," who are also destitute of grace, are subject to the "same sentence" of eternal death. But surely there is a distinction between the pronouncement of a sentence and the execution of that sentence; and Calvin does not here say, directly or by good and necessary consequence, that this sentence of eternal death is executed upon reprobate children while they are children. We need to be carrying this distinction with us all the while when reading the great Reformer—the distinction between the pronouncement of a sentence and the execution of that sentence. That sentence is pronounced upon all indiscriminately; it certainly is not, Calvin being the expositor, executed upon all universally and indiscriminately.

Another favorite passage which Calvin's accusers quote with great confidence is the famous one which he uttered in his controversy with Pighius: "If Pighius holds that original sin is not sufficient to damn men, and that the secret counsel of God is not to be admitted, what will he do with children and infants, who, before they have reached an age at which they can give any such specimens (of good and evil deeds) are snatched from this life? When the conditions of birth and death were alike to those who die in Sodom and Jerusalem, and there was no difference in their works, why will Christ, at the last day, with some standing at his right hand, separate others at his left? Who will not adore the wonderful decision of God whereby it comes to pass that some are born at Jerusalem, whence soon they pass to a better life, while Sodom, the entrance to the lower region, receives others at their birth. Moreover, I by no means deny that Christ awards the meed of righteous-

ness to the elect, so the reprobate will then suffer for their impiety and crimes.”—*De Acterna Dei Predestinatione*. Tom VIII.

This passage gives me more trouble than any which I have encountered. Pighius has denied that original sin, by itself, is sufficient to damn any man. Calvin asserts against his opponent that original sin is intrinsically so heinous as to be, by itself, a just ground of damnation. To make good his contention he points to children and infants who are snatched away from this life before they come to the years of moral responsibility. Some of these dead children, he seems to say, will, at the last day, stand on the right hand of Christ and some on his left. Some of them, he seems to say, will go from Jerusalem to a better life, and some from Sodom to the regions below. This is the interpretation which his critics put upon his language.

But let us remember that Calvin is in controversy with Pighius over a very serious matter—whether original sin is sin in a strict and proper sense, or only misfortune and moral blemish. His contention is that original sin is so heinous as to be intrinsically worthy of damnation. This is his point—the *sufficiency of original sin*, unsupplemented by actual sin, *to damn men*. He will not tolerate the doctrine that original sin is a trifling, blameless blemish. The proof of its malignity is that children die in Jerusalem as well as in Sodom. Now he adds, that, while I hold that original sin is sufficient to damn men, I by no means deny that it is Christ who bestows righteousness upon the elect, while the reprobate “suffer for their impiety and crimes.” But infants cannot be guilty of *impiety* and *crimes*, while they are infants; and yet the reprobate suffer for their *impiety* and

crimes; so we must conclude that Calvin did not here mean to convey the idea that reprobate infants stand on the left of Christ as infants, or that they go down to death through the gates of Sodom while they are still in the irresponsible infant stage of life. In short, to make him teach infant damnation in this place is to make him clearly inconsistent with himself. It would be fairer to construe the language as strong words, not sufficiently guarded, in the emergencies of fierce and vital debate.

But the passage most confidently relied upon to prove that Calvin held the doctrine of infant damnation is the following from his *Institutes*, Book III., Chap. XXXIII., Sec. 7: "I inquire again, how it came to pass that the fall of Adam, independent of any remedy, should involve so many nations with their infant children in eternal death, but because such was the will of God."

Here the predication is that the fall of Adam, when the gracious remedy is thought out of sight, involved many nations, with their infant children, in eternal death. This, say his critics, settles it; for he distinctly says, "infant children in eternal death," and that by "the will of God."

But the context eliminates from the passage the whole idea of infant damnation. The quotation is made from that chapter of the *Institutes* in which Calvin answers objections to Predestination.

The first objection is: *God precludes Himself from finding fault because reprobation antedates the actual sinning of His creatures.* To this, Calvin makes the sublapsarian reply, that, while chronologically reprobation precedes sinning, logically—at the moment of forming the decree in the divine mind—mankind was conceived as created and fallen. "If all whom the Lord predes-

tinates to death are in their natural condition liable to the sentence of death, what injustice do they complain of receiving from him? . . . If they have all been taken from a corrupt mass, it is no wonder that they are subject to condemnation. Let them not, therefore, accuse God of injustice."

