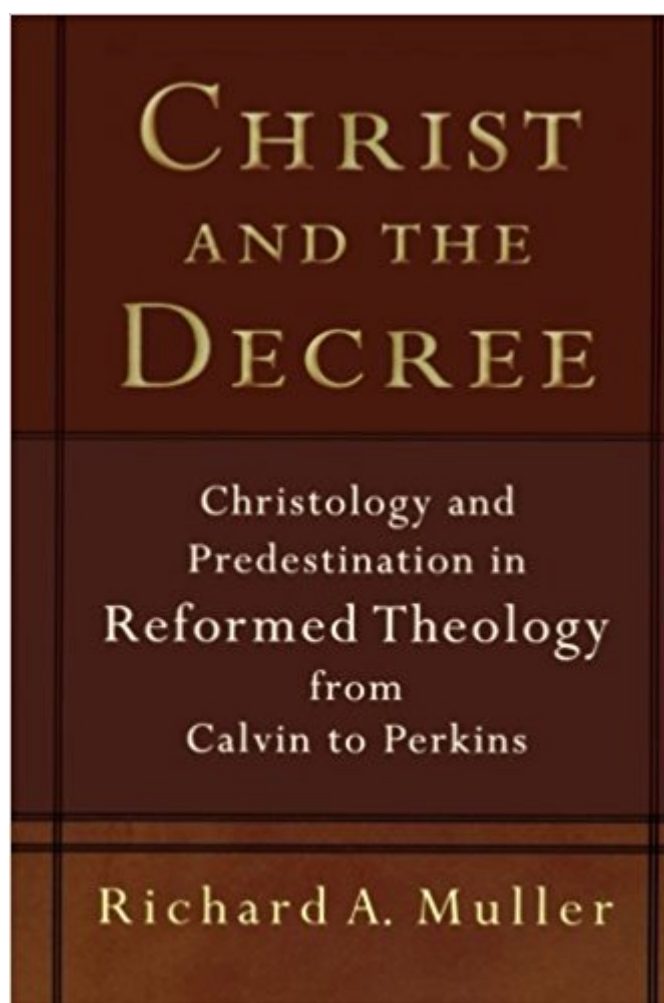


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# Christ And The Decree: Christology And Predestination In Reformed Theology From Calvin To Perkins



## Synopsis

In *Christ and the Decree*, one of the foremost scholars of Calvinism today expounds the doctrines of Christ and predestination as they were developed by Calvin, Bullinger, Musculus, Vermigli, Beza, Ursinus, Zanchi, Polanus, and Perkins. Muller analyzes the relationship of these two doctrines to each other and to the soteriological structure of the system. Back by demand, this seminal work on the relationship between Calvin and the Calvinists is once again available with a new contextualizing preface by the author. It offers a succinct introduction to the early development of Calvinism/Reformation thought.

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## Customer Reviews

In this seminal work, one of the foremost scholars of Calvinism today expounds the doctrines of Christ and predestination as they were developed by Calvin, Bullinger, Musculus, Vermigli, Beza, Ursinus, Zanchi, Polanus, and Perkins. This volume is once again available with a new contextualizing preface by the author. "[Muller] has undertaken a massive exposition of the teachings of Reformed theologians extending from Calvin through William Perkins . . . concerning predestination and Christology. . . . Those who interpret 'Calvin and Calvinism' would be well advised to give heed to Muller's conclusions."--James Leo Garrett Jr., *Fides et Historia* "Richard Muller does his homework. His is one of few books in recent memory to address seriously the systematic-theological issues inherent in the debate concerning the relationship of predestination and Christology in the thought of Calvin and his successors. This study is a welcome addition to the

