



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 NEEDED NOT TO BE ASHAMED, RIGHTLY DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH. 2 TIMOTHY 2:15

Predestination and the Sovereignty of God

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Ephesians 1:4-5 (NASB)

⁴just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love ⁵He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will,

As we struggle through the doctrine of predestination, we must start with a clear understanding of what the word means. Here we encounter difficulties immediately. Our definition is often colored by our doctrine. We might hope that if we turn to a neutral source for our definition—source like Webster’s dictionary—we will escape such prejudice. No such luck. (Or should I say, no such providence.)

Look at these entries in **Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary**.

predestinate: *destined, fated, or determined beforehand; to foreordain to an earthly or eternal lot or destiny by divine decree.*

predestination: *the doctrine that God in consequence of his foreknowledge of all events infallibly guides those who are destined for salvation.*

predestine: *to destine, decree, determine, appoint, or settle beforehand.*

I am not sure how much we can learn

from these dictionary definitions other than that Noah Webster must have been a Lutheran. What we can glean, however, is that predestination has something to do with the relationship of our ultimate destination and that something is done about that destination by somebody before we arrive there. The pre-of predestination refers to time. Webster speaks of **beforehand.**” Destiny refers to the place we are going, as we see in the normal use of the word destination.

When I call my travel agent to book a flight, the question is soon raised: “*What is your destination?*” Sometimes the question is put more simply: “*Where are you going?*” Our destination is the place where we are going. In theology it refers to one of two places; either we are going to heaven or we are going to hell. In either case, we cannot cancel the trip. God gives us but two final options. One or the other is our final destination. Even Roman Catholicism, which has another place beyond the grave, purgatory, views that as an intermediate stop along the way. Their travelers ride the local while Protestants prefer the express route.

What predestination means, in its most elementary form, is that our final destination, heaven or hell, is decided by God not only before we get there, but before we are even born. It teaches that our ultimate des-

tiny is in the hands of God. Another way of saying it is this: From all eternity, before we existed, God decided to save some members of the human race and to let the rest of the human race perish. God made a choice—he chose some individuals to be saved unto everlasting blessedness in heaven and others he chose to pass over, to allow them to follow the consequences of their sins into eternal torment in hell.

This is a hard saying, no matter how we approach it. We wonder, “Do our individual lives have any bearing on God’s decision? Even though God makes his choice before we are born, he still knows everything about our lives before we live them. Does he take that prior knowledge of us into account when he makes his decision?” ***How we answer that last question will determine whether our view of predestination is Reformed or not.*** Remember, we stated earlier that virtually all churches have some doctrine of predestination. Most churches agree that God’s decision is made before we are born. The issue then rests upon the question, “***On what basis does God make that decision?***”

Before we set out to answer that, we must clarify one other point. Frequently, people think about predestination with respect to everyday questions about traffic accidents and the like. They wonder whether God decreed that the Yankees win the World Series or whether the tree fell on their car by divine edict. Even insurance contracts have clauses that refer to “***acts of God.***”

Questions such as these are normally treated in theology under the broader heading of Providence. ***Our study focuses on predestination in the narrow sense***, restricting it to the ultimate question of predestined salvation or damnation, what we call election and reprobation. The other questions are both interesting and important, but they fall beyond the scope of this book.

The Sovereignty of God

In most discussions about predestination, there is great concern about protecting the dignity and freedom of man. But we must also observe the crucial importance of the sovereignty of God. Though God is not a creature, he is personal, with supreme dignity and supreme freedom. We are aware of the tick-

lish problems surrounding the relationship between God’s sovereignty and human freedom. We must also be aware of the close relationship between God’s sovereignty and God’s freedom. ***The freedom of a sovereign is always greater than the freedom of his subjects.***

When we speak of divine sovereignty we are speaking about God’s authority and about God’s power. As sovereign, God is the supreme authority of heaven and earth. All other authority is lesser authority. Any other authority that exists in the universe is derived from and dependent upon God’s authority. All other forms of authority exist either by God’s command or by God’s permission.

The word authority contains within itself the word author. God is the author of all things over which he has authority. He created the universe. He owns the universe. His ownership gives him certain rights. ***He may do with his universe what is pleasing to his holy will.***

Likewise, all power in the universe flows from the power of God. All power in this universe is subordinate to him. Even Satan is powerless without God’s sovereign permission to act.

Christianity is not dualism. We do not believe in two ultimate equal powers locked in an eternal struggle for supremacy. If Satan were equal to God, we would have no confidence, no hope of good triumphing over evil. We would be destined to an eternal standoff between two equal and opposing forces.

Satan is a creature. He is evil to be sure, but even his evil is subject to the sovereignty of God, as is our own evil. God’s authority is ultimate; his power is omnipotent. He is sovereign.

