

October 14, 2012

The National Presbyterian Church

Predestination: Fated By Our Genes?

Romans 8:28-32, 38-39; John 10:14-16, 22-30

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In this sermon series, we are looking together at some probing questions about the Christian faith. Some of these questions have been asked by people outside the faith and some of them are being asked by people inside the faith, and some of them by both those outside and those inside! We've been thinking together about God, Jesus, the Bible, the church, and we now move on to think some religious words that people use (or sometimes they try not to use because they sound so religious): sometimes we don't even like to use the words like apocalypse and redemption, and today's word, one of the theological "biggies" – '*predestination*'. Predestination! A word that's often associated with the Presbyterian church and with our theological forefather John Calvin, the French reformer who lived in Switzerland in the 1500's.

But what does it mean? Well to begin with, at least in the popular imagination, pre-'destination' means that *our 'destination' has been predetermined or preordained by someone or something other than ourselves – and therefore we don't seem to have a choice in the matter.* In the context, of course, of Scripture and religion, that 'something' or 'someone else' is clearly God: so that in its religious sense, predestination seems to indicate that God has somehow chosen your future or mine without giving us a choice in the matter.

And the general reaction to that kind of statement, the reaction that most people have (at least, as I am aware of it) is one of displeasure and disgust. It just seems, well, so unfair that somebody else should make choices for our lives over which we have no control. I mean, for example,

- If somebody says this about God: "God loves you," we say, "Isn't that wonderful."
- Or if somebody says, "God is a God of grace," we say, "Isn't that marvelous."

- If somebody says, “God is a savior and redeemer,” we say, “That is just fantastic!”

But then, if we say, “God is a god who predestines,” well, we go, “Well, I’m not too sure I like that! There is something which doesn’t sit well with me when I think of God’s predestination, that God predestines in some way or another. I don’t know if I like it.”

But whether we like it or not, it is there in the Bible, and you heard it in our first Scripture reading. So like it or not, this is a word that appears in the pages of holy Scripture and we have to deal with it if we want to be biblically faithful Christians and followers of Jesus Christ.

- It’s used in Romans in the passage that we read. *“Those whom God foreknew, he also **predestined** to be conformed to the image of his Son and those whom he **predestined**, he also called.”*
- And it is used, for example, again in the fourth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. In the early days of the Christian church, the Christians would gather together in Jerusalem and they were praying and they prayed like this. They say, *“In this city, both Herod and Pontius Pilate with the Gentiles and the people of Israel gathered together against your holy servant Jesus whom you anointed to do whatever your hand and your plan had **predestined** to take place.”* Predestined.

The word in Greek is *pro-ordizo*, and it is used in Scripture: we cannot avoid that... though what many people don’t know is that word is actually used only half a dozen times. It is not used very often in Scripture – though that doesn’t quite get us off of the hook because there are other words which are similar to ‘predestine’ that *are* used in Scripture and they are used frequently. So the word itself is only used a half dozen times in total but there are other words, frequently-used, that are like it: like *destine* (not pre-destine but *destine*), *chosen*, *elect* and the ‘*plan of God*’. These ideas fill Scripture from the beginning to the end and they all signify that in some way, shape or form, God has purposes for some that he doesn’t have for others; God chooses some and doesn’t choose others. And that fact immediately raises the problematic question of this whole issue.

- If God does the predestining, if God does the destining or the determining or the choosing or the electing or whatever word you want to use, is there anything left for us to choose?
- God is enormous and I’m just this little speck, and if God does the choosing, does my choice matter at all?

- Does God's predestining eliminate my choice leaving us as mere puppets on a string? How does this all play out together? Especially if my eternal destiny is at stake?
- Does my moral accountability amount to nothing, just a figment of my imagination because God chooses first and I'm just sort of down here wallowing?

The Secular version of the Question: Genetic Determinism? Now this is a good question, indeed, a very important question — the question of the relationship between freewill and the presence of some force or person that seems to pre-determine our choices. However, what needs to be pointed out is that this is not just a religious question or issue. Indeed, it is a question of increasing importance in the world of science, and the interplay (whether you believe in God or not!) between genetic science and philosophy in particular.

Thomas Clark operates a web site called www.naturalism.org, and he is dedicated to thinking about the world in secular terms with no reference to God whatsoever. I don't know if he is atheist or agnostic, but he wants to deal with the world *as we see it*, as he would say, 'naturally.' He writes this on his web site.

In the feverish race to understand what makes us tick, genes and genetics have been getting considerable attention recently... This scientific invasion of the self, what Tufts University philosopher Daniel Dennett has called 'creeping mechanism,' seems to threaten our role as free agents and along with it much we hold dear—personal responsibility, control of one's destiny, spontaneity and perhaps our very souls.

No reference to God in Thomas Clark, just the rise of what we understand about genetics and science here. Is our life determined on a genetic level? Dr. Ted Peters in another book called *Playing God: Genetic Determinism and Human Freedom*¹ asks the question this way:

The most threatening question is this. Are we about to lose our freedom? Or put it a bit more precisely, will new discoveries in genetic science so completely explain human behavior that the freedom we previously thought we had will turn out to be a dissolution? Do genes determine everything about us? Can we still think of ourselves as unique individuals? Can I rightly say on the other hand it's all in my genes?"

