

## Was Martin Luther a Calvinist?

Q. Do you consider Martin Luther a Calvinist, since he believed in loss of salvation?

A. Strictly speaking, Martin Luther (1483–1546) could not be called a Calvinist since he did not follow Calvin. Luther started the Reformation in 1517, while John Calvin (1509–1564) did not write the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* until 1536.

Luther does not develop the doctrines that have come to be known as the Five Points of Calvinism to anywhere near the extent that they would later be developed, and because of this, his stand on some points is not as clear as many later Reformers. But Luther does seem to have been in basic agreement with the five points. Some authors, usually Lutherans, deny this, but other authors make a good argument for it (an article by Brian G. Mattson called *Double or Nothing: Luther's Doctrine of Predestination* is a good introduction – see below).

While some deny that Luther believed in the perseverance of the saints, Luther's own words say otherwise. In *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther wrote,

“Even if he [the saint] wants to, he cannot lose his salvation, however much he sin, unless he will not believe. For no sin can condemn him save unbelief alone. All other sins—so long as the faith in God's promise made in baptism returns or remains—all other sins, I say, are immediately blotted out through that same faith, or rather through the truth of God, because He cannot deny Himself.”

Luther believed that the only sin that would cause a man to lose his salvation was the sin of unrepentant unbelief; i.e. if someone permanently turned from Christ. The Calvinist response to this is that if someone who appears to have been a Christian permanently turns from Christ, he was never elect and was never really saved. And Luther may not have disagreed with that position. After all, Luther believed in predestination and that salvation was an act of God's sovereignty; therefore, someone's unrepented unbelief would also have to be an act of God's sovereignty upon someone who was not predestined to salvation.

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# Double Or Nothing: Martin Luther's Doctrine of Predestination

1997 | Brian G. Mattson

“All things whatever arise from, and depend on, the divine appointment; whereby it was foreordained who should receive the word of life, and who should disbelieve it; who should be delivered from their sins, and who should be hardened in them; and who should be justified and who should be condemned.” - *Martin Luther*

## INTRODUCTION:

Commonly remembered as an age of great upheaval and enlightenment, the Protestant Reformation was one of the most significant events in the development of the Western World. *The Reformation was more than a simple rebellion against teachings of the Roman Catholic Church; it was truly a rediscovery of biblical doctrines that had gradually been lost due to mishandling and negligent teaching.*

When Martin Luther sparked the Reformation on October 31, 1517, he had no notion of beginning a fresh, new movement with no ties to the past, as many religious movements often do. On the contrary, he and every other Reformer affirmed that the doctrines they proclaimed had always been the true historic doctrines of the church.

It is for this reason that the Reformation followed on the heels of the Renaissance and the rise of intellectual humanism. With renewing interest in the discipline of exploring ancient writings in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, came the renewing and uncovering of the doctrines the ancient texts had so carefully preserved. As Luther and many others intensely studied the saints of old, they saw their own place in history in a very new light: the light of the past.

Of the many great doctrines rediscovered and revived during the Protestant Reformation, one in particular has and continues to be one of heated debate and discussion: the doctrine of predestination. This doctrine, perhaps more than any other, has caused division and strife within the Christian Church, and in particular, has historically been a dividing line between the traditions of Calvinism and Lutheranism. Why is this? What significant differences between Lutheran and Calvinist thought concerning predestination cause such a division?

Nearly all Modern Lutheran scholars insist that while John Calvin and his followers (Beza, Bucer, Knox, etc.) affirm the doctrine of double predestination, Martin Luther and his followers affirm the doctrine of single predestination.

Double predestination affirms that in eternity past, prior to the creation of the universe, God chose and elected a people for himself whom he would actively save in the outworking of history, but at the same time, chose to pass over the remaining number of mankind, thus handing them over to their sinful state, and reprobating them to the consequences of their sin: eternal hell. Double predestination affirms both God's election and His reprobation of certain men in eternity past. That is, God decreed that some would be saved, and others would be lost. Calvinist theologian Louis Berkhof defines reprobation as “[T]hat eternal decree of God whereby He has determined to pass some men by with the operations of His special grace, and to punish them for their sins, to the manifestation of His justice.” [1]

Lutherans, on the other hand, teach single predestination; that while God in eternity past did indeed elect a people for himself whom he would actively save in the outworking of history, he did not decree that the rest of mankind would absolutely be lost and reprobate them to eternal hell. That is, while affirming election, Lutherans reject reprobation. God refrained from electing some men to salvation, but at the same time did not actively decree their continuation in sin, and ultimate suffering as a consequence. Robert G. Hoerber writes,

“According to Ephesians 1, our salvation is the result of our election by God from eternity, which is a gospel message. To deduce by logical reasoning that therefore some people must be predestined to damnation is law - a clear instance of mingling law and gospel. On the other hand, the “unreasonable” doctrine of election to salvation (but not to damnation) is a particularly comforting part of the gospel message.”[2]

It is clear that the *motive* of Lutheran theology at this point is to preserve the goodness of God and to refrain from making God the author of evil and sin. Lutherans see the reprobate as being eternally punished on their own merit, not because of God’s eternal decree that they should be punished. Thus, the sinner is the author of his own sin, not God.

It is clear that *the Calvinist as well* wishes to make man the author of his own sin, not God, but the approaches in which this question is answered take two very different paths.

The purpose of this paper is to answer the question: *Did Martin Luther himself teach the doctrine of single predestination, or did he fully affirm the election and reprobation of God in eternity past?*

If the former, then the division between the Lutherans and Calvinists remains a legitimate outworking of their respective theological traditions. However, if the latter is indeed the case, then the Lutheran tradition finds itself in the uncomfortable as well as compromising position of proclaiming a doctrine their father in the faith rejected.

