

Martin Luther and John Calvin on Predestination

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The Christian doctrine of predestination attempts to explain how a person is redeemed from his sinfulness. According to this teaching, God chooses some people to be heirs to the promised Kingdom of Heaven and condemns others to an eternity in hell. God's power and grace assure the chosen, or elect, eternal salvation. Those lacking this saving grace, hereafter referred to as the reprobate, bear the responsibility for their fate, despite the fact that God predestined their damnation from the beginning of time. This doctrine asserts the majesty of God and vanquishes any trust in man's free will to work toward salvation. No work by any individual, not even the work of believing in Christ, can purchase salvation. Redemption is the gift of God to whom He chooses to give it.

The focus of this paper is the gap separating Martin Luther and the Lutheran church concerning this controversial doctrine. Early Lutheran confessions condemned teachings by John Calvin on predestination, ignoring Luther's agreement with Calvin on this issue. Even today Lutherans oppose Calvinist denominations on the questions of reprobation and assurance, which together comprise the complete doctrine of predestination.¹

The immediate questions answered by an examination of the doctrine of election are of secondary importance in the entire scheme of a theology of salvation. A belief in predestination, however, has extensive implications, and the doctrine therefore deserves the large amount of attention given it by theologians since the earliest days of Christianity.² Such faith in God's

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1. Julius Bodensieck, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1965), pp. 1953-54.

2. For a thorough history of the predestination and free will debates in the Christian churches see: Harry J. McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong?* (New York: Newman Press, 1969).

omnipotent and omnipresent shaping hand in history, as predestination implies, profoundly affects and reflects how one views the relationship between God and man, the purpose of creation, and the nature of sin. By undermining Luther's firm stance on predestination, Lutherans altered the entire tone of his theology of salvation.

The central point in Luther's thought was, of course, Christ's redemptive sacrifice on the cross. The belief in predestination was, for Luther, integrally bound to this event. Only God's relentless laboring at fulfilling his plan for creation could guarantee the efficacy of Christ's death. Only God's infinite grace could give man the faith necessary to trust God with his fate. Luther recognized the importance his theology placed on predestination. He chastised Erasmus when the humanist tried to dismiss predestination as an issue of frivolous speculation. "To lack this knowledge," Luther admonished, "is really to be ignorant of God—and salvation is notoriously incompatible with such ignorance."³

The support Luther offered predestination in *Bondage of the Will* (1525) placed Lutherans half a century later in a delicate situation. They persecuted German Calvinists for numerous heresies, one of them being the Calvinists' insistent adherence to predestination. Archbishop Edmund Grindal, living in the relative security of England, noted the irony of Lutherans denouncing Calvin on this point.

It is indeed strange that they make so much stir about predestination: let them only consult their own Luther on the 'Bondage of the Will.' What do Bucer, Calvin, and Martyr teach which Luther has not taught in that little Book?⁴

Luther and Calvin certainly differed on many issues, particularly that of the Eucharist, but they shared common beliefs concerning predestination.

The Lutheran attack on Calvinist predestination stemmed from the situation of the Protestant churches in the latter half of the sixteenth century. The Lutheran church was struggling for unity and identity in the general confusion of Protestant doctrine. The Reformation suffered from schism, the result of varied and contradictory teachings claiming descent from Luther.

The Swiss Reform movement posed an especially grave threat to the Lutherans. This loose organization of congregations, identified with the doctrine of John Calvin, claimed to possess the true heritage of the Reformation. Luther's revolt began a process, which the Reformed churches continued. Calvinists saw themselves as the genuine disciples of Luther, and criticized the Lutherans for clinging to the letter, and not the spirit, of the Saxon reformer's teachings.

3. Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, translated by J.I. Parker and O.P. Johnston, (London: James Clarke and Co., 1957), p. 83.

4. John Calvin, *Commentaries on Romans*, translated and edited by John Owen, (Edinburgh: T. Constable, 1849), Frontpiece.

