

## **Predestination: Do We Still Believe It?**

I Peter 1:17-23, Romans 8:28-30

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 8:30

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The world has focused its attention on Pope John Paul II in recent days. Millions have mourned his loss, remembered his legacy, and honored his extraordinary character and spiritual depth. The passing of the Roman Catholic Pope has reminded us of the faith that we share in the Christian church. Whether we are Roman Catholics or Greek Orthodox or Scottish Presbyterians, we believe that there is “one body and one spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all.” (Ephesians 4:5)

Many core convictions unite us with other believers in the catholic, that is, universal faith of Christianity than separate us; yet, each tradition has a distinctive vision of that faith that both distinguishes it from others and contributes to the whole. (1) This morning, I want to focus on the distinctive vision of Presbyterian Protestantism, which emphasizes grace alone, faith alone and Scripture alone. Other of our characteristic beliefs are these: “covenant life marked by a disciplined concern for order within the church according to the Word of God,” a distrust of authority invested in anyone individual, a kind of stewardship that shuns ostentation, a recognition of the human tendency toward idolatry, a recognition that leads the people of God to work always in humility and “for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to God’s Word.” (2)

One of the traits that has been particularly associated with Presbyterians is the doctrine of predestination. A more apt word is the word “election”. It is also part of our Presbyterian tradition to be people who think, not just emote. Presbyterians are known for loving God with their minds as well as with their hearts, and so I want you to think with me today. I make no claim to full comprehension of the doctrine, but I am convinced that many of us, myself included, want to understand predestination more fully. We sense that by keeping the subject tucked away in the dim recesses of seldom-used theology, we just might be missing something of great value.

Presbyterians believe first and last in the sovereignty of God. First and last, we affirm that God is at work in the broader realms of culture and society and that God is present, not just in my heart or your heart, but is at work in history as well. God is both the Alpha and the Omega. God’s providence guides human events. Moderns cannot tolerate that thought very well. Oh, we are very much into determinism. We believe that biology determines things. Psychology and sociology determine things. Genetic research is now delving into whether or not even our character is genetically determined. Is there a genetic factor behind the tendency to anger or violence, for instance?

We believe in determinism in the sense of assuming that where we were born or who our parents were or how we were raised predestines how the rest of our lives will go. I remember talking some years ago with a couple about to be married. We discussed the interesting topic of conflict resolution in a relationship. The bride-to-be sighed with resignation, "I'm afraid Bobby has inherited his daddy's bad temper." I thought to myself: his father might have a temper, and Bobby might have a temper, but his temper is his own temper, isn't it? It is his to manage and to control.

To many people, determinism is the way they understand reality, though not in terms of divine providence. They resort to a shoulder slumping kind of fatalism. On the other side, there are people who reject altogether the suggestion that God or fate has anything to do with what happens to them. They puff out their chests and declare their independence: I am the master of my fate. I alone am the captain of my soul. I am both the potter and the clay. I am in charge of myself entirely.

There you have it- either utter individualism or a resigned kind of fatalism. Predestination, the idea of predestination, I believe, offers an alternative way of understanding who we are and what is possible. This is not a doctrine that explains everything, but it can help us understand the ultimate shape of reality.

Let me begin by saying what predestination is not. It is not a bushel basket which holds an answer to every conceivable question. Do not look to predestination to find out why airplanes crash or buildings collapse. Predestination is a doctrine that has to do with the nature of God- what is God like, what the nature of God's character is, and what actions are likely to be undertaken by the God who is possessed of such character. Predestination says that God is God, and we are not.

Our tradition does have, as a part of its history, a daunting understanding of predestination called double predestination which, by the way, Presbyterians no longer have to say they believe in. Here is how Westminster Confession written in 1647 made the case: "By the Decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestined unto eternal life, and others are fore-ordained to everlasting death." Believe it or not, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, double predestination was understood to be a doctrine of grace. Everyone deserves God's judgment, but because God is gracious, some, that is, the elect, have been chosen in Christ for salvation, though through no merit of their own. They are called justified, sanctified, and saved because God is good.

