Calvinists In The Time of Civil War
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Reading from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, Chapter 1, King James Version, the only version known to the Civil War generation:

> **Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: having predestined us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according the good pleasure of his will, to the praise and glory of his grace, wherein he has made us acceptable in the beloved.**
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> **Praise and glory be to God, Amen!**

I was pleasantly surprised when Dave and Lou extended the invitation to preach this weekend. I feared I'd burned my bridges with your lead pastor earlier this summer. Reverend Wright had announced an "Ask The Pastor" Sunday, inviting questions that he, in turn, would answer during the worship hour. I thought it was a splendid idea and wished I'd done the same when I was in pulpit ministry—which I was, for forty-four years, serving Methodist congregations in Missouri and Nebraska.

Being new to Presbyterianism, this was my hand-written query: /// "What percentage of Gettysburg Presbyterians do you estimate are among the elect, and what percentage have been predestined to eternal wrath?"

Come Sunday, Dave drew questions from a hat, and when, in the 11:00 service, mine was in fact Providentially drawn, your pastor not only read the question aloud, but told the congregation he had a pretty idea where it came from; yea, mentioning me by name, and this was his in-depth theological answer: "Depends on the day."

Adept at reading rooms, I sensed some confusion--not so much at the answer, but the question itself. I can understand that.

Over the course of my ministry, I came to dread the new member who, knowing nothing of Methodism, wanted to press me with questions; red flags going way high by those bearing a Book of Discipline.

Dating back to the founding of our nation, the Book of Doctrines and Disciplines—shown here with a bobblehead of original Methodist John Wesley--has put the "method" into Methodism. What was originally a slim volume has since bloated expansively, as generations of Methodists felt compelled to take a position on everything. When you hear about pending schism in the church of my ordination, it is over paragraphs on human sexuality. Déjà vu all over again: Methodists split in 1844 over slavery, finally reunited in 1939, and are now again tearing ourselves asunder. I picked a good time to retire. But I digress.

I am, in truth, a low church guy, entirely disinterested in picky matters of polity, just wanting to talk about Jesus, sing some songs and foster fellowship in a caring community of faith--which certainly seems the operational mode here at GPC. I like this place.

Bottom line: I can understand that me asking questions about ideas dating back to original Presbyterian John Calvin (who himself has a bobblehead) concerning election and eternal wrath might cause eyes to roll.

From all evidence, present-day Presbyterians have distanced yourselves from some of the more controversial Reformation-era ideas. Thumbing through the Topical Index of your pew hymnal, I was surprised to find there are no entries for predestination, election or other topics I've long associated with historic Calvinism.

But here's the thing. My post-retirement plans included writing a book. Having gotten up bright and early most every morning for forty-plus years of sermon writing, on the morning after we moved into our new home in Gettysburg—the second day of June last year--I got up bright and early to start work on what was (and is) intended as a faith-based history of the Civil War.

I'd had a true-crime book published in 2005, pretty well-received. The prospect of a new writing adventure has excited me. I'm currently about half-way through a second draft, the first having come in at just under 600 pages, which, of course, is way too long. If the Calvinists are right, God already knows, word for word, what the finished copy will look like, whether it will find a publisher, and how it will be received. I don't.

But as the manuscript has evolved, I've become increasingly aware of a cloud hovering over the project. From Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain of Maine to Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson of Virginia, and countless personages in between, major players in America's Civil War were Calvinists; which, if I'm writing a faith-based history, makes it pretty important to understand where they were coming from--and the more I read, the more confused I became.

Among the many I've been tracking is the Reverend Robert Lewis Dabney, the Civil War South's preeminent Presbyterian theologian. In 1862, Stonewall Jackson summoned the Doctor of Divinity to his Shenandoah Valley encampment, informing Dabney he was being appointed Jackson's chief-of-staff. Doctor Dabney mounted a series of objections; at the top of the list, his total lack of military experience. Jackson's response: "You'll learn."

Anyway, under enemy fire in the Valley, Dabney took cover behind a stone wall—not Jackson, now, but a literal wall of stone, earning hoots from fellow Confederates. Stonewall Jackson's contempt for danger was born of his famous conviction that God had predetermined his fate; and the hard-shell Presbyterian would live or die according to God's timetable, not some random Yankee bullet. If such was the Presbyterian faith, why was Dabney hiding behind that wall, rather than trusting God in the open field?

