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*The Plan Behind the Promise:  
Luther's Proclamation of Predestination*



*Robert Kolb*

*T*here is abroad today a widespread suspicion that a robust faith in the absolute sovereignty of God is bound to undermine any adequate sense of human responsibility. . . . In particular [such a faith] is thought to paralyze evangelism by robbing one both of the motive to evangelize and of the message to evangelize with. . . . I shall try to show that this is nonsense. I shall try to show further that, as far from inhibiting evangelism, faith in the sovereignty of God's government and grace is the only thing that can sustain it, for it is the only thing that can give us the resilience that we need if we are to evangelize boldly and persistently, and not be daunted by temporary setbacks. So far from being weakened by this faith, therefore, evangelism will inevitably be weak and lack staying power without it.

JAMES I. PACKER

*U*pon returning from a visitation in Lower Saxony, probably in 1543, Martin Luther's Wittenberg colleague Caspar Cruciger had reported that he had met a person who was apparently a mutual acquaintance. This man had been "taken captive by strange and peculiar ideas regarding God's predestination and had become totally confused."<sup>1</sup> He had wanted to commit suicide because he thought that he could not possibly have been predestined to salvation, and so Luther wrote him a letter to bring him away from the hidden abyss of God's mysterious will and direct him to the comfort of the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

**LUTHER WRITING TO A FRIEND**

The biblical revelation of God presents him as a choosing God from Abraham's call in Genesis 12 on. Paul struggled with his own conceptions of God's plan for the chosen people of Israel, above all in Romans 9, and sought to deal with his own questions regarding the failure of many in Israel, God's elect nation, to come to faith in Jesus the Messiah. The early Church shied away from the topic of predestination, for the ancient world suffered under a widespread fatalistic resignation. Augustine of Hippo placed predestination once again at the center of the Church's concern, developing his

doctrine of God's choosing in reaction to the claims of Pelagius that sinners could contribute to their own salvation apart from God's grace. Augustine confessed that human salvation lies wholly in God's hands, that his grace alone predestined those whom he had chosen and ensured that the faithful would persevere until the end. Medieval theologians interpreted and applied Augustine's position in a variety of ways, and by Luther's time some had defused it by focusing on human contributions to the process of salvation in which grace played a key role but human works were not excluded.

As a young monk suffering from scruples that led him to a morbid introspection and sense of unworthiness before the wrath of the just God, Luther doubted that he was predestined to salvation. Johannes Staupitz, his monastic superior, pointed him to the wounds of Christ and led him to trust in God's mercy rather than persist in focusing on his own sins. This led Luther to believe that great comfort for uncertain and troubled consciences should flow from God's choice of human creatures to be his own children in the plan he made for human salvation in Christ before the foundations of the world. The good news of God's saving sinners through Christ rested upon this decision of God to choose those whom he would bring to faith apart from any contribution or consideration they would render.<sup>3</sup> But the Reformer also recognized that the mystery of God's plan for salvation brought doubts and despair to some who focused their thoughts about predestination somewhere other than on the promise of salvation in Jesus Christ. His answer to this despairing man demonstrates that 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.

The Reformer's understanding of God's election of believers cannot be correctly comprehended apart from his distinction of law and gospel. His reading of Paul, particularly of Romans, had led him to interpret all Scripture through the hermeneutical key of discerning whether to apply God's promise or his commands in a given situation. For he

believed that to speak of predestination is to describe one fundamental element of God's promise of salvation. It had no other purpose. He was convinced that sinners resisting God's Word could not make any sense out of this promise, and so they must be given the condemning Word of God's demands for human responsibility. It would be folly, Luther was convinced, to divert them to speculation about God's eternal plans for them. Only the broken and despairing sinner could properly comprehend that God's love comes to sinners apart from any human performance, simply because the Lord chose them to be his own. Furthermore, Luther's presentation of predestination to salvation cannot be comprehended apart from the recognition that God's Word, in oral, written, and sacramental forms, does not merely describe a heavenly reality. The promise of the gospel of Christ actually delivers the favor of God and the forgiveness of sins as it is spoken and heard, as it is received in the sacramental forms of the Word.

These two points are clear from Luther's rather long letter to this person whom he called a friend in the address of the letter. Luther confirmed the presupposition that he had made crystal clear in his famous *Bondage of Human Choice* [*De servo arbitrio*] in 1525.<sup>4</sup> Writing on a field of combat laid out by Erasmus, he had there insisted, as he did some two decades later, that "God the Almighty knows all things and every action and every thought in all his creatures must take place according to his will." This letter of 1543 reflects the same thought as he proceeded from Ephesians 1:5, "He destined us according to the purpose of his will." Luther immediately informed his friend to define that will of God according to Ezekiel 18:23 or 32, "It is not God's will that the sinner die but rather that he be converted and live." God's mercy extends from one horizon to the other and rests upon all those who repent and trust in him, Luther assured the receiver of this letter. God comes to those who call upon him with the righteousness that he bestows through faith in Christ (Romans 10:12; 3:22). When the devil introduces godless thoughts that divert us from the comfort of God's Word, we

must flee to Christ. Listen to the beloved Son of the Father (Matthew 3:17), Luther advised.

