

The Martin Bucer Seminar and the Doctrine of Predestination

Compiled from the website of the [Martin Bucer Seminar](#) (including [here](#) and [here](#)).

Together with the Reformers, the confessions of the Reformation, and Reformation churches and movements, and seeing how they have also been the starting point for many European free churches such as the Baptists or Free Evangelical Churches, we believe in the omnipotence and sovereignty of God in all questions of creation, salvation history, and salvation. We also believe that it is the Holy Spirit who gives people the knowledge of God and His revelation, so that without Pentecost there would be no church. This view is often associated with the term “predestination.”

For this reason, we are repeatedly asked by Christians tending to associate the term predestination with undesirable developments to explain where the Martin Bucer Seminar stands on the doctrine of predestination. Here is our response.

- We have lecturers from very different churches, both national churches and free churches. When it comes to the question of predestination, there tend to be more Reformed thinking individuals involved. However, there are Christians involved who have been shaped differently in their thinking.
- Our students do not sign a profession of faith. During the admission interviews, we point out that there is only one thing that makes studying with us very difficult, namely if a student constantly says that certain things taught or certain church orientations to which lecturers and students belong are false doctrine and protests against them. That makes a working relationship almost impossible. However, this does not apply to a thorough discussion of the issues involved when done with a Bible in one’s hand.
- Our seminary exists on a the basis of very open discussion between students and lecturers and students and lecturers among themselves other about such questions, as they are answered differently within the evangelical movement. No one has to fear being ‘run over’ by us.
- For us, the interpretation of Scripture, i.e. exegesis and hermeneutics, precedes dogmatic teachings. This will be explained in more detail below.
- You are welcome to inquire with congegations and churches where our graduates work, and you will find that they do not promulgate controversial topics or divisions. Our interest is really not to train individuals to have a spirit of division. Rather, it is to see Christians seek unity with other Christians with a Bible in hand and trust placed in the Holy Spirit.
- By the way, our focus on world missions and the great questions of world Christianity – such as the ecumenical code of ethics for missions („Christian Witness in a multi-religious World“, 2011) , the persecution of Christians, and the challenge of Islam – also shows that while we are convinced that only the Holy Spirit can expand his church worldwide, we have complete responsibility to make our contribution.

We are “faithful to the Bible,” “Alliance-minded,” “Reformed”

Terms relating to theological concerns and positions are not harmless because a listening counterpart most often already thinks he knows exactly what the other means, what the other individual stands for,

and very quickly comes to pass judgment before having listened at all to the other individual. Nevertheless, we will dare to use three catchwords, even if everyone has to get to know us better if they really want to know what these terms mean to us. Nevertheless, we dare here to use three catchwords, even if everyone who really wants to know what these terms mean to us has to get to know us better.

“Faithful to the Bible” means that we work on the basis of the complete trustworthiness of Scripture and believe that scholarly theology must do without atheistic methods. Only Scripture and no confession is the final authority of the congregation of Jesus – and we want to be measured every day anew by this constitution, even though we know that our human interpretation of Scripture can be fallible and must be discussed again and again with other Christians and established in lived experience.

“Alliance-minded” not only means that we understand ourselves to be connected with all people worldwide who believe in Jesus Christ. It also means that we especially work together with evangelical Christians. We do this, among others, on the basis of faith of the German, Swiss and Austrian Alliances, the European Evangelical Alliance, and on the basis of faith of the World Evangelical Alliance. We seek cooperation with all Evangelicals involved in biblical teaching, evangelism, mission, and building the church.

This also connects us with revival movements and spiritual awakenings worldwide, from which we always want to carry new ideas to Europe.

“Reformed” (or “molded by the Reformation”) means that in addition to the full responsibility of humankind, we bear witness to the perfect omnipotence and sovereignty of God in all things in a complementary way, (equivalent to saying that there are two apparently irreconcilable truths which nonetheless complement each other). This is broadly testified to in the Bible. Reformed also means that we value the Old Testament highly, attaching great importance to God’s ordinances for all areas of creation and see our task not only as it relates to the church but also as it relates to society.

