

Calvin, Dordt, and Westminster on Predestination A Comparative Study¹

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On December 4, 1646, the Confession of Faith, prepared by the Assembly of Divines meeting at Westminster, was completed. The date is more than a century later than that of the earlier editions of Calvin's masterpiece, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* and also of the first edition of what is one of his most notable commentaries, the *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. The century that intervened was one of prodigious theological output and intense controversy. Within the Reformed Churches the gravest issue was that focused in the Arminian Remonstrance of 1610 and it was this issue that gave occasion for the Synod of Dordt in 1618 and 1619. It would be unhistorical and theologically unscientific to overlook or discount the developments in the formulation of Reformed doctrine that a century of thought and particularly of controversy produced. Study even of Calvin's later works, including his definitive edition of the *Institutes* (1559), readily discloses that his polemics and formulations were not oriented to the exigencies of debates that were subsequent to the time of his writing. It is appropriate and necessary, therefore, that in dealing with Calvin, Dordt, and Westminster we should be alert to the differing situations existing in

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the respective dates and to the ways in which thought and language were affected by diverse contexts. In applying this principle, however, caution must be observed. This is particularly necessary in the case of Calvin. Too frequently he is enlisted in support of positions that diverge from those of his successors in the Reformed tradition. It is true that Calvin's method differs considerably from that of the classic Reformed systematizers of the 17th century. But this difference of method does not of itself afford any warrant for a construction of Calvin that places him in sharp contrast with the more analytically developed formulations of Reformed theology in the century that followed.

It would be expected that the vantage point occupied by the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, the unsurpassed care exercised in time composition of the documents that were the products of its labours, and the lengthy debates that characterized the Assembly would impart a precision scarcely equalled by earlier creedal formulations. This is conspicuously true in its Confession of Faith and Catechisms. In this essay we are concerned with the subject of predestination. No chapter in the Westminster Confession exhibits more of the qualities we might expect than Chapter III, 'Of God's Eternal Decree'. The chapter has eight sections. Sections I and II deal with the decree in its cosmic, all-inclusive reference, Sections III and IV with the decree as it has respect to men and angels in common, and Sections V-VIII with the decree as it applies to men distinctively. This order and the proportions of emphasis evince the competence which marks the Confession throughout.

The divines thought it meet to use the terms 'predestinate' and 'predestination' with reference to those appointed to everlasting life and the term 'foreordain' for those appointed to everlasting death. 'By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life; and others foreordained to everlasting death' (Sect. III). This variation is maintained in subsequent sections (cf. Sects. IV, V, and VIII). It cannot be said that any difference is intrinsic to the terms such as would require this restriction and it cannot be that greater or less efficacy was intended to be expressed by the one term in distinction from the other. What consideration dictated the usage concerned it may not be possible to say. But it cannot be denied that in the structure of the chapter as a whole the interest of differentiating between the elect and non-elect is thereby promoted and the felicity of the expression 'predestinated unto life' is made more apparent.

The doctrine of the Confession on predestination and foreordination is unequivocal. The differentiation involved and the diversity of destiny arising therefrom are clearly asserted. 'These angels and men, thus predestinated, and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished' (Sec. IV). It is worthy of note that this statement of the Confession includes both angels and men and is so framed that in respect of the doctrine set forth it has equal relevance to men and angels. This feature goes beyond what we find in the

Canons of Dordt. The Canons are concerned solely with the election and 'reprobation' of men. The reason for this is obvious. The Remonstrant tenets against which the Canons were directed dealt with the decree of God with reference to mankind and the issue would have been unnecessarily perplexed by introducing the subject of angels. But Dordt enunciates the same position in respect of mankind. 'And as God himself is most wise, unchangeable, omniscient, and omnipotent, so the election made by him can neither be interrupted nor changed, recalled nor annulled; neither can the elect be cast away, nor their number diminished' (Cap. I, Art. XI; cf. Art. VI). In the Rejection of Errors, Articles II, III, and V, the reason for this emphasis upon definiteness is given. The opposing position is stated to be that 'God's election to eternal life is manifold, the one general and indefinite, the other particular and definite . . . the one election to faith, the other to salvation that the good pleasure and purpose of God, of which Scripture makes mention in the doctrine of election, does not consist in this, that God elected certain men above others, but in this, that God from all possible conditions . . . elected faith, in itself unworthy, and the imperfect obedience of faith as the condition of salvation', a position pronounced to be pernicious error, prejudicial to the good pleasure of God and the merit of Christ. The Westminster Confession is oriented against the same error but the reference to angels in the same section is a reminder that the scope of its interest in Chapter III is more embracing than that of the Canons.

