

A Brief History of the Doctrine of Predestination

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“There’s no free will,” says the philosopher; “To hang is most unjust.”

“There’s no free will,” assents the officer; “We hang because we must.”

Ambrose Bierce

In this essay, I give a brief history of how the doctrine of predestination was developed and refined over the years by various Christian thinkers. We sometimes automatically equate predestination with Calvinism, but this is in some respects unfortunate, both because Calvin wrote about much else besides predestination and because predestination has a rich history dating back to Paul and passing through many diverse Christian traditions. When possible, I have tried to include extensive quotations from notable theologians, so that the reader knows where she might investigate their views more thoroughly.

I think that, especially as nondenominational Protestants,* we are often quick to ignore the history behind the development of theological ideas. However, I think this is a mistake; history can often be quite illuminating in revealing exactly what we believe and why. I want to be transparent from the start: my own views on the subject tend to fall within the Reformed tradition, but I do try to make allowances by mentioning and explaining notable contrasting viewpoints.

As in all matters of doctrine, we should turn first to Scripture; this is especially important on a confusing topic such as predestination. My serious recommendation would be to stop and read Romans 9 before continuing to read the rest of this essay, both because we want to make sure that our ideas are grounded in Scripture and because much of the history of the doctrine of predestination revolves around what Paul was saying there. The idea, of course, does not originate with Paul; Paul gives several historical examples to show that this is consistent with God’s nature as revealed in the Old Testament.*

*I originally wrote these notes for my cell group members, with whom I share this background. However, it is my hope that they will be useful for Christians from other backgrounds as well.

*These examples include the cases of Isaac and Ishmael (Gen. 21:12, Rom. 9:7), Jacob and Esau, (Gen. 25:23, Mal. 1:2–3, Rom. 9:10–13) and Pharaoh (Ex. 9:16, Rom. 9:17).

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1 The Church Fathers and Antiquity

Christian thinking did not evolve in a vacuum; in fact, Paul was a Pharisee¹ prior to his conversion and may have been familiar with contemporary Jewish scholarship on the matter.* To give some background on the discussion, the Roman historian Josephus (c. 37 – 100) states that Jewish scholars at the time held three different views on the matter of fate and free will.²

*It is unclear to me if he would have shared the view that Josephus attributes to the Pharisees as a sect, or how much it would have shaped his writing.

At this time there were three sects among the Jews, who had different opinions concerning human actions... Now for the Pharisees, they say that some actions, but not all, are the work of fate, and some of them are in our own power, and that they are liable to fate, but are not caused by fate. But the sect of the Essens affirm, that fate governs all things, and that nothing befalls men but what is according to its determination. And for the Sadducees, they take away fate, and say there is no such thing...

Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews (c. 94), Book 13, Chap. 5, Sec. 9

Even the earliest Christian theologians commented on the difficulty of accepting Paul's teaching on predestination. Origen (c. 185 – 253), the prolific but controversial early theologian, came up with an inventive solution: that all souls had a previous life, and that some seem to have better fate in this life because they previously showed themselves to be worthy.

As, therefore, when the Scriptures are carefully examined regarding Jacob and Esau, it is not found to be unrighteousness with God that it should be said, before they were born, or had done anything in this life, "the elder shall serve the younger," and as it is found not to be unrighteousness that even in the womb Jacob supplanted his brother, if we feel that *he was worthily beloved by God, according to the deserts of his previous life, so as to deserve to be preferred before his brother.*

Origen, First Principles (c. 220), Book 2, Chap. 9, Sec. 7

To be clear, this view would be met with near-universal rejection* among Christians today, and Origen was explicitly anathematized³ at the Second Council of Constantinople (553), although it shares some similarities with Mormon views on pre-existence and Eastern views on reincarnation. In general, much of the early literature on predestination revolves around Paul's example of Jacob and Esau in Romans; for example, John Chrysostom (c. 347 – 407) comes to the conclusion that predestination must be based on God's foreknowledge of our actions.

*For example, Aquinas rejects Origen's view in his *Summa Theologiae* (Part 1, Quest. 23, Art. 5) by quoting Paul in Rom. 9:11–12: not because of works but because of him who calls—she was told, "the older will serve the younger."

