

“Are the Saints Predestined?”

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TEXT: Romans 8:27-31 And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?

TULIP. That is the acronym that Seminary students use to describe John Calvin’s theology.

You’re going to cringe at the first one, but the letters stand for:

Total depravity

Unconditional election

Limited Atonement

Irresistible Grace

and Perseverance of the Saints.

Yet the complex, consistent, and contagious nature of the thought and action beneath each of these headings is consistently eclipsed by another theological word “predestination.”-- a much-maligned and misunderstood idea, by the way!

Actually, it’s all St. Paul’s fault. He started it: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God . . . those whom God predestined” (Romans 8:28, 30). Martin Luther and Thomas Aquinas, and Augustine all wrote about it. But Calvin *elaborated* on it! Did they – did Calvin--ultimately get it wrong?

Here is what predestination is not. It is not fatalism or determinism—the notion that God not only has a plan for every one of us but that our lives are simply a playing out of the script God has written. You’ve heard it often: “It was her time to go.” “The bullet that killed him had his name on it.” “Whatever happens will happen.” Sometimes we say “God’s will is hard to understand,” as if God willed the death of a dear one.

What most people mean by predestination is that whatever happens is God’s will. And yet sooner or later everyone understands that fatalism is incompatible with the idea of a loving and merciful and just God, and many people, stunned by brutal violence or massive suffering, conclude that there is no God. “Calvinism,” says author William Stacy Johnson, “offers a different answer. . . . Who we are—our gifts and our calling—reside deep within the intentionality of God. . . . Before we were, God was. God thought of us and called us into being. God knows us by name.” Predestination means that not only does God know us by name, but that God has made a decision about us—to accept us, love us, to come find us, work in and through our lives to redeem us. God has made provision for our salvation.”

Calvin was absolutely convinced that God was absolutely sovereign and that our standing with God is based not on our own moral behavior—about which he was a realist, somewhat of a pessimist—and not on the church’s rules and rituals. Our standing with God is based solely on God’s goodness and grace—not upon our decision to believe or be faithful but on God’s decision to love us.

Calvin meant predestination to be a source of joy and comfort and courage.

Unfortunately, Calvin didn’t stop there—maybe because he was a lawyer. His logic drove him on to what he thought was a perfectly reasonable conclusion. Obviously a lot of people are not leading joyful, grateful, faithful lives. So God must have made a different decision about them. They are the unchosen, the losers, the outsiders, the reprobates, he called them. It’s called double predestination. It is an appalling idea, and I wish Calvin would have stopped while he was ahead, but he didn’t.

This is no longer part of our faith doctrine by the way. Your Presbyterian church doesn’t believe that any more. Even many of Calvin’s contemporaries thought he went overboard. They understood that double predestination seems to pull the rug out from any notion of moral responsibility: why bother being and doing good if it doesn’t matter in the final analysis? It also divides the human race between the chosen and the unchosen, who suddenly become less important and therefore disposable. One commentator says, “It doesn’t do much for God’s image.”

However, Professor Johnson makes the interesting observation that while double predestination is an obnoxious theological idea, it is, in fact, true in secular society. People in our world are “predestined: some to enjoy easy lives of affluence and personal ease, while others are predestined to lives of poverty, violence, and hopelessness.” At the moment of our birth, some experience a resounding “yes” (most of us here today) and some a resounding “no.” We are learning that there is a direct link in brain development between violence in childhood and adult violence: that children who are victims of violence, who witness violence everyday, are not only at risk, but if they survive are almost destined to become violent. We know if a third grader has not yet learned to read, he or she is predestined to a life of successive failures and, in all likelihood, headed toward jail. We know that without caring, responsible adults and adequate childcare and education, children are, in fact, predestined to failure, violence, and tragedy.

The double- predestination in this world is real. But in the mystery and glory of God, it is not real. God’s predestination is a radically expansive idea of God and God’s love in Jesus Christ. Paul wrote in another letter, God revealed “a plan to gather up all things in heaven and on earth” (Ephesians 1:10). Did we hear that right? All? Everyone? Not just Jews, Gentiles, Catholics, Protestants? Not just Baptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, but all—all of us—gathered up in the embrace of this amazing God. We all have the chance to overcome any and everything, with God’s unfailing love.

The great twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth, a Calvinist, said Calvin, in his doctrine of predestination, didn’t pay enough attention to Jesus, who never rejected anyone. When someone accused Barth of “universalism”—the idea that God loves and will finally save all of us—Barth responded, “You believe the Bible? Fine. Then believe this verse too. ‘Christ died not only for

our sins but for the sins of the whole world.’ If you are worried about universalism, you had better begin worrying about the Bible.” (Lewis Smedes, *My God and I*, pp. 99-100)

Were the Saints predestined? Well, they were predestined by the act of birth to be God’s children; they were predestined by circumstance of time and place to face particular challenges; and they were predestined to be given gifts of courage and faith and perseverance and patience to stand for God in miraculous ways and challenging circumstances. Here, however, is where they had free will: They each had to choose to use those gifts to be in the world but not of the world – just as we each have to choose every day. But mostly, they were predestined, by God’s amazing grace, to know a love so big it actually makes me uncomfortable. The history of religion is, in one way, the story of humans watering down that love, attaching conditions to it, saying God can’t love that much, redrawing the line between chosen and unchosen, insider and outsider, that Paul insisted God had erased in Jesus Christ.

Looking back, can you not see the subtle, gentle, sometimes not-so-gentle presence of God in your personal history, the hand of God in your own life? Psychologist Gerald May describes his return to faith as a “mystical courtship” God was conducting with him. Similarly, Kathleen Norris reflects, “I came to understand that God hadn’t lost me, even if for years I seemed to have misplaced God” (*Amazing Grace*, p. 104).

Can you open your mind to an idea that expansive? Can you open your heart to a love that big? Can you open your life to the courage and responsible faithfulness that is your destiny, that God intends for you, for which you are predestined?

God made a decision about me, about you, long ago.

God knows your name and has decided to be with you all the days of your life and beyond.

God is your destiny. You are safe and free.

Each of you is a saint. God has decided to love you forever. Your choice is whether to respond.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.