

PREDESTINATION OR FREE WILL?

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The question is sometimes asked, “Are some people predestined to become Christians and go to heaven, or do they choose to go to heaven through faith in Jesus Christ by their own free will?” The best answer to this question is that both are true. This answer may seem to be a blatant contradiction to many people, but that is so because they fail to comprehend what these terms, ‘predestination’ and ‘free will,’ really mean in biblical context. This paper will attempt to explain these terms in the light of Holy Scripture.

The teaching of predestination in the Bible is not an arbitrary choice made by God from eternity, a decree that stands alone and requires no other action to support it. This is the error of too many people, thinking that it was an arbitrary choice, that our Creator simply determined to love certain people, to hate others, and with that they ignore everything else the Lord has revealed about it in His Word.

Background Information: To move beyond this misunderstanding, we first have to appreciate that God’s throne is built on righteousness (Ps. 89:14), on His unwavering justice (Deut. 32:4), that He cannot and will not lie (Tit. 1:2), sin (Jas. 1:13), change (Mal. 3:6) or deny Himself (2 Tim. 2:13). We may not understand why it is that the Lord loves some people in a way that He does not love others (Deut. 7:6-8), nor has He told us why (Deut. 29:29), but we may be sure that His decrees, both to save and to condemn, flow out of His uncompromising righteousness.

To understand the biblical teaching of predestination, it also helps to appreciate who man is. Man was made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-28), that is true, but this was a privilege bestowed upon him, not a right. As a matter of fact, being an image-bearer of God is a privilege which carries with it certain responsibilities, moral duties summarized in the Ten Commandments that no man dares to defy without serious consequences for doing so. We must remember, however, that man did not start out as an image-bearer of God, but as mere dust (Gen. 2:7).

“Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honour and another for dishonour?” (Rom. 9:21.) This is meant to establish that our Creator did have the right, from the same earthen material, to

make whatever He wanted to make and to have it serve His own chosen purpose. Knowing this, who man is, a creature distinct from his Creator and wholly responsible to Him, helps us to see why His commandments must not be cast aside or disobeyed. These duties are all part of God's righteous plan and holy purpose for this particular creature, man, whom (unlike the rest of creation) He has made in His own image and to have fellowship with Him.

Predestination: God is not only altogether righteous, but is also uncompromisingly loving, and, knowing beforehand that man by his own volition would fall into sin (a condition from which he could not save himself), the Lord established from eternity a plan of redemption to rescue the objects of His undying love and favour. This plan, outlined in His covenant of grace, was to send a Mediator to establish peace between Himself and His chosen people.

No mere man could fulfill this role of Mediator, however, because all men have sinned (Rom. 3:23), and the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). This Mediator and would-be Saviour could not come from among those who needed saving. No, He would have to be a righteous man who would offer up his own life in order to atone for others (2 Cor. 5:21). This would be a singular act of unwavering commitment on his part, and on their behalf, to be portrayed in the sacrifices of spotless lambs throughout the Old Testament. He would, at the same time, have to be God in order to endure the torment of His sacrifice, raise Himself from the dead (John 10:17,18), and thereby verify to all the world what He had achieved as the true Lamb of God. Because there was no one else qualified to do these things, God sent His own Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to be this Mediator (1 Tim. 2:5).

As a man, on the one hand, a man who was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary, Jesus did not inherit Adam's sin. As the last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45), or new federal head, He acquired a perfect righteousness, something the first Adam failed to achieve in the covenant of works. As the righteous One, finally, He was offered up unto death in the place of His elect, and so fulfilled the law of God and all that was required to be done on their behalf in the covenant of grace. Notice, Jesus' death was not simply to make their salvation possible, but to secure it outright, a salvation they would later receive by faith. As God, on the

other hand, Jesus raised Himself from the dead, ascended to the right hand of God the Father, and from there He intercedes for His people, saves to the uttermost those who come to the Father through Him (Heb. 7:25), and all those so foreordained do come to Him (Acts 13:48).

This is the solid basis of predestination, namely, the finished work of Christ when there was nothing that any other man could do for himself. Predestination makes no sense, or would even be possible, apart from that. You see how it was not an arbitrary choice, therefore, but was something that God had planned and later fulfilled for a people He was not willing should ever perish (2 Pet. 3:9). Our salvation was not at any cost to us, believer, whether by silver or gold, but was achieved on our behalf – the price of ransom was fully paid – by the sacrifice of God’s own dear Son on the cross (1 Pet. 1: 18-21). And how could the result of it not be known to the Father beforehand, since it was all fully determined by Him, an arrangement He made with His Son from before the foundation of the world?

Free Will: People often speak of their having a free will when they mean nothing more than that they are free to choose whatever it is they want. That may seem reasonable enough until we learn that they never want anything that God has commanded and is pleasing to Him. If they are not free to do what is truly good and acceptable to the Lord our God, then whatever it is they presume to have, it is not a free will. It is rather like someone growing up in a street gang, robbing banks and killing other people; if he never wants any other kind of life, but rejects every incentive and encouragement from others to reform himself, he is not free, whatever he may think, but is in bondage to a way of life that is destroying him. The Bible describes such people, along with all others who are without hope and without God in the world, as dead in sin, harbouring enmity toward God, and therefore utterly unresponsive to the gospel. That is not freedom; it is slavery.

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Who can know it?” (Jer. 17:9.) For real freedom to exist, one must be free to choose what is truly good and pleasing to God – he must not be bound by his own sinful inclinations, however satisfying for the moment they may seem to be – and such freedom exists only for someone who has been regenerated (i.e. born again by a baptism

of the Holy Spirit). What happens when one is so regenerated, when the Lord breathes new life into his previously unresponsive spirit? It is then that he is eager to seek and find refuge in the Lord Jesus Christ, and, as an act of free will, he turns to the Lord and casts himself upon His mercy. This is what I mean when I say that Christians, though predestined by God from eternity, are nevertheless free to choose Christ as their Saviour and Lord in time, to choose heaven as their home over hell, and to live their life to the glory of God. This is not to say that it is without God working in them to will and to do His good pleasure, nor is it to say that they will always choose the good, but the point is that they now have a freedom in Christ – a capacity to do what is pleasing to the Lord, not just invoking His wrath in all that they do – and this is a freedom which they never knew before.

Perhaps you are an unbeliever, someone who has never tasted the goodness of the Lord for yourself or experienced the blessing of trusting in Him. You may think that you are predestined to hell, that God is against you – end of story. That is a very distorted view, and not what the Bible teaches. “Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die, says the Lord God, and not that he should turn from his ways and live?” (Ezek. 18:23.) Indeed, the call of God in the gospel, freely and sincerely offered, goes out to everyone in all the world (Is. 45:22; Rom. 10:11-13). If you choose to ignore that call, dear reader, or react with any kind of enmity toward God, it is because you are in bondage to the devil, to the ways of the world and your own sinful nature. That is not freedom, as you may think, though it is the course you have nevertheless chosen for yourself. Apart from your having a change of heart, you will have to live with the consequences of your action and, of course, have no reason to complain of God for this choice you made for yourself.

If, however, you see your sin and cry out to God for a new heart, He will hear your plea, grant you repentance unto life and give you a desire for Christ that will transform your whole being. Only then, when you flee to Christ, will you appreciate how He made you so willing in a day of His power, and how, as a result, real freedom is to commit yourself to the Lord, not to continue fleeing from Him. I plead with you by the mercies of God, unbeliever, seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Turn to the Lord, and He will have mercy upon you; cast yourself upon Him, and He will abundantly pardon! (Is. 55:6,7.)