

Predestination in America

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I

FROM its first emergence in colonial Massachusetts, American civilization has been massively affected—indeed, irrevocably determined—by the Christian doctrine of predestination. As Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel *The Scarlet Letter* so brilliantly illustrates, American culture can never be understood unless one first takes into account the determining influence that Puritanism has had on the American psyche (which would include, of course, the rejection of Puritanism by so many in later generations). And Puritanism *means* predestination. For, as an offshoot of Calvinism, it defined itself against other Protestant denominations by its adoption of Calvin’s strict and unsparing version of predestination.

Hawthorne’s novel recounts the sad tale of a Puritan pastor in seventeenth-century Boston, the aptly named Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, who collapses at the end of the story from guilt at having committed adultery. On the day of his death, he preaches his most effective sermon ever on the predestining grace of God, to the great edification of his congregation. But then on leaving church he climbs a different pulpit, the town scaffold. There, attended by the adulterous Hester Prynne and their daughter Pearl, he confesses his sin to the townsfolk while exposing the Scarlet A psychosomatically seared into his chest by his gnawing guilt, and falls dead just after Pearl kisses him.

From the distance of two centuries, Hawthorne made his novel a mordant commentary on Dimmesdale’s theology of predestination as the source of his torment. As a “five-point Calvinist,” this clergyman subscribed to five core doctrines of strict Calvinism, usefully captured in the famous acronym TULIP: Total depravity, Unmerited election,

Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints. Because Dimmesdale had failed to persevere, he recognizes that, despite his zeal for winning Boston souls, he had never been numbered among the elect to begin with, and therefore Christ had never atoned for *his* sins, only for the elect. Doom was thus his foreordained end, decided in the eternal counsels of God, even before he had committed any sins, indeed before creation itself.

Among its other implications, the universally recognized status of *The Scarlet Letter* as a classic of American literature shows that we have long needed an account of the career of the doctrine of predestination in America, a gap now amply and brilliantly filled in Peter Thuesen's monograph *Predestination: The American Career of a Contentious Doctrine*.¹ Oddly, though, Thuesen does not mention Hawthorne's novel, although he makes good use of John Updike and Flannery O'Connor, both keen students of American Protestantism (and, not incidentally, of Hawthorne). At all events, Thuesen's monograph on its own terms almost reads like a novel, so fascinating is the history he tells.

The story of course begins with St. Augustine, whose battles against the Pelagian doctrine of man's moral self-sufficiency forced him to the logic of predestination, his account of which would prove so determinative for all of later Western theology. In his summary of Augustine's theology, however, Thuesen, I think, goes too far. For example, he holds—without any supporting evidence from Augustine's own writings—that the bishop of Hippo held to a theory of double predestination, that is, that God determined whom to redeem and whom to damn even before the fall of Adam. (The technical name for this position is called supralapsarianism, but that distinction did not arise until the Reformation.) More startling, Thuesen claims that Augustine thought that even some *baptized* infants would be damned if they were not already counted among the predestined elect, even if they died with baptismal grace on their souls before reaching the age of reason, a bizarre position that again the author does not back up with any passage from Augustine's pen.

Aside from these flaws, Thuesen has a sharp eye for recurring patterns in the history of this somber doctrine. In his telling, debates about predestination have a habit of beginning with a theologian's innocent-seeming prayer asking for God's help, which some contemporary will hear as implying that God might command something that the Christian could not fulfill using

¹ Peter J. Thuesen, *Predestination: The American Career of a Contentious Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). To avoid excessive clutter, page numbers for all quotations from this book will be given in the body of the text.

his own power of free will. At this point, the first theologian will feel called upon to defend the need for grace; and as the debate gets ever more elaborate, a full doctrine of predestination emerges fully developed.

Thus in book X of the *Confessions* Augustine prayed to God (uncontroversially enough, it would seem): "Give what you command, and command what you will."² When he read that prayer, however, the British lay monk Pelagius objected on the grounds that God would never command something antecedently incapable of being obeyed, and therefore our ability to fulfill divine commands must have remained intact, even after the sin of Adam.

Not so, said Augustine, and the ensuing debate would last the rest of his life, bequeathing to Western Christianity his doctrine of predestination, which says this: Since we are saved without any merit on our part but only by grace, then that grace must be freely given independently of merit, as St. Paul clearly teaches: "For it is by grace that you have been saved; through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph 2:8–9). Thus there is nothing we can really do to "earn" our salvation. Yet that same grace of election is simultaneously required in order to be able to obey the moral law, which remains a command quite apart from the grace given to fulfill it, as again Paul clearly teaches:

God "will give to each person according to what he has done" [Ps 62:12; Prov 24:12]. To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. (Rom 2:6–8).

And given the wide variance in the human race between those who strive to do good and those who throw themselves into evil deeds, God therefore not only foresaw but predetermined who would receive this grace gratuitously and who would not: "For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the stench of death; to the other, the fragrance of life" (2 Cor 2:15–16). For if God only foresaw moral conduct and *on that basis* chose his elect, then he would not only be choosing the elect based on

² Augustine, *Confessions*, bk. X, chap. 37: "da quod jubes et jube quod vis." This prayer of course is a direct outcome of Augustine's psychology of sin: "Where I am able not to sin, I don't want to avoid it; and where I want not to sin, I can't help but sin, and am miserable in both conditions" ("hic esse valeo nec volo, illic volo nec valeo, miser utrobique") (bk. X, chap. 40).

their merit but would also be determined by a future event, which Augustine held to be an impossibility. On the contrary, as Paul says: "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Rom 9:18).