The parallelisms of Sections V-VIII of the Confession with the First Head of Doctrine in the Canons is conspicuous and comparison at various points will disclose not only the agreement of the two documents on what is germane to the doctrine of predestination, but also the debt the Assembly of Divines owed to the deliberations and conclusions of Dordt. There is, of course, the marked contrast in proportions. Compact brevity is a distinguishing feature of the Confession. The four sections of the Confession comprise not more than one eighth of the space occupied by the eighteen affirmative and nine negative articles of the Canons. But the Canons are not to be accused of redundancy, and it should be kept in mind that there is in the text of the Canons copious quotation of Scripture in support of the doctrine asserted and in refutation of the errors rejected, a practice not adhered to in the Confession.

In contrast with the Remonstrant teaching, predestination to life and salvation is in both documents construed as unconditional, that is, as constrained by the sovereign good pleasure of God and not by any difference belonging to men themselves. This is expressed in the Confession in these terms: 'Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to His eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, hath chosen in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of his mere free grace and love' (Sect. V). The terms of the Canons are: 'Election is the unchangeable purpose of God, whereby, before the foundation of the world, he hath, out of mere grace, according to the sovereign good pleasure of his own will, chosen, from the whole human race . . . a certain

number of persons to redemption in Christ' (Art. VII); 'The good pleasure of God is the sole cause of this gracious election' (Art. X; cf. also Arts. XV and XVIII). So there is not only an identity of doctrine but also to a large extent of language.²

The negative counterpart of the emphasis upon mere free grace and the sovereign pleasure of God is, in contrast likewise with Remonstrant teaching, that election is not determined by any foresight of faith or of perseverance. 'Without any foresight of faith, or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving Him thereunto' (Sect. V) says the Confession. 'This election was not founded upon foreseen faith, and the obedience of faith, holiness, or any other good quality or disposition in man, as the prerequisite, cause, or condition on which it depended' (Art. IX) say the Canons (cf. also Rejection of Errors, Art. V).

That redemption by Christ and all the grace necessary to the fruition of God's electing purpose should flow from election rather than be the determinants of it is a correlate of the positive and negative declarations just noted. Both documents are careful to state this expressly. 'The elect God hath decreed to give to Christ to be saved by him, and effectually to call and draw them to his communion by his word and Spirit; to bestow upon them true faith, justification, and sanctification; and having powerfully preserved them in the fellowship of his Son, finally to glorify them for the demonstration of his mercy, and for the praise of the riches of his glorious grace' (Canons, Art. VII; cf. Art. IX). It can scarcely be denied, however, that the formulation of Westminster excels in not only tying up the fruits with election but also in stating the certainty of effectuation in both redemption and application. 'As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath He, by the eternal and most free purpose of His will, foreordained all the means thereunto. Wherefore, they who are elected, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ, are effectually called unto faith in Christ by His Spirit working in due season, are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by His power, through faith, unto salvation' (Sect. VI).³

The section just quoted from the Confession requires comment from another angle. On the question of the order of the divine decrees the Canons of Dordt are infralapsarian. This would appear to be the purport of Article VII when it says that election is that whereby God hath 'chosen in Christ unto salvation a certain number of men from the whole human race, which had fallen by their own fault from their original integrity into sin and destruction, neither better nor more worthy than others but with them involved in common misery'. But it is clearly set

² Space will not permit us to adduce the teaching of Calvin on this subject. A cursory reading of the *Institutes*, Book III, Chapters XXI-XXIII and of his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Chapter 9 will show that this same insistence is sustained and pervasive. Cf. my *Calvin on Scripture and Divine Sovereignty* (Grand Rapids, 1960).