¹Phil. 3:5

²Jonathan Klawans, "Josephus on Fate, Free Will, and Ancient Jewish Types of Compatibilism" (2009), *Numen* 56(1), pp. 44–90.

³Origen is named in the eleventh anathema of the council, though one should note that the original Greek text is lost, and some believe that the extant Latin version was tampered with.

What was the cause then why one was loved and the other hated? Why was it that one served, the other was served? It was because one was wicked, and the other good. And yet the children being not yet born, one was honored and the other condemned. For when they were not as yet born, God said, "the elder shall serve the younger." With what intent then did God say this? Because He does not wait, as man does, to see from the issue of their acts the good and him who is not so, but *even before these He knows which is the wicked and which not such.*

Chrysostom, Homily 16 on Romans (c. 370)

I admit that I am not particularly familiar with the doctrine of the Eastern churches. It is my understanding that they do not emphasize predestination as strongly as the Western churches, but if pressed, they might cite Chrysostom much in the way that we cite Augustine.

Speaking of Augustine of Hippo (354–430), it is really not possible to speak of the history of some theological topic without turning to him, the most prominent of the early theologians. Augustine was perhaps the first to hold a view of predestination that we today would largely agree with; his views on predestination developed over time as he fleshed out the doctrine of justification by grace.⁴ In his early life, he held to the view of predestination as foreknowledge, but as he matured in his thought—and in particular as he argued against the Pelagian heresy—his views began to shift. Pelagius (c. 354 – 418) taught that humans are not tainted by original sin, but rather have the free choice to obey or disobey the Law, and thereby gain salvation.* This heresy was refuted by Augustine and condemned at the Council of Carthage (418), and the subsequent semi-Pelagian heresy was condemned at the Council of Orange (529).

In his books addressed to Simplician (c. 320 – 400), Augustine gives what is perhaps the most complete overview of his opinion on predestination. He argues that predestination is not based on God's foreknowledge of good works; rather, God simply chooses and we cannot help but respond accordingly.

God's purpose, therefore, does not abide on account of a choice, but the choice results from the purpose—that is, *it is not because God discovers in human beings good works that he chooses*, and that therefore his plan of making righteous abides, but because it abides in order to make righteous those who believe, and that therefore he discovers works that he may now choose for the kingdom of heaven.

Augustine, Ad Simplicianum (397), Sec. 2.6⁵

In another example of how the Pelagian controversy influenced the development of predestination, Jerome (c. 345 – 420), the notable Bible translator,

⁴Josef Lössl, "Augustine on Predestination: Consequences for the Reception" (2002), *Augustiniana* 52(2/4), pp. 241–272.

⁵Quotation from *Responses to Miscellaneous Questions, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* 1/12, New City Press (2008), p. 190

*In fairness to him, Pelagius is mostly known to us through the denunciations by his fiercest critics. Some argue that the few surviving works genuinely attributable to him paint him as much more of a moderate than his reputation would suggest.

wrote his own treatise against the Pelagians, emphasizing the role of God's grace in giving us strength to obey him.* I mention Pelagianism so frequently because I think it is an example of a typical pattern worth keeping in mind: many of the orthodox Christian doctrines were historically expressed or clarified as a response to particular heresies present in the early church. For example, our understanding of the Trinity and of Christology was deeply improved as the early Church Fathers sought to refute the heresies of Arius (c. 250 – 336), Nestorius (c. 386 – 451), and others. As Protestants, we might even turn to the five *solae* of the Reformation, which deny certain Catholic errors, as a more modern example.

I could go on quoting various Church Fathers on the subject of predestination, but then I would never finish this essay. I think it suffices to say that many of the ideas that would be vigorously debated in the following millennium—free will, foreknowledge, *etc.*—were already present in their writings. For instance, the doctrine of double predestination* is clearly present in the writings of Isidore of Seville⁶ (c. 560 – 636), and something approaching the Calvinist idea of the perseverance of the saints** can likewise be seen in Ambrosiaster's commentary on Romans. As in many things, the view that aligns most closely with Christian orthodoxy today, especially within Protestantism, is that of Augustine.

