

# Calvin, Beza, and Perkins on Predestination

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## Abstract

Given the importance of predestination to Reformed theology and the place that Calvin, Beza, and Perkins have in its development and in modern historiography, this article asks what these theologians actually said about predestination. It offers a brief exposition of their teachings on this important topic and seeks to demonstrate their basic complementarity of belief, their shared intention, and their desire to promote godliness by this aspect of *sola gratia*. It is no surprise that succeeding generations of Reformed orthodoxy such as the divines of the Westminster Assembly and the Dutch further Reformation looked to their writings as stellar examples of a predestinarian theology that is biblical, christological, and practical.

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**T**he Reformed faith is often judged, positively or negatively, for its doctrine of predestination.<sup>1</sup> Reformed Christianity is as broad in scope as the faith of the Apostles' Creed, the loving obedience prescribed in the Ten Commandments, and the hopeful devotion modeled in the Lord's Prayer, as the Reformed

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this article have been condensed from Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 117–31; Joel R. Beeke, *Debated Issues in Sovereign Predestination: Early Lutheran Predestination, Calvinian Reprobation, and Variations in Genevan Lapsarianism* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 93–110, 140–46, 175–95.

catechisms teach us. However, it is inevitable that people would single out predestination as a distinguishing feature of Reformed theology, for Reformed divines have fought many battles on this particular doctrinal field.

Those who view predestination as the stuff of nightmares often try to pin the blame on a particular bogeyman of history. For many, it is John Calvin. Of course, Calvin did not invent predestination. The makings of the doctrine may be found everywhere in the Old Testament: “The counsel of the LORD standeth forever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations” (Ps 33:11). The verb “predestine” or “predestinate” (*proorizo*) appears several times in the New Testament,<sup>2</sup> and the same is true of the related words “choose” (*eklegomai*), “elect” (*eklektos*), and “election” (*ekloge*).<sup>3</sup> Augustine (354–430) wrote extensively on predestination in the Pelagian controversies more than a thousand years before Calvin was born.

In the twentieth century, a number of historical scholars have tried to exonerate Calvin and indict his successor at Geneva, Theodore Beza (1519–1605). It was Beza, we have been told, who distorted Calvin’s biblical faith into the monstrous logical system of “Calvinism.”<sup>4</sup> Beza’s error in turn is said to have infected English Puritanism, due in large measure to the widely read books of William Perkins (1558–1602). This theory has been largely discredited today.<sup>5</sup>

Given the importance of predestination for Reformed theology and the place that Calvin, Beza, and Perkins have in its development and in modern historiography, it behooves us to ask in the first place what these theologians actually said about predestination. This article will offer a brief exposition of their teachings on this important topic, seeking to demonstrate their basic continuity of belief and shared intention to promote godliness by this aspect of *sola gratia*.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 4:28; Rom 8:29–30; 1 Cor 2:7; Eph 1:5, 11.

<sup>3</sup> See the theological uses of this word group in Matt 20:16; 22:14; 24:22, 31; Mark 13:20, 22, 27; Luke 18:7; John 15:16, 19; Acts 9:15; Rom 8:33; 9:11; 11:5, 7, 28; 16:13; 1 Cor 1:27–28; Eph 1:4; Col 3:12; 1 Thess 1:4; 2 Tim 2:10; Titus 1:1; Jas 2:5; 1 Pet 1:2; 2:4, 6, 9; 2 Pet 1:10; 2 John 1, 13; Rev 17:14.

<sup>4</sup> R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster, 1997), 38. See Basil Hall, “The Calvin Legend,” and “Calvin against the Calvinists,” in *John Calvin*, ed. G. E. Duffield (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 1–37.

<sup>5</sup> For a review of the historiography and Richard Muller’s role in its reversal, see Raymond A. Blacketer, “The Man in the Black Hat: Theodore Beza and the Reorientation of Early Reformed Historiography,” in *Church and School in Early Modern Protestantism: Studies in Honor of Richard A. Muller on the Maturation of a Theological Tradition*, ed. Jordan J. Ballor, David S. Sytsma, and Jason Zuidema (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 227–41.

## I. Calvin's Sources for His Doctrine

Calvin's primary and supremely authoritative source for the doctrine of predestination was the Bible.<sup>6</sup> S. Leigh Hunt has said, "The doctrine of predestination occupies a prominent place in his system, primarily because he found it so clearly revealed in Holy Scripture."<sup>7</sup> Calvin warned against the two errors of speculating beyond what God has revealed and blasphemously judging as useless what God has spoken in his Word for our use.<sup>8</sup> Calvin's doctrine was also shaped by Augustine,<sup>9</sup> possibly Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples (1455–1536) and his pupil Gérard Roussel (1500–1550),<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther (1483–1546),<sup>11</sup> and Martin Bucer (1491–1551).<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, however, Calvin must be regarded as a man of God's Word rather than the disciple of any mere human teacher. Nor did he build his doctrine on experience,<sup>13</sup> or

<sup>6</sup> John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (London: James Clarke, 1961), 61–62. Hereafter cited as Calvin, *Eternal Predestination* (1961).

<sup>7</sup> S. Leigh Hunt, "Predestination in the 'Institutes of the Christian Religion,' 1536–1559," *Evangelical Quarterly* 9.1 (January 1937): 38. See A. Mitchell Hunter, *The Teaching of Calvin* (London: James Clark, 1950), 100–101.

<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, LCC 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.21.2–4; cf. 3.22.10; 3.23.1.