³ Cf. Calvin: *Institutes*, III, xxiv, 1-4.

forth in Article X when it is said that God was pleased ‘out of the common mass of sinners to adopt some certain persons as a peculiar treasure to himself’. The Confession might seem to have the same intent. ‘Wherefore, they who are elected, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ.’ This would not be correct. The words, ‘being fallen in Adam’, do not imply that the elect when elected were contemplated as fallen in Adam. The words simply state an historical fact which explains the *necessity* of redemption by Christ and the other phases of salvation. The Confession is non-committal on the debate between the Supralapsarians and Infralapsarians and intentionally so, as both the terms of the section and the debate in the Assembly clearly show. Surely, this is proper reserve in a creedal document.

No paragraph in the whole compass of confessional literature excels for precision of thought, compactness of formulation, and jealousy for the various elements of truth in the doctrine concerned than Section VII of the Confession. ‘The rest of mankind, God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will, whereby He extendeth or withholdeth mercy, as He pleaseth, for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures, to pass by; and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice.’ Several observations should be noted.

The section deals with what has often been called the decree of reprobation. In distinction from Dordt (cf. Arts. VI, XV, and XVI)⁴ the Confession does not use this term. This restraint must be commended. Although the Scripture uses the term that is properly rendered ‘reprobate’ (cf. Rom. 1:28; 1 Cor. 9:27; 2 Cor. 13:5, 6, 7; 2 Tim. 3:8; Tit. 1:16), yet its use is such that the elements entering into the decree of God respecting the non-elect could not legitimately be injected into it. The presumption is that the Westminster divines hesitated to employ it for this reason. *Biblical* terms should not be loosely applied.

The precision of the formulation is evident in the distinction drawn between the two expressions ‘to pass by’ and ‘to ordain them’. The former is not modified, the latter is. No reason is given for the passing by except the sovereign will of God. If sin had been mentioned as the reason, then all would have been passed by. The differentiation finds its explanation wholly in God’s sovereign will and in respect of this ingredient the only reason is that ‘God was pleased . . . to pass by’. But when ordination to dishonour and wrath is contemplated, then the proper ground of *dishonour* and *wrath* demands mention. And this is sin. Hence the addition in this case, ‘to ordain them to dishonour and wrath for their sin’.

A third observation, however, is all-important. It might be alleged that the Confession represents judicial infliction and ill-desert as the only factor relevant to the ordaining to dishonour and wrath, that what has been called ‘reprobation’ as distinct from preterition is purely judicial. The Confession is eloquent in its

⁴ Calvin frequently uses the term ‘reprobation’. Cf. citations given above.

avoidance of this construction and only superficial reading of its terms could yield such an interpretation. The earlier clauses — ‘God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will, whereby He extendeth or withholdeth mercy, as He pleaseth, for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures’ — govern ‘to ordain them to dishonour and wrath’ as well as ‘to pass by’. So the sovereign will of God is operative in ordaining to dishonour and wrath as well as in passing by. And careful analysis will demonstrate the necessity for this construction. Why are some ordained to dishonour and wrath when others equally deserving are not? The only explanation is the sovereign will of God. The *ground* of dishonour and wrath is sin alone. But the reason why the non-elect are ordained to this dishonour and wrath when others, the elect, are not, is sovereign differentiation on God’s part and there is no other answer to the question.

The genius of the fathers of Dordt did not lie in the direction of such compact and yet adequate definition. And the situation confronting them required more expanded treatment. But Dordt was likewise alert to the need for these same distinctions and to the diverse factors entering into what it called the decree of reprobation (*decretum reprobationis*). ‘What peculiarly tends to illustrate and recommend to us the eternal and unmerited grace of election is the express testimony of sacred Scripture, that not all men are elect but certain non-elect are passed by in God’s eternal election, and these God out of his most free, most just, irreprehensible, and immutable good pleasure decreed to leave in the common misery into which they by their own fault have plunged themselves, and not to bestow upon them saving faith and the grace of conversion, but, left to their own ways and under just judgment, at length, not only on account of unbelief but also for all other sins, for the declaration of his justice to condemn and punish forever’ (Art. XV; cf. also Art. VI).

