

Naselli, Andrew David. *Predestination: An Introduction*. Short Studies in Systematic Theology. Wheaton: Crossway, 2024. 206pp. + 14pp. (front matter) + 34pp. (back matter).

A chief goal of this series—featuring a dozen titles so far, covering topics from Atonement to Trinity—is (as the editors put it, quoting Calvin) “lucid brevity.” The parameter of brevity requires that the author be selective, accurate, and simple (without becoming simplistic). Naselli’s treatment of the complex doctrine of predestination displays those qualities admirably. The book’s brevity is its genius but, at times, also its most frustrating feature. Then again, the subtitle signals that it is, after all, designed to be *An Introduction*.

In his Introduction to this *Introduction*, Naselli helpfully addresses several preliminary issues including anxiety over the topic and how to approach such a controversial but important doctrine. His definitions of the key terms are concise and (in my opinion) correct (7). Predestination: “*God predetermined the destiny of certain individuals for salvation and others for condemnation*” (emphasis original). Technically, in biblical theological usage predestination refers exclusively to God’s appointing believers to a destiny beyond salvation, including sonship, inheritance, and conformity to Christ (Eph 1:5, 11; Rom 8:29); but Naselli’s definition reflects a wider, standard systematic-theological usage that incorporates other NT terms (8). Election: “*God sovereignly and graciously chose to save individual sinners.*” Reprobation: “*God sovereignly and justly chose to pass over nonelect sinners and punish them*” (emphasis original). The definition of both “election” and “reprobation” are particularly contested by theologians. I will offer only two simple observations at this point. First, Naselli’s definition of reprobation aligns with what is usually labeled *preterition*, though that term shows up only twice (7n9, 196n14). Second, his definition of reprobation also invites the possibility of a small but worthwhile tweak to his definition of election; for election is not only sovereign and gracious but equally as *just* as reprobation, since God *chose to save individual sinners and* (it could be added for definitional symmetry) *to punish Christ instead*.

In the introduction and throughout the book, discussions are often condensed into concise charts (a total of twenty-one tables)—an enormously useful feature when discussing complex theological ideas. Such compression offers simplification and clarity, but sometimes at the expense of a fully accurate picture. For example, the comparison between key doctrinal points according to Arminianism and Calvinism (11–12) omits a significant and differing body of interpretation that resides historically within the body of Calvinism. Granted, the focus of the book precludes detailed delineation of all the shades of theological variation (11, 16); this being *An Introduction*, the presentation must necessarily be simplified. But the lack of nuance can be misleading, as though these two views (as Naselli has defined them) stake out the only available options.¹

¹ A couple of corroborating quotations from J. I. Packer in the Introduction are mildly disconcerting. “It has become usual in Protestant theology to define God’s predestination as including both his decision to save some from sin (election) and his decision to condemn the rest for their sin (reprobation), side by side” (16). One can only assume that Packer sees “Protestant” as synonymous with Reformed and exclusive of Arminianism, which seems a bit theologically myopic. Later, after presenting TULIP as a summary of Calvinist soteriology, Naselli notes that “Packer summarizes Calvinism in three

To many, election and reprobation may seem like theoretical, esoteric, top-shelf doctrines of minimal practical import except to sparring theologians. But Naselli understands that all theology has immediate, personal implications. Consequently, once the book moves into the full-bodied discussion of these doctrines, Naselli helpfully breaks down and arranges each topic according to engaging questions—the kinds of questions thoughtful Christians have about these issues.² And each chapter ends with a personalized prayer focused on how to respond to the doctrine set forth.

Part 1 takes about 130 pages to explain positive predestination (election). The discussion develops along these lines:

- What Is the Goal of Election?
- When Did God Choose to Save Humans?
- Did God Choose to Save Individuals?
- Did God Choose to Save Individuals Based on Foreseen Faith?
- Is Unconditional Election Unfair?
- Do We Have Free Will?
- Does Election Contradict God's Desire That All Humans Be Saved?
- How Does God Accomplish His Plan to Save Individuals?
- How Do I Know If God Has Elected Me?
- Did God Elect Babies Who Die?

