



*Reformation*  
& **REVIVAL**  
**JOURNAL**

**PREDESTINATION**

*A Quarterly for Church Leadership*

---

VOLUME 12 · NUMBER 2 · SPRING 2003

## *FINAL THOUGHTS*

*John H. Armstrong*

All Christians agree that predestination is a biblical doctrine. From there the disagreements begin to grow. As is the case with so many difficult truths Christian theologians have tried to exegete the biblical texts as carefully and contextually as possible. Still there is disagreement. Thus, one recent book is titled: *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* (InterVarsity Press, 2001). What is the wise Christian to do in the face of such persistent difficulty?

The context for us to look at such a doctrine must be in humility before God and fellow Christians. Presently, none of us sees everything that has been revealed clearly. None of us understands all mysteries, revealed and unrevealed. At the end of his glorious treatise on the supremacy of love Paul concludes: "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face-to-face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12). So what should we do? Paul answers that faith, hope and love abide (in the present state of things) but "the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13b). The least we can do, indeed the greatest that we can do in the face of such revelation, is to love. We can even love those who do not understand this great truth the way we do. Far too much acrimony has been scattered across the story of Church history when it comes to the doctrine of predestination. It would appear that the nature of this revealed truth will never be fully explicated by any one group of theologians this side of heaven. Let us not give up the pursuit of light but let us, above all else, love one another for by so doing we demonstrate that we are born of God (1 John 2:7-11; 3:11-15).



The Church Fathers were not of one mind regarding predestination. Any attempt to make them agree with theological developments that evolved later in Christian history is not a fair reading of their actual comments and the context in which they occur.

Irenaeus, for example, said:

But man, being endowed with reason, and in this respect similar to God, having been made free in his will, and with power over himself, is himself his own cause that sometimes he becomes wheat and sometimes chaff.

So God knows the number of those who will not believe, since he foreknows all things. So he has given them over to unbelief and turned his face away from men of this character, leaving them in the darkness that they have chosen for themselves. So what is baffling if he gave Pharaoh and those who were with him over to their unbelief? For they would never have believed.



Nice try, Sonny.

Justin Martyr, another of the early Fathers, seems quite plainly to have held the same idea of freedom and human will.

He created both angels and men free to do that which is righteous. And he appointed periods of time during which he knew it would be good for them to have the exercise of free will.

Clement of Alexandria exhibits a similar doctrine of free will and human choice in the following quote.

Perhaps the Father himself draws to himself every one who has led a pure life and who has reached the conception of the blessed and incorruptible nature. Or, perhaps the free will that is in us, by reaching the knowledge of the good, leaps and bounds over the barriers (as the gymnasts say). Either way, it is not without eminent grace that the soul is winged, soars, and is raised above the higher spheres.

An abundance of similar texts in the early Church Fathers could be called to testify to much the same idea as that expressed above. The reason for this development is not too difficult to see if you remember what the early Fathers were counteracting at the time—Gnosticism. The Gnostics proudly believed they were initiated into true knowledge. Part of their heresy was the belief that physical evil was necessary and the freedom of the will was thus denied. This was part of the Greek emphasis on “fate.” The Fathers quite necessarily emphasized human freedom (responsibility) over predestination precisely because they were opposing blind fatalism. Yet, as Harry Buis noted in *Historic Protestantism and Predestination* (1958), “Even before Augustine, an increasing tendency to recognize the work of God’s grace can be traced in the thinking of the Church Fathers” (7).

The Eastern Church almost universally emphasized synergism, namely, the idea that regeneration is the cooperative work of the human will and the Holy Spirit. In the West the story is a little different. While early Fathers stressed human

freedom, Ambrose wrote: "God calls those whom he deigns to call; he makes him pious whom he wills to make pious, for if he willed he could have changed the impious into pious." And, he writes, "He who follows Christ, if asked why he was willing to be in Christ, must confirm because it so pleased himself, but in saying that, he does not deny that it so pleased God." Ambrose had a doctrine of predestination but he based it on foreknowledge.

By the time of St. Augustine the situation had changed significantly. Originally he taught synergism but later abandoned it and embraced a strong view of predestination. In reality, it was Augustine's famous prayer in his *Confessions* ("Give what thou commandest and command what thou wilt") that brought about the strong reaction of Pelagius, the British monk. The course of theology, by these events, was permanently changed and would never be the same in the centuries that followed.



I find it more than interesting that Thomas Aquinas, the most respected theologian in the Roman Catholic church, at least among conservative Catholic apologists, strictly adheres to an Augustinian understanding of predestination. In the famous *Summa* there is a question dealing with predestination and in it eight articles provide a lengthy treatment of the matter. In the very first article Thomas says, "It is fitting that God should predestine men. For all things are subject to his providence, as was shown above."

Modern apologists for the Roman Catholic church lean much more heavily on semi-Pelagianism (and at times even Pelagius) than upon Augustinianism and Thomas Aquinas. I am yet to hear a reasonable explanation for this departure from the theologian most loved by the modern neo-conservative movement in the Catholic church.



Predestination is often opposed because it is commonly believed that it destroys human freedom and personal moral responsibility. Freedom, however, is only conceivable in personal terms, both at the divine level and the human. God's plan is worked out within the persons of the Trinity and human persons were made in the divine image.

Anglican theologian Gerald Bray notes that, "The essence of this freedom is voluntary obedience and self-sacrifice; it is the freedom to forget oneself and to live for others. But humanity could always reject this freedom by disobedience, and this eventuality was also foreordained by God. Here there is a mystery that the Bible reveals but does not explain." The immediate cause of Adam's sin was his surrender to Satan's lies. Gerald Bray adds, "Exactly why God wanted this to happen is unknown" (*The Doctrine of God*, 91).

Bray adds that "whatever the final explanation of the mystery of predestination may be, two things are of vital importance for the Christian" (92). First, sin and the fall are real and God has dealt with them both in his own wisdom and grace. We do not understand the cause, and for that matter may

never understand it, but presently we have, as Bray writes, "access to their cure, and it would obviously be silly to reject the latter simply because we cannot fully understand the former" (92). In addition, freedom involves personal responsibility, which puts the blame for sin on us and not God. Concludes Bray very pastorally, "In a time when so many people equate freedom with irresponsibility, it is surely the prime duty of the Church to remind us that freedom cannot exist without obligations—of which the greatest is our obligation to seek the forgiveness of God" (92).

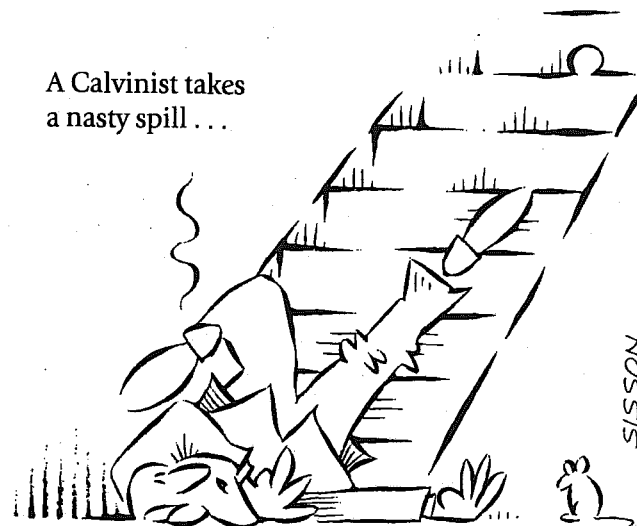


The Augustinian and Calvinistic view is very often misrepresented or misunderstood. It is correct to affirm that *compatibilistic freedom* is what most Reformed theologians have in mind when they speak of freedom *and* necessity. By this idea they believe human freedom, properly defined, is never inconsistent with God having rendered certain what is to happen in the end. The true mystery is found not in the middle but by affirming both with the same biblical certainty. Faith leaves this to God and asks no more.



The most basic and fundamental thing that can be said about Reformed Christianity is that it is supremely theocentric in its orientation. The doctrine of predestination does a number of things for the one who embraces it biblically but perhaps the most important is this—it reminds the Christian every moment of every day that he is not God; only God can be God! When I first "saw" the truth of predestination, after having fought it for some time, I fell to my face and acknowledged that God was God. The freedom of that moment lingers in my soul to this day. I do not find it profitable to "argue" for such doctrine but rather to preach a big and gracious God and let the Spirit convince people of this marvelous truth!

A Calvinist takes  
a nasty spill . . .



"Well, I'm certainly glad that's out of the way."



The vigor with which predestination has been pursued by Reformed Christians is noteworthy. It appears in all the Reformed confessions and catechisms. It runs like a thread throughout the historical tradition. The late John H. Leith once noted that: "Predestination brings the Reformed understanding of God to focus upon the believer and the church" (*Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, 104). Reformed theologians, he adds, understood God "in a dynamic way, as activity, force, will and intentionality. God is the Lord, the all-governing creator" (104). That says it very well.

What difference does this *really* make? Well, Reformed theologians and people have always recognized that the source of faith and life lies in the purpose of God first and foremost. They do not deny human responsibility but they gladly attribute the life of faith in the believer, and in the Christian Church, to God.

I believe most Christians, on their knees in prayer, believe the same truth even if they arise to debate the way in which this doctrine is to be understood. Long before I embraced Reformed confessional teaching regarding predestination I worshiped and prayed to a sovereign God. When my mind accepted this truth, and my will gladly embraced the numerous mysteries regarding it, my soul was flooded with light and peace. I knew that my Father loved me. I understood that my future was secure in his loving purpose for me as a child of the King. I had new strength in my soul to live for God knowing that nothing could harm me or stop me without first passing through his heart of love. Primary and secondary causes aside, God is the ruler of his universe. An affirmation of predestination establishes the soul in God's grace and love. That is good.