secondary sources in the field. Students--whether they finally agree or disagree with Professor Muller's views--will want to read thoroughly his carefully researched arguments. . . . One will . . . find a wealth of valuable research and trenchant observations in an area of Reformed thought which often is neglected, and even more often treated only with superficial scholarship. . . . This book is worthy of reflection and argument."--Michael Jenkins, *Scottish Journal of Theology*"It is rare nowadays to read a scholarly analysis of the Reformation and post-Reformation literature which renders a faithful interpretation of the theology of the Reformers. Richard A. Muller's masterful study . . . provides a welcome breath of fresh air. . . . The author has achieved a notable contribution to the study of the doctrine of Christ in decretive theology."--Mark W. Karlberg, *Westminster Theological Journal*"The book will certainly be effective in answering those who wish to turn Reformed theology into simply a system rationally deduced from the doctrine of predestination, for the author has shown that the doctrine is not the central or controlling factor in the system."--W. Stanford Reid, *Sixteenth Century Journal*

Richard A. Muller (Ph.D., Duke University) is P. J. Zondervan Professor of Historical Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and the author of numerous books, including *The Un-accommodated Calvin*, *After Calvin*, and *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*. He also serves as the editor for the *Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post Reformation Thought* series.

Muller makes cloudy, difficult concepts comprehensible!

Richard Muller. What else do I need to say? What a scholar! It is very well written. It's a slow read but that's ok in my book. This subject is revisited and expanded in his four volume PRRD.

I am writing this review as one who is outside the Calvinist tradition, but thoroughly familiar with it (having read through the *Institutes* two or three times, plus about 20-30 Reformed systematics texts). While I have problems with Calvinist Christology, Muller's book is a fine work and deserves a wide dissemination. Richard Muller's work begins on a promising note: he refuses to view election in any way apart from the Person of Christ, specifically regarding the role of the mediator. Part of the difficulty in this review is noting what is Muller's own view and what is John Calvin's. Assuming Muller wants to identify his position with Calvin's, I will use "Muller" and "Calvin/Calvin's contemporaries" interchangeably. One of the so-called caricatures of Reformed theology is that it

posits an angry Father making an arbitrary decision on who gets to go to hell and to heaven. Muller reconstructs Calvin's work to show that Calvin spoke of election in the context of Christology; therefore, election and the saving work of Christ can never be separated. By the end of the review one will see how successful Muller was. This review will examine the historical development of Reformed perspectives on predestination as they relate to a specifically Reformed approach to Christology. The reviewer intends to offer a critical evaluation at the end of the review, documenting shortcomings in Reformed Christology. Until then it is the reviewer's intent to use a fairly appreciative tone and highlight some very important arguments Calvinists have made on this topic. Also, whether or not the doctrine of unconditional election is true or false is independent of Muller's historical thesis. If election is false, that in no way validates whether Muller's reconstruction of these Reformers is true or false. Muller begins his book with a review and reconstruction of Calvin's Christology. There are some difficulties in evaluating Muller's line of argument on Calvin. When Muller speaks of the "church fathers," it is not always clear to whom he is referring. Sometimes by "fathers" he means simply Augustine. Occasionally he will contrast Calvin and Augustine with "the Eastern Fathers," but then he arbitrarily divides "the Eastern Fathers" from "Hilary of Poitiers," who did his most formative work in the East. As to the Christology itself, Calvin distinguishes the Person of the Son from the Son as God, which leads to the Reformed doctrine of aseity and autotheos (Muller 29). Much of the book will hinge on the connections between aseity, autotheos, and extra calvinisticum. This leads to Calvin's important doctrine of mediation, which is framed according to the Son's two natures. Muller claims that Calvin's Christology is a historical Christology that focuses on the covenant-keeping God who acts in history to save man. Muller claims this is a genuine innovation. In fact, it is the covenant-keeping Christology that sets Calvin apart from the Eastern and Chalcedonian Christology (33). Presumably, the East is more interested in a Divine Person who assumes a human nature to himself, whereas Calvin is more interested in the mediator who acts in history to save his people. By the end of the review one will see if this claim can be substantiated.) The rest of Muller's book tracing the development from Peter Martyr Vermigli to William Perkins documents how these writers viewed election "in Christ." There is no such thing as a nude Deos absconditus who makes deals "behind the back" of the Son. Starting with Vermigli, we see an emphasis on grace as mediated (57), putting a Reformed slant on a very Roman Catholic doctrine and structure (showing how much a child of Rome Protestantism truly is). One side-note related to this, and important for Muller's thesis, is that election is mediated by Christ while reprobation is im-mediate (80). In other words, Christ actively saves the elect while no person actively damns the reprobate. Obviously, Muller is putting a very infralapsarian spin on the

