



Talmid תלמיד a Hebrew word that means “a true disciple who desires to be what the Rabbi Jesus is.”

Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did. 1 John 2:6 (NIV)

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STUDY TO SHEW THYSELF APPROVED UNTO GOD, A WORKMAN THAT NEEDETH NOT TO BE ASHAMED, RIGHTLY
DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH. 2 TIMOTHY 2:15

THE STRUGGLE

Dr. Eddie Idefonso

Ephesians 1:4-5 (NASB)

⁴ just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love

⁵ He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will,

Mottoes are made to be broken. Perhaps no American rule is broken more frequently than the one about not discussing religion or politics. We embark on such discussions repeatedly. And when the topic turns to religion it often gravitates to the issue of predestination. Sadly, that often means the end of discussion and the beginning of argument, yielding more heat than light.

Arguing about *predestination* is virtually irresistible. (Pardon the pun.) The topic is so juicy. It provides an opportunity to spar about all things philosophical. When the issue flares up we suddenly become super-patriotic, guarding the tree of human liberty with more zeal and tenacity than Patrick Henry ever dreamed of. The specter of an all-powerful God making choices for us, and perhaps even against us, makes us scream, “Give me free will or give me death!”

The very word *predestination* has an

ominous ring to it. It is linked to the despairing notion of fatalism and somehow suggests that within its pale we are reduced to meaningless puppets. The word conjures up visions of a diabolical deity who plays capricious games with our lives. We seem to be subjected to the whims of horrible decrees that were fixed in concrete long before we were born. Better that our lives were fixed by the stars, for then at least we could find clues to our destiny in the daily horoscopes.

Add to the horror of the word *predestination* the public image of its most famous teacher, John Calvin, and we shudder all the more. We see Calvin portrayed as a stern and grim-faced tyrant, a sixteenth-century Ichabod Crane who found fiendish delight in the burning of recalcitrant heretics. It is enough to cause us to retreat from the discussion altogether and reaffirm our commitment never to discuss religion and politics.

With a topic people find so unpleasant, it is a wonder that we ever discuss it at all. Why do we speak of it? Because we enjoy unpleasantness? Not at all. We discuss it because we cannot avoid it. It is a doctrine plainly set forth in the Bible. We talk about *predestination* because the Bible talks about *predestination*. If we desire to build our theology on the Bible, we run head on into this concept. We soon discover that

John Calvin did not invent it.

Virtually all Christian churches have some formal doctrine of predestination. To be sure, the doctrine of *predestination* found in the Roman Catholic Church is different from that in the Presbyterian Church. The Lutherans have a different view of the matter from the Episcopalians.

The fact that such variant views of *predestination* abound only underscores the fact that if we are biblical in our thinking we must have some doctrine of *predestination*. We cannot ignore such well-known passages as:

Ephesians 1:4-5 (NASB)

⁴ just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love

⁵ He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will,

Ephesians 1:11 (NASB)

¹¹ also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will,

Romans 8:29 (NASB)

²⁹ For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren;

If we are to be biblical, then, the issue is not whether we should have a doctrine of *predestination* or not, but what kind we should embrace. If the Bible is the Word of God, not mere human speculation, and if God himself declares that there is such a thing as *predestination*, then it follows irresistibly that we must embrace some doctrine of *predestination*.

If we are to follow this line of thinking, then, of course, we must go one step further. It is not enough to have just any view of *predestination*. It is our duty to seek the correct view of *predestination*, lest we be guilty of distorting or ignoring the Word of God. Here is where the real struggle begins, the struggle to sort out accurately all that the Bible teaches about this matter.

My struggle with *predestination* began early in my Christian life. I knew a professor of philosophy in college who was a convinced Calvinist. He set forth the so-called “Reformed” view of *predestination*. I did not like it. I did not like it at all. I fought against it tooth and nail all the way through college.

I graduated from college unpersuaded of the Reformed or Calvinistic view of *predestination* only to go to a seminary that included on its staff the king of the Calvinists, John H. Gerstner. Gerstner is to *predestination* what Einstein is to physics or what Arnold Palmer is to golf. I would rather have challenged Einstein on relativity or entered into match play with Palmer than to take on Gerstner. But... fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

I challenged Gerstner in the classroom time after time, making a total pest of myself. I resisted for well over a year. My final surrender came in stages. Painful stages. It started when I began work as a student pastor in a church. I wrote a note to myself that I kept on my desk in a place where I could always see it.

YOU ARE REQUIRED TO BELIEVE, TO PREACH, AND TO TEACH WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS IS TRUE, NOT WHAT YOU WANT THE BIBLE TO SAY IS TRUE.

