

Joel R. Beeke

Debated Issues in Sovereign Predestination

Early Lutheran Predestination, Calvinian Reprobation,
and Variations in Genevan Lapsarianism

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Foreword

Predestination is a biblical doctrine that clearly highlights God's initiative in salvation. But this doctrine, especially double predestination, has given rise to considerable controversy throughout the course of church history, particularly in the Reformed tradition, with flashpoints in Calvin, Beza, and the Arminian controversy. Rather than presenting a complete history of this doctrine in early Protestantism, in this volume Joel Beeke tackles three debated issues relating to predestination that have not been fully addressed: early Lutheran views on predestination and their relationship to Reformed views; Calvin's stance on reprobation; and treatment of the supralapsarian-infralapsarian issue by early Genevan theologians.

Though there is affinity between Luther's early theology and the Reformed tradition on predestination, Beeke shows that, beginning with Melancthon, later Lutheranism diverged from Luther on this issue, especially by downplaying the role of reprobation. In exploring the relationship between early Lutheran and Reformed views, Beeke focuses on the controversy between Marbach and Zanchi, as a backdrop for the respective confessional expressions on predestination presented in the Lutheran Formula of Concord and the Canons of Dordt.

Calvin's view of predestination has been thoroughly studied, but such studies usually treat reprobation together with election, with the emphasis on election. However, it is reprobation, the darker side of predestination, that has been the focus of most criticism of the predestination views held by Calvin and later Reformed theologians. Though election and reprobation should not be separated, the doctrine of reprobation has a long history of its own and is a theme that deserves treatment in its own right. Beeke provides the most thorough analysis, to date, of Calvin's view of reprobation, as expressed throughout the various phases of his career. Beeke especially notes how Calvin sees in this doctrine pastoral implications for the elect.

The supralapsarian-infralapsarian issue is a somewhat abstruse question that has often been sorely misrepresented. Since Calvin's successor Theodore Beza first formulated the supralapsarian position, this is an issue that has frequently

plagued debates about predestination, especially in the Reformed tradition. Sometimes the issue is simplistically portrayed as if the supra position teaches that God predestined people before the fall into sin, while the infra position teaches that God predestined people after the fall. Actually, whether the issue is posed in terms of the object of predestination or in terms of the order of divine decrees, the real issue is how God from eternity *considered* those he predestined—as not yet fallen, or as fallen and justly deserving of condemnation. The whole question probes the limits of human knowledge about the inner workings of God’s mind. But practically speaking, the question centers on where the emphasis should be placed—on God by his good pleasure sovereignly predestining people to everlasting life or death, or on God graciously and justly predestining them as sinners. Beeke well sorts through the intricacies of these matters, as he explores the historical trajectory of Genevan lapsarian views—from Beza to the Genevan delegates at the Synod of Dordt, and on to Francis Turretin and his successors.

Beeke addresses these difficult matters with sensitivity to historical context and development, with systematic acuity, and a broad grasp of secondary scholarly literature with which he dialogues. The result is a balanced analysis of these issues that should bring greater clarity to scholarly understanding of the doctrine of predestination in the early modern era.

Donald Sinnema

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Author's Preface

This book explores specific and controversial questions regarding the doctrine of double predestination in the historical theology of the Reformation. First, I examine the views of Martin Luther, Philip Melanchthon, and the authors of the Formula of Concord on double predestination. Scholars have long puzzled over the partnership between the two Reformers often polarized as the Augustinian Luther and the synergistic Melanchthon, but recent scholarship has demonstrated that the two Wittenberg professors actually stood closer together than once thought and they contributed together to the peculiar combination of doctrines evident in articles two and eleven of the Formula. Second, I trace the doctrine of reprobation through its development in John Calvin's corpus of writings. Reprobation tends to be viewed as the "dark side" of predestination, but Calvin consistently insisted upon it as a biblical and logical corollary of election. Third, I follow the line of predestinarian teaching at Geneva from Theodore Beza through Jacob Vernet, giving special attention to their positions on the order of God's decrees. The post-Calvin Genevans varied in their lapsarian positions, but maintained an orthodox Reformed view of predestination until Amyraldianism penetrated into the academy and opened the door for Arminianism, and later virtual Socinianism.

In a sense, I've wanted to publish this book for more than thirty years. I began the research for it in the early 1980s when studying for my PhD at Westminster Theological Seminary. I was convinced that election, and in some senses, even reprobation, were doctrines that were "friends of sinners" rather than obstacles to their salvation. For the last few decades I continued to read substantively in the area of predestination, especially the thornier questions of reprobation and the supralapsarian-infralapsarian debate among Reformed theologians concerning the conceptual order of God's decree from eternity.