The second objection he gives his attention to is the following: *Reprobation necessitates the very sin for which the reprobate are condemned.* To this objection he makes the following effective reply: God having ætetermined to pass by a corrupt and guilty sinner and leave him in his natural state unregenerated by divine grace, does thus doom him by the negative act of letting him alone and leaving him to himself for the destiny of his own making.

But to this resolution of this objection, some of his critics took the ground that God made no decree concerning the lost of any kind; that is, denied the decree of reprobation outright. To this Calvin replied: If God made no decree, concerning the lost, of one kind or another—if the divine will was only negative and the divine attitude neutral and non-committal—then, in that case, under that supposition, how can his opponents explain the fact that the fall of Adam involved not only Adam himself, but also many nations with their infant children in eternal death?"

It is a Biblical fact that the fall of Adam did involve not only Adam himself, but all his posterity, in a ruin, independent of any remedy, would be eternal. Now this consequence, he argues, was either (1) by nature, or (2) by the will of God. He denies that the involvement of the race in the fall of Adam was a naturalistic result, and affirms that it was a judicial judgment of God. His

express language is: "This (the race's participation in the sin of Adam), not being attributable to nature, it is evident must have proceeded from the wonderful counsel of God."

This is the purpose and the connection of the famous sentence in which Calvin called the decree of reprobation an "horrible decree." Think, says Calvin, the remedy out the way—think the whole scheme of saving grace as non-existent—then how could you explain the fact that the fall of Adam involved "nations and their infant children" in a death which would have otherwise been eternal, except you say it was because God so willed it?

It is clear that Calvin has not asserted in this place, said to be the strongest passage on the subject which can be quoted, the doctrine of infant damnation. He has said here that God has passed by some "nations with their infant children" and left them to the doom of "eternal death," but he has not here said that any reprobate infant dies in its infancy and is consigned to "eternal death" while it is an infant.

INFERENCES.

But the main reliance of Calvin's accusers is upon their logical deductions from his theological system. Their interpretation of certain isolated passages from his writings are made plausible because of their inferences from his doctrine of Predestination.

He did hold that all mankind were united to Adam by divine ordination; that they sinned in him and fell with him in his first transgression; that all the race did thus become guilty and depraved; that God did pronounce upon the entire human family therefor a sentence

of eternal death; that children are consequently born into the world under guilt and condemnation; that out of this "corrupt mass" God did elect some to everlasting life and pass by others with His saving mercy and leave them in their estate of sin and misery; that this Predestination was eternal and antenatal; that all infants consequently make their appearance in the world either as elect or reprobate, with final destiny determined; but he nowhere taught, by direction or by indirection, that this sentence of eternal death is executed upon any non-elect infant while in its infantile state.

There are two reasons why his theology would require him to hold, in order to be consistent with himself, that no reprobate infant can perish in its infancy.

1. He everywhere taught that the reprobate "procure" their own destruction. That is, they are the active, conscious agents in bringing about their own doom.

In his last chapter on Predestination, in which he closes and dismisses the subject, he contrasts the mode in which the elect actually attain their predestined end, and the mode in which the reprobate realize their predestined death. The elect come to heaven by the effectual operation of the grace of the Spirit, but the reprobate come to their dreadful doom by the effectual operation of their own will. The elect are patients and the Spirit is the agent of their salvation; but the reprobate are agents and the Spirit is patient in their actual damnation.

He heads this last chapter: "Election confirmed by the divine call. The destined destruction of the reprobate procured by themselves" (Book III., Chapter XXIV.). This is his final thesis and last contention: *The benefits of election are procured for the elect by*

divine vocation; but the destined destruction of the reprobate is procured by themselves.

How are these two decrees—election and reprobation—executed in time and made manifest in experience? Calvin answers: Election is made manifest, revealed, declared, developed in conscious experience by the divine call; the other decree—reprobation—is translated into history and experience by the reprobate themselves through their own personal and conscious acts of sin—the destined destruction of the reprobate is procured by themselves.”