The note haunted me. My final crisis came in my senior year. I had a three-credit course in the study of Jonathan Edwards. We spent the semester studying Edwards’s most famous book, *The Freedom of the Will*, under Gerstner’s tutelage. At the same time I had a Greek exegesis course in the Book of Romans. I was the only student in that course, one on one with the New Testament professor. There was nowhere I could hide.

The combination was too much for me. Gerstner, Edwards, the New Testament professor, and above all the Apostle Paul, were too formidable a team for me to withstand. The ninth chapter of Romans was the clincher. I simply could find no way to avoid the Apostle’s teaching in that chapter. Reluctantly, I sighed and surrendered, but with my head, not my heart. “OK, I believe this stuff, but I don’t have to like it!”

I soon discovered that God has created us so that the heart is supposed to follow the head. I could not, with impunity, love something with my head that I hated in

my heart. Once I began to see the cogency of the doctrine and its broader implications, my eyes were opened to the graciousness of grace and to the grand comfort of God's sovereignty. I began to like the doctrine little by little, until it burst upon my soul that the doctrine revealed the depth and the riches of the mercy of God.

I no longer feared the demons of fatalism or the ugly thought that I was being reduced to a puppet. Now I rejoiced in a gracious Savior who alone was immortal, invisible, the only wise God.

They say there is nothing more obnoxious than a converted drunk. Try a converted Arminian. Converted Arminians tend to become flaming Calvinists, zealots for the cause of *predestination*. You are reading the work of such a convert.¹

My struggle has taught me a few things along the way. I have learned, for example, that not all Christians are as zealous about *predestination* as I am. There are better men than I who do not share my conclusions. I have learned that many misunderstand *predestination*. I have also learned the pain of being wrong.

When I teach the doctrine of *predestination* I am often frustrated by those who obstinately refuse to submit to it. I want to scream, "Don't you realize you are resisting the Word of God?" In these cases I am guilty of at least one of two possible sins. If my understanding of *predestination* is correct, then at best I am being impatient with people who are merely struggling as I once did, and at worst I am being arrogant and patronizing toward those who disagree with me.

If my understanding of *predestination* is not correct, then my sin is compounded, since I would be slandering the saints who by opposing my view are fighting for the angels. So the stakes are high for me in this matter.

The struggle about *predestination* is all the more confusing because the greatest minds in the history of the church have disagreed about it. Scholars and Christian leaders, past and present, have taken different stands. A brief glance at church history reveals that the debate over predestination is not be-

tween liberals and conservatives or between believers and unbelievers. It is a debate among believers, among godly and earnest Christians.

It may be helpful to see how the great teachers of the past line up on the question.

<i>"Reformed" view</i>	<i>Opposing views</i>
St. Augustine	Pelagius
St. Thomas Aquinas	Arminius
Martin Luther	Philip Melancthon
John Calvin	John Wesley
Jonathan Edwards	Charles Finney

It must look like I am trying to stack the deck. Those thinkers who are most widely regarded as the titans of classical Christian scholarship fall heavily on the Reformed side. I am persuaded, however, that this is a fact of history that dare not be ignored. To be sure, it is possible that Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Edwards could all be wrong on this matter. These men certainly disagree with each other on other points of doctrine. They are neither individually nor collectively infallible.

We cannot determine truth by counting noses. The great thinkers of the past can be wrong. But it is important for us to see that the Reformed doctrine of *predestination* was not invented by John Calvin. There is nothing in Calvin's view of *predestination* that was not earlier propounded by Luther and Augustine before him. Later, Lutheranism did not follow Luther on this matter but Melancthon, who altered his views after Luther's death. It is also noteworthy that in his famous treatise on theology, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin wrote sparingly on the subject. Luther wrote more about predestination than did Calvin.

The history lesson aside, we must take seriously the fact that such learned men agreed on this difficult subject. Again, that they agreed does not prove the case for *predestination*. They could have been wrong. But it gets our attention. We cannot dismiss the Reformed view as a peculiarly Presbyterian notion. I know that during my great struggle with *predestination* I was deeply troubled by the unified voices of the titans of classical Christian scholarship on this point. Again, they are not infallible, but they deserve our respect and an honest hearing.

Among contemporary Christian leaders we find a

more balanced list of agreement and disagreement. (Keep in mind that we are speaking here in general terms and that there are significant points of difference among those on each side.)

