

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

PREDESTINATION IN HISTORY¹

IN attempting to survey the place and influence of our solemn theme in history it is necessary to define, as far as that is possible, what predestination means, what it comprises, its source and issues; in a word its significance.

In history, predestination occupies a large place, both in its purely theological and in its strictly philosophical connotation. Theologically the term is used to express the idea of God's voluntary and unchangeable decision from all eternity in regard to all that comes to pass, including the destinies of men in everlasting happiness or misery, and the election of individuals to grace and glory. Philosophically, this self-revelation of God is viewed as taking place not only in redemption but also in creation and providence. Accordingly the notion of it is formed from experience, and must therefore justify its claim to rational validity. While the one moves in the sphere of religious intuition, and the other in that of speculative impulse, the former holding by the facts of revelations and the latter by inferences deducible from the facts of experience, the idea of predestination is fundamental to both.

Predestination comprises foreknowledge, which is indeed a necessity of God's omniscience and prevenience which also is a necessity of His omnipotence. Foreknowledge is involved in the immutability of His knowledge; for in the mirror of His will all future events are visible to Him, who was thus never ignorant of what He was to do and what the consequences of His doings would be. Further, predestination is not merely the resolve of God to manifest Himself in self-revealing activity; it is also an activity which is creative of creaturely destinies according to His eternal purpose. Both these activities exclude all naturalistic conceptions of God's relation to the world that deny the present reality and unity of God's works, and their sure issue in the consummation of an eternal plan.

Predestination has its source in the scriptural representation of the Divine perfections and Sovereignty. For God's self-revealing and self-communicating activities involving His divine will and divine efficiency operate through His attributes of power,

¹ An Address delivered at a Congress of Calvinists held at Geneva, June 15th-18th, 1936.

knowledge, wisdom, justice and love. But while God is absolutely supreme and exercises Sovereign Dominion over all His creatures by the necessity of the perfection of His being there can be no disharmony in His nature or conflict in His attributes. This fact precludes any possibility of caprice or arbitrariness in His decrees or pre-determination of the everlasting destiny of His creatures or in their execution.

In the Divine method in accomplishing His design, God works by means towards an end which shall ultimately reveal the principle and motive of the origin and process of His plan. In considering both the Divine design and its issues, the avoidance of intricate speculations is imposed upon us, as a matter of obligation, by just views of the sacredness and incomprehensibility of our subject. For it is a plain teaching of Scripture that God and man, in some way, concur or combine in forming man's character, in producing man's actions and in determining man's fate. Revelation makes it equally clear that the explanation of the way and manner in which God and men thus combine and concur in producing these results involves mysteries which never have been fully solved and which we are warranted in supposing cannot be solved by man with the limits imposed on his capacities by the conditions of his terrestrial life.

Nevertheless, the inscrutability of our profound theme in its irresistible operations and consequences should not be made a retreat for allegations of divine injustice, or a cover for presumption and lassitude in discharge of human responsibility, or as encouraging a fatalism against which both Calvin and Knox vigorously protested in their time. Even while the limitation of our capacities makes it as impossible for us to explore this mystery any more than the fathomless ocean, yet it has been the privilege of God's people in all ages to taste and test the quality of the whole in its outward fringe in human experience as the ocean can be tasted on the beach. To them the doctrine is not an abstract problem, but one which is related as a part of the doctrine of salvation, both to the godness of God and the sin of His creatures. This leaves upon them the moral impressions that God's mercy is wholly unmerited by them. Consequently a solution for the problems associated with aspects of our theme cannot be found in the proud posture of a man-ward approach to them, but by reverently relating them to the real Personality of God and by walking humbly with Him. *Solvitur ambulando*

cum Deo. History furnishes abundant proof of the correctness of this assertion. For Predestination occupies a large place in the history of the Christian Church. It attracted some of the finest intellects of the ages, and the quest for its secrets ignited and fanned raging controversies. It begat awe and instilled unflinching courage. It was the dynamic of racial expansions in the conquest of intractable nature to the service of man. It inculcated severe discipline and fostered high ideals. Its inherent justice formed the basis of spacious civil liberty within the wide ambit of Divine sovereign rule. The apprehension of its unmerited mercies generated a purposive obedience to the revealed will of God and erected barriers against all presumptuous sin. Let us now take a cursory glance at the well-defined periods in the epochs of the unfolding of our subject.

I

In the ancient world the gropings of the human mind for a solution of the enigma of life through speculative thinking adumbrate aspects of our revealed doctrine. Sophocles represented life as a "shuttle of adamant", the Stoics had their doctrine of necessity and the deity Fortuna embodied the faith of the Romans. The elaborate mythology of the Teutonic races culminates in the idea of destiny as the invincible necessity of an arbitrary and relentless elemental will. Vestiges of this belief lingered long among these northern races even to the north of Scotland. The huge exactions in human life claimed by the pitiless storms was to these peoples a constant reminder of this inevitability. It may not be without relevant significance that to many of these people the austerer aspects of our revealed doctrine were never as repellent as they have been to dwellers in the sunny and temperate plains or to those living in the ease and comfort of city environment. In all the ethnic religions there is a more or less clear reflection of necessity.