One of my duties as a seminary professor was to teach the theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith. The Westminster Confession has been the central creedal document for historic Presbyterianism and not the modern liberal church of today.

Once, while teaching this course, I announced to my evening class that the following week we would study the section of the confession dealing with predestination. Since the evening class was open to the public, my students rushed to invite their friends for the juicy discussion. The next week the classroom was packed with

students and guests.

I began the class by reading the opening lines from **chapter three of the Westminster Confession:**

“God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.”

I stopped reading at that point. I asked, “Is there anyone in this room who does not believe the words that I just read?” A multitude of hands went up. I then asked, “Are there any convinced atheists in the room?” No hands were raised. I then said something outrageous: “Everyone who raised his hand to the first question should also have raised his hand to the second question.”

A chorus of groans and protests met my statement. How could I accuse someone of atheism for not believing that God foreordains whatever comes to pass? Those who protested these words were not denying the existence of God. They were not protesting against Christianity. They were protesting against Calvinism.

I tried to explain to the class that the idea that God foreordains whatever comes to pass is not an idea unique to Calvinism. It isn't even unique to Christianity. **It is simply a tenet of theism—a necessary tenet of theism.**

That God in some sense foreordains whatever comes to pass is a necessary result of his sovereignty. In itself it does not plead for Calvinism. It only declares that God is absolutely sovereign over his creation. God can foreordain things in different ways. But everything that happens must at least happen by his permission. If he permits something, then he must decide to allow it. If he decides to allow something, then in a sense he is foreordaining it. Who, among Christians, would argue that God could not stop something in this world from happening? If God so desires, he has the power to stop the whole world.

To say that God foreordains all that comes to pass is simply to say that God is sovereign over his entire creation. If something could come to pass apart from his sovereign permission, then that which came to pass would frustrate his sovereignty. If God refused to permit something to happen and it happened anyway, then whatever caused it to happen would have more

authority and power than God himself. If there is any part of creation outside of God's sovereignty, then God is simply not sovereign. If God is not sovereign, then God is not God.

If there is one single molecule in this universe running around loose, totally free of God's sovereignty, then we have no guarantee that a single promise of God will ever be fulfilled. Perhaps that one maverick molecule will lay waste all the grand and glorious plans that God has made and promised to us. If a grain of sand in the kidney of Oliver Cromwell changed the course of English history, so our maverick molecule could change the course of all redemption history. Maybe that one molecule will be the thing that prevents Christ from returning.

We've heard the story: For want of a nail the shoe was lost; for want of the shoe the horse was lost; for want of the horse the rider was lost; for want of the rider the battle was lost; for want of the battle the war was lost. I remember my distress when I heard that Bill Vukovich, the greatest car driver of his era, was killed in a crash in the Indianapolis 500. The cause was later isolated in the failure of a cotter pin that cost ten cents.

Bill Vukovich had amazing control of race cars. He was a magnificent driver. However, he was not sovereign. A part worth only a dime cost him his life. God doesn't have to worry about ten-cent cotter pins wrecking his plans. There are no maverick molecules running around loose. God is sovereign. God is God.

My students began to see that divine sovereignty is not an issue peculiar to Calvinism, or even to Christianity. Without sovereignty God cannot be God. If we reject divine sovereignty then we must embrace atheism. This is the problem we all face. We must hold tightly to God's sovereignty. Yet we must do it in such a way so as not to violate human freedom.

At this point I should do for you what I did for my students in the evening class—finish the statement from the Westminster Confession. The whole statement reads as follows:

“God, from all eternity, did by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is vio-

lence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.”

Note that, while it affirms God’s sovereignty over all things, the Confession also asserts that God does not do evil or violate human freedom. Human freedom and evil are under God’s sovereignty.



The Law of God

In giving a summary of what constitutes the true knowledge of God, we showed that we cannot form any just conception of the character of God, without feeling overawed by His majesty, and bound to do Him service.—John Calvin

Yesterday, a man I met for the first time asked me, “And what is the Lord doing in your life?” (Something about how he asked the question, the tone of his voice, and his manner in it disturbed me.) The manner of asking was a bit too casual, as if the utterance was mechanical. I suppressed my annoyance and answered as if the question were sincere. I said, “He is impressing upon me the beauty and sweetness of His law.” The man obviously was not prepared for my answer. He looked at me as though I was from another planet. He visibly recoiled from my words as if I was weird for uttering them.

We are living in an era in which the law of God is not given much attention either by secularists or by Christians. The law, we assume, is a relic of the past, part of the history of Judaeo-Christianity to be sure, but of no abiding relevance to the Christian life. We are living out, in practice, the antinomian heresy.