<sup>9</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 3.23.13–14. See John Weeks, "A Comparison of Calvin and Edwards on the Doctrine of Election" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1963), 71–73; Anthony N. S. Lane, "Augustine and Calvin," in *The T&T Clark Companion to Augustine and Modern Theology*, ed. C. C. Pecknold and Tarmo Toom (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 185.

<sup>10</sup> Hunter, *The Teaching of Calvin*, 99.

<sup>11</sup> John Calvin, *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will: A Defense of the Orthodox Doctrine of Human Choice against Pighius*, ed. A. N. S. Lane, trans. G. I. Davies, Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 26, 28, 49; Willem Nijenhuis, "Calvin and the Augsburg Confession," in *Ecclesia Reformata: Studies on the Reformation* (Leiden: Brill, 1972, 1994), 1:101–14; 2:63; Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, trans. David Foxgrover and Wade Provo (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 137–45; Chun-ming Abel Fong, "Luther, Melancthon and Calvin: The Dynamic Balance between the Freedom of God's Grace and the Freedom of Human Responsibility in Salvation" (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1997), 273–75.

<sup>12</sup> David Wiley, "Calvin's Doctrine of Predestination: His Principal Soteriological and Polemical Doctrine" (PhD diss., Duke University, 1971), 314–24; François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 138–39; Weeks, "Calvin and Edwards on the Doctrine of Election," 77–80; Hunter, *The Teaching of Calvin*, 99; Williston Walker, *John Calvin: The Organizer of Reformed Protestantism* (1906; repr., New York: Putnam's Sons, 1969), 148; John Patrick Donnelly, *Calvinism and Scholasticism in Vermigli's Doctrine of Man and Grace* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 129; J. I. Packer, "Calvin the Theologian," in *John Calvin*, ed. G. E. Duffield (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 175; Klaas Dijk, *Om't Eeuwig Welbehagen: de leer der praedestinatie* (Amsterdam: De Standaard, 1925), 125.

<sup>13</sup> Harro Hopfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 237, *contra* Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. T. H. L. Parker et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), II/2:39; Heinz Otten, *Calvins theologische*

on philosophical speculation,<sup>14</sup> but on the exegesis and interpretation of the holy Scriptures.

Calvin's doctrine of predestination was fiercely tested in polemics. He was opposed by Albertus Pighius (ca. 1490–1542), Jerome Bolsec (ca. 1510–1584), Jean Trollet (fl. 1550), and Sebastian Castellio (1515–1563). When in 1542 Pighius replied to Calvin's 1539 *Institutes* with a book entitled *De libero hominis arbitrio et divina gratia* (*On the Free Will of Man and Divine Grace*), Calvin responded with his *Defensio doctrinae de servitute arbitrii contra Pighium* (*A Defense of the Doctrine of the Bondage of the Will against Pighius*) in 1543,<sup>15</sup> and his *De aeterna Dei praedestinatione* (*Of God's Eternal Predestination*) in 1552.<sup>16</sup>

For Calvin, predestination was a crucial element in the doctrine of salvation by grace alone. The apostle Paul had written that "the election of grace" establishes that salvation is "by grace," not "of works" (Rom 11:5–6). Calvin therefore said that "we must be called back to the course of election" in order "to make it clear that our salvation comes about solely from God's mere generosity."<sup>17</sup> Calvin defined predestination as "God's eternal decree, by which he compacted with himself what he willed to become of each man.... Eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others."<sup>18</sup> Calvin's summary of the doctrine of eternal predestination includes two branches: first, election to salvation through effectual calling, justification, and sanctification, and second, reprobation to damnation.<sup>19</sup>

Calvin taught that God took the initiative and chose from eternity unconditionally, that is, for no merit or desert in those who are chosen. He summarized election by saying that "God once established by his eternal and unchangeable plan those whom he long before determined once for all to

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*Anschauung von der Prædestination* (Munich: Kaiser, 1938), 29.

<sup>14</sup> Calvin, *Commentary*, on Rom 9:14; 11:33; Eph 1:5, 8; *Institutes* 1.17.2; 3.14.21; 3.21.1–3; 3.23.1–13; 3.24.14, 17; *Eternal Predestination* (1961), 65, 122. See Packer, "Calvin the Theologian," 171; Charles Partee, *Calvin and Classical Philosophy*, *Studies in the History of Christian Thought* 14 (Leiden: Brill, 1977).

<sup>15</sup> *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. G. Baum, E. Cunitz, and E. Reuss, vols. 29–87 in *Corpus Reformatorum* (Brunsvigae: Schwetschke, 1863–1900). Hereafter, CR 34:225–404, first translated into English as *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will: A Defense of the Orthodox Doctrine of Human Choice against Pighius*, ed. A. N. S. Lane, trans. G. I. Davies (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> CR 36:249–366; English translations include, John Calvin, "The Eternal Predestination of God," in *Calvin's Calvinism*, trans. Henry Cole (London: Sovereign Grace Union, 1927), and Reid's translation in *Eternal Predestination* (1961).

<sup>17</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 3.21.1.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.21.5.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.21.7.

receive into salvation.”<sup>20</sup> According to Calvin, the ultimate reason why some are elected and some reprobated was God’s sovereign will and good pleasure. He said, “If, then, we cannot determine a reason why he vouchsafes mercy to his own, except that it so pleases him, neither shall we have any reason for rejecting others, other than his will.”<sup>21</sup>

The absolute unconditionality of election corresponds to the total corruption of all mankind. Due to man’s “depravity of nature,” Calvin said, “except out of the Lord’s mercy there is no salvation for man, for in himself he is lost and forsaken.”<sup>22</sup> In himself, man is totally given over to sin, full of pollution, and lacks even “a single taste or grain of purity”; in fact, “just as a fish is nourished in water so men are confined in sin and iniquity.”<sup>23</sup> Man cannot blame God’s decree for his sinfulness, for God made man righteous, and Adam sinned of his own free will, apart from any corrupting influence from God, who cannot be the author or approver of sin.<sup>24</sup> Calvin said, “If all whom the Lord predestines to death are naturally liable to the sentence of death, of what injustice, pray, do they complain?”<sup>25</sup> Simply said, we all deserve to be condemned, for all have sinned. For Calvin, the wonder is that any are redeemed and that not all are reprobated.