The importance of the question cannot be under-emphasized.

The Reformation, as previously mentioned, consisted of the recovery of ancient doctrines, especially those of St. Augustine of Hippo. Augustine wrote extensively on the issue of predestination, and has thus been the object of both admiration and scorn. The vigorous debate that reappeared on the subject during the Reformation makes this a perennial subject very relevant to today’s disciples of the Reformation.

In fact, while many students of the Reformation today focus their attention to the obvious differences between Protestantism and Romanism, such as the Papacy, mass, indulgences, et cetera, Luther himself recognizes those issues to be entirely peripheral to the conflict. He wrote in 1525 to Erasmus of Rotterdam, with whom he had been debating the Sovereignty of God’s grace (in election and salvation) and the freedom of man’s will:

“I give you hearty praise and commendation on this further account - that you alone, in contrast with all others, have attacked the real thing, that is, *the essential issue*. You have not wearied me with those extraneous issues about the Papacy, purgatory, indulgences and such like - trifles, rather than issues - in respect of which almost all to date have

sought my blood (though without success); you, and you alone, have seen \_\_\_\_\_*THE HINGE ON WHICH ALL TURNS*\_\_\_\_\_, and aimed for the vital spot.[3]

With this admission by the Father of the Protestant Reformation, the present study becomes highly important in understanding the Reformation.

The debate over single versus double predestination has certainly been an issue throughout church history, but was it an issue among the Reformers? Specifically, were Luther and Calvin at odds on this issue? 19th Century Scottish theologian William Cunningham asserts,

“When Luther’s followers, in a subsequent generation, openly deviated from scriptural orthodoxy on these points, they set themselves to prove that Luther had never held Calvinistic principles... But we have no hesitation in saying, that it can be established beyond all reasonable question, that Luther held the doctrines which are commonly regarded as most peculiarly Calvinistic, though he was never led to explain and apply, to illustrate and defend some of them, so fully as Calvin did.”[4]

Though Cunningham is confident enough to make this claim, his reader may be disappointed that he fails to make a comprehensive case for his assertion (though his claim is not entirely without defense).

Another Reformed[5] theologian, Loraine Boettner, in his work *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* claims that “Luther... went into the doctrine [of predestination] as heartily as did Calvin himself. He even asserted it with more warmth and proceeded to much harsher lengths in defending it than Calvin ever did.”[6] Boettner’s work displays a far better defense of his claim than Cunningham’s, but both fail to fully analyze Luther’s position.

What Cunningham and Boettner both fail to support, the present work intends to prove. Where their assertions fall short, this work will provide ample evidence to support their claims. The Modern Lutheran church does not stand with Martin Luther on the issue of predestination, and thus suffers from an internal contradiction. Its efforts to modify Luther’s views and to present a more moderate case for predestination ultimately end in conflict with Luther’s uncompromising doctrine of God’s Sovereignty. However, before critically analyzing the writings of Luther, an examination must be made of the various presuppositions possible in approaching Luther’s writings.

## **PARADIGMS:**

Any astute reader of Reformation history must note the great discrepancies among analysts of Martin Luther. Lutherans read him and conclude that he taught single predestination. Calvinists read him and conclude that he taught double predestination. Certainly, the overall perspective with which one approaches the Reformer has great impact on the conclusions reached. This is indeed unavoidable. Every reader approaches a subject matter within a given framework, or paradigm, by which he interprets given data. Thus, when two parties disagree upon an interpretation, the debate must proceed to a level beyond the respective interpretations of the facts, but to the philosophy of interpretation employed in reaching conclusions.

Therefore, in considering the subject of Martin Luther's view of predestination, two different paradigms appear in analyses of his works. One we shall call the Concord Paradigm, the other, the Augustinian Paradigm.

The Concord Paradigm is the mainstream conservative Lutheran viewpoint, which views Luther through the eyes of the Book of Concord, the standard book of Lutheran confession, which was compiled thirty-four years after Luther's death in 1546. In other words, the Concord Paradigm looks at more recent developments of Lutheran theology and reads Luther in that light.

The Augustinian Paradigm, on the other hand, is a framework of analyzing Luther's views not in light of more recent statements of theology, but in terms of Luther's own theological background. That is, what were the theological traditions and doctrines closest to his own upbringing and training in theology? Thus, it is the older statements of Luther's theological tradition through which one views his writings.

At first glance it may seem as though the Concord Paradigm ought to be the interpretive framework by which one analyzes Luther, in that, after all, it takes into account the doctrines and statements of the later Lutheran tradition. It would seem that those best suited to systematize Martin Luther's doctrines would be the second generation Lutherans. Furthermore, Luther's own colleague, Philip Melancthon, was influential in propagating the doctrines reflected in the Book of Concord. Cannot even Luther's closest colleague be trusted to give an accurate account of Luther's beliefs?

Historians viewing Luther through the Concord Paradigm (unaware though they may be) have their perception of him colored, so to speak, by the Book of Concord. The book clearly spells out a scheme for single predestination, therefore the historian expects to find single predestination in Luther's writings. So when one encounters a passage in Luther that may be questionable, on account of this paradigmatic coloring they must err on the side of single predestination. The expectation that the Book of Concord accurately reflects Luther's own theology is largely an assumption made by the adherents of the Concord Paradigm.

