

MBS TEXTE 53



MARTIN
BUCER
SEMINAR

2. Jahrgang
2005

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**Providence and
Predestination in
the Call of the Gospel**



Reformed Forum

Reformiertes Forum

Table of Contents

Inhaltsverzeichnis

Our gospel is not partitioned	3
The general good of God shown in providence	4
Bullinger's lesson for today's evangelists	5
Preserving the balance between two extremes	6
Providence and predestination go hand in hand.....	6
Seeing predestination within the full gospel framework.....	8
Calvin's Scriptural 'evidence' for his Supralapsarianism	8
The two divergent paths of the Reformation.....	9
Doctrines taken in isolation are never complete	9
Annotations	11
The Author	11
Impressum	12

Providence and Predestination in the Call of the Gospel

George M. Ella

Our gospel is not partitioned

Nowadays, there is a trend away from the philosophical over-systematising of theology typified by the later Puritans and a return to the more comprehensive overviews of our early Reformers. Though such Puritan systematic theologians were godly men, they tended to use the academic approach of their age built on scholastic traditions, including the didactics and logic of Aristotle and Peter Ramus, believing that true doctrinal analysis consisted in a series of successive dichotomies. William Cowper compares them to butchers dressing poultry. They pluck the feathers, dress the meat, discard the giblets and the beautiful bird disappears. The weakness of these systematic theologies is that they lose the comprehensiveness of the gospel in the mass of separate logical deductions and doctrines which really belong together such as creation and redemption, law and grace, justification and sanctification, and God's mercy and justice. The individual entities are presented as absolutes in themselves which cannot be reconciled with one another. This has misled one

party of modern Reformed evangelicals, under the guise of preaching 'a free offer to all', to emphasise imagined tensions and paradoxes in the Godhead and Scripture, so taking their first steps into Antitrinitarianism. These hirelings even condemn those who see no disunity and antonyms in the work of Christ in the gospel as 'false shepherds' and claim that they find their doctrines in Calvin's *Institutes*. Here they are in great danger of using their interpretations of the *Institutes* as a substitute for the Word of God. Calvin's *Institutes* was a didactic compilation of the views of contemporary Reformers, using the *loci*, layout, themes and often verbatim words of Luther, Melancthon, Zwingli, Bucer and Bullinger in order to provide a textbook of topical theology. The radically different views of Calvin's mentors are thus reflected in his anthology. However, instead of viewing this work as an ecumenical manual of theology, expressing at times conflicting views, modern so-called Calvinists either have come to the conclusion that Calvin was a tensionist and dealer in antonyms or have selected that part of the *Institutes* which serves them best and built their

theology around it. Thus we have Louis Berkoﬀ regarding Calvin as a Supralapsarian, which is the same nowadays as calling him a Hyper-Calvinist; Paul Helm sees God as sometimes appearing in a Supralapsarian guise and sometimes as a Sublapsarian; the Banner of Truth look on God as being in inner conflict between his wills and his desires; R.T. Kendall views Calvin as a modiﬂed Universalist; Allan Clifford claims Calvin was an Amyraldian; and Eva-Maria Faber depicts Calvin as teaching a conditional predestination. All these views are reﬂected in the component parts of the *Institutes*. This is no surprise, but again, this is no substitute for the unity of truth found in Scripture.

Our early Continental and English Reformers did not speak of contradictory wills in the Godhead and rejected the notion of a Bible burdened with opposite ideas. They believed in the immutability of God and the unity of God’s Holy Word. Henry Bullinger (1504–1575), Calvin’s mentor and friend, was one of these pan-Biblicists who presented the doctrines of grace in their unity and not in their imagined diversity. He is thus able to help modern believers see through the maze of doubts concerning Scriptures and the Being of God sown by modern so-called Evangelicals who dichotomise and systematise their God and His Word so that they are left with William Cowper’s dead duck. In this study, I would like to point out the unity in God’s plan of providence and predestination which is causing our modern Free Offer, Com-

mon Grace and Duty Faith enthusiasts to pervert the gospel as they invariably base their gospel on a doctrine of providence and predestination separate from each other which provides them with proof of their god of divided wills.

