

## *Divine Election and Predestination*

### I. Introduction

#### A. The common response

Divine election and predestination are doctrines taught in the Bible, yet most believers avoid these topics like last week's leftover fish. It is commonly believed that these subjects are better left to theologians with too much time on their hands. The mere mention of election and predestination strikes fear in the hearts of some, anger in others. When Christians discuss it, emotions get out of control, heated arguments often ensue, along with name-calling, and pigeon-holing. *You're a hyper-Calvinist. You're a rank Arminian. It's a damnable doctrine.* These are but a few of the epithets we have all heard.

#### B. Its Importance

The Apostle Paul spent considerable time expounding this doctrine in Romans and Ephesians. The teaching of divine election and predestination is an integral part of the gospel of grace we as believers cherish. Because it is so contrary to prideful human nature, it is a doctrine which is, and always will be under attack. It must be examined anew and afresh by every generation and by every individual believer. It is our belief that when properly understood this doctrine leads to evangelistic fervor and humble worship before the Creator.

### II. Major Scripture Passages

The passages on this subject are numerous. The word *elect* was a favorite name given to believers in Christ in the NT. The trend continues in the writings of the early fathers. We are mainly interested in passages where the words *chose*, *chosen*, *foreordained*, or, *appointed*, are used. This is by no means an exhaustive list:

OT: Ex. 33:19; Dt. 7:6,7; 10:14,15; Ps. 33:12; 65:4; 106:5; Isa. 65:1; Jer. 18:4-6; Hag. 2:23.

NT: Matt. 20:15-16; 22:14; 24:22,24,32; Mk. 13:20,22,27; Lk. 18:7; Jn. 1:13; 10:3-4; 15:16; 17:8,9; Acts 13:48; 15:14; 18:27; Rom. 8:28-30,33;

9:10-24; 10:20; 11:4-7,28,33-36; I Cor. 1:26-29; Eph. 1:4-5,11,12; Phil. 1:29; 2:12,13; Col. 3:12; I Thess. 1:4-5; 5:9; II Thess. 2:13,14; I Tim. 1:9; 2:9; II Tim. 1:9; Tit. 1:1; James 1:18; 2:5; I Pet. 1:1,2,5-11; 2:8,9; II Pet. 1:10; Rev. 13:8; 17:8,14.

### III. Terms and Definitions

- A. Foreordination: This term refers to God ordaining or determining from eternity whatever comes to pass. Theologians refer to God's ordaining as the Divine Decree. The key point here is that foreordaining refers to the totality of creation, i.e., whatever occurs. His right to do this stems from His being the Creator of all that is.
- B. Predestination: It refers to a specific act whereby God foreordains the destiny of moral agents (angels or men). In more practical terms it means that God decides the final destiny of beings before they were created or born. (See Psalm 139:14-16; Romans 8:29, and Eph. 1:4-5,11.).
- C. Election: *To elect* means to choose among possibilities. In this context it means that God chose some for blessing (eternal salvation) and passed over others. For example: He chose Israel and passed over Egypt and Babylon. He chose Jacob for blessing, but passed over Esau.
- D. Reprobation: It refers to those who were passed over and left for their *just* (the key word) condemnation. Note that it was a passive action. There is another view (a debatable one) that teaches that it was an active choice of God to condemn some. This view is sometimes called double predestination or hyper-Calvinism, though never taught by Calvin. One proof used to support this view are the several passages where God is said to *harden* Pharaoh's heart (e.g., Ex. 10:20 and Rom 9:10ff.).

### IV. The Inter-relatedness of the Doctrine

It is very easy to get a stilted view of this doctrine if it is not seen in the wider context of the doctrine of the atonement (soteriology). A continuing, life-long study of Paul's Epistle to the Romans should be on every believer's agenda.

For a good overview of the doctrine of atonement we recommend:

***REDEMPTION: ACCOMPLISHED AND APPLIED*** by John Murray (181 pp.).

*The doctrine of election should be viewed not only against the backdrop*

*of human depravity and guilt, but it should also be studied in connection with the eternal covenant or agreement made between the members of the Godhead. For it was in the execution of this covenant that the Father chose out of the world of lost sinners a definite number of individuals and gave them to the Son to be His people. The Son, under the terms of this compact agreed to do all that was necessary to save those "chosen" and "given" to Him by the Father. The Spirit's part in the execution of this covenant was to apply to the elect the salvation secured for them by the Son.*