... And if it is, of course, 'all in our genes,' and we believe in God, well, whether we like the idea of predestination or not, it seems to add a scientific background to the theological idea. But that's a big IF! That's a big 'If.' In fact, both the leading scientists who are responsible for

mapping out the human genome, Dr. Craig Venter and Dr. Francis Collins, despite popular ideas, about genetic determinism believe that our genes do not, **do not** determine our destiny. Influence? Yes. But destiny? No.

In a *National Geographic* interview in 2007, Dr. Collins was asked the following question by science writer John Horgan: “Don’t you worry that science in general and genetics in particular—and your work as head of the Genome Project—are undermining belief in free will?”

And Dr. Collins replied:

You’re talking about genetic determinism, which implies that we are helpless marionettes being controlled by strings made of double helices... or pawns in some computer model... That is so far away from what we know scientifically. Heredity does have an influence, not only over medical risks but also over certain behaviors and personality traits.” And then he adds, “Look at identical twins who have exactly the same DNA but often don’t behave alike or think alike. They show the importance of learning and experience—and free will. I think we all, whether we’re religious or not, recognize that free will is a reality.

<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0702/voices.html>

So that’s what the scientists say, or at least some of the scientists, some very prominent scientists.

But back to the Bible. What does the Bible say and how are we to interpret this word ‘predestination’ as we find it in the pages of Scripture? How are we to deal with the whole issue of determinism and free will? God’s election and our choice? Well, I want to say just a few things.

The first thing is a word about free will and the importance of free will, human choice, to our self understanding as creatures who are utterly accountable to God. I believe that this is an absolutely inescapable part, an essential element, of the biblical world view: the fact that *the creatures whom God has made in God’s image are accountable human beings in the sight of God, who are given choices to make that have eternal ramifications.* That is who we are!

In some sense, the burden of that free choice should make us shudder: that God should place such a burden on us about the significance of the choices that we make. It is fundamental, though, to the Bible.

- It is there in the very first story of the Bible which sets the scene for everything else.

- In Genesis 1, God creates the world. That is, God's choice, over which we have no control, is made first. You and I did not choose to be born, but here we are!!
- But in Genesis 2, immediately in the story of the first human beings, in the fundamental story about human nature, we are told that Adam and Eve are presented with a critical choice on which their eternal destiny depends! In the garden there are lots of trees, with lots of fruit: Says God: "You can eat the fruit out of all of them but there's one you can't eat." That is *choice*. The first thing that God does is to give these creatures choice and then God says, "There is a consequence to the choice. Eat that fruit and you die." This is the foundational story of the rest of Scripture. Even if we don't understand another word of Scripture, we all understand that and the rest of Scripture actually feeds off of that story. We all understand that. Choice and accountability. God's choice, and our choice! And our choice is there in the Scripture not just at the beginning but all the way through to the end. It's there in Genesis 2, but also . . .
- It's there in Deuteronomy (30) with Moses and the people of Israel. He says to them in the thirtieth chapter, "*Choose life . . . that you and your descendants may live loving the Lord, your God, obeying him and holding fast to him.*"
- And in the gospel in that most famous verse of all, John 3:16. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that *whoever believes in him...*" The choice is yours.
- Or go to the end of the Bible to the book of Revelation 3:20. "Jesus says, 'Behold I stand at the door and knock (It's the door of your life and my life.) and *if anyone hears my voice and opens the door*, (I'm not going to push my way in. You must open it. That's your choice.) I'll come in and I'll eat with you and stay with you.'"

It is there in the Bible from the beginning to the end. But the Bible is also clear that God himself is in the business of making choices as well, and those choices involve your life and my life. God not only chooses to create (Genesis 1), but ...

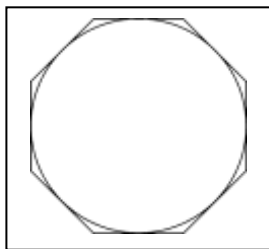
- God chooses, for example, (in Deuteronomy 7) the people of Israel. "*The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people.*" His treasured possession!
- Or in the thirteenth chapter of John's gospel, Jesus speaks of choosing his disciples. "*I know whom I have chosen.*"

- Or in Matthew's gospel. "*Many are called but few are chosen.*"
- Or the fifteenth chapter of John's gospel. "*You did not choose me but I chose you.*"
- Or the Apostle Paul in Ephesians the first chapter. "*God choose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.*" Wow! God choose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.

God's choice and choosing is clear, and it's important: just as clear and important as our own choice --- and somehow in Scripture these two things stand side by side *with no resolution!* And, in fact, what is truly fascinating is that they stand side by side sometimes in the very same book in the Bible.

John's gospel is the most 'predestinarian' gospel of the four gospels, but it is also the gospel which calls us to make choices more than any other gospel. So the author of John saw no conflict between the two: our choice and God's choice.