Recently, I returned to this subject in earnest, and am grateful to my publisher for helping me see this book through to the press. Heartfelt, belated thanks are in order to my primary teachers at WTS: Sinclair Ferguson, Clair Davis, and Rick Gamble. Without their impetus, insights, and encouragement, this book would

never have been written, much less published. I also wish to thank Richard Muller for his profound impact on my thinking in the area of predestination over the last three decades, as well as for his friendship and conversations—especially about supralapsarianism. Another friend who has impacted my thought, particularly on the doctrine of reprobation is Don Sinnema, whose doctoral dissertation, “The Issue of Reprobation at the Synod of Dort (1618–19) in Light of the History of This Doctrine,” is a masterpiece of careful scholarship on the Reformation understanding of reprobation. I appreciate deeply his wise counsel on various matters raised in this book and am grateful for his foreword. Thanks too to Robert Kolb, one of my best Lutheran friends and a stellar scholar of Lutheranism, for taking time to meticulously examine and comment on the first part of this book related to Lutheranism. I also value the suggestions on the manuscript made by my nephew, Jonathon Beeke, PhD candidate at the University of Groningen studying Christ’s twofold kingdom in Reformed theology, as well as the editorial skills of Greg Bailey and Ray Lanning.

I am indebted to the Dutch scholar and publisher, Pieter Rouwendal, a friend of many years who has graciously engineered the translation and publication of a number of my books into Dutch, for showing me that, contrary to what other scholars and I had been saying for years, primary source evidence shows that the Genevan theologians between Theodore Beza and Francis Turretin did not follow Beza’s supralapsarian convictions but were largely infralapsarian in their approach to the order of God’s decree. Finally, I am deeply grateful to Paul Smalley, my valued assistant, for his invaluable insights and research. Paul, this is a much better book because of your work than it ever would have been without you.

To Mary, my extraordinarily special helpmeet, I owe far more thanks than feeble words can ever express. Your love and support and involvement in my ministry is more than any grateful husband/pastor/author could wish for. As you and I are fast becoming empty-nesters and are beginning the enjoyable grandparenting phase of life, I pray that the precious doctrine of eternal predestination as an act of a covenant-keeping, faithful, God for thousands of generations will increasingly become even more meaningful to us (2 Sam. 23:5).

If this book sheds light on theological and historical issues relative to the Reformation view of predestination and simultaneously assists scholars, pastors, and other church leaders to grapple with these issues in such a way that those whom they lead will receive real and practical benefit from them, I would count my labor more than repaid.

Joel R. Beeke

Part I: Predestination in Early Lutheranism

Chapter 1: Historical Germination in Luther

The definitive statement on predestination for confessional Lutheranism appears in Article 11 of the Formula of Concord.¹ Despite notable exceptions,² this article, entitled “God’s Eternal Foreknowledge and Election,” has received inadequate attention in secondary sources from Reformation historians or dogmaticians. In one sense, this is no surprise. These doctrines have taken a back seat to more up-front doctrinal disputes of early Lutheranism on topics such as original sin, free will, good works, law and gospel, the Lord’s Supper, and the person of Christ. Article 11 is sandwiched between the consideration of “Ecclesiastical Practices Which Are Called *Adiaphora* or Indifferent Things” (Art. 10) and “Other Factions and Sects That Never Subscribed to the Augsburg Confession” (Art. 12). The eleventh article of Lutheran orthodoxy’s definitive symbol does not appear to

1 The Formula of Concord, Epitome, Art. 11, and Solid Declaration, Art. 11, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 517–20, 640–56. Hereafter the Epitome of the Formula of Concord will be noted as *Epitome* and Solid Declaration as *SD*, with article and section numbers.

2 F. Bente, *Historical Introductions to the Book of Concord* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965), 195–227; Gerrit C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, trans. Hugo Bakker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 38–42; Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism, vol. 1*, trans. Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia, 1962), 133–40; Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jensen, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 153–63; Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method*, Lutheran Quarterly Books, ed. Paul Rorem (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 244–70; J. L. Neve, *Introduction to Lutheran Symbolics* (Columbus: F. Heer, 1917), 423–28; Timothy J. Wengert, *A Formula for Parish Practice: Using the Formula of Concord in Congregations*, Lutheran Quarterly Books, ed. Paul Rorem (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 180–96; Charles P. Arand, Robert Kolb, and James A. Nestingen, *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 214–15. See also Rune Söderlund, *Ex praevisa Fide. Zum Verständnis der Prädestinationslehre in der lutherischen Orthodoxie* (Hannover: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1983), cited in Kolb, *Bound Choice*, 293n25. I am indebted to a lecture at Westminster Theological Seminary on Lutheran orthodoxy by D. Clair Davis (September 1982) for seminal thoughts leading me to do this research. I am also grateful to Robert Kolb and Jonathon Beeke for their helpful comments on this study.

have been intended by its framers to have front-line significance in the ongoing debates of Reformation theology.³

