

1-1-2013

Review of *Predestination: Biblical and Theological Paths* by Matthew Levering

Mickey Mattox

Marquette University, mickey.mattox@marquette.edu

Predestination: Biblical and Theological Paths by Matthew Levering (*Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011*), x + 228 pp.

TEACHING HISTORY of theology in a Catholic university, one often finds that Catholic students are among the most vociferous classroom opponents of the notion that a vigorous doctrine of predestination—one that prioritizes God's election and grace over the sinner's exercise of the free will—has ever had a proper place in the Catholic theological tradition. Start out with Paul's words in Romans 8:28–30 and the students will be sure that the Apostle had nothing more in mind than God's foreknowledge of right or wrong use of the free will. Mention Augustine's

idea of operating grace and the students may puzzle, but will probably decide he is distant enough to disregard. Toss in the authority of Aquinas and their confused expressions will suggest growing worry. Aquinas couldn't have said that, could he? Review the Molinist controversy and they will likely puzzle over the intensity of the debate. Confront them at last with the relevant pages from such a classic source as Ludwig Ott's *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, which gives both election and reprobation *de fide* status, and they will likely be baffled. Search for a clincher from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, however, and find scant mention of the theme. The contrast between Ott and the *Catechism* is glaring. How, one might well wonder, did we get from there to here?

Levering's rich and wide-ranging study offers answers to such questions in the form of an eminently readable and theologically sensitive reflection on the theology of predestination from its roots in the Old and New Testaments down to the present day. A slim volume, it eschews the encyclopedic approach in favor of a method that selects particular theologians over the various periods of church history and sets their views out for analysis and reflection. The goal is wisdom for faith and teaching, that is, "biblical and theological paths" toward a proper Catholic embrace of the mystery of predestination.

The volume begins with Levering's own review of the biblical roots of the doctrine of predestination in the Old and New Testaments. Scripture, Levering argues, presents a generally coherent narrative of a God who providentially directs the cosmos as a whole toward its ultimate fulfillment, who freely elects Israel as the privileged agent of that providential care, and who brings his promises and covenants with Israel to fulfillment through Jesus Christ. At the same time, Scripture also affirms human responsibility. The foundation for God's own providential care and electing grace, moreover, is solely his own love. More than that, the election of the Father itself stands as the point of origin of the missions of the Son and the Spirit. Examining Romans 8–11 with this broad characterization in mind, Levering sketches out the problem of a God who has "mercy upon all" but also "hardens" the heart, for example, of Pharaoh. Attending with care to the results of contemporary exegetical studies of Romans, Levering concludes that the Scriptures challenge the theologian with a difficult balancing act. On the one hand, there is no deficiency in the grace and love of God for every rational creature. On the other hand, God freely elects to allow some rational creatures to remain in their sin. This is the mystery of predestination.

The next four chapters examine the treatment of this mystery in the works of a small group of representative theologians. For the patristic

period, Levering chooses Origen, Augustine, Boethius, and John of Damascus. In each case, here and throughout the book, Levering demonstrates a remarkably wide and deep reading, not only in the primary sources, but in the relevant secondary literature as well. His conclusions are drawn with care and with an admirable commitment to fairness and attention to nuance, even in theologians with whom he seems to disagree. Augustine and Boethius, Levering notes, emphasize God's providential control but seem at times to struggle to affirm the universality of God's love. The latter point is admirably underscored in Origen's work. John of Damascus, on the other hand, emphasizes creaturely freedom in such a way that human freedom threatens the priority of God's gift of grace.

Moving to the Middle Ages, Levering examines the positions of Eriugena, Thomas Aquinas, William of Ockham, and Catherine of Siena. Both Eriugena and Ockham tend to reduce predestination to God's foreknowledge. Ockham sees predestination as God's foreknowledge of human good deeds, although he allows that God is free in rewarding them. Aquinas, on the other hand, makes a series of crucial distinctions. Most fundamentally, perhaps, God's providential care involves a "transcendent causality" that mysteriously upholds the freedom of "created causality" (78). At the same time, God permits but does not will evil. Instead, God only "wills to permit evil to be done" (79). Antecedently—that is, as the gracious giver of all being and salvation—God wills the salvation of all. Consequently, however—that is, with a view toward their free rejection of his love and persistence in sin, God wills the everlasting punishment of some rational creatures. God gives good to all and does not cause the failure of those who are lost, but the good of eternal life is given only to some, through God's predestination of particular rational creatures to the good of a supernatural end that lies wholly beyond their natural capacities. Why do not all persons receive this supernatural destination? Catherine of Siena, Levering argues, better balances the sense of the believer's radical dependence on the gift and grace of God with the superabundant love of God for all rational creatures. In her willingness to live with this tension rather than seeking to resolve it in a conceptually rigorous manner, she points the way forward for those who would be faithful to the Scripture's own inner tension.