The theologian explained that in His divine foresight, God had providentially placed that wall where it was, so it might serve Dabney's shield, practically obligating Dabney hide behind it. I believe this falls into what doctrinal Calvinism terms "second causes," but, regardless, I got no problem with it.

St. Peter addresses the first of his letters to a readership of those "elect according to the foreknowledge of God." The idea that God, according to divine foreknowledge, would move the owner of a field to construct a stone fence that, quite apart from the property owner's original purpose, would, at a future date and time, serve to save one of these elect, is not inconsistent with one of my favorite passages, St. Paul writing to the Romans, chapter 8, verse 28, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to His purpose." Works for me.

Where I got stuck was studying Harriet Beecher Stowe. As told by biographer Joan Hedrick, when Harriet's husband *Calvin* took a professorship at Bowdoin College in Maine, the Stowes opened their home on Saturday evenings to an elect group of students and friends. The highlight was Harriet reading aloud from the latest installment of her magazine serial "Uncle Tom's Cabin," subtitled, "Life among the lowly." Regular attendees included young Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, who would, of course, go on to "fix bayonets" in our town, July 2, 1863. Hence my proposed chapter, "When Joshua Met Harriett." You don't get any more Calvinist than these people.

Harriet's father, the Reverend Lyman Beecher, was known as "The Great Gun Of Calvinism." Her brother, the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, was arguably the nation's first celebrity, biographer Debbie Applegate titling her book, "The Most Famous Man In America." Harriet's older sister Catharine founded one of the nation's first schools of higher learning for women, The Hartford Female Seminary. It would be said Lyman Beecher was the father of more brains than any man in America.

At age 22, Catherine was engaged to marry Professor Alexander Metcalf Fisher, who taught mathematics at Yale, the couple intending to wed when he returned from an overseas trip to Europe. Lyman was the first to learn that Fisher's ship had wrecked off Ireland, Catherine's fiancé among the drowned dead; father breaking the news to daughter in a letter reported by Debby Applegate:

> **With a callousness that could come only from great faith, Lyman informed her that that there was no evidence that Professor Fisher was converted before he died. Although he was a pious, upright man, filled with natural goodness, it seemed likely that her fiancé was now forever damned.**

The Great Gun of Calvinism continued, "And now, my dear child, what will you do? Will you turn at length to God, and set your affections on thing above, or (remember the circumstances of Fisher's death) cling to the ship-wrecked hopes of earthly good?"

Goodness. I didn't know Calvinists talked like that. Methodists and Baptists, sure. I remember, as a pup pastor, attending a small town Baptist revival. The evangelist followed up a rip-roaring sermon with an exhortation to come to the altar and be saved. Sang all six verses of "Just As I Am" without a single sinner coming forward; whereupon, the preacher repeated the call, singing all six verses again. The altar still empty, he finally gave up, saying churlishly, "All right, don't come. But if you go to hell, don't blame me."

I didn't realize that sort of thing was part of Calvinism. I mean, if one's eternal destiny is already divinely pre-decided, what difference does human decision in the present moment make? I assure you, while I'm perfectly capable of being a wise acre, such is not the case here. If I'm going to presume to write about Civil War-era religiosity, given the prominence of Calvinism in the mid-19th century, both north and south, blue and gray, this is something I need to get right.

Seeking clarity, I turned to what I understood to be the foundational document of Calvinist theology: The Westminster Confession—which, come to find out, is itself a product of civil war. In the 1640s, having overthrown the English monarch, Oliver Cromwell-brand Puritan clergy assembled at Westminster in London to formulate a Confession of Faith that would "consistently adhere to Calvinistic standards of doctrine and worship."

Parliament ratified the document in 1648, just months before cutting off the head of deposed King Charles I. 140 years later, The Confession was adopted (with minor revisions) by the newly formed Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. Reading from the Westminster Confession, Chapter 5, "Of Providence":

> **God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise and glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.**

I like it. Honestly, sometimes I'll be in in a mainline Protestant Church and half expect the closing hymn to be John Lennon's hymn to secularity:

> **Imagine there's no heaven, it's easy if you try**
> **No hell below us, above us only sky**

I decided way back in seminary that if I was going to commit to this Jesus thing, I was going to stake my faith in the God of the ancient creeds: Creator of heaven and earth, author of the human experience, judge of the living and the dead; revealed upclose and personal in Jesus Christ, who when this fallen world nailed him to a tree, was raised from the dead that whosover believeth in him might not perish, but be saved unto eternal life.

