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## Predestination, 1517-1543. The Debates between Erasmus, Luther, Melanchthon, and Calvin

**ABSTRACT:** This article examines discussions of predestination in the context of Wittenberg theology during the first three decades of the Protestant Reformation. It shows that from the earliest disputations involving Wittenberg theologians, predestination was part of the debate because of its significance for Luther's reconsideration of the relation between human agency and divine grace. By following the discussions between Erasmus, Luther, Melanchthon, and Calvin, and the implicit intertextuality of their debates, this study aims to consider what was left unsaid and explores what can be inferred about some of the known doctrinal shifts and precisions, especially in Melanchthon's thought, when analyzed in light of the discussions of predestination.

**SOMMARIO:** Questo articolo esamina le discussioni sulla predestinazione nella teologia di Wittenberg durante i primi tre decenni della Riforma protestante. Esso mostra come fin dalle prime dispute che coinvolsero i teologi di Wittenberg, la predestinazione facesse parte del dibattito, vista la sua importanza nella riconsiderazione operata da Lutero della relazione tra l'azione umana e la grazia divina. Seguendo le discussioni tra Erasmo, Lutero, Melantone e Calvino, e l'implicita intertestualità dei loro dibattiti, questo studio mira a considerare ciò che è stato taciuto ed esplora quel che si può desumere da alcuni noti cambiamenti e precisazioni dottrinali, soprattutto nel pensiero di Melantone, una volta analizzati alla luce delle discussioni sulla predestinazione.

**KEYWORDS:** Predestination; Desiderius Erasmus; Martin Luther; Philip Melanchthon; John Calvin

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### INTRODUCTION

The problem of predestination seems to have played a significant role in the discussions that shaped the Wittenberg Reformation of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. Intrinsicly linked with the doctrine of *sola gratia* and human inability to contribute to salvation, the question about the relationship between divine election and human freedom was indeed at the core of some of the earliest debates.<sup>1</sup> Already by late 1518, when preparations started for the later Leipzig disputation, the problem of free will was placed prominently on the agenda by the catholic opponent John Eck, and it even became the central point of contention when, in 1524, the humanist Desiderius Erasmus publicly

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1. See Cerezo Galán 2020 and Rouwendal 2024: 709.



distanced himself from Martin Luther with his *Diatribes on Free Will*.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, the young Philip Melanchthon, who, as Luther's companion in Wittenberg, quickly assumed the responsibility of putting protestant doctrine into systematic form, presented predestination in these early years as one of the core topics of Christian doctrine.<sup>3</sup>

It is striking, however, that no extended developments on predestination were issued in the context of these debates. In the Leipzig disputation, the problem was superseded by the discussions of papal authority, and in the controversy that followed the publication of Erasmus' *Diatribes*, the doctrine of predestination was openly addressed in little more than three to four paragraphs.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Melanchthon did not produce much more than just a few declarative statements about it in the earliest versions of what would become his main and often revised theological work, the *Loci communes*. On top of that, in later editions of these *Loci communes* Melanchthon even displaced the doctrine from its central position and explicitly forbade other topics to be understood in the light of it.<sup>5</sup>

Lutheran historiography has followed this reticent consideration of the doctrine. Unlike accounts of the Reformed branch of Protestantism, where 19<sup>th</sup>-century historians declared double predestination the *Zentraldogma* of Calvinism so that it remained an omnipresent topic in studies of reformed thought,<sup>6</sup> the *Lutherforschung* adopted the view of the later Melanchthon: predestination is not totally absent from research, but it is not considered important enough to be covered, for example, in recent handbooks on Luther and the Wittenberg Reformation.<sup>7</sup> In light of the systematic role the doctrine apparently had in the early Reformation, this is somewhat surprising. Since predestination was considered a core topic by the young Melanchthon, and since it was put on the forefront by those who first attacked Protestant thought, it seems worthwhile to adopt this early perspective and to see what can be gleaned about early Wittenberg theology and its first development when examined in the light of the doctrine.

This is what the present article aims to do. The task is not an obvious one, though. The historiography of the Reformation has still not completely freed itself from certain apologetic narratives stemming from confessional agendas, and the reticence of the *Lutherforschung* to deal with predestination seems to be the result of one of these narratives in particular: namely, that the doctrine of double predestination was considered for long the unattractive *Zentraldogma* of Calvinism.<sup>8</sup> Already in the 16<sup>th</sup> century,

2. On Eck's early doctrine of predestination, see Moore 1982; for his later stance on the question, see Eck 1979: 210-219. On Erasmus, see below, n. 36.

3. CR 21: 11f., see below, n. 105.

4. For an overview on the debate and its evolution, see Kolb 2017; on the scarce use of predestination see Kolb 2024: 197.

5. See below, n. 134.

6. Schweizer 1854; see already Schweizer 1844: 40. See Muller 2024: 80.

7. McKim 2003; Kolb, Dingel and Batka 2014; Beutel 2017; Nelson and Hinlicky 2017. An exception is Janz 2010: 110-112; see also Jung 2017.

8. See, e.g., Härle 2009.

but even more so to modern, enlightened ears, the “horrible decree”<sup>9</sup> of a God who actively chose a part of humanity for eternal reprobation threatened to discredit the legacy of the Reformation as such, so that the historiographical task arose to keep the heroes of the first Reformation as far away as possible from this unpleasant teaching.<sup>10</sup> Even in present day research, there is an endeavor to show that Luther himself never spoke of double predestination – at least not explicitly, and not even in his dispute with Erasmus where Luther had defended the nullity of the human will.<sup>11</sup> The situation is all the more complicated, however, since Luther’s companion Melanchthon began to grow uneasy with the moral and theological consequences of double predestination at a certain point of his career, and began to fall back on a version of the doctrine that – in surprising proximity to Erasmus – attributed a causal power to the human will even in spiritual matters. As early as the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, this earned him accusations of betraying Luther’s original theology,<sup>12</sup> so that, in order to save both Melanchthon and Luther, the historiographical challenge consisted – and still consists for some<sup>13</sup> – in showing Melanchthon’s closeness to Luther and their common criticism of Erasmus, while avoiding both double predestination and any synergistic account.

From a historical perspective, these concerns are understandable. In a historiographical regard, however, they risk introducing bias not only because of their apologetic tendencies, but also because they argue in retrospect: Luther is read in light of the later Calvin (and all that he was to be accused of) and Melanchthon in light of the synergistic controversy of the later 16<sup>th</sup> century, as if these later events set the moral by which the earlier positions were to be understood. The present article does not, of course, presume to be free of subjective emphasis. However, it attempts to circumvent the bias of a moral *ex eventu* by following closely the debates in their historical setting, and by focusing on the possible interactions that might have motivated them.<sup>14</sup> In order to retrace the debates within their context, it will start with an outline of the first appearances of the doctrine in Wittenberg and analyze from there the debate between Erasmus and Luther in order to better understand what was at stake regarding predestination in Protestant thought. It will then move on to Melanchthon and the different stages of his treatment of predestination, and it will argue that there was indeed a fundamental change in Melanchthon’s approach, and that this change was induced by Melanchthon’s reading of Erasmus. Finally, for the later Melanchthon, it will also include a section on Calvin, for Calvin was not only an avid reader of, but was himself read by, the *Praeceptor Germaniae*, and it will be shown that these readings did not remain without effect on the Wittenberger’s position.

9. As Calvin himself would call it in the latest version of his *Institutes* (III.23.7; CO 2: 704).

10. This also greatly impacted research on Calvin: in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a common historiographical tendency consisted in separating Calvin from Calvinism and blaming representatives of the latter for having betrayed Calvin and turned predestination into a *Zentraldogma*; see Trueman 2004: 235-237; Gordon and Trueman 2021; Muller 2024: 36f.

11. See below, n. 95.

12. See Kolb 2005: 103-134; Graybill 2010: 255-259 and 293-296; Dingel 2019a.

13. See Wengert 1998: 7-14; Matz 2001: 12-20.

14. See Matz 2001: 23; Wengert 2012: 185-187; Kolb 2024; Muller 2024: 79-105.

### 1. DISPUTING PREDESTINATION IN THE EARLY WITTENBERG REFORMATION

Late medieval scholastic theology had discussed predestination within the doctrine of divine attributes, and of divine foreknowledge in particular.<sup>15</sup> Assuming that God, in His unfathomable wisdom, had foreseen since eternity everything that would happen, one of the main questions consisted in knowing to what extent this foreknowledge predetermined the fate of everything and everyone: how was God's knowledge connected to His will? Was there a way to think the possibility that He knew that something would happen without Him wanting it to happen? An important part of late medieval theology sought to affirm this possibility of a distinction between God's knowing and God's willing, for this preserved God from being considered the author of sin and evil, by allowing room for human freedom, and thus for making humans responsible for the sins they committed.<sup>16</sup> Two distinctions became particularly important to maintain this possibility: the one between the things God *wanted* to happen and those he simply *permitted* to happen (the latter giving room for human agency),<sup>17</sup> and the famous one between the 'necessity of the consequent' and the 'necessity of the consequence' (the latter giving room for contingency).<sup>18</sup> From this rather speculative perspective of divine epistemology, late medieval theologians developed three main models (with numerous subtypes) to think about predestination: one that modern scholarship has labeled 'General Election' (GE: God wants everyone to be saved and it depends on the humans' response whether they end up being rejected or not), one labeled 'Singular Particular Election' (SPE: God wants some to be saved and provides them with the necessary grace to contribute with all they are able to do [*facere quod in se est*], whereas he permits others to fall into sin), and one labeled 'Double Particular Election' or double predestination (DPE: God actively wills both the election of some and the reprobation of others).<sup>19</sup> This third model that was known to fit well with biblical passages such as *Romans* 9 was mainly defended by strongly voluntaristic thinkers (who did not accept that something could happen without God actively willing it), whereas the first two models were defended by theologians who put more weight on pastoral concerns and the role of divine benevolence. This picture was not fundamentally changed with the arrival of Protestant thought.<sup>20</sup>

15. See Zahnd 2024.

16. See Friedman 2003: 100-113.

17. See, e.g., Goris 2024: 150 for Aquinas.

18. Only the 'necessity of the consequent' describes cases of absolute necessity (if God is good, His doings are good; but God is necessarily good, so all His doings are also necessarily good), whereas the 'necessity of the consequence' leaves room for contingency (when it rains heavily, the roads are necessarily wet; but there is no necessity that the roads are wet right now, for there is no necessity that it is raining heavily right now).

19. These labels were established by Halverson 1995: 1-3.

20. There is absolutely no reason to talk about a "Wiederentdeckung der Prädestination" by Luther, as Kim 2013: 11 does. See also Pitkin 2004: 348.

### 1.1 The Early Luther

Even if it took a moment for the problem of predestination to be openly addressed in the Reformation debates, it started to resonate as early as public discussion about Luther's positions began. As in former discussions on grace, the flip side of Luther's insistence that human beings depend entirely on divine grace for their salvation was the denial of any positive power of human capacities before God, and therefore of the human will.<sup>21</sup> But if the will had no power, it was to be considered as determined, so that it was through the problem of the freedom of will (and not the divine attributes) that questions relating to the doctrine of predestination began to be raised. As early as in his *Disputation against Scholastic Theology* (1517), Luther accepted "the eternal election and predestination of God" as "the sole means of obtaining grace", and rejected accordingly the possibility of a *facere quod in se est* and the scholastic distinction of the two necessities.<sup>22</sup> At the Heidelberg Disputation (1518), where Luther gave a first condensed outline of his theological approach, he proposed as part of thesis 13 that "the free will, after the fall, exists in name only", for "it is not free except to do evil".<sup>23</sup> Both these accounts were entirely informed by the pastoral concerns of the early Luther: the guiding focus was on the dominance of sin (and thus the dependency on grace), but Luther alluded here a systematic corollary of his position that would quickly interest the theologians.

When, in the later part of 1518, the first plans emerged for another disputation in Leipzig, to be held between Andreas Karlstadt, a colleague of Luther at the university of Wittenberg, and Johannes Eck, professor in Ingoldstadt and a committed advocate of the Catholic faith, the question of free will moved into a more central role.<sup>24</sup> In order to stir up the public opinion, Karlstadt advertised the disputation with a pamphlet representing two carts, one flagged with catchphrases from Luther's theology driving towards the cross and heaven, and the other flagged with traditional doctrine rushing into the mouth of hell: this *Höllenzug* wore the inscription "own will", whereas a shield on the *Himmelzug* said "Thy will be done".<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, the Leipzig Disputation opened in June 1519 with a discussion of free will, and even if the topic took a back seat to the discussion Luther engaged in the following with Eck on the primacy of papal power, it was clear from now that the relation between God's determining will and human freedom touched on the core of the Wittenberger's approach.

21. See Graybill 2010: 63f.; Visala and Vainio 2020: 322f.

22. Theses 29 to 32, WA 1: 225; LW 31: 11; see Kolb 2024: 195. For an even earlier statement of Luther about predestination, see Lopes Pereira 2013: 455; Rouwendal 2024: 710f.

23. WA 1: 359f.; LW 31: 48f.

24. On the context of the Leipzig Disputation, see Dingel 2019b and Lehr Evans 2019. On Karlstadt's position, see Pater 1984: 25-46; on Eck, see above, n. 2, and Godin 1982: 461-463.

25. "Dein Wil der geschech" and "Eigner wil". The woodcut was created by Lucas Cranach the Elder and represents most probably the very first Reformation pamphlet. See Roper and Spinks 2017 for a detailed analysis of the imagery. A digital copy is available at <https://diglib.hab.de/drucke/ed000747/start.htm>.

It is no surprise that thesis 13 of the Heidelberg Disputation re-appeared in the syllabus of errors the papal Curia prepared in 1520 in order to condemn Luther. It is true that, listed as article 36 (out of 41) in the papal bull *Exsurge Domine*,<sup>26</sup> the problem was seen as one among others, but Luther himself underlined its importance when, in the fall of 1520, he refused to recant, but rather published a detailed assertion of all the condemned articles. When it came to article 36, he even assured that he could have tolerated “the frivolity and stupidity of the pope [...] in the other articles”, but not in the present one, for it “is the best of all and the sum of my cause”.<sup>27</sup> And instead of a mere reassertion of the Heidelberg thesis, he made the rhetorical move of agreeing to revoke the article, but only to replace it with an even more radical one: having reminded that he wanted to listen exclusively to Scripture,<sup>28</sup> Luther discussed several passages from the Old and New Testament confirming the depravity of human nature, and the more he advanced, the more he came to the conclusion that free will is pure fiction.<sup>29</sup> Humans were not only incapable of doing good (as the Heidelberg thesis had stated) but of doing any act whatsoever by their own power, including evil deeds. Exposing Jer 10:23 (“I know, Lord, that a person’s path is not his own and that man does not have the power to direct his own steps”), Luther wrote:

What statement could be clearer? If a person’s path and his steps are not in his power, how can God’s path and God’s steps be in his power? A person’s path is what they call the natural power of doing what in him lies [*faciendi quod est in se*]. See now that this is not in man’s choice or free will. What, then, is free will but a thing in name only? How can it prepare itself for the good when it does not even have the power to make its own paths evil? For God does even bad deeds in the wicked, as Proverbs 16[:4] says: ‘The Lord made everything for his own sake, even the wicked for the evil day’.<sup>30</sup>

This was more radical than the Heidelberg thesis not only with regard to the moral dimension of human actions (neither good nor bad is in their power), but also to the possible outreach of human activity: whereas the Heidelberg thesis could be read as relating only to the sphere of meritorious acts, it was all human action including “what they call the natural power” that was now understood to be withdrawn from human agency. The *facere quod in se est* Luther had discarded two years earlier within its Late Medieval soteriological context was now rejected in absolute terms: there was no human *facere* at all. Accordingly, Luther rejected his adversaries’ “babble” that it was “in our power to perform natural operations”,<sup>31</sup> and concluded:

Hence it is [...] necessary to revoke this article. For I misspoke when I said that free will before grace exists in name only; rather I should have simply said ‘free

26. Published on July 24, 1520, see DH 1486.

27. WA 7: 148; Luther 1999: 309.

28. WA 7: 142: “Augustino non credam. Scripturas audiamus”.

29. “Figmenta”, see WA 7: 144 and 145.