Reflecting on the treatment of this problem in the Reformation and early modern period, Levering turns to the writings of John Calvin, Luis de Molina, Francis de Sales, and G. W. Leibniz. In this group, he finds that de Sales best preserves the salutary tension between the priority of God's gift and the superabundant love of God. Levering offers an ecumenically sensitive but not uncritical treatment of Calvin, whose position on this

matter is all too easily caricatured. Calvin did not accept the notion of a "permissive will" in God, and thus he concluded that God, who after all is Lord over all of history, both does not and does will sin. The difficulty for Calvin, then, is to explain how it is that God does not somehow commit the sin that, as part of his "secret plan," he allows. Calvin's doctrine of predestination, however, is "asymmetrical," for he located the cause of election in God's grace, but the cause of reprobation in the defect of the rational creature itself. In denying God's permissive will and assigning reprobation to God's active will, however, "Calvin solves the problem by, as it were, seizing the nettle" (197). Molina, on the other hand, famously distinguished God's "middle knowledge" of the causal nexus by means of which rational creatures may come to participate in himself from his "natural knowledge" of all possibilities for the created order, as well as his "free knowledge" of what will happen within the created order he has actually chosen to instantiate. On the basis of this "middle knowledge," God knows how free creatures will act, that is, turning themselves either toward or away from God. Predestination, then, means God's free choice of that particular order in which some creatures turn toward, others away. Predestination, in short, is not causative; instead, it is a matter of fore-knowledge. Leibniz continues the emphasis on causal chains characteristic of Molina, but without the "middle knowledge." Finally, de Sales radically emphasizes the love of God, even for those who persist in sin. He allows as a possibility the explanation that God wills the beauty of diversity in allowing some to be lost eternally, but he does not wish to assert it. The mystery of predestination will be revealed only in heaven, and every attempt to grasp that now threatens to undermine the revealed knowledge of divine mercy and love.

A final historical chapter examines twentieth-century theologians, including Sergius Bulgakov, Karl Barth, Jacques Maritain, and Hans Urs von Balthasar. Both Bulgakov and Barth tend toward a universalism that seems to compromise the revealed truth that some rational creatures are forever lost, as Jesus himself repeatedly warned. For his part, Maritain seeks to resolve the difficulty of the relationship between the creature's free response and the grace of God. Levering offers a brilliant and illuminating account of Maritain's proposal of a "non-active nihilation" that renders the grace of God ineffective in some rational creatures without involving God as cause at any level. Levering argues that, in spite of Maritain's intellectual agility, the latter does not resolve the question why God does not infallibly move all to assent to grace. The mystery of God's permissive will remains firmly in place. Lastly, in von Balthasar, lostness is taken up into the mystery of the divine life by means of an intra-Trinitarian kenosis, a

strategy that (Levering not implausibly complains) “imports horrors into the divine life” (176). His gentle but persistent argumentation here suggests that these twentieth-century strategies for taming the problem of predestination focus one-sidedly upon God’s love to the exclusion of his free and providential decision to allow some to be permanently lost.

A concluding chapter engages these problems energetically. Here, Levering observes that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms that some of the angels have been irrevocably lost. Likewise, the *Catechism* warns that we human beings may also be lost if we persist in mortal sin without repentance, even if it does not ask or answer the question who or how many may be lost. If, however, we embrace the position that none will be lost, then we render a good deal of Jesus’ own teaching misleading at the least. In the end, we must in our praise of God affirm the mystery of predestination after the manner of Catherine of Siena and Francis de Sales, that is, that God superabundantly loves each rational creature and that God permits the permanent free rebellion of some of them.

In probing the question of predestination in dialogue with Scripture, tradition, and magisterial teaching, and in listening well to a wide range of Protestant and Orthodox voices, Levering offers a fine model of the Catholic theologian at work today. In doing so, moreover, he provides no little assistance for all who would teach not only the history but also the faith of the Church Catholic. N.V.

Mickey L. Mattox
Marquette University
Milwaukee, WI