Our generations are into "stuff happens." Creation itself is random accident, the human creature spinning pointlessly on a rock through time and space, and th-th-that's all folks. NO, said the old Calvinists: Hear "God's Eternal Decree," Chapter 3.1 of the Westminster Confession: /// "God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass…" He's got the whole world in his hands. Such was the faith of mid-19th century Christian America:

And so Harriett Beecher Stowe would say of her incendiary masterpiece: "I did not write it. God wrote it. I merely did his dictation."

While Gettysburg rightly remembers Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain for his heroics with the 20th Maine on Little Round Top, the former seminarian's war was a long way from over. Moving south with Ulysses S. Grant in 1864, the college professor turned warrior was felled in the initial assault on Petersburg, death so certain that Grant promoted him "on the spot." Chamberlain himself was under no illusion, writing to his wife, "I am lying mortally wounded the doctors think, but my mind & heart are at peace. Jesus Christ is my all-sufficient savior. I go to him."

19th century Calvinism was steeped in "Whether we live, or whether we die, we are the Lord's," with a premium on dying well, and Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain was prepared to die in the faith in which he had lived.

When he in fact survived Chamberlain wrote of his realization that whatever plans he had formerly laid, God had better ones, the near-death experience included: "I could see it as plain as day, that God had done it and for my own good."

His recovery still "incomplete," instead of going home—which he had every right to do—Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain went back to what he believed was the divinely-appointed struggle for human freedom, explaining, "I can trust my own life & the welfare of my family in the hands of Providence."

Though my favorite Providential summation is from Grant, himself a Methodist, "Man proposes, God disposes."

So, I'm rolling with the Westminster Confession, momentum sufficient to get past Chapter 3.3: "By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestined unto everlasting life; and others foreordained to everlasting death." Okay. I sort of knew that, at least about humankind; I guess the angel reference is Lucifer? Okay, whatever…

But even my new-found enthusiasm for Calvinism stumbles over this next part: "These angels and men, thus predestined, and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished."

To repeat, the predestined number is "so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished." Yowza…

To be sure, the Confession goes on to insist that God's Eternal Decree does NOT void free will; it's just that, as I read it, sin has rendered us incapable of freely willing anything good. If it seems unjust that some are elected to salvation and others to wrath, consider: in our fallen state, "justice" would have us all condemned and it's only by God's infinite mercy that any are saved.

As to the election process, even the Methodist knows Romans 9:21,"Hath not the potter power over the clay, over the same lump to make one vessel unto honor, and another unto dishonor?" Who's the pot to complain?

Furthermore, from the 1830s through the war itself, God's Eternal Decree got caught up in the slavery issue, specifically, whether or not God had foreordained Africans to enslavement on account of the sin of Noah's son, Ham. While the Presbyterian schism of 1837 was nominally about doctrinal issues, it's suggested that the underlying fracture was slavery and Biblical interpretation thereof.

The theology of Calvinism's Great Gun evolved, Lyman Beecher finding license to embrace a theology summarized by a biographer: "Sin is black, grace abounds, the will is free." Presbyterians put him on trial for heresy. Son Henry, who'd become America's foremost anti-slavery preacher, is quoted as saying, "My father was tried for believing a man could obey the commandments of God."

Lyman was acquitted by his peers and the quote on the screen seems a pretty good representation of functional, if not doctrinal Calvinism at the time of America's Civil War-- perhaps even into our own time.

Turn now from the Westminster Confession to my own: At some point, I realized my Calvinistic quest had become less about 19th century history than processing my own stuff of the present. I do pause to reflect, occasionally, on my purpose in the universe, recognizing the secularists and John Lennon may be exactly right: neither the universe writ infinitely large nor my existence writ infinitesimally small are of any purpose whatsoever; this thing called life entirely void of meaning.

Reading from Psalm 90, still in King James: "The days of our years are threescore years and ten, and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off and we fly away."

Next month, I turn threescore and nine, and I do wonder, sometimes, where I'll fly away. Some say into the void from whence I came. If so, I won't have anything to complain about. The prayer I offer most every night will include a word of thanks for existence, trusting God is on the other end.

It would be nice, of course, to fancy myself among the elect, though there's no particular reason to think so. Working with the Westminster Confession, I remembered something read decades ago, from a John Updike novel, "In The Beauty of the Lilies." Set in the early 20th century, ineffectual pastor Clarence Wilmot is calling on an aging curmudgeon named Orr. The end of his life drawing near, Mr. Orr asks Clarence, point blank, "What do you think my chances are, to find myself among the elect?"

