

*Practical Predestinarians in England, c. 1590–1640.* Leif Dixon.

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Why did predestinarian doctrine gain so much traction in post-Reformation England? An older literature either did not ask the question or made it difficult to answer. Max Weber focused on the unintended effects of predestinarianism, not on its sources, and he created an “image of nervy, introspective predestinarians” (175). The literary scholar John Stachniewski supplied evidence that predestination produced “the persecutory imagination,” citing Blair Worden’s remark that “the volume of despair” generated by the teaching of the doctrine was “incalculable” (Stachniewski, *The Persecutory Imagination* [1991], 1). On this agonistic reading, predestinarianism could seem to be a form of psychological self-harm, a deeply perplexing phenomenon associated with the

Puritan fringe. Yet ever since Nicholas Tyacke demonstrated that Calvinist theology was mainstream Church of England divinity in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, there has been a pressing need to explain the appeal of predestinarian ideas.

Leif Dixon's astutely observed monograph builds on the suggestive work of earlier scholars like Peter Lake and R. T. Kendall (who coined the term "experimental predestinarianism"). Dixon wrestles with the problem not as a historical theologian, but as a historian of religious thought and practice. His subjects are clerics, but he analyzes them as pastors (practical predestinarians) rather than as exegetes or systematic theologians. The approach has its limitations, since divines were immersed in scripture and Christian tradition, and this provides part of the explanation for their predestinarianism. The Augustinian tradition, which flowed from the *schola Augustinia moderna* into the early Reformation, weighed heavily in the minds of Protestant divines anxious to associate their theology with the enormous prestige of the preeminent Latin father. For the Reformers, predestination was essential for securing the core Reformation principles of *sola gratia* and *sola Dei gloria* — in Luther's thought, the bondage of the will highlighted the necessity of grace and thus brought glory to God alone. And while Protestants justified the doctrine from scripture, they read Pauline texts through an exegetical tradition forged in the biblical commentaries of first and second generation Reformers. Dixon pays relatively little attention to these factors, but they go a long way toward explaining why a difficult doctrine loomed large in the minds of clergy.

Instead, Dixon focuses on the practical uses of the doctrine. His assumption is the functionalist one that the popularity and longevity of predestinarian Protestantism points to its capacity "to encompass a wide range of emotional needs and provide for a wide range of emotional responses" (31n). Weber's and Stachniewski's predestinarians were angst-ridden; Dixon's are practical, popular, and rather prosaic. Reformed divines insisted that predestination was a "comforting doctrine," and Dixon shows how this was so. In this respect, his book has much in common with a work he doesn't cite, Michael Davies's *Graceful Reading* (2002), a study of Bunyan that corrects Stachniewski's remorselessly bleak view of Puritan piety. The argument is developed through a series of well-chosen case studies featuring William Perkins, Richard Greenham, Richard Rogers, Thomas Wilson, Robert Sanderson, homiletical literature, and funeral sermons. A key claim is that the doctrine of predestination could be used to bring certainty and assurance in a very insecure world. In contrast to the modern West, where "the buffered self" described by Charles Taylor enjoys a strong (even inflated) sense of personal agency and independence, early modern people were acutely conscious of their vulnerability and dependence on an inscrutable Providence. "Predestination was a codification of this dependent relationship" (353), and derived its plausibility from its capacity to address this sense of anxiety.

In supplying a useful corrective to Stachniewski, Dixon arguably overcorrects. The more one emphasizes the humdrum character of practical predestinarianism and its pastoral success, the harder it becomes to understand the growing discomfort it engendered among leading clergy. Of course, the reaction to Calvinist soteriology is not the subject of this book, but it is a shadow looming over it. Among the episcopal clergy, there was an anti-Calvinist

reaction from the 1620s and a turn toward Arminianism that accelerated from the 1650s. Even among Puritans there was a growing tendency to soften or reject predestinarianism. It is striking that the practical divinity of Richard Baxter — the most popular Puritan divine of the second half of the century — placed little weight on the doctrine of predestination. There were various factors behind this theological shift, but complaints about the pastoral problems caused by experimental predestinarianism were insistent. Nevertheless, Dixon helps us to understand why pastors and theologians found the doctrine useful. The book's arguments can be long-winded, replicating the prolixity of its sources. The index is inadequate, and there are occasional slips — the eminent church historian David Steinmetz is misnamed John Steinmetz (45), and J. W. Packer's book on the Anglican Henry Hammond is misattributed to J. I. Packer, who wrote on Richard Baxter and Puritanism (213n). Yet this monograph is packed with acute observations and merits careful reading. It takes its place alongside the work of Lake and Tyacke as an important contribution to the literature on English Calvinism.

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