So too with John Calvin, the same pattern occurs as with Augustine earlier: first an aside confessing utter reliance on grace, followed by contemporary objections, and finally leading to a full doctrine of predestination. As is well known, Calvin spoke of predestination only twice in the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and then only in passing. Inevitably, objections were raised about the fairness of God and the meaning of human free will, which prompted Calvin to expand on the matter in later editions until Calvinism and predestination became almost synonymous terms. After his death the controversy lived on (no surprise there), in the course of which one second-generation Calvinist, Jacob Arminius, attributed an independent power of man to accept or reject grace outside of the offer of that grace. His opponents saw this position as contradicting Augustine's view that the prayer for grace itself comes from grace, just as the decision to believe is itself the outcome of God's grace. The debate raged on and remained unresolved until the famous Synod of Dort in the Netherlands (1619), which insisted on what became known thereafter as the acronymic TULIP rule, "an appropriately Dutch flower" for this synod that met in Holland, Thuesen drolly notes.

To bring the story now to America, Jonathan Edwards, whom Thuesen rightly calls the last great theologian in the American Puritan tradition, preached a fiercely uncompromising version of predestination during the Great Awakening revival of 1734–1735, prompting one upset listener, the elderly Bernard Bartlett, to call Edwards "as great an instrument as the devil had on this side of hell to bring souls to hell," an accusation that Augustine also had to face from his fellow-bishop Julian of Eclanum because of Augustine's conclusion that infants who die before baptism will suffer in hellfire eternally, which Julian saw as the greatest weak spot in Augustine's theology, and subsequent history would prove him right.

Since the Bible teaches that Satan prowls the world "seeking whom he may devour" (1 Pet 5:8), so Julian reasoned, nothing would please the devil more than to get to keep all these dead babies for his own kingdom. Eternal destiny to hell in effect means, said the bishop of Eclanum, that God already concedes to Satan what has been predetermined to be his from the beginning, the very same conclusion of the dualist Manichaeans, who also left good and evil equipoised. Augustine had supposedly abandoned the Manichaeism of his youth, but, Julian claimed,

it lingered on in his theology of predestination and an infantile hell.³ Edwards, too, found himself caught in this same bind in his ever-more elaborate defense of predestination against Bartlett; for, in his ringing defense of the servility of human will and its need for God's predestined grace, Edwards, authentic son of Calvin that he was, spoke of predestination applying to infants no less than to adults.⁴

Although Calvinists did not have as strong a view on the efficacy of infant baptism as did Augustine, their Westminster Confession (1647) nonetheless spoke openly of elect infants (X.3), leaving open the question of their number. When it was conceded, in essential harmony with Augustine, that the number of elect infants was finite, one Arminian theologian with a taste for sarcasm charged these "hard-shell Calvinists" with advocating the eschatology of "Fried Baby." (Similarly, when Augustinians in the Middle Ages objected to the Thomist hypothesis of a painless limbo for unbaptized infants, Thomists in turn called these Augustinians *tortores infantium*, baby-torturers, an objection that has put all predestinarians in the Augustinian tradition in the acutest rhetorical bind.)

Such patterns, as we have seen, played themselves out on both continents, Europe and America. In Thuesen's account, though, two aspects of the debate on predestination hit Americans with special force: the suicidal torment the doctrine caused to some sensitive souls and the divisive effect it had on American denominationalism.

First of all, predestination in the Calvinist rubric often brought on genuine emotional distress in some parishioners' lives, so often in fact that the syndrome soon earned its own moniker: *tentatio praedestinationis*, the temptation to despair at one's future salvation (think Dimmesdale again). "Hell was, of course, a person's default destination under the Augustinian doctrine of original sin," Thuesen notes (61). Nor was this position uniquely Reformed, for Augustine was the common touchstone for both sides of the Reformation debate. Thus Catholic theologians like the medieval Thomas Aquinas and the counter-Reformation Jesuit Robert

³ On this point see further Paul Rhodes Eddy, "Can a leopard change its spots? Augustine and the crypto-Manichaeism question," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 62 (2009): 316–46.

⁴ Despite Edwards's reputation for fire-and-brimstone sermons, Michael Allen argues that Edwards was, at best, a cautious supralapsarian; see Michael Allen, "Jonathan Edwards and the lapsarian debate," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 62 (2009): 299–315. However, since Edwards clearly countenanced the idea of infant reprobation, and since infants can hardly be said to have any choice in their early death, the conclusion of supralapsarian logic seems unavoidable in Edwards, even if he was diffident in expressing it, given its essential grimness.

Cardinal Bellarmine freely admitted that the number of the saved would be few in comparison to the damned.

Not a very hopeful doctrine for anyone, to be sure. But Puritan divines seemed to have been especially concerned with the latent despair many of their flock drew from the doctrine. One not terribly helpful strategy would be to say, as one Puritan theologian actually did, that “[i]f among a thousand capital offenders, it were published that one of them should have a pardon, would not everyone hope to be the man?”⁵ Obviously that ploy can only offer the hope of desperation. Anyone with the slightest sense of unworthiness, or even a delicate conscience, would easily assume he belonged among the vast number of the reprobate.