*Election, therefore, is but one aspect (though an important aspect) of the saving purpose of the Triune God, and thus must not be viewed as salvation. For the act of election itself saved no one; what it did was to mark out certain individuals for salvation. Consequently, the doctrine of election must not be divorced from the doctrines of human guilt, redemption, and regeneration or else it will be distorted and misrepresented. In other words, if it is to be kept in its proper Biblical balance and correctly understood, the Father's act of election must be related to the redeeming work of the Son who gave Himself to save the elect and to the renewing work of the Spirit who brings the elect to faith in Christ! (**THE FIVE POINTS OF CALVINISM** by David Steele and Curtis C. Thomas, p.31).*

More specifically, a Biblical understanding of God's attribute of sovereignty and man's moral depravity is crucial to making sense out of the Bible's teaching on election and predestination.

- A. The Sovereignty of God: It refers to God's authority and power over His creation. Because God is sovereign, He foreordains whatever comes to pass. This last statement is a necessary tenet of Christian theism. Why? If God's sovereignty is limited in any way it is conceivable that something could happen apart from divine permission. It would mean that something or someone is outside of His sovereignty and could therefore thwart His plans. It would mean that God is finite and would have all the weaknesses of the Greek and Roman gods. If there are any atomic particles that are outside of God's jurisdiction we would have no guarantee that God could keep His promises. The real issue is how God's absolute authority can co-exist with the free will of man. The solution lies in the fact that the freedom of a sovereign is always greater than his subjects. Man has free will but it is affected by his sin condition.

- B. The Depravity of Man: The doctrine of total depravity would be more accurately referred to as total inability. This doctrine teaches that man sins because he is a sinner, i.e. he was born with a sin nature inherited from the first father, Adam. Because of Adam's sin all are under the curse. This inherited sin nature affects every part of man's being. All men are said to be spiritually dead (Eph. 2). What this means is, that no man can do anything to effect his own salvation.

Man's will is likewise affected by the fall. Man is free, but his freedom is limited. Even God's freedom is limited by His nature (He is not free to lie). Man's freedom is likewise limited by his nature. Prior to regeneration the Bible describes man's state as being a slave to sin.

Human choices are always made according to the strongest inclination (motive) at that moment. In a situation where a thief sticks a gun in your back and says, "Your money or your life," your options may be limited but you still have freedom, and you choose according to your strongest motive (to live). The Bible teaches that man in his unregenerate state never has an inclination (motive) to choose Christ unless first put there by God. Man does not come to Christ unless drawn by Christ (Jn. 6:44).

## V. The Two Major Positions

On the whole, the dispute is not based on God's nature and will. Most Christians agree here. Rather, the debate is about the nature of man and his will. This argument centers around *the basis* on which God makes His decision to choose some and pass over others. There are two basic positions:

- A. Unconditional Election: It teaches that God did not choose us based on any prior condition. God did not choose anyone because He knew beforehand that they would choose Him. Rather His decision to elect some is based purely on His sovereign good pleasure (gratuitous). No one is able to believe in Christ on his own unaided initiative; he is spiritually dead.

Those who hold this position often use the Biblical story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead to illustrate what they believe is overwhelmingly taught in the rest of Scripture (Jn. 11). When Jesus shouted to Lazarus (in the tomb) to come forth we would normally conclude that he could not hear Jesus since he had already been dead four days. However, Lazarus did hear and did come forth. How could he respond to the Savior's

command? The answer: He was given new life at the moment of his calling. This view illustrates that when God calls us, He simultaneously gives us life (spiritual life) and the sinner then comes to Christ in faith. The view of UE was held and expounded by some of the greatest theologians of the church: Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Owen, Edwards, and by some of the greatest evangelists and missionaries of the Nineteenth Century.

Critique: Critics of UE assert that this view violates human freedom and is thus unfair. I believe this criticism is clearly answered from Scripture. (See part VI.)

- B. Conditional Election: It teaches that God's choice depends on what He foresees (or foreknows) man will do. Because He knew before time that you would do the right thing and accept Christ as your Savior you are numbered among the elect. This view acknowledges the effects of sin but believes that unregenerate man still has freedom to choose Christ. Sometimes this view is explained by the rather simplistic illustration: *There is an election going on; God's got one vote; the devil's got one vote, and you cast the deciding vote.*

The view of CE is undoubtedly the major view when seen in the wider context of Christendom.