The framers of the article seem to have desired to reduce predestination to a sub-point under the comforting and assuring aspects of soteriology. The Formula of Concord shifted gears from Luther's bold assertion of predestination in *De servo arbitrio* (*The Bondage of the Will*) to the idea of foreknowledge or prescience (*praescientia* or *praevisio*). This downshift has provoked criticism. Philip Schaff charged the Formula with contradicting itself by its extremely "Augustinian" statements on human depravity and inability (Art. 2) and "anti-Augustinian" statements on predestination (Art. 11).⁴ G. C. Berkouwer said that in the case of "many Lutherans" we find "the projection of synergism into the counsel of God" by their reduction of predestination to prescience—the mere recognition by God of human choice rather than the divine choice of pure sovereignty.⁵

The Formula of Concord separates reprobation from predestination, asserting the former to be a divine response of rejection (based on foreknowledge) to persistent human resistance of God's grace, whereas the latter is a sovereign preordination of the elect to calling, illumination, conversion, justification, and salvation.⁶ Retreating from the dreaded implications of full-orbed predestination, the composers of the Formula of Concord addressed predestination exclusively from the comforting aspect of election unto life and explicitly rejected the doctrine of predestination unto damnation as "blasphemous, horrible, and erroneous."⁷ The concordists pursued a dichotomous, paradoxical line of thought regarding election and reprobation. They attempted to combine particularism and universalism.⁸ How could God elect some sinners to salvation by grace alone, and yet fully will that all sinners be saved? How can man be dead in sin and utterly opposed to God, and salvation be entirely of God's grace, and yet the reason that some are saved be that they did not resist God when others did? As a result, the Formula's position gives rise to numerous, thorny, historical and theological questions.

3 That is not to say that predestination has never been a front-line issue in Lutheranism since the Formula of Concord. Regarding the controversy over predestination in American Lutheranism in the late nineteenth century, see Hans R. Haug, "The Predestinarian Controversy in the Lutheran Church in North America" (PhD Dissertation, Temple University, 1968); Edward Busch, "The Predestinarian Controversy 100 Years Later," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 9, no. 3 (June 1982): 132–48.

4 Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1877), 1:314–15, 329–30.

5 Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 34–35.

6 *SD*, XI.40.

7 *Epitome*, XI.16–21.

8 Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 1:330.

First, what historical/theological climate gave rise to Lutheranism's paradoxical answer to predestination's question? More specifically, what was the *germination* of sixteenth-century Lutheran thought that bore fruit in the Formula of Concord's conception of divine predestination? To remain within the scope of the subject at hand, I will limit myself to a cursory sketch of the views of Luther and Melancthonian predestination and conclude this first section with the Marbach *vs.* Zanchius debate which encouraged, to say the least, the formulation of an article on predestination in the Formula of Concord.

Secondly, what actually is the historical/theological *position* of the Formula of Concord on predestination? What tensions result, for example, from its attempt to pursue predestination along a middle path between semi-Pelagianism and full Augustinianism? Is the denial of predestination unto damnation a viable answer scripturally, theologically, historically, and practically? Is the Formula of Concord trying to say that Lutheranism has no room for, and, what is more, no need for, such a strong view of reprobation in its theology and life? By rejecting predestination unto damnation, how far does and must Lutheran orthodoxy reject election as well? Does Lutheran orthodoxy, as represented in the Formula of Concord, loosen the bond between election and conversion if and when it limits predestination to the sole prerogative of giving encouragement in personal Christian life? What role does uninhibited gospel preaching play in Lutheran orthodoxy's view of predestination?

Moreover, does Lutheran orthodoxy's analytical method in soteriology negate the theological value of predestination beyond an auxiliary role of affording consolation and assurance? Does this analytical view of salvation preclude reprobation apart from man's persistence in sin specifically on the grounds that we cannot discern its function in solving spiritual problems? Is Lutheranism's ultimate answer on reprobation (which is, after all, the most hotly contested aspect of predestination) neither an affirmation nor a denial, but merely a vote to abstain? "We don't deny it, but don't know how to fit it in; we don't repudiate it, but have no need for it?" Such questions as these comprise the task before us when we make the transition from a consideration of the historical/doctrinal germination of the Formula of Concord's Article 11 to its final historical/doctrinal formulation.

Thirdly, I desire to fortify Sections One and Two by pursuing a *comparison* of a relevant Reformed standard (the Canons of Dordt) with its Lutheran counterpart on the doctrine of predestination. I trust that a comparative historical/doctrinal analysis of predestination in the Formula of Concord will be of assistance in delving into our limited human understanding of divine predestination. I will inevitably aim at the burning question of the whole: Is Lutheran symbolism correct when it views reprobation as worthless at best or as undermining the gospel at worst? Is Lutheran orthodoxy biblical when it confesses that repro-

bation is indeed logical, but that we must not be logicians when we approach the awesome mystery of predestination? Or, is Reformed orthodoxy more consistently biblical when it asserts that the doctrine of predestinarian reprobation can be presented in a useful, contributory, and consoling manner to the church of God (but not, of course, to the reprobate). Berkouwer asks whether the decree of reprobation is “a *lapsus* in the history of the doctrine of election or an echo of the gospel of God?” He asks, “Is it possible and therefore legitimate and necessary to be silent about rejection, and to discuss the task of the Church implied in election: the *eu-aggelion*, the glad tidings?”⁹

Finally, by way of conclusion of this part, I wish to examine briefly the historical reception of Article 11 of the Formula of Concord in both Lutheran and Reformed orthodoxy. Was Article 11 influential in promoting greater unity between the Lutheran and Reformed camps, or did it serve a divisive role by contributing to further “cold war” polarization between them? Did it at least consolidate Lutheranism within itself?