Calvin thought his theology embodied the finest of Luther's doctrine and belittled his Lutheran opponents. "Ah, Luther!" he mused, "How few imitators of your excellence have you left behind you—and how many apes of your holy belligerence."⁵

On the other hand, the Lutherans believed that the Calvinists masked their erroneous innovations under the authority of Luther. Worse yet, the Calvinists were winning converts even on German soil. They were the most wicked of false brethern, who seduced the unwary believer to heresy with doctrines appearing as orthodox. To solve the problem of encroaching Calvinism, James Andreae and Martin Chemnitz wrote the *Formula of Concord* in 1577. They hoped to unify the splintered Lutheran movement and smoke out the false teachings in the church with this document. The *Formula* distinguished Lutherans from Calvinists in all respects, and thus condemned the latter on several counts. In their zealotry to create a unique Lutheran identity, Andreae and Chemnitz also discarded tenets of Luther's own faith.

They rejected the Calvinist formulation of predestination by denying that God actively condemned those who were not saved. Election extended "only to the good and beloved children of God." The *Formula* separated predestination from foreknowledge. God's omniscience enabled Him to know each man's fate. God could know the future without necessarily wanting it or causing it to happen.⁶

Andreae and Chemnitz tried to achieve a delicate balance by opposing the doctrine of reprobation. They wanted to assert the complete majesty of God's will without excluding man's responsibility for damnation. Therefore, they supported a formulation known as single predestination. Therefore, they supported a formulation known as single predestination. By blurring the distinction between foreknowledge and predestination, the Calvinist doctrine seemed to eliminate man's responsibility to account for his faith and actions before God.

In 1592 the *Saxon Visitation Articles*, prepared by Aegidius Hunnius, elaborated on this theme. These articles explicitly condemned the Calvinist tenet that the elect cannot lose the Holy Spirit, a doctrine which they feared would invite antinomianism. It was also heresy to claim that God "created the greater part of mankind for eternal damnation." God was neither just nor loving if he condemned the non-elect "... though they be baptized a thousand times and receive the Eucharist every day, and lead as blameless a life as ever can be led."⁷

The condemned teachings were, without question, fundamental parts of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. The *Second Helvetic Confession* (1566)

5. B.A. Gerrish, "John Calvin on Luther," in Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *Interpreters of Luther*, (Phil.: Fortress Press, 1968), p. 84.

6. Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1966), p. 166.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

stated that God "ingrafted into Christ" only the elect. Damnation waited for those who died without this benefit. The Reformed Churches denied, however, that predestination undermined the need for good behavior. The *Second Helvetic Confession* discouraged speculation concerning each individual's predestined end, emphasizing that "Christ exhorts every man to 'strive to enter in at the strait gate.'"⁸

The Lutherans, however, incorrectly appraised their founder's view of predestination. The *Visitation Articles* were contradictory to Luther's personal opinion. He had violently opposed Rome for teaching that a "blameless life" had any merit toward salvation.

Luther's formulation of the doctrine was neither as systematic nor as precise as Calvin's. Predestination was for Luther primarily a proof that man has no free will, while Calvin devoted much time to predestination as an independent aspect of the complete doctrine of salvation. Nevertheless, Luther attached as much value to the doctrine of election as the Genevan reformer. He considered it "fundamentally necessary" for the Christian to understand that God "foresees, purposes, and does all things according to His own immutable, eternal, and infallible will."⁹ The two reformers differed in emphasis on the doctrine because their writings were primarily responses to needs each saw in the Church. Erasmus opposed Luther on the doctrine of the unfree will, and Luther appropriately directed his response to answering Erasmus's charge.