However, upon analysis, it becomes clear that the best framework through which to analyze the great Reformer is the Augustinian framework. *St. Augustine taught the doctrine of double predestination*. That he believed God predestined not only the salvation of His elect, but also the reprobation of the wicked is clear:

“Therefore the mercy is past finding out by which He has mercy on whom He will, no merits of his own preceding; and the truth is unsearchable by which He hardeneth whom He will, even although his merits may have preceded, but merits for the most part common to him with the man on whom He has mercy. As of two twins, of which one is taken and the other left, the end is unequal, while the deserts are common, yet in these the one is in such wise delivered by God's great goodness, that the other is condemned by no injustice of God's. For is there unrighteousness with God? Away with the thought!”[7]

Augustine clearly taught that from eternity God predestined those whom He would save and those whom He would not. In writing against the Pelagian heretics of his day, Augustine was prolific in his treatment of divine predestination. He taught that the Sovereignty of God was so great that even the hearts and wills of wicked men are directly controlled by God Himself.

He wrote, *“It is, therefore, in the power of the wicked to sin; but that in sinning they should do this or that by that wickedness is not in their power, but in God’s, who divides the darkness and regulates it; so that hence even what they do contrary to God’s will is not fulfilled except it be God’s will.”*[8]

In his Treatise on Grace & Free Will, the title of Chapter 41 reads, *“The wills of men are so much in the power of God, that he can turn them whithersoever it pleases him.”*[9] And again, chapter 42 reads, *“God does whatsoever he wills in the hearts of even wicked men.”*

He begins the chapter, *“Who can help trembling at those judgments of God by which He does in the hearts of even wicked men whatsoever He wills, at the same time rendering to them according to their deeds?”*[10] Thus, it is clear that Augustine’s doctrine is centered around the Sovereignty of God.

The significance of Augustinian doctrine in the present study becomes more apparent when one takes into account that Martin Luther, in July of 1505, entered the Augustinian Monastery at Erfurt. The monks of this order were known as the “Black Augustinians” (due to the color of their garb), and were known for their intense, rigorous pursuit of spirituality.[11] Luther studied at Erfurt and was mentored under an Augustinian monk named *Johann von Staupitz*, a man from whom Luther would eventually say *“I received everything.”*[12]

Staupitz himself was not ignorant of the Augustinian position on predestination. He himself emphasized the doctrines of “prevenience of grace, the bondage of the will, and predestination...”[13] In his treatise *Eternal Predestination and its Execution in Time* he wrote, *“Because mercy and justice contribute equally to the praise of the Almighty it has been decreed that some should be elected and predestined to conformation with the image of the Son of God and to faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. But those who do not have faith are judged already.”*[14] Thus Staupitz affirms the double predestination of Augustine.

Interestingly, in his treatise, he uses the same basis as Augustine before him: the Sovereignty of God. *“[I]t ought to be remembered that God is the universal, principal, and most immediate cause of each individual thing and the prime agent of all actions. Therefore, though there are different kinds of work, it is one God who works all in all.”*[15]

It seems that simply on the prima facie basis that Luther was an Augustinian monk and taught by a self-consciously double predestinarian Augustinian, Johann von Staupitz, one ought to assume that Luther was familiar with and schooled in traditional Augustinian doctrines. However, this simple assumption cannot be made, for it would be an entirely superficial analysis.

In the late medieval era the scholastic theologians began to modify and deviate from Augustine’s views on man’s will and predestination.

James Mackinnon writes that *“this divergence is already discernible throughout the intervening seven centuries - from the fifth to the twelfth.”*[16] Among the schools of thought which deviated the most were the Scotus and Occamist. Mackinnon observes:

*“At the same time, there was a tendency to tone down [Augustine’s] doctrine of absolute predestination by emphasizing God’s foreknowledge and to make the most of his idea of freedom of choice. This divergence shows itself in the Semi-Pelagian, or, as Loofs prefers*

*to call it, Neo-Pelagian, trend of scholastic theology... .For the scholastic theologians, even those of them, like Scotus and Occam and his followers, who diverged farthest from Augustine's doctrine of salvation, professed to follow him before all other fathers as their master, and held the teaching of Pelagius to be heresy. Nevertheless, there is in the scholastic theologians, even the least divergent from Augustine, an element that does not entirely accord with his teaching on grace and free will, and this element becomes more marked in that of the later schoolmen, in whose teaching Luther was trained."*[17]

It seems that here Mackinnon damages any "Augustinian Paradigm" one might wish to assert, because, apparently, Luther was not schooled in "Old School" Augustinianism, but rather "New School." If this is indeed true, then perhaps Luther's writings must be seen in light of a pervasive Semi-Pelagianism rather than Augustinianism. Another question arises from Mackinnon's assertion; was Staupitz himself affected by this New School deviation? If so, then any influence he had on Luther would not be the true representation of Augustine, but deviations from it.

It seems clear, first of all, that Staupitz remained always a staunch Old School Augustinian. While he certainly utilized and interacted with the late scholastics, his reliance upon them was minimal.

Steinmetz observes, "While Staupitz quotes Thomas Aquinas and a host of scholastic authorities, their comments appear subordinate to Scripture understood from a strongly Augustinian point of view." [18] He also comments, "The Bible and St. Augustine are all the school that Staupitz wants." [19] It seems that Staupitz maintained this unswerving commitment to the Augustinian doctrines of grace even among his own order, who were influenced by the late scholastics. That his own order maintained no Augustinian consensus is evident in the fact that Staupitz had to correct Luther in his doctrines of grace. [20]

While it seems safe to conclude, then, that Luther's close mentor and confidant had remained a faithful disciple of Augustine, the question still remains: was Luther mainly influenced in theology by Staupitz or other scholastics, as Mackinnon asserts?