2 The Scholastics and the Medieval Era

The doctrine of predestination came up from time to time during the Middle Ages, sometimes with great vigor. The scholastic tradition especially emphasized the authority of the ancient teachers, both religious and secular. As such, much of the medieval debate on predestination centered around trying to interpret the writings of the Church Fathers on this matter, particularly Augustine. For instance, the Carolingian monk Gottschalk of Orbais (c. 803 – 868) ignited significant controversy within the ninth-century Catholic Church by suggesting a form of double predestination based on Augustinianism not dissimilar to the Protestant views that would arise centuries later.⁷ Gottschalk's ideas were not well received by the church authorities, and he was condemned at the Synod of Mainz (848). He was attacked in several treatises, most notably by Eriugena (c. 800 – 877) in his *On Divine Predestination* (c. 851).

One question that concerned the scholastics very much was the unification of Christian theology (exemplified by Augustine) and Greek philosophy (exemplified by Plato and Aristotle).* As such, the theologians of the time often applied a very logical lens to predestination, attempting to tease out the relationship between predestination and free will. A good example of this is Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), who wrote a treatise on whether free will, predestination, and grace are compatible; his conclusion was that they are.*

⁶Fun fact: Isidore, famous for compiling the *Etymologies*, is sometimes called the patron saint of computer programmers, if you're into that sort of thing.

⁷Andrzej P. Stefańczyk, "Doctrinal Controversies of the Carolingian Renaissance: Gottschalk of Orbais' Teachings on Predestination" (2017), *Roczniki Filozoficzne* 65(3), pp. 53–70.

*But when we are concerned with grace and mercy, free will is in part void. . . it depends on God whether we have the power in his strength and with his help to perform what we desire, and to bring to effect our toil and effort.

Against the Pelagians (415), III.10

*Gemina est praedestinatio sive electorum ad requiem, sive reproborum ad mortem. *Predestination is double: of the elect to rest, or of the reprobate to death.*

Sentences (c. 600) II.6

**Hi qui credere videntur, et non permanent in fide coepta, a Deo electi negentur; quia quos Deus elegit, apud se permanent.

Those who seem to believe, and do not remain in the faith they begun, are denied the elect by God; because those whom God elects remain in him.

Commentary on Rom. 9:29 (c. 380)

*Aristotle himself explored the tension between future contingents and free will through the famous sea battle example in his *On Interpretation* (c. 350 BC).

*. . . some actions that are going to occur by means of free choice are likewise predestined.

De Concordia (1108), Sec. 2.3

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), perhaps the most well-known and influential Medieval thinker, likewise gives a very logical definition of predestination.

Now if a thing cannot attain to something by the power of its nature, it must be directed thereto by another; thus, an arrow is directed by the archer towards a mark. Hence, properly speaking, a rational creature, capable of eternal life, is led towards it, directed, as it were, by God. . . Hence *the type of the aforesaid direction of a rational creature towards the end of life eternal is called predestination.*

Aquinas, Summa Theologiae (c. 1270), Part 1, Quest. 23, Art. 1

In fact, Aquinas devotes the entirety of question twenty-three of his *Summa Theologiae* to a discussion of predestination, addressing age-old questions such as whether or not predestination can be considered a foreknowledge of merits (article five essentially says “it’s complicated”) and whether there is a double predestination (article three affirms it). Aquinas’s view on this and other matters has come to be known as Thomism, and it still plays a prominent role in Catholic beliefs about predestination today.

This is not to say that the Thomist view held absolute sway during the Middle Ages. Other scholars applied themselves to the matter; for instance, the notable logician William of Ockham⁸ (c. 1287 – 1347) gave a different account of predestination in his *Treatise on Predestination and God’s Foreknowledge with respect to Future Contingents* (c. 1323), though he was later summoned to Avignon to answer for charges of heresy on a different matter. Ockham’s account relies on his analysis of counterfactuals and future contingents, prefiguring similar analyses by Molina and others.

We ought to exercise caution when reading the scholastics, for their works contain several errors which were not corrected until the time of the Reformation. Still, they present an important and distinctive view of predestination, and they address many questions that the modern reader may have when thinking about it.

3 The Reformation and Counter-Reformation

Now we fast forward to the time period of the Renaissance, during which a high view of humans and free will developed in secular culture. This was a time of great religious tumult as well; the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation were immensely theologically productive on both sides.