The Wittenberg professor himself had often struggled with his own doubts regarding God's disposition toward him. When he wrote to his friend about being "hard and stubborn, completely deaf, refusing to lift your eyes toward heaven, as a despairing, stubborn human creature, with ears that cannot hear, thinking God will not listen to you," he was reflecting his own struggles with his former image of God as well as Cruciger's report of his correspondent. He knew whereof he was speaking when he wrote:

[T]hen you should listen to and look to the Son, who stands upon your path, where everyone must go, and hear his call, "Come!" Come away from your worthless ideas that you will not be saved, with such illusions. "Come, all of you who are worn out and are bearing heavy loads, and I will refresh you" (Matthew 11:28).

Luther concluded that Jesus' "all" excludes no one. All people are called to Christ, who is the only way and path (John 14:6). He calls those who are discouraged and downtrodden, not the arrogant who wish to continue to sin. He calls those who are exhausted and at the end of their own powers. Such people God comforts with the promise of salvation that he planned for them from eternity.

This promise of God is certain, Luther assured his reader, for God chose and created his own people for salvation. He did not choose them to be destroyed but to be saved, according to Ephesians 1. Luther then warned him against trying to use reason or God's law to argue about God's choice of the elect. For God has forbidden speculation. Paul had simply extolled the mysteries and wonders of God's ways as he contemplated God's way of choosing his own (Romans 11:33-36). The Reformer called for trust in God's promise, and he did not try to go beyond trust in the promise to explanations that solve the mystery of God's way of operating in the sinful world.<sup>5</sup>

Luther closed his letter by repeating to his troubled friend that he should not try to figure out God's ways. The priests and Levites under the cross probably speculated about the propriety of promising a thief the gift of paradise, but reason cannot penetrate God's plan and purpose. Trust in God's Word governs all our thoughts, and so we simply cling to the promise of his gospel and claim his assurance, persevering to the end (2 Timothy 2:12-13). For God wants to drive out all the ideas the devil plants in our hearts and comfort us with the forgiveness of sins God promised in Galatians 3:22 and 26.<sup>6</sup>

#### LUTHER LECTURING TO HIS STUDENTS

Not long before he wrote this letter, probably about the end of 1541, Luther had dealt with predestination in an excursus as he was lecturing on Genesis 26. Isaac's denial that Rebecca was his wife, an example of believers' weakness of faith (Genesis 26:7), gave the opportunity to comment on "doubt, God, and God's will." The Wittenberg professor felt compelled to warn his students against the argument that had been circulating within some circles: "If I am predestined, I shall be saved, whether I do good or evil. If I am not predestined, I shall be condemned regardless of my good works." Such statements render all that Christ did for sinners null and void. Such an idea the Reformer rejected out of hand. The first problem that this false view of God's predestining love caused was immorality. A misunderstanding of God's choice of his own children could lead to dissolute living. Predestination is not a license to sin, Luther insisted, but God's plan for giving the life of new obedience to those whom the Holy Spirit has brought to faith. Luther labeled such licentious ideas "devilish and poisoned darts and original sin itself." For these people were "not satisfied with the divinity that has been revealed and in the knowledge of which they were blessed, but they wanted to penetrate to the depth of the divinity." He rejected the argument that concerns about religion and salvation were "uncertain and useless" because "what God has determined beforehand must happen"<sup>7</sup> even though he had always maintained that God governs all things and determines them

through his eternal will. (He made this clear above all in, *On the Bondage of Human Choice*.<sup>8</sup>) In the case of his argument before his students in 1541 he was not refuting Erasmus's views of the freedom of the will but rather was alarmed by antinomianism that sought a license to sin in such deterministic views.

Luther was also moved by the despair that certain people experienced because they believed that God has predestined some, "probably me among them," to damnation. The Reformer went on to treat that problem as well. God did not send his Son to suffer and be crucified for us and he did not give us the sacraments with their comfort and assurance, Luther announced to his students, to leave us in doubt as to whether we are among the saved or among the damned! Against this kind of "delusions of the devil with which he tries to cause us in order to doubt and disbelieve" Luther asserted that God counters such despair and such contempt for God with the Bible, his baptismal promise, and all the blessings that he uses to strengthen faith against uncertainty and doubt. Luther anchored the relationship between God and his chosen people in God's Word, which had created faith in Christ in their hearts. This faith produces peace and assurance because it rests upon Christ alone. The basis of his explaining such assurance lies in his distinction between the Hidden God and the Revealed God. God, as he is in his essence, lies beyond human grasp and human imagination. "God has most sternly forbidden investigating this divinity," Luther told his students. "Let me be hidden where I have not revealed myself to you," Luther echoed God's admonition, "or you will be the cause of your own destruction, just as Adam fell in a horrible manner. For whoever investigates my majesty will be overwhelmed by my glory."<sup>9</sup> God detests reason's attempts to plumb the depths of his way of working.

