

Predestination :: A Scary and Contentious Issue

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Predestination is a topic that Christians can get very heated about! It's an issue that has split churches and spilt much ink. It even triggered the falling out between two of the greatest evangelists the Protestant church has ever seen: John Wesley and George Whitfield. So before we embark on this subject, we need to listen carefully, and ensure we understand all God has to say, lest we react hastily about what He does not say. Sit back, relax, as Rev. Marty Foord takes us through this magnificent topic: predestination.

[Two key truths to remember]

Transcendence :: We must remember that God is so above our understanding that we cannot possibly hope to understand him fully. Our limited minds cannot fully understand all there is to know about God. There **MUST** be teachings about God that to us are simply mysterious, teachings which may appear contradictory to us, but in actual fact are harmonious when seen from God's perspective.

Biblical Balance :: Some Christians talk as if the Bible speaks only about predestination. Others never talk about it at all. We must make sure we use predestination the way the Bible uses it.

[Understanding Predestination]

What it is :: Predestination is the doctrine that God has decided and fixed beforehand what will happen. This applies to all events in the world. God has his plan for all of creation set up and he will bring it to completion (Eph. 1:11). But the Bible particularly focuses on the predestination of God's people. That is, God has chosen some people to be saved before the world was created. This is the clear teaching of Scripture:

"For he [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, in accordance with his pleasure and will"

Ephesians 1:4-5, NIV

Five things need to be understood here. Firstly, God chose believers. It's not saying that God chose Christ only, and somehow we are elect if we are "in Christ". No, God chose "us", believers. Secondly, God's election centers on Jesus. It is "in him [Christ]" that we are chosen. Thirdly, notice the time reference. Election happens "Before the foundation of the world". From our human time-bound perspective we must understand God's

election of believers as having happened before the world was created. Fourthly, the purpose of election is salvation: "to be holy and blameless in his sight". It is not election for a task in which we might fail. It is nothing less than God choosing us to be right, perfect and blameless on judgment day. Finally, note God's motive in election. At that the end of verse 4 and beginning of verse 5 it says "in love". That is, predestination reveals to us the full extent of God's love. If we misunderstand predestination, we fail to grasp the fullness of God's love.

What it's not :: Some have attempted to say from texts like Romans 8:29 (those God foreknew he also predestined), that God chose the people whom he knew beforehand would respond to the gospel. It is said, God "foreknew" some people would respond to the gospel, so he then "also predestined them." But this is based on a misunderstanding of the Greek word "foreknow". It doesn't mean "know beforehand", but rather "fore-appoint". If it did mean to know before hand it would contradict Eph. 1:4-5; Acts 13:48 & so on. Rather, this verse is actually driving home the point that God chose the believer first.

[Some objections]

Predestination has the habit of making believers angry because it seems unfair for two reasons. The first is this: predestination seals our fate. Humans don't seem to have any say in their destiny. How can God punish someone for not being chosen? The second objection is: if God is truly loving, why doesn't he chose everyone to be saved? At this point we must remember the caution we first raised: God is bigger than you and me, we won't understand everything about him. And with that said, let's tease out these two objections.

a. Then I'm not Responsible! :: If people are predestined then do we have no say in our destiny? Here we come to a genuine mystery. The Bible teaches two truths that appear contradictory to us, but aren't to God. On the one hand God is totally sovereign, but on the other hand humans are completely responsible for their actions. For example, Acts 2:23 teaches both predestination AND human responsibility in one verse:

"This man [Jesus] was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross."

God planned beforehand that Jesus would die; at the same time the people were responsible for killing him. And when the crowd realized their sin, notice they cry out "What should we do?" not "God that's not fair!" I don't know how God can be both 100% sovereign over my actions without compromising my 100% responsibility, but as said above, predestination is a mystery precisely because God is beyond our understanding.

b. Then God's Unfair :: Is God really unloving and unjust for not choosing everyone? We must remember that if God had been completely just he could have chosen no one and given all people what their sins deserve. It's sensational news that God has chosen some not to be punished! Remember, predestination reveals the full extent of God's love

(Eph. 1:4). But we are dealing with a mystery. When asking why God doesn't chose all we must remember to preserve God's freedom. Who are we as finite creatures to say what God should or shouldn't do? God is not some machine whose actions can be predicted! We must hold in tension that God is completely just but not all are chosen.