Yet election is a gracious reality in Christ. The apostle Paul taught that God “hath chosen us in him [that is, in Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him” (Eph 1:4). For Calvin, “in Christ” implies that we cannot know our own election apart from knowing Jesus Christ as our Savior: “If we have been chosen in Christ, we shall not find assurance of our election in ourselves; and not even in God the Father, if we conceive of him as severed from his Son. Christ, then, is the mirror wherein we must, and without self-deception may, contemplate our own election.”<sup>26</sup>

Neither can we separate divine election from practical holiness. Though God did not choose us on the basis of anything that we would do, God’s intention in election is to produce a holy people. Election, far from making us indifferent to good works, rather makes us “devote ourselves to the pursuit of good as the appointed goal of election.”<sup>27</sup> God’s choosing the elect to be holy refutes the accusation that election dampens or extinguishes incentives

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 3.22.11.

<sup>22</sup> Calvin, *Eternal Predestination* (1961), 121.

<sup>23</sup> Cited in Wiley, “Calvin’s Doctrine of Predestination,” 145–46.

<sup>24</sup> Cole, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, 125.

<sup>25</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 2.5.3.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 3.24.4.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 3.23.12.

to godly living.<sup>28</sup> On the contrary, God's design in electing his people is "that we should be to the praise of his glory" (Isa 43:20–21; Eph 1:4–6). Calvin said, "The end of our election is that we may show forth the glory of God in every possible way."<sup>29</sup>

Calvin did not shrink from affirming election's dreadful twin: the decree of reprobation, damning some men forever. However, he guarded his teaching from any suggestion that God is responsible for our sin. He distinguished between God as the *remote* (or ultimate) cause of man's deeds and man as the *proximate* (or secondary) cause of his own actions.<sup>30</sup> As the remote cause, God's will governs all his creatures and all their actions. However, man is the proximate cause of his sins, and all guilt resides with the sinner, who is rightly damned for his sins. Fred Klooster has summarized Calvin's view well: "While God sovereignly passes some by in His decretive will, the ground of His final condemnation of them is their sin and guilt. This sin is our sin; it constitutes the proximate cause of reprobation as far as the unbeliever's condemnation is concerned."<sup>31</sup> As Calvin said, "none undeservedly perish,"<sup>32</sup> for condemnation, while sovereignly executed, is always hinged upon human sin and guilt.<sup>33</sup> Both election and reprobation are sovereign and free acts of God. But God executes election in time monergistically (that is, it is his work alone), whereas he works out reprobation synergistically, as his righteous judgment in response to man's willful and culpable sin.<sup>34</sup> For Calvin, election is always sovereign and gracious; reprobation is always sovereign and just.

Taking his stand on the Bible and in continuity with the Augustinian tradition represented in Luther and Bucer, Calvin unreservedly taught the doctrine of a double predestination as the purpose and outworking of God's will for mankind. Calvin's distinction between remote and proximate causes assigns full sovereignty to God and leaves full culpability with man. Because all have sinned, God could rightly damn the entire race. Therefore, the election of anyone to salvation is a signal act of undeserved mercy, and no injustice can be found in the reprobation of sinners. In this manner, Calvin sought to assert and protect the biblical doctrines of salvation by grace alone,

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 3.23.13.

<sup>29</sup> Calvin, *Commentary*, on Isa 43:21.

<sup>30</sup> Cole, *Calvin's Calvinism*, 91, 100; cf. *Commentary*, on Rom 9:11; 11:7; and CR 36:346.

<sup>31</sup> Fred Klooster, *Calvin's Doctrine of Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967), 76–77.

<sup>32</sup> Calvin, *Eternal Predestination* (1961), 125.

<sup>33</sup> John Murray, *Calvin on Scripture and Divine Sovereignty* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 55–71.

<sup>34</sup> J. V. Fesko, *Diversity Within the Reformed Tradition: Supra- and Infralapsarianism in Calvin, Dort, and Westminster* (Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic Press, 2001), 97.

sovereign divine election to salvation, and sovereign divine reprobation to damnation, while exalting God's perfect justice and impeccability or freedom from all sin and affirming human responsibility for human actions.

## II. *Beza on Predestination*

Regarding the doctrine of predestination, Theodore Beza is best known for his *Tabula Praedestinationis* ("A Chart of Predestination"; 1555).<sup>35</sup> This treatise contains Beza's influential chart or diagram of the outworking of predestination, which divides mankind into the two pathways blazed by election and reprobation, tracing the execution of these two decrees through the life of an individual and on to his eternal destiny.