The general good of God shown in providence

Bullinger’s sermon in Decades¹ IV:4 *That God is the Creator of all things, and governeth all things by His Providence: Where mention is also made of the good-will of God to usward, and of predestination* looks at the reason for God creating the earth and furnituring² it as the realm of man’s stewardship under God’s dominion. He sees the providence of God as centred in his general good will to His creation and to man, whom He has placed as steward over the world. Though man is earth’s administrator, God is earth’s Governor and He has given man strict, though benevolent, rules as to how his stewardship should proceed. All are therefore obliged to trust in God’s benevolence and just government in providence. Whoever appeals merely to God’s providence in the form of benevolence for his gospel and excludes His providence in the form of justice preaches a false gospel. Bullinger thus states:

“We content ourselves in the only word of God; and do therefore simply believe and teach, that God by his providence doth govern all things, and that, too,

according to his own will, just judgment and comely order, by means just and equal: which means whosoever despiseth, and maketh his boast only on the bare name of God's providence, it cannot be that he should rightly understand the effect of God's providence."²³

Bullinger's lesson for today's evangelists

Here Bullinger has a word to say concerning two extremes in evangelism. On the one hand, we have those evangelists and preachers who believe they are motivated to offer salvation on the basis of a benign providence alone and on the other hand those who equally erroneously leave out God's purposes, government and justice in placing man on the earth in their doctrine of the eternal decrees regarding predestination and election. It is, according to Bullinger, erroneous to work out one's gospel of salvation without taking into account man's pre-fallen duties in a benevolent creation and how he failed them. It is equally erroneous to conceive of a gospel of salvation without respect to God's just government of creation and how man was damned because of his misuse of these duties. Bullinger believed that Calvin was in danger of forgetting this Biblical view of God in providence and creation in his doctrine of predestination. To Bullinger, the very idea that God would reprobate a man to hell irrespective of his failure as God's steward and irrespective of God's governing jus-

tice in creation was unthinkable. Furthermore, he saw election as stemming from the elect's union with Christ and His vicarious work for them so that any doctrine of election based on the mere *a priori* idea that God can do arbitrarily as He likes is ignoring the Scriptural doctrine of election. This tells us not what God *may do* if He likes, which is beyond our comprehension, but what God *has done* for His elect in Christ. There is thus no antinomy between God's providence and God's justice and any doctrine of predestination and election must be centred in God's original plan for mankind as a just steward and his restoration to a higher Eden in Christ.

Another serious error, which Bullinger confronts, is the old idea that a benign providence can lead sinful man directly to God. For Bullinger, this is a futile faith because providence, simply because it is a just providence, brings with it both curses and blessings. Thus, though modern evangelists lay great emphasis on stressing that God's providence in nature, which they often call 'Common Grace', shows sinners that God has provided for their salvation, they omit to tell us, like Paul in Romans 1–2, that God's providence leaves all men accursed because they have sinned against the just providence of God. Thus a gospel that is not based on a true understanding of creation and the Fall is a false gospel which goes against providential justice.

Preserving the balance between two extremes

As interpretations of the doctrine of providence and predestination, like nowadays, were the cause of much strife in the sixteenth century, leading to the extremes of the so-called ‘Hyper’- and ‘Moderate’ Calvinists, it will be instructive to compare Bullinger’s balanced views on the subject with those of Calvin whom both ‘Hypers’ and ‘Moderates’ claim is their master.

