

What About Predestination?

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We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first born within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified (Romans 8:28-30).

This year marks the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth. Calvin was the first great systematic thinker of the Reformed tradition, which includes our own Presbyterian Church. Most people today don't know much about Calvin, but if they know anything at all, they identify him with predestination, an idea they find completely baffling. Poor Calvin – a great thinker, largely forgotten except for an idea nobody understands.

There was a lot more to Calvin than predestination, and in the months ahead we'll talk about the great themes of the Reformed tradition. But today I want to dive into the deep end of the pool and try to make some sense of what predestination means, and what it doesn't mean, and why, if we understand it at all, it ought to be a source of great comfort.

Some of you know that I'm congenitally half Presbyterian and half Methodist, which means I have Calvinist genes and Wesleyan genes. John Wesley and the Methodists thought Calvin and the Presbyterians were wrong about predestination. Wesley thought predestination was a kind of determinism, meaning that everything that happens has already been determined by God. But if that were true, we would have no free will, and so we could not be held accountable for our actions. Morality would make no sense: why encourage people to do right and praise them for doing it, or punish people for doing wrong, when no one has the freedom to choose anyway? And besides, Wesley thought, predestination would make God responsible for every bad thing that happens. God would be the cause of evil. But that's absurd. The Bible and our own experience tell us that God is good, and human beings are responsible for their actions, so predestination must be false.

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Calvin died a couple centuries before Wesley, so the debate wasn't quite fair. Calvin never had a chance for rebuttal, and my theological ancestors never did work out their differences. If they had had the chance, they might eventually have seen eye to eye.

The first thing Calvin would have clarified is that predestination is not determinism. Just because God guides some things according to God's own plan, that doesn't mean human beings are not free to make their own decisions. A chess master's plan to win the game takes into account the opponent's moves, but the opponent makes her own decisions. A great general anticipates the enemy's strategy and has a plan to defeat it, though the enemy decides for himself how to fight. Predestination is more like a game or a battle where the master anticipates the other side's moves than like some predetermined script where the actors simply say the lines that were written for them.

Calvin would agree with Wesley that human beings are accountable for their actions. Morality really does matter, and there is nothing in predestination that undermines our responsibility. We make decisions all the time with the sense that we have real choices. We raise children on the assumption that influences make a difference. Society makes laws on the grounds that people are responsible for their actions, and ought to be rewarded or punished according to the way they behave. The Bible sets out laws for living, and describes God as, among other things, the great judge who rewards righteousness and punishes wickedness. None of that would make any sense if people did not have enough freedom to be responsible for what they do.

But Calvin would also say that he did not make up the idea of predestination. It's right there in the scripture. The most explicit texts are in the New Testament. Romans 8 says, "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." Ephesians 1 says, "he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world ... as a plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in him...." And 1 Peter says Jesus "was destined before the foundation of the world" to save God's people. Over and over again the gospels claim Jesus did things to fulfill what was spoken by the prophets. And before the prophets, God promised Abraham that all the nations of the world will be blessed through him; and before that, God called Moses to be the instrument of his plan to bring the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt. The last book of the Bible, Revelation, says in its own mysterious way that God still has a plan to create a new heaven and a new earth, where those who love God will live forever.

You can't read the Bible without seeing that God has a plan for the world in general, and more specifically, to save those who love God. Sometimes explicitly, and often implicitly, some form of predestination is woven all through the scripture. Calvin thought that should be an enormous comfort to anyone who loves God. As Paul writes to the Romans,

If God is for us, who is against us? ... Who will bring any charge against God's elect? ... For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:31-39).

By the "elect," Paul means those who love God and receive the grace of God in Jesus Christ. If we belong to God, nothing can separate us from God's love and salvation. All sorts of things may happen to us – *will* happen to us – but absolutely nothing can thwart God's plan to save us in the end. And God's plan was there before the foundation of the world. Before anyone even had a chance to sin, God was ready to reconcile us in Christ.

This has several implications. First, it means that Presbyterians and others who take predestination seriously have a different answer when some evangelicals ask, "When were you saved?" Some Christians insist that everyone who is really saved ought to be able to point to the time when he or she accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and therefore, as they say, "got saved." But a Presbyterian answer is more like, "I was saved by the grace of God before the world began." That's what Ephesians says: "he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love." It's important to confess Christ as Lord and Savior – in fact we ask everyone who joins the church to make that profession. But professing Christ means becoming aware of and affirming what God has been doing in us all along. It doesn't mean, "On Tuesday I was lost and on my way to hell, but on Wednesday I got saved and now I'm on the way to heaven." No, the grace of God has been working in us from the very beginning.