God's choice does not cancel out our choice! Now, I have to tell you I don't know how it works, but I, for one, am just willing to live with this mystery, with this conundrum: that the two of them are side by side, and they don't cancel each other out. In part, I'm willing to live with this mystery because of something I learned when I was a math major at a university. Here is a little diagram: a circle and outside of that circle, there is an octagon.



So here's the situation: at the foundation of calculus in math, there is a question about a circle and that question is this: How many straight lines are there in a circle? So what's your answer? Answer 1. Well, perhaps the most obvious answer seems to be, there are no straight lines in a circle. The whole thing, the whole way round, and round and round forever, is circular. There are absolutely no straight lines in a circle.

Ah, but that 'isn't necessarily so!' Have a look at the diagram. Imagine that that little octagon is first of all a square outside a circle. Then add some sides to it: turn it into a pentagon and then into a hexagon. Keep adding sides to it, and do you see? it becomes more and more circular. The more sides it has, the more circular it becomes. And the foundation of calculus is the belief that when you get to infinity, when the number of sides is infinite, you have a circle. Answer 2. So the mathematical answer is: there are an infinite number of straight lines in a circle.

I don't understand it, but such ideas as these lie at the foundation of a huge amount of our mathematical and scientific world. ***So the realm of 'unresolved mystery,' two ideas held in unresolved tension, is there not***

only in religion but it is there in math and in science as well. And I'm willing to live with that mystery; and I'm willing to live with that tension – between God's choice and ours: that somehow, *God's choice does not leave us as puppets on a string. Our choice is critical, but so is God's.*

Two final words, two things need to be said in conclusion, especially with the desire to rehabilitate the word 'predestination' and make us thankful for it! The first is this. Back to the word 'predestine' itself as we find it in the pages of Scripture. Remember, I said it's only used six times? The Greek, '*proridzo*,' to predestine, is only used six times. What you need to know is this, that *proridzo* is never used ever in Scripture to signify whether people are going to heaven or hell. In Scripture, it is never used in the context of saying some are predestined to heaven and some are predestined to hell.

- When I read earlier from Acts 4 and you heard the word 'predestine,' in that context, predestination had to do with God's plan and purpose for Jesus and our salvation: it was used to remind us that Jesus' death was no accident. In other words it was 'predestined' by God (as a fulfillment, in this case of Scripture, Psalm 2;1). He died at the hands of human beings, and was raised to life, according to the deliberate plan and foreknowledge and predestination of God. That's the context of its use. It has to do with Jesus and his work of salvation for us, which God planned for us before the foundation of the world. Isn't that amazing good news?
- The second use of the word in Scripture has to do with us, but not with whether we go 'up or down'! It has to do with what happens to us *after* we choose to put our faith in Jesus Christ: I choose to put my faith in Jesus Christ. I place my life in his hands. When we read in Romans 8 about predestination, the message was that once that relationship is there with Jesus, Jesus will hold on to us to the very end of life: *in his grip, we will reach our destination because Jesus will make sure that it happens.* That's how the Apostle Paul uses the word: that we will reach the destination that God has for us in Jesus Christ: it is a pre-determined-destination! We have been "*predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ.*" Jesus will not stop his work with me and in me until he has finished redeeming me and changing me (and you!) into the image of Christ. We *will* get to the destination.

It is as if Jesus is a train! It is as if Jesus is the tracks! It is as if Jesus is our ticket! Let's imagine a train going to Atlanta (and I'm not going to

decide for you whether going to Atlanta is more like going to heaven, or hell!). The train is going to Atlanta and if you get on that train, one way or another, it will get to the end because that's where the tracks go. That's what the ticket says! Well, Jesus is the way. He's the truth. He's the life! And when our lives are wrapped in his life, he will get us to the destination and that is of enormous comfort, is it not? No matter what I do, he will hold onto me.

And that's the final thing that needs to be said about this: that in the end, if I were to choose what's more important – my choice of God or God's choice of me – *as a Presbyterian*, I will always choose God's choice of me! It is a gracious choice. I know that God is not capricious! I know that God is not cruel! Because I know that God has come to us in Jesus Christ. This is who God is. He gives his life, says St. John, for people! He will not do anything with his 'power to predetermine' that would be cruel or wicked or vicious. He will not do that, because we know what kind of God he is through Jesus Christ. Indeed, what I know is this, that while my choice is important, my choice is also weak, my faith is weak, but his faithfulness is strong. His choice will not waver. And when my life wavers, God will never ever let me or you go. And that is an enormous comfort. Indeed, a foundational comfort, for a confident – not arrogant, but confident – life!

Hear Jesus' words in John, Chapter 10 again. *"I am the good shepherd."* They're his words to you. *"I am the good shepherd. I lay down my life for the sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. No one will snatch them out of my hand."* Or the Apostle Paul in Romans, Chapter 8: *"If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own son but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? I'm convinced that neither death nor life nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God made known in Jesus Christ."* His choice. My choice. Critical! I'm accountable. But . . . God's choice, thank God, is stronger than mine.

1 *Playing God: Genetic Determinism and Human Freedom*: Ted Peters. Routledge, 1997.