Predestination features prominently in the thought of the sixteenth century Reformers, even from the earliest days of the Reformation. There was a famous written debate between the Catholic (and humanist) scholar Erasmus* (1466–1536) and the early Reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546) on the subject; the two most notable works to come out of that debate were Erasmus’s *The Freedom of the Will* (1524) and Luther’s reply, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525).

*Erasmus did feel that the Catholic Church needed to be reformed in some aspects, but he remained within it and distanced himself from the Reformation as a movement.

⁸Incidentally, Occam’s razor is named after William of Ockham.

Of course, the Reformer who is today most closely associated with predestination is John Calvin (1509–1564), whose name has become synonymous with the doctrine. It is true that Calvin takes a very strong stance on the matter; he insists on election being solely the work of God, not attributable in any sense to our own faith.

Two errors are here to be avoided. Some make man a fellow-worker with God in such a sense, that man's suffrage ratifies election, so that, according to them, the will of man is superior to the counsel of God... Others, although they do not so much impair the grace of the Holy Spirit, yet induced by what means I know not, make election dependent on faith, *as if it were doubtful and ineffectual till confirmed by faith.*

Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion (1559), Chap. 24, Sec. 3

Right away, Calvin's soteriology had its detractors, even among the other nascent Protestants. A notable historical example is Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609), whose followers published the *Five Articles of Remonstrance* (1610) summarizing their theology. The Arminian view would go on to be quite influential; it was held by John Wesley (1703–1791), the founder of the Methodist movement, and it continues to be held by many Protestants today.

In response to the controversy between the Calvinists and the Arminians within the Dutch Reformed Church, the Synod of Dordt (1618–1619) was convened. It ended in the rejection of the Arminian view, and its five canons* summarizing Calvinist soteriology have been popularized with the acronym TULIP,⁹ which stands for

- *Total depravity*, meaning that every human faculty is corrupted by sin;
- *Unconditional election*, meaning that God's sovereign choice to save is not conditional on anything we do, but was made before the world began;
- *Limited atonement*, meaning that the atoning power of Christ's death is effective* only for the elect;
- *Irresistible grace*, meaning that our natural resistance to God is fully overcome at the proper time by God's grace for the elect; and
- *Perseverance of the saints*, meaning that the elect cannot lose their status, but rather will persevere in the faith.

Today, these "five points of Calvinism" form the basic outline of the Reformed position on predestination. It is not entirely without controversy; for instance, there are many who identify as "four-point" Calvinists, usually rejecting limited atonement.* On the other hand, Arminius taught *conditional election*, meaning that election is conditional on our response to God. Hence when Scripture

⁹On this a good reference is John Piper, *Five Points* (2013), although Piper was of course not the one to come up with the acronym.

*The Canons of Dordt are, in many ways, a response to the Five Articles of Remonstrance. It can be helpful to compare the two.

*Perhaps it is more precise—and contentious—to say here that it is *available* only to the elect.

*A historical example of such a view is Amyraldism, named after the French theologian Moïse Amyraut (1596–1664), who taught that atonement is unlimited but election is limited.

speaks of the “elect,” it simply refers to those who accept God’s grace (and consequently, grace must be resistible rather than irresistible). The Calvinist view was codified in many of the classic Reformed confessions of faith written during this time.

God is merciful in withdrawing and saving from perdition those who, in the eternal and unchangeable divine counsel, have been elected and chosen in Jesus Christ our Lord by his pure goodness, *without any consideration of their works*. God is just in leaving the others in their ruin and fall into which they plunged themselves.

Belgic Confession (1561), Art. 16

Although the Protestant Reformers are most closely associated with the doctrine of predestination today, they were not the only ones thinking about the problem at the time. Within the Catholic Church, different factions held opposing views; in a debate against the Dominican theologian Domingo Báñez (1528–1604), the Jesuit theologian Luis de Molina (1535–1600) proposed that God holds a special kind of knowledge, *scientia media*,* in order to resolve the apparent tension between free will and predestination. The reasoning involved is based on counterfactual semantics and has become known as Molinism; to my understanding, Molinism is one of the two popular views of predestination within the Catholic Church today, the other being Thomism.