Naselli opens with eight scripturally grounded divine goals in election (chapter 1), a divine decision that preceded creation (chapter 2). The discussions of conditional versus unconditional election (chapter 4), free will (chapter 6), and how God accomplishes his elective purpose (chapter 8) occupy the most space. At every point, Naselli seeks to anchor his reasoning and conclusions solidly in Scripture. In chapter 3 (individual versus corporate election), he works through seven reasons to “reject the Arminian view of corporate election” (48ff). While I agree with the position he stakes out, some of the reasoning offered seems, at points, ineffective. After citing several passages that imply individual election based on their use of singular pronouns (45–47), Naselli cites Romans 8:29–30 to argue that “God foreknows, calls, justifies, and glorifies particular individuals”—even though the pronouns throughout this passage are plural, not singular. Arguing simultaneously that singular-pronoun passages *and* plural-pronoun passages prove individual election seems less than compelling. Bruce Demarest’s explanation is more convincing: since the verbs in Romans 8:29–30 are both aorist and sequential, “if the election and calling were exclusively corporate, so also would be the justification. . . . But God does not justify an empty class; he justifies individuals.”³

words: ‘God saves sinners’” (16). One can only imagine an exasperated Arminian exclaiming, “That’s not ‘Calvinism.’ That’s Christianity!”

² For a “Quick View” version of the answers to the questions that occupy each chapter, you can go straight to an Appendix on “Chapter Summary Questions and Answers.” The author confirmed, however, that the Q&A for chapter 7 contains a typographical error; the question should read, “Is election compatible with God’s desire that all humans be saved?”

³ *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton: Crossway, 1997), 129.

In chapter 4, Naselli follows an argument for the decisiveness of God's sovereignty (53–56) with the magnificent observation that “the basis for election is God's forelove” (56; Naselli cites Eph 1:4–5, 1 Thess 1:4, and 2 Thess 2:13; but see also Eph 2:4–6). While the author does try to represent Arminians fairly, I suspect Arminians will think he could have tried a little harder. Naselli admits that they would never say that they are saved because they are smarter than other people, but that “they are radically depraved and thus in need of God's special grace in order to repent and believe in Jesus.” Their view of universal prevenient grace, however, implies “that a believer decisively chose God, and has a ground for boasting” (64). But then, an Arminian would never say *that* either! Naselli concedes that both “Arminians and Calvinists agree that we need God's special grace *before* we can believe because we are radically depraved. But we disagree on five key issues regarding God's special grace”—differences which he then concisely charts out. In an extensive footnote (75) quoting two Arminian theologians who insist that “the decisive factor” in salvation “is the grace of God” not human choice, Naselli nevertheless defends his insistence that the Arminian doctrine of universal prevenient grace logically entails that “man's choice is decisive” in election, not God's. It seems the two sides talk past each other by insisting on asking the same question differently: the Calvinist's question is, “Which is decisive, man's choice or God's choice?” whereas the Arminian's question is, “Which is decisive, man's choice or God's (choice to give) grace?”

The chapter on free will is superb, differentiating between natural ability and moral ability. The former is the “natural freedom to choose what I want” in accordance with my nature—a capacity all humans exercise every day. The latter is the “moral freedom to choose what God wants”—a capacity that all humans, by virtue of depravity, lack apart from the intervening grace of God. Naselli offers ten arguments in support of the idea that divine determination and human freedom harmonize (compatibilism).

Chapter 7 addresses whether the doctrine of individual, unconditional election contradicts God's desire that all humans be saved. Similar to the differentiation between two kinds of human will, Naselli differentiates between two aspects of the divine will: God's commanded or moral will, and God's decreed or sovereign will (112–16). I was puzzled by a chart that distinguishes between (a) God's command to Pharaoh (“Let my people go”) as “what God would like to see happen” and (b) God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart as “what God actually wills to happen” (113); but surely both of those are God's decreed will, since both of them were divinely purposed *and* both of them actually happened.⁴ Naselli ends the chapter with a series of five real-life examples designed to demonstrate the feasibility of two competing wills in God (117–19). The problem with the examples is not so much the issue of two competing wills but (in the case of God) the utter impossibility of one of the options, depending on how one defines the atonement—which, to be fair, was not the focus of this book and is mentioned only briefly (12, 14). If God's choice not to save certain people means that he also decided *not* to provide for those people the atoning sacrifice that renders their salvation possible in the first place, it is legitimate to question the meaningfulness of saying that God desires and offers to save those