Thus, by way of analyzing Article 11 of the Formula of Concord in its historical/doctrinal *germination, formulation, comparison, and reception*, I hope to show that its role in historical theology’s development of a scriptural doctrine of predestination is by no means negligible as commonly assumed. If its forthrightly paradoxical concept of predestination sharpens our sense of the awesomeness, mystery, and grace of divine predestination by driving us to bow before God, so that the Spirit might impress upon us all the more clearly the image of Jesus Christ, the primary aim of predestination *in us* will have been achieved, though many secondary questions may remain unanswered.

Before taking up the historical consideration of the germination of Article 11, it should first be noted that Lutheran and Reformed scholars approached the issue of predestination from slightly different perspectives. The primary concern of the Lutherans was the origin and continuation of evil: how can a sovereign God be righteous and holy despite the presence of sin in the world He created, and, furthermore, how should repentance be preached to the chosen of God, who, having received God’s baptismal promise, still show evidences of sin in their lives? The methodological framework or lens through which Lutherans sought to answer such questions was a law/gospel hermeneutic; on these terms, reprobation does not serve the purposes of gospel, nor can it be said to lie properly in the domain of law. The Reformed, on the other hand, while they also addressed such questions, held that the Bible placed its highest priority in the revelation of God’s sovereignty, which is absolute. It is these two different methodological approaches, further explained below, that helped lead to the varying positions on election and reprobation developed by Lutheran and Reformed scholars.

9 Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 175, 172.

Luther on Predestination

Martin Luther's precise stance on predestination is not easy to ascertain. Primarily and practically, he sought to focus the doctrine of predestination on the elect under the consoling umbrella of salvation in and through Christ. However, his polemical comments suggest a robust doctrine of divine and sovereign election no more limited or qualified than that of John Calvin. In 1517 he wrote, "The best, infallible preparation for grace, and the only disposing factor for its reception, is God's eternal choosing and predestination."¹⁰

In 1516, Luther lectured on Romans 9 and declared his fundamental agreement with the doctrine of predestination found in the later writings of Augustine.¹¹ Human flesh cannot produce children of God, but only the Spirit of God working "because they have been chosen by God from eternity."¹² No man entered this world better than any other, "but by their own merit they were the same and equal and belonged to the same mass of perdition."¹³ Though salvation must involve the human will, it does not arise from the will, but is "of the mercy of God, who has given this power of willing and doing," and that to those whom God had "predestined to receive mercy."¹⁴ God has chosen from eternity to show mercy to some individuals out of the mass of damned humanity.¹⁵ As to the person not elected, Luther thought it likely that Paul's reference to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart (Rom. 9:17–18) meant God hardened the non-elect man in his sin, "for He wills that His power be magnified in his perdition" (cf. v. 22).¹⁶ Though man contributes no more to his salvation than an ax is able to swing itself, nevertheless Luther warned that men should not become fatalistic and "fall into the abyss of horror and hopelessness," but instead cleanse their minds with "meditations on the wounds of Jesus Christ."¹⁷ Predestination must not be opposed to the gospel or to hope.

Some of Luther's strongest affirmations of divine sovereignty appear in *De servo arbitrio* (1525): "If grace comes from the purpose or predestination of God, it comes by necessity and not by our effort or endeavor, as we have shown

10 *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–1993), 1:225 [hereafter noted as WA], cited in Kolb, *Bound Choice*, 38.

11 Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, trans. Walter G. Tillmanns and Jacob A. O. Preus, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, in *Luther's Works* (Saint Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1958–1986), 25:394 [hereafter noted as LW]. WA 56:405. See David C. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 16–20.

12 Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, in LW 25:385; WA 56:394–95.

13 Luther, *Lectures in Romans*, in LW 25:386; WA 56:395–96.

14 Luther, *Lectures in Romans*, in LW 25:386, 388; WA 56:395–98.

15 Luther, *Lectures in Romans*, in LW 25:391; WA 56:401–402.

16 Luther, *Lectures in Romans*, in LW 25:394; WA 56:404.

17 Luther, *Lectures in Romans*, in LW 25:389; WA 56:399–400.

above.”¹⁸ Luther said, “God’s love towards men is eternal and immutable, and his hatred is eternal... and everything takes place by necessity in us, according as he either loves or does not love us from all eternity.”¹⁹ Wilhelm Niesel goes so far as to assert that Luther “stressed the doctrine of predestination far more than Calvin did. We shall look in vain in Calvin for as harsh a form of the doctrine and such extreme expressions of it as we find in Luther’s *De servo arbitrio*.”²⁰ Some have even placed Luther, somewhat anachronistically, in the camp of the supralapsarians.²¹