The Canons are at this point careful to guard against the inference that the decree of reprobation makes God the author of sin. ‘And this is the decree of reprobation which by no means makes God the author of sin (the very thought of which is blasphemy), but declares him to be an awful, irreprehensible, and righteous judge and avenger’ (Art. XV). The Confession reiterates the same caution. Although God ordains ‘whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures’ (Sect. I).

On the distinction between the sovereign and judicial elements in foreordination to death Calvin likewise is cognizant. He draws the distinction in terms of the difference between ‘the highest cause’ (*suprema causa*) and the ‘the proximate cause’ (*propinqua causa*).⁵ The highest cause is ‘the secret predestination of God’ and the proximate cause is that ‘we are all cursed in Adam’. ‘But as the secret predestination is above every other cause, so the corruption and wickedness of the ungodly affords a ground and provides the occasion for the

⁵ *Comm. ad* Romans 9:30 and 9:11 respectively.

judgments of God.’⁶ Thus for Calvin, as for Dordt and Westminster, the *reason* for discriminating is ‘the bare and simple good pleasure of God’ (*ad Rom.* 9:11) and the *ground* of damnation is the sin of the reprobate, a damnation to which they have been destined by the will of God (*cf. ad Rom.* 9:20).⁷

It will be admitted that in ‘the decree of reprobation’ the doctrine of God’s absolute predestination comes to sharpest focus and expression. On this crucial issue, therefore, Calvin, Dordt, and Westminster are at one. The terms of expression differ, as we might expect, and the Westminster Confession with inimitable finesse and brevity has given to it the most classic formulation. But the doctrine is the same and this fact demonstrates the undissenting unity of thought on a tenet of faith that is a distinguishing mark of our Reformed heritage and without which the witness to the sovereignty of God and to his revealed counsel suffers eclipse at the point where it must jealously be maintained. For the glory of God is the issue at stake.

The abuses of the doctrine of predestination and the alleged conflict thereby instituted with other doctrines of Scripture are matters with which Calvin, Dordt, and Westminster were compelled to deal. The Westminster Confession with characteristic felicity reads: ‘The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men, attending the will of God revealed in His Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election. So shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God; and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the Gospel’ (Sect. VIII). The situation Dordt encountered demanded much more expansion of these same caveats, exhortations, and assurances pertaining to the doctrine. The first article of the Arminian Remonstrance required that Dordt should give prominence to the universal sin and condemnation of mankind, to the love of God manifest in the giving of Christ, to the proclamation of the gospel, to the summons of men without distinction to repentance and faith, to the guilt and consequence of unbelief as well as to the saving effect of faith, and to the responsibility of men in the rejection of the gospel. It was necessary to show that these truths were not curtailed or negated by the doctrine of predestination and the latter had to be set in proper focus in relation to them. Hence the first five articles of the Canons are devoted to such aspects of the gospel. But, after the pattern followed by the Westminster Confession and in greater fulness, Dordt deals with the proper uses of the doctrine and warns against the distortions to which it is liable to be subjected. The way of attaining to the assurance of election is set forth in Article XII. The elect may attain to this assurance, ‘though in various degrees and in different measure . . . not by inquisitively prying into the secret and deep things of God but by observing in themselves with spiritual joy and holy pleasure the infallible fruits of election designated in the Word of God’.

⁶ *Ibid. ad* 9:30 (E.T., 1960), p. 216.

⁷ Cf. also *Inst.*, III, xxiii, 3, 8, 9 and 10.