There is a clear difference between Bullinger’s view of Adam’s special case as a man created upright and who fell and begot fallen offspring and Calvin’s teaching that Adam, though created initially upright, had nevertheless a sinful, deadly virus placed in him at creation, waiting to break out at God’s appointed time. Calvin tells us in his *The Secret Providence of God*, “From all that has been said, we can at once gather how vain and fluctuating is that flimsy defence of the Divine justice which desires to make it appear that the evil things that are done, are so done, not by the will of God, but by His permission only.”²⁴ Not so Bullinger. The doctrine of predestination for Bullinger is a saving doctrine and thus applicable to men in a fallen state. To be elect is not through a direct belief in God’s Person. No man can attain to such a belief. It is a belief in the Lord Jesus Christ, the only way, the truth and the life. Thus one of Bullinger’s favourite evangelistic texts was Philippians 2:12–13; i.e, those who work for their salvation are those

in whom God is working and drawing to Christ. In Calvin’s pamphlets on predestination against Pighius and in his *Articles concerning Predestination* as also in his *Institutes*, III:XXIII:7 Calvin teaches a direct election to either salvation or reprobation prior to and irrespective of the sinner’s relationship to Christ in eternity, irrespective of his union with Christ and the work of Christ and without regards to the covenant of grace between God and mankind. But Christ is the cause of salvation, not merely the result of it.

Providence and predestination go hand in hand

Bullinger does not teach, however, that predestination to salvation has no parallels with providence. Providence is God working out his purpose from eternity in a world whose time-flux is constantly before Him from the beginning to the end. He has fore-appointed who are to be saved and who are to be condemned, but the end of that fore-appointment is Christ, who is the Saviour of those who are fore-appointed to salvation. Therefore God’s predestination or fore-appointment can only be known in Christ and it is futile to speak of a predestination apart from Christ. Indeed, it is futile to speak of either providence or predestination in Christ without seeing the one in relation to the other. The one condemns and the other justifies. Bullinger continues:

“The end of predestination, or fore-appointment, is Christ, the Son of God the Father. For God hath ordained and decreed to save all, how many soever have communion and fellowship with Christ, his only-begotten Son; and to destroy or condemn all, how many soever have no part in the communion or fellowship of Christ, his only Son. Now the faithful verily have fellowship with Christ, and the unfaithful are strangers from Christ. For Paul in his Epistle to the Ephesians saith: ‘God hath chosen us in Christ, before the foundations of the world were laid, that we should be holy and without blame before him through love: who hath predestinate us into his sons through Jesus Christ into himself, according to the good pleasure of his will; that the glory of his grace may be praised, wherewith he is pleased with us in his beloved.’ Lo, God hath chosen us; and he hath chosen us before the foundations of the world were laid; yea, he hath chosen us, that we should be without blame, that is, to be heirs of eternal life: howbeit, in Christ, by and through Christ hath he chosen us. And yet again more plainer: he hath ‘predestinate us’, saith he, ‘to adopt us into his sons’, but by Christ; and that too hath he done freely, to the intent that to his divine grace glory might be given. Therefore whosoever are in Christ are chosen and elected: for John the apostle saith: ‘Whoso hath the Son hath life; whoso hath not the Son of God, hath not life.’ With the doctrine of the apostles agreeth that also of the gospel. For in the gospel the Lord saith: ‘This is the will of him

that sent me, the Father; that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth in him, should have everlasting life: and I will raise him up in the last day.’ Lo. This is the will or eternal decree of God, saith he, that in the Son by faith we should be saved. Again, on the contrary part, touching those that are predestinate to death, the Lord saith: ‘He that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men have loved darkness more than light.’ Therefore, if thou ask me whether thou art elected to life, or predestinate to death; that is, whether thou art of the number of them that are to be damned, or that are to be saved; I answer simply out of the scripture, both of the evangelists and the apostles: If thou hast communion or fellowship with Christ, thou art predestinate to life, and thou art of the number of the elect and chosen: but if thou be a stranger from Christ, howsoever otherwise thou seem to flourish in virtues, thou art predestinate to death, and foreknownedged, as they say, to damnation. Higher and deeper I will not creep into the seat of God’s counsel.

