

ARCHBISHOP THOMAS BRADWARDINE

His basic theological position and
relation to the Reformation

Keith Underhill
3223 Mediaeval Church
For Dr. Clair Davis
10th. May 1973

1. INTRODUCTION

Although the fourteenth century has long been a neglected field of study for the scholar of church history, there are appearing widely divergent interpretations of Bradwardine's theology and its significance in the history of the church. There is no general agreement as to whether he was truly in the Augustinian tradition. In a discussion of the doctrine of sin, comparing Gregory of Rimini with Bradwardine, Leff makes the following judgement:

Bradwardine's distance from Gregory and true Augustinianism is clearly emphasized by his inability to locate sin in the deviations of free will from God's will.¹

While Oberman clearly recognizes this weakness in Bradwardine's view of sin, he does consider him to have gone back to the true Augustinian position:

... Bradwardine is an Augustinian in the garb of the "via antiqua", because by making use of traditional forms taken from Anselm, Thomas and Duns he wants to make people hear the voice of the Doctor Gratiae (i.e. Augustine) faithfully reproduced.²

Neither is there agreement over whether he was a determinist or not. While it is generally agreed that he did seek to combat the rising tide of determinism, not all are convinced that he successfully kept himself from falling into that pit. Some of the older interpreters like Werner (1883) did call him a theological determinist for until the last few years this period of church history, and everyone in it, has been considered only from the point of view of mediaeval philosophy. Oberman himself considers Bradwardine to have had only a "deterministic tendency".³ The following summary evaluation might be noted:

Although one can find traces of determinism in his doctrine concerning the will, he was not a determinist.⁴

As the study of the theology of this era of the church is still at its inceptive stage there is still a variety of opinion also over the influence of Bradwardine on the Reformation. Can he be described as a pre-Reformer? If so, then in what respects?

Bradwardine was born somewhere between 1290 and 1300, and the importance of his life is associated with the situation in the University of Oxford, where he studied and held many posts. His early career was in Mathematics. Before he ever started his theological study he attended theological lectures and was seduced by the nominalistic theology so prevalent in his day. But he came to have an internal conflict between the emphasis on free-will of these nominalists and the emphasis on grace of the apostle Paul, particularly as expressed on Romans 9:16. This particular text remained with him and overpowered him so that it became the central text of all his theological work from that moment. He was motivated to declare that grace was actually a free gift, an amazing insight for the time. From 1328 he devoted himself entirely to the study of theology at Oxford. From 1337 to 1348 he was the Chancellor

¹ Leff, Gordon, *Gregory of Rimini* (Manchester University Press, 1961), p. 212.

² Oberman, H. A., *Archbishop Thomas Bradwardine* (Utrecht, 1957), p. 222.

³ Ibid., p. 94.

⁴ Cohen, Gary ed., *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (National Foundation for Christian Education, 1968), Vol. 2, pp. 151-152.

of St. Paul's in London. Appointed Archbishop of Canterbury in 1349, he was claimed by the Black Death only thirty-eight days later.

His great work which has come down to us is *De Causa Dei*, begun in the years before 1335 but not finished until 1344.⁵ His desired purpose in this work is centred around the doctrine of predestination, which became the foundation of his system. He shows the freeness of the grace of God, that it is not given in response to anything that is in man. God's grace precedes every work on man, and is also its cause. Primarily he was seeking to oppose those who saw predestination only in terms of prescience, thus ultimately making the grace of God dependent on the actions of men. In this he is opposing the nominalist logicians who saw God in terms of will. Divorcing His will from His other attributes, the nominalists had ultimately come up with the position that God was completely free so that He could even contradict Himself. With denial of the second cause, Aureolus could almost say that the future was so contingent that it was hid from God's prescience. On the other end of the scale, the human will has complete freedom, otherwise morals would be undermined, so they thought.

To combat this and other errors, Bradwardine lays great stress on tradition. In his work he makes an almost continual reference to the Scriptures, the Fathers, the papal doctrinal decisions and the Doctors of the Church. Yet in all this he did see the Bible as the touchstone of the truth, so that even the great master, Augustine himself, had to make corrections. The Bible thus even judges the Fathers, and this principle, while far short of the Reformation view, goes a long way towards it.

