

Herman Bavinck's Notebook on Calvin's Doctrine of Sin

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Translator's Introduction

How does one fit together the sovereignty of God and sin? Bavinck turns to Calvin for advice, or at least turns to his edition of the *Institutes* to wrestle seriously with the Genevan Doctor's reflections on the subject matter. Below is a translation of Bavinck's notebook on Calvin's doctrine of sin.¹

The Calvin notes are undated by Bavinck and therefore somewhat difficult to place. Nonetheless, a subsequent page in the notebook is dated "Maart 77" (March '77), so it is likely that the Calvin notes were written prior to this date, during Bavinck's early student years at Leiden before he became a candidate in theology. If so, the notes are likely the reflections of a young Bavinck on Calvin. His honesty in the preamble is an insight into his own irenic spirit and the mind of a young theologian at work.

One must be careful not to read too much into Bavinck's preamble to these notes. Bavinck was not questioning the doctrine of election. As late as 1918 Bavinck gave a speech on predestination, in which he stated, "Election is the crown!"² Both in this notebook and in that speech, Bavinck engages the tension between the doctrine of sin and God's sovereignty in the system of Reformed theology.

I've done my best to maintain Bavinck's style. Where I have made additions, it is to forge a smoother experience for the reader. These instances,

¹Herman Bavinck, "Zonde bij Calvijn," (n.d.), box 346, folder 284, archive 176 of the Historical Documentation Centre, Free University, Amsterdam (hereafter abbreviated as "Bavinck Archive").

²Herman Bavinck, "Praedestinatie," (1918), box 346, folder 406, Bavinck Archive, 1–12, on 12.

which are few, are in brackets. In the text below, anything that was originally in Latin rather than Dutch is italicized. In places where Bavinck's Latin notes are identical to Calvin's own Latin, I've used the John T. McNeill and Ford Lewis Battles edition of the *Institutes* as the translation, and noted the reference in that edition in a footnote.³ Thus, all of the footnotes below are mine and not in the original text. The underlined words are underlined in the Dutch original.

Calvin's Doctrine of Sin⁴

[1] This belief [in sin] is that of the Christian church universally, of all ecclesial parties. Election, the sovereignty of God is the specialty of the Reformed church. Therefore, the first universal [belief] should never be sacrificed to the second.

Calvin and the Reformed have self-consciously, with full awareness, with conscious inconsistency allowed sin to exist alongside predestination.

Sin hangs together with the whole system.

Instit. II.i.1 — a) Knowledge of oneself is necessary, of our excellent nature, but also of our fall. b) Men hear and prefer praise, but this is self-deception. c) Method of self-knowledge: our obligation for which we were created and our *capacity* to satisfy them.

Instit. II.i.4 — Not greediness, but pride “*Unfaithfulness, then, was the root of the fall*”⁵ and as a result of that: ambition, pride. “*if apostasy, by which man withdraws from the authority of his Maker—indeed insolently shakes off*

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (London: S. C. M. Press, 1961).

⁴ Herman Bavinck, “Zonde bij Calvijn.” (n.d.), box 346, folder 284, Bavinck Archive.

⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.i.4, 245.

his yoke—is a foul and detestable offense, it is vain to extenuate Adam's sin."⁶
 And this *apostasy* was "joined with vile reproaches against God."⁷

Instit. II.i.5 — Adam received in its place "*plagues, blindness, impotence, impurity, vanity, and injustice.*"⁸ Adam's sin passed to all: "*before we saw the light of this life we were spoiled and spotted in God's sight.*"⁹

Instit. II.i.6 — Adam was therefore *as a root of "human nature."*¹⁰
 (Romans 5:12¹¹)

Instit. II.i.7 — With Adam all stood or fell; without the fall we share his "*gifts.*"¹²

Instit. II.i.8 — Original sin is a "*hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused into all parts of the soul, which makes us first liable to God's wrath, then also brings forth in us . . . the 'works of the flesh.'*"¹³ Already by such a

⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.i.4, 245.

⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.i.4, 245.

⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.i.5, 246. "Therefore, after the heavenly image was obliterated in him, he was not the only one to suffer this punishment that, in place of wisdom, virtue, holiness, truth, and justice, with which adornments he was clad, there came forth the most filthy plagues, blindness, impotence, impurity, vanity, and injustice—but he also entangled and immersed his offspring in the same miseries."

⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.i.5, 248.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.i.6, 248.

¹¹ Rom. 5:12, "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned." (ESV)

¹² Calvin, *Institutes*, II.i.7, 250.

¹³ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.i.8, 251. Bavinck inserts the Latin word *nos* into the middle of this quotation, seemingly notating for himself that "we" too take part in being liable for the wrath of God. By bolding "us," above, I have striven to communicate Bavinck's reminder to himself.

*corruption we are condemned and found guilty.*¹⁴ Adam's imparted contagion "resides in us, which justly deserves punishment."¹⁵ Children have the seed of a variety of sin within them. "Our nature is not only destitute and empty of good, but so fertile and fruitful of every evil that it cannot be idle."¹⁶ *All of man is nothing but concupiscence.*¹⁷

Instit. II.i.9 — Not only *sensual impulses σαρκ;* but "all that proceeds from him is . . . imputed to sin."¹⁸

Instit. II.i.10 — "Our destruction therefore comes from the guilt of our flesh, not from God."¹⁹ "Let us accordingly remember to impute our ruin to depravity of nature, in order that we may not accuse God himself, the Author of nature."²⁰ Man "by his own folly sunk into vanity."²¹

Instit. II.i.11 — *Man at birth is corrupt, which did not flow from nature.*

[2] Instit. II.ii.12 — *Natural gifts in man were corrupted (intellect, reason, will); supernatural destroyed.*²² "Similarly the will, because it is inseparable

¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.i.8, 251. Bavinck is paraphrasing the middle of this sentence: "First, we are so vitiated and perverted in every part of our nature that by this great corruption we stand justly condemned and convicted before God, to whom nothing is acceptable but righteousness, innocence, and purity."