A recent survey by George Gallup Jr. revealed a startling trend in our culture. According to Gallup the evidence seems to indicate that there are not clear behavioral patterns that distinguish Christians from non-Christians in our society. We all seem to be marching to the same drummer, looking to the shifting standards of contemporary culture for the basis of what is acceptable conduct. What every-

body else is doing seems to be our only ethical norm.

This pattern can only emerge in a society or a church wherein the law of God is eclipsed. The very word *law* seems to have an unpleasant ring to it in our evangelical circles.

Let’s try an experiment. I’m going to cite a few passages from **Psalm 119** for our reflection. I’m asking that you read them existentially in the sense that you try to crawl into the skin of the writer and experience empathy. Try to feel what he felt when he wrote these lines thousands of years ago:

- *Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day ([v. 97](#)).*
- *Your testimonies I have taken as a heritage forever, for they are the rejoicing of my heart. I have inclined my heart to perform Your statutes forever, to the very end ([vv. 111–112](#)).*
- *I opened my mouth and panted, for I longed for Your commandments ([vs. 131](#)).*
- *Trouble and anguish have overtaken me. Yet Your commandments are my delights ([vs. 143](#)).*

Does this sound like a modern Christian? Do we hear people talk about longing passionately for the law of God? Do we hear our friends expressing joy and delight in God’s commandments?

These sentiments are foreign to our culture. Some will surely say, “But that is Old Testament stuff. We’ve been redeemed from the law, now our focus is on the Gospel, not the law.”

Let’s continue the experiment. Let’s read some excerpts from another biblical writer, only this time from the New Testament. Let’s hear from a man who loved the Gospel, preached it, and taught it as much as any mortal. Let’s hear from Paul:

- *But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter ([Romans 7:6](#)).*
- *What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through law ([Romans 7:8](#)).*
- *Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good ([Romans 7:12](#)).*
- *For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man ([Romans 7:22](#)).*

Does this sound like a man who believed the law of God has no place in the Christian life? Read Paul carefully and you will find a man whose heart longed for the law of God as much as David's.

Church history witnesses that at periods of revival and reformation there has been a profound awakening to the sweetness of God's law that can easily degenerate into legalism, which usually provokes a response of antinomianism (Medieval Latin *antinomus*, from Latin *anti-* + Greek *nomos* law). Neither is biblical. The law drives us to the Gospel. The Gospel saves us from the curse of the law but in turn directs us back to the law to search its spirit, its goodness and its beauty. The law of God is still a lamp unto our feet. Without it we stumble and trip and grope in darkness.

For the Christian the greatest benefit of the law of God is its revelatory character. The law reveals to us the Law-Giver. It teaches us what is pleasing in His sight. We need to seek the law of God—to pant after it—to delight in it. Anything less is an offense against the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

CORAM DEO (Before the face of God)

How seriously do you take membership in the church? While the church does not save us, God created it as a great benefit for us. Too often Christians neglect or take lightly the opportunities for ministry and service that God provides through the church. Are you taking full advantage of these benefits and fully supporting your congregation?

Doctrine in Capsule

“Who is the Holy Spirit?”

There are many misconceptions about the identity of the Holy Spirit. Some view the Holy Spirit as a mystical force. Others understand the Holy Spirit as the impersonal power that God makes available to followers of Christ. What does the Bible say about the identity of the Holy Spirit? Simply put, the Bible declares that the Holy Spirit is God. The Bible also tells us that the Holy Spirit is a divine person, a being with a mind, emotions, and a will.

The fact that the Holy Spirit is God is clearly seen in many Scriptures, including [Acts 5:3-4](#). In this verse Pe-

ter confronts Ananias as to why he lied to the Holy Spirit and tells him that he had **“not lied to men but to God.”** It is a clear declaration that lying to the Holy Spirit is lying to God. We can also know that the Holy Spirit is God because He possesses the characteristics of God. For example, His omnipresence is seen in [Psalm 139:7-8](#), **“Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.”**

Then in [1 Corinthians 2:10-11](#), we see the characteristic of omniscience in the Holy Spirit. **“But God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.”**

We can know that the Holy Spirit is indeed a divine person because He possesses a mind, emotions, and a will. The Holy Spirit thinks and knows ([1 Corinthians 2:10](#)). The Holy Spirit can be grieved ([Ephesians 4:30](#)). The Spirit intercedes for us ([Romans 8:26-27](#)). He makes decisions according to His will ([1 Corinthians 12:7-11](#)). The Holy Spirit is God, the third Person of the Trinity. As God, the Holy Spirit can truly function as the Comforter and Counselor that Jesus promised He would be ([John 14:16, 26, John- 15:26](#)).



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