<i>“Reformed” view</i>	<i>Opposing views</i>
Francis Schaeffer	C. S. Lewis
Cornelius Van Til	Norman Geisler
Roger Nicole	John W. Montgomery
James Boice	Clark Pinnock
Philip Hughes	Billy Graham

I don’t know where Bill Bright, Chuck Swindoll, Pat Robertson, and a lot of other leaders stand on this point. Jimmy Swaggart has made it clear that he considers the Reformed view a demonic heresy. His attacks on the doctrine have been less than sober. They do not reflect the care and earnestness of the men listed above in the “opposing” column. They are all great leaders whose views are worthy of our close attention.

My hope is that we will all continue to struggle. We must never assume that we have arrived. Yet there is no virtue in sheer skepticism. We look with a jaundiced eye at those who are always learning but never coming to knowledge of the truth. God is delighted with men and women of conviction. Of course he is concerned that our convictions be according to truth. Struggle with me then as we embark upon the difficult but, I hope, profitable journey examining the doctrine of predestination.

1. Sproul, R.C. (1996). *Chosen by God*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers



Evangelism: Why Bother?

What does the doctrine of predestination do to the task of evangelism? If salvation is determined in advance by the decree of God, why should believers share their faith? Many who struggle with the doctrine of election fear that it steals away the incentive for believers to be wholeheartedly engaged in evangelism.

Over the years, Calvinist theologians (such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield during the Great Awakening in New England) have responded by showing the necessary link between election and evangelism.

The following quotes do not argue this doctrine; rather, they serve as windows into the heart and soul of men whose commitment to election results in a zeal for evangelism.

The command to evangelize is a part of God’s law. It belongs to God’s revealed will for His people. It could not in principle be affected ... by anything that we might believe about God’s sovereignty in election and calling. Whatever we may believe about election, ... evangelism is necessary, because no man can be saved without the Gospel.... The sovereignty of God in grace is the one thing that prevents evangelism from being pointless, for it creates the possibility—indeed, the certainty—that evangelism will be fruitful. Apart from it, there is not even a possibility of evangelism being fruitful.

—J. I. Packer

He who believes the Gospel earnestly cannot be quiet about it. But he must gladly and willingly sing and speak about it so that others also may come and hear it. And whoever does not want to sing and speak of it shows that he does not believe.

—Martin Luther

If you believe not the Word of God, and the danger of sinners, why are you Christians yourselves? If you do believe it, why do you not bestir yourself to the helping of others? Do you not care who is damned, so you be saved?... Dost thou live close by them, ... or labour with them, ... or sit and talk with them, and say nothing to them of their souls, or the life to come? If their houses were on fire, thou wouldst run and help them; and wilt thou not help them when their souls are almost at the fire of hell?

—Richard Baxter

The Gospel does not fall from the clouds like rain, by accident, but is brought by the hands of men to where God has sent it.

—John Calvin

The Reason for Salvation

JOHN 6:35–40

“All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out.” ([John 6:37](#)).

In [John 6](#), Jesus sets out the doctrine of predestination to His disciples. He tells them in [verse 44](#) that **“no one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him.”** He reiterates this fact in [verses 63–65](#), where He tells them that the flesh profits nothing—that is, the flesh cannot save—but it is the Spirit who gives life: **“That is why I told you that no one can come to Me unless the Father has enabled him.”**

I know of no reason ultimately why God would save me other than to honor His Son. There is nothing in me, or in you, that compels God to save us. It is God’s love for us that causes Him to deliver us from death to life. However, it is God’s love for His Son that brings about our salvation.

Isaiah expressed it this way: **“After the suffering of His soul, He will see the light of life and be satisfied” ([Isaiah 53:11](#)).** God intends to reward Jesus’ suffering with the gift of a people, and God does not intend to be thwarted. As Jesus told His disciples in [John 6:37](#), all those that the Father intends to give to Jesus will come to Him. When God appoints you and me to be His personal gift to His Son, He sovereignly makes sure that He has a gift to give. He makes us alive again, and gives us to Jesus.

The Gift of Faith

Paul expresses this truth in [Ephesians 2:8](#), **“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.”** What is the gift of God? Our faith. We did not have within ourselves the ability to exercise such faith. It had to be given to us by God’s sovereign invasion of our souls.

God gives us the faith that enables us to lay hold on salvation. He does this to provide a bride for His Son. No one is going to prevent God the Father from carrying out His purposes in this matter, and no one is going to snatch Christ’s bride from His hands.

CORAM DEO (Before the face of God)



When we see that we are God’s gift to His Son, we realize even more fully how secure we are in our salvation. Does this help you understand why God has called you to such high expectations of holiness and perfection? Seek God’s help and begin today to rectify that area you perceive to be the most troubling blemish of sin in your life.

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