God has refused to reveal how his foreknowledge and predestination function "by way of reason and fleshly wisdom," Luther maintained. Instead, God decided that "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. He shall die for your sins and shall rise from the dead. In this way I will fulfill your desire so that you may be able to know whether you are predestined or not." Again Luther pointed to Christ "as he lies in the manger and on the lap of his mother, as he hangs on the cross." Luther spoke directly to believers who had come to faith through the Holy Spirit's use of God's Word in their lives. "If you listen to him (Matthew 17:5), are baptized in his name, and love his Word, then you are surely predestined and are certain of your salvation." That was the gospel, Luther knew. "But if you revile or despise the Word, then you are damned." That was his proclamation of the law.<sup>10</sup>

Luther told his students the story of a woman in Torgau who had come to him with tears in her eyes, claiming she could not believe. He summarized God's work in Christ on her behalf with the outline of the Apostles' Creed, and assured her that her doubts were but satanic deceptions. If someone would say, "I do not know whether I am remaining in faith," Luther counseled accepting the promise and the predestining plan of God that lies behind it, and simply clinging to God as he has revealed himself in Christ, knowing that God will be faithful to those who do so. He recalled his own struggle with overwhelming doubts. He would have died in despair, he claimed, if his monastic superior Johannes Staupitz had not comforted him by directing him away from his speculations about God's disposition toward him, pointing him instead to "the wounds of Christ and the blood that was shed for you. From these, predestination will shine. . . . He says to you: 'You are my sheep because you hear my voice' and 'no one shall snatch you out of my hands' (John 10:27-28)." Luther noted that "many who did not resist such a trial in this manner were hurled headlong into destruction."<sup>11</sup>

Luther concluded that believers begin by focusing on God's manifestation of himself in the flesh to snatch them from death and Satan's power, and they are moved to their "great joy and delight that God is unchangeable, that he works with unchangeable necessity, and that he cannot deny himself but keeps his promises," as Paul stated in 2 Timothy

2:13. For ministering to those bending under the weight of their doubts, Luther counseled his students to direct them to the Word of baptism and the Lord's Supper, where God's promises become concrete. These future pastors in his lecture hall might indeed expect to have doubts about other people, their professor told them, but "concerning God you must maintain with assurance and without any doubt that he is well disposed toward you on account of Christ and that you have been redeemed and sanctified through the precious blood of the Son of God. And in this way you will be sure of your predestination since all the prying and dangerous questions about God's secret counsels have been removed—the questions to which Satan tries to drive us, just as he drove our first parents."<sup>12</sup>

#### LUTHER'S PROCLAMATION OF PREDESTINATION

From these two illustrations of Luther's treatment and use of the doctrine of predestination, it is clear, first of all, that Luther's doctrine of predestination is what the Swedish Reformation scholar Rune Söderlund has called a "broken" or asymmetrical doctrine of God's election of his own people.<sup>13</sup> By that Söderlund means that Luther's approach to speaking of God's choosing of his own before the foundations of the world does not fit logically together. The Wittenberg Reformer held God's sovereignty and human responsibility in tension. He could do so because the distinction of law and gospel governed his use of God's Word. His distinction of the Hidden God and the Revealed God prevented him from delving into metaphysical speculation that goes beyond the biblical assertions. Thus, he resisted two temptations: first, it refuses to "smooth out" God's claim that he had chosen believers totally apart from their efforts and performance by assigning to him responsibility for the damnation of others and, second, it rejects the logical conclusion that if human beings are responsible for their own condemnation, they must be at least in some very small way contributing to the ability of God's grace to work in their lives. Luther's insistence that all biblical teaching must be delivered to human

creatures within the distinction of law and gospel required this "broken" or asymmetrical but biblical presentation of God's total responsibility for salvation and total human responsibility for sinners' rebellion against God. That does not make sense from the perspective of human calculations, but it leaves intact both the biblical announcement that God's will is that sinners find life and that all people be saved (Ezekiel 18:23, 32; 1 Timothy 2:4), and that human beings do die in their sins and enter into eternal condemnation (Matthew 25:41). Therefore, Luther addressed the consolation and assurance of God's love for individuals through the gospel of election while proclaiming the law that condemns to those who reject the promises of God.