*“Middle knowledge”

Even if (i) the conditional is necessary (because in the composed sense these two things cannot both obtain, namely that God fore-knows something to be future and that the thing does not turn out that way), and even if (ii) the antecedent is necessary in the sense in question (because it is past-tense and because no shadow of alteration can befall God), nonetheless the consequent can be purely contingent.

*Luis de Molina, Concordia (1588), Part 4, Disp. 52*¹⁰

Yet another interesting movement that arose within the Catholic Church around this time is Jansenism, which began with the posthumous publication of the *Augustinus* by Cornelius Jansen (1585–1638). While Jansen disagreed with the Reformers like Calvin, he thought that the Catholic response in the Counter-Reformation went too far, straying into the ancient Pelagian heresy; Jansen sought to recover Augustine’s original doctrines of grace. This proved extremely controversial, and Jansenism was strongly condemned in a papal bull by Pope Clement XI.*

*... clearly renewing many heresies respectively and most especially those which are contained in the infamous propositions of Jansen

Unigenitus (1713)

While the Reformation and Counter-Reformation raged on over continental Europe, the church in England also underwent a split from Rome during the reign of Henry VIII (1491–1547). The independence of the Church of England also saw a shift of its doctrine away from that of the Roman Catholic Church. Over the next decades, the Church of England shifted back and forth—often

¹⁰Translation from *On Divine Foreknowledge*, Cornell University Press (1988), p. 189

violently—as Protestant and Catholic monarchs took power; during the reign of Elizabeth I (1533–1603), the dust largely settled as the church adopted the Thirty-nine Articles as its confessional standard. The Thirty-nine Articles supported a mild form of Calvinism,¹¹ explicitly affirming election* while remaining silent on reprobation.

This consensus was not easy to reach; although the most famous English Protestants now are the Puritans, who were very much Calvinists, there was a significant faction of Arminians within the Anglican Church who disagreed with them. This led to some debate; for instance, Archbishop of Canterbury William Laud (1573–1645) led a reform movement known as Laudianism that included an Arminian soteriology, in addition to standardization of the liturgy and strengthening of the episcopal hierarchy, all vigorously opposed by the largely Presbyterian Puritans. This doctrinal controversy often became entangled with the political sphere, as various monarchs favored different factions of the clergy. From an American standpoint, these early splits in the Church of England are especially interesting because the Puritans, after settling in New England, became the theological forebears of many prominent American Protestants.

4 Modern and Contemporary Views

With the end of the Reformation as a movement, the most widely-held views on predestination among Protestants today—namely Calvinism and Arminianism—reached relative theological maturity. However, the modern era still brought several innovations on the doctrine which are worth reviewing. I'll briefly go over some of the notable developments, framed against various major theological movements that have occurred since the Reformation.

To begin with, it seems impossible to discuss the recent intellectual history of Europe or America without mentioning the Enlightenment, which saw the rise of a great deal of interesting secular philosophy and an emphasis on reason. These philosophers were not theologians, but their attempts to reconcile free will and causal determinism find obvious echoes in Christian thinking about predestination, so they merit inclusion in this essay. David Hume (1711–1776), for instance, gives a classic statement of the compatibilist position on free will and determinism; he touches briefly on its application to predestination, concluding that his theory cannot account for divine foreknowledge.* The philosophical scholarship on this subject is immense, dating back even to the Greeks; I cannot pretend to be very familiar with it all. Suffice it to say that the Enlightenment saw renewed interest in applying reason to all matters of philosophy and theology, and its rational skepticism would shape much of religious thought in the following centuries.

In response to this, the nineteenth century saw the rise of the Liberal school of Christian theology.¹² This movement was characterized by a willingness

¹¹The Puritans made some attempts to strengthen the support of Calvinism, such as in the Lambeth Articles (1595), but these were rejected by Elizabeth.

¹²It is important to distinguish *Liberal Theology* as a school of thought from political liberalism as understood in the American ideological landscape today, better termed *progressive Christianity*.

*Predestination to Life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby (before the foundations of the world were laid) he hath constantly decreed by his counsel secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom he hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation, as vessels made to honour.