30. WA 7: 144; Luther 1999: 304f.

31. WA 7: 145; Luther 1999: 306.

will is a fiction among real things, a name with no reality'. For no one has it within his control to intend anything, good or evil, but rather, as was rightly taught by the article of Wyclif, which was condemned at Constance, all things occur by absolute necessity.<sup>32</sup>

Although the notions were not explicit in this account, it is clear that Luther advocated here a radical view not only of double predestination, but of determinism, attributing all human action in its entirety to the governing will of God.

Luther was sure that this position was in total agreement with Scripture. At the end of his assertion of article 36, he had to explain thus why the preceding centuries of scholastic theology had failed to promote this position, and he attributed it to the distortion of the biblical text "by our Nebuchadnezzar" (that is, the pope).<sup>33</sup> According to Luther, the result of this distortion was a deformation of the doctrine of the will so fundamental and widespread that he could "not see anyone who is fit to understand it or even dispute with me about it".<sup>34</sup> What was needed, therefore, was a "new Esdras" who would "recover the Bible for us once more, which I hope is now being done as the Hebrew and Greek languages are flourishing all over the world".<sup>35</sup>

## 1.2 Erasmus' *Diatribes*

The ending paragraph of Luther's discussion of free will in the *Assertio* must have appeared as an open provocation to Erasmus. If the claim that nobody was fit enough to dispute the problem with Luther was an attack on contemporary intellectuals in general, the calling of a new Esdras and the utility of ancient languages was more specific. Restoring the biblical text since 1516 with his editions of the New Testament and being one of the best-known advocates of the teaching of Hebrew and Greek, Erasmus found himself presented here as if his doings would inevitably support Luther's position, if he were fit enough to understand what he did. But Erasmus hesitated to launch an open conflict. For years, he had denounced the uselessness of theological discourse that got lost in sophisticated quibbles rather than cultivating a pious life, and an open debate on a complex theological topic with Luther would only run the risk of destroying the reform of learning that Erasmus had been advocating. Therefore, he resisted the growing expectation on the Catholic side to oppose Luther until summer 1523 when he finally decided to enter the ring.<sup>36</sup> Erasmus disagreed with Luther on a number of topics, but in light of the systematic role of free will for Wittenberg theology, in light of Luther's

32. WA 7: 146; Luther 1999: 306. For Wyclif, see DH 1177.

33. WA 7: 148f.; Luther 1999: 309f. Luther speaks here of "more than 300 years" of oppression of the doctrine ("plus trecentis annis"), not of "thirteen hundred years" as the English translation says.

34. WA 7: 149; Luther 1999: 310.

35. *Ibid.*

36. As late as August 1523, Erasmus wrote in a letter that he preferred not to write something against Luther despite the common expectation (see CWE 10: 80, letter 1383 to Willibald Prikheimer, 29 August).

claim about the unambiguity of the Bible if it was read with a humanist approach, and in light of the growing necessity to take a stance once it was clear that Luther's excommunication would not repress the movement he had triggered, the question of human liberty before God was more than appropriate for Erasmus to showcase the fundamental difference between his and Luther's position.<sup>37</sup>

Erasmus named the treatise he published in 1524 against Luther a "Diatribē", that is, "a learned exchange of ideas".<sup>38</sup> He left no doubt, however, that he understood it in some way as the disputation Luther had thought no one was able to perform against him. Although adhering to a style that made his profound familiarity with patristic literature clear, Erasmus presented himself from the beginning as "disputator"<sup>39</sup> and he structured the whole treatise in an affirming and an opposing part of the main thesis that "a certain power of free will does exist".<sup>40</sup> Erasmus understood the will as "a power [...] by which man may be able to direct himself towards [*se applicare*], or turn away from [*avertere*], what leads to eternal salvation",<sup>41</sup> but he remained very concerned not to attribute too much to this power, for he agreed "that the contribution of free will is very small indeed; and that our very ability to direct our mind to the things that pertain to salvation, or to cooperate with grace, is itself a gift of God".<sup>42</sup> At the same time, Erasmus remained true to his commitment not to pursue theology as a speculative science or to give his treatise a scholastic shape, which is why he did not engage in logical analyses or far-reaching doctrinal considerations, but preferred against dogmatic assertions to "rather seek refuge in Skepticism".<sup>43</sup> Accepting Luther's basic principle of allowing Scripture alone to be the authority for clarifying the question,<sup>44</sup> but raising doubts about the thoroughgoing perspicuity of the Bible,<sup>45</sup> Erasmus was merely interested in compiling and evaluating what Scripture seemed to support for and against free will, however not to assert ultimate truth, but to gain a "clearer", "more evident" and "surer" view of what appeared to be true.<sup>46</sup> He provided thus an exposition of numerous biblical passages, and even if these readings spanned over more than two third of the treatise, their result was of an unambiguous similarity: the countless uses<sup>47</sup> of vocabulary that spoke of "nothing but conversion, endeavour, and striving to improve", and of

37. Up to this point, Erasmus had almost not treated the topic, see Kolb 2005: 13.

38. Kolb 2017: 4.

39. CWE 8 and 88. On the genre of disputations, see Dingel 2021: 256-261, and Wöller 2023.

40. CWE 76: 8. On the patristic (and particularly Origenistic) roots of Erasmus' account, see Godin 1982: 469-489; Dechow 1995; Dechow 2016; see also Scheck 2008: 137.

41. CWE 76: 21.

42. CWE 76: 79.

43. CWE 76: 7; see Godin 1982: 517; Rosin 1997: 109.

44. CWE 76: 14.

45. CWE 76: 8f. and 17; on Erasmus' rejection of scriptural clarity see Huiban 2023: 289-310.

46. *Dilucidior, evidentior, and certius* in CWE 76: 6f.

47. CWE 76: 57: "there are hundreds and hundreds of such quotations in Holy Scripture".

divine “assistance, aid, succour, help”<sup>48</sup> could only make sense for Erasmus if the biblical authors presupposed the existence of real agency in humans, and thus of free will.

To assert the necessity of all human action, on the other hand, entailed for Erasmus a whole series of contradictions. Not only would the numerous biblical passages that seemed to presuppose the possibility of human agency become “meaningless” and even “ridiculous”,<sup>49</sup> but the biblical concept of justice itself would be eroded.<sup>50</sup> If the human will was not free (at least to do evil), it “could not have been charged with sin”,<sup>51</sup> rather it would turn God into the author of sin,<sup>52</sup> question divine goodness,<sup>53</sup> and challenge the idea of a merciful God.<sup>54</sup> On the human side, it would foster either despair or indolence, and would therefore have the demoralizing effect of leading to complacency.<sup>55</sup> For Erasmus, these “paradoxes”<sup>56</sup> discredited Luther’s position sufficiently, so he concluded:

Why, you may ask, attribute anything at all to free will? To allow the ungodly, who have deliberately fallen short of the grace of God, to be deservedly condemned; to clear God of the false accusation of cruelty and injustice; to free us from despair, protect us from complacency, and spur us on to moral endeavour. For these reasons nearly everyone admits the existence of free will.<sup>57</sup>

This suggestive presentation of reasons was enough for Erasmus to cast doubt on Luther’s uncompromising assertion to the contrary and to see himself as the winner of the disputation.<sup>58</sup> The unambiguity of the biblical text claimed by Luther was not given, so that it appeared much more plausible to continue to attribute, with the backing of the entire Christian tradition, a certain power to the will – and be it only the minimal one of assenting and holding fast once divine grace had intervened in a human being.<sup>59</sup>

And what of the doctrine of predestination? Even though the entire treatise dealt with human freedom towards God so that the question was always in the background, predestination was never directly addressed. The subject belonged simply to those speculative subtleties that Erasmus wanted to avoid because they offered no constructive contribution to a pious Christian life. In only one passage did he address the problem

48. CWE 76: 36 and 73.

49. CWE 76: 34, 36, 38, 41, 55.

50. CWE 76: 42.

51. CWE 76: 26. See also CWE 76: 39.

52. CWE 76: 82.

53. See, in particular, CWE 76: 43 and 76.

54. CWE 76: 78.

55. CWE 76: 27, 56, and 87.

56. CWE 76: 84-86; see Cerezo Galán 2020: 820.

57. CWE 76: 87.

58. See CWE 76: 74. In accordance with the rules of university disputations, it was not up to the disputants, however, to define the winner, as Erasmus deliberately concedes at the end of the *Diatribes* (CWE 76: 89).

59. See, in particular, CWE 76: 79.

of divine foreknowledge as connected to the divine will and admitted its difficulty, “for God wills the same things as he foreknows”.<sup>60</sup> There too, however, he immediately withdrew from further speculation with reference to Scriptures: for Erasmus, in the famous passage in *Rom* 9, Paul had not “explained” this question either, but rebuked in *Rom* 9:20 “anyone who would dispute about it”.<sup>61</sup> Even the main biblical passage that had served the Christian tradition to discuss the doctrine of predestination was, for Erasmus, an invitation to refrain from speculation.<sup>62</sup> Of course, it can be deduced from Erasmus’ explanations that his rejection of the concept of necessity also implied a rejection of any doctrine of double predestination and that his concession of minimal human willpower included a model of cooperation between God and humans. In two places, he made his preference clear for a three-stage process in the coming about of this cooperation (beginning, continuation, and completion), and he insisted that the human will “concurred” only in the second stage, while the rest (and the beginning in particular) depended on divine grace.<sup>63</sup> Since he insisted at the same time on the necessity of divine grace, in particular to enable humans to will something good and to persevere in following it,<sup>64</sup> and since he considered human salvation to depend on this previous intervention of divine grace, his position seems to fit most closely with the Late Medieval model of Singular Particular Election.<sup>65</sup> At one point, he even referred in an affirmative way to the scholastic distinction of the ‘necessity of consequence’ and the ‘necessity of the consequent’<sup>66</sup> in order to hint at a possible understanding of the cooperation between divine grace and human freedom. But in the *Diatribes*, Erasmus deliberately left open how this should be explained in detail.<sup>67</sup>

60. CWE 76: 48; see Cerezo Galán 2020: 822.

61. CWE 76: 49.

62. This reservation did not change in Erasmus’ later contributions to the debate, see *Hyperaspistes* I (CWE 76: 122f. and 136) and *Hyperaspistes* II (CWE 77: 500 and 516).

63. CWE 76: 79. In CWE 76: 67, the three stages are thought, wish to carry out, and actual performance. In both cases, this is by no means explained with a theoretical impetus, and only in *Hyperaspistes* II, there is a hint at a reconstruction in terms of predestination, when Erasmus claims that it would have been sufficient to say “that God predestines some, does not predestine others” (CWE 77: 428).

64. See the position he presents as “highly probable” in CWE 76: 32: “Those farthest from Pelagius’s position attribute a great deal to grace and almost nothing to free will, though they do not deny it altogether. They say that without particular grace man cannot desire good; can neither make a beginning, nor persevere, nor bring to completion without the perpetual help of God’s grace from the very beginning. This opinion seems highly probable, for it permits man the opportunity of serious moral endeavour, but not of making any claims for his own powers”.

65. In *Hyperaspistes* I, Erasmus identifies this position with Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, see CWE 76: 278.

66. CWE 76: 52. Once more, *Hyperaspistes* II is slightly more detailed about the coexistence of divine foreknowledge and human will, see CWE 77: 493-499. For a more analytical reconstruction of Erasmus’ position see Visala and Vainio 2020.

67. In *Hyperaspistes* II (CWE 77: 516), Erasmus would ask rhetorically: “Does he [Luther] want me to repeat here all the scholastic chatter about future contingents, God’s foreknowl-

### 1.3 Luther's Reply

This reluctance to discuss the question of predestination theologically remained unchanged when Luther embarked on a rebuttal to Erasmus. Having put off an answer for more than a year,<sup>68</sup> Luther published his *De servo arbitrio* in December 1525. The work was full of irony against Erasmus, who, according to Luther, argued even worse than the scholastics and therefore contributed nothing to the discussion.<sup>69</sup> At least, Erasmus was acknowledged by Luther as the one of his opponents to have recognized the centrality of the problem as he had laid it out in the *Assertio*.<sup>70</sup> Accordingly, in *De servo arbitrio*, Luther declared once more the doctrine of the unfree will to be the sum of his teaching,<sup>71</sup> and all the more he had to reject any skeptical reticence towards taking a clear stance on the matter.<sup>72</sup> However, to be assertive was more than a simple question of protecting the core of doctrine, as Luther explained now more clearly than in his earlier accounts: if humans were thought to be free to influence their fate with their will, the assurance of the divine promise itself was called into question. Therefore, nothing less than each individual's certitude of salvation depended not only on a firm answer to this problem, but on the firmness of divine election: far from a theoretical discussion, this was about confidence, assurance of salvation and consolation in faith, and it was only by accepting the stability of God's predestination that one could be sure about the divine promise.<sup>73</sup>

It was therefore all the more important to dispel the doubts sown by Erasmus. Step by step,<sup>74</sup> Luther went through the *Diatribes* and rejected Erasmus: on a principal level where the latter had spoken of unclear and obscure passages of Scripture or preferred a metaphorical meaning over a verbatim understanding of the Bible,<sup>75</sup> but also on the level of individual expositions of biblical passages. For Luther, the Bible was clear and had to be taken in its literal sense wherever possible, even if this opposed human reasoning: to convey a revolting message was the very core of the biblical text, for revelation would not have been necessary if its message was accessible (and acceptable)

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edge and his predestination?" See also his explicit refusal to discuss secondary causes in CWE 76: 50, a concept he nevertheless applies from time to time (*ibid.*: 67 and 80).

68. This was due to both the political situation and Luther's personal hesitation, see Kolb 2005: 14.

69. WA 18: 601; LW 33: 16. See already WA.B 2: 544, and Strohm 2023: 63.

70. WA 18: 786; LW 33: 294.

71. WA 18: 614; LW 33: 35. See already WA 18: 609f.; LW 33: 29f.

72. WA 18: 603; LW 33: 19f. See also WA 18: 625; LW 33: 50f., and see Rosin 1997: 93.

73. WA 18: 619; LW 33: 43: "supreme consolation"; WA 18: 749; LW 33: 236: "labor to establish consciences"; WA 18: 716; LW 33: 185: "who could believe his promises, who would fear his threats, if what he promises or threatens does not follow necessarily?" See also WA 18: 783; LW 33: 289; as well as Kolb 2005: 21 and 33, Graybill 2010: 73, and Beeke 2017: 23.