¹⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.i.8, 251.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.i.8, 252.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.i.8, 252. "Or to put it more briefly, the whole man is of himself nothing but concupiscence." Bavinck utilizes this passage in *Reformed Dogmatics*, see e.g. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 3:98.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.i.9, 253.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.i.10, 253.

²⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.i.10, 254.

²¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.i.10, 254.

²² Calvin, *Institutes*, II.ii.12, 270.

from man's nature, did not perish, but was so bound to wicked desires that it cannot strive after the right."²³

Instit. II.ii.13 — *"In the arrangement of this life no man is without the light of reason."*²⁴

Instit. II.ii.15 — The intellect has outstanding gifts.

Instit. II.ii.18 — In spiritual things people are *blind* as *moles*.²⁵

Instit. II.ii.27 — Augustine: *"Nothing is ours but sin."*²⁶

Instit. II.iii.1 — Flesh = *"whatever we have from nature."*²⁷ (Ephesians 4:17–18, 24²⁸)

Instit. II.iii.2 — *The soul is utterly devoid of all good.*²⁹ (Romans 3)

The heading of this section: *"Only damnable things come forth from man's corrupt nature."*³⁰

²³ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.ii.12, 271.

²⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.ii.13, 273.

²⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.ii.18, 277.

²⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.ii.27, 287.

²⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.iii.1, 289. "Whatever we have from nature, therefore, is flesh."

²⁸ Eph. 4:17–18, "Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart." (ESV) Eph. 4:24, "and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." (ESV)

²⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.iii.2, 291–92. "For in the diseased body some vigor of life yet remains; although the soul plunged into this deadly abyss, is not only burdened with vices but is utterly devoid of all good."

³⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.iii.2, 289.

Instit. III.xx.45 — “*He calls Sins ‘debts’ because we owe penalty for them.*”³¹

Instit. III.xxi.3 — Look no further than the revealed things.

Instit. III.xxi.7 — *Damnation is his just and irreprehensible and incomprehensible judgment, he has closed life to those whom he has given over.*³²

Instit. III.xxii.8 — “*God’s grace does not find but makes those fit to be chosen.*” (Augustine).³³

Instit. III.xxiii.1 — “*election itself, could not stand except as set over against reprobation.*”³⁴

Calvin as Paul (Romans 9:20).³⁵ “*God’s secret plan is the cause of hardening.*”³⁶

Instit. III.xxiii.2 — God’s will *is free from all fault, but also is the highest rule of perfection, and even the law of all laws*³⁷; is a superb answer. He does not have to give an account for his actions and we are not a *fitting jury*.

³¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xx.45, 910.

³² Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxi.7, 931. “We assert that, with respect to the elect, this plan was founded upon his freely given mercy, without regard to human worth; but by his just and irreprehensible but incomprehensible judgment he has barred the door of life to those whom he has given over to damnation.”

³³ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxii.8, 943.

³⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxiii.1, 947.

³⁵ Rom. 9:20, “But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’” (ESV)

³⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxiii.1, 949.

³⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxiii.2, 950.

Instit. III.xxiii.3 — The man cannot argue against that, because *they feel led toward (death) by their nature itself according to the will of God, whether they will or will not.*³⁸ “*How perverse is their disposition to protest is apparent from the fact that they deliberately suppress the cause of condemnation, which they are compelled to recognize in themselves, in order to free themselves by blaming God. But though I should confess a hundred times that God is the author of it—which is very true—yet they do not promptly cleanse away the guilt that, engraved upon their consciences, repeatedly meets their eyes.*”³⁹

[3] *Against general opinion.*⁴⁰ “*The reason may be hidden, but it cannot be unjust.*”⁴¹

Instit. III.xxiii.4 — God can do no wrong, rather his *justice* is too high for our understanding (Paul).

Instit. III.xxiii.7 — *I confess the decree is dreadful.*⁴²

Instit. III.xxiii.8 — “*For if predestination is nothing but the meting out of divine justice—secret, indeed, but blameless, because it is certain that they were not unworthy to be predestined to this condition, it is equally certain that the destruction that they undergo by predestination is also most just.*”⁴³

³⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxiii.3, 951. Paraphrase of this sentence: “Let them not accuse God of injustice if they are destined by his eternal judgment to death, to which they feel—whether they will or not—that they are led by their own nature of itself.”

³⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxiii.3, 951.

⁴⁰ I believe this abbreviation (*Con. Gener.*) is *contra generalem*.

⁴¹ Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (London: James Clarke, 1961), 122.

⁴² Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxiii.7, 955.

⁴³ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxiii.8, 956–57.

*He falls down etc. “By his own evil intention, then, man corrupted the pure nature he had received from the Lord.”*⁴⁴ We prefer to search for the cause in God’s hidden will.

Instit. III.xxiii.9 — *The ordinance of God (of damnation) “has its own equity—unknown indeed, to us but very sure.”*⁴⁵

Instit. III.xxiv.13 — *There is always enough light to convict the conscience of the wicked.*⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxiii.8, 957.

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxiii.9, 957.

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxiv.13, 980–81. Bavinck is pulling from this sentence: “For however much obscurity there may be in the Word, there is still always enough light to convict the conscience of the wicked.”