So it could hardly have come as much of a surprise when Increase Mather (the Puritan clergyman involved in the Salem witch trials) announced, in a sermon specifically devoted to his congregation’s collective temptation to suicide, that “within the space of but five weeks, there had been five self-murders” in his own congregation.⁶ Thus a doctrine that Calvin had meant to give hope to his persecuted followers in fact became the occasion for their despair.

This ironic outcome brings up the second feature of the doctrine of predestination that played such a prominent role in the history of American Protestantism: its inherent divisiveness *inside* congregations. Usually those denominations that took their identity from their *rejection* of the TULIP rule, such as John Wesley’s Methodism, never felt tempted to return to a strict Calvinist understanding of predestination. Wesley, for example, when he arrived in the American colonies, excised fifteen of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England in which he had been raised that treated of justification by faith alone and the condemnation of works-righteousness. Obviously, a Methodist stress on the need for good works must equally imply a robust free will, hence Wesley’s hostility to Calvinism. As Susanna Wesley wrote to her brother John in 1725: “The doctrine of predestination, as maintained by the rigid Calvinists, is very shocking and ought utterly to be abhorred, because it charges the most holy God with being the author of sin.”⁷

But whenever a congregation or denomination *adopted* either five-point Calvinism or its equivalent, such a doctrinal subscription to strict predesti-

⁵ Samuel Willard, *Compleat Body of Divinity in Two Hundred and Fifty Expository Lectures on the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism* (Boston, 1726), 248–49; cited in Thuesen, *Predestination*, 60.

⁶ Increase Mather, *A Call to the Tempted: A Sermon on the Horrid Crime of Self-Murder* (Boston, 1724), 1; cited in Thuesen, *Predestination*, 65.

⁷ Cited in Thuesen, *Predestination*, 73.

nationism invariably served as a catalyst for internal dissent from the doctrine—and a breakup of that denomination into another church formation. The reason why predestination proved so perennially discordant stems, not surprisingly, from the very *tentatio praedestinationis* that so dominated the lives of the devout in Puritan New England, as Thuesen explains here:

First, [anxiety over one's predestined salvation] entailed something of a Catch-22. If you were not anxious about your eternal election, you were obviously not elect. But continuous (or at least cyclical) anxiety about election denied you the very comfort that predestination was supposed to bring. Comfort, in other words, could be notoriously elusive in this system. Predestinarian anxiety . . . all too easily passed from salutary struggle to genuine distress. The second problem . . . was its sheer intensity. . . . Not everyone was a spiritual marathon runner like Edwards or an accomplished soliloquist like Hamlet. Many Americans, including many Puritan laypeople, were happy simply muddling through. They looked to religion for the sort of automatic and tangible comforts that medieval laypeople once sought in merely watching the Mass. But such a view of the sacrament was the very thing Puritan clerics were bent on dispelling. (69)

Such paradoxes abound in the world where predestination is seen as operative, paradoxical both on its own doctrinal terms and in its historical effects on Christianity. After all, the doctrine must affirm human free will, lest predestination turn into outright fatalism or philosophical determinism. Yet the doctrine must also assume as one of its basic premises the servility of the will and its inability to carry out God's commands without efficacious grace. The juxtaposition of these two seemingly irreconcilable principles can lead to the impression that while one is free to choose evil (and thus responsible before the bars of justice for that evil), yet whatever good one does is not one's own doing but must be credited to God—in other words, “damned if you do [evil], damned if you don't [have grace].” Such a position prompted much predictable scoffing both from anti-Calvinist Christians and from those Enlightened skeptics who scorned the Christian religion in its entirety. To believe in predestination while still maintaining that reprobates sin of their own accord, one sociologist quips, “is almost like saying that a man who finds himself falling from a tree will decide on the way down that this is what he really planned to do anyway.”⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein says something similar in his posthumously published notebooks:

⁸ Kai T. Erikson, *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: Wiley, 1966), 191.

[The Calvinist axiom] “Out of his goodness he has chosen them and he will punish you” makes no sense. The two halves of the proposition belong to different ways of looking at things. The second is ethical, the first not. And taken together with the first, the second is absurd.⁹

The Catholic poet Alexander Pope said something similar in his 1734 poem *Essay on Man*:

But still this world (so fitted for the knave)
 Contents us not. A better shall we have?
 A kingdom of the Just then let it be:
 But first consider how those Just agree.
 The good must merit God’s peculiar care!
 But who but God can tell us who they are?
 One thinks, on Calvin Heaven’s own spirit fell,
 Another deems him instrument of hell;
 If Calvin feel Heaven’s blessing, or its rod,
 This cries there is, and that, there is no God.
 What shocks one part will edify the rest,
 Nor with one system can they all be blest.¹⁰

These painful implications are part of what should properly be called the dogmatic paradox of predestination. But there are other, more historical paradoxes too. For example, predestination as a doctrine has been on the defensive in America from its first enunciation in Edwards’s own time, through the Declaration of Independence (hardly a Calvinist document with its solemn claim that all men are created equal), and down to the present day. Yet the only two American theologians who can plausibly claim first rank with the theologians of Europe (in any age) are Jonathan Edwards and Reinhold Niebuhr, both Augustinians (albeit each in his own fashion of course). Niebuhr even managed to make Augustine’s thought sound sensible to, of all people, secularists. (One recalls here the informal club called “Atheists for Niebuhr.”)

