

“Predestination – To Pre or Not To Pre”

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New Testament Lesson: Ephesians 1:11-14

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 84:1-7

One of Fuller Seminary’s past presidents, Richard Mouw, contends that there are two distances that separate us from knowing what really guides our lives.¹ “The first is the distance between creature and Creator.

This is an eternal distance. It will never go away. Since God is infinite and we are finite, we will never know as God knows.... The second distance separates the way we are now from the way we will someday be. We will never know as God knows, but we will someday understand things much better than we do now....”

In Our New Testament lesson today, the Apostle Paul speaks of our destiny; of how God destined us to receive redemption as the people of God. This assertion in Holy Scripture here and elsewhere has led to much debate among theologians down through the centuries.

The question is, are some people predestined for salvation and others not. One of the greatest theologians to take on this question was John Calvin, who was first to outline the religious beliefs of our Protestant faith. Concerning our destiny, Calvin says that God has already “determined what he wished to make of every person. For (God) does not create everyone in the same condition,” says Calvin, “but ordains eternal life for some and eternal damnation for other.”²

Pretty tough stuff. And because Calvin gave rise to the Presbyterian denomination, many people today believe that Presbyterians hold fast to Calvin’s teaching that some people are damned to hell no matter what they do, and that others – usually those we refer to as “us,” are destined for heaven.

You can imagine the trouble that would create when it comes to saying who’s in and who’s out; I’ve had questions about this from people looking to join this church, concerned about the concept of predestination, that it’s not something they believe in. And actually, scholars have determined that predestination is not at all central to Calvin’s theology, and certainly not central to – or necessary in – the Presbyterian denomination.

¹ Donald C. Posterski, *True to You: Living Our Faith in Our Multi-minded World* (Canada: Wood Lake Books, Inc., 1995), 56. Richard Mouw, *Distorted Truth: What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Battle for the Mind*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 145.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, Book III, chapters 21-4.

First, they point out that Calvin's work on predestination comes after his writings on the Doctrine of Grace. "It is only after the great themes of this doctrine – such as justification by faith – have been expounded that Calvin turns to consider the mysterious and perplexing subject of predestination."³ This was noted by a later religious thinker named Alister McGrath. McGrath's point is that, for Calvin, "The primary function of his thinking about predestination is to explain why some individuals respond to the gospel, and others do not. It is an attempt to explain the variety of human responses to grace."⁴

In other words, if God is all powerful and all knowing, how is it that some people accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and others do not. In Calvin's thinking, it must be that our all-powerful God destined it to be this way, having determined our destinies from the beginning of time, knowing who would believe and who would not. Wouldn't that be great?!? Being so certain of your divine destiny throughout all of life. But is that really how life feels to us? So certain and carefree?

I mean, consider the small child who was just beginning the first grade. Thinking ahead to her destiny, she said, "After the first grade, I'll be in the second, then the third, then" And all of a sudden she had this look of panic, then resignation as she cried out, "I've got such a long way to go!"⁵ I mean just think of it, nine more grades, 3rd and 12th, not to mention four years of college, two years in grad school, and why not, let's make her doctor-she can spend a third of her life in school.

Let's face it, we've all got a long way to go in life. So how can we be sure we're on the right track? How can we be sure we're among God's elect, those predestined for redemption and salvation?

Paul speaks of two groups of people in today's New Testament lesson. First, he talks about himself and others who had already accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, saying "We who were the first to set our hope on Christ ... have ... obtained an inheritance ..." of eternal life.

Second, he talks about those who more recently accepted Christ, and presumably, those who will accept Christ in the future. Of this second group, Paul says, "In (Christ) you also ... were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit." And he calls this seal (quote) "... the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people."

³ McGrath, Alister E. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. Oxford Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001, 467.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Lovett Weems, Jr., *The Gospel According to Wesley* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1982), 34.

In other words, Paul seems to be saying that in Christ, all people can and will be saved, “having (quote) been destined according to the purpose (of God) who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will.”

If Calvin is all predestination – heaven or hell all worked out ahead of time for everyone – isn't there anyone who will speak to what Paul seems to be saying here about God accomplishing all things when it comes to who's in and who's out? Yes, there is someone to speak to this. And that person is a ***theologian named Karl Barth.***

Now before you let your eyes glaze over at the mention of yet another theologian, remember that this really does matter to you. Not only is it a question of whether you are saved, or not, but it's also a question of whether people of other faiths are saved.

Or how about people of no faith; what's to become of them? The fate of humanity hangs in the balance. Karl Barth, who is second behind Calvin in outlining the religious beliefs of Protestants like us, places Jesus Christ at the center of his teaching about predestination.

Barth says that it is Christ and Christ alone who was predestined to take upon himself the negative side of predestination. And this, Christ did in ***his rejection by the world, his death on the cross, his resurrection to new life, and his ascension into Heaven.***

To quote McGrath again, it was God's will that he “bear the ‘rejection and condemnation and death’ which are the inevitable consequences of sin. Thus,” says Barth, “rejection cannot again become the portion or affair of humanity. Christ bore what sinful humanity ought to have borne, in order that they – (that we) – need never bear it again,”⁶ Because of Christ's work of salvation, no one in all humanity need to face the fires of hell, apart from a hell of their own making or choosing.

OK, enough Barth, and enough Calvin, and enough McGrath.

To understand what was just said, we can simply look at the Gospel According to John (3:16 ff), where it says, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

And what's more, says John, “Those who do what is true come to the light (of Christ), so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” Those who do what is true come to the light of Christ. So yes, living in Christ and having our deeds reflect the Spirit of God Almighty is essential to our salvation as individuals, and to the redemption of all humanity.

⁶ McGrath, Alister E. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. Oxford Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001, 471.

Now how God chooses to accomplish this, well, that's up to God, God who, as Paul says, "accomplishes all things according to his (divine) ... will."

This is our destiny as human beings: the redemption of humanity and the salvation of all God's people. And so we dare not go around judging or condemning others who have a different way of expressing their relationship to God; nor should we pretend that just because we are Christian and counted among God's beloved, we can do whatever we want and leave the rest to God.

No, as Christians, we – both you and I – have a role to play in God's working out of salvation, both for us and for all of humanity. And that role is to share the Good News of Jesus Christ in both word and deed. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Jesus Christ, you are the Word of God through whom all creation came into being: rivers and trees, mountains and valleys, birds and horses, wheat and corn, sun and stars, rain and thunder, wind and storm and above all – people, male and female, young and old, black and white, brown and red, farmers and teachers.

You, O Lord, can be found in all your creation because you spoke the world into existence and saw that it was good.

We thank you for the beauty of all that is: Glory to you, O Lord, and to the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and to your Spirit.

Let us now raise our eyes to heaven and our voice to God as we sing the Lord's Prayer:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**