He says: “The destined destruction of the reprobate is procured by themselves” (Book III., Chapter XXIV.). Again: God does what He does to the reprobate because of “their impiety, wickedness, and ingratitude” (Book III., Chapter XXIV., Section 14). Again: “They can do nothing but what is deserving of his curse” (Book III., Chapter XXIV., Section 17).

In the execution of the decree of election, Calvin predicates the divine causality; but in the execution of the decree of reprobation he predicates the causality of the reprobate themselves. In other words: while *original sin* was the ground of a universal, race-wide condemnation, *actual sin* is the necessary premise of actual damnation.

This being true, it is a logical implicate of his premises that no reprobate child could die in its infancy, but must be kept alive by the providence of God to the years of moral discretion, so that it could “procure” its own destruction by translating the corruption which is “latent” into sin of omission and commission.

2. A second premise of Calvin which precludes the idea of his holding infant damnation is his doctrine of resurrection and punishment.

He says: "It would be as light punishment to be destroyed by death, if they (the reprobate) were not to be brought before the Judge whose infinite and endless vengeance they have incurred, to receive the punishment due to their rebellion" (Book III., Chapter XXV., Section 9).

There is something incongruous and absurd in an infant being "brought" before a Judge to answer for his "rebellion"! Yet this must be charged upon the great Genevan, if we make him teach that any non-elect infants die in infancy. That an infant eight days of age should be engaged in a rebellion against God is something unthinkable.

The whole idea of *punishment* cannot be associated with infants without shocking the very genius of Calvin's theological system. Punishment, strictly speaking, is that suffering which is inflicted upon a person because of his guilt. For suffering to be punishment the subject must be aware in conscience of the moral reason for the infliction. A horse can be made to suffer because he has a nervous system, but he cannot be punished because he has no conscience. An infant can be made to suffer, because it has a sentiment nature; but it cannot be punished, because its conscience has not been developed to the degree where it can appreciate the moral reason for its suffering.

But the death of an infant must be either *penal* or *disciplinary*. The death of a reprobate infant cannot be *disciplinary*, because it is non-elect and outside the pale of the scheme of grace; and its death cannot be *penal*, because it cannot in conscience appreciate the moral meaning of death.

Therefore, we must conclude from Calvin's general premises, that a reprobate infant cannot die as an infant.

On the contrary we must conclude from his general teaching about the justice and judgment of God, that the divine providence must keep all reprobate children alive until they can reach the years of their moral majority, and translate their original sin into actual sin, so as to create a ground, in conscience and consciousness, for their actual punishment.

It is a fair inference from his whole theology, that he predicated *actual damnation* only upon *actual transgression*.

I. Calvin did, explicitly and avowedly, teach the salvation of all elect infants which die in their infancy.

II. He taught, contrary to the Romanism and Pelagianism of his day, that the mode of the salvation of infants was (1) by the election of the Father, (2) by the atonement of the Son, and (3) by the vocation of the Spirit. He said that the Spirit could regenerate, and sanctify, and communicate, with infants in a manner inscrutable to us.

III. Concerning reprobate infants, he taught that there were such infants; that they were involved, with their parents, in the Adamic fall and curse; and that they are all born into the world guilty, depraved, and condemned.

IV. He did not teach that any reprobate infants die in their infancy, and so have executed upon them the sentence of eternal death while at an infantile and irresponsible age.

V. He did teach that all the reprobate "procure their own destined destruction" by their overt and conscious acts of disobedience; and that their final damnation would be predicated upon their evil deeds.

VI. He did teach that all the reprobate must appear before God as a Judge, and receive the judicial punishment due to their sins, which requires us to infer that every one so dealt with must be morally full-grown.

VII. Wherefore we must conclude that Calvin, to be consistent with the ruling principles of his theology, must have held that no reprobate child died in infancy; but that, on the contrary, all such infants live to the age of moral maturity, and "procure their destined destruction" by "their impiety and crimes" and by their "rebellion" against God.