Steinmetz writes, "*The fact that Staupitz corrects Luther's theology and that Luther cites one of these corrections as fundamental to his new understanding of justification raises the interesting and important question whether for a period of time - at least, say, from 1509 to 1518 - Luther should be understood primarily as a disciple of John Staupitz.*" [21]

Heiko Oberman certainly concludes that this is indeed the case. According to Steinmetz, he views Staupitz as "[T]he mediator of a late Augustinian school tradition to Luther," [22] and himself writes that "at least one aspect of Luther's thought... was radical Augustinianism." [23] Most persuasive of all, however, is Luther himself, when he rejects the late scholastics regarding his understanding of grace and free will. He wrote in 1519:

*"It is certain that the so-called 'Modern Theologians,' in this point of grace and free will, agree with the Scotists and Thomists except for one whom all condemn, Gregory of Rimini... .Also these theologians made it absolutely and convincingly clear that they are worse than the Pelagians."* [24]

This admission by Luther makes it plain that he is not influenced in the least by the scholastics, contrary to Mackinnon's thesis, especially in regard to the issues of grace and free will. It seems

best, in light of this statement, as well as in Luther's overwhelming gratitude to Staupitz in his remark that he had received "everything" from him, that Luther is indeed primarily a disciple of Johann Staupitz, and therefore of the "authentic" Augustinian tradition.[25]

The implications of this fact upon the study of predestination are impressive. This demonstrates that first and foremost, the reader of Martin Luther must presuppose his adherence to the Augustinian doctrine of predestination, as promoted both by the great Saint, and later Johann Staupitz. In other words, the Augustinian Paradigm is clearly the more accurate picture of Luther the theologian.

For proponents of the Concord Paradigm, this proposition completely turns the tables.

While Lutheran scholars have contented themselves by insisting that Reformed theologians prove where Luther affirms double predestination, the situation is in reality reversed. The Reformed theologian, presupposing an Augustinian Paradigm, must insist that the Lutheran theologian prove where Luther self-consciously or otherwise parts ways from the teachings of St. Augustine.

While this perspective may be maintained so as to simply await a Lutheran response, the present work will now seek to answer Modern Lutheranism on its own (albeit illegitimate) terms.

That is, it shall now be demonstrated that not only did Martin Luther not depart from orthodox Augustinian teaching, he in actuality *explicitly taught* double predestination.

### **LUTHER'S "MAGNUM OPUS":**

The most significant work of Martin Luther regarding the issues of God's sovereignty in grace is his 1525 work, *The Bondage of the Will*. Written in response to Erasmus of Rotterdam's *Diatribes on Free Will*, the book remains the greatest of Luther's works. When Luther contemplated answering Erasmus he was very aware that the issue centered around God's eternal predestination. In May of 1522 he wrote to an anonymous addressee,

"I knew before that Mosellanus agreed with Erasmus on predestination, for he is altogether an Erasmian. I, on the contrary, think that Erasmus know less, or seems to know less, about predestination than the schools of the sophists have known. There is no reason why I should fear my own downfall if I do not change my opinion. Erasmus is not to be feared either in this or in almost any other really important subject that pertains to Christian doctrine. Truth is mightier than eloquence, the Spirit stronger than genius, faith greater than learning. As Paul says: 'The foolishness of God is wiser than men.' The eloquence of Cicero was often beaten in court by less eloquent men; Julian was more eloquent than Augustine. In summary: Truth conquers lying eloquence, even though it only stammers, as it is written: 'Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou perfected strength to destroy the enemy and the avenger... .Yes, give my greetings to Mosellanus, for I don't hold it against him that he follows Erasmus rather than me. Indeed, tell him to be boldly Erasmian. The time will come when he will think differently. Meanwhile, we must bear with the poor understanding of matters held by an excellent friend.'"[26]

Luther at this time refused to write against Erasmus on his views, but rather decided to wait for Erasmus to initiate the debate. But from this it is clear that Luther understands the issues of disagreement between he and Erasmus as including the issue of predestination. He also here equates his position with those of Augustine, who was challenged by a more eloquent Julian.

Ultimately Erasmus did issue a challenge to Luther, under pressure from both his friends and enemies: A Diatribe on Free Will.[27]

Luther's response was his *The Bondage of the Will*, in which he argues against Erasmus' notion that the will of man must cooperate with the will of God in the reception of the gospel. As the title suggests, Luther responded that *the will of man is bound in sin, and therefore \_\_completely unable to cooperate\_\_ with God. Therefore, the sovereign grace of God must be \_\_the sole determining factor\_\_ in the salvation of men.*

Different opinions have been offered of this work, but it can hardly be denied that Luther's claims are very boldly stated, as well as very Augustinian. Nonetheless, regarding Luther's view of predestination, Lewis Spitz writes,

“St. Augustine was a high double predestinarian... .Luther found assurance in the belief that the faith of the elect was determined by God's eternal counsel and did not depend upon man's own weak will, but, except for some polemical passages in his treatise On the Bondage of the Will in which he overstated his own case, he left the question of why some were lost open... .”[28]

That Spitz makes this claim apart from any analysis of Luther is unfortunate, considering his good reputation as an historian. He here seems embarrassed for Luther by claiming he “overstated his own case.” While this is quite an admission regarding the contents of Luther's work, Spitz's editorialism is simply untrue.

Did the great author himself believe he had “overstated” his case? On the contrary, in 1537, writing to Wolfgang Capito concerning a plan to publish his complete works, he states, “*I would rather see them [his books] devoured. For I acknowledge none of them to be really a book of mine, except for perhaps the one On the Bound Will, and the Catechism.*”[29]

It is clear that twelve years following its publication, Luther claimed the book as his most important, hardly as an overstatement of his case for predestination.

