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The Predestination Principle: A Bible Study

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THEOLOGIANS HAVE argued for centuries over one of the most fundamental questions in Christianity. The Bible¹ itself seems to give two radically different answers. Some Christians may try to embrace both answers, with little thought for the problems between them. Theologians, by contrast, have given the problems between the two answers a great deal of thought. They have tended to devote themselves to whichever answer they find most compelling while putting little stock in the other. I believe that a groundless assumption has kept the two sides from seeing the elegant reconciliation of the two answers.

The question is, What is God's criterion for determining who goes to heaven? Let's call the first answer the

predestination view. Let's call the second answer the free-will view.

The predestination view says in essence that before the earth or people were even created, God chose certain individuals to wind up in heaven and all the rest to wind up in hell. Advocates of the predestination view quote passages such as Ephesians 1: 4-5:

For [God] chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ.

They also point to Romans 8:29-30:

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the first-born among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

The free-will view, by contrast, says in essence that God created us with a free will to make our own choices, to obey or to disobey. God holds us accountable for our choices, but does

not coerce us in the choosing. Advocates of the free-will view emphasize passages such as John 3:16 (KJ):

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Another key passage they cite is Romans 10:13:

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

John sums up the free-will view as Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him (Jn. 3:36).

The conflict between these two concepts, the predestination view and the free-will view, cuts to the heart of the nature of God and the nature of humans. If God is sovereign, how can we be free? If we are free, how can God be sovereign? Theologians, historians, ecclesiologists, debaters, and logicians have been loading their respective canons in the defence of their own personal convictions since the time of Jesus.

I Reformation articulations of the predestination view

The issue came into sharpest focus in the Reformation. One of the foremost issues of the Reformation was the choosing of mutually exclusive sides between the concepts of predestination and free will. The two most outspoken advocates for predestination were Martin Luther and John Calvin.

Kenneth Scott Latourette summarized Luther's view this way: 'Man, so

Luther held, does not have free will. Man's will is like a beast of burden. It is ridden either by God or by the Devil and does whatever the one who is in the saddle directs.'²

Calvin defined predestination as

the eternal decree of God, by which He has determined in Himself, what He would have to become of every individual of mankind. *For they are not all created with a similar destiny; but eternal life is foreordained for some and eternal death for others. Every man, therefore, being created for one or the other of these ends, we say he is predestinated either to life or to death.*³

Luther and Calvin saw the hand of God in every event in history and in all the workings of physical nature, so that the world was the complete realization in time of the eternal ideal. They believed that the world as a whole and in all its parts and movements and changes was brought into a unity by the governing, all-pervading, all-harmonizing activity of the divine will, and its purpose was to manifest the divine glory. While their conception was that of a divine ordering of the whole course of history to the smallest detail, they were especially concerned with its relation to salvation.

Picking up Luther's and Calvin's theme, the Westminster Confession

¹ All citations are New International Version unless noted otherwise; King James (KJ).

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² Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953), 724.

³ Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1932), 14-15, italics added.

expressed the predestination view thus:

Some men and angels are predestinated to everlasting life, and others are foreordained to everlasting death. These angels and men, thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number is so certain and definite that it cannot be either increased or diminished.... God hath appointed the elect unto glory.... *Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.* The rest of mankind, God was pleased...to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice.⁴

II Erasmus and the free-will view

The most outspoken Reformation advocate of the free-will view was Erasmus, who became Luther's opponent in the field. Erasmus held, as Latourette summarizes it,

God would be unjust and immoral if He were so to order the universe that man could not of himself fulfill the conditions which He had ordained for salvation and then were arbitrarily to choose some to be saved and by doing so condemn others to hell. Luther admitted that natural reason was offended by the doctrine of man's helplessness in

sin and by a conception of God which, while holding Him to be good, taught that by His mere will He hardens and damns men whom He has not chosen to save. He confessed that at one time the apparent contradiction had so driven him to the abyss of despair that he wished that he had never been born. Luther stood in awe of the majesty and inscrutable justice of God. God, he maintained, is inaccessible to human reason.⁵

Even today, centuries after the Reformation, this dualism of doctrine continues to bring confusion. I am convinced that predestination is a fact reported in the Bible. I am also convinced that free will is a fact reported in the Bible. But how can we ever reconcile these seemingly opposite doctrines?

III Reconciliation?

Our search for a reconciliation must begin with a recognition that the problem lies not in the Bible, but in our understanding of it. Since both predestination and free will are presented clearly in the Bible, there can be neither conflict nor contradiction between them. So we must do more than paper over the problem. We must find a genuine reconciliation.

Let me propose an axiom: *Truth is not related to what we believe. Truth is truth, whether anyone believes it or not. If what you believe is true, that is good. But it is not true just because you believe it.* Nor is it untrue just because you do not believe it. If we want to know truth, we

will find it in the Bible—not in what someone says about the Bible, but in what the Bible itself says.