Thirty-nine Articles (1571), Art. 17

*To reconcile the indifference and contingency of human actions with prescience; or do defend absolute decrees, and yet free the Deity from being the author of sin, has been found hitherto to exceed all the power of philosophy.

Enquiry concerning Human Understanding (1748), VIII.36

to defer to reason or experience over appeals to the authority of Scripture, as well as the application of more sophisticated textual criticism to the Bible; as such, it was willing to challenge the prevailing consensus among Christian thinkers. The fountainhead of such thought was Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), who, despite identifying with the historic Reformed tradition, came to an understanding of predestination far removed from anything resembling Calvin’s. Schleiermacher was a universalist, believing that all humans would eventually be saved; as such, he held only to a single election to salvation, and not one to reprobation. To him, the mystery of predestination lay not in whether or not any individual is saved, but rather in how the Church arises as a distinct group of people in response to God’s single decree of election. He found such a conception of predestination much cleaner than the double predestination in the historic Reformed confessions of faith.

If, however, we proceed on the definite assumption that all belonging to the human race are eventually taken up into living fellowship with Christ, there is nothing for it but this single divine fore-ordination. . . . Such is the faith in Christ which ascribes to Him a claim and power over the whole human race, without at the same time needing to admit any blind divine preference, and in which there is encountered no contradiction between the end in view in the divine plan of salvation and the result accomplished by the divine government of the world.

F. Schleiermacher, *Glaubenslehre* (1830), “*The Origin of the Church*”¹³

Schleiermacher’s thought became immensely influential over the next century, but it also invited many detractors who feared its unmooring from traditional Christian doctrines.* One of the most prominent reactions to the excesses of Liberal Theology was that of Karl Barth (1886–1968), who was perhaps the most formidable of the twentieth-century Protestant theologians. His neo-orthodoxy, though a reaction against some of the more radical departures of his predecessors, nonetheless included a view of predestination quite distinct from Calvinism. To Barth, predestination did not refer to the predetermined “quantitative” splitting of humanity into the categories *elect* and *reprobate*, but rather the internal tension between election and reprobation within each individual. Such dialectical theology is characteristic of Barth’s thought, which is difficult to summarize in brief.*

He makes Himself known in the parable and riddle of the beloved Jacob and the hated Esau, that is to say, in the secret of the eternal, twofold predestination. Now, this secret concerns not this or that man, but all men. By it men are not divided, but united. In its presence they all stand on one line—for Jacob is always Esau also, and in the eternal ‘Moment’ of revelation Esau is also Jacob.

Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief* (1928), “*The Tributation of the Church*”¹⁴

¹³Translation from *The Christian Faith*, T&T Clark (1928), p. 549

¹⁴This translation is from *The Epistle to the Romans*, Oxford University Press (1968), p. 347

*This is not to say that Liberal Theology reigned supreme during that time. Traditional Christianity was alive and well within the church, but academia become mired in turmoil, leading to the modernist–fundamentalist split.

*I will note that Barth’s neo-orthodoxy has been accused of leaning too close to universalism, although Barth himself was coy on the matter.

In his *magnum opus*, the unfinished *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Barth continues to expound on the doctrine of election by identifying Christ as the one who is simultaneously the object of divine election and rejection, and hence the key to understanding the riddle of election: “in the opposition of the two figures of the elect and the rejected the one figure of Jesus Christ is often more clearly discernible than the opposition itself.”¹⁵

Other modern thinkers have also sought to challenge the traditional reading of Paul’s epistle to the Romans. Another notable example is N.T. Wright (b. 1948), an Anglican theologian associated with the somewhat controversial New Perspective on Paul movement.* Wright argues that Romans 9 is not primarily concerned with matters of personal salvation, but rather God’s action in history, especially relating to ancient Israel.

Jacob’s behavior as a young adult, cheating and twisting this way and that, would scarcely have earned him favor with an impartial deity. The point is, though, that Paul is not here discussing what an abstract, impartial deity would or should have done; he is discussing the long purposes of God for Israel, and through Israel for the world.

