

The Concept of Predestination in the Thought of John Knox

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I. Introduction

It is generally accepted that John Knox adhered to the doctrine of predestination in some form. Nevertheless, the specifics of Knox's predestinarian faith are not common knowledge, and the scholars that have written on this subject have often registered points of disagreement.¹ Therefore, the primary objective of this article is to focus on the details, the historical development, and the context of the Scottish reformer's concept of predestination, and secondarily to analyze the points of scholarly difference on this subject. The variances pertain to Knox's lengthy treatise concerning predestination, to Calvin's influence on Knox's predestinarian thought, and to specific points of predestinarian doctrine. Did Knox's large predestination tract really represent his views on that doctrine? For his predestinarian thought, was Knox largely indebted to John Calvin or to a wider range of Reformed influences that would include George Wishart, John Hooper, Ulrich Zwingli,

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and Heinrich Bullinger? Some scholarly disagreements also pertain to Knox's positions regarding supralapsarianism or infralapsarianism and on single or double predestination.

John Knox's writings concerning predestination primarily span from 1552 to 1559. According to Pierre Janton, Knox read Calvin's *Institutes* by 1550 and incorporated the doctrine into his thinking some time after this date, particularly during the years 1553 and 1554. In his works before 1552 and after 1559, allusions to predestination are insufficient to constitute a sound base for judgment.² The best sources are Knox's writings to Mrs. Bowes (1553–1554), *On Predestination* (1560), and to a lesser extent, *A Faithful Admonition* (1554) and letters to his Scottish brethren (1557). Otherwise the reformer made few references to the subject, and even those citations occurred in the sense of practical application rather than in setting forth doctrine. *On Predestination*, however, was by no means insignificant for it encompassed nearly an entire volume of about 170,000 words, excluding the lengthy quotations from the work that he was refuting.³

Knox's approach to predestination during the 1550s was practical in orientation and shaped by historical circumstances. He tended to emphasize predestination, as he did the small-flock concept of the church, during troubled times and prior to the establishment of the Reformation in Scotland. And for John Knox, the 1550s were troubl...

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