

## DO PRESBYTERIANS BELIEVE IN PREDESTINATION, AND WHAT IS IT ANYWAY?

### *Second in the series “Questions from the Floor”*

July 18, 2004

[Ephesians 1:3-14](#)

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*Prayer: For the mystery of the text, and for the history of eyes to see and ears to hear the text, we give you thanks. We pray now for the gift of perception; for energy and courage to take you scriptures and wrench your blessing from them. Amen.*

Theology matters. What and how we think about God and about ourselves makes a difference in how we live our lives and how the life of the world is shaped. Theology matters.

Having said that, let me make two disclaimers: First, the creeds and doctrines of our church which make up our theology are only important as signposts, and not hitching posts.<sup>1</sup> It is bad religion to deify doctrines and creeds, or to make them into something they aren't: infallible. But their purpose, and the purpose of theology, is to make us more loving by trying to help us understand the mysteries of the God of truth and grace. If they enable us to make love our hitching post, then they are doing their job!

The second disclaimer is related to the first, and that is that all theology is fallible and ultimately inadequate. It is simply our human effort to understand the mysteries of divine revelation. All of which is to say that we need to take our doctrines seriously, but not *too* seriously, and perhaps with a bit of levity and a sense of humor.

Which reminds me, of course, of the story told of the man known throughout the congregation to be inclined a little too much toward the bottle. One night late, he turned up obviously inebriated, pounding at his pastor's front door. The minister, who was a prominent New York City pastor, had retired for the evening, and raised the upstairs bedroom window and called down to see what the man wanted. The drunk shouted back "I want you to tell me about predestination." The minister, recognizing his parishioner, and sizing up the situation, charged back, "You're drunk...come back in the morning when you're sober and I will tell you about predestination." To which the drunk retorted, "You'd better tell me now....when I am sober, I don't give a [hoot] about predestination."

Well, on a hot, mid-July summer morning, that might be your attitude. Still, several of you asked about this doctrine about which we Presbyterians are famous...or infamous. And it is well worth thinking about it because it is a major biblical theme. One can hardly open up the Old Testament and not find God working God's purpose out with a wide assortment of people. There's Abraham and Sarah, picked out, called, to be the father and mother of a nation, so they go forth, not fully understanding or even knowing where they were heading.

There's Moses—stuttering and protesting the whole way, but given a divine destiny to fulfill. There's that strange group of prophets, all picked by God and charged to proclaim God's message of justice and righteousness. And we need to remember that sometimes God worked through pagans, Assyrians, for example, or Cyrus, to accomplish God's purpose. God calling,

picking, choosing, leading...sometimes chastising and judging, but always having a hand in history, involved in the lives of people and nations as God works God's purposes out.

And then the New Testament continues that theme of the providence and purpose of God. In our Ephesians text, we read of how God "chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world....and destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ." Paul's letter to the church at Rome attempted to wade through this mystery: "whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate...Moreover, whom he did predestinate, them he also called, and whom he called, them he also justified, and whom he justified he also glorified." (Rm. 8:29-30)

God chooses a people not because they are wise or good or powerful, but because God is wise and good and powerful. God chooses us before we choose God. (That's a reason we baptize infants!) Even Jesus, as he was saying good-bye to his disciples, knew how difficult life would be for them, so he reminded them "You did not choose me, but I chose you." I can well imagine one of the disciples piping up "But we thought we chose to follow you!" "Yeah," says Jesus: "you thought."

So let me say what predestination is not. It is not irreversible fate; it is not the predetermination of absolutely everything. The socks you wear this morning, you chose. The decision to eat at Wendy's or The Rendezvous or at home is your decision. We have the free will to make those decisions, and even more important ones that when made, often run counter to God's purposes. But some things are too important to be left to us, and our salvation is one of those.

In addition, predestination is not careless and capricious. In "The Producers," which is still a hot Broadway ticket, Matthew Broderick sings of his fantasy of being a Broadway producer and selecting chorus girls for his show:

I wanna be a producer with a hit show on Broadway  
 I wanna be a producer, lunch with Sardi's every day  
 I wanna be a producer and sleep till half-past two  
 I wanna be a producer and say "you, you, you, not you."

At times predestination has been imagined with "you, you, you, not you," but rightly understood, predestination delivers us from that sort of speculation. God chooses, not us. God chooses, and our only appropriate human response to being chosen is humility and thanksgiving; not arrogance and self-righteousness.

You see, predestination is meant to be a source of comfort, a word of encouragement, a declaration of independence from fear and anxiety. That's what it is meant to be, but seldom is. There have been so many distortions through the years that people think its bad news. But ultimately, predestination is just a complicated way of spelling out God's grace and mercy and goodness and justice.

We could spend time this morning, or in an entire course on predestination examining all those texts in the Bible which support predestination, and then sharing with you how it was

developed by Augustine and then Calvin and Knox and Turretin. I could even quote some of our confessions and creeds. But I think the most convincing evidence is simply to be found in stories—biblical stories—of the people, who like us, went stumbling through life looking for truth; trying to make sense of life. Some days everything might click and they could see a unifying purpose to it all. But some days not believing at all. Stories not unlike so many of ours. But then, only later, looking backward, being able to sense a pattern, a theme too obscure to discern at the time, but seeing only in retrospect that for all our choices and decisions, failures and successes, for all of those plans that succeeded and all of those that got sidetracked, looking back over their lives and sensing a purpose beyond their own doing.