Calvin received criticism from Catholic and Lutheran theologians directly on his explication of predestination. Therefore, Calvin devoted an entire book, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* (1552), and several chapters of his final edition of the *Institutes* (1559) to defending his interpretation of individual predestination. In earlier editions of the *Institutes*, Calvin did not address the issue thoroughly; the heavy criticism he received sparked the extensive rebuttals defending his position. In his first edition of the *Institutes*, printed in 1536, Calvin did not even treat predestination as a separate topic in the doctrine of salvation.¹⁰

Many years of debate helped to increase the value of the doctrine in Calvin's eyes. He came to view predestination as necessary not only to complete the theory of salvation, but also to help man understand his Creator. "For without it," Calvin wrote, "the faithful cannot adequately apprehend how great the goodness of God by which they are effectually called to salvation."¹¹

Luther and Calvin differed substantially in the language and tone of their

8. *Ibid.*, p. 848.

9. Luther, *Bondage*, p. 80.

10. François Wendel, *Calvin*, translated by Philip Mairet, (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 264.

11. John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, translated with introduction by J.K.S. Reid, (London: Camelot Press, 1961), p. 58.

formulations, as any two independent thinkers will do. These contrasts reflect personal experiences instead of indicating any basic disagreement in doctrine. Concerning predestination, their similarities are much more striking than any disagreements. Luther and Calvin approached the problem from two different directions and arrived at similar conclusions. Significantly, both agreed on the two counts on which Lutheran confessions later condemned Calvin: the issues of reprobation and assurance of election.

There is no doubt that John Calvin considered it essential to the concept of predestination to recognize that God actively condemned the reprobate. He clearly stated that God willed the ultimate destiny of each man: "eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others."¹² God could not truly be God unless everything happened according to his will. Calvin's view of omnipotence was so radical that it would be an infringement on the Almighty's power to concede man even the ability to incur his own damnation. Man, in his inherent pride, desired to strip God of his freedom of judgment.

Calvin also disapproved of his Lutheran opponents' reluctance to accept the logic of double predestination. "God is said to set apart those whom he adopts into salvation: it will be highly absurd to say that others acquire by chance or obtain by their own effort what election alone confers on a few."¹³ Calvin scorned the distinction made by Lutherans between foreknowledge and predestination. God actively worked within history; He did not just know or predict the future, He caused it.¹⁴ God's actions hardened and condemned the reprobate, driving them to their deserved judgment.¹⁵

The *Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church* concedes that single predestination "fails to fulfill the requirements of formal logic."¹⁶ Martin Luther wrestled with the same problem, trying to reconcile his faith in an all-loving God with the inescapable conclusions to which Scripture and logic drove him. There are hints in one of his early works, *Lectures on Romans* (1516), that Luther understood the logical implications of claiming that some were saved by grace alone. Paul wrote to the Romans that "there is a remnant according to the election of grace" (Rom. 11:5).¹⁷ Luther understood this passage to indicate

12. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill, translated and indexed by Ford Lewis Battles, (Phil: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 926.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 947.

14. Calvin even ascribed the Fall to God's predestination (*Institutes*, pp. 955-56). Luther, on the other hand, was silent about whether or not God caused the Fall. He also limited predestination to salvation, maintaining that God usually granted man freedom in handling worldly affairs (*Bondage*, p. 107). It seems, then, that Calvin had a more inclusive view of God's action in history than Luther did.

15. Calvin, *Concerning Predestination*, pp. 124-25.

16. Bodensieck, *Encyclopedia*, p. 1954.

17. Rom. 11:5, "Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace." All Biblical passages referred to will appear in the footnotes. Text from *Washburn College Bible*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

“indirectly” that God was the “author of the reprobation of others.”¹⁸ In 1516 Luther still lacked confidence, and he balked at the implications of this assertion.

In other commentaries he was unwilling to say that God condemned some men.¹⁹ Luther interpreted Paul’s allusion to Pharaoh to indicate only that God worked in all things for the salvation of his chosen people. Pharaoh was God’s tool to force Israel to humility, that the nation might then appreciate God’s saving power. Luther chose not to discuss the consequences to Pharaoh himself. Luther also avoided discussion of Esau’s fate (Rom. 9:11-13).²⁰ Luther acknowledged Jacob’s promise as demonstrating the unmerited and “gracious election of God.” He did not, however, conclude that God predestined Esau to damnation.²¹