Furthermore, it would seem as though Luther held his “overstated” double predestinarian views not simply at the time of, or after, the publication of *The Bondage of the Will*, but years prior as well. In his *Commentary on Romans*, written around 1515, he wrote,

*“All things whatever arise from, and depend on, the divine appointment; whereby it was foreordained who should receive the word of life, and who should disbelieve it; who should be delivered from their sins, and who should be hardened in them; and who should be justified and who should be condemned.”*[30]

While Spitz thinks that Luther generally held a single predestinarian view, Oxford scholar Alister McGrath takes quite a different view. In fact, McGrath is a scholar who seriously disagrees with the thesis of this paper: namely, that Luther held a consistently Augustinian view of

predestination and did not part from it. McGrath concludes that Luther did indeed part ways from Augustine. He writes,

“[Luther’s] assertions that Wycliffe was correct to maintain that all things happen by absolute necessity, and that God is the author of all man’s evil deeds, have proved serious obstacles to those who wish to suggest that Luther was merely restating an Augustinian or scriptural position... .Luther explicitly teaches a doctrine of double predestination, whereas Augustine was reluctant to acknowledge such a doctrine, no matter how logically appropriate it might appear.[31]

In light of this quote McGrath certainly disagrees that Luther was a consistent Augustinian. McGrath actually reverses here the positions most Lutherans assume: that Augustine was the double predestinarian, while Luther taught single. Not so, claims McGrath, it is actually the very opposite!

This author would certainly take issue with McGrath in that it is his reading of Augustine that is questionable, but not his reading of Luther. However, that issue is not critical to the thesis of the present work. McGrath is correct, as shall now be demonstrated, that Luther’s work without question teaches double predestination.

Luther begins *The Bondage of the Will*, after addressing some introductory matters, with a most appropriate question: that is, the nature of the Sovereignty of God. Section IV of Chapter 2 is entitled, “Of the Necessitating Foreknowledge of God.” In this chapter Luther sets out to demonstrate and prove that all things are controlled directly by the counsel and will of God: what he calls “necessitating foreknowledge.” That is, “[God foreknows nothing contingently, but... He foresees, purposes, and does all things according to His own immutable, eternal and infallible will.](#)”[32]

Not only is this the case, but Luther also says that it is “[fundamentally necessary and wholesome for Christians](#)” to know and trust this sovereignty,[33] and where it is not known, “[There can be no faith, nor any worship of God. To lack this knowledge is really to be ignorant of God - and salvation is notoriously incompatible with such ignorance.](#)”[34]

His justification for saying this is quite simple: “[If you hesitate to believe, or are too proud to acknowledge, that God foreknows and wills all things, not contingently, but necessarily and immutably, how can you believe, trust and rely on His promises?](#)”[35] This logic is refreshingly carried through by Luther:

*“If, then, we are taught and believe that we ought to be ignorant of the necessary foreknowledge of God and the necessity of events, Christian faith is utterly destroyed, and the promises of God and the whole gospel fall to the ground completely; for the Christian’s chief and only comfort in every adversity lies in knowing that God does not lie, but brings all things to pass immutably, and that His will cannot be resisted, altered, or impeded.”*[36]

It is this *foundational chapter* in Luther’s work that provides the basis for the rest of his conclusions.

While Luther analyzes many different arguments, and exegetes hundreds of passages of Scripture, the Sovereignty of God is the fundamental truth by which his conclusions are reached.

It is from this that he continues by asserting God's absolute control over man's salvation through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. It is from the Sovereignty of God that he also argues for God's control over the reprobation of the wicked by means of sovereign control, working evil through them, and handing them over to their sins.

Luther argues against the Erasmian thesis of the cooperative will on the grounds that the human will is bound by sin as a result of the fall of man.

Erasmus fully realized the implications of Luther's strong statement of God's sovereignty. He writes that if this teaching of God's sovereignty is proclaimed, "*Who will try and reform his life?*"[37]

Luther lashes back, "*I reply, Nobody! Nobody can! God has no time for your practitioners of self-reformation, for they are hypocrites. The elect, who fear God, will be reformed by the Holy Spirit; the rest will perish unreformed.*"[38]

Erasmus pushes the point: "*Who will believe that God loves him?*"

Luther stands his ground: "*I reply, Nobody! Nobody can! But the elect shall believe it; and the rest shall perish without believing it, raging and blaspheming, as you describe them. So there will be some who believe it.*"[39]

This is the *central point Erasmus makes* in his Diatribe, that God's sovereignty should not be emphasized to the point that the freedom of man's will is usurped.

Luther fires volley after volley, arguing that *unless the sovereign God changes the heart of man, none shall accept the gospel*. He writes:

*"God has surely promised His grace to the humbled: that is, to those who mourn over and despair of themselves. But a man cannot be thoroughly humbled till he realises [sic] that his salvation is utterly beyond his own powers, counsels, efforts, will and works, and depends absolutely on the will, counsel, pleasure and work of Another - God alone."*[40]

Thus Luther affirms the absolute sovereignty of God in salvation. In this same passage, Luther also goes on to speak of those who are not elect, that is, the reprobate. He realizes that his theology will not allow him to speak only of the elect, but of the non-elect as well. He writes:

*"Thus God conceals His eternal mercy and loving kindness beneath eternal wrath, His righteousness beneath unrighteousness. Now, the highest degree of faith is to believe that He is merciful, though he saves so few and damns so many; to believe that He is just, though of His own will He makes us perforce proper subjects for damnation, and seems (in Erasmus' words) 'to delight in the torments of poor wretches and to be a fitter object for hate than for love.' If I could by any means understand how this same God, who makes such a show of wrath and unrighteousness, can yet be merciful and just, there would be no need for faith. But as it is, the impossibility of understanding makes room for*

*the exercise of faith when these things are preached and published; just as, when God kills, faith in life is exercised in death.”[41]*

Thus Luther exhibits no qualms about following his theology to its *logical conclusion*.