Critique: (1)God's foreknowledge does not eliminate the fact that the event (election of certain individuals) is certain. (2)This makes God obligated to save those He foreknew would choose Him. This is contrary to the definition of grace which is not obligated. There would then be a reason for the sinner to boast.

## VI. Objections and Questions about Unconditional Election

- A. The question of justice and impartiality: God could have chosen to save all men because He had the power to do so, and Christ's death was sufficient to pay all men's sin. Also, it would have been perfectly just of God if He had shown mercy to no one. He chose to do neither. What He did do is choose to save some and exclude others. He was not under obligation to choose all; those excluded will receive their just reward. They chose to reject Christ, and eternal separation from Christ is what they get. Those who were excluded did not want anything to do with the Savior. There was never any coercion.

In John's Gospel (Jn. 5) an incident is related in which a great number of people with all manner of diseases waited by a pool to wait for an angel to stir the water. The belief being that the first in the water would be healed. Jesus came by the pool and healed a man who had been waiting for 38 years. The great theological conundrum is why He only healed this man and not all the people when He had the power to do so. Was Jesus unfair? This may not be an easy answer, but the God of the universe can do as He pleases with His creation. **The question that should really haunt us is not how can God be just?, but how can He be merciful?**

- B. The necessity of evangelism and prayer. Evangelism, i.e., preaching the gospel and praying for the lost have been ordained as the means. If the means fail so will the ends. In other words, there is no salvation apart from the gospel. Believers are commanded to preach the gospel to all men. We are not able to check out the Book of Life to see whose names are there. Only God knows the identity of the elect.
- C. God's insincerity. Is it insincere to offer the gospel to all men if only some are chosen? Note: this is a problem for both views of predestination. If election is based on foreknowledge as in CE, the outcome is still certain. But why does God offer the gospel to all men knowing some will not choose Him? There may be several reasons: (1) To show the hardness of the sinful heart. (2) Preaching the gospel to all demonstrates God sincerity. Salvation *is* open to all. If they repent; they will be saved. (3) For all eternity believers will reflect on the hardness of their own hearts, and had it not been for God's grace, all will be compelled to say *But for the grace of God there go I*.
- D. The teaching of election and predestination will lead to fatalism and determinism. Fatalism is the concept that all events happen by blind, impersonal forces, i.e., by chance. Christians believe, and are comforted by Romans 8:28. History is purposeful and headed toward a predesigned end. It simply is not true that Judas would have been damned whether he betrayed Jesus or not. If he had repented he would have been saved. Judas exercised his will in doing what he did.
- E. Predestination makes God the author of sin. This is a troubling question. God obviously made evil a part of His plan, but He Himself does not commit sin. Free moral agency would not be possible if God had not allowed for the possibility of evil. To be otherwise, would make man a

machine.

## VII. Conclusion:

- A. We must be wary of a non-Biblical emphasis, and must guard against creating a God we are comfortable with, rather than what is revealed in Scripture.
- B. This is a difficult subject and we must resign ourselves to living with some mystery and tension. On the other hand, we must never give in to contradictions. God's sovereignty and man's will are not mutually exclusive.
- C. Some *water*, some *plant*, but it is God who gives the increase (I Cor. 3:6). We can fill waterpots but only Jesus can turn the water to wine. The lesson: in preaching the gospel it is God who saves sinners. We must never be guilty of relying on skillful preaching (though we should do the best we can), methods, programs, gimmicks, or emotional appeals.
- D. The result of concluding that we had nothing to do with our salvation is that we never recover; it drives us to our knees. We will not be constrained from telling others. At the end of time, when men reflect on God's plan, how His mercy and justice have been worked out, all alive will do what the multitude did in The Revelation: We will shout *Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgements.* (Rev. 19: 1-2).

For Further Study:

(The three marked with astericks are highly recommended for their popular approach.)

Basinger, David, and, Basinger, Randall. ***PREDESTINATION AND FREE WILL: FOUR VIEWS OF DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY AND HUMAN FREEDOM.***

Boettner, Lorraine. ***THE REFORMED DOCTRINE OF PREDESTINATION.***

Edwards, Jonathan. ***THE FREEDOM OF THE WILL.***

Fisk, Samuel. ***DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY AND HUMAN FREEDOM.***

\*Gerstner, John. ***A PREDESTINATION PRIMER.***

Luther, Martin. ***ON THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL.***

\*Sproul, R.C. ***CHOSEN BY GOD.***

\*Storms, C. Samuel. ***CHOSEN FOR LIFE.***