Luther’s initial unwillingness to accept reprobation shows his sensitivity to the bitterness of this doctrine. Some years passed before he could accept in his heart what logic showed him. As he testified to Erasmus in 1525:

Doubtless it gives the greatest possible offence to common sense or natural reason, that God, who is proclaimed as being full of mercy and goodness, and so on, should of His own mere will abandon, harden and damn men, as though He delighted in the sins and great eternal torments of such poor wretches. It seems an iniquitous, cruel, intolerable, thought to think of God. . . . And who would not stumble at it? I have stumbled at it myself more than once, down to the deepest pit of despair, so that I wished I had never been made a man.²²

If only those who were granted the promise found redemption, there could be no doubt that those whom God excluded from this grace faced eternal damnation. This thought, that God damned some men, revolted Luther at first. It seemed irreconcilable with his view of an all-loving God.

Luther eventually reconciled the doctrine of predestination with his belief in the infinite love of God. Predestination removed salvation totally from man’s own power, an act which showed God’s love as much as His omnipotence. As

18. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, translated and ed. by Wilhelm Pauck, (Phil.: Westminster Press, 1961), p. 306.

19. Rom. 9: 17-18, “For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth.”

20. Rom. 9: 11-13, “For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good nor evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth; It was said unto her, the elder shall serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob have I loved but Esau have I hated.”

21. Luther, *Lectures*, pp. 266, 275-277. In contrast, Calvin named both Pharaoh and Esau among the reprobate. See *Calvin Commentaries*, p. 352.

22. Luther, *Bondage*, p. 217.

Luther grew older he became more convinced of the extensive evil staining man's nature. Original Sin, manifested in all of humanity as pride, separated man from God to such a degree that only an all-loving God could rescue anyone from damnation.

The more man strove to win his redemption, the harder he tried to have faith in Christ, the further he slipped away from God. The faith and love necessary for salvation could only come from God's gift of grace. That God predestined this gift according to his own perfect purpose filled Luther with peace in an otherwise uncertain world.

I frankly confess that, for myself, even if it could be, I should not want 'free-will' to be given me, nor anything to be left in my own hands to enable me to endeavor after salvation; not merely because in the face of so many dangers, and adversities, and assaults of devils, I could not stand my ground and hold fast my 'free-will' . . . but because, even were there no dangers, adversities, or devils, I should still be forced to labour with no guarantee of success, and to beat my fists at the air.²³

Luther's thoughts on predestination vividly reflect his personal experience. Luther had struggled to attain faith, only to arrive at the inescapable conclusion that he was a sinful man, unable to love God as he should. This realization caused him both despair and hatred of the Almighty Judge, Luther believed he was striving to reach impossible standards to attain salvation. God, the implacable judge, demanded absolute love from man, a love that man could not give.²⁴

Predestination removed salvation from Luther's control, thus ending the struggle. Luther consequently was freed from the fear and despair that the attempt to satisfy God had caused. As long as he struggled to win salvation, his faith — and works — arose from love for heaven and not from love of God. The quest for salvation separated him from the "Fountain of Life," as he had set his eyes on the lesser glory of Paradise. By foreordaining his fate, God had freed Luther from fear and the constant anxiety of wondering whether he could please someone so infinitely holy.

Luther's acceptance of the doctrine of predestination stemmed from a craving for peace. By encouraging trust in a loving God who controlled his fate, the doctrine of predestination filled this need. Calvin approved of the doctrine because it taught humility. Calvin viewed the Christian life as one of self-denial; predestination forced one to compare one's own powerlessness to God's omnipotence, a comparison sure to negate all pride.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 313.

24. Martin Luther, "Preface to Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings," in John Dillenberger, *Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1961), p. 11.