From this *Tabula* twentieth-century scholarship has gathered most of its ammunition against Beza, labeling him as rigidly theocentric, coldly deterministic, and rationalistically scholastic.<sup>36</sup> However, these critics have neglected to take into account that the text of the *Tabula* consists of relatively few brief theological aphorisms, each supported by a substantial list of citations from the holy Scriptures. Rather than a deductive system of logic, it provided an answer to Bolsec's accusation that Calvin's theology was not proven by clear testimonies from the Bible.<sup>37</sup> Richard Muller has noted,

Beza's *Tabula* is nothing more than a presentation of the doctrine of predestination in its relation to the *ordo salutis*, based on the standard scholastic distinction between the decree and its execution in time. It is hardly a prospectus for a [logical] system.<sup>38</sup>

The *Tabula* does not make predestination the central dogma of Reformed theology. Instead, "the intention of the *Tabula* is to show that the doctrine of the decree and its execution, as presented through the collation of biblical texts, is a source of consolation and strength."<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> For a modern translation, see Theodore Beza, *The Potter and the Clay: The Main Predestination Writings of Theodore Beza*, trans. Philip Holtrop (Grand Rapids: Calvin College, 1982), 19–94. I will cite the Holtrop edition, enumerated by chapter and aphorism.

<sup>36</sup> David Steinmetz once held this view (David C. Steinmetz, *Reformers in the Wings* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981], 168–69), but changed as more research was done in this area by Muller. See the 2001 rev. ed. of *Reformers in the Wings* and Blacketer, "The Man in the Black Hat," in *Church and School*, 227.

<sup>37</sup> Richard A. Muller, "The Use and Abuse of a Document: Beza's *Tabula Praedestinationis*, The Bolsec Controversy, and the Origins of Reformed Orthodoxy," in *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment*, ed. Carl R. Trueman and R. S. Clark (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster, 1999), 46.

<sup>38</sup> Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 1:128.

<sup>39</sup> Muller, "The Use and Abuse of a Document," 35.



As did Calvin, Beza asserted the priority of God's will while maintaining the culpability of sinners. While asserting with regard to "the destruction of the reprobate" that the "total blame remains within themselves," Beza still affirmed that God's will is "that high mystery that precedes in order all causes of their damnation."<sup>40</sup> He noted that when the apostle Paul answered objections against predestination in Romans 9, he did not say "that God so willed because he foresaw that they would be corrupt," but that to find the ultimate cause, we must "ascend to God's supreme will, which is the only rule of justice."<sup>41</sup> The cause of God's decree of reprobation is his own will, while the reprobate are damned for their own sins and unbelief.<sup>42</sup>

Beza structured his treatment of predestination according to the distinction between the eternal decree in God and the execution of that decree in time through secondary causes, until God's ultimate purpose is achieved.<sup>43</sup> Donald Sinnema has concluded that this is a basic framework in Beza's doctrine of predestination, serving to safeguard, as it does in Calvin's thought, the doctrines of God's sovereignty, God's righteousness, the reality of secondary causes, and the responsibility of angels and men for their own sins.<sup>44</sup> When God executes his decree of reprobation in time, he acts in righteous wrath against impenitent sinners who choose to be hardened and deserve to be damned: "Why doth he harden? Because they are corrupt. Why doth he condemn? Because they are sinners. Where is then unrighteousness? Nay, if he should destroy all after this same sort, to whom should he do injury?"<sup>45</sup> John Bray felt that this distinction became Beza's "most significant original contribution to the question of predestination."<sup>46</sup>

Another distinctive aspect of Beza's doctrine is his supralapsarianism, which gives to God's decree of election and reprobation logical priority over his decrees of creation, the fall of mankind, and redemption in Christ.

<sup>40</sup> Beza, *Tabula*, II, 5, in *Potter and the Clay*, 35.

<sup>41</sup> Beza, *Tabula*, II, 5, proof 2, in *Potter and the Clay*, 36.

<sup>42</sup> Beza, *Tabula*, II, 5, in *Potter and the Clay*, 35–36. See Donald W. Sinnema, "The Issue of Reprobation at the Synod of Dort (1618–19) in Light of the History of the Doctrine" (PhD diss., University of St. Michael's College, 1985), 69–70.

<sup>43</sup> Donald Sinnema, "God's Eternal Decree and Its Temporal Execution: The Role of this Distinction in Theodore Beza's Theology," in *Adaptations of Calvinism in Reformation Europe: Essays in Honour of Brian G. Armstrong*, ed. Mack P. Holt (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007), 56–58. See Beza, *Tabula*, III and following.

<sup>44</sup> Sinnema, "God's Eternal Decree," 55–78.

<sup>45</sup> Theodore Beza, *The New Testament of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Translated out of Greek by Theod. Beza*, trans. L. Tomson (London: Deputies of Christopher Barker, 1599), on Rom 9:18. On Beza's insistence on dividing reprobation (God's eternal will) from damnation (immediately arising from man's sin), see *Tabula*, V, 1–2, in *Potter and the Clay*, 61.

<sup>46</sup> John S. Bray, *Theodore Beza's Doctrine of Predestination* (Nieuwkoop: B. de Graaf, 1975), 91.



In a 1555 letter to Calvin, Beza described both the *infra* and the *supra* approach and opted for the latter, writing that creation, fall, original sin, and Christ's mission are all "subordinated ... to that first purpose of God to elect and to reprobate." He so wrote because of the medieval axiom, "the end is first in intention" (and last in execution), and because he understood the image of the potter and the clay (Rom 9:20–21) to communicate God's purpose to glorify himself in salvation and damnation "even before he decided to create" mankind.<sup>47</sup>

Even in the context of his supralapsarianism, Beza's view of salvation remained centered upon Christ, saying, "Christ, the second Adam from heaven, is the foundation and entire substance of the salvation of the elect."<sup>48</sup> Consequently, our assurance of election cannot be separated from faith in Christ. Beza wrote,

The gift of faith proceedeth from the free election of the Father in Christ, after which followeth necessarily everlasting life. Therefore, faith in Christ Jesus is a sure witness of our election, and therefore of our glorification, which is to come.<sup>49</sup>