On the other hand, and to compound the paradoxes, a convincing case can be made that without Calvinism there would be no Declaration of Independence. True, Thomas Jefferson wrote to his close friend John

⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 81e: “‘Er hat sie, in seiner Güte, erwählt und er wird Dich strafen’ hat ja keinen Sinn. Die beiden Hälften gehören zu verschiedenen Betrachtungen. Die zweite Hälfte ist ethisch und die erste ist es nicht. Und mit der ersten zusammen ist die zweite absurd” (81).

¹⁰ Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*, Epistle IV.5 in Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man and Other Poems*, ed. Stanley Appelbaum (New York: Dover, 1994), 72–73.

Adams decrying Calvin as the real atheist: "If ever man worshipped a false god, he did. The being described in his five points is not the God whom you and I acknowledge and adore, the Creator and benevolent governor of the world; but a demon of malignant spirit." Adams clearly agreed, for he expressed the same sentiment to his son, John Quincy Adams: "The Calvinist and the Atheists differ in nothing but this; the former believe in eternal misery; the latter not."¹¹

Nonetheless, the Calvinist version of predestination had a role (an ironic one, to be sure) in promoting democracy because, unlike Augustine's version, it downplayed the efficacy and meaning of the sacraments, thereby undermining an ordained hierarchy as well. This democracy-promoting effect can be seen in the negative case, in those who opposed Calvinist doctrine, as Thuesen ably explains here:

Despite their rhetoric about human freedom, Anglicans at their core believed in absolute obedience to God, king, lords, and bishops—a traditional hierarchy they regarded as the only divinely instituted safeguard of social stability. The seventeenth-century Puritan revolution had upset that order and had revived a strong predestinarianism that theoretically transcended all class distinctions. As historian John Woolverton has aptly put it, "anyone could call himself God's chosen vessel and persevere in endless and stubborn independence." From an Anglican perspective, an overemphasis on predestination threatened to undermine the laity's patriotic allegiance to the royal heads of state and church. (79–80)

Another historical paradox comes from Max Weber's famous thesis in his controversial book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1903), which claimed that Puritan anxiety over salvation and its correlative denial of works-righteousness found relief *through* hard work. Even on its own terms, this thesis is, in the words of one critic, "just as hard to demolish . . . as to substantiate."¹² Then there are counterexamples, such as Mormonism, which denies the doctrine of original sin entirely, to no apparent detriment to Mormons' industriousness.

Yet there are counterexamples to the counterexamples. Take the case of Abraham Lincoln, whose parents were raised in a hard-shell sect (called

¹¹ Thomas Jefferson, letter to John Adams, 11 April 1823, and John Adams, letter to John Quincy Adams, 6 June 1816, in *The Founders on Religion: A Book of Quotations*, ed. James H. Hutson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 117; cited in Thuesen, *Predestination*, 106.

¹² Alastair Hamilton, "Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Max Weber*, ed. Stephen Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 169.

Primitive Baptists) so extreme that it denied the efficacy of revivals or any missionary effort whatever, since altar calls and even conversions presuppose a response on the part of the potential convert. Although Lincoln never joined a church himself, based on his early realization of discrepancies in the Bible (something that caused considerable difficulties for him at the outset of his political career), “his early exposure to ‘hard-shell’ Calvinism contributed to his lifelong belief in fate and necessity,” Thuesen notes (197). Yet such a worldview, so redolent of the fatalism of Marcus Aurelius, did nothing to keep him from vigorously prosecuting the Civil War, at least to the extent that his feckless generals would allow.

Lincoln’s own unchurched status points out another feature of the predestinarian debate in America: strict views on predestination by no means go hand in hand with fundamentalism, as can be seen in Thuesen’s penultimate chapter on the Southern Baptist Convention. In 1979 the Convention elected an inerrantist party to its governing board, which resulted in the ouster of about eighty percent of the faculty at the Convention’s six seminaries, all of whom belonged to the so-called moderate wing. Fascinatingly, however, such a victory of the inerrantist party only exposed how a simple appeal to Scripture could not resolve the debate over predestination, resulting in what Thuesen calls a pyrrhic victory for the fundamentalists: “In making the SBC safe for inerrancy, conservatives exposed seemingly irreconcilable differences within their own ranks. The new struggle was not between fundamentalists and moderates (as the two parties of 1979 have been styled) but between an outspoken cadre of five-point Calvinists and their equally resolute non-Calvinist opponents” (201).

This heated intra-Baptist debate played itself out in Dallas between the pastors of two megachurches, W. A. Criswell and John R. Rice. Upon assuming the pastorate at the First Baptist Church of Dallas in 1944, Criswell announced he would preach through the entire Bible, a project that took seventeen years. When he got to the verse in which God proclaims through Isaiah “I will do all my pleasure” (Is 46:11), Criswell declared: “That’s what you call predestination. That’s Calvinism. And I am a Calvinist.” Take away predestination, he said, and “there would be nothing left of the Bible.”¹³

Rice, though, was having none of that. Most well known for his fiercely anti-secular and anti-ecumenical newsletter *Sword of the Lord*, Rice also penned a less famous work with the openly defiant title *Predestined for Hell? No!*—in which he compared five-point Calvinism to the fatalism he claimed was the essence of Islam. Above all, he said, Calvin-

¹³ Cited in Thuesen, *Predestination*, 206. Criswell’s sermons are available online at the Criswell Sermon Library, www.wacriswell.org.

ists were wrong in teaching God's absolute sovereignty: "God is love and love limits absolute sovereignty."¹⁴ Thus God's saving promises in the Bible actually prevented God from preemptively damning sinners to hell apart from any consideration of their conduct. Rice even notoriously criticized Billy Graham in 1957, mostly because of his nondenominational altar-calls (pure syncretistic modernism to Rice) but also because Graham had been reared in a strict Calvinist Presbyterian church before becoming a Southern Baptist, and he, Rice claimed, still harbored crypto-predestinarian views. The charge "could not have been more ironic," Thuesen notes, since "Graham was in reality the forerunner of contemporary figures such as Rick Warren, for whom doctrinal specificity gets in the way of winning souls for Christ" (203).

