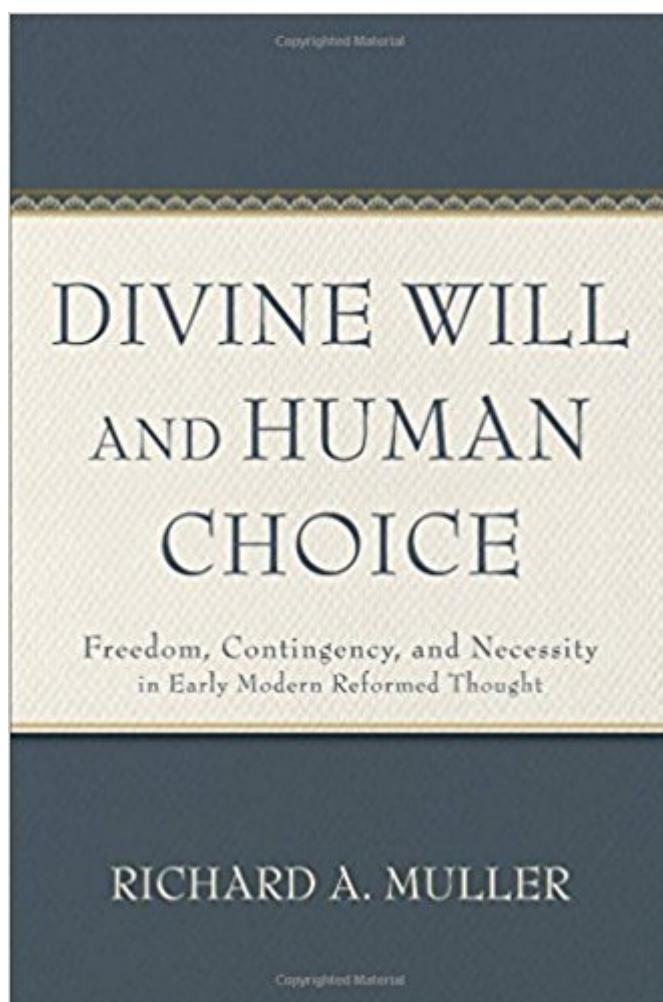


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# Divine Will And Human Choice: Freedom, Contingency, And Necessity In Early Modern Reformed Thought



## Synopsis

This fresh study from an internationally respected scholar of the Reformation and post-Reformation eras shows how the Reformers and their successors analyzed and reconciled the concepts of divine sovereignty and human freedom. Richard Muller argues that traditional Reformed theology supported a robust theory of an omnipotent divine will and human free choice and drew on a tradition of Western theological and philosophical discussion. The book provides historical perspective on a topic of current interest and debate and offers a corrective to recent discussions.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Divine Will and Human Choice exhibits all the characteristics we have come to expect from Richard Muller. Through his compelling historical argumentation and mastery of ancient, patristic, medieval, and early modern sources, Muller demonstrates that the contemporary categories of compatibilism and libertarianism fail to capture the rich and variegated approaches of early modern Reformed theologians to questions of divine and human freedom, necessity, and contingency. The result is a new perspective on Reformed orthodox teaching about God and providence with new possibilities for constructive theology."--Scott R. Swain, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando "At long last we have a comprehensive historical study of the Reformed understanding of divine will and human free choice in its pre-Edwardsian formulation. Muller's analysis first introduces readers to the current state of the question, focusing particularly on synchronic contingency and its variant understandings. With a close reading of primary sources--reaching back to the various receptions of

Aristotelian ideas among the medievals and centering on Aquinas and Duns Scotus--Muller unpacks how early Reformed thinkers and their heirs, the Reformed orthodox, treated matters surrounding necessity, contingency, and freedom relative to the divine will. Engaging the most prominent Reformed writers, including Calvin, Zanchius, Junius, Gomarus, Twisse, Owen, Voetius, and Turretin among others, this study demonstrates how these matters have been forgotten or misapprehended in modern discussions. Muller's work amply succeeds in showing how the Reformed orthodox knit a theological garment that does not well fit the modern categories and nomenclature of incompatibilism (or libertarianism) and compatibilism, that is, an indeterminism versus a raw determinism. In doing so, this volume is destined to propel the theological discussion surrounding necessity, contingency, and human freedom for decades to come."--J. Mark Beach, Mid-America Reformed Seminary" This book provides a major reassessment of ancient and medieval antecedents of the Reformed understanding of contingency. Devoting specific attention to Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and John Duns Scotus, Muller highlights the eclecticism of Reformed orthodoxy. In particular, he develops a multilayered argument showing that Duns Scotus was both less of an innovator in his own day and less of a formative influence for later Reformed orthodoxy than has sometimes been suggested."--Aza Goudriaan, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