Although predestination met the psychological needs of Calvin and Luther, both men were forced to contend with a glaring weakness in the doctrine. They had to explain how God could still be called “just” if He created men and willed their sinfulness only to condemn them for it. It was hard to imagine how this could be fair. Luther and Calvin did retort that man must submit himself to God’s inscrutable judgment, but their justifications for reprobation go beyond taking refuge in this undebatable proposition. They demanded that all men recognize that they lived under judgment and deserved condemnation. Moreover, everyone participated willingly in disobeying God’s law. Man was hardly a passive instrument, sinning under God’s compulsion. Calvin and Luther asked that each individual evaluate himself honestly; whoever did so would fear, instead of revolt against, God’s decree.

In replying to their opponents, both Reformers stressed the need for humility. The first premise was that God’s will, by definition, was righteous. No one could judge God’s decisions: to deny God the power of judgement would be to create a God according to man’s own desires. Calvin complained that his opponents, by denying individual predestination, acted toward God “as if either mercy were to be forbidden to him or as if when he wills to show mercy he is compelled to renounce his judgment completely.”²⁵

The proud self naturally tended to contradict God. Any attempt to solve the riddle of predestination by relying on one’s own reason inevitably led to wild speculation. Calvin and Luther both opened their discussions of the doctrine with this warning.²⁶ Election remained a divine mystery. Man’s only means of uncovering this mystery was through the revelation that God gave. In order to understand predestination, one had to read Scripture with an open mind, willing to accept whatever truth God revealed.

Humility also meant recognizing that all men lived under condemnation until God redeemed them. No one deserved salvation. God was merciful to pardon any man from his well-earned punishment. The proud man could abuse predestination to blame God for man’s own sin. Calvin said that it was much more sensible to “contemplate the evident cause of condemnation in the corrupt nature of humanity – which is closer to us – rather than seek a hidden and utterly incomprehensible cause in God’s predestination.”²⁷

The attempt to displace responsibility for sin from man’s nature to God’s predestination revealed the perversity of man’s pride.

Part of the nature of sin was that man was pitifully unaware of the extent of his corruption. Sin was imbedded so deeply in man that it could not be identified only in individual actions, but was present in every thought, feeling, and motion. Reprobation had nothing to do with causing man to sin. He did that

25. Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 959.

26. Luther, *Commentaries*, p. 114, and Calvin, *Concerning Predestination*, p. 61.

27. Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 957.

himself with every breath he took. Rather, God hardened and condemned man by leaving him blinded to his condition, so that man came to glory in his filth. Predestination did not exclude the voluntary nature of man's behavior, as individual voluntary actions had no bearing on salvation. Luther said the Pelagians could not understand that "God lets the ungodly sin even when they do good works."²⁸ Individual actions did nothing but confirm man's sinful nature. Judas was predestined to betray Christ, but he certainly acted out of his own volition. According to the doctrine of predestination, man delighted in his own sin. Even the best works of the unregenerate were products of a desire to lay claim to God's promise, to bind him to man's will. The reprobate were not "taken by the scruff of the neck" and forced to sin by God.²⁹ They attempted to glorify themselves by trusting in their own works – even in their own faith – which was the most insidious of sins.

Every voluntary act of man reaffirmed the sinful condition into which he was born and justified God's judgment upon him. The real wonder was not how a just God could condemn anyone, but why a holy God would bother to redeem anyone. The elect had nothing but God's love to thank, and the condemned had no cause for complaint.³⁰

The Old Testament stories of Pharaoh and Esau revealed the majesty of God's will. Luther and Calvin heavily relied on Paul's interpretation of these stories (Rom., chapter 9) to support their position. Esau's condemnation demonstrated that he was damned without consideration of his works. All judgment was God's alone; His eternal decree could not be changed by man's works, good or bad. God was not responsible for Esau's damnation, as neither Jacob nor Esau produced any good which deserved God's favor. The mercy God showed Jacob did not mean He was cruel to Esau. Esau deserved his fate, while Jacob was blessed with unmerited redemption.³¹

The story of Pharaoh showed that the reprobate man proudly contested God's will, thus justifying God's judgment on him. Luther refused to concede that God coerced Pharaoh into evil while turning him away from righteousness. God presented to Pharaoh his will and holiness, but withheld the grace necessary to make him humble enough to submit to the Almighty's plan. When faced with God's will Pharaoh rebelled in proud and futile anger. Luther commented that the reprobate, such as Pharaoh, were "turned away from God by the very corruption of their nature" when God's work contradicted them.³² God's action hardened Pharaoh's will, but Pharaoh responded in voluntary transgression of God's commandment. Pharaoh confirmed the justice of his condemnation, even though God predestined, and even actively brought about, Pharaoh's demise.

