



What is Predestination, and Does It Matter?

New Testament Reading: Ephesians 1:3-14

As most of you know, we are in the midst of a sermon series based on questions that you have submitted for us to preach on. So the inevitable question has finally arisen: *What Is Predestination, and Does It Matter?* Before I attempt to address this, let me just say that though the doctrine of predestination is strongly associated with Presbyterians and with John Calvin, Calvin did not invent the idea. Predestination is a biblical teaching. Predestination is not even a particularly Presbyterian conviction. Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Episcopalians, and our Baptist friends also join us in this common belief.

So what is predestination and does it matter? When I was discussing this topic with my theologian husband, he said, "Does predestination matter? Absolutely! You can't have the gospel without it. No predestination, no gospel." Wow. Them's strong words. Why would predestination be so central to the gospel? The reason is that predestination involves God's election, God's choosing to bring blessing, deliverance, and salvation to the world by calling and using specific people. This conviction is the centerpiece of both the Old and New Testaments. For instance, in the Old Testament God chooses Abraham and makes a covenant with him and with his descendants, charging the children of Israel to be a blessing to all nations (Gen. 12:3). Then God raises up Hebrew prophets, priests, and kings through whom the divine will is made known. In the New Testament, God continues to call people to covenant relationship in Jesus Christ. Jesus is frequently spoken of as God's elected One (Luke 9:35; Acts 3:20; 1 Peter 1:20; Eph. 1:9-10). As the New Testament presents it, predestination has to do with God's choosing Jesus Christ to be the One through whom salvation is offered to all by grace, through faith. It's about God's calling a people who will be faithful to the new covenant in Christ--and again charging the faithful in Christ to be a blessing to all nations.

All of this talk of being chosen can sound sort of lofty and far removed from your life and mine. So what does predestination have to say to you and me? Here is where the rubber meets the road. Predestination includes the affirmation that prior to any action or merit on our part, God knows us, God saves us and God empowers us for service. This means that before you were, God was; that God thought of you and called you into being; that God knows you by name; and that God has chosen to give you a future and a hope. Further, predestination tells us that God has determined to be *for* us and *with* us in Jesus Christ, and God has also determined not to leave us on our own, but rather God works *in* us and *among* us by the power of the Holy Spirit. This in turn tells us something vitally important about ourselves. You and I matter to God--we

matter so much that we are called to live in relationship with God all our days. It tells us that our lives have purpose and meaning. Our purpose is to love and serve God by loving and serving our neighbors. In other words, this doctrine tells us that God is at work in our lives and in our world to reconcile and redeem us. First and foremost, predestination is about a gracious God whose redeeming love is made real in Jesus Christ. That is what predestination is all about. There are a few things that predestination is NOT, and these are outlined on the insert sheet in today's bulletin. But I digress....

It seems to me that there are two basic ways to view predestination--each of which will take us in a different theological direction. Predestination can be viewed through the lens of LOGIC or through the lens of LOVE. John Calvin, and some of his buddies, tended to view predestination through the lens of logic. Calvin's understanding was heavily influenced by two things: 1) his belief that Scripture is the primary authority for Christian faith and life and 2) his experience as a leader of the Reformation during the 1500's in Geneva. Calvin's views were often in response to central issues that caused the Protestant Reformation. Chief among them, was the teaching that the Roman Catholic Church had a monopoly on salvation. Salvation could only be gained by following the practices and teachings of the Catholic Church. Disregarding Church authority and doctrine led to excommunication--being cut off not only from the Church but also from salvation itself. Over against this teaching, Calvin and other Reformers protested that salvation was the gift of God alone, through God's gift of Christ alone, received by grace through faith alone. In other words, the giver of salvation is God--not the Church. Consequently, one of the most important themes of the Reformation is that God alone is sovereign--God has absolute authority, power, majesty, and holiness. And further, that if there is any salvation at all, any faith at all, any grace and mercy at all, then it comes as a direct gift from a sovereign God.

Now the sovereignty of God is all well and good, but when you add logic as the principle guiding God's sovereign actions, then you can arrive at some surprising conclusions. For instance, IF God alone is the source of salvation and IF God is all-knowing and all-powerful, then God must know (even before we are born) who is saved and who is not. It only stands to reason that you cannot surprise an all-knowing, all-powerful God. And IF, as Scripture teaches, God chooses some for salvation, does it not logically follow that God must choose the rest for damnation? This kind of deductive, logical reasoning is how some Reformers arrived at the doctrine of double predestination--the belief that God saves some and damns others. At this point, it is important to note that the New Testament speaks of God's election only to salvation and never to damnation. So letting logic be the guide to understanding divine election is contradictory to Scripture. Think about that for a minute...how logical was it for God to choose Abraham, Isaac or Jacob? As the poet EE Cummings once noted, "How odd of God to choose the Jews."

