

I Was Just Wondering...How Do I Understand Predestination?

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Romans 8:26-32

So today's "I Was Just Wondering..." question is a doozy. How do I understand predestination? A nice lightweight question for this October Sunday.

Maybe you're surprised that our youth ask this question. Predestination? I thought our youth were too busy thinking about dating and friendship, I thought they were too busy scrolling on their phones to think of such things. If that thought went through your mind, you're not giving our young people enough credit. They think about things like predestination. In fact, when I was a youth leader at my previous church, my students always wanted to talk about this issue. Not everyone was into it, but there was always a group who wanted to talk about predestination. When he first saw this sermon topic on the schedule for this sermon series, Bob Grussing smiled. "I'm not surprised," he said, "They always want to know about that." And Rachel, our new youth director, said the youth at Plymouth Heights, her previous church, also wanted to talk about predestination. Why the interest? Young people are interested in this subject for the same reason that many of you are: it goes to the heart of how we understand our life.

Predestination is the belief that we don't choose God; God chooses us. He predestines us to follow him. He predestines us to be saved. "Those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." God has predestined, God has decided beforehand who would follow him, He predestined us in love not because we are so smart and beautiful, he loves us because he loves us. It was his choice.

People hear the doctrine, and they think about it for a second, and pretty soon they have questions. There are two questions in particular that tend to come up. I'm pretty sure that these are the two questions that our young people have, and they revolve around fairness and freewill. Fairness: Is predestination fair? Sure God predestined me to be his child, but what about the people who are not believers. I have an uncle who left the church. I have a friend on my soccer team who says he's a Buddhist. Are you saying they weren't chosen and now they are going to hell? Freedom: If God has predestined me, do my choices not matter? Do I have free will? Or is it all predestined? Am I just God's robot, God's puppet, God's marionette? Because of these two questions people say, "I don't like the doctrine of predestination! It makes God seem cold and calculating. God sounds like a cold puppet master; a control freak who randomly condemns people."

Before I address these questions, we should answer a previous question: Does the Bible teach predestination? Does the Bible teach that God chooses us ahead of time apart from anything I do? Not every church tradition agrees on the answer to this question. But our tradition, the Reformed tradition, following in the steps of John Calvin, we say that the Bible does absolutely teach predestination.

There are a number of places you can go to see that. Our passage is one of those places, and maybe the most famous one, but there are others. Ephesians 1 says "God chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ," It happened before the foundation of the world; it was pre-destined. In John 6:44 Jesus is talking about how some people believe in him and others don't and he says, "No one can come to me unless the Father draws them." God draws us, we don't choose him. Acts 13:48 describes people coming to faith after one of Paul's sermons. Listen to the description: "When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed." They were appointed beforehand – pre-destined. 1 Peter 1:2 calls church members, people "who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ." Foreknowledge. In Galatians 1:15, Paul says about himself: "God...set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace." I was pre-destined. In Jeremiah 1:5 God says to the prophet, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." Jeremiah was pre-destined. In John 15:16 Jesus says to his disciples, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit, fruit that will last." In other words, I pre-destined you. And finally, Ephesians 1:11 "In him we were also chosen having been predestined according to the plan of God who works everything out according

to his purposes.” This is a pretty consistent Biblical teaching. Predestination may make us uncomfortable, but I’m not sure there’s any way of getting around the fact that the Bible teaches it.

So what can we say about the uncomfortable parts of the doctrine. To return to your original question, “How do we understand predestination.” There are a few things we can say. First, I know that some people talk about predestination in a way that makes God sound like a cold puppet master. But in the Bible the doctrine of predestination is not cold; it is a big bear hug of a doctrine that picks you up off your feet and spins you around.

Let me explain. When the Bible talks about predestination, it’s not doing it as part of a cold, abstract conversation about as who gets to go to heaven, or a cold, abstract conversation about whether or not we have freewill. When the Bible talks about predestination, it’s giving warm words of encouragement. So Paul writes to an Ephesian Church who feels small and frail, and he says, “You are not frail, you were chosen by God before the beginning of time. You are predestined for glory! Don’t be afraid. Jeremiah is feeling like he’s not up to the work of being a prophet, and God says, “Don’t be afraid! Before you were in your Mom’s tummy, I chose you to be a prophet. You are predestined!” The Roman church is feeling small and vulnerable in the middle of this pagan city, so Paul says to them, “you are predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son. God is going to make you like Jesus. This is happening.” In all these cases, God is not doing cold, abstract theology. God is not saying, “Let’s review the logic of who gets saved and who doesn’t.” No, he’s grabbing hold of uncertain people and saying, “Don’t worry! I love you, and I am with you, and you have always been my child.”

Now, what’s happened of course is that people have taken these words of encouragement and started speculating. If God has predestined me to be his child, does it even matter if I’m good or bad? If God predestined me to be his child, do I have any freedom at all? And what about those people who haven’t been chosen? That’s Ok. We’re allowed to ask those questions and we’re allowed to speculate about answers, but we should recognize that we are speculating. These passages aren’t aimed at those questions.