The Christocentric character of Beza's theology is crystal clear, notwithstanding the refusal of Barthian-influenced scholarship to acknowledge it.<sup>50</sup>

If Beza did subsume all of theology under a rationalistic, decretal structure, then one would certainly expect to find this bent in his systematic presentation of the Christian faith. However, his *Confessio Christianae Fidei* (French 1559; Latin 1560) demonstrates quite the opposite.<sup>51</sup> The *Confessio* represents Beza's most comprehensive and systematic theological work, but he structured it around not predestination, but the Trinitarian pattern of the Apostles' Creed.<sup>52</sup> Predestination serves as one concept among many, not as the overarching principle of all theology. Beza's "*Confessio* is not a predestinarian system," as Muller notes.<sup>53</sup> Beza did not regard predestination

<sup>47</sup> Beza, Letter to Calvin, July 19, 1555, *Correspondance*, 1:170, in *The Potter and the Clay*, 16–17.

<sup>48</sup> Beza, *Tabula*, V, 1, in *Potter and the Clay*, 61.

<sup>49</sup> Beza, *The New Testament of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, on John 6:37.

<sup>50</sup> Herman Hanko, "Predestination in Calvin, Beza, and Later Reformed Theology," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 10 (April 1977): 21.

<sup>51</sup> Theodore Beza, *Confessio Chistianae fidei, et eiusdem collation cum Papisticis haeresibus* (Genevae: Eustathium Vignon, 1587); translated into English as "Theodore Beza's Confession (1560)," in *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries in English Translation, Volume 2, 1552–1566*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 234–369.

<sup>52</sup> Sinnema, "God's Eternal Decree," in *Adaptations*, 62–66.

<sup>53</sup> Richard A. Muller, "Predestination and Christology in Sixteenth-Century Reformed Theology" (PhD diss., Duke University, 1976), 227.

as the heart of the gospel (for that is Christ), although he did regard it as an important support for the Christian's hope, grounding our confidence in God's sovereignty.<sup>54</sup> This observation is confirmed in Beza's shorter confession, *Altera Brevis Fidei Confessio* (1559) and his brief *Catechismus Compendarius* (1575), both of which are evangelical, Christ-centered affirmations of salvation by grace alone with incidental references to predestination.<sup>55</sup> Andrew Woolsey says that in these works, "predestination was not at all prominent ... and could in no sense be considered an organizing principle of theology."<sup>56</sup>

Finally, the accusation that Beza is rigid and cold in his doctrine of predestination runs contrary to even a cursory reading of the *Confessio*. Beza refuses to divorce predestination from the Christian's redemption, comfort, and sanctification in Christ, writing in the *Confessio*,

Good works are certain testimonies of our faith and also assure us of our eternal election, for faith is necessarily joined to election .... Our sanctification (from whence good works proceed) is a certain effect of faith (Rom. 8:5–9); or rather of Jesus Christ dwelling in us by faith. And whoever is united to Jesus Christ is necessarily called and elected of God to salvation in such a way that he will never be rejected or forsaken (John 6:37).<sup>57</sup>

Like Calvin, Beza believed that the doctrines of election and reprobation mortify pride and cultivate awe and humility in believers as they contemplate the fact that apart from God's gracious will they would be as fatally blind and horribly corrupt as others.<sup>58</sup> We might say of Beza what some scholars have said of the English Puritans: he was a practical predestinarian.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Shawn D. Wright, *Our Sovereign Refuge: The Pastoral Theology of Theodore Beza*, Studies in Christian History and Thought (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster, 2004), 167–73.

<sup>55</sup> Theodore Beza, *Altera Brevis Fidei Confessio*, in *Tractationum Theologicarum* (Anchora [Geneva], Joannis Crispini, 1570), 1:80–84. It was originally appended to Beza's fuller *Confession*, and translated with it as *Another Brief Confession of Faith*, in *Briefe and Pithie Sum* (1565), 184–96. See Lyle D. Bierma, *The Theology of the Heidelberg Catechism: A Reformation Synthesis*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 24; Wright, *Our Sovereign Refuge*, 122–26. Theodore Beza, *Catechismus Compendarius*, in *Tractationum Theologicarum*, 2nd ed. (Geneva: Apud Enstathium Vignon, 1576), 1:689–94; English translation: *A Little Catechisme* (London: Hugh Singleton, 1578).

<sup>56</sup> Andrew Woolsey, *Unity and Continuity in Covenantal Thought: A Study in the Reformed Tradition to the Westminster Assembly*, Reformed Historical-Theological Studies (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 355.

<sup>57</sup> Beza, "Confession (1560)," 4.19, in *Reformed Confessions*, 2:268–69; cf. "Theodore Beza's Confession at Poissy (1561)," in *Reformed Confessions*, 2:415–16.

<sup>58</sup> Kirk M. Summers, *Morality after Calvin: Theodore Beza's Christian Censor and Reformed Ethics*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 87–88.

<sup>59</sup> Shawn Wright has written copiously on Beza's warm, practical, pastoral heart and life. See his "The Pastoral Use of the Doctrine of God's Sovereignty in the Theology of Theodore Beza" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2001); *Our Sovereign Refuge*;

Beza's teachings on predestination did not arise from logical speculation, but from the exegesis of God's Word and from the use of tools provided by both medieval scholasticism and Renaissance humanism, as Jeffrey Mallinson notes. Human reason cannot comprehend God, "for how will finite things be capable of infinity?"<sup>60</sup> Man's need for special revelation is compounded by the corruption and darkness left in man by his fall away from God.<sup>61</sup> For Beza, human reason cannot supplement Scripture as a source of doctrine; rather, it should serve Scripture, so that interpreters can draw out its truths with valid arguments and avoid logical contradictions, as God intended us to use our minds.<sup>62</sup> Beza's predestinarian doctrine did not arise out of a metaphysical agenda, but out of his sincere and thoughtful interpretation and application of the written Word of God.