74. WA 18: 661; LW 33: 102.

75. WA 18: 606-609; LW 33: 24-28 (scriptural clarity); WA 18: 700f.; LW 33: 161-163 (metaphors); WA 18: 737 and 749; LW 33: 217 and 236 (ordinary grammatical sense). See also Dechow 1995: 753.

by itself to human understanding.<sup>76</sup> That the biblical message was unpleasant to hear was thus no argument against it, and so Luther reasserted the scriptural conformity of his doctrine of the bound will by developing, in particular, the famous distinction of Law and Gospel:<sup>77</sup> taking as starting point *Rom* 3:20, that “through the law comes knowledge of sin”, all the numerous biblical exhortations, precepts and invitations to do better<sup>78</sup> did not presuppose the existence of free will, but rather assumed the noetic function of the Law to make humans aware of their inability to do as demanded, and thus of their incapacity to freely choose the good.<sup>79</sup> In contrast to Erasmus’ interpretation, these passages did not suggest the existence of free will,<sup>80</sup> but gave proof of its nullity. Accordingly, they were not meaningless or ridiculous,<sup>81</sup> but made humans aware of their total dependency on divine grace as it was promised to them by the Gospel.

For Luther, therefore, it was clear on his part that he was the winner as to the sense of the biblical message.<sup>82</sup> But he also deemed Erasmus’ theological considerations to be inadequate. Although Luther too did not want to speculate about the divine will (but merely about the human will),<sup>83</sup> he repeatedly made it clear that he understood divine omniscience and omnipotence more consistently than Erasmus: because God’s foreknowledge was comprehensively linked to His will (which Erasmus had also conceded),<sup>84</sup> not only did everything happen solely through God’s omnipotence and thus necessarily,<sup>85</sup> but also what happened was right because God Himself wanted it to happen:

He is God, and for his will there is no cause or reason that can be laid down as a rule or measure for it, since there is nothing equal or superior to it, but it is itself the rule of all things. For if there were any rule or standard for it, either as cause or reason, it could no longer be the will of God. For it is not because he is or was obliged so to will that what he wills is right, but on the contrary, because he himself so wills, therefore what happens must be right.<sup>86</sup>

76. WA 18: 779; LW 33: 282. On the clarity of Scripture, see also WA 18: 659; LW 33: 99, and Huiban 2023: 216-242.

77. WA 18: 680; LW 33: 132; see Reinhuber 2012: 64f. and Kolb 2024: 194.

78. In WA 18: 677; LW 33: 127, Luther suggests Erasmus to use “the major concordances, if you like”.

79. WA 18: 674-677; LW 33: 121-127. On the Augustinian roots of Luther’s account (as opposed to Erasmus’ Origenistic account) see Burger 1993 and Lopes Pereira 2013: 454-461.

80. In particular, Luther insisted on their imperative form that stated only what should be, but not what is, see WA 18: 677, 680, 688, 696; LW 33: 127, 131, 144, 156.

81. WA 18: 696; LW 33: 156. See already WA 18: 677; LW 33: 127.

82. WA 18: 757, 775; 782; LW 33: 247, 274, 287. At the very end (WA 18: 7; LW 33: 295), however, Luther explicitly abandons the framework of a disputation, advising “everyone to yield assent”.

83. WA 18: 685 and 689; LW 33: 139 and 145.

84. WA 18: 716; LW 33: 186.

85. WA 18: 718; LW 33: 189. See also WA 18: 786; LW 33: 293, and below, n. 90.

86. WA 18: 712; LW 33: 181.

This strictly voluntarist perspective prevented Luther from seeing divine mercy and justice called into question by his doctrine of the bound will. Rather, the opposite view seemed to him to lead to paradoxes, because a genuinely free will in humans undermined the necessity of grace<sup>87</sup> and left no room for an efficient divine election, but made God an “idol of chance”.<sup>88</sup> Even the concept of divine mercy was much more strongly called into question for Luther when it was assumed that God actually gave people a free will, but so weak that they could not obey the divine commandments.<sup>89</sup>

Once again, therefore, Luther repeated the thesis condemned by the papal bull that everything was done out of necessity:

God foreknows nothing contingently, but [...] he foresees and purposes and does all things by his immutable, eternal, and infallible will. Here is a thunderbolt by which free choice is completely prostrated and shattered [...]. From this, it follows irrefutably that everything we do, everything that happens, even if it seems to us to happen mutably and contingently, happens in fact nonetheless necessarily and immutably, if you have regard to the will of God. For the will of God is effectual and cannot be hindered, since it is the power of the divine nature itself; moreover it is wise, so that it cannot be deceived.<sup>90</sup>

In contrast, the difference between good and bad human actions resulted from the fact that God intervened in the (chosen) ones with his Spirit and enabled them to act well, while he left the others to the constraints of their flesh and thus of Satan who was himself an instrument of God:<sup>91</sup> since humans continued, without the divine grace, to have a corrupt nature, they were like bad instruments and it was their fault (and not God's) if they were of no use to do any good. Even then, however, their will was not involved, as Luther made clear with his famous image of the beast of burden:

The human will is placed between the two [God and Satan] like a beast of burden. If God rides it, it wills and goes where God wills [...]. If Satan rides it, it wills and goes where Satan wills; nor can it choose to run to either of the two riders or to seek him out, but the riders themselves contend for the possession and control of it.<sup>92</sup>

Once more, the problem of predestination as such was not explicitly addressed in the treatise,<sup>93</sup> but Luther's position on the topic was unequivocal. By emphasizing on the one hand the infallible efficacy of God's providence, and on the other, the necessity of all human action, Luther made it clear that for him everything depended on divine

87. See also WA 18: 762; LW 33: 255.

88. WA 18: 706: “*idolum fortunae*”; see LW 33: 171.

89. WA 18: 706; LW 33: 171.

90. WA 18: 615; LW 33: 37f. See also WA 18: 634f. and 747; LW 33: 64f. and 232, as well as Kolb 2005: 33.

91. WA 18: 709; LW 33: 176: “Since, then, God moves and actuates all in all, he necessarily moves and acts also in Satan and ungodly man”. Against Kolb 2005: 96.

92. WA 18: 635; LW 33: 65f. See also WA 18: 750; LW 33: 237, as well as Kolb 2005: 57.

93. See Kolb 2005: 39. For mentions of predestination see WA 18: 618, 691, 716, 723, 772, 786; LW 33: 41, 149, 186, 197, 272, 293.

counsel, both the good and the bad, and therefore also a good and a bad fate. Luther explicitly rejected the scholastic distinction of the ‘necessity of consequence’ and the ‘necessity of the consequent’ Erasmus had endorsed,<sup>94</sup> and even if it is true that Luther never explicitly spoke of double predestination (as Luther scholars have always been keen to emphasize),<sup>95</sup> the concept that God efficiently willed the fate of every individual was thus unmistakably in the background: when discussing *Rom* 9:11 and the fate of Esau and Jacob where Paul had referred to the firmness of “God’s purpose in election”, Luther said more explicitly than the biblical text that it had “been settled [*definitus*] by the *foreknowledge and determination* of God what should be the lot of *each*”, making it clear that, for him, the fate of both sons was actively determined by God.<sup>96</sup> Similarly, with reference to *Rom* 9:13 (and its quotation of *Mal* 1:2f.: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated”), Luther said:

God [...] loves and hates in accord with his eternal and immutable nature, so that passing moods and feelings do not arise in him. It is this fact that makes complete nonsense of free choice, because God’s love toward men is eternal and immutable, *and* his hatred is eternal, being prior to the creation of the world, and not only to the merit and work of free choice; and everything takes place by necessity in us, according as he either loves or does not love us *from all eternity*, so that not only God’s love but also *the manner of his loving* imposes necessity on us.<sup>97</sup>

In light of the divine will and his eternal and immutable nature, not to love was not simply the absence of an affection in God, but a “manner of loving” (*modus amandi*) and hence an effective voluntary act. God willed the fate of Esau as much as the one of Jacob, so that the one’s fate was as eternally and unconditionally predetermined as the other’s.<sup>98</sup> In light of the Late Medieval developments, this was a strong version of Double Particular Election, and with the necessity it imposed it remained intrinsically linked to what Luther considered at that time the sum of Christian teaching.

Erasmus would reply to Luther in the following two years with the two parts of his *Hyperaspistes*,<sup>99</sup> a “shield” he wrote to protect his *Diatribes* against the attacks from Luther’s *De servo arbitrio*. However, he did not add anything entirely new or different regarding the question of predestination (although giving more detail to this

94. In particular WA 18: 722; LW 33: 194f.; see already WA 18: 616f.; LW 33: 38f., Kolb 2024: 198, and Heckel 2025: 89f.

95. E.g., Rosin 1997: 96; Kolb 2005: 42f.; Reinhuber 2012: 210f.; Kolb 2024: 193; see already WA 18: 692, note to lines 9ff.

96. WA 18: 723; LW 33: 197 (italics mine).

97. WA 18: 724f.; LW 33: 199 (italics mine).

98. On Luther teaching unconditional election see Brosché 1978: 104; Kolb 2005: 39; Beeke 2017: 24; Kolb 2024: 197-199.

99. *Hyperaspistes* I (CWE 76: 91-297) appeared in March 1526; *Hyperaspistes* II (CWE 77: 333-749) in September 1527.

defense),<sup>100</sup> so that we do not need to discuss here these texts any further.<sup>101</sup> Rather, for the present purpose, the debate between Erasmus and Luther has sufficiently shown the importance of the doctrine of predestination in the early discussions of the Protestant Reformation, where it quickly resonated as the systematic background of Luther's combination of a radical theology of grace and the voluntaristic concept of an infallible divine will. But since the question of predestination was factored in by way of the doctrine of grace (and not of divine attributes as in traditional theological designs), and since Erasmus and Luther both wanted to avoid theological speculation, the doctrine of predestination remained, as it were, an almost unspoken presupposition. It should therefore be left to the Wittenberg theologian who devoted himself more decidedly to systematic questions to tackle predestination more explicitly.

## 2. MELANCHTHON'S FIRST SYSTEMATIZATIONS

### 2.1 The Earliest *Loci communes*

As a young scholar aged 21, Philip Melanchthon arrived at the University of Wittenberg in 1518, where he was quickly involved in the development and teaching of Protestant theology. Initially employed as a professor of Greek, he began lecturing on the *Epistle to the Romans* as early as 1519,<sup>102</sup> and in these lectures he not only worked on the biblical grounds of the new theological approach, but also presented a new method: inspired by the *Methodus* Erasmus had added to his *Novum Instrumentum* in 1516, and by Rudolf Agricola's *Epistola de ratione studii*, Melanchthon did not go through the biblical text verse by verse, but collected as 'commonplaces' (*loci communes*) the main themes encountered in the *Epistle to the Romans*. He then used these *loci* to develop a systematic framework to open up the content of the text.<sup>103</sup> In 1519, he identified justification, predestination, and morals as the three main *loci* of *Romans*, and defined sin, law, and grace as the three most useful *loci* for Christians,<sup>104</sup> but as early as 1520 he put them together in a list of four *loci* subsuming predestination under the one of free will.<sup>105</sup> This addition not only reflects the above-mentioned intensification of the debate on free will in the context of the Heidelberg Disputation, but also demonstrates Melanchthon's increasing appropriation of Luther's reading of the Bible. Whereas in 1519 Melanchthon had still largely included accounts of traditional virtue ethics into his teachings, they receded from 1520 in favor of a consistent denial of free will.<sup>106</sup>

100. See above, nn. 62 to 67. For evolutions regarding the question of papal authority and the obscurity of Scripture see already Augustijn 1972: 745f., and now Huiban 2023: 290-296.

101. For Luther's reply to Erasmus in his lectures on Ecclesiastes, see Rosin 1997: 99-108.

102. Schäfer 2017: 27.

103. See Schäfer 2017: 25; Scheible 1984: 166f.

104. CR 21: 49.

105. CR 21: 11f.; see Matz 2001: 36; Schäfer 2017: 41.

106. Already in 1519, Melanchthon had denied free will (but continued to accept virtue ethics), see CR 21: 52, and Matz 2001: 30.

Without much explanation, this denial was presented as an evident consequence of divine predestination as it was attested by the Bible. Having cited *Romans* 9:18 and some other biblical passages, Melanchthon concluded:

Therefore nothing is in our power – neither internal desires, nor external works, if you compare what is ours with predestination – and everything happens as it is determined by divine counsel.<sup>107</sup>

When Melanchthon had his *Loci communes* printed for the first time in 1521, the work reflected entirely this Wittenberg approach. In accordance with Luther's *Assertio* and the presentation of the problem of free will as the sum of his cause, Melanchthon treated the *locus* "on human powers and on free will" in the first place,<sup>108</sup> and he continued to agree with Luther about the nullity of human freedom as the result of the necessity of all events:

Freedom is to be able to act or not to act, to be able to act in one way or another. The question therefore arises as to whether the will is free and to what extent it is free. Answer: because everything that happens happens necessarily according to divine predestination, there is no freedom of our will.<sup>109</sup>

Although Melanchthon supported thus the idea of a fundamental necessity of everything that happens,<sup>110</sup> two nuances of Melanchthon's contribution become clear in this short passage alone. Other than Luther who had claimed the nullity of free *will* and put thus into question the existence of such a volitive capacity, Melanchthon claimed here only the nullity of the will's *freedom*; and other than Luther, Melanchthon declared this nullity explicitly in terms of divine predestination.<sup>111</sup>

The first nuance is due to the fact that Melanchthon, unlike Luther and contrary to the prevailing Aristotelian psychology, did not distinguish the human will from emotions and desires (*affectus*).<sup>112</sup> For Melanchthon, there was only one *vis affectiva* in human beings, which is why its existence could not be fundamentally questioned given the daily experience of strong emotions. On the other hand, this theory of the *vis affectiva* helped explain how the erroneous idea came about that humans are free. For desires could contradict each other, and when a stronger desire suppressed a weaker one, this could give the outward appearance of self-control and self-restraint, which was then (hypocritically) taken for freedom.<sup>113</sup> Melanchthon was therefore able to empha-

107. CR 21: 15f.

108. CR 21: 86.

109. CR 21: 88.

110. See also CR 21: 89: "omnia necessario evenire scripturae docent".

111. See Matz 2001: 239.

112. CR 21: 87; see Huiban 2024: 37. See also Graybill 2010: 89-91.

113. CR 21: 90f. There is no room, thus, for any real role for the judgment of the intellect, but the *vis cognoscendi* who "serves the will" is "torn (*rapitur*) here and there in its subjection to the will" (both citations in CR 21: 87). On the voluntaristic anti-voluntarism of this anthropology see Huiban 2024: 45f.

size more strongly than Luther that, according to human judgment, there seemed to be a kind of freedom when one looked exclusively at external works.<sup>114</sup> However, since it was the inner motivations that counted before God, and since these were completely dominated by human emotions and desires, it was pointless to build on this external appearance and try to derive genuine freedom from it.