There were two main heresies that Bradwardine was concerned to combat, that of Averroistic determinism and that of Pelagianism. The determinists used the Islamic model to interpret Aristotle without trying to make him into a Christian. This Aristotelian model sought to explain everything in terms of science and causality which led to fatalism. The position of the nominalist Pelagians has already been briefly outlined. In his opposition, Bradwardine clearly claimed that he himself was the one following the Augustinian tradition as opposed to those who falsely claimed that title. The library that he had access to at Merton College, Oxford, was larger than most others with its 200 books, and contained almost all the works of Augustine.

2. THEOLOGY

As has already been noted, Bradwardine has usually been studied as a philosopher and not as a theologian. In that he spoke in the philosophic categories of the day does not take away from the fact that his main concern was theological truth.

... we will try to approach Bradwardine theologically and we believe that this is the only way that we can give him his due. We can no doubt speak of the philosophy of Thomas Bradwardine, as has been done till now, but in this way it was not made sufficiently clear that he uses philosophy in the same manner as a scholar in his days had to use Latin in order to make himself understood.⁶

⁵ Oberman, op. cit., p. 19.

⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

The *Pelagiani moderni* sought to make free will and merit independent of grace.⁷ Bradwardine, however, makes them dependent in the following way.

... the grace of God precedes all good works in time and in nature; that is, the gracious will of God, who in both these media wills beforehand that he who does deserving works should be saved, and who in the natural medium performs the man's merits in him earlier than he does himself, since in all movements He is the first Mover.⁸

The central purpose of this paper will be to examine Bradwardine's theology of predestination and its relationship to the doctrine of justification.

(a) Predestination

Bradwardine's opponents, in emphasizing God's *potential absoluta*, made Him arbitrary in His dealings. But Bradwardine wants to exclude contingency by emphasizing the essential connection between God's being and action. Neither God's will (nominalists), nor God's reason (Thomists), can be considered apart from the attributes of God. The freedom of His will is based on His being so that He cannot decide against Himself.

God's intellect is impartial, as it offers all possible and impossible things for choice. But in that choice the will is bound to God's being, i.e. to His *amor* and *bonitas*. With this accent on love as a motive for the will the Doctor Profundus attacks his contemporary opponents who do not place the *potential absoluta* of God explicitly in the service of His unchangeable love.⁹

Bradwardine makes the following arguments for a Scriptural doctrine of predestination against his Pelagian opponents.¹⁰ They accuse the doctrine of being unreasonable, but Bradwardine turns the tables, accusing them of the same thing. If the ultimate cause of a man's salvation is anything other than the will of God, it makes God dependent on something outside of Himself, and that is impossible. The Pelagians did have a doctrine of election, one which equalled prescience, by which God elected to save those with individual merit, whether it be just a propensity for mercy or even despair in anything else. Bradwardine counters by contradicting the facts of the case, for not all with the same propensity for mercy are chosen, nor are all who despair ultimately saved. He then proceeds to refute the exposition of such texts as John 1:12, Psalm 69:28 and Revelation 3:11 as used by the Pelagians. To the accusation that a God who predestines is unjust and cruel Bradwardine answers, quoting Romans 9:21, that no man is punished to eternal damnation unless he is deserving.

In *De Causa Dei* there is no special section on predestination, rather it is the thread that binds the whole work together. Bradwardine defines predestination as preordination or prevolition and seeks Biblical backing from such Scriptural data as Acts 13:38.¹¹ No predestined person can fall away. Thus we can summarize his doctrine of predestination.

⁷ Leff, op. cit., p. 158.

⁸ Oberman, op. cit., p. 15.

⁹ Ibid., p. 60.

¹⁰ Oberman, H. A. ed., *Forerunners of the Reformation* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966), pp. 151-164.

¹¹ Oberman, H. A., *Archbishop Thomas Bradwardine*, p. 114.

Predestination does not happen on account of human works, but on account of the gracious will of God.¹²

Bradwardine's doctrine of predestination is thus seen to be central in his theology and to be in line with the Scriptural data. With such an emphasis there are close parallels with the Reformation, but this does not mean that the Reformers were dependent upon Bradwardine for their doctrinal orientation. Yet a consideration of the formal aspects of the doctrine cannot suffice us. Predestination brings into view the notion of necessity which error has sometimes been levelled against Bradwardine; and from thence into Bradwardine's doctrine of sin.