This fudging infuriates the hard core on either side, abetted by internet blogsites and chatrooms with accusations from the anti-predestinarians of a "Calvinist jihad" being waged by the followers of Criswell, to which the hard-shell Calvinists reply with accusations of a relapse into works-righteousness in the soft-shell party. To which Thuesen adds this outsider's friendly observation: "One might fault Rick Warren for doctrinal fuzziness but one can hardly blame him for steering clear of such poisonous rhetoric" (216).

Not that Warren's own theology is without its problems. Thuesen concludes his book with an account of a visit he paid (as an historian, not as a prospective convert) to Warren's Saddleback Church in northern California, where he had the opportunity to listen to one of Warren's sermons. "As I listened to his sermon, though," observes Thuesen, "I could not shake the feeling that I was looking at Jonathan Edwards in the guise of a huggable, high school coach of a man" (211).

Although he was denied an interview with Warren himself, Thuesen cannot help noting that Warren's hugely popular book *The Purpose-Driven Life* (which has by now sold over 30 million copies) relies on key predestinarian themes. Indeed the epigram on the dedication page comes from one of only six verses in the New Testament that uses the verb usually translated "predestinate" or "predestine," all, not surprisingly, from Paul: "In him [Christ] we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Eph 1:11). Tellingly, though, Warren used a paraphrase translation¹⁵ which fudges the issue by speaking only of God's "designs on us."

¹⁴ John R. Rice, *Predestined to Hell? No!* (Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord, 1958), 81; cited in Thuesen, *Predestination*, 202.

¹⁵ Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress; New Testament edition, 1997).

But the message inside Warren's book certainly sounds predestinarian enough: "Nothing in your life is arbitrary," Warren says. "God prescribed every single detail of your body. He deliberately chose your race, your hair, and every other feature."¹⁶ Taken in isolation, these passages (and others like them) reflect the wider Christian doctrine of God's providence (not to be isomorphically identified, strictly speaking, with divine predestination). But in a gloss on the most famous proof text for predestination in the whole New Testament, Romans 8:29 ("For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son"), Warren says that the promise of salvation is "only for God's children,"¹⁷ which seems to get as close to classical predestinarian doctrine as he is willing to go.

Lacking a chance to interview Warren himself, Thuesen did manage to interview another pastor at Saddleback, Tom Holladay, Warren's brother-in-law. When pressed on where Saddleback stood in the ongoing conflict in the SBC (Warren's church is Southern Baptist, although it does not advertise itself as such), Holladay said this:

When Calvinism gets to that point where I don't have this urge to share my faith with somebody else, that's clearly outside the bounds of the Bible" [Holladay said]. . . . He added that Saddleback's pastors were in general agreement that "both Arminianism and Calvinism are true [he continued]. It's not that truth is in the middle. They just both have truth in them. . . . God's foreknowledge and election do not prohibit our choice, nor does our choice inhibit God's election. Now I know that's doublespeak. I've wrestled with it for years and years. But to me that's the best way to honor the choice that God has given us while we live on this earth. (213–14)

Thuesen is a historian, and his method is rigorously descriptive, although he concludes the book with the wider (and specifically theological) claim that excessive obsession with predestination robs Christianity of its deeply mysterious revelation when it tries to figure out God's ultimate intentions for the world; and he quotes both Martin Luther and Flannery O'Connor in support of this contention. In a remark from his *Table-Talk* Luther said: "I have been baptized. I believe in Jesus Christ. I have received the sacraments. What do I care if I have been predestined or not?" And Thuesen interprets O'Connor's short story "Parker's Back" as an allegory on the folly of seeking assurance of one's salvation in God's

¹⁶ Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 22–23.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 196.

foreordained decrees. The story recounts the attempts of one O. E. Parker to please his Puritan wife by having a stern-looking image of Christ tattooed on his back. When he finally reveals the tattoo to his wife, she beats him senseless with a broom handle, "leaving him broken, like the scourged Christ of the passion," says Thuesen (218). As O'Connor herself said in a letter written in 1959, "Dogma is the guardian of mystery. The doctrines are spiritually significant in ways that we cannot fathom."¹⁸

II

Thuesen's book of course will be of interest not just to historians of American religion but to theologians, on account of which I feel bound to make a few remarks as a member of that latter guild. For Christian theology has in fact made noticeable strides, from both the Catholic and Protestant side, to move away from the presuppositions that led both to Augustine's infantile hell and to the Puritans' inability to offer true hope and consolation in their reliance on five-point Calvinism.