Time and time again he makes this known. He uses the specific examples of Pharoah, Judas, and Esau to prove his case that God sovereignly, in the counsel of His own will, determined to harden and reprobate them. At this point it is best to allow Luther to express his own views.

*“Here, God Incarnate says: ‘I would, and thou wouldst not.’ God Incarnate, I repeat, was sent for this purpose, to will, say, do, suffer, and offer to all men, all that is necessary for salvation; albeit He offends many who, being abandoned or hardened by God’s secret will of Majesty, do not receive Him thus willing, speaking, doing and offering... It belongs to the same God Incarnate to weep, lament, and groan over the perdition of the ungodly, though that will of Majesty purposely leaves and reprobates some to perish. Nor is it for us to ask why He does so, but to stand in awe of God, Who can do, and wills to do such things.”[42]*

*“On your view [Erasmus], God will elect nobody, and no place for election will be left; all that is left is freedom of will to heed or defy the long-suffering and wrath of God. But if God is thus robbed of His power and wisdom in election, what will He be but just that idol, Chance, under whose sway all things happen at random? Eventually, we shall come to this: that men may be saved and damned without God’s knowledge! For He will not have marked out by sure election those that should be saved and those that should be damned; He will merely have set before all men His general long-suffering, which forbears and hardens, together with His chastening and punishing mercy, and left it to them to choose whether they would be saved or damned, while He Himself, perchance, goes off, as Homer says, to an Ethiopian banquet!”[43]*

This passage remarkably demonstrates Luther’s purpose in *The Bondage of the Will*. Here he states that the entire problem with the theology of Erasmus is that it makes its case for free will by robbing God of His sovereignty.

The entire problem with Erasmus is that on his terms God would not mark out, predestine, and know those among the elect and reprobate.

A single predestinarian may at this point claim that God marks out and knows those whom he elects, but not the remaining number.

The simple question is then how God elects any in an informed manner? How does God know He has elected all He wants to elect? This is to say, that unless God marks out and knows both the elect and reprobate, His sovereignty as well as omniscience suffers. Thus, Luther chastises Erasmus for promoting a relinquishing of God’s sovereignty. He writes that Erasmus has been deceived by the “Mistress Reason”[44] and that

*“Reason will insist that these are not the acts of a good and merciful God. They are too far beyond her grasp; and she cannot bring herself to believe that the God Who acts and judges thus is good; she wants to shut out faith, and to see, and feel, and understand, how it is that He is good and not cruel. She would certainly understand, were it said of God*

*that He hardens none and damns none, but has mercy on all and saves all, so that hell is destroyed, and the fear of death may be put away, and no future punishment need be dreaded!”[45]*

*“[I]f God foreknew that Judas would be a traitor, Judas became a traitor of necessity, and it was not in the power of Judas or of any creature to act differently, or to change his will, from that which God had foreseen. It is true that Judas acted willingly, and not under compulsion, but his willing was the work of God, brought into being by His omnipotence, like everything else... If you do not allow that the thing which God foreknows is necessarily brought to pass, you take away faith and the fear of God, you undermine all the Divine promises and threatenings, and so you deny Deity itself!”[46]*

This is a strong statement in favor of maintaining God’s sovereign will over even evil events and actions such as Judas Iscariot’s betrayal of Jesus.

Luther understands the initial offensiveness of the doctrine he teaches, but holds that though it may be difficult, God must be revered and believed on the subject. He states, *“Doubtless it gives the greatest possible offence [sic] to common sense or natural reason, that God... should of His own mere will abandon, harden and damn men.”[47]*

After admitting this to be a great stumbling block, *even for him*, he states that *“None the less, the arrow of conviction has remained, fastened deep in the hearts of learned and unlearned alike... that if the foreknowledge and omnipotence of God are admitted, then we must be under necessity.”[48]*

*“You may be worried that it is hard to defend the mercy and equity of God in damning the undeserving, that is, ungodly persons, who, being born in ungodliness, can by no means avoid being ungodly, and staying so, and being damned, but are compelled by natural necessity to sin and perish; as Paul says: ‘We were all the children of wrath, even as others’ (Eph.2.3), created such by God Himself from a seed that had been corrupted by the sin of the one man, Adam. But here God must be revered and held in awe, as being most merciful to those whom He justifies and saves in their own utter unworthiness; and we must show some measure of deference to His Divine wisdom by believing Him just when to us He seems unjust.”[49]*

It is here that two very important considerations must be addressed. Opponents of the doctrine of double predestination often object on the grounds that the doctrine makes God into an “arbitrary” being - having no just reason to choose one over another. The other is an objection that the doctrine makes God to be the author of evil. These *two objections* Luther himself addresses quite adequately.

Is it true that upon the basis of double predestination God becomes a creature of arbitrariness, not having a just reason for choosing one man over another? Why did God choose to harden some in their sins and not alter their evil wills? *“This question touches on the secrets of His Majesty, where ‘His judgments are past finding out’ (cf. Rom.11.33). It is not for us to inquire into these mysteries, but to adore them.”[50]* Luther surely recognizes an element of mystery in the doctrine of predestination, as did virtually all the Reformers. But Luther goes on to address the issue in a *more satisfying manner*.