The second nuance may be explained by the fact that Melanchthon composed his *loci* as a theological guide to *Romans*, so that from the outset he had *Romans* 9 in mind.<sup>115</sup> “What else,” Melanchthon asked, “is Paul doing in *Romans* 9 and 11, other than referring everything that happens to divine destiny?”<sup>116</sup> Accordingly, other than Luther who had refrained from being too explicit about the systematic framework of his doctrine of *sola gratia*, Melanchthon approached the discussion from its theological presuppositions. He even apologized for this systematic starting point, knowing perfectly well that it was highly unusual from a traditional perspective:

I may seem foolish for discussing predestination, the most difficult *locus*, right at the beginning of this work. Yet, what does it matter whether I address this topic at the start or the end of this compendium, since it permeates every part of our discussion? And since I must address free will first of all, how could I conceal Scripture’s teaching on predestination, when Scripture itself denies the freedom of our will through the necessity of predestination? In any case I do not think it is entirely unprofitable that young minds should be imbued early with this doctrine: that all things happen not according to human plans and efforts but according to the will of God.<sup>117</sup>

Although it was somewhat hidden in the *locus* on human powers and free will, predestination represented thus the systematic core in the *Loci communes* of 1521. No different from Luther, however, Melanchthon hesitated to explore it any further.<sup>118</sup> Already in his 1519 lectures, where Melanchthon had identified predestination as one of the three main themes of *Romans*, he devoted no more than a few words to it, stating that the human reasoning or intellect is unable to go any further than “what Paul has said in a few words”.<sup>119</sup> In 1521, even if the development was more extended, he kept to this reticence about further speculation, and so he could end the *locus* with a simple summary of what should be known about the topic:

If you refer human will to predestination, there is no freedom, neither in external nor internal works, but everything happens according to divine predestination. If you refer the will to external works, there seems to be a certain freedom according

114. CR 21: 90; “negari non potest iuxta rationem humanam, quin sit in ea libertas quaedam externorum operum”, see Huiban 2024: 66.

115. Already in 1519, Melanchthon had defined predestination as one of the three main loci to be found in *Romans*, see CR 21: 49. On the Pauline structure of the *Loci*, see Schäfer 2017.

116. CR 21: 88.

117. CR 21: 89.

118. Graybill 2010: 96f., Jung 2017: 439.

119. This was already the case in 1519, see CR 21: 56.

to natural judgment. If you refer the will to the affections, there is no freedom at all, not even according to natural judgment. For once the affections begin to rage and boil, they cannot be restrained from bursting forth.<sup>120</sup>

## 2.2 A Change of Mind?

When, in 1524, the debate between Erasmus and Luther escalated, Melanchthon was not publicly involved. It is true that Melanchthon who, since their first exchanges in 1519, had been on better terms with Erasmus than Luther, was the recipient of the copy of the *Diatribes* Erasmus sent to Wittenberg in September 1524,<sup>121</sup> and at the beginning of *De servo arbitrio* Luther explained his reluctance to reply to Erasmus with the fact that any defense of free will had already been “completely pulverized in Philip Melanchthon’s *Commonplaces*”.<sup>122</sup> But Melanchthon did not enter the debate with a public statement of his own, and while there are reasons to assume that he refrained from doing so out of reverence for the great humanist,<sup>123</sup> there is also reason to suspect that he refrained out of consideration for Luther. For, in the aftermath of the Luther-Erasmus debate, Melanchthon began to considerably change his position in a way that seemed to distance himself from Luther and to bring himself more closely to Erasmus.

This change is already apparent in a series of lectures on Colossians that Melanchthon gave and reworked between 1526 and 1528.<sup>124</sup> Compared to the first edition of the *Loci communes*, these lectures reveal three modifications that are of particular interest for our purposes: Melanchthon abandoned the notion of necessity, stressed much more the role of “external” freedom, and did not mention any more the systematic framework of the doctrine of predestination. All the three modifications seem to point into one direction: other than in his early *Loci communes*, Melanchthon wanted to avoid the impression that his theological framework consisted in a deterministic worldview, and it appears that he wanted to avoid this impression because it would make God the author of sin.<sup>125</sup> This is all the more interesting since it was Erasmus who had pointed in the *Diatribes* to this consequence of Luther’s doctrine of necessity and had demonstrated all its problematic ethical and theological corollaries. As it appears, Melanchthon was more reluctant than Luther to embrace these implications, and while the avoidance of the concept of necessity and the emphasis on external freedom can be seen as simple nuances of his earlier teaching, the silence on the doctrine of predestination was the sign of a more far-reaching reconsideration: in order to avoid determinism

120. CR 21: 93.

121. See Scheible 1984: 171f. For further material evidence of the contacts between Erasmus and Melanchthon, see also Wengert 1998, 21-27 and 67-79.

122. WA 18: 601; LW 33: 16.

123. Matz 2001: 95; Kolb 2005: 71f.; see also Graybill 2010: 128.

124. These lectures are regarded as Melanchthon’s unofficial response to Erasmus, see Wengert 1998 for a detailed analysis of the lectures, and Holm 2017: 399f.

125. See Matz 2001: 105 and 158; Kolb 2005: 88; Graybill 2010: 158-160.

and to free God from being the author of sin, Melanchthon abandoned here the doctrine that he had considered the systematic core of his theology since 1519.

It is not surprising that Melanchthon then planned to fundamentally rework his *Loci communes*.<sup>126</sup> Already in 1533, he presented in a university lecture a revised version of the work with a completely reorganized structure.<sup>127</sup> In agreement with traditional theological accounts, he started now with the doctrine of God, followed by creation, and then only came to free will as a follow up problem to the existence of evil in creation: in order to understand the cause of evil, Melanchthon suggested, “we first have to discuss the cause of sin, for, once it will be established that God is not the cause of sin, it will then be easy to reason that there is a certain contingency, or that not all things happen by absolute necessity”.<sup>128</sup> Whereas the doctrine of absolute necessity had been the consequence of God’s predestination in the *Loci communes* of 1521, the doctrine of contingency was now the consequence of the impossibility to see God as the author of sin. Accordingly, Melanchthon introduced the scholastic distinction of the two necessities Erasmus had fostered and Luther rejected, in order to explain how this “certain contingency” could be thought together with God’s foreknowledge,<sup>129</sup> and he gave more weight to human freedom. In line with his earlier biblical readings and the Wittenberg approach, he still defended the absence of internal freedom as the incapacity of the will to turn itself to God by its proper means (and thus the total dependency on grace), but since he would not explain this absence with predestination anymore, he attributed it now to the traditional doctrine of original sin that had corrupted human nature:

The doctrine of the Gospel abolishes free will such that it teaches that there is a terrible corruption in man that naturally opposes the law of God, and human will cannot remove this corruption by nature on its own, just as it cannot remove death – the most proper effect of this corruption – by nature on its own. It cannot, by its own power, cause nature to render perfect obedience to the law of God.<sup>130</sup>

Yet, if the reason for the absence of internal freedom was thus located within human beings themselves, and not anymore on the cosmological level of divine providence, external freedom was liberated, so to say, to be real freedom:

Nevertheless, some freedom of human will remains in human nature. For the human will can, in some way without the Holy Spirit [...], perform the external works of the law. Just as judgment and choice concerning other things subject to the senses or reason remain in nature, so too do judgment and choice concerning external civil works. And this is the freedom of will about which the philosophers speak and which, in some way, is also attributed to humans by Holy Scripture.<sup>131</sup>

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126. Already in 1529, Melanchthon recommended his students to rather read his lectures on Colossians than the *Loci communes*, see CR 2: 457, and Matz 2001: 79f.

127. Matz 2001: 108-138.

128. CR 21: 271.

129. CR 21: 274.

130. CR 21: 277; see Matz 2001: 137.

131. CR 21: 278f.

Whereas, in 1521, Melanchthon had distinguished between internal and external works and had attributed a simple appearance of liberty to the latter, he transformed now the distinction into one between works *coram Deo* (where no freedom was to be found) and civil works.<sup>132</sup> In civil works, however, there was not just an appearance of freedom anymore, but the very freedom the tradition had spoken about, that is, not only the philosophers, but even Scripture itself when Paul mentioned, in *Rom* 13, our duties against civil authorities, or when *Heb* 9:10 alluded to the righteousness of the flesh.<sup>133</sup>

Given this new framework to explain human agency, Melanchthon mentioned predestination at only one point in his revised development of free will and human powers, and he did so in a way that underscored his fundamental change of perspective:

The question is not how God determines all contingent things in the whole creation, whether indifferent or good or bad. Zwingli denied free will to such an extent because he believed that all things happen by the decree and predestination of God. But this reasoning has no relevance to this *locus*.<sup>134</sup>

The very reason that had governed the *Loci* of 1521 was now of “no relevance”. However, instead of correcting explicitly his earlier work (or Luther), Melanchthon introduced Zwingli as the one to have held the opposite position, an accusation that has to be understood in the context of the recent split up between the Wittenberg and the Zurich branch of the Reformation.<sup>135</sup> All the more it underscores how important it was for Melanchthon to disassociate at this point with the framework that had guided his first theological account.

In 1535, Melanchthon put the revised version of his *Loci communes* into print, and this “second era” of the *Loci* confirmed the changes that had become apparent in the years before:<sup>136</sup> the new structure of the work beginning with the doctrine of God,<sup>137</sup> the discussion of human powers and free will in order to understand the existence of evil in God’s creation,<sup>138</sup> the distinction of the two modes of necessity,<sup>139</sup> and the explicit rejection of considering human will in the framework of the doctrine of predestination and its replacement with the doctrine of original sin were all there.<sup>140</sup>

132. Huiban 2024: 72. The figure in Graybill 2010: 167 misses this change of focus.

133. Melanchthon does not provide a clear reference, however, when saying in CR 21: 279 that Scripture speaks of “iustitia carnis”, and the references provided by Wengert 2012: 198, are to a different topic.

134. CR 21: 275.

135. It is therefore doubtful that Zwingli was “Melanchthon’s true enemy”, as Wengert 2012: 190 and 196 puts it. This was first of all a welcome side blow to take himself out of the line of fire. On Zwingli’s defense of double predestination, see Rouwendal 2024: 712f.

136. See Huiban 2024: 67-86; Matz 2001: 139-158. On the immediate context of 1534 that might have led to some of the nuances of this edition, see Wengert 2012: 204f.

137. See Melanchthon’s explanations in the opening paragraphs in CR 21: 349.

138. The chapter “De causa mali et de contingentia” is now renamed in “De causa peccati et de contingentia”, see CR 21: 371.

139. CR 21: 372.

140. CR 21: 373.

Instead of Zwingli, however, it was now “Valla and many others” who were used as those who had wrongly denied the will’s freedom,<sup>141</sup> and the modified distinction between works *coram Deo* and works of civil righteousness was pushed even further: civil freedom was now discussed in the first place, making it clear from the beginning that there was some sort of real freedom, and in order to dispel any doubts about it, Melanchthon underscored now that this was “the freedom of the will the philosophers *rightly* attribute to humans”.<sup>142</sup>

More importantly, this acceptance of a real freedom in humans started to affect Melanchthon’s view of human agency *coram Deo*.<sup>143</sup> Since the absence of freedom was not understood anymore as a corollary of predestination, but as the effect of a “corruption human will cannot remove on its own by nature” – as both the 1533 lectures and the 1535 edition stated –<sup>144</sup> it was possible to think that humans could be liberated to circumnavigate this corruption once they received a supernatural aid to do so, that is, grace. In a passage in which Melanchthon addressed Erasmus’ charge<sup>145</sup> that the Wittenberg approach with its denial of human agency would lead to apathy and despair, the Wittenberger said with reference to *Rom* 8:26:

These things are not said to ensnare consciences, or to deter people from the pursuit of obedience or faith, or from striving. On the contrary, since we must begin with the Word, we certainly must not oppose the Word of God, but strive to obey it and to hold fast to the promise of the Gospel, which is universal. [...] Although the will struggles with weakness, nevertheless, because it does not reject the Word but instead supports itself with the Word, it attains consolation. And the Holy Spirit is effective there through the Word, as Paul says: “the Spirit helps our weakness”. In this struggle, the soul must be encouraged to hold fast to the Word with all its effort. It should not be discouraged from striving, but rather taught that the promise is universal and that it ought to believe. In this example, we see these causes joined together: the Word, the Holy Spirit, and the will – not, indeed, idle, but resisting its own weakness.<sup>146</sup>

In those who have received the Word and have the support of the Spirit, the will has a real function in fighting its corruption and weakness, namely to strive, to hold fast, and to resist. Melanchthon even called it here a “cause”, and in light of the sanctification that should follow in those who received grace, he repeated that, “although there is inborn weakness, there is nonetheless some freedom of the will – namely, when it is already aided by the Holy Spirit – and it can accomplish something in avoiding ex-

141. *Ibid.*

142. CR 21: 374 (italics mine). See Wengert 2012: 198.

143. See Pitkin 2004: 364.

144. CR 21: 277 and CR 21: 374, see above, n. 130.

145. Melanchthon says in CR 21: 276 that the question should not be discussed “in otiosis disputationibus”, which is an open attack on the approach of Erasmus’ *Diatribes*, see Wengert 2012: 200.

146. CR 21: 376.

ternal lapses".<sup>147</sup> The former distinction between internal and external works was thus entirely blurred, and the will could now figure as a real cause even in the sanctifying work *coram Deo*.

This naming of the will as one of three causes has challenged Melanchthon scholars, as it has been seen as a contradiction to the strict *sola gratia* of the early Reformation.<sup>148</sup> Since the 1980s and an article of Lowell Green, there has been a tendency to say that Melanchthon understood here the will in an "Aristotelian" framework as a mere material cause (cooperating with the efficient and instrumental causes of the Spirit and the Word), and hence as "the 'material' upon which the first two 'causes' operate".<sup>149</sup> Others have insisted that Melanchthon talks in this passage exclusively about sanctification, whereas the *sola gratia* was meant for justification.<sup>150</sup> Putting aside Green's somewhat peculiar reading of Aristotle's theory of causes,<sup>151</sup> these explanations may work in the narrow context of the question of free will, but they cannot explain away two points: first, the role Melanchthon attributes here to the will does not structurally differ from the one Erasmus had attributed to it when talking about the humans' contribution to salvation. Similar to Melanchthon, Erasmus had insisted on the necessity of a first, exclusive, and gratuitous liberation through divine grace, to which humans were expected then to reply with their striving – a striving which, even for Erasmus, continued to be mainly the work of the supporting grace.<sup>152</sup> If these explanations save Melanchthon, they also save Erasmus whom Luther had rejected. Second, these explanations become more difficult if they are not only seen in the narrow context of free will, as most scholars discuss them, but when taking into account other *loci*, and in particular the one of predestination. For, even if Melanchthon refused since the late 1520s to understand free will under the presuppositions of predestination, he continued at a later point in his *Loci communes* to discuss the doctrine. And as it appears, he now conversely discussed predestination under the presuppositions of his doctrine of the will.

### 2.3 Predestination in the 'Second Era' of Melanchthon's *Loci*

In the 1535 edition,<sup>153</sup> Melanchthon inserted an entire chapter on predestination at the end of a series of soteriological *loci* (sin, Law, Gospel, justification, and good works). These *loci* followed immediately the discussion of free will, and their inner coherence was given by the fact that Melanchthon not only referred several times to his later dis-

147. CR 21: 377.

148. The discussion already began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, see above, n. 12.

149. Green 1980: 97; see Matz 2001: 157; Pitkin 2004: 365f.; Kolb 2005: 93; Beeke 2017: 31.

150. Matz 2001: 150-156.

151. Green 1980: 97f., agrees that his presentation is an "oversimplification", but some of those citing him are less cautious, see Matz 2001: 187, 212, 236, 249; Kolb 2005: 93.