We are not Reformed in a wrongly understood, purely confessional sense. Thus, we do not question the superordinate position of Scripture prior to all dogmatism (faithful to the Bible) or the learning of all missionary Christians (alliance-oriented). We know that the kingdom of God is greater than can be expressed by a confessional school of thought. Nevertheless, awareness of one’s own position and honesty towards other Christians is a prerequisite for every conversation, even in one’s own circle of association.

Our namesake Martin Bucer was Reformed and yet placed the Bible study of every Christian faithfulness above every confession. At the same time, like us, he was committed to reconciliation and cooperation between Christians. He, like us, was convinced that joint thorough research in Scripture and the discussion of theological positions does not disturb the unity of Christians. Rather, it promotes it. No wonder he was accused of not having a position himself and of hanging his flag according to the direction of the wind. This is a strange accusation for someone who in the end almost died for his convictions and survived only by fleeing to Cambridge. Clarity and affability, truth and love do not have to be in opposition to each other. We want to pass on our convictions clearly, but with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15).

Martin Bucer: Exegesis comes before Dogmatics

Our namesake Martin Bucer (1491–1551) worked throughout his life on the text of the Scriptures and was always ready to listen to the Scriptures, especially on the basis of suggestions coming from his opponents of every stripe.

“Bucer’s theology is fundamentally Biblical. His writings are rich in Bible quotations, his knowledge of Scripture is extraordinary, and his exegetical achievement impressive. The structure of his ecclesiology is never the result of a series of dogmatic premises he only documented with Bible quotations a posteriori. Rather, it is the fruit of tireless exegetical research and reflection” (Gottfried Hammann).

In addition to the prioritization of exegesis over dogmatics – a typical characteristic of later Pietism but also of the Enlightenment – practice and ethics were also more important than ‘clean’ dogmatics:

“Bucer was more interested in preaching and ethics than in contradiction-free teaching. His heart beat for the interpretation of Scripture, in which he unfolds an extraordinary wealth of ideas” (Werner Neuser).

Text Excerpt 1: Complementarity

Extract from: Thomas Schirrmacher. [“The Discovery of Complementarity, Its Transfer to Theology, and Its Significance for Biblical Thought,”](#) *MBS Texte 66 (Theologische Akzente)*. Bonn: Martin Bucer Seminar, 2006.

The Bible makes each person fully responsible as an individual. And yet this responsibility only refers to the area of responsibility that God has given mankind. Above this, God stands in his omnipotence and directs creation. It is in the first place out of this omnipotence that the responsibility of man and the commandment to man are founded. The passage Philippians 2:12–13 makes this clear: “... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” Here one sees that the knowledge that God works out everything does not lead to passivity but rather to ‘tackle things.’

Similarly, in Ephesians 2:8–10, the good works of the Christian are associated with God’s sovereign action:

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

“According to Augustine, if justice is to be done to the richness and complexity of the biblical statements on this subject, one must at the same time adhere to the absolute sovereignty of God and to true human freedom and responsibility. To simplify the problem by denying the sovereignty of God or human freedom would amount to a serious questioning of the Christian understanding of the way in which God justifies man” [Alister E. McGrath. *The Way of Christian Theology*. C. H. Beck: Munich, 1997. p. 436].

Many biblical issues and questions have two sides that are equally important, and some theological discussion in the past or present have only resulted from the fact that discussion partners emphasize one side revealed in the Bible and neglect another. Examples can be cited as follows:

- God is one and yet three.
- Jesus is true man and true God;
- The Bible is a book composed by humans and at the same time the Word of God inspired by the Holy Spirit.
- The Christian is free from the law and still lives according to the commandments of God.
- The Christian is free from sin and yet not sinless.
- The devil has long been deprived of power and yet has great power.
- The Christian has eternal life that cannot be lost and is nevertheless intensely warned to hold fast the faith.

The fact that knowing that God directs all things does not diminish man's responsibility, and conversely that man's complete responsibility does not place God's sovereignty into question, is shown in particular by such Bible texts in which both sides are simultaneously found, indeed where from one side a conclusion is drawn about the other side.

- Philippians 2:12–13: "... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good counsel. (Christians put forth efforts, yet only because they know that God brings about everything.)"
- John 1:12–13: "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." (One must receive God personally, and yet this is not done by human power but by God.)
- John 6:37: "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away." (One must come to Jesus, but he who comes is given by the Father.)
- John 6:29: "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." (This is the answer to the question in 6:28 as to which works of God are to be done.) (One personally believes and yet this faith is the work of God.)
- Galatians 4:8–9: "Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God – or rather are known by God ..."