The same reply should be given to those who ask: Why did God let Adam fall, and why did He create us all tainted with the same sin, when He might have kept Adam safe, and might have created us of other material, or of seed that had first been cleansed? God is He for Whose will no cause or ground may be laid down as its rule and standard; for nothing is on a level with it or above it, but it is itself the rule for all things. If any rule or standard, or cause or ground, existed for it, it could no longer be the will of God. What God wills is not right because He ought, or was bound, so to will; on the contrary, what takes place must be right, because He so wills it. Causes and grounds are laid down for the will of the creature, but not for the will of the Creator - unless you set another Creator over him![51]

Luther himself, in a skillful approach, answers the objection of arbitrariness. The ground upon which the objection must be brought is that God is bound to some greater rule of equity than His own infallible will. Luther articulates that the actual rule of equity God is bound to is His own will. That is, God does whatsoever pleases Him, and because it pleases Him, it is by definition equitable and right. While sometimes men may not understand fully the justice and righteousness of God's ways, Luther explains that God's ways are often mysterious to fallible and sinful men, and that He must be "reverenced and held in awe." [52]

The second objection regarding double predestination *stems ultimately from a misunderstanding of it*. Many caricatures of the doctrine see God as electing and reprobating men in eternity past, with no reference to man as sinner, but merely as creature. Thus, when God reprobated men from eternity, he had to then set His plan into action by then creating them sinful, (that is, create their sin afresh) and actively incline their hearts to wickedness so that he could punish them eternally. This particular doctrine is best called symmetrical predestination, in that God reprobated in the same active fashion as he elects. That is, as God must create a new, righteous, heart in the elect man, God must also create a new, wicked heart in the reprobate man. Very few theologians, especially Reformers, held this particular view.

The view that Luther maintains is also the view of the other major Reformers, including John Calvin, as well as earlier St. Augustine and Johann Staupitz. This view may be called asymmetrical predestination, as it pictures God electing and reprobating in eternity past with reference to man as sinner, not as creature.

Therefore, when God had before him the entire human race, he viewed mankind as fallen.

This is why Luther constantly writes that God "*damns the undeserving*" as well as "*elects the undeserving*." [53]

God, in His act of election and reprobation, saw both kinds of men as "undeserving."

The implications of this are such that God had no need to create the reprobate with fresh evil in them, as if it were possible for Him to be the author of evil, but rather, His decree of reprobation was passive. God simply "passed over" the reprobate in the exercise of His saving mercy.

One may wonder how this differs from "single" predestination. Quite simply, *in single predestination there is no "decree of reprobation," while in asymmetrical double predestination there is, albeit a passive decree*. [54]

It is the opinion of this paper that the positions of Martin Luther are in no way compatible with any scheme of “single” predestination.

Luther at every turn affirms the sovereignty of God in both election and reprobation, as well as in everything that comes to pass. That is, God’s sovereignty is the foundation upon which all his argument flows.

If the very candid statements by Luther so far are not enough to convince the skeptic, nowhere does Luther so skillfully defend the doctrine of double predestination as in the following (lengthy) passage:

*“The Diatribe gathers its second absurdity from Mistress Reason - ‘human’ reason, so-called: to wit, that on my view blame must attach, not to the vessel, but to the potter, especially in view of the fact that He is a potter who creates this clay as well as moulds it. ‘Here (says the Diatribe) the vessel is cast into eternal fire, a fate which it in no way deserved, except that it was not under its own control.’ Nowhere does the Diatribe more openly betray itself than here. You hear it saying (in different words, admittedly, but with identical meaning) just what Paul makes the ungodly say: ‘Why doth He find fault? Who shall resist His will?’ This is what Reason cannot receive nor bear. This is what offended so many men of outstanding ability, men who have won acceptance down so many ages.”*

*“At this point, \_\_\_they demand that God should act according to man’s idea of right\_\_\_, and do what seems proper to themselves - or else that He should cease to be God! ... .Flesh does not deign to give God glory to the extent of believing Him to be just and good when He speaks and acts above and beyond the definitions of Justinian’s Code, or the fifth book of Aristotle’s Ethics! No, let the Majesty that created all things give way before a worthless fragment of His own creation! Let the boot be on the other foot, and the Corycian cavern fear those that look into it! So it is ‘absurd’ to condemn one who cannot avoid deserving damnation. And because of this ‘absurdity’ it must be false that God has mercy on whom He will have mercy, and hardens whom He will. He must be brought to order! Rules must be laid down for Him, and \_\_\_He is not to damn any but those who have deserved it by our reckoning\_\_\_! In this way, Paul and his simile are satisfactorily answered; so Paul must presumably recall it, and allow that it has no force, and remodel it; because the Potter in question (this is the Diatribe’s explanation) makes the vessel unto dishonour on the grounds of merit preceding, just as He rejected some of the Jews by reason of unbelief, and received Gentiles by reason of their faith. But if God works in such a way as to regard merit, why do the objectors grumble and complain? Why do they say: ‘Why doth He find fault? Who resists His will?’ Why need Paul restrain them? For who is surprised, let alone shocked or inclined to object, if one is damned who deserved it? Moreover, what becomes of the power of the Potter to make what vessel He will, if He is controlled by merits and rules, and is not allowed to make as He would, but is required to make as He should?”*

*“... .Suppose we imagine that God ought to be a God who regards merit in those that are to be damned. Must we not equally maintain and allow that He should also regard merit in those that are to be saved? If we want to follow Reason, it is as unjust to reward the undeserving as to punish the undeserving. So let us conclude that God ought to justify on*

*the grounds of merit preceding; or else we shall be declaring Him to be unjust. One who delights in evil and wicked men, and who invites and crowns their impiety with rewards!”*