Another implication of predestination is that anyone who is truly saved cannot lose his or her salvation. If we were called by God before the foundation of the world, and we belong to God, then we cannot forfeit God's grace. This is a great comfort when we fall short of God's will for us – which, of course, we do every day. That's why every worship service begins with a confession of sin: because

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we accumulate plenty of things to confess in the course of a week, and the assurance of pardon reminds us that God's grace is sufficient for every need. Even when we fail in a big way, God is merciful. That's why we say that grace is amazing.

But this does not mean we can get away with anything we want. People sometimes say, "Well, if I'm saved and can't lose my salvation, then I'm free to do whatever I want!" They think it's like having a "Get Out of Jail Free" card. But if you think like that, be careful: it may be a sign that you're not really saved! Anyone who belongs to God wants to love God, and please God, and serve God. If you love God, why would you even *want* to do anything God doesn't like? If you love another person, you don't say, "I love her so much that I want to pull something over on her and do things to hurt her." No, if we love someone, we want to make that person happy. Why should it be any different with God? And besides, do we really think we can pull things over on the Almighty?

The doctrine of predestination says that it's grace all the way down. There's nothing we can do to deserve our salvation. Even the act of receiving God's grace is made possible by the grace of God working in us. "By grace you are saved through faith," Paul says, "and not by works, lest anyone should boast." But there's a twist. We are saved, not to follow our own desires, but "for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life" (Ephesians 2:10). We're not saved *by* good works, but *for* good works – to do the things that make God happy. But that's what lovers do, isn't it? They love to please the beloved. So it isn't a chore to please God if you really love God. It's what makes you happy. And it pains you when you think you've let God down, not for fear you'll be punished, but because you hate to disappoint someone you love.

To recap what we've said so far, predestination is a thoroughly biblical idea, described not only by Calvin but by lots of other theologians who take scripture seriously. It isn't determinism. People make choices that matter, and we're still responsible for our actions. But predestination says God has a plan to save us, even before the world began, and if we belong to God we can never lose our salvation. That should be a source of great comfort when we fall short – not because we want to get away with anything, but precisely because we want to serve God and it pains us when we let God down.

Now a couple more things need to be said. First, if predestination is good news for the "elect," for those whom God has called to be saved, it sounds like really

bad news for anyone who is not among the elect. It raises the obvious question: If God made them and they are not going to be saved in the end, then isn't that unfair? It sounds as though they never really had a chance.

But that's a misunderstanding, and it probably has to do with the nature of time, and the difference between God's perspective and ours. Here the water gets deep very quickly, but we can point toward an answer. At least since Einstein we've learned to think of space and time as being all wrapped up together. God created the space and time we live in, but God is not confined within them. From God's perspective, things may not be "before" and "after" in our sense at all, so it's misleading to talk about *pre-destination*. If God creates some people who choose, for whatever reason, to reject God's grace indefinitely, they have the freedom to do that, but it's their decision, not God's. There is no injustice on God's part if some people choose to turn away from God.

Whether anybody ultimately decides to do that, only God knows. There are passages in scripture that talk about eternal punishment, which we can think of as eternal separation from God, but scripture also says that God wants everyone to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). How that comes out in the end, again only God knows. But we know that God is good, and God is just, so whatever happens, it will not be unfair.

And that brings us to the last point, which is that there are many things we don't understand completely, including predestination. But the fact that we don't understand something does not mean it isn't true.

I often think that theology, which has been defined as faith seeking understanding, is like a Sudoku puzzle. I do those puzzles regularly, partly because they're challenging and fun, and partly because I read that they help to fight off dementia, which I would like very much to avoid. (So far, it seems to be working, but I suppose I'd be the last to know if it wasn't.) You may know that Sudokus require you to use all nine digits, from 1 to 9, once and only once across a row, down a column, and within each of nine boxes. Some puzzles are easy: only a few numbers are left out, and it isn't hard to fill in the blanks. But the more blank spaces there are, the harder the puzzle. You fill in a few numbers, and then all you know is the limits of the remaining blank spaces. You know they cannot include some numbers, and they must include some others, but you're not sure which number goes in which space.

Theology is something like that. We know the answer must include some things

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and cannot include others, but what exactly the answer is may be hard to figure out. We know that God is good, and just, and merciful. We know that we are saved by the grace of God, and even the ability to accept God's grace is a gift from God. We know that God had a plan to save us before the creation of the world, and that if God is working to save us, we cannot lose our salvation. The rest may be unclear to us now, but that doesn't mean the puzzle has no answer.

If you really get stumped by a Sudoku, you can wait for tomorrow's paper and find the answer. I imagine that one day we will open the paper of revelation and find the answers to many of the puzzles we can't solve here and now.

Someone has said that life must be lived forward, but can only be understood backward. Someone else said long ago that the essence of a great story is that you can never quite tell exactly where it's going, but when you get to the end you say, "Of course! It had to be that way!" Something like that will be true of puzzles like predestination. In the meantime, our task is to live this life loving God, and trusting God, and being grateful for God's grace, and beginning now to enjoy God forever.