Clarence Wilmot, a man of modern theology, is quick to offer reassurance. Orr stops him cold; the old man isn't asking for reassurance, just the truth. "I'm not afraid to face the worst. I'll take damnation in good stride if that's what's to come."

The Reverend Clarence Wilmot is appalled, but Orr isn't backing off what he was raised to believe: "There's the elect and the others, damned… It makes good sense. How can you be saved if you can't be damned?… Young man, don't worry about relieving *my* mind. I told you, I can face it… if it was always ordained. God's as helpless in this as I am."

Clarence hardly knows what to say, "How can a God be considered helpless?"

Orr explains, "If He's made his elections at the beginning of time He is. He can't keep changing his mind…You take counsel with yourself, Reverend Wilmot, and see if you can't think a bit more kindly of damnation."

Soon thereafter, Clarence quits the ministry and goes to selling encyclopedias door-to-door.

I like to think I'll take whatever comes. When I was in pulpit ministry, myself, I could hope my often ineffectual work might somehow play a part in God's larger purpose. Put out to pasture at three score and eight, I'm inclined to think my primo purpose of the present is to serve as companion to one who I am quite certain is among elect, that being the Reverend Nancy Davis, currently serving as your Pastor of Visitation and leading a Bible Study.

I should add that my beloved adamantly resists the notion; how can she be among the elect when she thinks the whole election business is nonsense; me trying to explain that it doesn't matter what she thinks; we're talking God's eternal decree; and as, per the scripture read much earlier, she evidences being "holy and without blame…in love," I sort of think she's in.

FYI: I'd certainly count Dave and Bonnie among the elect. As to Lou: While he certainly evidences more righteousness than my own sinful self, this dancing pastor thing makes the Methodist nervous--though, perhaps this, too, serves God's foreordained purpose. Who am I to judge?

At three score and nine, the great danger to my soul is likely the trap of John Wesley's generation. As noted, the Westminster Confession was produced by 17th century English Puritans. Their more prosperous descendants of the next century embraced what I'm quite certain John Calvin himself would have denounced as doctrinal perversion.

This was the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, a time and place of stark divide between haves and have-nots—the great mass of people among the latter; their "existence" described by a contemporary as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." In the absence of child labor laws, even little ones were worked to death in the factories and mines, their small corpses discarded with the trash.

How could a "Christian" nation allow such conditions to exist? Easy: the upper crust interpreted their good fortune as a sign of divine favor, surely indicative of their election unto everlasting life; in contrast, the wretched state of the downtrodden must mean these were destined to wrath, anyway, so what did it matter if they got an early start on hell?

I am in the happy circumstance of being able to echo Psalm 16:16, "The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places." I can imagine no place more pleasant than Gettysburg. I'll be wandering the battlefield, exploring the region, and be amazed all over again to think I actually get to live here—in pretty good health, financially stable, sharing my life with an elect woman. Is it any wonder that it occasionally crosses my mind: "God must really like me a lot."

But then I watch the news and read the papers, my pleasantry contrasted with the decidedly unpleasant plight of Harriet's "life among the lowly": multitudes trapped in poverty, in communities infested with violence; there are some living in 21 century slavery, others in actual war zones, still others who places have been made uninhabitable by climate change; trying to flee, nowhere to run.

And I recall the punch line to Jesus' parable of the unjust judge, St. Luke 18:17, the savior saying of this unjust world, "And shall not God avenge his elect, which cry day and night unto him…?" Hear this, if you've heard nothing else to this point: I figure, about the surest sign of eternal wrath is to mistake good fortune as permission to harden our hearts to those whose chances are few.

In September of 1862, ten months before the battle in our town, thirteen before he sat in that pew, Abraham Lincoln, trying to make sense of the crucible of war, meditated on the Divine Will:

> **In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different than the purpose of either party…I am almost ready to say that this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By his mere power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either *saved* or *destroyed* the Union without human contest. Yet the contest began. And, having begun, He could have given the final victory to either side either day. Yet the contest proceeds…**

As does my contest, at three score and nine: an internal warring as old as original sin: between good and evil; between trust in God and trust in self; between thanksgiving for what I have and coveting what I have not; between compassion for others and contempt for others; between "what can God do for me?" and "what can I do for God"?

The way I see it, if I go to hell, I'll have no one to blame but me.