Yet even Luther foresaw that this polemical book would be misunderstood by people after he died, and required careful interpretation.²² He denied that God produces sin and spiritual evil in people, like a malicious innkeeper pouring poison into a cup of good wine.²³ Rather, God rules over wicked men “as a wood-carver might make statues out of rotten wood.”²⁴ God did not harden Pharaoh’s heart by injecting evil into his soul, but by “not sending him his Spirit.”²⁵

Luther’s concern in *De servo arbitrio* can be summarized as, “Let God be God.”²⁶ James McGoldrick writes that Luther understood that this theocentric view opposes and offends the anthropocentric inclinations of fallen mankind. Luther said, “Man by nature is unable to want God to be God. Indeed, he himself wants to be God and does not want God to be God.”²⁷ And yet the God-ness of

18 Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. Philip S. Watson with Benjamin Drewery, in *LW* 33:272; *WA* 18:772–73.

19 Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, in *LW* 33:199; *WA* 18:724.

20 Wilhelm Niesel, *Reformed Symbolics: A Comparison of Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Protestantism*, trans. David Lewis (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), 232–33. Cf. Herman Hanko, “Predestination in Calvin, Beza, and Later Reformed Theology,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 10 (April 1977): 1–24, which solidly refutes several statements of Niesel by emphasizing the continuity of Calvin’s thought regarding predestination throughout his theology.

21 Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 257.

22 Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, in *LW* 5:50; *WA* 43:462–63. Robert Kolb notes, “(1) in treating *De servo arbitrio* it is important to take seriously the context, in the specific dispute with Erasmus and the *Diatribes*. That determines both the way in which Luther shapes his content, or the ‘binary opposite’ with whom and whose arguments he is fencing, and also the disputation-style of the argument; 2) it is also important to look at Luther’s own commentary on *DSA* in his commentary on Genesis 26 (see *Luther’s Works* 5: 45–50). There he warns against its misinterpretation—not in any way disavowing it, but trying to explain what he had “really” meant. It is also important to point out that Luther seldom uses the term ‘praedestinato’ in *De servo arbitrio* and when he does, it seems to refer more to ‘providentia’ in general rather than election” (personal communication with author).

23 *LW* 33:178; *WA* 18:711–12.

24 *LW* 33:175; *WA* 18:709.

25 *WA TR* 4:642–43, #5071, cited by Kolb, *Bound Choice*, 53. See also *LW* 33:179; *WA* 18:712–13.

26 Kolb, *Bound Choice*, 32.

27 James E. McGoldrick, “Luther’s Doctrine of Predestination,” *Reformation and Revival Journal* 8, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 90, citing *LW* 31:10.

God is essential to the gospel. Luther said, “Here, then, is something fundamentally necessary and salutary for a Christian, to know that God foreknows nothing contingently, but that he foresees and purposes and does all things by his immutable, eternal, and infallible will.”²⁸ He said, “For this is the one supreme consolation of Christians in all adversities, to know that God does not lie, but does all things immutably, and that his will can neither be resisted nor changed nor hindered.”²⁹ Luther stressed that everything flows forth from God’s eternal decree in accordance with His sovereign will:

[God] would be equally ridiculous if he could not and did not do everything, or if anything took place without him. But granted foreknowledge and omnipotence, it follows naturally by irrefutable logic that we have not been made by ourselves, nor do we live or perform any action by ourselves, but by his omnipotence. And seeing he knew in advance that we should be the sort of people we are, and now makes, moves, and governs us as such, what imaginable thing is there, I ask you, in us which is free to become in any way different from what he has foreknown or is now bringing about?³⁰

Luther traced all events back to God’s active omnipotence, and emphasized the initiative of God in salvation. Man does nothing towards his new birth, or his preservation in God’s kingdom after he has been born again, “but the Spirit alone does both of these things in us, recreating us without us and preserving us without our help in our recreated state.” However, “he does not work without us, because it is for this very thing he recreated and preserves us, that he might work in us and we might cooperate with him.”³¹ This Augustinian language communicates Luther’s belief that all good things in the soul come entirely of God’s grace, and yet grace does not nullify the human will but vivifies it to live to God.

Luther’s writings do contain occasional references to divine reprobation: “Admittedly, it gives the greatest possible offense to common sense or natural reason that God *by his own sheer will should abandon, harden, and damn men* as if he enjoyed the sins and the vast, eternal torments of his wretched creatures, when he is preached as a God of such great mercy and goodness.”³² Yet he could also write that, “It is likewise the part of this incarnate God [i. e., Christ] to weep, wail, and groan over the perdition of the ungodly, when the will of the Divine Majesty *purposely abandons and reprobates some to perish.*” Luther immediately adds, “And it is not for us to ask why he does so, but to stand in awe of God who both can do and wills to do such things.”³³