⁴ For a more thorough treatment, see Layton Talbert, “An Inquiry into the Hardness, and Hardening, of Pharaoh's Heart,” *JBTW* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2023), 56–78.

people *on that view* (viz., an exclusively particularistic atonement). The NT does teach particularity, but it consistently locates that particularity in election not in the atonement.⁵

Chapter 8 (how God accomplishes his elective purposes) argues for the priority of regeneration (123–26), God’s use of the means of Scripture, prayer, and witness (126–28), and our obligation to obey God even if we do not understand how all this works (128–29).⁶ The final chapter on election (“Did God Elect Babies Who Die?”) offers a perspective that is biblically insightful and pastorally sensitive. Naselli concedes that though “the Bible does not directly answer this difficult question” (143), there is sufficient biblical data to conclude that it “is almost certainly true” (147). He even offers a feasible explanation for why the Bible is *not* clearer on this issue: given human depravity, “people would be more inclined to do horrible things” if the Bible’s answer were explicit (148).

Part 2 devotes about fifty pages to negative predestination (reprobation) and follows this succession of questions:

- Who Ultimately Causes Reprobation?
- How Does God Accomplish Reprobation?
- What Is the Result of Reprobation?
- What Is the Goal of Reprobation?
- Who Deserves Blame for Reprobation?

The answer to the first question is “God,” but that requires some explanation (chapter 11). To begin with, God does not reprobate neutral or innocent humans; the entire human race consists of fallen rebels who already reject God as he has revealed himself (159–60). Naselli differentiates “equal or symmetrical double predestination” (God actively chooses to work unbelief in some and faith in others) from “unequal or nonsymmetrical double predestination” (God actively chooses to save some, and passes over others), and then offers five reasons for defending the latter (160–63). Indeed, a robust biblical understanding of depravity makes the former nonsensical; why would God need to work unbelief in those whose natural disposition is unbelief? As Naselli writes, “Reprobation does not mean that God decreed to transform innocent humans into wicked ones and then damn them,” because there are no innocent humans (161). He cites corroborative statements from other theologians, including this one from Moo: “‘God’s mercy is given to those who do not deserve it; *his hardening affects those who have already by their sin deserved condemnation*’” (162, emphasis added)—a statement well worth applying to the hardness, and hardening, of Pharaoh. Naselli’s explanation of some passages, however, seems confusing and inconsistent with his view of negative predestination as preterition. For example: “First Peter 2:8 teaches that God *destined certain people to disobey* and thus stumble—that is, *he destined them to rebel against him* and thus take offense at and reject Christ the cornerstone” (156, emphasis added). How is this different from symmetrical predestination, in which

⁵ To be clear, I am not faulting the author for not addressing this issue, nor am I attributing to him any particular view of the atonement. I am simply observing that the issue that complicates the universal call rests less in the issue of the nature of God’s will, and more in the nature of the atonement. Cf. my review of Austin Brown’s *A Boisterously Reformed Polemic against Limited Atonement* immediately above in this journal issue.

⁶ It is just my opinion—as, indeed, all of this review is—but the citation of a rap song lyric that reads like a rather banal advertising cliché (122) does not contribute much to the dignity and sobriety of the subject.

God equally *actively chooses* (destines) “certain people” to not believe and to be condemned? Perhaps some would appeal to mystery here (see below). But to say that God *both* passively “passes over” the non-elect *and also* actively chooses to work unbelief in them sounds more like logical contradiction than mystery.

How does God accomplish reprobation (chapter 12)? The biblical term Naselli zeroes in on is that word *hardening*. He correctly asserts, “When God hardens individuals, he is not merely *reacting* to how they previously decided to harden their hearts for themselves” (170, emphasis original). God does not need to wait for them to decide to harden themselves; rather, when God hardens individuals he is *confirming* the *native hardness* of their already-fallen condition.⁷ After all, God did not *make* them that way; as Naselli already argued, “God does not harden or condemn *innocent* humans” (161, emphasis original; cf. 175). But how does this divine hardening work? Naselli offers examples of several kinds of hardening: God hardens (a) by withholding grace, (b) through sinful people, and (c) with the truth. The first category is the clearest; in the cited words of A. A. Hodge and R. C. Sproul, “‘God *withdraws* from sinful men . . . and *leaves* them to the *unrestrained* tendencies of their own hearts, and to the *uncounteracted* influences of the world and the devil,’” and he “*lets them have their own way . . . and lets them do their own will*” (173, emphasis added).⁸ Later, Naselli also quotes Michael Horton at some length: “Scripture does speak of God hardening hearts. . . . Yet it also speaks of sinners hardening their own hearts. . . . *Human beings alone are responsible for their hardness of heart. . . . God only has to leave us to our own devices in the case of reprobation*” (176, emphasis added).