### III. Perkins on Predestination

William Perkins has been called the father of Reformed pietism and Puritanism. He grounded the practice of godliness upon the biblical doctrine of divine predestination, writing that God's "decree determines what shall be done.... For there is nothing higher than his will."<sup>63</sup> Perkins balanced his doctrine so as not to fall into either the abyss of fatalism or the snare of man-centered religion. He was faithful to the theology of Calvin and Beza in their healthy combination of Reformed theology and piety.<sup>64</sup> However, Perkins expressed his theology in a form shaped by the methodology of Petrus Ramus (1515–1572), with its nested sets of topical divisions.<sup>65</sup> This methodology was new for its time, but the content was not. Muller says, "Perkins's thought is not a distortion of earlier Reformed Theology, but a positive outgrowth of the systematic beginnings of Protestant thought."<sup>66</sup>

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*Theodore Beza: The Man and the Myth* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2015).

<sup>60</sup> Theodore Beza, *Cours sur les Épîtres aux Romains et aux Hébreux, 1565–66*, ed. Pierre Fraenkel and Luc Perrotet (Geneva: Droz, 1988), 40, quoted in Jeffrey Mallinson, *Faith, Reason, and Revelation in Theodore Beza (1519–1605)*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 110.

<sup>61</sup> Beza, *Tractationem Theologicarum* (1570–1582), 1:678–79, quoted in Mallinson, *Faith, Reason, and Revelation*, 115, 117.

<sup>62</sup> Mallinson, *Faith, Reason, and Revelation*, 74–79.

<sup>63</sup> William Perkins, *The Workes of That Famous and Worthy Minister of Christ in the Universitie of Cambridge, Mr. William Perkins*, 3 vols. (London: John Legatt, 1612–13), 1:723 [hereafter, *Works*].

<sup>64</sup> Ian Breward, intro. and ed., *The Work of William Perkins*, The Courtenay Library of Reformation Classics 3 (Abingdon, England: Sutton Courtenay, 1970), xi.

<sup>65</sup> W. B. Patterson, *William Perkins and the Making of a Protestant England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 121–22.

<sup>66</sup> Richard A. Muller, "Perkins' *A Golden Chaine*: Predestinarian System or Schematized Ordo Salutis?," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 9.1 (1978): 69–71, 79–81.

In the introduction to his *Armilla Aurea* (1590), translated as *A Golden Chaine* (1591),<sup>67</sup> Perkins identified four viewpoints on the matter of predestination:

- The old and new Pelagians, who place the cause of predestination in man, in that God ordained men to life or death according to his foreknowledge of their free-will rejection or receiving of offered grace
- The Lutherans, who teach that God chose some to salvation by his mere mercy but rejected the rest because he foresaw they would reject his grace
- The semi-Pelagian Roman Catholics, who ascribe God's predestination partly to mercy and partly to foreseen human preparations and meritorious works
- Finally, Perkins's view, those who teach that God saves some merely of his mercy and damns others entirely because of man's sin, but that the divine predestination concerning both has no other cause than his will.<sup>68</sup>

God's decrees flow from the inner life of the triune God. Perkins defined God's glory as "the infinite excellency of his most simple and most holy divine nature."<sup>69</sup> Proceeding from this internal glory, God's decree, as well as its execution, aims at "the manifestation of the glory of God."<sup>70</sup> Perkins wrote, "The decree of God, is that by which God in himself, hath necessarily, and yet freely, from all eternity determined all things (Eph. 1:11; Matt. 10:29; Rom. 9:21)."<sup>71</sup>

Predestination, which is God's decree insofar as it concerns man, is that "by which he hath ordained all men to a certain and everlasting estate: that is, either to salvation or condemnation, for his own glory."<sup>72</sup> Election is God's decree "whereby on his own free will, he hath ordained certain men to salvation, to the praise of the glory of his grace."<sup>73</sup> Reprobation is "that part of predestination, whereby God, according to the most free and just

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<sup>67</sup> An *armilla* is an arm band or bracelet; to call it a "chaine" calls attention to the fact that its parts are woven together into a thing of usefulness and beauty, made of material most precious.

<sup>68</sup> Breward, ed., *Work of Perkins*, 175–76. Cf. Michael T. Malone, "The Doctrine of Predestination in the Thought of William Perkins and Richard Hooker," *Anglican Theological Review* 52 (1970): 103–17.

<sup>69</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 1:13.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:15.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:16.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:24.

purpose of his will, hath determined to reject certain men unto eternal destruction, and misery, and that to the praise of his justice.”<sup>74</sup>

Like Beza, Perkins held a supralapsarian position: God’s highest and first purpose is to manifest his glory in saving and damning, prior to any consideration of the means, such as the fall of man and Christ’s mission to save sinners.<sup>75</sup> Though Reformed theologians continued to debate supralapsarianism *versus* infralapsarianism, it is the case, as Richard Sibbes (1577–1635) wrote, that all Reformed divines agree that God had eternally distinguished between men as “an act of sovereignty over his creature, and altogether independent of anything in the creature as a cause of it” and that “damnation is an act of divine justice ... and therefore the execution of God’s decree is founded on sin.”<sup>76</sup>