"Few scholars possess Richard Muller's knowledge of early modern theology or his ability to analyze with precision Reformed teaching on the central question of divine and human causality. The breadth and depth of Muller's command of Reformed thought displayed in this book are unrivaled, ensuring that *Divine Will and Human Choice* will quickly establish itself as a must-read for all students of Protestant theology."--Bruce Gordon, Yale Divinity School" There is not a more contested area in the study of Reformed orthodoxy than issues of divine foreknowledge, human free will, and the nature of contingency. The matter is highly complicated and involves multiple questions of interpretation and reception, including how Aristotle was appropriated by medieval schoolmen, such as Aquinas and Scotus, and how the medievals were then used by the Reformed. Those new to the field can easily become overwhelmed by the sheer volume of primary literature and the confusing subtlety of the arguments. In this context, *Divine Will and Human Choice* is a welcome addition to the literature because it offers both the neophyte and the scholar a superb account of the various questions involved and provides judicious critiques of the contemporary debate."--Carl R. Trueman, Westminster Theological Seminary" Once again Richard Muller has provided us with an extremely careful and insightful analysis on the development of Reformed theology. He has approached the topics of freedom and necessity in Reformed thought from his extremely

knowledgeable background of ancient philosophy and medieval theology. In so doing he has provided a trajectory that demonstrates that Reformed thought cannot be understood in isolation from the Western tradition as a whole. This is a superb study, and there is much to learn from this volume."--Susan Schreiner, University of Chicago Divinity School" Muller's masterful treatment of God's will and human free choice is exemplary. It clearly and accurately presents the positions held by medieval and early modern Reformed theologians rather than spinning them in favor of a preferred position or conclusion. Muller has command of both the historical and contemporary philosophical categories and positions involved in theological debates, and he fruitfully relates historic positions to current philosophical and theological debates without anachronistically treating our theological ancestors as our philosophical contemporaries."--John Cooper, Calvin Theological Seminary" Muller continues to surprise readers with fascinating news from historical sources, and this rich volume is the latest fruit of his ongoing research. His careful analysis in Divine Will and Human Choice shows that this theme remains highly relevant for church and society today. Here Muller reevaluates positions, challenges readers, and serves theology with another fine work."--Herman Selderhuis, Theological University Apeldoorn; director of Refo500

Dr. Muller provides the general public with another wonderful volume. "Divine Will and Human Choice" requires attention to detail, but the fruit of Dr. Muller's labors is vast. If the debate surrounding human choice and the divine is of interest, there is not better volume on the subject. Caveat emptor, the author employs precise theological language and a variety of terms present in the classical languages. Picking up a copy of his theological dictionary would be a helpful entry into his work.

Richard A Muller, *Divine Will and Human Choice: Freedom, Contingency, and Necessity in Early Modern Reformed Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017). 329pp. Hardcover. \$45.00. Richard Muller has gained a (deserved) reputation as one of the leading scholars of historic Reformed orthodox theology. He has, in large part, led the way in exploding historical myths, such as that of a pristine Calvinian theology that was fouled up by later Reformed writers through appropriating scholastic elements. He has done so by arguing that Reformed theologians developed their theology from Scripture through an eclectic dialogue with early church, medieval, and contemporary authors. Calvin did not single-handedly found a theological tradition. Moreover, later Reformed orthodoxy illustrates continuities and discontinuities with the Middle Ages as well as with the sixteenth-century Reformers. Such research has been useful, both in historical and

