

## Suk Yu Chan, *Heavenly Providence: A Historical Exploration of the Development of Calvin's Biblical Doctrine of Divine Providence*

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Donald K. McKim

Germantown, TN, USA ([donmckim@comcast.net](mailto:donmckim@comcast.net))

This book is an historical study of John Calvin's interpretation of the doctrine of divine providence. It explores Calvin's works from 1534 to 1559 and contends that from 1534 to 1541, Calvin's dominant image for providence is that of a 'fountain', which conveys God as the source of everything. God's power gives life and preserves all earthly creatures. Then, from Calvin's Latin edition of his 1539 *Institutes* and its French translation (1541), Calvin is more vague – indecisive – about the definition of God's special providence, as he explored the relation of providence and soteriology. Calvin's doctrine from 1534 onward thus 'displays a development rather than a fixed doctrine' (p. 56). The fountain image dropped out after 1552. Chan notes that 'Calvin gradually moves away from portraying God's providence as a fountain because God's providence is more than what can be illustrated by the image of a fountain.... God's action is not passive as a fountain implies. In addition, God's providence does not imply passivity in the role of believers' (p. 179).

Instead, three definitions of providence emerged. Chan explains that in Calvin's *De aeterna Dei praedestinatione* (1552), *providentia Dei* is: first, 'a general providence of the world so that everything is kept in its proper and natural state'; second, there is a 'special government of particular parts of the world, but this care is especially for humans'; third is a '*providentia "praesentissima Dei"*', in which God protects and guides the church by his fatherly care' (p. 178). This clarification of the *providentia Dei* is what Calvin used 'to preach, to write commentaries and to finish his definitive edition of the *Institutes*' (p. 56). Calvin's presentations in sermons on the book of Job (1554–1555) and his commentary on the Psalms (1557) were based on the understandings he had developed.

Soteriological elements came to play a stronger role as Calvin advanced. Chan argues that Calvin used 'the doctrine of heavenly providence to link providence to predestination' (p. 15). *Providentia coelestis* ('heavenly providence') is considered in Calvin's final (Latin) *Institutes* (1559) as 'a doctrine related to the knowledge of God, and its purpose is to encourage the godly to worship God, and hope for eternal life as God's clemency and His judgment are not yet fulfilled in the present life' (p. 182). This leads particularly to Calvin's developed views on election and predestination. In Books 2 and 3 of the *Institutes*, Chan notes Calvin writes that 'God wills to predestine some to be His children, and to exclude the rest from the inheritance of salvation and those who have not become part of Christ will not inherit God's kingdom' (p. 182). In Book 4, Calvin contended that salvation for members of the church is grounded on the church's unshakable nature, and that, as Chan says, 'the Church stands firm because God's election is in His eternal providence' (p. 182).

Calvin used various terms to describe this 'heavenly providence' throughout his writings, and Chan lists some of these. But as Calvin dropped the fountain image, he started to 'consolidate his doctrine of *Providentia Dei*, by assuring the faithful that they are cared for by God's "*providentia coelestis*". He asserts that the faithful are members of God's unshakable church and therefore in His eternal providence, they are entitled to inherit God's kingdom' (183). Guaranteed eternal salvation is under the 'care' God provides.

The image of 'heavenly providence' provides a connection between God's providence and predestination which cannot be explained as well by the image of the fountain. Throughout, his works, Calvin had always maintained there is 'a genuine existence of human agency as a secondary cause in *providentia Dei*' (p. 91). Through prayer, 'human beings can understand some parts of divine providence', notes Chan (p. 91). But while there is 'a genuine existence of secondary cause in heavenly providence', the 'fountain image' does not facilitate this understanding (p. 186).

In sum, as Calvin advocated and Chan makes plain: '*providentia Dei* is truly "*providentia coelestis*", which is *providentia Dei* for the church' (p. 183). It seems that Calvin defines the meanings of general providence, special providence and this very special providence progressively, but there is only one kind of *providentia Dei*: "*providentia coelestis*", from the Elect's point of view' (p. 183). Or: 'Calvin advocates that *providentia Dei* is "*providentia coelestis*" for the godly' (p. 185).

Chan's devotes a discussion to Calvin's successor, Theodore Beza (1519–1605) and his treatment of predestination and providence. Chan considers Beza's major *Tabula praedestinationis* (1555), which featured a 'table' of parallel lines with the causes for salvation or damnation of the 'elect' and 'reprobate', each emerging from the decree of God. She writes: 'While Calvin's doctrine of heavenly providence is soteriological, Beza's doctrine of predestination is providential' (p. 173). Calvin and Beza treated the case of Job differently – a 'clear divergence' (p. 183). This originated, says Chan, from 'Beza's consideration for human righteousness' (p. 183). Beza is 'more sympathetic to Job than Calvin' (p. 184).

Chan's thorough study will be a reference source for further research on Calvin and providence. Chan shows Calvin's increasing concern for providence to be a doctrine of strong nurture, confidence and comfort for Christians in the church.

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