There was one seminary professor I know of who always cautioned his students not to preach on predestination until they had grandchildren. Obviously, I am violating that admonition today, but I see what he was talking about. Predestination is a doctrine for the older folk. The younger folk can analyze it, debate it, argue about it, but predestination is first to be experienced, and only then intellectualized.

Isn't that what the Bible does? The Old Testament does not set forth a doctrine of predestination. It simply tells stories. Later on, the New Testament, after the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, reflects back on what all of those experiences mean. That's the way it is with us. Whether we are sharing our faith stories as confirmands, or church officers, or just reflecting back over our lives, we think of events, sometimes joyful, sometimes tragic, sometimes seemingly insignificant, but being able to see all of this as a part of the larger tapestry of one's story, and perhaps seeing God working through it all.

One example would be the words of Harry Emerson Fosdick, probably the greatest American preacher during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Toward the end of his long pastorate at Riverside Church in New York, he reflected back over his life:

“Now in my older years,” he said, “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 of his glory was not arrayed like one of them. . . . but my deepest faith came from times when the rain descended and the floods came and the winds blew and beat, and God was there so that the house fell not.”

He went on: “In my young manhood, I had a critical nervous breakdown. It was the most terrifying wilderness I have ever traveled through. I dreadfully wanted to commit suicide, but instead I made some of the most vital discoveries of my life. My little book on the meaning of prayer would never have been written without that breakdown. I found God in the desert.”<sup>2</sup>

Now, we have to be careful with stories like that, as Fosdick was. He made clear that his breakdown was not caused by God in order to bring him to faith. Despair to the point of suicide must not be seen as anything but the destructive force that it is. Pain is pain. Suffering is suffering. Evil is evil. And all breakdowns do not work for good. Some people never recover.

Yet, with all of those denials, Fosdick was able . . . later on, looking back over his life . . . to discern that God was indeed working in his life. His experience led him to believe that Paul's words were true: “In all things God works for good for those who are called according to his

purpose.” And that is what the church has tried to say through the years. Sometimes we’ve said it poorly, some times we’ve said it arrogantly. John Calvin took this doctrine a step further and developed “double predestination”, which says that some are predestined to go to heaven and some are predestined to go to hell. (You’ll be pleased to know that Presbyterians disavowed themselves of that belief years ago). But the doctrine of predestination simply says “God is for us.” The authors of Genesis looked back at creation and said “God is for us.” Abraham, Sarah: “God is for us.” Joseph, at the end of his long saga in which he had been sold into slavery by his brothers but then re-united with them: “I know you intended to do harm to me, but God intended it for good” (Gen. 50:20), as if to say “God is for us.”

That’s what the prophets were trying to say: “God is for us.” Even in God’s judgment, God judges in order to save. And what is the incarnation about, God-with-us, if it is not “God is for us.”

Karl Barth uses an image that those of us living near the mighty Mississippi might appreciate. He said that he often felt like a person in a boat, who must row and steer diligently, but which swims in a stream over which he had no control. That’s not a bad image for predestination: we are in a boat in which we must row and steer as wisely and cautiously as we can; along the course we pick and choose goals—a distant shore, a little town, a lighthouse; yet even as we glide through the waters there is the realization that the boat rides upon a river whose current we do not control.<sup>3</sup>

This doctrine of predestination, like all doctrines, is ultimately inadequate, but it represents the attempt of people who have lived before us, and have navigated these waters long before us, who have had the kind of experiences that you and I have had, who have struggled with the meaning of Jesus, who have tried to make sense of their lives, and who, looking back have realized the truth that “God is for us.”

These are women and men who have chosen to live by faith, trusting that God is leading us, and is even able to turn our poor choices, our mistakes, our blunders, our sins, into something better than we have any right to deserve.

There’s that one final story I am reminded of...that time when Peter became concerned about the destiny of John. (Like so many of our questions about the salvation of others) But Jesus said “What is that to you, Peter...follow me.” As if to say “Let God take care of John...but Peter, I’m calling you...to follow me.” That’s our job, to preach and teach and bear witness to the life-saving, life-changing, life-enhancing love of Jesus Christ, and then leave the rest in the hands of a gracious and just God.

God takes great delight in calling us. And as Calvin put it, this doctrine of predestination is nothing more than the testimony that we are children of God, that is, of the grace and mercy of God. How can we help but respond with thanksgiving, humility, and praise?

*Click endnote to return to text*

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<sup>1</sup> This was H. Richard Niebuhr's famous image, but I can't find the original source.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Moats Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick: Preacher, Pastor, Prophet*. New York: Oxford Press, 1985. Pp. 44-49. Also cited in an unpublished sermon by P.C. Ennis, Central Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, August 24, 1980. Though I am grateful to a number of sources, I am indebted especially to Dr. Ennis' treatment of predestination.

<sup>3</sup> Ennis, *ibid.*

**FOR FURTHER STUDY:**

Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1996.

John Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977.

Donald K. McKim, *Introducing the Reformed Faith*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001.

Donald K. McKim, *The Westminster Handbook to Reformed Theology*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001.

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**3** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, **4** just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. **5** He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, **6** to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. **7** In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace **8** that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight **9** he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, **10** as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. **11** In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, **12** so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. **13** In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; **14** this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.