Perkins knew that the Reformed doctrine of predestination prompted the objections that it implicates God in the guilt of sin and diminishes the role of Christ as Savior. In addressing the first objection, Perkins rejected the idea that God is the author of sin. God decreed the fall of man, for God ordains all that comes to pass, but he did not approve of sin.<sup>77</sup> God “planted nothing in Adam, whereby he should fall into sin, but left him to his own liberty, not hindering his fall when it might.”<sup>78</sup> If it be objected that man had no choice but to sin if God decreed the fall, Perkins distinguished the necessity of infallibility and the necessity of compulsion. As a consequence of God’s sovereignty, what he decrees will infallibly come to pass. But the voluntary acts of the creature are in no way coerced or compelled by God’s decree.<sup>79</sup> The proper cause of the fall, according to Perkins, was the choice of Adam’s own will.<sup>80</sup> God gave Adam a righteous will, a revelation of God’s commandment, and the inward ability to will what is good. But God did not give Adam the grace to persevere in willing the good under temptation. Nor can he be blamed for withholding this grace because God owes no man any grace, which by its very nature is something unmerited or unearned; and God had good purposes for withholding it.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 1:106.

<sup>75</sup> William Perkins, *An Exposition of the Symbole or Creed of the Apostles* (London: John Legatt, 1595), 431.

<sup>76</sup> Richard Sibbes, preface to Paul Bayne[s], *An Entire Commentary upon the Whole Epistle of St. Paul to the Ephesians* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1866), 2.

<sup>77</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 1:15; Breward, ed., *Work of Perkins*, 197–98.

<sup>78</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 2:619.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 2:619; cf. 621.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 2:607.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 1:160; cf. 1:16; 2:611.

As for the second charge, that predestination subordinates Christ to the decree, Perkins firmly maintained that *election in Christ* draws the line of separation between the elect and reprobate. Christ is “the foundation” of “the execution of this decree” of election; Christ is “not subordinate” to the “decree itself of election, but to the execution thereof only.”<sup>82</sup> Elsewhere Perkins wrote,

The actual or real foundation of God’s election ... is Christ: and therefore we are said to be chosen ‘in Christ.’ He must be considered two ways: as he is God, we are predestinated *of him*, even as we are predestinated of the Father and the Holy Ghost. As he is our Mediator, we are predestinated *in him*.<sup>83</sup>

Perkins was more Christ-centered in his predestinarian theology than most scholars realize; he carefully placed the mediator in a central relation to both the decree and its execution, and the *ordo salutis* originates from and is effected in Christ.<sup>84</sup>

In *A Golden Chaine*, Perkins adapted the chart from Beza’s *Tabula* to represent the origin and progressive execution of God’s decrees from the glory of the eternal past to the glory of the eternal future. Perkins’s chart is similar to Beza’s in showing the contrasts between God’s love for his elect and his hatred for the reprobate, effectual calling and ineffectual calling, the softening of the heart and the hardening of the heart, saving faith and culpable ignorance, justification and sanctification over against unrighteousness and pollution, and the glorification of the elect over against the damnation of the reprobate.

The greatest difference between Beza’s and Perkins’s tables is the center of the diagram. The central column of Beza’s table is empty between the fall and the final judgment. By contrast, the center of Perkins’s table is filled with the work of Christ as mediator. Christ is central to predestination and all its outworking in the calling, justification, sanctification, and glorification of the elect.<sup>85</sup>

The execution of election falls under covenantal headings: the covenant of works with Adam and the covenant of grace in Christ.<sup>86</sup> Under the banner of God’s absolute sovereignty, the covenant brings God’s decree into the realm of human relationships and makes both God’s glory and

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<sup>82</sup> Breward, ed., *Work of Perkins*, 197–98; cf. *Works*, 1:283.

<sup>83</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 1:282; cf. 2:607–608.

<sup>84</sup> Muller, “Perkins’s *A Golden Chaine*,” 71, 76.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 76–77.

<sup>86</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 1:32; Mark R. Shaw, “The Marrow of Practical Divinity: A Study in the Theology of William Perkins” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1981), 124.

personal conversion central to the application of salvation—reflecting the practical emphasis of Reformed piety.<sup>87</sup>

According to Perkins, God carries out election in Jesus Christ by means of the covenant of grace through steps by which he puts into action his eternal love: beginning with effectual calling and continuing in justification, sanctification, and finally glorification.<sup>88</sup> Election manifests itself in the whole process of the Christian's conversion, engagement in spiritual warfare, and ongoing pilgrimage to the kingdom of glory. The whole Christian life is by faith in Christ, not because of faith's perfection, but because of faith's perfect object, Jesus Christ, to whom the Holy Spirit has bound the believer in union and communion.<sup>89</sup>

Perkins's chart reveals that he had developed reprobation as carefully as he did election. Indeed, the dark chain of reprobation from man's perspective is really a golden chain from God's perspective, for it too issues in the glory of God at the last. Reprobation involves two acts. The first act is God's decision to leave certain men to themselves. This act is absolute, based on nothing in man, but only on the will of God. The second act is God's decision to damn these men to hell. This second act is not absolute, but based on their sins. It is the act of God's righteous hatred against sinners. Therefore, Perkins did not teach that God damns men arbitrarily; no one will go to hell except those who deserve it for their sins.<sup>90</sup>

Perkins saw reprobation as a logical concomitant of election.<sup>91</sup> A major difference exists between reprobation and election, however. God's will to elect sinners consisted of his delight in showing grace and his intent to work grace in them. But God's will to reprobate sinners did not include any delight in their sin, nor any intention to work sin in them. Rather, he willed to not prevent their sinning because he delights in the manifestation of his glorious justice.<sup>92</sup>

According to Perkins, there are two types of reprobates: those who are not called, and those who are called, but not effectually. Those who are not called go on in sin unhindered, proceeding from "ignorance and vanity of mind" to "heart hardening," to "a reprobate sense," to "greediness in sin,"

<sup>87</sup> F. Ernest Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism* (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 55.