Here’s an analogy. Imagine I said to you, “I’m so hungry I could eat a horse.” What could you conclude from that? If you concluded, ‘Peter is very hungry,’ you would be correct. You would be on safe interpretive ground with that conclusion. But what if you went on from there and started to say, “Peter must be pro horse meat. And he must need an enormous caloric intake to be satisfied.”? Now your conclusions are much more speculative because they are deductions that aren’t really based on the main point of what I was saying. The Bible proclaims predestination as a word of encouragement. We can try to make further deductions and conclusions from those statements using our human logic and human reason, but we should be careful about the conclusions we draw and how firmly we hold them.

Jesus actually warns us about too much speculation. At the end of the gospel of John, Jesus and Peter have a conversation. Jesus tells Peter about his future; he basically tells Peter that he’s predestined to die for his faith. “When you are older someone will take you by the hand and lead you where you do not want to go.” Peter hears that personal word and then he points to John: “What about him!?” Peter wants to know about the fate of his fellow disciple. Do you remember what Jesus says? “Mind your own beeswax.” Actually that’s a loose translation. Jesus actually says: “What is that to you? You must follow me.”

That’s good guidance for all of us as we think about predestination and the fate of other people. God says, “Don’t worry about them so much. Tell them about me. Show them my love. But don’t get too caught up in speculation about their eternal fate. Trust me, I will deal justly and mercifully with the world and its peoples.”

When we talk about predestination we should sound less like a philosophy textbook and more like Harry Jellema on his death bed. This is an old classic LaGrave story. Our old preacher Jake Eppinga told this story in the last article he ever wrote before he died. In effect, this is a story about a dying man written by a dying man. Harry Jellema was a beloved teacher at Calvin for many years and a member of this congregation. Harry taught philosophy and so he was practiced in the ways of reason and logic. He had worked as hard as he could to answer life’s great questions. In 1982 he was dying, and so Jake Eppinga came to visit him. Jake prayed with him and read scripture. They talked about life and they talked about death. And according to Jake, after a lifetime of reading and thinking and speculating about life, Harry had these last words to offer: “It’s all grace Jake. It’s all grace.” My whole life long I’ve been carried along by God’s grace.

You could say that in his last words, Harry Jellema was proclaiming the doctrine of predestination.

Or, you could also say that in our passage, Paul was saying what Harry Jellema said. It's all grace, says Paul. God started this process and nothing is going to stop his grace. "Those he predestines he also calls, those he calls he also justifies he also glorifies," it's all grace. "What then shall we say in response to all these things, if God is for us who can be against us?" It's all grace.

This knowledge leads to freedom. It is the opposite of confining; it empowers us. Ed Clowney, who used to teach at Westminster Seminary, used this analogy to help explain how that's so. Imagine you're married and you ask your spouse, "Why do you love me?" I'm not sure that's a good question to ask your spouse, and it's probably not a good question for your spouse to answer. But suppose she did and she said, "I love you because you are successful in your work and you are fit and handsome."

How would that make you feel? For a minute you would feel great. 'Look at me, all handsome and successful.' But then what's the next thing you say? 'I better work out and stay fit and handsome or I might lose that love.' 'I better work hard and make sure I stay successful or I might lose that love.' And now you're on the hamster wheel of anxiety. You don't feel free; you feel insecure and trapped. The only answer to the question, 'why do you love me' is "I love you because I love you." "I love you and neither sickness nor health, neither plenty nor want, neither success nor failure will change that." When you are loved like that you have freedom. When you are loved like that you are blessed.

Predestination is God saying, I love you because I love you. I love you because I chose you. And there's nothing that can break the hold of my love on you; there's nothing that can change my love's purpose for you. "If God is for us, who can be against us, he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also together with him, graciously give us all things?"

Does that mean you don't have any responsibility? Does that mean you can just do whatever you want? Not at all. 'Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all.' We are called to repent from our sins. We are called to commit ourselves to Jesus. We are called to do his work in the world. We are called to show the fruit of the spirit, but we don't do that as a way to earn God's love, we do it because the Holy Spirit of God is at work in us. We do it because we are so thankful that the great predestining love of God has come into our life and picked us up and cleaned us off and brought us into the light.

So young people, you ask, "How do I understand predestination?" Understand this: The grace of Jesus Christ is all around you, and it's moving in your life, it is the hope of your life. In Christ, God's love has embraced you, lifted you off your feet and spun you around. I urge you, in Paul's words, to take hold of that for which Christ has already taken hold of you. The appropriate response to this doctrine is not passivity, it's action and purpose and passion. Jesus has put his hand on you and said, I love you, give yourself to that love. Let it fill your heart. Let it fill your soul. Let it fill your mind. Let it fill your hands. Let it be at the center of your plans. Let it be at the center of your life. Do it today, do it tomorrow, do it every morning of your life. Because in his predestining love you will find joy, and you will find your life's true purpose.

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