152. See above, n. 63.

153. The manuscript of his 1533 lectures brakes off rightly when Melanchthon discussed predestination, see CR 21: 332.

cussion of predestination,<sup>154</sup> but also proposed to understand predestination, once he started to discuss it, in parallel with the *locus* of justification.<sup>155</sup> In this *locus* of justification, however, Melanchthon had taken up some of the wording of his discussion of the will, and attributed an active role to humans: in order to receive the effect of justification – that is, the forgiveness of sin – Melanchthon stated that the human mind had to “uplift” itself by faith,<sup>156</sup> and that faith had to “apprehend” the divine promise and mercy,<sup>157</sup> so that the confidence which resulted from it depended on two factors:

Confidence encompasses both the [human] knowledge of Christ, the Son of God, and the [human] will, whether as a disposition or an action, by which it wills and accepts the promise of Christ, and thus rests in Christ.<sup>158</sup>

Similar to his explanation of free will whose role consisted in “holding fast to the Word with all its effort”,<sup>159</sup> Melanchthon attributed here to the will the role of accepting the promise of Christ in order to rest in Him.

In addition, Melanchthon insisted in these soteriological *loci* on a new concept, that of the universality of the divine promise.<sup>160</sup> Melanchthon had briefly introduced it in the few paragraphs on predestination that survive from the lecture of 1533,<sup>161</sup> but in the 1535 edition, it reappeared throughout the soteriological *loci*. Melanchthon used it for a first time somewhat covertly in the above cited discussion of the will as a cause that had served to reject Erasmus’ charge of apathy and despair,<sup>162</sup> and right before the *locus* on justification, Melanchthon came back to it in a way that confirms that this risk of demoralization still remained the reason that brought him to insist on the notion of universality:

Just as it is necessary to know that the Gospel is a *gratuitous* promise, so it is necessary to know that the Gospel is a *universal* promise – that is, that it offers and promises reconciliation to all people. It is necessary to hold it as universal against the harmful imaginations about predestination, so that we do not argue that this promise pertains only to a few others and does not pertain to us.<sup>163</sup>

154. CR 21: 420 and 428.

155. CR 21: 450.

156. CR 21: 421: “Mens perterrefacta agnitione peccatorum statuere *debet*, remitti sibi peccata gratis propter Christum per misericordiam, non propter dignitatem [...] operum. Cum hoc modo fide *se* mens *erigit*, donantur remissio peccatorum et reconciliatio” (italics mine); CR 21: 428: “*Agimus* igitur aliquid, cum desperationi *resistimus*, et nos *erigimus* atque consolamur promissione Christi” (italics mine).

157. CR 21: 422: “Paulus [...] requirit fidem, quae apprehendit promissionem”; CR 21: 423: “misericordia fide apprehendenda est”; CR 21: 425: “ut fide apprehendamus Christum tanquam mediatorem”.

158. CR 21: 422.

159. See above, n. 146.

160. That is, new to the Protestant discussion. See Wengert 1998: 143f.; Graybill 2010: 213f. For Late Medieval concepts of a universal calling within discussions of predestination, see Zahnd 2024: 169f.

161. CR 21: 331f.

162. See above, n. 146.

163. CR 21: 419 (italics mine).

It is apparent from this passage that the concept was introduced in order to reject the harsh implications a strong doctrine of predestination risked having. Strikingly, however, it was not introduced to simply reject double predestination, but to reject any “harmful imaginations about predestination”: insisting on the universality of God’s promise, the very idea of a particular election was dissipated, be it positive or negative.

No different from Melanchthon’s earlier introduction of contingency which – while serving the same goal of circumventing problematic corollaries of the doctrine of predestination – introduced the problem of explaining human freedom, this concept of universality had itself consequences in need of explanation. For, if the promise was universal, why was salvation particular? And no different from his dealing with contingency, Melanchthon replied once more by resorting to human agency:

But that not all attain the promises of the Gospel happens because not all believe. For the Gospel, although it promises freely, nevertheless requires faith; for it is necessary that the promise be accepted by faith.<sup>164</sup>

It was the humans’ answer, it was their acceptance of the promise which was necessary and made the difference between those who were saved and those who were rejected.

When finally discussing predestination, Melanchthon even re-used the notion of “cause”. At the very beginning of the *locus* dedicated to the doctrine, he stated:

One has to assess predestination neither by reason, nor by the Law [that is, by the works done according to the Law], but by the Gospel. Moreover, one has to seek no other cause of predestination than [the one] of justification. [...] Therefore, just as when asking about justification we begin with the Word, we begin with the Word or the Gospel when asking about predestination.<sup>165</sup>

As with his teaching of justification, there were two things in particular the Gospel had to say: that it “promised righteousness gratuitously”, and that this promise was universal.<sup>166</sup> Whereas the latter would serve, as we have seen, to exclude the idea of particular election, the first tackled the role of human merits: a gratuitous gift does not depend on the worthiness of the receiver. Yet, while this seems to recall the usual Protestant approach, Melanchthon introduced a significant nuance: righteousness itself was not *given* gratuitously, but *promised* to be given for free. This qualification was necessary, because otherwise Melanchthon would have been led to defend universalism. Once more, however, this qualification opened up a space for human agency:

Just as we say *a posteriori* in justification that there is some cause in the recipient – namely, not worthiness, but because they apprehend the promise with which the Holy Spirit is effective – [...] so too let us judge *a posteriori* about election, that without doubt those are elect who apprehend mercy by faith and do not cast away that confidence to the very end.<sup>167</sup>

164. CR 21: 420.

165. CR 21: 450f.

166. CR 21: 451.

167. *Ibid.*

For Melanchthon, even when discussing election, the gratuitous divine promise was said to expect a human answer in order to be effective. Introducing the idea of an *a posteriori* assignment of causes for one's election – an idea already present in the Late Medieval scholastic discussion<sup>168</sup> – Melanchthon used it in both a temporal and a logical sense:<sup>169</sup> temporal because someone's apprehension of the promise and mercy could never precede a first intervention of divine grace, and logical because it was impossible to predict thus if someone would accept the divine gift unless they did so. All the more, this notion of *a posteriori* underscored the role of human agency: it depended on their will, striving, holding fast, and resisting to the very end whether they could be counted among the elect or not. Insisting once more on the universality of the promise, Melanchthon said:

This must be noted: evil comes from us, and therefore we must be careful not to willingly indulge in natural distrust and resist the promise, or, while turning away from the promise, seek other causes of election apart from the Word of God. And thus, even though Augustine is quite strict, he nonetheless wrote about predestination and grace in this way: 'Those who accept the gift of calling with congruous piety, and, as far as it lies within human capacity, preserve the good of God within themselves, are helped'.<sup>170</sup>

Recalling that, in light of the universality of the divine promise, it depended on the humans' apprehension of this promise, Melanchthon went as far as citing what could have served as a key reference of the scholastic doctrine of good deeds: what he invoked here in words attributed to Augustine<sup>171</sup> was nothing other than the doctrine of an *opus congruum* the scholastics had used to describe the human contribution of *facere quod in se est*, and even if this contribution was reduced to holding fast the divine promise, it remained the result of an act of the human will which had been liberated by grace to do so.

Melanchthon would give an even more explicit account of the human role in election in a later edition of his *Loci communes* published in 1543.<sup>172</sup> This later account, however, was also shaped by a reaction to John Calvin, and before turning to it, the moment has come to draw a conclusion on the earlier Melanchthon. Already with the elements provided in the 1535 edition of his *Loci communes* it is evident that Melanchthon's account had a totally different shape from the one of his first theological expression. And the differences were too fundamental to be discussed away by saying that "changes in 'doctrine,' as modern readers may label them, were for [Melanchthon] not changes at all but simply clearer ways to defend what was central", as Timothy

168. It was William of Ockham who had started to discuss the problem of predestination on a merely propositional level, see Zahnd 2024: 173.

169. See also Graybill 2010: 214f.

170. CR 21: 452; cf. PL 45: 1671.

171. On the inauthentic character of *De praedestinatione et gratia* see Zumkeller 1985.

172. See below, n. 242.

Wengert has tried to argue.<sup>173</sup> The complete displacement of the systematic framework of the doctrine of predestination, the introduction of a theory of contingency in contrast to the earlier insistence on necessity, and the growing recognition of a real human agency in opposition to its complete denial in 1521 are more than simple nuances in the defense of a consistent doctrinal core, but the sign of a thoroughgoing theological reconsideration.

The majority of scholars therefore agree that Melanchthon changed his mind.<sup>174</sup> The question remains, however, as to what made him change his mind. There was a long tradition of saying that Melanchthon had been overcome by his philosophical roots and convinced by Erasmus,<sup>175</sup> but since this research analyzed the change by focusing mainly on Melanchthon's doctrine of the human will it has convincingly been shown in the meantime that the doctrinal differences and the explicit opposition remain too important to claim a simple doctrinal takeover.<sup>176</sup> It has thus been argued – still in light of Melanchthon's doctrine of the will – that the political situation in the later 1520s and “the pitiful state of public behavior in the Saxon villages” he had encountered together with Luther during an official visitation journey,<sup>177</sup> made him insist much more strongly on an anthropology that gave room to moral education. In light of Melanchthon's emphasis of civic freedom, this is certainly not wrong, but as we have just seen, the changes he introduced go deeper than the nuancing of external liberty.

It is here, then, that a focus on Melanchthon's doctrine of predestination may help.<sup>178</sup> As we have seen, it was first of all the deterministic consequence of the doctrine as he had defended it in 1521, and its corollary that God was the author of sin, that made him rethink the notion of necessity. In order to be able to hold that it was in fact humans who were responsible for evil and sin, he introduced then the scholastics' understanding of contingency, which finally led him to insist on a minimal notion of real human freedom. Similarly, it was the demoralizing effect of a strong doctrine of predestination that led Melanchthon to insist on the universality of God's promise, and in order to understand the diversity of election, he went then as far as describing the role of human action with the notion of cause. Therefore, his change of mind regarding anthropology was not the result of a simple change of focus, but of a fundamental reconsideration of the doctrine of predestination.<sup>179</sup>

173. Wengert 2012: 190.

174. Matz 2001: 232; Kolb 2005: 72; Graybill 2010: 4f.; Huiban 2024: 68; see also Wengert 1999: 27.

175. See the overview in Graybill 2010: 9.

176. As has been made clear by Wengert 1998.

177. Kolb 2005: 74f.; see also Scheible 1984: 177; Matz 2001: 106; Jung 2017: 439; Huiban 2024: 74.

178. See already Manschreck 1958: 301.

179. Graybill 2010: 12 agrees that predestination played “a significant role in Melanchthon's changing thought”, but he thinks that “the problem of evil, the question of the origins of sin, and Melanchthon's exegetical methods” should also be taken into account. He seems to be unaware that the first two are one and the same problem which is intrinsically dependent on the doctrine of predestination.

This focus on Melanchthon's doctrine of predestination also sheds a different light on the question of knowing what induced Melanchthon to change his mind. For the most obvious resource to have made him aware of the problematic corollaries of his early doctrine of predestination is, of course, Erasmus. It is Erasmus who insisted that Luther's deterministic account made God the author of sin, and it is Erasmus who underscored its demoralizing effect. In addition, it was Erasmus who resorted to the scholastic distinction of the two types of contingency, who underlined the biblical statements about human striving and fighting, and who underscored that God had pleased to give his promise to everybody who was willing to respond.<sup>180</sup> While it is true that Melanchthon continued to attack Erasmus explicitly and that the differences between their positions remained important,<sup>181</sup> it is thus difficult not to assume that Melanchthon was influenced by Erasmus when reconsidering his doctrine of predestination, all the more since it is certain that Melanchthon engaged with Erasmus' position in the very period when he changed his mind.<sup>182</sup> This is not to say that Melanchthon simply switched over to Erasmus' camp and adopted the humanist's position. Rather, Erasmus' questioning of determinism made him reconsider his own theological presuppositions and think them through in a way that precluded the problematic corollaries of double predestination, without making him therefore a doctrinal ally of the humanist. Ironically, thus, even if Melanchthon repeatedly displaced predestination from the systematic center it had in 1521, the doctrine appears to have remained *ex negativo* the guiding principle of his thought.

### 3. JOHN CALVIN AND THE 'THIRD ERA' OF MELANCHTHON'S *LOCI*

In the 1530s, Melanchthon gained an avid reader from France, who at the time was endeavoring to find his first theological profile: John Calvin. After studies of philosophy and law, Calvin began in his mid-twenties to develop an interest in theological questions, and traces that he knew of Melanchthon's *Loci communes* are recognizable since 1536 from the time when, having fled from France because of his religious views, he published the first version of his opus magnum, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.<sup>183</sup> Calvin, who is notorious for his defense of double predestination, took a moment to start to openly discuss the problem, but as early as 1539, it can be shown that he did so in reaction, among others, to Melanchthon's *Loci communes* of 1535. This is not the place, however, to discuss Calvin's doctrine in its full historical development, but simply to present his early accounts in relation to Melanchthon's position, for the

180. CWE 76: 75.

181. See, e.g. Wengert 1998: 140f.; also Graybill 2010: 130f.; Grosse 2017: 341.

182. With Strohm 2023: 65f.; see also Matz 2001: 101 and 113f.; Pitkin 2004: 364.

183. In the second letter to the reader of his *Psychopannychia*, dated Basel 1536, Calvin mocks about those who "want to appear Christian and are called so because they ponder a few chapters of *Loci communes*" (CO 5: 173/174). Neuser 2009: 175 and 202, claims that Calvin cites Melanchthon's early *Loci communes* in the dedicatory letter of his *Institutes* to Francis I, but he provides no evidence. See rather Millet 2008: 31.

latter would react to Calvin in 1543/44 when producing the so called “third era” of his *Loci communes*. In any case, Calvin would not change his view after 1539 anymore, but reuse and simply expand his account up to the latest edition of his *Institutes* of 1559,<sup>184</sup> so that the following may nevertheless be regarded as an account of Calvin’s position *tout court*.

### 3.1 Calvin’s Early Accounts on Predestination

In the first edition of Calvin’s *Institutes*, predestination was not yet treated as a topic in its own right but was merely touched on in the context of a few comments on the church as the congregation of the elect. Organized in the form of the catechetical literature of the early French evangelical movement,<sup>185</sup> the first *Institutes* provided in its second chapter (out of six) an exposition of the Creed, and as an explanation of “I believe in the catholic Church”, Calvin presented the church as the

universal number of the elect [...], of whom Christ, our Lord, is the leader and prince, and as of one body he is the head, insofar as they are elected in him by the goodness of God before the formation of the world, so that they are all gathered into the reign of God.<sup>186</sup>

In this ecclesiological setting, Calvin’s early view on election depended strongly on Ephesians, a letter traditionally considered fundamental for understanding what the church is. Calvin’s statements that election was settled “before the formation of the world”, that it happened “in Christ”, and that it was due to “the goodness of God” were all contained in the opening verses *Eph* 1:4-5.<sup>187</sup> This ecclesiological focus was primarily due to a specific interest Calvin pursued with this first version of the *Institutes* and that consisted in reassuring those who, like him, had to flee from France for religious reasons. He tried to comfort them, and he used the doctrine of election to ensure them that, wherever they were dispersed in the world, as members of the church, they were unshakably part of God’s salvation plan.<sup>188</sup> Confirming that, as the community of the elect of God, the church could neither collapse nor be ruined,<sup>189</sup> Calvin added with an implicit reference to *Rom* 8:30:

The church is to be believed by us as such that, relying with confidence on the divine goodness, we have it for sure that we also belong to her, and we trust that,

184. See also Neuser 2009: 339; against Grosse 2017: 340.

185. These texts depended to some extent on Luther’s catechetical works, see Strohm 2023: 160 and Selderhuis 2008: 200.

186. CO 1: 72.

187. “For he chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him, in love, he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will”.