<sup>88</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 1:77–94, 370.

<sup>89</sup> Charles R. Munson, "William Perkins: Theologian of Transition" (PhD diss., Case Western Reserve, 1971), 100; Victor L. Priebe, "The Covenant Theology of William Perkins" (PhD diss., Drew University, 1967), 141.

<sup>90</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 1:105; 2:612.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:287.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:611–18.



to “fullness of sin.”<sup>93</sup> Those who are called, but not effectually, may experience “a general illumination, penitence, temporary faith, a taste [of eternal things], [and] zeal”—before they “relapse” into sin by means of “the deceit of sin, the hardening of the heart, an evil heart, an unbelieving heart, [and] apostasy.” Their last state is worse than their first. Ultimately, those so called are led to “fullness of sin,” so that the two streams of reprobates become one prior to death. For the reprobate, all gospel calls remain ineffectual because they do not bring them to Christ. Taken captive by their own sins, of which the greatest sin is “an unbelieving heart,” the reprobate make themselves ripe for divine judgment and damnation.<sup>94</sup>

However, no one should conclude in this life that his present sins and unbelief prove him to be reprobate or rejected by God. Rather, he should seek God’s grace and place himself under the ministry of the Word. Perkins taught that preaching is “the mighty arm” by which God “draws his elect into his kingdom and fashions them to all holy obedience.”<sup>95</sup> The Word promises “that now for all such as repent and believe in Christ Jesus, there is prepared a full remission for all their sins, together with salvation and life everlasting.”<sup>96</sup> Therefore, Perkins said, “The gospel preached is ... that ordinary means to beget faith.”<sup>97</sup> How else shall unbelievers come to faith if not by the hearing of the Word? So we see that for Perkins the gospel is to be preached to all men without distinction and calls all men to repentance and faith in Christ.

Perkins’s predestinarian theology did not make him cold and heartless when dealing with either sinners in need of a Savior or saints burdened with difficulties. Rather, his warm, biblical theology set the tone for the literature of Puritan “practical divinity” that would pour forth from the presses in the seventeenth century. It has inspired generations of preachers to call men to turn from sin to a loving Savior and to follow him through life, trials, and death to glory.

## Conclusion

Calvin, Beza, and Perkins were men of distinct temperaments and gifts who served in different, albeit overlapping, historical settings. We find nuances particular to each of these theologians. Calvin did not structure his

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 1:107.

<sup>94</sup> See chart on Perkins, *Works*, 1:11.

<sup>95</sup> Quoted in Munson, “William Perkins: Theologian of Transition,” 197.

<sup>96</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 1:70.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 1:71.

treatment of predestination according to distinction between the eternal decree and its execution in history as did Beza and Perkins. This distinction led to a further development of the doctrine of the *ordo salutis*. Calvin also did not enunciate a distinctly supralapsarian view of predestination like that of Beza and Perkins, though it would be anachronistic to call Calvin an infralapsarian. The supralapsarian position would have other adherents after Beza and Perkins, but it proved over time to be a minority view among Reformed theologians. Calvin and Beza did not formulate their treatises according to the Ramist division of topics, as Perkins did.

However, Calvin, Beza, and Perkins demonstrated remarkable continuity in their teaching on predestination. They all taught the following ten points:

1. The triune God has revealed in his Word that he determined and decreed before time began whom he would save and whom he would damn.
2. Both election and reprobation hinge upon God's will, not man's worthiness, will, or works.
3. God's decree infallibly secures God's intended results, but it does not coerce men to sin or negate the responsibility of angels and men for their sins.
4. The salvation purposed in election centers upon Christ's mediatorial work and is applied to people through a Spirit-worked faith.
5. Election is unto holiness of life and is both the ultimate cause of true piety and a great encouragement to the practice of godliness.
6. Persevering faith in Christ and in godly living serve as crucial indicators of divine election for the assurance of God's people.
7. Though reprobation destines some people to damnation, it does not do so arbitrarily; the reprobate will surely be damned, but only for their sins, unbelief, and culpability before God.
8. Neither the fall of all mankind nor the sins of any individual may be blamed on God, who is never the author or approver of sin, but the righteous creator, lawgiver, and judge.
9. The gospel addresses men indiscriminately, calling all who hear it to repent of sin and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and promising eternal life to all who do so.
10. God has ordered all things, from the creation and fall of man to the salvation of the elect by grace alone and the damnation of impenitent, unbelieving sinners, for his own glory.

Calvin, Beza, and Perkins bore united witness to Reformed experiential Christianity, a faith that is expressly rooted in the Bible, wrought out in

experience, and doxologically oriented to the praise of God. Theirs was a God-centered worldview that saw God's purposes pulsating in all of life. It is no surprise that succeeding generations of Reformed orthodoxy such as the divines of the Westminster Assembly and the Dutch Further Reformation looked to the writings of Calvin, Beza, and Perkins as stellar examples of predestinarian theology that is biblical, christological, and practical. As John Owen (1616–1683) said, Calvin, Beza, Perkins, and others like them were theologians “whose fame upon this very account, of the eminent and effectual breathing of a spirit of holiness in their writings, is gone out into all the nations about us, and their remembrance is blessed at home and abroad.”<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> John Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance*, in *The Works of John Owen* (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 11:487.