And here I rehearse again the former testimonies of scripture: ‘God hath predestinate us, to adopt us into his sons through Jesus Christ. This is the will of God, that whoso believeth in the Son should live; and whose believeth not should die.’ Faith therefore is a most assured sign that thou art elected; and

whiles thou art called to the communion of Christ, and art taught faith, the most loving God declareth towards thee his election and good-will.”⁵

Bullinger then goes on to comfort those who have been frightened away from the gospel by metaphysical speculations concerning a God who elects some and reprobates others without regress to a Saviour who calls not the righteous but sinners to repentance. Bullinger teaches that no one has cause to despair if they seek Christ but do not find a ripe and mature faith in themselves. Those who hear Christ’s voice calling them to salvation will be saved but the call of Christ can be likened to the Scriptures (Mark 4). “Of her own accord doth the earth bring forth fruit; first the blade, then the ear, and afterwards the full corn in the ear.” So faith often comes little by little as we pray, “I believe Lord; help mine unbelief,” and as we follow the Scriptural advice, “Ask and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you.”

Seeing predestination within the full gospel framework

Thus Bullinger preaches election and predestination Biblically in the full framework of the whole gospel. This is where it belongs, and from here it should never be isolated. On the other hand, instead of merging the doctrines of predestination and providence

together and centering them in Christ, Calvin, in the works mentioned, separates predestination from the rest of the gospel and subordinates everything else to it, including God’s saving covenant with man. He obviously does this because he cannot envisage his sovereign God bending down and entering into any dialogue or agreement with man or interaction with him. This was no problem for Bullinger, who emphasised that God’s providence, the covenant and Christ’s priestly work were all bilateral communicatory channels of God’s grace.

Calvin’s Scriptural ‘evidence’ for his Supralapsarianism

Thus when one looks at Bullinger on providence and predestination, it is all the story of God’s patience with man but Calvin’s providence shows an arbitrary, dual-natured God and Calvin’s one refrain is thus the mind-breaking hypothesis that though God is allegedly not the author of evil, He yet decrees, ordains and directs it and, “Those things which are vainly or unrighteously done by man, are rightly and righteously the works of God.” Calvin here adds that if such sentiments seem paradoxical or self-contradictory, two Scripture references will prove him right. However, Calvin’s use of Scripture here, is most questionable. He provides Proverbs 16:33 “The lot is cast into the lap, but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord.” Taking the

first and obvious meaning as being the safest, this text is saying that God overrules in all things, in spite of man's foolishness. Here, there is a great distinction between man's foolishness in casting the lot and God's wisdom in overruling. It would be blasphemy to say that God's wisdom overrules over the foolishness He instills in man, a foolishness that comes from God. Calvin's next text is Deuteronomy 19:5 which says that if a branch falls from a tree or an axe slips from someone's hand and kills a person, this is because God willed that the man be killed. This valid argument is a far cry from concluding from it that man as a sinful agent is a product of God's will. Sin is a rebellion against God and not God's rebellion against His own nature. Calvin goes on to argue that God can make the wicked mad if it is in His purpose. Few Christians would deny this. But it is a far cry from this to say that God made righteous Adam mad because God wanted Adam to fall, which is what Calvin is getting at all the time.⁶

The two divergent paths of the Reformation

Sadly, the doctrine of predestination was to divide the still young Reformed Church. Two positions quickly formed. The first was the argument from revelation and experience based on the entire ways of God with man and does not separate predestination from adoption, salvation, justification, sanctification

and glorification. Instead of separating the gospel's doctrines and the commands of the Great Commission, they are synthesised and placed in the comprehensive unity of thought to which they belong. This was Bullinger's standpoint and this was also the view of John Hooper and the majority of the English Reformers who had sat at Bullinger's feet. The second view was based on a logical sequence deriving from a subjective view of God's absolute sovereignty, greatness, honour and majesty as such. It was strictly analytical but also strictly theoretical. This was the view of Bartholomew Traheron who had been a pupil of Bullinger's but was introduced by him to Calvin from whom he gained the impression that he was a Hyper-Calvinist of the most fatalistic kind.

