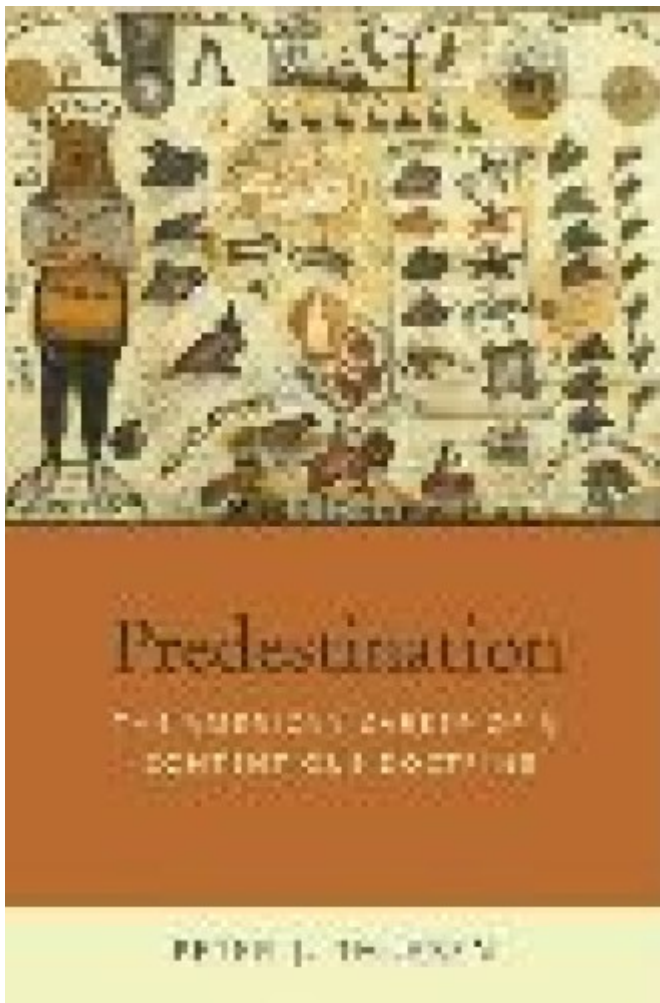


Predestination: The American Career of a Contentious Doctrine

reviewed by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [October 20, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Predestination: The American Career of a Contentious Doctrine

Peter J. Thuesen

Oxford University Press

On the face of it, it does not seem difficult to state the contradictions that beset a doctrine of predestination. An absolute sense that God determines the outcome of our lives cuts the nerve of moral responsibility. Softening the doctrine to make room for human efforts leads to works righteousness. Adopting universalism—the view that all will be saved—also undermines the motive for moral action.

As easy as it is to state the tensions, the problem is theologically unsolvable. For that reason the church has been in dispute over the doctrine since the time of Augustine, or perhaps since Paul wrote Romans 8:29-30, which is echoed in Ephesians 1:5, 11. The history of the doctrine may leave the reader baffled—and dismayed that attempts to articulate the power of God’s grace have regularly culminated in acrimonious and exclusionary reasoning.

Peter Thuesen has written a careful and compelling historical account of the way in which predestination has vexed and engaged the church in the United States. He makes no conclusive theological judgment of his own but permits the reader to see close up what the dispute has meant in the church.

In his introductory chapter he presents the European background of the doctrine and details the disputes that were transported to the New World. In the wake of Augustine, the medieval church had formulated a sacramental theology that provided a means to soften or counter any simplistic notion of the divine decree and to engage the church’s confidence in a relational dimension of faith.

But the Reformation accent on grace alone evoked a resistance to any help from the sacraments and set the table for the ensuing assertions of Calvin (not very different from those of Luther) that led to the doctrine that became the “werewolf of Reformed theology.” By the end of the 16th century, the dispute had hardened into the Calvinism of the Council of Dort and the reaction of Dort’s Arminian opponents.

After reviewing that background, Thuesen focuses on U.S. religious history, beginning, of course, with the Puritans, who made many refinements in the doctrine. John Cotton, for example, was judged by his adversaries as one of those “weak-kneed Calvinists who could not endure the full arbitrariness of absolute predestination.” The book traces the bottomless drama of certitude and anxiety in great and illuminating detail.

Beyond the Puritans, Thuesen offers a survey of the way in which the high-church Episcopalians mounted a sacramental protest against predestination and appealed to Enlightenment reason to resist the offensive claims of the divine decree. Central to the 18th-century dispute was the role of John Wesley, who had the vigorous support of his mother, Susanna, in opposing the doctrine. As the battle heated up, Arminians were labeled papists and Calvinists were called Muslims. Both sides pushed the logic of their adversaries to illogical extremes, so that, Thuesen concludes, "The old Calvinist-Arminian battle from the Old World was replaying itself in the New, with Calvinists tarring Arminians as heretics and Arminians portraying Calvinists as killjoys."

Thuesen grasps the irony that royalist Anglicans opposed absolute monarchy in theology, while Calvinist supporters of democracy held to absolutism. He hints that the theological argument in the 19th century had important political overtones. The challenge to Calvinist certitude was continued by the Methodists with their moral zeal, with an important assist from the Mormons.

As Thuesen turns to the story of Protestantism in the 19th century, he takes up, in turn, the Stone-Campbell Disciples, the Adventists, the Christian Scientists and the Unitarians, with special mention of the tribe of Lyman Beecher, whose children eventually broke from their adamant father on the issue.

In two chapters on recent denominational struggles, Thuesen considers the ways in which Catholics and Lutherans in the U.S. have worked out a domestication of predestination. Catholics have done their work through the doctrine of purgatory, which allows breathing room amid the absolute decree. Lutherans have staged their conflict as a battle between the pastoral agenda of Henry Muhlenberg and the fire-eating certitude of C. F. W. Walther of the Missouri Synod—a struggle that Thuesen labels the Lutheran Civil War. Happily the Lutheran and Catholic fractiousness still permitted agreement on a joint declaration on justification in 1998, a statement that may make one wonder about the history of the dispute.

Thuesen offers a parallel chapter on the Presbyterians and Baptists. The wars over revising the Westminster Confession have been intense among the Presbyterians, and the Baptists have long been splitting and excommunicating each other over issues that are rooted in the doctrine of predestination. The sum of this tale is that Christians have a breathtaking capacity to engage in actions that dismiss their theological opponents and allow no room for the graciousness they otherwise

proclaim.

Thuesen concludes with the surprising, persuasive assertion that megachurch pastor Rick Warren, extoller of the “purpose-driven life,” traffics in a soft doctrine of predestination, one that stands in continuity with the teachings of the ancients. Upon hearing Warren, Thuesen could not shake the feeling that he “was looking at Jonathan Edwards in the guise of a huggable, high school coach of a man.”

It became clear to this reviewer by the end of the book that the quarrel has not been generated by mad theologians, though some may have been mad and made the worst of the doctrine. Rather the issue is intrinsic in a faith based in grace and committed to moral passion. The quarrel will continue, though perhaps couched in softer, more therapeutic terms that leave U.S. Christians in a comfort zone of permissive democracy.

The book puts me in mind of a story from Columbia Seminary that witnesses who were in the room attest is true. Felix Gear, beloved theologian, was lecturing on double predestination. Seeing a student dozing in his class, he woke him and said, “Explain double predestination.” The dazed student, not fully awake, said, “Oh Dr. Gear, I did understand, but I have forgotten.” Dr. Gear responded, “Holy Jesus, the only person in Western Christendom who has understood the doctrine, and he has forgotten.” Indeed! This book is a compelling reminder of where we have been, what is entrusted to us, and how much we have forgotten.