*“But then woe to us poor wretches with such a God! For who shall be saved? Behold, therefore, the wickedness of the human heart! When God saves the undeserving without merit, yes, and justifies the ungodly, with all their great demerit, man’s heart does not accuse God of iniquity, nor demand to know why He wills to do so, although by its own reckoning such action is most unprincipled; but because what God does is in its own interest, and welcome, it considers it just and good. But when He damns the undeserving, because this is against its interest, it finds the action iniquitous and intolerable; and here man’s heart protests, and grumbles, blasphemes. So you see that the Diatribe and its friends do not judge in this matter according to equity, but according to their passionate regard for their own interest.”*

*“... .[I]f God who crowns the undeserving pleases you, you ought not be displeased when He damns the undeserving! If He is just in the one case, He cannot but be just in the other. In the one case, He pours out grace and mercy upon the unworthy; in the other, He pours our wrath and severity upon the undeserving; in both He transgresses the bounds of equity in man’s sight, yet is just and true in His own sight. How it is just for Him to crown the unworthy is incomprehensible now; but we shall see it when we reach the place where He will be no more an object of faith, but we shall with open face behold Him. So too, it is at present incomprehensible how it is just for Him to damn the undeserving; yet faith will continue to believe that it is so, till the Son of Man shall be revealed.”[55]*

The author of these words might well have drafted the Articles of Dordt, the Westminster Confession of Faith, or any other historic Calvinist creed. In this quote are found a summary of all that has been said thus far. Luther addresses every element: election (active), reprobation (passive), God’s justice (anti-arbitrariness), and God’s sovereignty.

The *Modern Lutheran* statement on predestination states that, “[We] reject that God does not want everybody to be saved, but that merely by an arbitrary counsel, purpose, and will, without regard for their sin, God has predestined certain people to damnation so that they cannot be saved.”[56]

Luther and every Calvinist would agree on at least one point: God’s counsels nor purposes are never arbitrary. They are righteous and good because God Himself makes them, and God does not reprobate without regard for their sin. God’s reprobation *presupposes* their sin.

Regarding God’s desire for all men to be saved, *Luther himself objects*. In response to the claim that ‘God desires all men to be saved,’ and that ‘Christ died for all men,’ he writes that:

*“These points and others like them can be refuted as easily as the first one. For these verses must always be understood as pertaining to the elect only, as the apostle says in 2 Tim. 2:10 ‘everything for the sake of the elect.’ For in an absolute sense Christ did not die for all, because he says: ‘This is my blood which is poured out for you’ and ‘for many’ - He does not say: for all - ‘for the forgiveness of sins’ (Mark 14:24, Matt. 26:28)”[57]*

## CONCLUSION:

*Something has gone wrong in Lutheranism.* It has been more than adequately shown that regarding the doctrine of the eternal predestination of God Martin Luther taught things directly contrary to the standards of Modern Lutheranism. Something very clearly happened in Lutheran doctrine between 1546 and 1580. In the span between Luther's death and the Formula of Concord a radical shift came in "Lutheran" theology. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine exactly what did happen, enough has been said to demonstrate that something did indeed happen.

Luther never taught any such doctrine as "single" predestination. The concept was clearly very foreign to him, as it required the suspension of God's sovereignty over the reprobation of man. Such a suspension to Luther was the "denial of Deity itself." [58]

Luther understood that in terms of God's predestination, the principle is indeed "double or nothing." Either God is sovereign over all things which comes to pass, or He is not sovereign at all.

Modern Lutheranism, however, treats reprobation in an almost agnostic fashion. Recall the quote from Robert Hoerber: "[T]he 'unreasonable' doctrine of election to salvation (but not to damnation) is a particularly comforting part of the gospel message." [59]

No explanation is given by Hoerber as to how it is possible (indeed, he admits that it is "unreasonable") for God to maintain sovereignty over election yet not over reprobation.

One can almost anticipate Luther's response that "the Christian's *chief and only comfort* in every adversity lies in knowing that God does not lie, but brings all things to pass immutably, and that His will cannot be resisted, altered, or impeded." [60]

Hoerber's *supposedly "comforting"* single predestinarian view is thus rejected by Luther himself. Comfort is only drawn through faith in God's sovereignty, not faith in His relinquishing of it.

Though Martin Luther and other Reformers like Calvin and Zwingli may have differed over many issues, such as the regulating principle of worship, the nature of the sacraments, the use of law in civil government, and the like, they never had a public disagreement over their respective doctrines of predestination.

In an age of controversy, this fact is quite remarkable, especially as the doctrine remains the most controversial of all doctrines. If one reads the doctrine as presented by the Reformers, a single, uniform, voice will be found: God is sovereign over heaven and hell, salvation and damnation, life and death.

The health of the church today requires re-thinking on the issue of God's sovereignty. With semi-Pelagianism and Arminianism the norm rather than the exception in the modern church, the tough issues must once again be grappled with. *There must be another reformation.*

Perhaps this should start with a "rediscovery" of the doctrines of times long past. Perhaps there must be a revival of reading ancient documents and treatises to discover the secrets long

obscured. The church must see its place in history through the light of the past. The author, however, does not speak now of that ancient light of St. Augustine, now dimmed and wearied with age. God continues to raise up new lights for the continual reformation of His church. The light now shining is not Augustine, but Martin Luther himself.

*Sola Fide, Sola Gratia, Sola Scriptura, Soli Deo Gloria*

Original article with references found at the following URL:

[Double Or Nothing: Martin Luther's Doctrine of Predestination Brian G. Mattson](#)