Henry Meeter has pointed out that Calvin and the Calvinists not only emphasize predestination more than others. They also emphasize human responsibility more than others. So they have been equally accused of overemphasizing predestination and therefore being fatalists as well as overemphasizing responsibility and therefore being legalistic!

Text Excerpt 2: Pentecost – We are involved – not despite the Holy Spirit but because of It

Extract from: Thomas Schirmmacher. *Missio Dei*. VTR: Nuremberg & RVB: Hamburg, 2011.

Without the Holy Spirit every world mission and every mission strategy would be meaningless and

doomed to failure. Only the Holy Spirit can convict people of their guilt (John 16:7–10), lead them to the knowledge of God and the saving work of Jesus, and make them new people in Christ (John 3:5).

“We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. ... The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:12+14).

“He will convict the world,” it says of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8). We often ask the question of predestination and responsibility and want to know how our responsibility is compatible with God ruling everything. Here, however, the opposite question arises: What else do we have to do with mission if the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit do everything and if the Spirit convicts the world?

What about me, as a witness, leading someone to faith? Can I lead someone else to faith? Or does God do that? In order to lead someone else to faith, the Holy Spirit I needed. But the fact that the Holy Spirit has the task of revealing the gospel to other people does not mean that we can sit back. Whoever receives the power of the Holy Spirit, which is the prerequisite for at all being able to preach the Gospel, does not sit quietly in the chair but becomes a witness.

It is not the case that the church of Jesus has the program ‘Mission’ and one must now consider what role God actually plays in it. It is also not the case that we only need God as a command giver, for instance, in order to be able to counter critics as follows: “We have the command directly from God.” That would be far too little. Behind mission is not the fact that God only gave us one command. Behind the ‘command’ there is a promise and finally Missio Dei and thus God’s very being.

Our mission is a direct continuation of God’s mission. Therefore, the crucial question is why God, who acting along would get along much better with his mission, brings us human beings into it. The Holy Spirit wants to convict people of sin. It makes no sense to commit ourselves to it!

A missionary command and the Holy Spirit! The astonishing thing about it is not the Holy Spirit but our participation! In other words, why is there a Great Commission? If God is already running after humankind in the Garden of Eden and again and again in history, why then still commission man? If Jesus is the missionary par excellence to whom we owe our faith – according to the Epistle to the Hebrews, “Jesus” is “the apostle” (Hebrews 3:1) – what are people still needed for? If the Holy Spirit has above all a task: “He will convict the world of sin, judgment, and righteousness,” what do we have to do with it? In my opinion, that is the real question.

John Calvin correctly writes:

“I am now compelled to repeat what I have already discussed above. Although God could do this work purely by Himself, without any other aid or tool, He could also do it through the angels; but there are a number of reasons why He prefers to do it through men” [*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated here from the German version into English from: John Calvin. *Unterricht in der christlichen Religion. Institutio Christianae Religionis*. Neukirchen publishing house: Neukirchen, 1988 5th Edition, p. 714 (from 4th book, 3rd chapter, section 1)].

As the first reason, Calvin mentions God's regard for man as His own creation and in His image.

A modern Reformed theologian, John Stott, writes similarly:

“The place of the Holy Spirit in evangelism is primary. For the Holy Spirit himself is the supreme evangelist, the chief witness and first communicator of the gospel. Normally, however, he does not wish to evangelize without the help of human instruments, but without the aid of the Holy Spirit, the work of the human evangelist will definitely be fruitless” [“The Holy Spirit in Evangelism” translated from “Der Heilige Geist in der Evangelisation.” Gnadauer Materialdienst 2nd Denkendorf: Gnadauer Verlag, 1976, 12 pp.].

The gifts of the Spirit are thus a beautiful example of the *Missio Dei* and the complementarity of the mission which God Himself carries out and in which He fully includes people. God Himself determines through gifts who within the church and mission has which abilities and tasks. And yet, the individual Christian and the church as a whole are not thereby incapacitated. Rather, the Spirit enables Christians to weigh in with their special features and individuality all the more.