188. On this audience and its importance for the doctrine of election, see Oberman 2009: 192, Ha 2024, and Woo 2024: 220f.

189. CO 1: 73.

together with the other elect of God with whom we are called and already partially justified, we will walk as perfectly justified and glorified ones.<sup>190</sup>

In the remainder of the passage, Calvin repeated at least four other times that his readers could be assured of their belonging to the elect and that there were clear testimonies of their being part of the church of the chosen ones.<sup>191</sup>

In this attempt to give comfort to the persecuted, Calvin did not even use the notion of predestination.<sup>192</sup> He was neither interested in explaining more systematically how this election came about, nor to discuss the fate of those who were not part of the church. Rather, he warned against asking about the latter's status: "To discern firmly of others whether they belong to the church or not, and to distinguish the elect from the rejected is not our business: *non nostrum est*. For this is God's exclusive prerogative to know who are his own".<sup>193</sup> And having discussed some ethical consequences of this uncertainty regarding the state of others, he concluded:

Although it is inappropriate to discern individually who belongs to the church and who does not – given that God's judgment is uncertain to us for now – there is no doubt that, where the word of God is sincerely preached and received, where we see that the sacraments instituted by Christ are administered, there is a church of God.<sup>194</sup>

In this first version of his *Institutes*, Calvin did not deny that there are reprobates, but he was simply not interested in that side of the doctrine.<sup>195</sup> To think about them was *non nostrum*, and accordingly, there was also no speculation about the divine will, foreknowledge, or justice.

In the light of Calvin's fame for being one of the most, if not *the* most, prominent advocates of double predestination, this absence of a more thorough discussion in the *Institutes* of 1536 is somewhat striking. There has been a tendency in modern research to underline nevertheless the continuity of this early exposition with Calvin's later developments, and it is true that the position Calvin defends here is not logically contradictory to an account of double predestination: since he remains silent about the reprobate and considers the elect as being chosen by God before the creation of the world, he possibly may have thought that the rejected were actively determined at the same instant of eternity. But this remains mere speculation because Calvin simply does

190. CO 1: 74.

191. "certo expectamus, nunquam futurum, ut nos deserat"; "satis clarum testimonium habemus, nos et inter Dei electos, et ex ecclesia esse"; "ob id certi simus, nos inter eos esse, quos protecturus, quos nunquam perire sinet"; "certo statuendum [...] nos per ipsum in Dei filios sumus adoptati" in CO 1: 74.

192. Alluding to *Rom* 9:11, Calvin uses once the notion of "destinare" (CO 1: 73).

193. CO 1: 75. See already CO 1: 74: "Comprehendere quidem non possumus incomprehensibilem Dei sapientiam, nec eam excutere nostrum est: ut nobis constet, qui aeterno eius consilio electi, qui reprobati sint".

194. CO 1: 77.

195. See also Link 2021: 296. A reconstruction of Calvin's early ideas about the reprobate can be found in Beeke 2017: 111-116.

not discuss reprobation, nor a double decree, and he passes in silence over the famous passages in *Romans* 9.<sup>196</sup> His exclusive interest in God's eternal election of the chosen ones seems rather to suggest that Calvin defended here a position that complied with traditional accounts of single particular election.<sup>197</sup>

This was to change radically when, only three years later, Calvin published a thoroughly revised version of his *Institutes*.<sup>198</sup> Calvin who had been withheld in Geneva in 1536 in order to help the city implement the recently adopted Reformation, but who had to leave the city in 1538 due to irreconcilable differences with representatives of the magistrate, gave this edition of 1539 a much more systematic shape. Having settled in the vibrant intellectual climate of the Upper Rhine area, Calvin intended the work not only to reach a broader academic public, but in the meantime, he had also started to comment on the Bible (beginning with *Romans*)<sup>199</sup> and studied an important number of theological works, both of the fathers and of contemporaries, not the least among them being the 1535 edition of Melanchthon's *Loci communes*.<sup>200</sup>

This new setting affected also his presentation of the doctrine of predestination. The doctrine was now explicitly addressed and was considered sufficiently important to be treated together with the doctrine of providence in a chapter of their own, and in line with the 'second era' of Melanchthon's *Loci*, this chapter (chapter eight out of seventeen) followed after a group of soteriological topics dealing with sin, justification and the distinction of Law and Gospel.<sup>201</sup> Still in line with the later Melanchthon, Calvin did not attribute predestination a particular systematic role. On the contrary, he clearly indicated a sort of systematic break in the middle of this soteriological group, for he said at the beginning of chapter seven:

Above, I have executed as best as I could the sum of the doctrine by which we get from a true knowledge of God and of ourselves to the communication of salvation. Now, as an appendix [*vice appendicis*] I will add what is of no small interest to stabilize this faith.<sup>202</sup>

196. There is only the allusion to *Rom* 9:11 referred to above, n. 192; and a general reference to *Rom* 9-11 is given as a marginal note in CO 1: 73. But this very passage depends much more clearly on *Rom* 8.

197. Calvin mentions the eternal will of God only when talking about the elect, see in particular the passage cited above, n. 193.

198. This change is already discernible in his Catechism of 1537/1538, see Neuser 2009: 273-275, and Muller 2024: 83.

199. See Woo 2024: 211f.

200. On Calvin's Strasbourg period in general, see Arnold 2010. On his reading and use of Melanchthon, see Muller 1999 and 2000: 125-130. Calvin would even produce a translation of Melanchthon during his stay at Strasbourg (see Peter 1980), and back in Geneva, he would write the preface to a French translation of the 1543 edition of Melanchthon's *Loci*, see Wells and Wells 2018.

201. CO 1: 685-830. See also Muller 2000: 136.

202. CO 1: 801.

Whereas chapters one to six represented the “sum of doctrine”, the chapters following this remark – including the one on providence and predestination – were nothing but a stabilizing appendix. Even if this is not the later Melanchthon’s explicit refusal to attribute any systematic importance to the doctrine, it is evident that this placement of the doctrine is also far away from any notion of *Zentraldogma*.

Other than Melanchthon, however, and other than his own earlier account, Calvin made it clear from the very first line of chapter eight that he thought now of predestination in terms of double particular election:

The fact that the covenant of life is not preached to all in the same way, and that among those to whom it is preached, it does not always find the same reception, is a diversity that testifies to the marvelous highness of the divine judgment, and there is no doubt that this variety is subordinate to the decision of God’s eternal will. But if it is plainly owing to the command of God that salvation is spontaneously offered to some, while others are prevented from access to it, great and difficult questions immediately arise, which cannot be untangled otherwise than by providing to pious minds some instruction about what to hold concerning election and predestination.<sup>203</sup>

With the eternal will of God being responsible for the whole variety of human sorts, and with both the spontaneous offer of salvation to some and the prevention of others from accessing it being “plainly” submitted to divine command, Calvin now explicitly defended the doctrine of double predestination. In addition, in seeing the need to give “some instruction” to untangle the difficult questions this brought about, Calvin clearly shifted away from the *non nostrum* of the 1536 *Institutes*.<sup>204</sup>

There has been some discussion in modern research about the reasons for this shift of interest. It has been suggested that Calvin himself was struck by these difficult questions, or that the reality of the situation in Geneva had confronted him with the complexity of a mixed society.<sup>205</sup> Instead of such psychologizing explanations, it seems more promising, however, to insist on some elements Calvin himself gave in the present account. In fact, still at the beginning of the chapter in the 1539 *Institutes*, and thus very prominently before entering the discussion on predestination itself, Calvin inserted a preliminary remark noting that, on this topic, one had to deal with two types of men: those on the one hand, who analyze the problem with too much curiosity and try to penetrate the secrets of divine wisdom,<sup>206</sup> and those, on the other, “who, even if they do not command to suppress every mention of predestination, tell us to shy away from any question about it – not other than [we should shy away] from a cliff”.<sup>207</sup>

203. CO 1: 861.

204. See above, n. 193. Already in the catechism, Calvin had that one “necessarily” had to consider the subtle mystery of the divine counsel in the distinction of elected and rejected ones, see CO 5: 332f. and Neuser 2009: 274.

205. See the discussion in Beeke 2017: 118.

206. CO 1: 861f.

207. CO 1: 863.

This is an interesting statement. While the first group can easily be identified with the commonly criticized scholastics and their presumed speculations that both Luther and Erasmus had rejected, it was Calvin himself who, as to the second group, had been reluctant in 1536 to talk about predestination. At some point, he had even warned then that those who, unsatisfied with having the mere promise of Christ, try to climb higher and fall into the abyss of God's majesty.<sup>208</sup> In so doing, however, Calvin seems to have belonged rather to those who "suppress every mention of predestination" than to the second group he presented here. On the other hand, it was Melanchthon who, in his *Loci* of 1535, had not completely omitted the notion of predestination, but had been outspokenly against attributing too much relevance to it. In the light of Calvin's knowledge of and esteem for Melanchthon's *Loci*, it appears that Calvin addressed here the *Praeceptor Germaniae*, so that this whole preliminary note was just about finding his own profile against the background of the Wittenberger's work he had so avidly read.<sup>209</sup> Unsurprisingly, Calvin tried to remain as sympathetic as possible, for he continued:

Their moderation is justly commendable because they think that mysteries should be treated with so much reservation. Yet, as they go too far below the proper measure, they are of too little help to the human mind, which does not easily allow itself to be restrained. Therefore, in order to keep also in this matter the rightful end, one has to return to the word of God in which we have a reliable rule of knowledge. For scripture is the school of the Holy Spirit in which, just as nothing has been omitted in it which is necessary or useful to know, nothing is taught but what is conducive to know. Therefore, whatever is put forward in scripture about predestination, we have to take care that we do not deter the faithful from it, so that we do not seem either to maliciously steel from them their benefice of God, nor to blame and insult the Spirit for having vulgarized as useful what [we think] should be suppressed.<sup>210</sup>

Taken for its own, this is a surprisingly extensive justification of why a treatment of the problem of predestination is appropriate. When read in the light of Calvin's relation to Melanchthon, however, it underscores how much he was aware of departing here from Melanchthon's approach, and accordingly, it underscores how important it must have been for Calvin to nevertheless introduce a more extended account of predestination.<sup>211</sup>

208. CO 1: 74.

209. See also Lane 2010: 203. This is confirmed by two other prominent texts: on the one hand, by the preface to Calvin's commentary on *Romans* published in 1540, where Calvin charged Melanchthon with having "designedly passed by [in his explanation of *Romans*] many things which could annoy the common mind" (CO 10.2: 404, see Graybill 2010: 228). On the other, by the preface Calvin would write to a French translation of Melanchthon's *Loci* published in Geneva in 1546. Calvin openly states there that Melanchthon preferred to give a very restrained account for fear of the curiosity of others, see CO 9: 849; Wells and Wells 2018: 207.

210. CO 1: 863.

211. In the question of predestination, the possibility of an influence of Wittenberg theology on Calvin is usually discussed in terms of Calvin's possible readings of Luther, see Heckel

Interestingly, Calvin also gave here the reason why he thought it was not possible to remain over-reluctant in addressing predestination, and he gave a reason that he probably thought would also convince Melanchthon. As Calvin stated, it was Scripture itself that discussed predestination, and given that Scripture was “the school of the Holy Spirit” and the reliable rule of knowledge, a good theologian was not only allowed to deal with the problem, but obliged to teach it to the faithful, for otherwise he would question the authority of the Spirit to know what is best to have been revealed.<sup>212</sup> In a certain sense, Calvin presented here the same motivation which had driven the early Luther: regardless of whether it was pleasant or not, Scripture revealed the will of God, and humans had to accept it.<sup>213</sup> Calvin also mentioned the Trinity and the *creatio ex nihilo* as doctrines difficult to accept for “profane men”,<sup>214</sup> and added:

But the claim that this entire discussion is dangerous even for pious minds – because it is opposed to exhortations, because it shakes faith, because it disturbs and dismays the heart – is empty. For these reasons, Augustine did not deny that he was often criticized for preaching predestination too freely. However, he readily refuted this objection abundantly.<sup>215</sup>

This scriptural obligation appears as the crucial element in the evolution between the two editions of Calvin’s *Institutes*. From a letter of the Basel printer Johannes Oporinus, it is known that Calvin had lectured on the Pauline epistles during his first stay in Geneva,<sup>216</sup> and the final years of the 1530s were also the period when Calvin prepared an extended commentary on *Romans* that would be published in Strasbourg in 1540. In the face of this more intensive engagement with the Pauline corpus, and the letter to the *Romans* in particular, Calvin appears to have realized in the late 1530s that there is no way of avoiding the topic, and so he attacked it head-on and in spite of Melanchthon’s reluctance.

As to his doctrine of predestination properly speaking, it can be laid out rather quickly. Calvin defined predestination as

the eternal decree of God, by which He has established for Himself what He wants to happen to each individual human being. For it is not the case that they are all created under the same condition, but some are preordained to eternal life, and others to eternal damnation.<sup>217</sup>

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2025: 38-40, and more generally, Strohm 2023: 156-159.

212. In the preface mentioned above, n. 209, Calvin explicitly opposes Melanchthon with the same argument: “I maintain that nothing of what is revealed to us in Scripture must be held back, whatever be the case” (CO 9: 849; Wells and Wells 2018: 207).

213. See above, n. 76.

214. CO 1: 864.

215. *Ibid.* See PL 45: 1028f.

216. CO 10/2: 91, see Neuser 2009: 260f., and Muller 2024: 83.

217. CO 1: 865.

This was clearly a statement of double predestination for it involved an active willing of God and a positive decree regarding both the elect and the rejected. Calvin also stressed the eternity of the decree – a few lines later, he would call it an “eternal and immutable counsel”<sup>218</sup> – and made clear that by “preordaining” humans to their destiny, the decree preceded anything that might have been regarded as a reason for predestination. Later in the discussion, Calvin focused on *Romans* 9 in order to reject even more clearly the idea of any cause other than God’s willing, and in so doing he made a fundamentally voluntarist understanding of God’s decree apparent, for he said in regard of the rejected:

If we can give no other reason why he dignifies with mercy those who are his, than that it pleases him to do so, then we have also in the reprobation of the others no other reason than his will. [...] If he would have the slightest [other] reason, it would be necessary that something precedes his will, as if his will would be bound to it, which is outrageous to imagine. For God’s will is that much the highest rule of justice that, whatever he wants, by the mere fact that he wants it, has to be taken as just.<sup>219</sup>

No less than Luther in 1525,<sup>220</sup> Calvin subscribed here to the voluntarist principle that something is just (or good or appropriate) and had to be accepted as such by the mere fact that God wanted it to be. Therefore, he did not need to enter any discussion about the legitimacy of God’s particular election, for humans being sinful they would all have earned condemnation in any case.<sup>221</sup> In light of the primacy of God’s will, Calvin would also deny the possibility of a difference in God between His willing and permitting,<sup>222</sup> and he considered it superfluous to discuss divine foreknowledge and the idea of foreseen merits that could have influenced God’s decision, for God only foreknew what He first had decreed in His will to happen.<sup>223</sup> This led him to affirm, in the end, that God even willed Adam’s fall:

The first man has fallen, because the Lord deemed it expedient that it be thus. Why he deemed it so escapes us, but it is sure that he does not have deemed it otherwise, because he saw that the glory of his name was rightly displayed in doing so. [...] Man has fallen, thus, with God’s providence ordaining it so, but he fell by his own fault.<sup>224</sup>

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218. *Ibid.*

219. CO 1: 870; see Beeke 2017: 130f.

220. See above n. 86, and Heckel 2025: 222.

221. CO 1: 872.

222. CO 1: 873f. See Woo 2024: 215f.

223. Calvin attributed this argument explicitly to Lorenzo Valla, the named enemy of the discussion in Melancthon’s 1535 *Locis*, see above, n. 141.