On the Catholic side, the key word missing from the debate on predestination from Augustine up to today is *solidarity*. In his book *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Mankind*, the Jesuit theologian Henri de Lubac shows how deep go the roots of the concept of solidarity in both the Bible and in patristic literature. He opens this influential, indeed epochal, book with an approving citation from a French author who insists, "My joy will not be lasting unless it is the joy of all."¹⁹

As presumably everyone knows, Pope Benedict XVI draws on de Lubac's book in his 2007 encyclical *Spe Salvi* and makes his own its conclusion: "Against this [individualism], drawing upon the vast range of patristic theology, de Lubac was able to demonstrate that salvation has always been considered a 'social' reality" (§14). Which of course prompts the inevitable question from the pope: "How could the idea have developed that Jesus' message is narrowly individualistic and aimed only at each person singly?" (§16) A large portion of the encyclical is devoted to a genealogical account of this declension from solidarity to individualism, but in terms of predestination the genealogy is not as important as

¹⁸ Flannery O'Connor, letter to Cecil Dawkins, 23 December 1959, in *The Habit of Being: The Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 365.

¹⁹ Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Mankind*, forward by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard and Sister Elizabeth Englund, O.C.D. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 13, quoting Jean Giono, *Les vrais richesses*.

the dogmatic conclusion reached by this magisterial document: "No one lives alone. No one sins alone. No one is saved alone" (§48).²⁰

From this conclusion comes the correlate entailment (enunciated two paragraphs earlier), one that marks the final official, magisterial break with Augustine's thesis of the *massa damnata*: "For the great majority of people—we may suppose—there remains in the depths of their being an ultimate interior openness to truth, to love, to God" (§46). True, for Benedict these depths are occluded with the dross of sin, which must first be purged and burned away, by a fire which he suggests is Christ himself:

Some recent theologians are of the opinion that the fire which both burns and saves is Christ himself, the Judge and Savior. The encounter with him is the decisive act of judgment. Before his gaze all falsehood melts away. This encounter with him, as it burns us, transforms and frees us, allowing us to become truly ourselves. All that we build during our lives can prove to be mere straw, pure bluster, and it collapses. Yet in the pain of this encounter, when the impurity and sickness of our lives become evident to us, there lies salvation. His gaze, the touch of his heart, heals us through an undeniably painful transformation "as through fire." But it is a blessed pain, in which the holy power of his

²⁰ Ironically, there are abundant resources in Augustine's own thought that could have led him in that same direction, but for his polemic against the Pelagians: "Consider our species, our human race. . . . One man begot us to sin and to death, and yet as one race. . . . One man [Christ] came against one man [Adam]: against the one man who *scattered* came one who *gathered*. In the same way, against one man who killed came one man who made alive. For 'just as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive' [1 Cor 15:22]." St. Augustine, *Sermon 90.7*, in *The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, part 3: Sermons, vol. 3: *Sermons 51–94*, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991), 452; emphases added. Augustine even more strongly emphasizes Adam's representative role standing in for all humanity in his *Commentary on Psalm 94*: "Now Adam's name, as I have said more than once, means in Greek the whole world. For there are four letters in his name A, D, A, and M; and with the Greeks the four quarters of the world have these initial letters. . . . Adam is thus scattered throughout the globe. Set in one place, he fell and, as it were, now broken small, he has filled the whole world. But the Divine Mercy gathered up the fragments from every side, forged them in the fire of love and welded into one what had been broken. That was a work which this Artist knew how to do! Let no one therefore give way to despair! An immense task it was indeed! But think who the Artist was! He who remade [us] was himself the Maker. He who refashioned [us] was himself the Fashioner." Cited in Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Mankind*, 376. How ironic that Augustine's counsel not to despair later became the occasion for so much despair from the neglect of this motif of solidarity in Augustine's own thought!

love sears through us like a flame, enabling us to become totally ourselves and thus totally of God. (§47)²¹

In another recent work, his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, Benedict advances the idea, also advocated most famously by Hans Urs von Balthasar, that Christ can be that purging and saving fire precisely because he has first endured that same fire in his atoning love during his descent into hell.²² Drawing on

²¹ Benedict is of course no Origenist, anticipating an Eschaton in which all will be reconciled. That said, he seems to envision a kind of Bell's Curve operating before the end of time, with roughly equal (but small) numbers of souls going straight to heaven or, as the case may be, to hell, with the vast majority having some form of purgatory to endure: "With death, our life-choice becomes definitive—our life stands before the judge. Our choice, which in the course of an entire life takes on a certain shape, can have a variety of forms. There can be people who have totally destroyed their desire for truth and readiness to love, people for whom everything has become a lie, people who have lived for hatred and have suppressed all love within themselves. This is a terrifying thought, but alarming profiles of this type can be seen in certain figures of our own history. In such people all would be beyond remedy and the destruction of good would be irrevocable: this is what we mean by the word *Hell*. On the other hand there can be people who are utterly pure, completely permeated by God, and thus fully open to their neighbors—people for whom communion with God even now gives direction to their entire being and whose journey toward God only brings to fulfillment what they already are. Yet we know from experience that neither case is normal in human life. For *the great majority of people*—we may suppose—there remains in the depths of their being an ultimate interior openness to truth, to love, to God. In the concrete choices of life, however, it is covered over by ever new compromises with evil—much filth covers purity, but the thirst for purity remains and it still constantly re-emerges from all that is base and remains present in the soul. . . . [Thus] it is . . . evident that our salvation can take different forms, that some of what is built may be burned down, that in order to be saved we personally have to pass through 'fire' so as to become fully open to receiving God and able to take our place at the table of the eternal marriage-feast" (*Spe Salvi*, §46–47, emphasis added).