28. Luther, *Lectures*, p. 391.

29. Luther, *Bondage*, p. 102.

30. Luther, *Bondage*, p. 207, and Calvin, *Concerning Predestination*, p. 123.

31. Calvin, *Commentaries*, p. 349.

32. Luther, *Bondage*, p. 205.

...since he is impelled and made to act by his own willing, no violence is done to his will; for it is not under unwilling constraint, but by an operation of God consonant with its nature it is impelled to will naturally, according to what it is (that is, evil).³³

God hardened the reprobate, of whom Pharaoh is an example. That is, He turned the reprobate away from himself by presenting them with His will, which the condemned man naturally contested. Calvin characterized hardening as a blinding of the reprobate souls; rebellion against God's will made these men increasingly unaware of their desperate situation.³⁴ God willed not to illumine their hearts, causing them to become self-reliant, and scornful of God's might. Luther told his students that not even the fear of damnation could drive a hardened man to prostrate himself before God.

It is not characteristic of reprobates to tremble at the secret counsel of God; but that is the characteristic of the elect. The reprobate despise it, or at least pay no attention to it, or else they declare in the arrogance of their despair: 'Well, if I am damned, all right, then I am damned.'³⁵

God used the reprobate to fulfill his purpose. Satan was God's "minister" whose evil was turned to God's own use. The workings of Satan blinded the reprobate and taught the elect the futility of trying to earn salvation. Thus, even Satan cooperated against his will to achieve God's predestined end. Pharaoh, Satan, and the rest of the reprobate tried to thwart God's will. God predestined both these challenges and their ultimate failure so He could show the elect the majesty of His will. Predestination, revealed as God's wrath against the reprobate, purged the elect of their pride.³⁶

Reprobation created a remnant of humanity whose humility prepared them for God's grace. God's elect were those who abandoned trust in their faith and works as a means to salvation. God granted the elect assurance of their salvation through the promise of his Son. The faith of the elect was not in their own ability to lead the rigorous life that Jesus did, but in Christ's promise to intercede for them. The love of Christ assured the elect of their salvation despite all of their failings.

Jesus Christ himself was the "clearest mirror of free election." John Calvin observed that "he was not made Son of God by righteous living but was freely given such honor so that he might afterward share his gifts with others."³⁷ The assurance of the elect lay in a man whom God had chosen of His own free will of fulfill His purpose. Everything rested on God's promise. There was no chance involved. Christ effected the redemption of the world because God predestined

33. *Ibid.*, p. 212.

34. Calvin, *Commentaries*, p. 362.

35. Luther, *Commentaries*, p. 116.

36. Calvin, *Commentaries*, p. 362, and *Concerning Predestination*, p. 84.

37. Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 933.

from the beginning of time that Christ's sacrifice would not fail. Those whom God had chosen to share in Christ's redemptive work would likewise be assured of success.

Luther craved the assurance that God would work in him the salvation he had failed to achieve. By condemning the doctrine of assurance of election, Andreae and Chemnitz condemned a teaching which brought Luther peace. For a man as painfully aware of his own weakness as Luther was, the hope of God's assurance was a most comforting thought. Even in the most trying *Anfechtungen*, Luther could find solace in the knowledge that God controlled his destiny, whether it be heaven or hell. He was so convinced of the love and righteousness in God's purpose, that he was sure God would work all his sufferings for the best. There was no need to struggle against all the unseen and menacing powers in the world. Salvation was in the control of the mightiest hand of all. Though Luther would always doubt himself, he could never despair of the "comfortable certainty that He is faithful and will not lie to me, and that He is also great and powerful, so that no devils or opposition can break Him or pluck one from Him."³⁸ If the determinative nature of God's eternal purpose for each individual were somehow reduced, salvation would rest on chance. Luther feared a destiny of chance more than the certainty of Hell, as chance removed any hope that the evil of the world had any purpose. Furthermore, if God did not guard His elect, there would be no protection against the wiles of Satan.³⁹