1. Using our will to choose new birth

The problem of predestination and free will turns on the role of the will. What is the will? It is one of the functions of the soul. God created us as three-part beings: body, spirit, and soul. The body is familiar enough. The spirit is the capacity to walk with God, to communicate with God, to enjoy his presence, to learn from him without any barrier or hindrance to his fellowship. The soul is itself three parts: mind, emotion, and will. The will is the capacity to discern, to decide, to choose, and to take action. A person's mind and emotion wait before the door of the free will. Here alone are decisions made.

If there were any question that God equipped us with a free will, we need only look at the Bible's many stories of people exercising their free will. The story of Adam and Eve makes it clear that God equipped them with a will that was free to choose to obey or disobey their Creator. God told Adam that a certain tree was forbidden to him and said, 'When you eat of it you will surely die' (Gen. 2:17). Adam processed this prohibition through the decision-making equipment that God had given him. His intellect knew God's order about that tree. His emotion responded to Eve's invitation to eat. Then his free will chose to disobey God.

His free decision had real consequences. God separated Adam and Eve from himself. Adam passed his sin and separation to his offspring, who would be born in sin and 'shapen in iniquity'

(Ps. 51:5, KJ). All were born with a full-functioning body and full-functioning soul, but without the indwelling Spirit of God who alone is able to assist us in making decisions that correspond to the will of God. Without the Spirit, our will acts under the control of our own fleshly desires.

The responsibility for and the consequences of our decisions therefore lie at our own feet. God acknowledged our free will from creation, conditioning our relationship with him on how we exercise our free will. We can either choose to 'believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved' (Acts 16:31), or we can choose to continue in unbelief and stay lost. No change can take place until we exercise our free will.

The story of Adam and Eve is just the first biblical account of people exercising their free will. Cain chose to kill his brother. Noah chose to obey God and build the ark. Abraham chose to obey the call of God and became his friend. Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses (think of all of the decisions he made!), Saul, David, and the prophets all faced many challenges to use their free will to obey or disobey God.

The gospel presupposes our free will. When Jesus began to preach in Galilee, his first message was, 'Repent, for the kingdom of God is near' (Mt. 4:12). The Greek word for *repent* that he used was *metanoeite*. This is the imperative meaning, 'change your mind'. The thing that people need to do more than any other is to change their minds. Our conduct is wrong because our creed is wrong. Our thoughts are wrong because our hearts are wrong. So Jesus said, 'change your mind'. About what? The kingdom of God.

⁴ Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 84, italics added).

⁵ Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, 724.

What is the kingdom of God? Any kingdom is a relationship between a sovereign and his subjects in which the king demands obedience and his subjects obey. Likewise, the kingdom of God is a relationship between God and his people.

Adam lost this relationship in the Garden. As his heirs, we natural men can do nothing to establish a position with God. But Jesus promises to restore the relationship by bringing a new birth to anyone who will trust him. As he told Nicodemus,

No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again..., unless he is born of water [a natural birth] and the Spirit [the spiritual birth].... For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (Jn. 3:3-17).

Jesus required that Nicodemus 'believe.' Believing is an action of the free will. At this point the relationship stands and waits at the door of our will. If we decide to trust Jesus, we are given a new birth of the Spirit. That which Adam lost in the garden can be restored to the one who will receive Jesus as Saviour and Lord. That person will then be in the kingdom and have a relationship with the King. Then, like Adam before the fall, that one will have access to the Father for communication and fellowship. So the new birth waits upon the action of our free will.

Conversely, the essence of sin is the action of that free will to reject Jesus: The Holy Spirit, Jesus said, 'will con-

vict the world of guilt in regard to sin...because men do not believe in me' (Jn. 16:8-9). The Holy Spirit also teaches us that the 'prince of this world now stands condemned' (Jn. 16:11). Satan has already been judged. His condemnation is settled. Those who choose to follow Satan and reject Jesus are already condemned.

In other words, God takes very seriously the action of the free will in making decisions concerning Jesus. We are always held accountable for our decisions. We have no one else to blame.

2. Reconciling predestination and free will

In short, the Bible leaves no doubt about the decisive role of our free will in determining who goes to heaven. Does that mean that the predestination view is wrong? No, but it does mean that a groundless assumption leads the predestination view astray.

The essence of the error is crystallized in John Calvin's statement that 'Predestination we call the eternal decree of God, by which He has determined in Himself, what He would have to become of *every individual of mankind*.'⁶ But Calvin cannot find a single syllable in the Bible that teaches that any individual person has been predestined to either heaven or hell.