²² Ratzinger's debt to Balthasar's eschatology began early in his career, as can be seen in this review written in 1961, of two early volumes of Balthasar's *Explorations in Theology*: "In several places Balthasar expresses the opinion that the closed brackets of predestination, which had been firmly shut with Augustine, and by which he had set an absolute limit to the Church's capacity for carrying sinners to redemption, are today ever so gradually and slowly starting to open up again. Not of course that Balthasar, the great scholar and translator of Origen, wants to align himself with Origenism in the sense of a doctrine of inevitable universal redemption. He fully realizes the danger entailed in the sense of election, in whatever guise, and decisively rejects 'a certain exhilaration at feeling part of the elect of God, which is just as extreme as was the correlative Reformed despondency resulting from an obsession with guilt.' But he also teaches us even more clearly that what belongs to God we should leave to God and not fix the

a patristic motif that sees Jesus' descent into the River Jordan at his baptism as an anticipation of his descent into hell after his death, Benedict explains the saving effects of this descent to the underworld this way:

Jesus' Baptism, then, is understood as a repetition of the whole of history, which both recapitulates the past and anticipates the future. His entering into the sin of others is a descent into the "inferno." But he does not descend merely in the role of a spectator, as in Dante's *Inferno*. Rather, *he goes down in the role of one whose suffering-with-others is a transforming suffering that turns the underworld around, knocking down and flinging open the gates of the abyss*. His Baptism is a descent into the house of the evil one, combat with the "strong man" (cf. Lk 11:22) who holds men captive (and the truth is that we are all very much captive to powers that anonymously manipulate us!). Throughout all its history, the world is powerless to defeat the "strong man": he is overcome and bound by one yet stronger, who, because of his equality with God, can take upon himself all the sin of the world and then *suffers it through to the end—omitting nothing on the downward path into identity with the fallen*. This struggle is the "conversion" of being that brings it into a new condition, that prepares a new heaven and a new earth. Looked at from this angle, the sacrament of Baptism appears as the gift of participation in Jesus' world-transforming struggle in the conversion of life that took place in his descent and ascent.²³

This motif has long been a part of Joseph Ratzinger's theology: among its other implications, the doctrine of Christ's descent into hell *means* solidarity. As he said in his last book before becoming archbishop of

decision ahead of time in either direction—either toward the Origenist or the extreme Augustinian side. Above all he reminds us that when Holy Scripture narrates God's *historical* acts of reprobation and election—when, for example, it recounts God's election of Isaac over Ishmael, of Jacob over Esau, of Moses over Pharaoh, and finally of Israel as a whole—it is not speaking of eternal salvation and damnation but instead, and unambiguously, of God's historical dealings with mankind in world history and salvation-history." Joseph Ratzinger, "Christlicher Universalismus: Zum Aufsatzwerk Hans Urs v. Balthasars," *Hochland* 54 (1961): 68–76, here 72, my translation. The internal quotation comes from Balthasar's essay "Christian Universalism," *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 1: *The Word Made Flesh*, trans. A. V. Littledale with Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989): 241–54, here 250.

²³ Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 20, emphasis added. At a minimum, this passage undercuts the idea that baptism is of relevance to the individual alone but is in fact a plunge into the Body of Christ, his Church, as Paul so clearly teaches (Rom 6:3).

Munich, *Eschatology*, Christ becomes Judge of sinners by first enacting his solidarity with them in the realm of the dead:

While the real quality of evil and its consequences become quite palpable here, the question also arises . . . whether in this event we are not in touch with a divine response able to draw freedom precisely as freedom to itself. The answer lies hidden in Jesus' descent into Sheol, in the night of the soul which he suffered, a night which no one can observe except by entering this darkness in suffering faith. Thus, in the history of holiness which hagiology offers us, and notable in the course of recent centuries, in John of the Cross, in Carmelite piety in general, and in that of Thérèse of Lisieux in particular, "Hell" has taken on a completely new meaning and form. For the saints, "Hell" is not so much a threat to be hurled at other people but a challenge to oneself. It is a challenge to suffer in the dark night of faith, to experience communion with Christ in solidarity with his descent into the Night. One draws near to the Lord's radiance by sharing his darkness. One serves the salvation of the world by leaving one's own salvation behind for the sake of others.²⁴

This mention of Thérèse of Lisieux was no mere gesture in her direction by this future pope, for this too was a motif in her own writings. Indeed, there are passages in the writings of this most recently named Doctor of the Church which capture this theologoumenon of Christ's solidarity with sinners in the underworld with astonishing force. In one of the most remarkable and daring statements ever penned from the writings of the saints, Thérèse writes in her autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*:

One night, not knowing how to tell Jesus that I loved Him and how much I desired that He be everywhere loved and glorified, I was thinking with sorrow that He could never receive in hell a single act of love. So I told God that to please Him I would willingly consent to find myself plunged into hell, so that He might be eternally loved in that place of blasphemy.²⁵

The foregoing passages might seem to speak only to Catholics; or at least five-point Calvinists would probably find them unimpressive. After all, the

²⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988/2007), 217–18.

²⁵ Thérèse de Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, trans. Robert J. Edmonson (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006), 122. For those unsettled by this daring (but entirely *evangelical*) "folly," her generous gesture has ample biblical warrant: "For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, those of my own race, the people of Israel" (Rom 9:3–4a).

L of TULIP means *Limited* atonement, which would seem to undercut any appeal to solidarity, especially one made by a pope influenced by Balthasar or by a pious, bourgeois adolescent who had been raised in the hothouse atmosphere of nineteenth-century French Catholicism. But Protestant theology, too, has moved beyond Calvin, especially in that most famous Calvinist theologian of the twentieth century, Karl Barth.