How is Bradwardine able to steer that narrow course between predestination and necessity, if indeed he is able to do so? How is he able to reconcile the power of God's will in predestination and the fact that man acts freely and thus responsibly? Bradwardine approaches this problem as he approaches all other problems.

This is the general principle upon which Bradwardine discusses freedom and necessity; it flows from each aspect of divine participation: first, that no second cause can itself be entirely the first cause of an effect, since it is not absolute; second, that God's will is the direct cause of all that His creatures do. He must therefore be involved in their own contingent actions.¹³

So Bradwardine has not denied that man acts freely because he makes God the very cause of such free actions. He is thus against the fatalists who deny the freedom of the actions of men, and also the Pelagians who deny the sovereignty of God in all the actions of men. Bradwardine explains that the will is free to will that which exercises an attraction on it and not to will the opposite.¹⁴ With this definition we cannot agree for, as will be seen later, Bradwardine has not seen the seriousness of sin as a result of the Fall. As a sinner man is not free to do the good but only to make choices amongst the evil things presented to him. Only the believer is free to choose between moral opposites. However, he does say that true freedom consists in serving God. In these formulations Bradwardine has departed from tradition. But he does so because of his strictly theocentric point of view which leads him to define prescience differently from scholasticism as represented by Anselm and Lombard. If then, all the actions of men, while being free, originate in the determining will of God, does that make God responsible for sin? To avoid this conclusion, Bradwardine distinguishes between the act and the evil will of man that determines the act. God is only responsible for the act itself.

God is coefficient in every act, therefore also in evil acts. Not, however, insofar as they are evil, but only by their essence, which like every form of real being is necessarily good ... An act is something, so it comes from God, no act being possible without Him. Evil cannot come from God, so God gives only the act; the evil will, however, determines the direction.¹⁵

This distinction is not a Biblical one; rather it originates from some philosophical scheme. Yet we must take Bradwardine seriously that he does not intend to make God the author of sin while he wants to make His will the originator in every act. Rather than find a solution, this is

¹² Ibid., p. 115.

¹³ Leff, Gordon, *Bradwardine and the Pelagians* (Cambridge University Press, 1957), pp. 98-99.

¹⁴ Oberman, op. cit., p. 67.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 79.

one of those apparent contradictions that the Bible does not indicate what is the answer. But Bradwardine is right in not wavering from the position, even for a moment, that there is not a single act that man can do for himself without the co-efficiency of God.

We must look further into this problem of the relationship between sin and the decree of God, and notice what is insufficient in his definition of sin. In making a definite line between the intention and the deed, Bradwardine can actually label sins of ignorance as meritorious!¹⁶ He has so emphasized man as being worthless and powerless to do good of his own resources that he bypasses the Fall, and makes such weakness and dependence upon God as characteristic of man as created. It is this deficiency in man, preventing the full realization of their natures, which makes God will His creatures to sin. In so doing Bradwardine has made secondary causes the starting-point of sin. But this still does not answer the problem, for it was the will of God in the first place to create man inherently weak as he was, according to Bradwardine's scheme.

Bradwardine's final summing up, as expressed in later parts of *De Causa Dei*, tends to regard sin as a negative effect of God's will. This in fact results in making God an indirect cause of sin; and for all his qualifications, Bradwardine leaves open the impression that sin, as firmly rooted in the universe, cannot be separated from God's will. It makes God the efficient, formal and final cause of sin, but not the material cause ...¹⁷

Oberman, however, thinks that Bradwardine has succeeded in not making God the author of evil in spite of pressing the divine operation in evil deeds long way.¹⁸ But he has compromised the seriousness of sin in order to get the will of God and sin as close together as he logically can do. Clearly at this point Bradwardine departs from his master, Augustine, and is no longer in the true Augustinian tradition. Gregory of Rimini did not follow Bradwardine at this point, positing that through the Fall man has been both rendered ignorant of the good and that his free will has been so weakened, that it can neither want nor do the right.¹⁹ The above discussion has inevitable results on the application of grace in justification, and to this we must now turn.