N.T. Wright, New Interpreter’s Bible (1994), Vol. 10, p. 637

On the other hand, other twentieth-century theologians in the Reformed tradition have argued for a return to a more traditional understanding of predestination, more in line with the Augustinian doctrines of grace. In the early twentieth century, the neo-Calvinism movement, led by figures like Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) and Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), sought to bring the Dutch Reformed Church more in line with historical Calvinism in the face of modernism. The movement gained significant political traction* and has had a large impact on the Continental Reformed tradition.

In America, too, there has been a similar trend. In the past few decades, the New Calvinism movement,* led by figures like John Piper (b. 1946) and Timothy Keller (1950–2023), has gained prominence. New Calvinism seeks to recenter the ideas of the Reformers and Puritans (especially Jonathan Edwards) in contemporary American evangelicalism, and it is quite explicit in its affirmation of the Calvinist view of predestination. This has gained such currency in certain parts of the evangelical sphere that Time magazine somewhat infamously named *New Calvinism* one of the “ten ideas changing the world” in the twenty-first century, alongside things like *Ecological Intelligence* and *Africa, Business Destination*.¹⁶

The shift toward Calvinism is readily apparent in the trajectory of the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in America. The denomination, like American Protestantism as a whole, has long been home to both Calvinist and Arminian views on predestination. Historically, the first Baptists were the General Baptists, who tended to be Arminians. However, there is also a robust tradition of Particular Baptists who hold to a Calvinistic

*The New Perspective on Paul argues for a re-reading of his epistles in the context of first-century Jewish thought and customs. Controversially, it seeks to re-examine the traditional understanding of Paul’s doctrine of justification. See N.T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision* (2009).

*Kuyper served as the Prime Minister of the Netherlands between 1901 and 1905.

*This is sometimes called the “Young, Restless, and Reformed” movement, especially when talking about recent years.

¹⁵Translation quoted from *Church Dogmatics* II/2, T&T Clark (1957), p. 354

¹⁶“10 Ideas Changing the World Right Now,” *Time Magazine* (2009)

soteriology; many of the most famous Baptists in history, such as John Bunyan (1628–1688) and Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892) identified with this tradition. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was a brief but lively debate over the perceived growing influence of Calvinism, particularly within Southern Baptist seminaries. A few decades ago, its most famous preachers, such as Billy Graham (1918–2018), tended to emphasize the “personal choice” to follow Jesus in their evangelism. Nowadays, many of the most notable Southern Baptists, such as Albert Mohler (b. 1959) are avowed Calvinists.

The recent turmoil around predestination has not been limited to debates between Calvinists and Arminians; there has also been a recent revival of interest in Molinism. In the world of secular analytic philosophy, the twentieth century saw the introduction of the modal account of counterfactual conditionals.¹⁷ Alvin Plantinga (b. 1932) used this to develop and reformulate the Free Will Defense to the problem of evil.* This produced a resurgence of interest in the philosophy of religion in general; being obviously related by its heavy reliance on counterfactuals, there was a particular resurgence of interest in Molinism.¹⁸ In the popular sphere, too, there has been renewed interest in Molinist accounts of predestination; one notable advocate is the popular apologist William Lane Craig (b. 1949).

*For more on Plantinga's theodicy, see his academic book *The Nature of Necessity* (1974) and his popular book *God, Freedom, and Evil* (1974).

5 Summary and Thoughts

I hope we can approach the subject of predestination with humility. Much has been written on it over the past two millennia, and I cannot pretend to be familiar with all of the literature. I've touched here on a litany of “-isms,” each with a different view on predestination: Augustinianism, Pelagianism, Thomism, Calvinism, Arminianism, Molinism, Jansenism, Barthianism, and others. Some vocabulary if you wish to pursue the matter further:

- A distinction is sometimes drawn between mere predestination and double predestination, which asserts that God also predestines the reprobate to damnation. Personally, I don't think this distinction is particularly meaningful, since one must logically entail the other, at least if you take the meaning of the terms *prima facie*. However, there is some truth to the notion that the cases of the elect and the reprobate are not entirely symmetric.¹⁹ The elect are saved *in spite of their sin* because they have received grace which is wholly external to themselves, being from God. The reprobate are damned because of their own sin, which is entirely internal in the sense that the fault for it lies entirely with themselves. God is not the author of sin.