So, when Naselli asks how can God ordain “both (1) what we choose and (2) that we freely and responsibly choose what we most want?” I am somewhat mystified by his answer: “I don’t know how. It’s a mystery” (177). Is it? Isn’t it depravity, in conjunction with preterition and withheld grace? Naselli and those he quotes have explained it admirably. Hardening is allowing sinners to choose what we most want in keeping with our fallen nature, without the intervention of persuasive grace to change what we want. Where is the mystery in that? As to “how God can ordain sin but not be guilty of it,” John Piper explains it in essentially the same way: not divine instigation, but divine permission.⁹ The objection may be raised, “But that’s not how Paul answers in Romans 9; he seems to think it’s a mystery (9:19) answerable solely by a silencing appeal to God’s absolute sovereignty (9:20)” (cf. 61). But as I have argued elsewhere, 9:20 is not all Paul had to say on the subject.¹⁰ To be sure, there is a

⁷ This is my conclusion, not Naselli’s. The author admits, on the one hand, that hardening is just and deserved by virtue of our depravity; but he also seems to want to maintain that such hardening is an utterly independent and unconditional act of divine sovereignty (171). But if hardening is God’s just dealing with those already guilty by virtue of the depraved human condition, then it’s not really “*unconditional*.”

⁸ I found the second category particularly confusing. Under “God Hardens through Sinful People” Naselli shows how “God uses wicked people to accomplish his purposes”—such as Joseph’s brothers, the Sabians who attacked Job’s flocks and servants, the Babylonians, and Judas (173–74). But these are not equivalent or synonymous propositions. *Whom* is God hardening “through” these wicked people? The examples do not seem to make sense of the category. The meaning and explanation of the third category (“God Hardens with the Truth,” 174) could also use more clarification.

⁹ *Providence*, 175–79 (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020). See my review of this work in *JBTW* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2023) and my article in the same issue, “An Inquiry into the Hardness, and Hardening, of Pharaoh’s Heart,” especially 70–72.

¹⁰ See *ibid.*, 67–70.

mystery attached to election and reprobation. Naselli hits on it earlier: “Why did he love us *and not others* in this way? We don’t know because God doesn’t tell us” (56). Aye, there is the mystery.

Naselli does a masterful job summarizing the goal of reprobation. God’s mercy and grace are seen and appreciated most vividly against the backdrop of his wrath and power—attributes that are just as inherent to God’s nature and character as his mercy and grace. He rehearses the seven doxologies in Revelation that glorify God specifically for his righteous judgments on the earth (187–89). “If reprobation did not exist then there would be aspects of God’s glory that we could not see and praise God for” (191).

Who, then, deserves blame for reprobation (chapter 15)? Naselli marshals a series of passages that lay the blame squarely upon humanity. It is because of “*your hard* and impenitent heart” (Rom 2:5 ESV). Paul does not explain Israel’s unbelief in terms of election; that may be “a theologically correct answer, but it is only part of the answer. And . . . it is not what Paul emphasizes in [Rom] 9:30–10:21. Paul emphasizes the *human* reason: . . . *They* have not pursued . . . *They* have stumbled . . . *They* have sought . . . *They* have not confessed . . . [*they*] have not called . . .” (200–1, emphasis added). In short, “an individual non-elect sinner is responsible for his or her own reprobation because sinners are responsible for their sins” (199)—which roots the justice of reprobation in depravity, in native human hardness not just divine hardening. That is why I am again mystified when Naselli raises the question, “How can God be the ultimate cause of reprobation and humans still be responsible for their condemnation?” only to answer, “That’s a mystery” (203). In my opinion, Naselli does a pretty good job of explaining the mystery.

If you want a concise, accessible, well-organized, Reformed-oriented primer to the vexed and complex topics of election and reprobation, you could hardly do better. Despite some disagreements and differences in emphasis (which the author and I have shared, in friendship, for a long time), I warmly commend Naselli’s thorough, thoughtful, and reverent work on predestination.

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