(b) Justification

Grace is the realization of God's predestination. Both are equally related to God's immutable will. In thus relating grace to predestination, Bradwardine is opposing those who make the giving of grace in any way related to something in the person himself, the *Pelagiani moderni*. However, this is not the Reformation view of grace.

At whatever conclusion he may have arrived at in his doctrine of grace, it does not proceed from soteriology, Luther's question of conscience: "How do I find a gracious God?" but results from his theocentric sense of the distance between

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 125.

¹⁷ Leff, op. cit, p. 64.

¹⁸ Oberman, op. cit, p. 133.

¹⁹ Leff, Gordon, *Gregory of Rimini*, pp. 173-174.

Creator and creature: God does not react to the conduct of His creature, but performs it Himself.²⁰

Thus while grace is made completely gratuitous it does not proceed from the loving kindness of God, but from the omnipotent Creator. Grace is not contrasted with sin, but with merit, because he is so concerned about the good works of the Pelagian. There is no room for co-operation in Bradwardine, for without the Creator's grace the creature only opposes God. He vigorously denies that repentance for sin can be made by a man's own strength, so that through this grace can be obtained, and thus justification. This includes denying the efficacy of the combined effects of the sacraments and the spirit of repentance. True repentance can only come from a soul already in grace. Only so can he be justified.²¹

In typical mediaeval thought justification was inseparable from the sacraments, particularly the sacrament of penance. The latter deals with the constant falling back into sin of the one who has received the grace of baptism, and by partaking of it he obtains righteousness. There was a constant controversy on how much initial contrition was necessary to make the sacraments, especially penance, effective in justification. The final point reached was that all that was necessary was some desire of not wanting to go to hell. Bradwardine dismisses all these arguments by showing that the only preparation that there can be for the sacraments is the grace of God, for only God can prepare a man for grace. Not only is contrition not coincident with grace, but it does not even need to follow it as a sign for grace. For this would mean that every act of contrition signified a state of grace and Bradwardine is not willing to grant any assurance to the participant.²²

However, justification is more than an act of God in first infusing grace into the one He has predestined. In wanting to maintain the tradition of the continuance of penance, Bradwardine makes justification a process, penance becoming essential for the removal of temporal punishment. Although he admits the possibility that repentance could be so great that it might even satisfy such punishment, he still regards it essential for the following reasons.

But even if outward penance is not always necessary, it should be pointed out ... that outward penance is of service for one's own humility and exercise of righteousness, for the satisfaction of the church ... and for the warning of others.

²³

This definition of justification as a process, although completely dependent on the grace of God, still distances him from the Reformation. He differs from Duns Scotus by combining infusion of grace, justification and forgiveness of sin; and from Occam by making every good deed a consequence of forgiveness of sin. But he also differs from Luther in excluding *sola fide* from *sola gratia*. Bradwardine does not teach a justification by faith alone, but only by grace without preceding works. The works of love are the necessary condition for the completion of justification and total remission of sins.²⁴

²⁰ Oberman, op. cit., p. 135.

²¹ Leff, Gordon, *Bradwardine and the Pelagians*, p. 82.

²² Ibid., p. 84.

²³ Oberman, op. cit., p. 171.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 182.

In summary of Bradwardine's basic doctrines, we see that while he put great significance on the predestining will of God which accomplished all things, and therefore on the freeness of God's grace to the individual, he nevertheless undermines free grace in a number of ways.²⁵

1. The effects of the Fall rendering a man totally disabled, is not the reason for grace alone in justification. Grace is necessary because man as created is totally unable to do anything without God. Grace enables man to do good and thus to attain eternal glory. Grace is not completely free because in itself it does not guarantee a man's salvation.

2. This leads to the idea of justification only in the end on the basis of completion of temporal punishment as in the ecclesiastical sacrament of penance. It is true that Bradwardine does acknowledge that nevertheless an act of man needs the work of God also for him to be able to perform it, yet the initial granting of grace and the forgiveness of sin which accompanies it is only the beginning of justification.