¹⁷For more on modal counterfactual semantics, a classic work is David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (1986).

¹⁸Ken Perszyk (ed.), *Molinism: The Contemporary Debate* (2011), p. 19

¹⁹R.C. Sproul, “Is Double Predestination Biblical?” (2018), available online at <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/double-predestination-biblical>.

- Another distinction is sometimes made between the supralapsarian and infralapsarian positions. The former holds that God predestined men before the fall (and hence he decreed the fall to happen), while the latter holds that God predestined men after the fall.* Infralapsarianism is the more mainstream view.
- Yet another distinction is made between the monergistic and synergistic views of justification. In the former view, our salvation is purely a work of the Spirit, to which we contribute nothing. Some language commonly used here is the saying that *regeneration precedes faith*, which is to say that we cannot have faith until we have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, being dead in our transgressions prior to this moment.²⁰ In the latter view, our salvation is a cooperative work between the Spirit and ourselves.

*Naturally, there is much more that could be said about this distinction. For instance, it might be better to think of it as a logical, rather than temporal, ordering of decrees.

I would like to end with this thought: why does the doctrine of predestination matter, or what benefit does it confer upon us? In my opinion, the benefits are several. *First*, it gives us a very high view of God's sovereignty. He is sovereign over all things in our lives, and apart from him we can do nothing; through him, we can do all things.²¹ *Second*, it is, in my opinion, the purest form of the Reformation ideal of *sola gratia*.²² Since God has predestined us before the foundation of the world,²³ salvation cannot rely on anything within our own power. It is by grace and grace alone that we are saved. Since, then, salvation is only by God's grace, we cannot boast in it.²⁴ *Third*, it gives us assurance of our salvation. Since salvation does not depend on us at all, we cannot lose it. In the words of the Westminster divines:

The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care,²⁵ that men, attending the will of God revealed in His Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election.²⁶ So shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God;²⁷ and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the Gospel.²⁸

Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), Chap. 3, Art. 8

Wherever you fall in your views on the matter, it is my hope that you can appreciate the rich history of scholarship on predestination and indeed praise God for the wonder of salvation.

²⁰Eph. 2:5

²¹Lk. 18:27, Jn. 15:5, Phil. 4:13

²²Salvation "by grace alone"

²³Eph. 1:4

²⁴Rom. 3:27, 1 Cor. 1:29, Eph. 2:9

²⁵Rom. 9:20, 11:33, Dt. 29:29

²⁶2 Pt. 1:10

²⁷Eph. 1:6, Rom. 11:33

²⁸Rom. 11:5, 6, 20, 2 Pt. 1:10, Rom. 8:33, Lk. 10:20

Colophon: About This Essay

Predestination is somewhat infamous for attracting contention; it is commonly joked that Christians—particularly of the Reformed sort—who are beginning to take theology seriously will enter into a so-called “cage stage” during which they will argue with great passion and certainty for their favored view of predestination. I, of course, once went through such a stage myself, and it prompted my initial forays into thinking about predestination, reading relevant Scripture, and talking to others about it. The history of this doctrine is quite long, and my understanding of its is doubtless incomplete and somewhat biased by my particular convictions.

By popular demand, we had a cell group discussion last November on predestination, mostly centered around a study of Romans 9. This essay arose out of a set of notes that I compiled in preparation for that study, as I sought to understand historical perspectives on the matter. It originally largely followed the historical notes in Berkhof’s *Systematic Theology* (1949), but I continued to elaborate on it and add non-Reformed perspectives until it developed into something much longer. The reader may notice at times a paucity of references throughout this essay. This is an artifact of the way this essay developed, starting from a quick set of notes for myself that I did not intend on publishing.

Most of the time, the primary sources referenced in the text are easily available online. For instance, there is no shortage of translations of Josephus’s *Antiquities* on the Internet. However, in some cases, it took some effort to find an English copy of the text; in those cases, I have cited a specific translation in order to aid the reader in finding it. In a rare couple of cases, I was not able to find a complete English translation at all, and so I have preserved the original Latin and added my own rough English translation below it. In all quotes, emphasis is added.

This is the first version of this essay. The latest version can be found online at <https://www.ericzheng.org/files/pdf/predestination.pdf>.