28 LW 33:37; WA 18:615.

29 LW 33:43; WA 18:619.

30 LW 33:189; WA 18:718.

31 LW 33:243; WA 18:754.

32 LW 33:190; WA 18:719 (emphasis added).

33 LW 33:146; WA 18:690 (emphasis added).

However, Luther's over-all thrust is essentially *soteriological*. Kolb writes, "His doctrine of predestination was not merely a topic in a theological system but rather a tool in delivering God's consolation through the gospel of Christ."³⁴ Indeed, as Werner Elert repeatedly stresses, "the doctrine of predestination is merely an auxiliary thought" for Luther, having "only a subsidiary significance." Yet the doctrine is necessary in order to humble human pride in our own powers and to place us in a position where we must trust the God we cannot fully understand. From this soteriological perspective, Elert says that Luther believed that "predestination is proclaimed only 'for the sake of the elect.'"³⁵

Luther sought to solve the tension between his theoretical predestinarianism and his practical soteriology by resorting to his distinction between the "hidden God" (*Deus absconditus*) and the "revealed God" (*Deus revelatus*). This should not be understood as the positing of a double reality or a double will in God. God "revealed" in Christ is the same "hidden" God who predestines.³⁶ Luther later clarified his position by portraying the Lord as saying, "From an unrevealed God I will become a revealed God. Nevertheless, I will remain the same God. I will be made flesh, or send My Son."³⁷ The difference between God hidden and God revealed is not absolute or ontological, but only consists in the extent to which He is made known to us. Luther said, "If you believe in the revealed God and accept His Word, He will gradually also reveal the hidden God; for 'He who sees Me also sees the Father,' as John 14:9 says."³⁸ Though the hidden God and the revealed God are one and the same, Luther stressed the necessity of approaching God always and only through His self-revelation in Christ.

The *revealed* will of God, synonymous with Holy Scripture, approaches man with life-giving mercy and not death (Ezek. 33), but the *hidden* will of God (before which we must tremble with godly fear) is that whereby God "ordains by his own counsel which and what sort of persons he wills to be recipients and partakers of his preached and offered mercy." God, according to Luther, "does not will the death of a sinner, according to his word; but he wills it according to that inscrutable will of his." God as revealed in His Word mourns the sinner's death and seeks to save him from it; "but God hidden in his majesty neither deplores nor takes away death, but works life, death, and all in all. For there he has not bound

34 Robert Kolb, "The Plan behind the Promise: Luther's Proclamation of Predestination," *Reformation and Revival Journal* 12, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 42.

35 Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 122–23. On the need to preach the doctrine of divine sovereignty for the humbling of human pride and formation of Christian faith, see LW 33:61–62; WA 18:632–33, and the discussion in Gerhard O. Forde, *The Captivation of the Will*, ed. Steven Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 41–43.

36 I am indebted to Robert Kolb on this point (personal communication with author).

37 LW 5:45; WA 43:459–60.

38 LW 5:46; WA 43:460.

himself by his word, but has kept himself free over all things.... God does many things that he does not disclose to us in his word; he also wills many things which he does not disclose himself as willing in his word.”³⁹ From his limited perspective—according to Luther, the only perspective available to creatures incapable of comprehending their Creator—Luther freely maintained *strict monergism* regarding salvation while affirming an unconditional offer of grace to all mankind.

Working with his distinction between the revealed and hidden God, Luther reached the following salient points in his doctrine on predestination:

1) The boundary of human speculation regarding predestination is established by *the Word of God*, for Scripture represents God’s revealed will, beyond which we cannot go. If Scripture speaks little of predestination from a decretal viewpoint, though often from a soteriological perspective, and speaks of reprobation but rarely, then we must follow suit. If Scripture decries probing into the secret will of God (Deut. 29:29), we must also abhor all speculative intrusions into the divine decree. Since everything that is not of faith is sin, and since faith only encounters the revealed will of God, one must never pry into the secrets of the “hidden” God and expect to remain alive; indeed, to attempt to know the hidden God is the work of devils and even opened the door to the commission of original sin.⁴⁰ Thus, all trains of thought relative to predestination that lead us beyond the plain dictates of Scripture are rejected as attempts to reach the hidden God and into “the incomprehensible secrets of the divine majesty.”⁴¹ This confinement of human reasoning on predestination within the bounds of Scripture maintains the important distinction between the Creator and His creatures in Luther’s thought.⁴²

2) By fencing off, as it were, the hidden God from the very life of faith, Luther felt scripturally justified in maintaining simultaneously the universality of divine grace and the negation of human will and merit in receiving such grace. Luther, as it were, pushes the paradox that God wills that all men be saved and yet only some are saved, and that due to nothing in them, back into the unfathomable will of the hidden God, in whom there is neither confusion nor contradiction. Speaking bluntly, Luther’s parallelism between the hidden God/secret will of God and revealed God/revealed will of God, allows him to leave the most challenging predestination questions behind the veil of the hidden God. To the modern-day charges of pragmatism, inconsistency, dualism, and escapism, Luther has a comprehensive answer: Beyond the revealed will of God in Scripture our finite

39 LW 33:139–40; WA 18:684–86.

40 Bente, *Historical Introductions*, 224; Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 125.

41 Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 121–22.