Steeped in Luther's thought and deeply committed to making the comfort of his understanding of God's election of his own children clear, the contemporary American theologian Gerhard Forde has defined the task of all Christian thought: "theology," he writes, "is for proclamation." He recognizes that there are alternatives for the proclamation of the biblical message regarding God. But only one can be faithful to Scripture: that which acknowledges that the God who reveals himself in its pages is a God who has always made choices. He is an electing God. He chose Abraham from among the countless individuals of his time to be the father of his people. He chose Israel from among the nations to be his special people. He promises that he has chosen the faithful to be his very own family. Forde points out that to eviscerate this confession regarding the very nature of God with a universalistic view transgresses the definitions of the way God is and works found throughout Scripture. To preach to individuals that they will be saved because everybody will be saved opens the door both to licentiousness and to the despair of those who fear that their mistakes and failures have made them the exceptions to that message. It deprives God, Forde argues, of his credibility. A view that suggests that the elect of God are those who have opened their hearts and lives to him apart from the Holy Spirit deprives him of his divine power. For he alone is the re-creator of life, and to insist on

human responsibility for response to God's grace apart from the Spirit's working is to deliver people into either arrogance or despair. Indeed, God calls upon his people to respond to his promise and to exercise the responsibility that is inherent in the humanity he has created for us. God indeed has chosen those who will trust in him, but their trust in him is a creation of the Holy Spirit, not of their own doing. God's foreknowledge of his faithful people is a creative foreknowledge. He did not passively peek into the future when he chose his people, checking out whether they would decide to believe in him and obey him. He actively looked into the future and created his faithful flock.<sup>14</sup> When his people are wondering if they truly belong to the elect, only the promise of God that comes from his own heart, unconditioned by their disposition or performance, can comfort them and give them the assurance that nothing can separate them from God's love.

Second, in both his letter of 1543 and in his lectures some months earlier, the Wittenberg Reformer inseparably joined together God's plan for salvation and his delivery of salvation through his Word. Luther believed he could not proclaim God's unconditional love of those the Holy Spirit brings to faith—a love that is grounded in his choice of his own people before the foundations of the cosmos—without linking it inextricably with the instruments of the Spirit, the Word of God in oral, written, and sacramental forms. Luther loathed speculation about God's hidden will because of the despair he himself had endured when he had not been able to know what a distant and veiled God might have in store for him. He found comfort only in the blood and resurrection of Christ and in the promise of the Word in all its forms. For he trusted that God does actually deliver what he talks about when he speaks from the pages of Scripture, in the proclamation of other believers, in the sacraments that he has appointed to convey his Word of new life. God's choice stands behind his Word, but his Word alone gives access to that choice. His Word gives accurate access to that choice, and therefore believers can rest assured in the promise of God.

That was Martin Luther's confidence, and that brought him to sing what he consistently preached,

*But God beheld my wretched state before the world's foundation,*

*And, mindful of his mercies great, he planned my soul's salvation.*

*A father's heart he turned to me. Sought my redemption fervently:*

*He gave his dearest treasure.<sup>15</sup>*

That treasure is Jesus Christ, whom Luther confessed as Savior. Through him God chose his own—those whom he would grant new life through the promise created by Christ's death and resurrection.

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#### *Notes*

1. *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883-1993 [henceforth WA]), *Briefe* 10:489.
2. WA, 10: 488-496.
3. WA, 10: 492.
4. WA, 18: 600-787, *Luther's Works* (Saint Louis/Philadelphia: Concordia/Fortress, 1958-1986 [henceforth LW]) 33:15-295.
5. WA *Briefe* 10: 489-92.
6. WA *Briefe*, 10: 493-94.
7. WA 43: 457,32—458,27, LW 5:42-43.
8. WA 18: 614-20, 634-39; LW 33: 36-44, 64-70.



9. WA 43: 458,28—460,2; LW 5:43-44, 45.
10. WA 43:459,21-34, LW 5: 44-45.
11. WA 43: 460,2—461,16; LW 5:45-47.
12. WA 43: 461,16—463,17; LW 5:47-49.
13. Rune Söderlund, *Ex praevisa fide. Zum Verständnis der Prädestinationslehre in der lutherischen Orthodoxie* (Hannover: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1983), especially 20-38.
14. Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 30-37.
15. The fourth of the ten stanzas of Luther's hymn, "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice," in the translation of Richard Massie, *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1941), hymn 387; cf. *Das deutsche Kirchenlied von der ältesten Zeit bis zu Anfang des XVII. Jahrhunderts*. Edited by Philipp Wackernagel (reprint, Hildesheim: Olds, 1964), 3:5. The translation "he planned my soul's salvation" is in German literally, "it was his will to help me." The word "helfen," help, carries the connotation of salvation in some sixteenth-century texts.