matter. Conclusion Muller's book deserves high praise. He has done yeoman's work synthesizing a large amount of material, the nature of which is prohibitive to the average layman. On the other hand, many will have trouble with Muller's turgid prose. There are a few problems, however. In the background of the book is the recent "Calvin vs. the Calvinist Debates," which posits that the later Reformed scholastics warped Calvin's pure message. I am not competent to discuss the ins and outs of the debate, nor is it relevant to the current review. Muller wants to posit a clear continuum between Calvin and the scholastics, and he makes a convincing case. On the other hand, every time he comes across contrary material which seems to posit election within the arbitrary decrees of God, Muller simply brushes it aside, often with no more than a few words of argument, if that much. Secondly, while Muller highlights the interconnections between various Reformed loci, and he rightly places the Reformers in their Anselmic and Augustinian contexts, he does not seem to be aware of some the main implications of an Augustinian ontology. Augustine was famous for saying that God is his attributes. He writes, "The Godhead is absolutely simple essence, and therefore to be is then the same as to be wise" (Augustine 106). Therefore, if God's attributes = his essence, and his essence is immutable, then an attribute such as "will" is also immutable. Consider the argument, understanding "simplicity" to be a great "=" sign. If A = B, and B = C, then A = C. Further, per this Augustinian gloss, then one must come to the conclusion that "to foreknow = to predestine." If foreknow then equals predestine, and God foreknew the damned to reprobation, then given Augustinian simplicity one must conclude that God also predestined the damned to hell. This forces a reevaluation of the earlier claim that election is mediate while reprobation is immediate. Future Reformed historical theologians need to come to grips with a number of questions: given Augustinian simplicity entails the filioque, and given that Reformed Christological and soteriological distinctives stem from said simplicity, how then does the filioque impact Reformed soteriology. I do not fault Muller for not dealing with these questions. The scope of his work is simple (no pun intended) enough. Further, it is to his credit that he notes the connections between simplicity, extra-calvinisticum, and autotheos. It remains to future Reformed historians to face the challenges to Augustinian simplicity.

An extremely helpful overview of the development of Reformed theology from Calvin to Perkins and the continuity and discontinuity between the Reformers, the patristic, and medieval scholastics. The central focus of Reformed theology is a response to the sacramental system of the medieval church through Luther's exposition of Paul's writings. This led to the development of christocentric theology first through exposition and then as a scholastic theology. The book is narrowly focused in

response to the poor historical analysis of the last 150 years. It demolishes the "central dogma" tenant and the issue of "Calvin against the Calvinist." It was a delight to see the Baptist John Gill (1697-1771) mentioned as a Reformed scholastic.

This is by far the best book I've read on Predestination in Calvinism. It thoroughly refutes the poor scholarship that led to the mistaken theory that there was a radical disparity between Calvin's view of predestination and those of his immediate followers with most of the blame going to Calvin's hand-picked successor in Geneva: Theodore Beza. Muller, who in the years since this book was written has clearly established himself as THE authority on Reformed Scholasticism destroys years of biased scholarship in minutes. Anyone wanting more should investigate his four-volume series on Reformed Orthodoxy, but this is the best place to start clearing away the cobwebs of fuzzy, anti-Calvinist thinking that has dominated Reformed studies for the past 150 years. Essential to any understanding of predestination as developed by Calvin and later Calvinists.

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