Calvin also found assurance and freedom from fear in the promise of God's election. God swore that He would protect His own, and that was the hope of all Christians. Calvin interpreted any attempt to grant man freedom even to reject salvation not only as opening a door of frightening uncertainty, but also as a direct affront to God's omnipotence. Any implication that someone whom Christ had chosen could lose the Holy Spirit was an unpardonable insult to the Son of God. "If any of these should perish, God is conquered by the sin of man. But none perish, because God is conquered by nothing."⁴⁰

These views of Luther and Calvin offer a sharp contrast to the later Lutheran confessions. The *Saxon Visitation Articles* clearly opposed the position which brought Luther so much comfort. The *Formula of Concord* attempted to retain Luther's doctrine of assurance while discarding the distasteful clause concerning reprobation. However, the middle road cannot be available in such a doctrine as predestination. By maintaining that the reprobate freely chose damnation, Andreae undermined the assurance of election. For if condemnation is the result of free choice, some of those who received God's grace conceivably could choose damnation. Predestination cannot be one-way, a fact that both

38. Luther, *Bondage*, p. 314.

39. Luther, *Commentaries*, p. 112.

40. Calvin, *Concerning Predestination*, p. 75.

reformers recognized. By their unwillingness to accept reprobation, the authors of the *Formula of Concord* weakened the entire doctrine. Luther and Calvin both accepted the doctrine of reprobation as a necessary pillar to support their real hope, that the elect are assured salvation.

The doctrine concerning assurance of election was difficult to apply to the individual. There was a vast difference between maintaining that the elect cannot fall from grace and claiming that one can be assured of his own election. Luther, although he was convinced of his own election, never developed a system by which an individual could test himself for election. God's grace did not cleanse the elect of their sin, rather God justified them in spite of their sin. The elect were still inclined to the same vices as their less fortunate brethren. Therefore, no one could see within himself a sure sign of his ultimate destination. The only reliable gauge was that no one was saved unless he became fully aware of both his own depravity and of the almighty power and holiness of God. "If we anxiously tremble at God's word and are terrified by it, this indeed is a good sign," Luther noted.⁴¹ Contrition was the first sign of election, but not conclusive evidence. Someone could easily be led astray by trusting in his own repentance instead of Christ's death. Speculation about election was a dangerous occupation. The wisest thing to do was to put full faith outside of one's self, in Christ, and not even trust one's own ability to have faith in the Savior. Those who could love God regardless of His judgment upon them were the ones who would find peace in a troubled world.

Like Luther, Calvin also hesitated to identify a sure criterion against which men could examine themselves for their election. He disagreed with Luther's formulation, however, which tended to inspire resignation to one's fate. Predestination should encourage the elect to do good works in gratitude for the salvation promised by Christ. God's chosen should not tremble in fear of the future judgment, but should rest assured in Christ's promise. Thus, Calvin both conceded the ultimate uncertainty of election and also admonished the faithful to examine themselves for signs of their election. He admitted, "it daily happens that those who seemed to be Christ's, fall away from him again, and hasten to destruction." On the other hand, election was not buried "in the secret purpose of God." Calvin asserted, "there is no doubt but that we are all encouraged to examine our calling, so that we may become assured that we are the children of God."⁴²

41. Luther, *Commentaries*, p. 116.

42. Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 973 and *Commentaries*, p. 324. Calvin wrote the *Commentaries* many years before his final edition of the *Institutes* (1559). In this later work, Calvin took a much more cautious attitude toward the possibility of identifying the elect. This cautiousness may indicate that the older Calvin revised his original position because he feared that a strong emphasis on self-examination caused either unhealthy doubt or unwarranted trust in one's own actions. In the 1559 *Institutes*, however, he still referred to an "inward illumination of the Spirit" shared by the elect (p. 945, 974). God's chosen