3. Because justification is seen as a process then there is also no subjective assurance of salvation. Gregory of Rimini went all the way that Bradwardine might have taken for if God goes on controlling the process of justification then assurance of salvation would have been possible. Assurance is not possible because of the intrusion of works into the picture of justification, rather than simply grace through faith.

3. RELATIONSHIP TO THE REFORMATION

It has already been pointed out that this is a question over which there is no consensus of opinion at the moment. Much more work will have to be done before a conclusion is possible. It can readily be seen that many of the fundamental elements present in Bradwardine's theology are also integral parts of Reformation theology. But is this enough to constitute a definite link between the two, a dependence of the one upon the other? Bradwardine formally, at least, sought a return to the Scriptures rather than a continuance of scholastic speculation. The only God who could be spoken of is the One who has revealed Himself in the Scriptures, and no other possibilities are to be entertained. His emphasis on predestination was not a return to this scholasticism, but was a reiteration of the heart of the gospel, as was later seen with Luther and the Reformers. Yet we have already seen that there are many elements in his theology which are very much at odds with the principles of the Reformation. Indeed, it can be seriously debated how closely he was tied into the gospel. There is such little discussion on the atonement after Anselm's victory over Abelard; the former's view was never afterward seriously challenged so there was no need a continual reference to the problem. Yet lack of tie in of the work of Christ with election and grace is inexcusable for one who is claiming to speak with the authority of the Scriptures. If grace is not the result of good works, as the Pelagians claimed, then it should have been by grace that God provided another righteousness, the righteousness of Christ, and by the power of the risen Christ that the believer is enabled to perform good works. Bradwardine does see all these things as originating from God, but the distance between the Creator and the creature hardly seems to be filled by the divinely appointed Mediator, Jesus Christ.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 184-185.

Even so, two lines of tie up with the Reformation have been sought for Bradwardine, through Wiclif and Hus, and through Gregory of Rimini.

(a) Wyclif

He actually considered himself to be a pupil of Bradwardine, as he was also a student at Oxford, and thus there is generally agreed to be a relationship between the two men.²⁶ Oberman concludes his section on this relationship.

The results of the study of Wiclif's works, as it has been pursued up to now justify the conclusion that Wiclif was influenced by Bradwardine. We have seen, how even this cautiously formulated conclusion ought to be limited and how very difficult it is to define to what extent Wiclif's own interpretation originally traces back to the Doctor Profundus.²⁷

Oberman points out that there are differences between the two men, but one of the most interesting points is that before 1372 Wiclif disagreed with Bradwardine on the question of the will, during which time he frequently quoted from him. Yet after that date when he came to embrace it, he no longer quotes from Bradwardine. While both did share the same basic doctrine of predestination, it is quite possible that this arose without any dependence on Bradwardine, something which has happened often in the history of dogma. Luther found support both from Wiclif and Bradwardine, not because he had been initially convinced by their arguments, but because he found them giving the same sort of answers to the same sort of basic questions. There can be no doubt, however, that in whatever way Bradwardine turned back to true Augustinianism, he was influencing the general climate of opinion for the time when the doctrines of grace were once again to be proclaimed in all their fulness.

(b) Gregory of Rimini

He shared with Bradwardine a great veneration for Augustine and in this they would have together influenced the climate of opinion in preparation for the Reformation. Gregory quotes from Bradwardine in at least two places, but both times negatively: against Bradwardine's minimizing of the consequences of the Fall; and against the fear that he has that Bradwardine undermines morality by seeing the deed as independent of the intention of the performer. However, it is clear that Gregory begun this work long before he came into contact with Bradwardine's *De Causa Dei*, while he was in Italy far away. Gregory did make a great impression on Luther, as they were from the same order of monks, but there seems to be no direct relationship between Luther and Bradwardine. The latter and Gregory did have a common reaction against the Pelagian tendencies in fourteenth century nominalism but they appear to have arisen simultaneously, without reference to each other.²⁸

While we thank God for the desire on the part of these men to return to Augustine and to the Scriptures, and to maintain the distinction between the sovereign Creator and the sinful creature, yet in Bradwardine in particular, we only find a formal statement of Reformation

²⁶ Ibid., p. 198.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 204.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 216.

principles, without their application. Sharing a return to Augustinianism, does not therefore, imply direct dependence.