42 I am indebted to a personal communication from Robert Kolb for this insight.

minds cannot and must not tread; we must not think to be wiser than God, nor place our reason above God's revelation.

3) Refusing to yield to “the temptation of theo-logic,”⁴³ Luther equated the need to remain within Scripture's boundaries when discussing election with remaining within the “Christ-boundary.” It was Luther's aim “to keep solely to Christ in the discussion of election, and not to go beyond Him.”⁴⁴ The boundary of God's revealed will limits our minds to the boundary of Scripture, which, in turn, focuses on Christ as presented to us in the means of grace. In the light of the gospel, Luther would not discuss divine predestination apart from faith in Christ. Christ was the heart of predestination for Luther, for Christ crucified is the center of God's revelation. For Luther, all theology fell under what he called a “theology of the cross;” all attempts of logical enquiry that went beyond the cross and revelation of God, he labeled “theologies of glory” that no longer distinguish between the hidden and revealed God.⁴⁵

Luther's Christocentric approach to predestination (which Gritsch and Jenson define as, “whatever God might have planned, or is still planning for the world of men, is known in the gospel—the cheering news that the Jesus of Israel is our destiny”⁴⁶) was emphatically reinforced by his *personal experience*. Luther nearly succumbed to despair in the formative period of his Christian life due to his inability to see within himself solid marks and proofs of election. His eyes were brought to see things in a new light when his spiritual father, Staupitz, told him to abandon all thoughts of what God might have thought or done in eternity and to direct his attention to Christ. If he would find himself “in the wounds” of Christ he would find full assurance of salvation, for God's eternal Father-heart of electing grace is only revealed in his Son. Only then he would know perfectly what God had planned for him from all eternity.⁴⁷ Luther gave similar advice in later life to many similarly troubled souls (including Flacius), instructing them that the correct way to learn the truth is not by starting with God's eternal decrees, but with a personal embrace of Christ revealed in the gospel. Once Christ became one's personal Savior, He would also become both personal Elector and personal Election. Luther said of predestination, “The old Adam must first die before he

43 Gritsch and Jensen write, “[The] temptation of ‘theo-logic’ [is] to solve the mystery of the relationship between God hidden in creation and the God revealed in the gospel through syllogisms” (*Lutheranism*, 154).

44 Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 24.

45 LW 33:139; WA 18:685. For more on Luther's distinction between “theology of the cross” and “theology of glory” see Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

46 Gritsch and Jensen, *Lutheranism*, 154.

47 LW 5:47; WA 43:460–61. For more on Staupitz's significant influence on Luther see especially Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 134–46.

can tolerate this thing and drink the strong wine. Therefore beware that you do not drink wine while you are still a suckling. There is a limit, a time, and an age for every doctrine.”⁴⁸

4) Finally, since the church must only deal with predestination in terms of God’s revealed will (which is bounded by Scripture and by Christ who is the Book of Life,⁴⁹ and the means of grace), the keynote of predestination is soteriological, especially with regard to the advanced steps of the *ordo salutis*. Predestination promotes assurance, comfort, and perseverance. Luther sought to utilize predestination as a pastoral divine, who “attempted to comfort the despairing without permitting the libertine to use election as an excuse for sin.”⁵⁰

The doctrine of predestination, according to Luther, was a motivation to rest in the promises of God’s Word, which are able to keep a sinner from plunging himself into the despairing abyss of reprobation. Since God does not lie, anyone who trusts His promises “will be saved and chosen.”⁵¹ In his doctrinal writings, correspondence, and even at his table, Luther constantly reiterated this pastoral use of predestination, always seeking to use it as a guarantee of forgiveness and a pleading ground; predestination is *for*, rather than *against*, salvation.⁵² As John Dillenberger writes:

[Predestination] was an affirmation on the part of the believer that God could be trusted, trusted even at the point where one’s faith was weak and wavering. It was the confession that God could be trusted, that He had a sure and safe destiny for us. Predestination was confessed by those who, by a miracle they could ascribe only to God, discovered themselves delivered from the incapacity of their wills and now living by God’s grace and promise.⁵³

The priority which Luther assigned to the consolatory aspect of predestination, above and apart from its connection with the sovereignty of God and conversion itself, contains the incipient seeds of later Lutheranism’s outright rejection of the doctrine of double predestination.

Though later Lutheranism could not discern any possibility of comfort *via* reprobation (which in turn led to the rejection of double predestination), Luther himself maintained that reprobation does serve to promote the welfare of the

48 LW 35:378, cited in Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 285.

49 Cf. Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 110.

50 Robert Kolb, “Nikolaus von Amsdorf on Vessels of Wrath and Vessels of Mercy: A Lutheran’s Doctrine of Double Predestination,” *Harvard Theological Review* 69, no. 3–4 (July–October 1976): 325–26.