224. CO 1: 874. For later discussions of the problem of the Fall in Calvin, see Heckel 2025: 177-198.

With the last sentence recalling the legitimacy of God's action, Calvin went not as far as the early Wittenberg theology and their explicitly deterministic account. Having read the later Melanchthon, he knew of the danger of being associated with stoic fatalism,<sup>225</sup> and he tried to escape the charge by using a distinction which had already been present in the early Wittenberg theology:

What then? you may ask, does nothing happen fortuitously or contingently? I answer that it was rightly said by Basil the Great that fortune and chance are terms of the pagans, and the minds of the pious should not be occupied with their meaning. For if all success is the blessing of God, and all calamity and adversity His curse, then there is no place left for fortune or chance in human affairs. [...] I will say, therefore, that although all things are ordered by God's dispensation, they are still fortuitous to us. Not that we believe fortune rules over the world [...]. But because the order, reason, purpose, and necessity of events are, for the most part, hidden within God's counsel and cannot be grasped by human understanding, those things that are certain to proceed from God's will, are [to us] as if they were fortuitous [*quasi fortuita*].<sup>226</sup>

Combining, so to say, Luther's doctrine of the hidden God<sup>227</sup> and the early Melanchthon's distinction of a divine and a human perspective on predestination, Calvin refused to talk about fate or determinism, for these terms belonged to the human perspective and were thus inappropriate to describe what was hidden in divine counsel. In the human perspective, there was no possibly discernible chain of causes that might have earned one of these notions, so that humans while having it "firmly fixed in our hearts that nothing will happen which the Lord has not already foreseen" had to consider all events "as if they could incline in either side".<sup>228</sup>

Such an appearance of contingency did not give room for real human agency before God, of course. For Calvin, there was no doubt that the destiny of every individual was governed by the divine decree, and so he openly rejected Melanchthon's concept of a human involvement in accepting the divine call as an *a posteriori* cause. Discussing *Acts* 13:48 according to which, after having heard Paul and Barnabas in Antioch, "as many as were ordained to eternal life believed", Calvin said:

With what face can we deny that vocation<sup>229</sup> is gratuitous, when in it, from the very beginning to the end, election alone reigns? And indeed, this testimony refutes not only those who make man a co-worker with God in the completion of the calling, but also those who teach that election should be assessed *a posteriori*, as though it were suspended and uncertain until confirmed by vocation. Of course, there is no doubt that election is confirmed, provided that by this word [confirmation] you understand nothing other than its being attested with a sure testimony

225. CO 1: 890; for Melanchthon's charge, see CR 21: 372f.

226. CO 1: 891.

227. See Heckel 2025: 208f.

228. CO 1: 892. Calvin would later point in the same direction by distinguishing between necessity and coercion, see Heckel 2025: 134f.

229. The 1539 edition had here *electionem*, but it was corrected into *vocationem* since 1543.

and, as it were, sealed. But it is falsely said that election only becomes effective once we have embraced the Gospel and that it derives its power from there.<sup>230</sup>

There was no doubt that, in line with *Romans* 8, election was confirmed by vocation (and justification and glorification). But none of these steps could include, for Calvin, a human cooperation, given the eternity of the divine decree and the sovereignty of the divine will.

A further consequence of this strongly voluntaristic approach was a change in the Christological perspective of Calvin's account. Whereas, in 1536 and its orientation on *Eph* 1:4, Christ was included from the beginning as the one "in whom" election happened, the definition Calvin gave now of predestination bypassed the Son, as it seems, for it was an eternal decree God had "established for Himself".<sup>231</sup> This difference is due, of course, to the fact that Calvin had spoken in 1536 of election and the elect alone, whereas he began now with predestination and included the rejected – and by no means it would have been possible in a Christian setting to conceive of *reprobation* as happening "in Christ". If this explains the absence of Christological considerations in the first part of the *locus* where Calvin dealt mainly with double predestination, it does not discuss away a more fundamental systematic problem: the exclusion of Christ from the divine decree (because of the rejected) risked putting into question the necessity of Christ with regard of the chosen ones: if God could reject some without the Christ, what was the need of Christ for saving others?<sup>232</sup>

Calvin tried to overcome the problem by stressing Christ's role as soon as he focused, in his 1539 account, on the elect alone.<sup>233</sup>

If we seek the fatherly clemency and favorable disposition of God, the eyes must be turned to Christ, in whom alone the Father's soul finds rest. [...] Therefore, those whom God has adopted as His children are said to have been chosen not in themselves, but in His Christ: for He could not love them but in Him, nor could He honor them with the inheritance of His kingdom unless they had been made His consorts. If, then, we are elected in Him, we will not find the certainty of our election in ourselves; nor even in God the Father, if we imagine Him apart from the Son. Christ, therefore, is the mirror through which it is appropriate to contemplate our election.<sup>234</sup>

Christ appeared thus as the warrant of the believers' salvation – not only as the one "in whom" they were elected, but also as the one "through which" the believers could learn about their election, having been "enlightened with the knowledge of His name".<sup>235</sup>

230. CO 1: 879.

231. See above, nn. 186 and 217.

232. See Neuser 2009: 274f. and 340; and Link 2021: 296 and 303f. On the role of Christ, see Woo 2024: 217f.; and Wengert 2012: 196f. Melancthon's approach.

233. See already CO 1: 865, where *Eph* 1:4 is the first biblical text used once Calvin enters the discussion of the *locus*.

234. CO 1: 880.

235. CO 1: 881.

Christ assumed the classical role of the mediator of salvation in both bringing it and announcing that he had brought it, and building on *Rom* 8:30 according to which predestination was followed by vocation, Calvin saw in Christ the reassurance of those who had received his word to belong to the elected: “What did Christ want to teach us here other than to be confident that we would be saved forever because we have once been made His?”<sup>236</sup>

Calvin’s voluntaristic account then should not give the impression that the pastoral intention of his first *Institutes* had disappeared in 1539. Even if the discussion had left the ecclesiological setting of 1536, the concern to bring comfort to the community of believers remained evident throughout the 1539 discussion of predestination.<sup>237</sup> Just as Luther who had been convinced that the stability of the divine promise and the assurance it could give to the believers was only granted when it did not depend on human contribution, Calvin likewise presented the doctrine of predestination as “an extraordinary fruit of consolation”.<sup>238</sup> In the message of the Gospel he was sure that the pious would find a “reliable foundation of their election”,<sup>239</sup> and so he concluded: “Hence, the faithful, insofar as they have any taste of what we set forth at the beginning, will recognize that predestination, if rightly considered, brings not an unsettling of faith but rather its best confirmation”.<sup>240</sup>

Ironically, in his 1539 *Institutes*, Calvin presented therefore a version of double predestination that only differed with the early Wittenberg approach in the fact that Calvin did not consider it as belonging to the core of Christian teaching. Of course, Calvin was much more explicit on the topic than both Luther and the early Melanchthon, but with his insistence, on the one hand, on the sovereignty of the divine will, on unconditional election, and on the necessity of everything that resulted from it when seen in a divine perspective, and with his conviction, on the other, that only the doctrine of double predestination provided true consolation to the believers, Calvin invigorated here the very approach Melanchthon had been trying to overcome for the last ten years. Modern research is still undecided to what extent Calvin in 1539 was actually familiar with the respective writings of the early Wittenberg reform,<sup>241</sup> but for the present purpose we can leave this question aside. Far more important to us is the fact that Calvin evidently knew – and attacked – the ‘second era’ of Melanchthon’s *Loci* that had shaped his considerations to a large degree. All the more, Melanchthon, who had certainly not forgotten about the early Wittenberg approach, was now challenged to respond.

236. *Ibid.*

237. See also the transition in CO 1: 900, where Calvin states that he wanted to present predestination and providence “insofar as it contributes to the solid edification and consolation of the faithful”.

238. CO 1: 880; see Woo 2024: 220.

239. CO 1: 882.

240. CO 1: 883.

241. See above, n. 211.

### 3.2 Melancthon's *Loci* of 1543

At the turn of the year 1543/1544, Melancthon published a new edition of his *Loci communes*.<sup>242</sup> It was, yet again, a thoroughgoing revision of the entire work, and would define, for the large part of it, the final shape of the text. The revision was not anymore due to a reconsideration of fundamental theological doctrines, but the result of important discussion of the late 1530s and early 1540s, both within the protestant camp leading to the *Wittenberg Concord* and the *Confessio Augustana Variata*, and on an inter-confessional level with the religious colloquies of Worms and Regensburg (1540/1541). But Melancthon used the revision to adapt also some topics that had not been part of these discussions, and unsurprisingly, the doctrine of predestination was among them. Melancthon and Calvin had met in person at the two religious colloquies where their main interest had been to underline their doctrinal unity,<sup>243</sup> so they probably sought to diminish their differences in the present question. But two years later, in early 1543, Calvin did not hesitate to dedicate to Melancthon a treatise against Albert Pighius (a Dutch defender of traditional faith who had attacked Calvin on his doctrine of double predestination),<sup>244</sup> officially submitting to Melancthon his stance on the question. Especially since, in the dedicatory letter, Calvin used all the tricks of humanist rhetoric to play down the differences and introduce Melancthon as supporting him,<sup>245</sup> the Wittenberger was called upon to react.

The very structure of the 1543 *Loci* makes it clear that Melancthon benefited from revising them for the sake of clarifying his teaching of predestination once again. While the doctrine of the will and the subsequent soteriological chapters which followed the doctrine of creation remained structurally unchanged<sup>246</sup> in the first part of the work, the locus on predestination was separated from them and placed far back in the last third of the work after the *loci* of the church and sacraments. In this new context, the doctrine of predestination was given an openly ecclesiological framework, similar to the one Calvin had already given it in his *Institutio* of 1536. However, an intensification of ecclesiological orientation was also evident in parts of Melancthon's revision of the doctrine of the will,<sup>247</sup> so that a common intention seems to have been at work despite the further separation of the two *loci*. Modern research has attributed this emphasis to the context of the religious colloquies where ecclesiological questions

242. The preface and the title page are dated to 1543, but the explicit says 1544 (see CR 21: 563/564). I keep in the text the common designation as the "1543 edition". Graybill 2010: 249, is wrong, therefor, when assuming that Calvin's treatise against Pighius followed the 1543 *Loci*.

243. A first personal encounter had taken place in 1538 in Frankfurt, see Wengert 1999: 25.

244. See Muller 2024: 86-88, Heckel 2025: 16.

245. CO 6: 229-232; see Wengert 1999: 27f., and Pitkin 2004: 367.

246. According to Matz 2001: 171, Melancthon's exposition of Law, Gospel, grace and justification remained almost unchanged in the new edition also from a doctrinal point of view.

247. See Matz 2001: 182-188, Graybill 2010: 244f.

were indeed heavily disputed.<sup>248</sup> From the perspective of the doctrine of predestination, however, a further element becomes clear: just as Calvin had detached himself from the ecclesiological integration of the doctrine in 1539 in order to be able to take into account both sides of his doctrine of double predestination, the reintroduction of an ecclesiological framework could now help Melanchthon to exclude from the outset the idea of double predestination. Once again, the marginalization of the doctrine of predestination in the structure of Melanchthon's work may therefore be evidence of the lasting importance he attached to its discussion.

The textual changes in Melanchthon's treatment of the *locus* of predestination make it clear how much this reorientation was triggered by Calvin's position.<sup>249</sup> It is true that, similar to Calvin in 1539, Melanchthon did not name names, and he purged his discussion almost entirely from indications that there were other views on the topic than his, giving it an unpolemical shape that clearly tried to avoid unnecessary tensions in the hopes for Protestant unity.<sup>250</sup> But at the same time, Melanchthon reorganized the *locus* in a way that revealed his implicit adversary. At the very start of the *locus*, he complemented the textual bulk of the 1535 discussion with extended preliminary remarks based on a statement about the diversity and instability of human societies.<sup>251</sup> In a much more condensed manner, this had been the very starting point of Calvin's treatment of predestination in 1539,<sup>252</sup> but while the latter had used it to introduce the distinction between the elect and the reprobate (and their mutual dependence on the divine decree), Melanchthon used it in accordance with his new ecclesiological focus to talk about the Church as the community of the elect within a mixed society:

There is some Church of God, and the whole human race has not been created solely for destruction and present miseries, nor as mere material of perishing matter. [...] Although the ruins of kingdoms are frequent and great, we can know from God's own testimonies that the Church of God will endure. In order to hold fast to this consolation, it is useful to say something about election or predestination [*de electione seu de praedestinatione*].<sup>253</sup>

The tone of Melanchthon's treatment was set. Given the ecclesiological perspective, this was going to be about God's intention to preserve "some Church of the elect",<sup>254</sup> and hence the discussion could have been entitled "on election" as much as "on predestination". To be sure, the former concept would entirely replace the latter in Melanchthon's further discussion: although the *locus* continued to bear the title "de praedestinatione",

248. Matz 2001: 161f.

249. The link is thus much more strongly than Kolb 2005: 88-90 suggests.

250. Besides the passage mentioned below, n. 273, there is a short potshot against the Jews and the scholastics in CR 21: 914.

251. CR 21: 912f.

252. See above, n. 203.

253. CR 21: 913.

254. CR 21: 913f.

the focus on election was so strong that, with the exception of the passage just cited, the notion of predestination would not reappear anymore.

When he came to present his position after these preliminary remarks, Melancthon drew the consequences of this shifted focus. While repeating the content of the two statements which had opened the discussion of 1535<sup>255</sup> – replacing, of course, the notion of predestination with the one of election – he inserted between the two a third one, and presented them as three “hypotheses”:

The first is: one has to assess election neither by reason, nor by the Law, but by the Gospel. The second is: the whole number of the saved are elected because of Christ. Therefore, unless we embrace the knowledge of Christ, nothing can be said about election. The third is: we have not to seek one cause of justification, and another one of election.<sup>256</sup>

The importance of the Gospel and the notion of cause were still present, and in a certain sense they were put together in this new second statement in order to pave the way for a more thorough refutation of particular election: it reinforced the role of Christ as the one the Gospel was talking about, but it specified that an “embracement” of this message was a necessary part of any consideration of election.