The Bible certainly teaches that in eternity past God predestined some to go to heaven and others to hell. Scripture leaves no doubt about that. The question is what criterion he applied in making that judgment. To this critical

question, the predestination theologians have no answer. They say he just went by the secret council and good pleasure of his will. But that does not answer the question, *Why this individual and not that one?*

The solution to the predestination/free will problem is simple: *Predestination is not personal. It is a principle.*

Nobody's name is on predestination except God's. What criterion does God use in determining who goes to heaven and who goes to hell? The answer comes from the free-will view: Jesus. He is the one by whom God judges us.

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son (Jn. 3:18).

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (Jn. 14:6).

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him (Jn. 3:36).

God chose us in him [Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ (Eph. 1: 4-5).

In short, God did not choose us as individuals. 'He chose us *in him*.' In other words, he chose Jesus and, by extension, those who are 'in him'.

So what God predestined was not that individual A would go to heaven and individual B would go to hell, but that salvation is for whosoever believes in Jesus.

3. Calvin and Luther miss the mark

Why do we assume that predestination has to be personal? I suspect that human egotism keeps us from accepting the idea that God may not have to deal with us personally. Since he has already provided all that is required for the redemption of any and all souls, there remains only our choice to receive or reject what he has done. Continued separation from him or acceptance by him waits only upon the free choice of the individual.

Why does the doctrine of predestination and election as presented by Calvin and Luther and their progeny miss the mark? It seems to be based on an Old Testament concept of God. That concept is not wrong; it's just incomplete. It places great emphasis on Old Testament legalism.

Somehow, I wish that I could drag the men who wrote the great books of Reformation times into the New Testament and introduce them to Jesus, who is the final, complete, and perfect revelation of God. In him we find the fully developed teachings that unveil the very heart of the Creator.

Though God never changes, across the ages the Sovereign Lord has chosen to reveal himself progressively. He has revealed himself finally, completely, perfectly, and totally in Jesus Christ. For us to know the complete revelation of God, we must look to Jesus. Therefore, if we want to know God, we must know Jesus Christ.

The predestination view holds that 'none have this will and desire [to come to Christ and persevere in his service] except those whom God had previously made willing and desirous; and that He

⁶ Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 14-15, italics added.

gives this will and desire to none but His own elect.”⁷ But this view conflicts with the Bible’s statement that salvation is for ‘whosoever will’.

The Reformers’ doctrine of predestination, if followed to its ultimate conclusions, leaves me with a god in whom I cannot believe. It portrays a capricious God who deals with his creation without considering the nature that he himself created in us. Everything in the predestination view is based on an unbending application of his will without any room for the changing nature of his creature.

But God’s sovereignty is not static. It is dynamic. In the New Testament we find the nature and will of the God who is real, present, and involved in the affairs of men. In Jesus we see God showing us his eternal character. So, if I want to know God, I need only to look at Jesus. All of the powerful attributes of God presented in the Old Testament (as Sovereign, Judge, and exalted Ruler) are confirmed in the New. However, the New spotlights the clearer revelation of his heart as love, compassion, mercy, and grace.

III Faith has been God’s criterion since creation

The predestination view is correct that God made his determination before creation. But that view omits the critical point that God’s determination was that belief in Jesus would be his standard of judgment, the criterion by which he would judge the individual.

‘Whosoever believeth in him....’ In describing Jesus as the ‘Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world’ (Rev. 13:8), John shows Jesus to be the redeemer of mankind before we were created.

Faith in the Word of God—by this are we judged. Faith has always been the only way to God. ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness’ (Rom. 4:3). Faith in the Word of God, taking him at his word, relying on his word—this is the attitude that opens the gates of God’s audience chamber.

The righteous will live by faith (Rom. 1:17).

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith... (Eph. 2:8).

Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved (Acts 16:31).

Adam, by contrast, did not believe what God had said, so he ate of the forbidden fruit. It was a wilful act of disobedience to God’s word that brought death to all of us who have inherited his sinful, unbelieving nature.

God set boundaries around his creation within which his sovereignty is absolute. The Greek word for *predestination* is *prohoridzo*. *Pro* means before. *Horidzo* is to define, to mark out the boundaries or limits. The English word *horizon*—that which limits sight—is lifted from this Greek word. So *prohoridzo* simply means before horizoned, preset limits. Nothing within his creation can go beyond his governing hand. It is all surrounded, circumvented, enclosed, prelimited, and controlled by the absolute will of the sovereign. Our God reigns!

Within those boundaries, he created us with a free will with which to choose

obedience or disobedience. We therefore are wholly responsible for the outcome and consequences of our decisions. We are free to choose.

But God has the last word. Either ‘enter thou into the joy of thy lord’ (Mt. 25:21 KJ), or ‘depart from me, all you workers of iniquity.’ (Lk. 13:27 KJ). Neither of these conclusions is the result of predestination. One does not

enter the joys of the Lord just because God had predestined it. Nor does one depart from him because one was predestined to that. The outcome of this assignment in eternity is the result of our choice to accept or reject the grace of God. The position of God is always very clear: Believe or perish—your choice!

⁷ Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 215.