contemporary theology, for a number of reasons. In this reviewer's opinion, Muller's primary contribution to both fields is that his work has enabled classic Reformed theology to speak more clearly with its own voice in its own context once again. Doing so has great potential to provide different options to the church today than what are current regarding both faith and practice. Divine Will and Human Choice tackles the difficult age-old question of the relationship between God's sovereignty and human freedom. More specifically, whether and how the actions both of God and of humanity can be contingent and capable of contradictory or contrary choice. Muller treats this question with boldness, contradicting many respected historians on the subject, complexity, using uncommon scholastic terminology, and thoroughness, drawing from a wide range of primary source literature. The philosophical nature of the subject matter and the difficulty of the terminology for the uninitiated makes this work a particularly difficult read. This means that the subject matter, though profound and well argued in itself, will be rewarding to some readers and off-putting to others. Muller's analysis is bold. In treating issues related to divine will and human freedom in Reformed orthodoxy, he simultaneously builds upon and contradicts most respected scholars in the field, including Paul Helm, Antonie Vos, Andreas Beck, Willem van Asselt, Eef Dekker, Martin Bec, and many others. His primary contention is that that early modern Reformed authors developed a robust doctrine of creaturely contingency and human freedom, that drew from classic scholastic distinctions, in order to uphold the sovereignty of God's decrees, while maintaining the distinction between necessary, contingent, and free events among his creatures (34). Contra authors such as Helm, Muller argues that this meant more than simply saying that free choice is compatible with divine sovereignty, since Reformed theology taught that mankind genuinely retained the power of contrary choice and of contrariety. Contra authors such as Vos, he argues that ascribing the power of contrary choice to mankind in a given action (asynchronous contingency) does not necessarily entail a Scotist dominance in post-Reformation Reformed theology. Nor, he adds, did using the relevant scholastic distinctions result in an ontology because the only intent behind their use was to explain the interrelationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom. Leaving aside the complexities of such assertions for the moment, modifying or rejecting the conclusions of such a stellar collection of scholars is a bold move. However, such boldness does not make Muller's arguments wrong. The topic treated in this book can be perplexing and if anyone is qualified to refine and even correct the arguments of other scholars in this area it is Muller. Yet Muller's book is complicated as well. This point relates the character of the ascholastic distinctions (34) that Reformed authors employed and how Muller explains them. Roughly half of the book evaluates debated

interpretations of Aristotle, Aquinas, and Duns Scotus on the issue of the nature of contingency in divine and human choices. The second half of the book illustrates the influences and uses of these concepts among Reformed authors. Understanding his work requires a working knowledge of paired terms such as synchronic vs. diachronic contingency, necessity of the consequence vs. necessity of the consequent, *scientia intelligentiae simplicis* vs. *scientia visionis*, and, especially, simultaneity of potencies vs. potency of simultaneity. Put simply, Muller never really puts these terms simply. Synchronic contingency conveys the idea that when an event comes to pass, human beings retain the power of making alternate choices. Diachronic contingency asserts that though things could have turned out otherwise according to God’s will, the event or outcome of human actions is certain as it happens in time. The first term teaches that man could have done differently as a volitional creature. The second term asserts that man could not ultimately change the outcome because his freedom of choice is a dependent freedom. Necessity of the consequence means that an event must come to pass when it comes to pass through a volitional being, but not by any natural or inherent necessity in the thing itself (such as choosing to sit vs. choosing to run). Necessity of the consequent is a necessity that results from the nature of a thing (such as a rock falling). Human choice is involved in the former but not in the latter. *Scientia intelligentiae simplicis* refers to all possibilities that could come to pass in agreement with God’s nature (corresponding to *potentia absoluta*) and *scientia visionis* refers to God’s knowledge of what he has ordained to come to pass (*potentia ordinata*). Simultaneity of potencies means that human beings have the power to make more than one choice in any given circumstance. Potency of simultaneity refers to the (impossible) idea that human beings have the power of performing two contrary actions at the same time. The purpose of this complex set of terms is to show how and why God, as the first cause, foreordains whatsoever comes to pass without violating the wills of his creatures or eliminating the freedom or contingency of second causes. While such concepts can be inherently taxing, this reviewer finds it easier to understand them from reading scholastic authors directly than from reading Muller’s analysis of them. In light of Muller’s reputation, it should not surprise readers that his book is thorough. Every scholar knows very little ultimately in relation to what he or she could know in his or her field of study. Research is nothing if not humbling. However, Richard Muller has read and knows more than all but a very small number of people will ever know. In spite of the work being challenging to process, it remains a wealth of information. The primary liability in this respect is that the publisher did not include a bibliography, enabling readers to follow up with sources cited. In conclusion, Muller’s book is well-researched, nuanced, and insightful, but it is not for everyone. His books

are always worth laboring through, but they will not help all readers. The relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom will continue to be an important issue in both church and school. Yet Muller's treatment of this subject, while highly important, will be inaccessible to most people. For those interested in a more straightforward and standard introduction to classic Reformed theology, his Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics or his two volumes published with Oxford University Press are easier entry points. Yet for those who want (or need) to understand the medieval and Reformed terminological and philosophical underpinnings of the issue treated in this present volume, Divine Will and Human Choice will likely set the standard for years to come. Ryan M. McGraw Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary (This review appeared on [meetthepuritans.com](http://meetthepuritans.com))

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