51 LW 54:387.

52 Kolb, “Nikolaus von Amsdorf on Vessels of Wrath and Vessels of Mercy,” 336.

53 John Dillenberger, introduction to *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Doubleday, 1961), xxviii.

elect. The advanced Christian was to draw comfort from the decree of reprobation, first, by considering that God could also have passed him by, which enables an unworthy believer to magnify the free, distinguishing grace of God toward him. since there are no grounds for this election from the sinner's side. Second, the elect sinner continually needs to be reminded of reprobation to remain humble in receiving grace. If redemptive grace was universal in application, would we not take the gift of eternal life for granted? Faith would then divorce itself from the humble fear of God and become swollen with pride. Third, Luther taught the hidden God, His secret will, and His sovereign decree must be preached for this purpose: "that the faith of Christians will really remain faith that humbly fears God," as Althaus writes.⁵⁴ Thus, to praise grace, to be humbled under grace, and to exercise the grace of faith, constitutes the threefold benefit that reprobation renders (under the Spirit's blessing) to the mature Christian.

It is clear that Luther did, at least early in his career as is evident in the writing of *De servo arbitrio*, assert a doctrine of double predestination. His presentation of it was not in the theological sense as seen in Calvin, but in a pastoral sense. The whole doctrine of predestination (reprobation included) is intended to console the believer by purifying faith from all secret claims of merit and from self-security, so as to move him to rely on, and solely proclaim, the Pauline emphasis on the freedom of God's grace in Christ Jesus (Romans 9–11). For Luther, who once confessed of himself, "I am not only miserable, but misery itself," nothing could be more consoling.⁵⁵

54 Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 285. He also writes, "The hiddenness of God's grace [in Luther's thought] under the terrible reality of rejection creates room for faith and for its character as a risky 'nevertheless.' Faith fully becomes faith only when confronted by temptation through its knowledge of the hidden God. Beyond this: The knowledge that God has man's salvation and damnation completely in His hand and that He chooses and rejects and chooses by His own free will, completely frees a man from the delusion that he could contribute something to his own salvation. This teaching of God's hidden will and activity serves to 'humble our pride and lead us to know God's grace.' Only this can destroy man's final self-trust before God. When he completely despairs of himself, is made nothing, he becomes ripe for faith, that is, ready to throw himself without reservation into the arms of God. Preaching about the hidden God thus leads to despair and Luther testifies that this condition is terrible; at the same time, however, he asserts that it is salutary and 'very close to grace.' For God has promised to be gracious precisely to the despairing. This is revealed 'that those who fear God might in humility comprehend, claim, and receive His gracious promise'" (*The Theology of Martin Luther*, 283–84). See also chapter 20 in this same work for an excellent summary of Luther's teaching on the hidden and revealed God.

55 For additional material on Luther's view of predestination, consult in particular Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 159–60, 274–86; Bente, *Historical Introductions*, 209–228; Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 117–25.

Chapter 2: Further Germination in Melanchthon

Apart from Luther, no other theologian wielded such a pervasive influence on Lutheran orthodoxy as the peace-loving Philip Melanchthon, remembered today as the *Praeceptor Germaniae* (“Instructor of Germany”). Relative to predestination, Berkouwer said that Melanchthon’s doctrines of synergistic election and nearly non-existent reprobation paved the way for Lutheran orthodoxy’s abandonment of double predestination.¹ Indeed, Schaff went so far as to state that Melanchthon’s synergistic view of predestination was, at best, “an improved evangelical form of semi-Pelagianism and an anticipation of Arminianism.”² On the other hand, Hans Engelland maintains that regarding predestination, Melanchthon “stands theologically nearer to Luther than the traditional view indicates. The important theological deficiencies of the time following Melanchthon are more the responsibility of students who fragmented what he had fused.”³ Timothy Wengert more recently affirmed the same,⁴ though recognizing a substantial difference between Calvin and Melanchthon concerning predestination.⁵

1 Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 42.

2 Philip Schaff, *The Harmony of the Reformed Confessions* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1877), 24.

3 Hans Engelland, introduction to Philip Melanchthon, *Christian Doctrine: Loci communes 1555*, trans. and ed. Clyde L. Manschreck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), xli.

4 Timothy J. Wengert, *Human Freedom, Christian Righteousness: Philip Melanchthon’s Exegetical Dispute with Erasmus of Rotterdam*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology, ed. David Steinmetz (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). After noting that Melanchthon did indeed make “small, subtle shifts” from 1530 onwards, Wengert writes, “Melanchthon’s comments about [the human will] not repudiating the Word did not for him simply connote a kind of synergism. Instead, he seemed finally to have found a place in his theology for paradox (*simul*); not in the tension between *iustus* and *peccator*, as with Luther, but in the simultaneous nonrejection of human minds and the work of the Holy Spirit, who moved the hearts of true hearers of the Word and helped them effect true virtues” (141–42).

5 Timothy J. Wengert, “‘We Will Feast Together in Heaven Forever’: The Epistolary Friendship of John Calvin and Philip Melanchthon,” in *Melanchthon in Europe: His Work and Influence beyond Wittenberg*, ed. Karin Maag, Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation