**Assurance and Its Aftermath: The Reformation and Divine Determinism**

As generally described, the religious revolution of the 16th century originated in a German monk’s disillusionment with medieval piety and his transforming discovery that salvation was entirely the gift of God.[[1]](#footnote-1) Exactly what led Martin Luther to enter an Augustinian monastery at the age of 21 is a matter of historical debate. But there is no question about his underlying motive. He became a monk for exactly the same reason as thousands of others—in order to save his soul. To the medieval Christian mind, a monastic life was the surest way of entering heaven.[[2]](#footnote-2) Monasticism was not for spiritual weaklings. Those who entered took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. They endured a skimpy diet, rough clothing, nightly vigils and daily labors, along with the all the limitations of cloistered living, shut off from the rest of the world in the quest for personal holiness.

And Luther pursued the monastic life with relentless determination. He was so hard on himself that further attempts to mortify the flesh might have ended his life. But all his efforts brought no peace. As the months went by, he felt more and more alienated from God. Holy, majestic, devastating, consuming—how could anyone love a God who is a consuming fire, or a Christ who consigned damned souls to hell? “I was more than once driven to the very abyss of despair,” he later remarked.

In the midst of his struggles, the troubled young monk received an unexpected assignment. The vicar of the Augustinian order told him to study for his doctor’s degree, and to begin preaching and teaching Bible at the University of Wittenberg. Spiritually ailing himself, he was given the task of teaching others.

He started out by lecturing on the book of Psalms. Then he taught Paul’s letter to the Romans, and after that his letter to the Galatians. What happened to Luther during those four years with the Bible was a Damascus road experience. He discovered the gospel for the first.

The focal point of his discovery was Paul’s concept of “justification by faith.” During his years of spiritual turmoil, he thought of divine justice as the quality which led “God to condemn the guilty. And the one thing he was sure of was his guilt. God’s justice offered no hope. “I did not love a just and angry God,” he said, “but I hated and murmured against him.”

When he discovered that the Greek word for “justice” can also be translated “justification” or “righteousness,” Luther came to the momentous realization that righteousness Is not something “God demands, but something God gives.” With the realization that the “righteousness of God” revealed in the Gospel, (Romans 1:16-17) referred not to “that righteousness by which [God] is righteous in himself but to that righteousness by which we are made righteous,” he felt that he “had entered paradise itself through open gates.” His sins were forgiven—not through fasting and vigils and pilgrimages and self-mortification—but through the utterly unmerited grace of God made possible by the cross of Christ.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**From divine assurance to divine determinism**

With the revolutionary Reformation emphasis on the priority of divine grace, questions naturally arise about the role of humanity in the experience of salvation. And here the great Reformers were emphatic: salvation is entirely a matter of divine decision. Nothing we do contributes to it. In his exchange with Erasmus on the matter of free will, Luther asserts, “With regard to God, and in all that bears on salvation or damnation, [man] has no ‘free will’ but is a captive, prisoner, and bondslave, either to the will of God or to the will of Satan.”[[4]](#footnote-4) We do not have the freedom to say Yes to God. And neither, as John Calvin is famous for insisting, do we say No because we are free.

Calvin develops his doctrine of “double predestination”—not Calvin’s own expression, by the way—in Book 3 of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion.* He defines predestination as “the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation….”[[5]](#footnote-5) Because God is contented with his “secret pleasure,” the “intrinsic cause” of predestination is in himself,[[6]](#footnote-6) and this accounts for its twofold character. “If we cannot assign any reason for his bestowing mercy on his people, but just that it pleases him, neither can we have any reason for his reprobating others but his will.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Accordingly, predestination to eternal life is not in the least influenced by any human activity, such as good works or “merit.” Wherever God’s “good pleasure” reigns, no good works are taken into account.[[8]](#footnote-8) In no way, then, is salvation the result of some form of divine-human cooperation, for “God finds nothing in men themselves to induce him to show kindness.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Calvin is insistent. The result of God’s free mercy is “not shared between the grace of God and the will and agency of man.”[[10]](#footnote-10) But what about the idea that even though the desire and endeavor of sinners are of no avail by themselves without the grace of God, they nevertheless do their part in procuring salvation, when they are aided by his blessing? Wrong again. Calvin won’t grant “the subtlety of this argument” even “the value of straw.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Even the acquisition of faith is attributable to God, to whom alone “belongs the glory of freely illuminating those whom he had previously chosen.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

So, there is only one explanation for the fact that some are predestined to eternal life and others to eternal damnation—namely, because God wills it. And there is no basis for questioning the justice of God’s will, because God’s will is the “supreme standard of justice.”[[13]](#footnote-13) “[E]verything which he wills must be held to be righteous by the mere fact of his willing it.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

Implacable, and forbidding, as the logic of predestination sounds to modern ears, there are factors that seem to qualify its relative importance in Calvin’s thought. For one thing, a discussion of predestination is noticeably absent from the 1536 edition of the *Institutes*, and it does not make an appearance in the 1539 edition until the end of volume three—of the four volumes.[[15]](#footnote-15) Calvin also emphasizes the practical consequences of predestination. It removes from believers any grounds for self-congratulation and anchors their confidence in a greater source of security than their own accomplishments could ever provide—the divine will itself. Far from shaking faith, then, predestination provides the best confirmation of it.[[16]](#footnote-16) Nothing grounds the assurance of our salvation more firmly than the knowledge that God has unilaterally, irresistibly, and irreversibly placed us among the company of the saved.

These considerations, as well as the fact that he himself called the doctrine “horrible,”[[17]](#footnote-17) suggest that we should view Calvin’s concept of predestination as a logical consequence or subsidiary theme within his theology but not as the grounding principle of his thought.[[18]](#footnote-18)

There are Christians today who find in predestination the very assurance of which Calvin speaks and to which Luther’s experience bears witness. In an article that appeared in *Christianity Today* some years ago, two MDiv students at Princeton Theological Seminary described their respective journeys from different theological backgrounds, through a series of reservations about predestination—“walls” they call them—to an enthusiastic acceptance of the doctrine. When that happened, they said, “the heavens broke open and predestination descended like a dove.” It “was the most freeing thing that had ever happened to us spiritually,” they exclaimed. “We were free to be creatures again!” And “our intellectual adjustment to predestination has completely transfigured everything in our lives.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

**Questions about predestination**

Whatever its positive personal consequences, predestination raises a number of “great and difficult” questions, as Calvin himself noted. If God’s will is the sole factor that accounts for who is saved and who is lost, what is the point of preaching the gospel? And if the basis of our salvation has nothing whatever to do with our own activity, why should we have any interest in godly living? But the most pressing question concerns God’s responsibility for evil. If, in fact, God’s will is the ultimate explanation for everything that happens, the damnation of the wicked as well as the salvation of the saints, doesn’t it follow that God is responsible for sin and all its consequences?

No, Calvin argues, the wicked are themselves the cause of their condemnation.[[20]](#footnote-20) They are “hateful to God with perfect justice,”[[21]](#footnote-21) and “every evil which they bear is inflicted by the most just judgment of God.”[[22]](#footnote-22) So, even though their perdition depends upon predestination, “the cause and matter of it is in themselves.” [[23]](#footnote-23) This does not prevent God’s being merciful to some, however, and if we wonder why God is not merciful to all, Calvin offers this famous response: “In giving to some what they do not merit, he shows his free favour; in not giving to all he declares what all deserve.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

Despite such explanations, the great Reformers’ concept of God’s unilateral salvific activity continued to raise questions about the human role in the experience of salvation. One of the best known figures to ponder them was Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609), a Dutch theologian of the 16th century, who found the doctrine of predestination too harsh because it did not provide a place for human free will in the process of salvation.[[25]](#footnote-25) In reaction, Arminius held that one’s personal salvation depends not solely on God’s gracious call, but on one’s positive response to God’s invitation. We are free to accept or reject God’s invitation, he maintained. God’s will is not all-determining.

Early in 1610 a group of 48 preachers and teachers met in The Hague to formulate their views on disputed doctrines. According to the “five articles of remonstrance” they drew up, election is [conditional](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conditional_election) upon faith in Christ, Christ died for all, because of [total depravity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Total_depravity) human beings cannot save themselves, human beings have the [free will](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_will_in_theology) to [resist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prevenient_grace) God's [grace](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine_grace), and the perseverance of the saints may be [conditional](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conditional_preservation_of_the_saints) upon the believer remaining in Christ.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Several years later, 1618-19, the Dutch National Synod met in Dordrecht, reviewed the Articles of Remonstrance, and came up with five “heads of doctrine,” one in response to each article. The Canons of Dort, as they are known, have served as a definition of Calvinism ever since, with the acrostic “tulip” providing a familiar mnemonic for the essential items in Calvinist soteriology—t[otal depravity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Total_depravity), [unconditional election](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unconditional_election), [limited atonement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Limited_atonement), [irresistible grace](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irresistible_grace), and the [perseverance of the saints](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perseverance_of_the_saints). And there are a good number of people today who describe themselves as “five point Calvinists.”

Whether or not Calvin himself as a thoroughgoing “Calvinist,” the concept of predestination took on a life of its own, and divine determinism became for later Protestants the bedrock of their theology. In the third of its 33 chapters, for example, “Of God’s Eternal Decree,” the Westminster Confession (1646) asserts that “God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsover comes to pass.” And the notion that God is responsible, not just for the ultimate destiny of human beings, but for everything that happens in the universe, is alive and well today. During the 500th anniversary of Calvin’s birth, *Time Magazine* described Calvinism as “Evangelicalism’s latest success story, complete with an utterly sovereign and micromanaging deity, sinful and puny humanity, and the combination’s logical consequence, predestination ….”[[27]](#footnote-27)

In the words of one advocate, “Scripture never doubts God’s command over every event, or that he determines everything that happens, in its entirety and in minutest detail: God is sovereign totally, radically, absolutely.… God’s care extends even to the minutest occurrences …” (Mt 10:29).[[28]](#footnote-28)

**Theological “fine tuning” (or “hairsplitting”?)**

The contrasting positions taken by Calvinists and Arminians on matters of salvation reveal the difficulty of achieving all the objectives of good theology: to do justice to the full range of the biblical witness, to satisfy the requirements of reason for clarity and consistency, and to meet the complex needs of personal religious experience. Proponents of each position face serious challenges in trying to satisfy all of them.

If, as Calvinists maintain, God is entirely responsible for our salvation—human achievement/performance has nothing to do with it—and this necessarily implies that God is responsible for everything that is, how can one avoid the conclusion that God is responsible for evil and suffering? And if the perseverance of the saints is inevitable, what are we to make of the numerous biblical warnings against “falling away”? But if, as Arminians grant, human beings are the victims of total depravity, where do we get the ability to accept God’s offer of salvation? What accounts for our freedom to do that?

Both sides resort to careful maneuvering to avoid unacceptable conclusions. Calvinists solve their dilemma by distinguishing between what God ultimately wants to happen and what he allows to happen. in this vein, Millard Erickson, by his own account a “soft Calvinist,” distinguishes God’s “wish” from God’s “will.” The former refers to “God’s general intention, the values with which he is pleased. The latter is God’s specific intention in a given situation, what he decides shall actually occur.” And there are many times when God wills to permit “what he really does not wish.” Consequently, we should say that the will of God “permits rather than causes sin,” even though by not preventing it “God in effect wills the sin.” And if we wonder why God permits what he does not really wish, the answer is, we do not know. [[29]](#footnote-29)

Arminians find a way to account for the ability of sinful humans to accept the gift of salvation by distinguishing between saving grace and enabling, or “prevenient,” grace. As a theological dictionary describes Methodism, one of its distinctive emphases is the belief that the offer of salvation is universal, so all human beings can be saved. How? Because our fallen state is “offset by preliminary or prevenient grace [as distinct from irresistible grace] which operates to some extent in all men and leads them towards conversion.”[[30]](#footnote-30) This gives fallen human beings the ability to say Yes to God, but it is not enough to produce a positive response by itself.

Not surprisingly, proponents of each position find the others’ explanations unconvincing. In a revealing footnote in one of his essays, his extensive article, Bruce McCormick describes his transition from “from a Wesleyan-Arminian perspective to a Reformed outlook.” While a student at Nazarene Theological Seminary, he wrote a paper on Wesley’s doctrine of “prevenient grace.” His research led him to the conclusion that the concept of prevenient grace, with its assurance that God gives everyone just enough grace to accept or reject “saving grace” when it is offered, not only makes the notion of “total depravity” meaningless, but has not even a hint of biblical support.[[31]](#footnote-31) As McCormick came to see it, divine grace is effective in bringing its recipient salvation and is not, in any sense, a halfway, or preparatory, measure. In other words, divine grace, simply put, is saving grace. And with this conviction, his confidence in Arminianism gave way.

Clark Pinnock’s theological “pilgrimage”—his term—led him in the opposite direction, from Calvinism to Arminianism. Converted as a teen-ager, he began his theological life as a Calvinist. He began to develop doubts about Calvinist positions as he read the book of Hebrews, with its urgent exhortations to persevere and warnings about falling away. These statements seemed to conflict with the last of Calvinism’s famous five points, “the perseverance of the saints,” and once the thread was pulled, he recounted, the whole garment of Calvinism began to unravel. Drawing on the Bible, then, and his own religious experience as well, he began to see that “reciprocity and conditionality had to be brought into the picture of God’s relations with us in creation and redemption,” and with this the deterministic model of God gave way. The “insight of reciprocity” made it possible for him to accept the “universal salvific will of God” and dispense with the “morally loathsome” doctrine of double predestination. Eventually it led him to free will theism, with its open view of the future and its revisionary concept of divine foreknowledge.[[32]](#footnote-32)

A persistent question for Arminians—one that goes back to Arminius himself—concerns the relation between human freedom and divine foreknowledge.[[33]](#footnote-33) And among Arminians over the past twenty years or so, the issue of divine foreknowledge has generated animated discussions and some sharp divisions. If human beings are genuinely free—free in a libertarian sense—then how could God know what all their decisions will be before they make them? Arminians resort to a variety of responses, from middle knowledge to simple foreknowledge, and a number known as “open theists” take the position that when God endowed his creatures with genuine freedom he created a world whose future was indefinite in significant ways, even from his perspective. God has the inherent power to create a world that would fulfill his plan in every detail. But since his character is one of love, God chose instead to create a world whose inhabitants would have the freedom to return God’s love for them, and in so doing he ran the risk of rebellion.[[34]](#footnote-34)

The responses to open theism have been far more animated, and sometimes hostile, than any of its original proponents anticipated. And while its critics understandably include Calvinists, they include a number of Arminians as well. And the focal issue of the discussion is almost always the extent of God’s knowledge, or the meaning of divine omniscience. For open theists themselves, there is an issue more basic than foreknowledge, namely, the question of which quality or attribute is central to the nature of God. Is it power? Or is it love? If it’s love, then it follows that God is open to the world, responsive to its events, touched by its sufferings, delighted by its successes and disappointed by its failures … all of this, not in one timeless, all-encompassing perception, but sequentially, as these things happen.

**A possible response to theological challenges**

When we look at the circuitous course that the Reformation quest for personal assurance took, we can see the sort of challenges that theologians face in their attempt to apply the best of human reasoning to the complexity of religious experience. We seek clarity and consistency, *and* we seek explanatory adequacy.

From an Arminian perspective, double predestination is not a logical corollary of the priority of divine grace in the experience of salvation, but an exaggeration, and ultimately a distortion of it. By emphasizing God’s initiative to the exclusion of any human participation, it raises a number of puzzling, apparently intractable problems, the most glaring of which is God’s apparent responsibility for evil and suffering. And the attempt overcome this by drawing a line between general and meticulous providence leaves us with a distinction without a difference.

For Calvinists, Arminians unduly complicate what is essentially a straightforward understanding of salvation. In sovereign majesty, God decides entirely on his own who’s saved and who’s lost, and unilaterally applies his grace to the former. From a Calvinist perspective, the Arminian insistence that human freedom has an essential role to play in the experience of salvation detracts from the glory of God, overlooks the comprehensive effects of sin, and requires the hypothetical postulate of prevenient grace.

And what for most Armininians is a paradox—the dual affirmation of exhaustive divine foreknowledge and libertarian human freedom—open theists see as an avoidable contradiction. If God sees the future in all its detail, we actually contribute nothing to the scheme of things and our sense of freedom is an illusion. But we can avoid the incompatibility of exhaustive divine foreknowledge and human freedom by affirming divine temporality. The view that God experiences events as they happen, not in some timeless sphere, is makes sense of the biblical witness and personal experience.

This leaves us with a somewhat troubling conclusion. For theologians, nothing is more important than religion, and for them (for us) the stakes never seem higher than when we are embroiled in theological controversy, and nothing as important as the issues that divide us. When that happens, it becomes more important than ever to remember the convictions that we share. And this centennial year of the Reformation provides an occasion to bring the most important one to mind, namely, a common appreciation for Luther’s single, most important insight.

Luther is significant today, 500 years after he nailed his theses on the church door in Wittenberg, not simply as an inspiring example of moral courage, and not merely because he set in motion historical developments of incalculable consequence.[[35]](#footnote-35) He is significant today not primarily because his own spiritual struggle so dramatically expresses the experience of those who take religion with absolute seriousness. Nor is he significant for us because of the breadth and subtlety of his thought. (Other theologians had more to say, and many of them said it better.)

Luther is significant today because, more than any other figure since the apostles themselves, he saw what the Gospel is all about and portrayed its central truth with vivid and unforgettable strokes. Luther put it this way in his commentary on Galatians. “This is the reason why our theology is certain: It snatches us away from ourselves, so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works, but depend on that which is outside ourselves, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive.” As theologian Emil Brunner observes, “It is precisely his one-sided emphasis on justification which marks [Luther] out as … the one teacher in all the church who is nearest to the mind of Christ.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

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1. For a readable and informative account of Luther’s significance, see Jaroslav Pelikan’s article, “The Enduring Relevance of Martin Luther 500 Years After His Birth,” *The New York Times,* September 18, 1983. For another readable, and more recent—34 years more recent—account of Luther and the Reformation, see Joan Acocella, “The Hammer: How Martin Luther Changed the World,” *The New Yorker,* October 30, 2017, pp. 67-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther,* pp. 24-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Here I Stand,* p. 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Quotations from *The Bondage of the Will,* in Jennifer L. Bayne and Sarah E. Hinlicky, “Free to be Creatures Again,” *Christianity Today,* October 23, 2000, pp. 41, 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* trans. Henry Beveridge (Eerdman’s, 1966), III.xxi.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. III.xxii.7 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. III.xxii.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. iii.xxii.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. III.xxii.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. III.xxiv.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. III.xxiv.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. III.xxii.10. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. III.xxiii.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. III.xxiii.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Calvin introduces the topic with the observation that people respond to the proclamation of the gospel in different ways and then offers predestination as an explanation for this divergence. “[T]he covenant of life is not preached equally to all, and among those to whom it is preached, does not always meet with the same reception” (III.xxi.1). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. III.xxiv.9. A knowledge of election results in the assurance that “our salvation flows from the free mercy of God as its fountain.” And without it, “the very foundation of our safety” would be destroyed (II.xxi.1.). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. III.xxiii.7. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. In fact, for both Luther and Calvin predestination is arguably a “believer’s doctrine”—a truth perceptible to those who are assured of their salvation, but not something that belongs to the public proclamation of the Gospel. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Jennifer L. Bayne and Sarah E. Hinlicky, “Free to be Creatures Again,” *Christianity Today,* October 23, 2000, p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. III.xxiii.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. III.xxiii.17. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. III.xxiii.9. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. III.xxiii.8. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. III.xxiii.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jacobus-Arminius [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five\_Articles\_of\_Remonstrance [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *Time,* March 23, 2009, p. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Henri Blocher, *Evil and the Cross,* trans. David G. Preston (InterVarsity Press, 1994), 90-91. Blocher is a French theologian who taught for several years at Wheaton College, [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Baker, 1983), p. 361. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. A. Raymond Gorge, “Methodism,” in *A Dictionary of Christian Theology,”* ed. Alan Richardson (Westminster Press, 1969), p. 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. “The Actuality of God: Karl Barth in Conversation with Open Theism,” In *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives.* Ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Baker Academic, 2008), pp. 202-203, f.n. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. “From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrimage in Theology,” in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism,* ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Zondervan Academic, 1989), pp. 15-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Like many free will theists, Arminius accepted God’s absolute foreknowledge, but he admitted that he did not have a good explanation for it. “The knowledge of God,” he states, “is eternal, immutable and infinite, and … extends to all things, both necessary and contingent…. But I do not understand the mode in which He knows future contingencies and especially those which belong to the free-will of creatures….” (“A Discussion on the Subject of Predestination, Between James Arminius, D.D., Minister at Amsterdam, and Francis Junius, D.D., Professor of Divinity at Leyden,” in *The Writings of James Arminius,* trans. James Nichols and W. R. Bagnall, 3 vols. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956], 3:66). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. One might describe open theism as a quest for “consistent Arminianism,” a view of God’s relation to the creaturely world as one that grants the openness that genuine love and its corollary, viz. genuine creaturely freedom, require. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. A variety of surveys, both religious and secular, rank Luther as the most influential person of the past millennium. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *Church Dogmatics,* 3:191. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)