A more faithful lens through which to view predestination is the lens of LOVE. At the deepest level, what do we know about God? I would assert that first and foremost, we know that God is love and what motivates God is love. In fact, the whole idea that God reaches out to us in Jesus Christ in order to redeem our broken selves and our broken world is based on love. John 3:16 says, "For God so LOVED the world, that he sent his only Son, so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." And what else do we know about God's love? 1 John 4:19 puts it succinctly, "We love God because God first loved us." Our love for God is in response to God's prior love for us. So redeeming love is the name of the game, and in that department God is the initiator, reaching out to us well before we ever had the first thought about God. I believe that predestination, viewed through the lens of God's love, gives us a much more accurate picture.

A simple way to understand the love of God is by analogy to human love--in this case maternal love. So let me sketch out a parable for you. For those of you who have children, these words should sound especially familiar, but all of us have been children, so we can relate too.

This is the story of Jessica and her son, Luke. When Jessica first found out that she was pregnant, every waking thought was of the new life within. As time went on, she felt movement--kicks, bounces, even hiccups. There were distinct patterns of activity and though Luke was as yet unborn, he had a personality all his own. Finally D-day came (that's "delivery day"), and Luke was able to see his mother face-to-face. From Jessica's standpoint, she greeted Luke as a child who was familiar, a little person whose ways she already knew. But to Luke, the smiling face of his mother was entirely new and unfamiliar.

The story doesn't end here. Jessica soon discovered that she had a love for her baby that was close to being unconditional. She was smitten with this little boy, who did nothing but sleep, eat, wet and get her up all night. All this despite the fact that Luke did not respond to her smiles and coos and kisses right away. It took literally months before Jessica's smile was returned by one of Luke's own. And yet, Jessica's love for Luke was not dependent on his response--indeed, it was there even before he was born. In fact, there was lots of love shown to this child before he came into the world. His parents fixed a place for him--a nursery. They had clothes and blankets and diapers. They chose a name for him. They took out an insurance policy, made out wills to provide for Luke, and set up a college fund for his future. All of this was done by his loving parents before Luke was ever born. This is a picture we can understand.

Similarly, the doctrine of predestination affirms that God is our divine Parent, whose love was there for us before we were ever born; and whose love has watched over us every day of our lives. Before we ever knew God, God knew us. Before we ever responded to God in any way, God was already reaching out to us in love, providing for us, inviting us to become what we were created to be--children of God. God also provided an inheritance for us, our own trust fund if you will, an inheritance accessed by grace not merit. God's invitation in Christ is for us to share a relationship with God that begins now and extends into eternity. That is the divine plan made before the foundation of the world. It is what Scripture means when it says, "God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world...and destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ."

Salvation is an open invitation--and it is like any other invitation. An invitation does not dictate our actions or remove our free will. Instead, an invitation prompts our actions and invites us to direct our wills in a certain way. We can respond in ways that either accept or reject God's gracious offer of an eternal inheritance. Ephesians 2:8 sums up predestination in a nutshell: "For it is by grace that we have been saved by faith, and this is not our own doing; it is a gift from God."

Predestination is meant to be a word of encouragement, an affirmation of our worth in the eyes of God, a testament to God's love and grace, and a source of comfort to us in our life journey. Calvin said that predestination was a source of consolation not consternation. Our response to God's gracious invitation to follow Jesus should be humility, joyful obedience and thanksgiving; never arrogance or self-righteousness.

But there have been so many distortions over the years that people have made the good news of predestination into bad news. One way to do this is to try and decide who is saved and who is not. This is not a new preoccupation; we even see it in the New Testament itself. Peter asks the

risen Christ about the destiny of John (John 21:21-22), to which Jesus responds, "What is that to you, Peter? Follow me." In other words, "Let God take care of John, Peter. I want you to focus on following me!" I think that Jesus' words should also guide us here. Our calling is to proclaim, teach, and embody the life-saving, life-changing, life-enhancing love of Jesus Christ, and then leave the rest in the hands of a gracious and loving God. May it be so.

AMEN.

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