Doctrines taken in isolation are never complete

Taken in isolation, doctrines can never be complete. Thus, whereas Bullinger could not contemplate predestination outside of creation, the fall, the mission of Christ and the salvation of the elect, Calvin, from time to time, put his doctrine of predestination into what he believed was a strictly logical, analytical and a *priori* mould. In Calvin's doctrine, given that his commentaries and sermons occasionally disagree with his *Institutes* on this issue, he can ignore man, and especially his sin, fully and see God merely picking out those whom He wished to save and those whom He

wished to reject. Bullinger never viewed God's decrees in isolation from the way God chose to effect them, namely in the Person and Work of Christ. It is in Him and the grace given in salvation which reveals God's saving and electing decrees to man and it is through God-given faith in Christ that election is made known to him. We are never called to believe in decrees for salvation but to believe in Him who fulfils God's decrees, the Lord Jesus Christ. Furthermore, as Calvin leaves the freedom God gave to Adam completely out of his predestination story, one is led to believe that Adam was really innocent of the fall because God willed, ordained and decreed him to sin. The poor man had no choice! Thus, in this Supralapsarian system, man by nature was never upright, and this nature never fell in deciding to disobey God but God put disobedience from the start into his very nature. Thus Calvin can claim that Adam's ordained purpose in life was to sin. Complaining of those who believed that though God permitted Adam to sin, He did not make Him sin, Calvin says:

“They deny that it is ever said in distinct terms, God decreed that Adam should perish by his revolt. As if the same God, who is declared in Scripture to do what ever He pleases, could have made the noblest of his creatures without any special purpose. They say that, in accordance with free-will, he was to be the architect of his own fortune, that God had decreed nothing but

to treat him according to his desert. If this frigid fiction is received, where will be the omnipotence of God, by which, according to his secret counsel on which everything depends he rules over all?”

Then, turning to Adam's offspring in their fallen nature, Calvin concludes surprisingly that „It was not owing to nature that they all lost salvation by the fault of one parent.“⁷ Bullinger, on the other hand, argued that we must distinguish between what God permits in His mercy to happen and what He makes in His mercy out of it. Thus God can use man's fall to a greater rising in Christ. This does not mean that He decrees sin but it does mean that He decrees its healing.

Annotations

Anmerkungen

¹ Now available in two volumes from at a price far below the secondhand price of the Parker Society edition with introductory essays by G.M. Ella and Joel Beeke.

² Bullinger's phrase. The Reformer obviously compares Eden to a mansion as Christ did Heaven.

³ Parker Society, Book IV, p. 181.

⁴ Calvin's Calvinism, Sovereign Grace Union, p. 244.

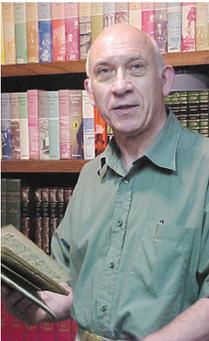
⁵ Decades, Book IV, pp. 188–189.

⁶ Calvin's Calvinism, pp. 232–237.

⁷ Institutes, Book III, Chapter XXIII, paragraph 7.

The Author

Über den Autor



Dr. George M. Ella was born in England in February 1939, and as a teenager moved to Sweden to continue his training as a Forestry Apprentice. After his conversion he returned to England to study theology. Whilst at the London Bible College, he attended the worship services of the well-known Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Upon graduation at London and Hull Universities, he worked as a school teacher and evangelist among the Lapps. For the past 32 years Dr. Ella has lived in Germany, near the Dutch border. Now retired, his career included work as a Senior Civil Servant, university examiner and writer of curricula

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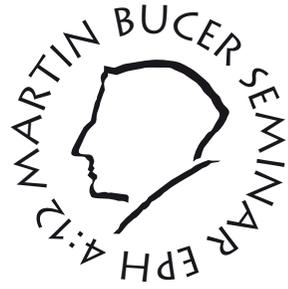
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Publisher:

Thomas Schirmmacher,
Prof. Dr. phil., Dr. theol., DD.

Editor: Ron Kubsch

Editorial Committee:

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