The consolations of the sense and certainty of election and the corresponding responses in humiliation, adoration, and gratitude are reflected on in Article XIII and the danger of carnal security, rash presumption, remissness in observing the commandments of God receives proportionate emphasis. Of particular and distinctive interest are Articles XIV and XVI, the *former* in setting forth the obligation to proclaim constantly, in due time and place to the glory of God's most holy name, the doctrine of election and the *latter* for the concern that the proper response should be offered to the doctrine of reprobation. Those who do not yet experience living faith in Christ and its accompanying confidences ought not to be alarmed or terrified by the doctrine of reprobation or rank themselves among the reprobate, provided they persevere in the use of the means of grace and earnestly desire to be turned to God. But it is a terror to those who are forgetful of the claims of Christ and indulge the lusts of the flesh.⁸

In dealing with abuses of the doctrine of foreordination one objection that both Dort and Westminster found it necessary to controvert is that it makes God the author of sin and exculpates the human agent. No one has exposed the fallacies underlying this objection with greater effect than Calvin. A great deal of his argumentation in *Institutes*, Book I, Chapters XVI-XVIII is devoted to a refutation. With eloquent reiteration he develops the distinction between the motive, reason, and end by which men are actuated in the commission of sin, on the one hand, and the motive, reason, and end entertained by God, on the other. In Calvin there is no toning down of the fact that the will of God is the first and ultimate cause of all that comes to pass. But there is total disparity between the will of God and the will of man as these two wills are operative in the same event. When men sin they are not actuated by the design of fulfilling God's purpose but by evil passions in contravention of his revealed good pleasure. Here is the same principle asserted by both Dort and Westminster that foreordination is not the *rule* of our action but the will or commandments of God revealed in his Word. 'From what source do we learn but from his Word? In such fashion we must in our deeds search out God's will which he declares through his Word. God requires of us only what he commands. If we contrive anything against his commandment, it is not obedience but obstinacy and transgression.'⁹

In reference to election there is one other aspect that may not be overlooked. It is that election was in Christ. Calvin repeatedly stresses this. There are three lessons derived from it. First, it certifies that 'the election is free; for if we were chosen in Christ, it is therefore not of ourselves'.¹⁰ Second, we cannot find assurance of our own election anywhere else than in Christ. Election is prior to faith but it is learned only by faith. Third, we learn thereby that election is discriminating; not all are members of Christ. It is noteworthy that both Dort and

⁸ Cf. Calvin: *Inst.*, III, xxi, 1 and 2; xxiii, 5, 12, 13 and 14.

⁹ *Inst.* I, xvii, 5 (E.T., 1960), p. 217.

¹⁰ *Comm. ad Ephesians* 1:4. Cf. *Inst.*, III, xxii, 1 and 2 *De Aeterna Dei Praedestinatione*, in *Opera* (Brunswick, 1870), VIII, coll. 318 f.

Westminster introduce this aspect in contexts where the sovereignty and freeness of election are set in the forefront (Confession, Sect. V; Canons, Art. VII). They are thus in accord with the position emphasized by Calvin. But in neither document is there reflection upon the more practical lessons mentioned by Calvin. We could scarcely expect the limits of creedal formulation to permit this. Both Dordt and Westminster also speak of God's decree to give the elect to Christ to be saved by him (Confession, Chap. VIII, Sect. I; Canons, Art. VII). This decree from eternity must have been conceived of as distinct from and logically subsequent to election in Christ. No index is given, however, in either document as to how the framers conceived of this election in Christ. This is to their credit. The revelatory data do not warrant dogmatism as to the precise *character* of the 'in Christ' although the Scripture makes apparent its manifold consequences.

The conclusion constrained by this comparative study is that although Calvin, Dordt, and Westminster exhibit distinguishing features appropriate to their respective contexts and to the demands these contexts exacted, yet on the subject of predestination there is one voice on all essential elements of the doctrine. This is but one example of what is true in respect of the system of doctrine espoused by the Reformed Churches. There is what must be called the consensus of Reformed theology. Our debt is unmeasured. It is also one to humble us. In no doctrine is the *solī Deo gloria* more demanded of us than in our thought of predestination. Nowhere in the compass of theological formulation is the praise of God's glory more central than in the work of Calvin, Dordt, and Westminster.