With the same intention, Melancthon expanded also his presentation of the central points the Gospel had to say on the topic. Before talking about the gratuitously and universally given promise of salvation he had put forward in 1535,<sup>257</sup> he stated:

Let us therefore seek the promise in which God has expressed His will, and let us understand that no other will concerning grace should be sought outside the Word. Rather, the mandate of God is immutable: that we should listen to the Son, as He has said: “Listen to Him” (*Luke 9:35*). This voice comprehends all promises. Thus, let it be fixed in the minds, and let it always be reflected in daily prayers that there is an eternal and immutable mandate of God that we should believe in the promise of grace, which is the sum of the Gospel.<sup>258</sup>

All of a sudden, Melancthon introduced the language of an “eternal and immutable mandate of God”,<sup>259</sup> reacting thus to Calvin’s concept of an eternal decree. But other than the notion of *decretum* that stated a fact to be (regardless of how this would be put into practice), the one of *mandatum* expected an active execution by those to whom the mandate was commanded. And since this execution consisted of faith in the divine promise, this slight nuancing of a central notion of Calvin’s position allowed Melancthon to further reinforce his conviction that there was no election without human response. Accordingly, Melancthon now insisted first on the universality of the divine promise, and mentioned the gratuity of the promise only in the third place.<sup>260</sup>

255. See above, n. 165.

256. CR 21: 914.

257. See above, n. 166.

258. CR 21: 914.

259. See also CR 21: 916, and already 659 (in the doctrine of free will) and 881f. (on penance).

260. CR 21: 914f.

his primary concern was not to fight anymore the defenders of meritorious acts but to refute the concept of particular election.

A further element making Melanchthon's engagement with Calvin clear was his introduction of a discussion of the cause of reprobation. Although the ecclesiological focus on election would have permitted him to omit a discussion of the reprobate, Melanchthon preferred to mention them and to talk about them even before discussing the elect:

It is certain that the cause of reprobation is this: namely, sin in humans who do not hear or accept the Gospel at all, or who abandon faith before departing from this life. In them, it is certain that the cause of reprobation is their sin and the human will. For the sentence is most true that God is not the cause of sin and does not will sin.<sup>261</sup>

Melanchthon's earlier fear that a different doctrine risked to make God the author of sin was still present. To start with reprobation permitted him to reiterate this risk and to repeat twice what he thought to be certain: that sin as the cause of one's rejection included some kind of human involvement. This was an important point of precision, for not even Calvin disagreed with the Christian commonplace that reprobation was legitimate because of the sinfulness of humans.<sup>262</sup> In order to distance himself, Melanchthon insisted however on the necessity of a further step, that it was not simply the general state of sinfulness, but the particular behavior of not responding appropriately to God's calling which caused reprobation. Pushed by Calvin, he was thus driven to explain even more clearly human contribution.

The same accentuation was discernible when Melanchthon came to discuss the cause of election. Having laid out that it was the lack of hearing, accepting, and persisting that caused reprobation, he could now emphasize all the more that it was the presence of these conducts that counted as a cause of election:

On the other hand, however, it is rightly said that the cause of election is the mercy in the will of God, who does not will the entire human race to perish [...]. Nevertheless, in the recipient an apprehension of the promise and an acknowledgment of Christ must also concur. For we are elected because we are made members of Christ. Therefore, just as we have said regarding justification that there is some cause in the recipient – not dignity, but their apprehension of the promise, with which the Holy Spirit is simultaneously efficacious [...] – so too do we judge *a posteriori* about election: namely, that without doubt those are elect who apprehend by faith the mercy promised because of Christ, and do not cast away that confidence to the very end.<sup>263</sup>

Compared with the 1535 account, repeated here almost word by word, two things become clear:<sup>264</sup> first, Melanchthon added the specification that the mercy believers had

261. CR 21: 915.

262. See above, n. 221.

263. CR 21: 916.

264. See above, n. 167.

to apprehend by faith was “promised because of Christ”, insisting on the Christological dimension of election which had faded into the background with Calvin. Second, Melanchthon now explicitly used the notion of *concurrere*<sup>265</sup> which had been a standard term not only of Late Medieval considerations of the human contribution to salvation, but also been put forward by Erasmus when describing the role of the human will.<sup>266</sup> An Erasmian focus was also discernible when Melanchthon discussed *John* 6:44 (“No one comes to me, unless the Father draws him”) and *Phil* 2:13 (“It is God who works in you to will and to fulfill for his good pleasure”), and said:

God begins and draws us by His Word and the Holy Spirit, but it is necessary for us to listen and learn – that is, to apprehend the promise and assent to it, not to resist, nor to indulge in distrust and doubt. [...] God draws minds so that they may will, but it is necessary that we assent and do not resist.<sup>267</sup>

In his own exposition of *John* 6:44, Erasmus had said that “this is not a violent drawing, but it makes that you may will, although you still can want not to”.<sup>268</sup> This is not to say that Melanchthon copied here from Erasmus, but it shows how much the discussion with Calvin made him align even more closely with a position that had also been defended by Erasmus.<sup>269</sup>

A final sign of Melanchthon’s engagement with Calvin was a series of new paragraphs at the end of his discussion. They served to show the “sweet, salutary and manifold consolations this position contains, which is nevertheless passed over as if void by idle readers”.<sup>270</sup> Although once more, Melanchthon gave no indication of any interlocutor, this was a telling statement not only in light of Calvin’s accusation that Melanchthon paid too little attention to the doctrine, but above all it reflected Calvin’s (and through Calvin, Luther’s) insistence that it was in the immutability of the divine decree that believers could find real comfort. In order to provide a counterweight to this claim, Melanchthon listed no less than six consolations his position could offer, and he used them to repeat the central elements of his approach: because “only those are called who listen to, learn, and profess the Gospel”, believers could be reassured that the church of the elect was to be found within the visible church, within which

265. See also CR 21: 919: “Vult igitur cum misericordia concurrere apprehensionem in accipiente promissionem”.

266. See above, n. 63.

267. CR 21: 914f.

268. LB 9, 1238D; see CWE 76: 66 (with a slightly different translation).

269. In the re-edition of his *Loci* of 1548, Melanchthon would even cite verbatim Erasmus’ definition of free will – and would have to take a lot of criticism for this, see Kolb 2005: 94, and Strohm 2023: 65f. For the citation see CR 21: 659 (see also Heckel 2025: 155f. who thinks however that the passage was already present in 1543); for Erasmus, see above, n. 41. While it is true that Melanchthon omitted again the passage in the re-editions of the 1550s (as Wengert 2012: 187 has been keen to underline), the central notion of the definition, the one of *se applicare*, was in the *Loci* since 1535, see CR 21: 425. See also CR 21: 749-751 for its presence in the 1543 edition. There is thus no reason to assume that, only “as an exception” (“ausnahmsweise”), Melanchthon was here close to Erasmus, as Holm 2017: 402 states.

270. CR 21: 917.

God would really accept those who did assent, so that they could be certain that He was present and efficient among them.<sup>271</sup> In addition, Melanchthon underlined that his position liberated believers from the postulations of an institutional church or the Law, and in this sense, he could even use *Romans 9* in his support, for “*it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy*” to set the conditions of election. Nevertheless, Melanchthon was quick to add that “He wills that apprehension concurs with His mercy in the one who receives the promise”.<sup>272</sup>

It was only after having laid out all these points that Melanchthon finally became more explicit about the position he had been implicitly refuting throughout. For he said:

Let us then remove from Paul the Stoic disputations, which overturn faith and prayer. How indeed can Saul believe or pray to God when he doubts that the promise pertains to him, or when that tablet of the Fates creeps in: “It has already been decreed that you are to be rejected; you are not written in the number of the elect, etc”.? Against these imaginations, let us learn God’s will from the Gospel and recognize that the promise is universal, so that faith and prayer may be inflamed.<sup>273</sup>

It was the risk of determinism with its demoralizing effects, and the recent advocacy of double predestination that he had found in Calvin, that pushed Melanchthon to rework his doctrine of election and accentuate further the role of human contribution. Melanchthon would follow this path in the years to come up to an explicit reuse of Erasmus’ definition of free will in 1548,<sup>274</sup> and since Calvin would not change his mind, but strengthen and expand his argument in his subsequent writings, the two would admit more openly their mutual disagreement on the topic: in the preface to a French translation of the *Loci* that was printed in Geneva in 1546, Calvin would encourage the reader to keep a “sense of proportion in assessing this book” as to its teachings on free will, predestination, and the sacraments,<sup>275</sup> and Melanchthon would openly complain about Calvin’s position when, in the early 1550s, a new dispute about predestination emerged in Geneva.<sup>276</sup> In the context of the present article, however, we do not have to analyze these further evolutions anymore, for the positions were clear and would remain the same. Although Calvin was only one among other representatives of the Reformed branch of Protestantism, and although Melanchthon’s position would be much attenuated in the controversies leading to the Wittenberg concord, the red lines drawn by the two theologians in their concealed dispute of the late 1530s and early 1540s would separate the confessions for centuries to come.

271. CR 21: 917f.

272. CR 21: 919.

273. *Ibid.*

274. See above, n. 269.

275. CO 9: 850; Wells and Wells 2018: 207.

276. On this so called Bolsec affair, see the still valuable documentation of Holtrop 1993; more recently, see Muller 2024: 88-94, and Bruening 2024. On Melanchthon’s change in tone, see Wengert 1999: 29-34, Pitkin 2004: 345f., and Kolb 2024: 205.

## CONCLUSION

This article has focused on the discussion of predestination in the context of the Wittenberg theology of the first three decades of the protestant Reformation. Based on several allusions to the doctrine in the earliest disputations involving Wittenberg theologians, its significance for Luther's reconsideration of the relation between human agency and divine grace has become clear, although a shared anti-speculative impetus hindered several of the interlocutors to expose their doctrine in detail. When, in the mid-1520s, Erasmus and Luther entered the ring for their publishing dispute on free will, they both confirmed the importance of the doctrine, but shied away from discussing 'scholastic subtleties' and even Melanchthon who offered a more systematic approach to theology and explicitly named predestination among the core topics of Christian teaching, did not give it more than a declarative summary in his first *Loci communes*. With Melanchthon, however, it has become clear that the discussion did not stop there. In the shift which his theology is known to have taken in the late 1520s, he also revised his teaching of predestination and arrived at a position that would be challenged by one of his avid readers: John Calvin. An interesting displacement happened thus in the landscape of predestinarian positions: whereas the early discussion opposed a deterministic Wittenberg account to traditional defenders of singular particular election, the discussion of the late 1530s opposed a Wittenberg defender of general election to a (later Genevan) advocate of double predestination.

To sum up, three points appear particularly interesting in this displacement. First, the dependencies between the different actors were stronger than is generally assumed. There is no doubt that Melanchthon read Erasmus in order to refute him, but the perspective on predestination has brought to the fore strong evidence that he learned from the humanist to avoid the two doctrines that made him change his mind on predestination: namely, the demoralizing effect of determinism, and its making God the author of sin. On the other hand, if it might have seemed strange in the beginning to include Calvin in a presentation of Wittenberg approaches to predestination, I hope to have shown how much he has to be considered an interlocutor of Melanchthon. It is known, of course, that the young Calvin was an avid reader of the *Praeceptor Germaniae*, but the extent to which his reformulation of predestination in the second edition of his *Institutes* has shown itself to be an answer to Melanchthon is striking. Even more striking – and much less known it seems – is the dependency on Calvin that appeared in Melanchthon's revision of the doctrine in the 1543 *Loci communes*, which seems to have been entirely rewritten to riposte Calvin's account. In none of these cases was the dependency doctrinal (in the sense that one would have adopted the position of the other). The influence consisted rather in learning about corollaries to consider and excrescences to avoid. But in so doing, our close reading of sources has traced terminological borrowings that were distinctive enough to reveal the interlocutors.

Second, in comparison with the Late Medieval discussion, it has been confirmed that the Protestant debate did not result in any fundamentally new position. Even if the approach to predestination was different in the earliest Wittenberg theology because it emerged as a presupposition of its doctrine of grace rather than a corollary of the di-

vine attributes, the positions defended were no different from the three main types of double, single, and general election medieval scholastics had defined. On the contrary, from a medieval perspective, it has not only become clear to what extent Luther and the early Melanchthon can be classified among the representatives of double particular election, but it has also become apparent that with Erasmus' position and the later Melanchthon's defense of the universality of the divine promise the whole range of Late Medieval positions continued to be represented. In addition, the aforementioned displacement between the earlier and later phase of the discussion has also brought about a dissolution of the initial Wittenberg link between predestination and the doctrine of grace. Unsurprisingly, this would liberate Protestant theologians of the next generation to place the discussion more freely within their works, so that some of them readopted the classical scholastic approach and discussed predestination once more within the traditional framework of the doctrine of divine attributes.<sup>277</sup>

A third point emerges from this. The loosening of the systematic link between the doctrines of grace and predestination also changed the systematic significance of the latter. While Luther repeatedly insisted in the early 1520s that his denial of free will spoke straight to the sum of his doctrine, and the early Melanchthon placed the discussion of predestination accordingly at the beginning of his *Loci communes*, the later Melanchthon resolutely rejected the idea of putting the doctrine at the core of Christian theology. Interestingly, Calvin followed him here, discussing predestination not only after justification, law and grace, but explicitly wanting it to be understood as a mere appendix to what he considered to be the sum of Christian doctrine. If it was to be applied anywhere in these early discussions, it would have been in early Wittenberg theology that a labeling of the doctrine of predestination as a *Zentraldogma* would have had its place. It is another matter, however, that the later perception of the different positions turned out quite differently than the actual reality.

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#### BIBLICAL ABBREVIATIONS

*Acts* = Acts  
*Eph* = Ephesians  
*Heb* = Hebrews  
*Jer* = Jeremiah  
*John* = Gospel of John  
*Mal* = Malachi  
*Phil* = Philippians  
*Rom* = Romans

277. But this was by far not the only place to discuss the doctrine, so that it can not be taken as a sign of rupture with the former accounts; see also Muller 2024: 35f.

## OTHER ABBREVIATIONS

- CO = J. Calvin, *Joannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. J.G. Baum *et al.*, 58 vols., Braunschweig, C.A. Schwetschke, 1863-1900.
- CR = P. Melancthon, *Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. K.G. Bretschneider *et al.*, 28 vols. (Corpus Reformatorum, 1-28), Halle (Saale) 1834-1860.
- CWE = D. Erasmus, *The Collected Works of Erasmus*, 89 vols., Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1974-.
- DH = *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, ed. H. Denzinger et P. Hühnermann, 45<sup>th</sup> edition, Freiburg, Herder, 2017.
- LB = D. Erasmus, *Opera omnia*, ed. J. Leclerc, 10 vols., Leiden, Peter van der Aa, 1703-1706.
- LW = M. Luther, *Luther's Works. American Edition*, ed. by J. Pelikan *et al.*, 55 vols., Saint Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1955-1986.
- PL = *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 217 vols., Paris, Jean-Paul Migne, 1841-1855.
- WA = M. Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, hrsg. von J. Knaake *et al.*, 72 vols., Weimar, Böhlau *et al.*, 1883-2009.
- WA.B = M. Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Briefwechsel*, hrsg. von G. Bebermeyer *et al.*, 17 vols., Weimar, Böhlau *et al.*, 1930-1983.

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