Calvin cautiously hoped that one could be assured of his salvation because God regenerated those whom He saved. The elect were not called merely to eternal glory, but also "according to a purpose" (Rom. 8:28) here on earth. "Therefore, God's saving grace infused them with virtue, that they may be witnesses to the power and goodness of God."⁴³ Outward signs of good behavior were not a perfect indicator of election, but if a man was not virtuous, he certainly was not one of the elect. Evil works were clear signs that God's judgment had already been pronounced.⁴⁴

Good works could mislead someone into thinking that his behavior had sealed his election. The true mirror of election was not an externally virtuous life, but a life in Christ. The Son of God, as the first of the chosen, was the perfect type of the elect. Those whom He had chosen out of this world would be conformed to His image, including his most "humiliating state."⁴⁵ God regenerated his elect through a definite and predictable process; the chosen were purged of their evil — "sanctified" — as well as saved from condemnation. The afflictions by which God hardened the reprobate worked in His elect toward sanctification. Anyone who studied the Gospel could see this process at work in Christ; he was the perfect, if inimitable, model of election and sanctification. The elect would face the same type of trials that the Messiah did:

...that by the same celestial decree, the afflictions which conform us to Christ, have been appointed; and he did this for the purpose of connecting, as by a kind of necessary chain, our salvation with the bearing of the cross.⁴⁶

Here was another clue to determine whether or not one possessed God's grace. Election involved a total communion with Christ, even to the point of some metaphorical "participation of the cross."⁴⁷ One could find the characteristics of the elect in the image of Christ and supposedly compare himself against this perfect example.

Luther saw no reason to believe that God's elect were in some identifiable way more virtuous than the reprobate. Likewise, he did not emphasize the sanctifying effect of suffering, as he did not hope for any substantial purification

could be known by their common awareness of the Holy Spirit. Although Calvin himself never conclusively stated that the elect could identify themselves, later Calvinists were obsessed with the task of discovering within themselves some irrefutable evidence of God's calling. See Edmund Stanley Morgan, *Visible Saints: the History of a Puritan Idea*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1963), pp. 67-73 for a fuller account of how Puritans adapted Calvin's teachings on sanctification.

43. Calvin, *Concerning Predestination*, p. 70.

44. Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 961.

45. Calvin, *Commentaries*, p. 318.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 316.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 318.

of the elect here on earth. God redeemed man despite all of his earthly afflictions and trials; suffering only served to demonstrate to the elect the futility of self-reliance.

These contrasting opinions on sanctification significantly affected how each theologian viewed the role of the Church in society. Since Calvin believed that the elect were graced with more virtue than the unredeemed population, he naturally assigned positions of secular authority to the regenerate. Luther, on the other hand, never detected that the elect were any more skilled in earthly matters than their less fortunate brethren. He consequently saw the Church as a less effective tool of social control than Calvin did.

The doctrines of Calvin and Luther were not identical. Contrasting views of the nature of God, the nature of man, the extent of original sin, the role of Christ, and, most importantly, their own personal hopes and fears colored their theologies. Despite these differences Luther and Calvin agreed on the essential principles of predestination. They both said that only those were saved whom God chose, in his righteous and incomprehensible judgment, to spare from the deserved torments of eternal condemnation. Reprobation meant that God willed the damnation of those without saving grace; He did not just permit them to condemn themselves through their own free will. Such free will would sacrifice the other principle of the doctrine, that God preserved His chosen in His grace despite the inherent weakness of man.

Debate over predestination often centered on the controversial question of reprobation, but both Calvin and Luther understood predestination to be primarily a message of hope. Predestination gave order to a world of apparent chaos, and hope that the present evil would be overcome by God's power. The Almighty God, and not fragile man, was in control of history, a fact which brought peace to Christians.