[**How does predestination help me?**]

Now comes the essential question: How practically does predestination help us? Why did God allow us to know about predestination?

LOVE :: Firstly, predestination shows us the full extent of God's love (Ephesians 1:4-5). Without knowing about predestination we would not fully appreciate God's love.

GRACE :: Secondly, Scripture uses predestination to guard the fact that we are saved fully by God's grace or unearned favor. If God chose me because I chose God, then I'd have reason to boast that there was something I initially did. But Scripture is adamant that this is not the case:

"So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace." (My emphasis)

Romans 11:5-6 (NIV)

In other words, if salvation is by grace (Eph. 2:8-9) then predestination must logically follow. Predestination guards grace. And so predestination produces humility in a believer. We cannot look down on a non-Christian as though we were any better. All we can say is "except for God's grace I'd be exactly the same." This gives the believer the ability to be patient, and long-suffering with unbelievers.

SECURITY :: Thirdly predestination helps us understand that our salvation is secure. This is taught clearly in the Bible:

"And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."

>Romans 8:30 (NIV)

Here we are told that those who are predestined will be glorified (that is, get to heaven). Paul ends the chapter by exclaiming, "nothing can separate us from the love of God!" For those who struggle with self-doubt about their ability to continue in the Christian life, predestination is a great balm.

MAKES GOD GOD :: Finally predestination guards God's sovereignty. If believers chose God then some actions would be out of God's control. God would then be forced to act on something outside of him. To put it bluntly, God could be manipulated by humans. But the very gospel message itself tells us that God is independent:

"And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else."

Acts 17:25 (NIV)

Thus predestination preserves God's independence and freedom.

[The dangers of predestination]

Here an alarm must be sounded! Predestination can be a dangerous doctrine if we lose the biblical balance. Teachings like apartheid have come from an imbalanced view of predestination. So how do we get it right? Here are four warnings.

Firstly, if predestination causes us to become nonchalant about sin, we have lost the biblical balance. Scripture uses predestination to encourage anxious Christians. But, Scripture never uses predestination to encourage those who are lax about their sin. For the lax Scripture says: "be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure." (2 Pet 1:10). The indicator of growing Christian maturity is greater awareness of personal sin. This will cultivate greater appreciation of Jesus' forgiveness and love.

Secondly, if predestination slackens our evangelism, we've lost the biblical balance. God has chosen to use humans to preach the gospel to unbelievers (Rom. 10:14). Predestination does not squash evangelism. In fact it saves it from using all sorts of emotional manipulation, which forces people into commitments. God has his people who will believe, our job is to preach the gospel to as many as possible.

Thirdly, if predestination stops us praying, we've lost the biblical balance. God has chosen the means of prayer to bring his purposes about. So from our perspective prayer "seems" to change things. James 4:2 says just that: "You don't have because you don't ask." How does this cohere with predestination? I don't know. What I'm called to do is observe the biblical balance, and keep praying (1 Thess. 5:17).

Finally, predestination should not stop us from being Christ centered. Often Christians become so obsessed with predestination that Jesus' work on the cross stops getting the major focus. Predestination guards grace, and grace is fundamentally seen in the cross (Titus 2:11). So predestination ultimately guards a right understanding of the cross, it does not usurp it.

If God's love is supremely seen in the cross (Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:10) then the cross is to be our focus as it was for the apostle Paul (1Cor 2:1). Our great temptation is to blow predestination out of proportion because of its mysterious nature. It's enticing to speculate about something so enigmatic! But speculation about this mystery is incredibly dangerous. We must be content to speak where the Bible speaks, and be silent where the Bible is silent. Predestination is not to take the limelight, but neither is it to be ignored!

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