The problem with this old classic definition is that God can hardly be seen as anything but an arbitrary tyrant and an enemy of human freedom. And yet, our forbearers understood it in the sense that God was good, at least to some, and they didn't just cook up this idea. They read the Bible, in which there certainly are passages that speak of an in-crowd and an out-crowd. The sheep and the goats come to mind. But to look at election in light of the whole Biblical witness is to see the God who is for the world and for the people in it. God's grace is offered to all-not just to some, but to all. Jeremiah the prophet was created and then sent to bear witness to the nations of God's salvation. Abraham and Sarah and their descendants were chosen to bless all

the people of the earth. In the New Testament, the covenant made with the Hebrew people expands to the Gentiles and beyond. “For those whom God foreknew, God also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a *large* family.” (Romans 8:29))

Predestination is not fatalism. Predestination is not a doctrine of wrath. Predestination is a doctrine of grace. In this whole matter of fatalism, I have to share with you a story that those of you who grew up in the Methodist tradition might appreciate. It seems that a Presbyterian pastor and a Methodist minister had debated the idea of predestination for decades. They decided to have a pulpit exchange one Sunday. Their churches were located several blocks apart. The preachers set out on horseback (this is an old story) to go to one another’s church. They met midway and exchanged greetings. The Presbyterian Calvinist said, “I feel I must remind you, dear sir, that before the foundations of the earth, the Almighty God did decree that on this Sabbath day you would preach in my pulpit and I in yours”

The Methodist brother replied, “Then, if that be the case, sir, I shall not do it.” He turned and rode his horse back to his own church. Predestination is not irreversible fate. (3)

Predestination is a doctrine of grace and inclusion. Predestination can have a positive effect on human beings when we understand that we were created to serve the great purposes of God. The theologian Karl Barth believed that Christian theology, at its core, has to do with Christ and with God’s choosing the world in and through him. Election is a mystery, but it is not the mystery we first thought it was. We do not have two Gods—one who is just and merciful to some and one who is just and merciful to others. We have one God, whose essential nature is revealed in Jesus Christ. The mystery is that God has decided, freely decided, independent of all our creaturely decisions, to love human beings and to be in communion with human beings forever. The mystery is God’s unbending determination to save and not to destroy. Barth puts it so eloquently, I think. If you remember nothing else about this theologically thick sermon, remember this: “In creation God’s first word was yes, and in Jesus Christ, yes will be God’s last word. “(4) Does that mean that there is no such thing as human freedom? Certainly, we are free to reject our election. We can exclude ourselves from the community of grace. But that is our choice, not God’s choice. We are chosen, not for privilege, but for service. We are chosen, not so that we individually can think of ourselves as better than others, but chosen so that we can take our place in the gracious family of God, and be the embodiment of God’s love and stewards of God’s vision for justice and righteousness in our time. Predestination is not fatalism. It is an acknowledgement that we are not our own; we belong to God. (5)

At the end of his life, Karl Barth was asked that if he had it to do all over again, what major theological themes he might change. He responded that his thinking and his writing all came from his encounters with real people and real conditions. He said that he felt like a man in a boat, a boat that he must row and steer, but a boat that traveled a river he did not control.(6) That is a wonderful understanding of predestination. Yes we have choices, yes, we steer our own boats, but our boats sail along on the journey down the river of God’s love and God’s sovereign will.

The doctrine of election is the glad affirmation that in the beginning and in the middle and in the end, we belong to God and are created to serve His great purposes. The doctrine of election is the

church's way of saying that God is for us and that in Jesus Christ; God is for the whole world. Harry Emerson Fosdick was probably the greatest preacher of the twentieth century. Toward the end of his ministry at Riverside Church, he stood in the pulpit in New York City and said to his congregation, "Now in my older years, I bear my witness. My deepest faith in God springs not so much from my Galilees where God clothed the lilies so that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of them. My deepest faith comes from those times when the rains descended and the floods came and the wind beat and blew and God was there and the house did not fall. In my young manhood, I had a terrible nervous breakdown. It was the most terrifying wilderness I have ever traveled through. I wanted to commit suicide, but I didn't. Instead, I discovered the most vital truths of life. My little book on the meaning of prayer would never have been written without my breakdown. Neither would my ministry have taken place. I found God in the darkest place of my life, which is to say that God is at work in the midst of all of it. 'In all things "God works for good for those who are called according to his purposes.'" (7)

God has a plan. God has a plan for the world, and for you and me. Even our poorest choices cannot thwart God's plan for redemption. Don't ever forget, when you find yourself lost, alone and afraid, there is always the river. There is always the God of grace who is waiting for you and calling you from the distant shore. "Come to me, my chosen one. I have been waiting for you since before the foundation of the world. And if you can't get to me on your own, I'll come and get you wherever you are."

Thanks be to God for the Presbyterian tradition. In Jesus Christ, we are chosen. Amen.

(1) William C. Placher and David Willis-Watkins, *Belonging to God*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, p. 9.

(2) *Book of Order*, G-2.0330-2,500.

(3) P.C. Enniss, *Predestination*, Central Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA, 1980.

(4) *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. II, p.4.

(5) *Brief Statement of Faith*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

(6) P.C. Enniss, *Predestination*, Central Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA, 1980.

(7) *Ibid.*