Ironically, Barth is so Calvinist that he even affirms supralapsarianism, the doctrine that says God determined the outcome of salvation prior to Adam's sin, prior even to creation. But basing himself on Paul's line that "no matter how many promises God has made, they are Yes in Christ" (2 Cor 1:20), Barth sees *Christ* as the primal object of God's predestination. Again, his reinterpretation of supralapsarianism is based on Paul, who says that "all things were created through him and for him" (Col 1:16b). Giving these passages their proper due, Barth can then quite transform Calvin's (and, *a fortiori*, Augustine's) version of predestination:

The truth which must now occupy us, the truth of the doctrine of predestination, is first and last and in all circumstances the sum of the Gospel, no matter how it may be understood in detail, no matter what apparently contradictory aspects or moments it may present to us. . . . It is not a mixed message of joy and terror, salvation and damnation. Originally and finally it is not dialectical but non-dialectical. It does not proclaim in the same breath both good and evil, both help and destruction, both life and death. It does, of course, throw a shadow. We cannot overlook or ignore this aspect of the matter. In itself, however, it is light and not darkness. We cannot, therefore, speak of the latter aspect in the same breath. In any case, even under this aspect, the final word is never that of warning, of judgment, of punishment, of a barrier erected, of a grave opened. We cannot speak of it without mention of all these things. The Yes cannot be heard unless the No is also heard. But the No is said for the sake of the Yes and not for its own sake. In substance, therefore, the first and last word is Yes and not No.²⁶

The outworkings of this vivid passage will occupy all of the 806 pages of this volume (II.2) of the *Church Dogmatics*, obviously too long to summarize here. Fortunately, the central thesis of this large tome has been neatly summarized in Balthasar's seminal work on Barth, a book that did so much to bring these insights into Catholic theology, not least Pope Benedict's:

The source and beginning of all election, behind and over which there is no earlier, no higher, and next to which there is no other election, is

²⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II.2: *The Doctrine of God*, trans. G. W. Bromiley et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 13.

Jesus Christ alone. In him God chooses himself, but in the form of a creature. On him, the gracious Mediator and Redeemer, all creation is founded “from before the foundation of the world.” He alone is the primal object of the Father’s election. It is in him that the family of man is summoned to election. And the individual is summoned to his own personal and private relationship with God only as a part of this family. This primal election of Christ is the foundation for the whole epic of divine providence, so that the doctrine of providence must be unconditionally regarded as part of the more comprehensive doctrine of election, but not the reverse.²⁷

Balthasar will of course want to ask the same question posed in *Spe Salvi*: how did these obviously biblical perspectives get occluded by later history? But again, that genealogical question recedes, and almost dissipates, once the Bible’s own Christocentrism is made the governing principle of predestination:

The flaw in most of the previous doctrines of election was a failure to contextualize election as part of God’s relationship to Christ. Previous theories misconstrued the christological basis that is so clearly witnessed to in the Bible. Instead, they regarded election as a purely individual happening between an abstract (and therefore terrifying) absolute God and the isolated creature viewed atomistically. But it is the Son of God who is the object of God’s election from all eternity. He is the one who has been elected and chosen to lead the as-yet uncreated world back to God. He will stand up for it and plead its case, take its guilt upon his shoulders, atoning for this guilt in place of all those who are to become sinners; and thus he will become in this sense the object of divine “reprobation” and rejection.²⁸

The perspective opened up by this move, one that sees the doctrine of predestination as the Father’s decision to create the world both through and for his Son, solves, in a stroke, the problem of the *tentatio praedestinationis* bequeathed to the Church by Augustine and Calvin. Finally, the believer finds true grounds for trust and sees why Paul could say that nothing in creation can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ

²⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation*, trans. Edward T. Oakes, S.J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 175. This passage occurs in the chapter called “Praedestinatio Gemina” (“double predestination”), which again shows how Barth can take accepted Calvinist motifs and revolutionize them by centering them on Christ.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 175–76. It should be stressed that this passage comes from the “exposition” part of Balthasar’s Barth book; for his own Catholic interpretation of Christ as simultaneously elect and “reprobate,” see 326–78.

(Rom 8:39). For now God, through Christ, no longer sees the *necessity* of condemning mankind to hell. The traditional understanding of supralapsarianism had insisted that the decree of predestination meant inevitable and unavoidable doom or redemption, all depending on God's decree prior to creation; but Barth's version of supralapsarianism upends that conclusion, as he explains in this powerful passage:

It is a serious matter to be threatened by hell, sentenced to hell, worthy of hell, and already on the road to hell. On the other hand, we must not minimize the fact that we actually know of only one certain triumph of hell—the handing-over of Jesus—and that this triumph of hell took place in order that it would never again be able to triumph over anyone. We must not deny that Jesus gave Himself up into the depths of hell not only with many others but on their behalf, in the place of all who believe in Him.²⁹

As Wittgenstein, himself an acute critic of the philosophical incoherence of predestination as traditionally understood, put it so well: “Within Christianity, it’s as though God says to men: Don’t act out a tragedy, don’t enact heaven and hell on earth. Heaven and hell are *my* affair.”³⁰ Exactly. N V

²⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II.2, 496.

³⁰ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 14e: “Im Christentum sagt der liebe Gott gleichsam zu den Menschen: Spielt nicht Tragödie, das heißt Himmel auf Erden. Himmel und Hölle habe ich mir vorbehalten.”