When we come to the sure ground of the Divine oracles, to Law, Prophecy and Gospel, we find everything in creation, general history and redemption related to the Divine Sovereignty. We see a gradual unfolding of a comprehensive dependence of all created things on the Divine supremacy. Similarly man's freedom and responsibility, in subordination to God's Sovereignty, are never allowed to vanish in excuse of a pessimistic fatalism.

II

From the beginning of the Christian era till about A.D. 350 our subject received attention from the Greek Apologists and early Fathers in their conflict with Gnosticism and the fatalism of Apocalyptic Jewish Literature. These did not present the subject in a formulated system. The doctrine of God supreme as Creator through the Logos, and the activities of the Logos, as mediator of the supreme God are particularly emphasized. In their process of reasoning out the Divine design in cosmic history, the reason and conscience of man were there exalted and efficacious norms for an ethnical and personal solution of the problems against the metaphysical and necessitarian solutions which they combated. Human freedom and responsibility in relation to the supreme God through the mediation of the Logos was their answer to the challenge of fatalism. While the Greek Fathers insisted on man's freedom and God's grace they left the relationship between the two unrelated and undefined.

III

From A.D. 350 to 600 we have the profound and abiding influence of Augustine asserting itself. He approached our subject in a fuller manner than any of his predecessors in the great line of Christian fathers vigorously advocating the necessity of Divine Grace. The absolute sovereignty of God is brought by Augustine into clear scriptural relief with the consequence of holiness in man as the result of God's prior thought and Act in man's behalf; and that the unregenerate must bear the consequences of their sins. The Pelagian insistence on a self-determination that left no room for original sin he combated with the denial of capricious choice and the assertion that freedom is really growth in the God-given power to do right, and that true self-determination is impossible in the unregenerate whose will is never free, and is possible only in the regenerate graciously rescued from the chains of sin. In drawing a distinction between prescience and predestination he analyses the latter helpfully for a better understanding of what it means. The principle underlying the unfolding of predestination in history, where nothing is outside its range, is the organic character of the Divine purpose operating continuously in all things under Divine Sovereignty. According to this profound conception redemption

decreed with God's predeterminate counsels is wholly and solely contingent upon Divine grace and never in any sense upon the works of man. According to Augustine's principles man is free under grace but God is absolute master of all determinations of the Will and these find a reconciliation in the exercise of Divine Sovereignty. During the middle ages Augustinianism in the main maintained its cogency as a generator of new ideas and creative impulses in the religious, political and social spheres. In certain details such as the Augustinian view of the reprobation of the unregenerate the position was attacked from the scriptural and metaphysical standpoints; and Erigena in particular anticipated and met the subsequent criticism of Augustinianism as fostering the idea of God being the author of evil. Nevertheless, while it is difficult to assent to Loofs's sweeping dictum that "the history of Catholicism is the history of the progressive elimination of Augustinianism", in speculative thought and practice, the Church officially Augustinian was inconsistently Semi-Pelagian or Pelagian. The Tridentine formulæ give evidence of this inconsistency by stereotyping, for example, the Thomist conception of man's ability to do good before apprehending the mercies of God in Jesus Christ.

IV

When we come to the Reformation we find an awakening of the moral conscience, a revolution by spiritual forces with spiritual issues which made religion and not speculation the absorbing interest of awakened people. A synthesis of faith and culture, such as the Schoolmen aspired to, made no appeal to a people who according to Knox's Scots Confession experienced the joy of salvation that wholly appertained to God and owed nothing to the grace of natural virtues emphasized by Aquinas and incorporated in the Roman instruments of grace. Luther accepted the Augustinian viewpoint on predestination which however was modified with far-reaching consequences by Melancthon's synergistic conception of the co-operation of Divine Grace and human freedom. Calvin was a logical Augustinian and a systematic theologian who made predestination a basic principle in his theological construction. This principle was not a philosophical idea with him but a practical and spiritual aid to evangelical piety expressed in his doctrine of election which furnished

believers with a ground for the assurance of that salvation to which their experienced joy was a positive witness. The emergence of the Federal theology, the conflict with Arminianism and Amyraldism had their own reactions, but Calvinism triumphed still holding to the central idea of the independence and immutability of the decrees of God and of pre-ordination and foreknowledge as inseparable. This is the deposit of the great Reformed creeds enunciated with varying intensity, but always from the viewpoint of God's relation to the problem and guarding against any tendency to such a low view of the efficacy of the Divine operations as would in the last analysis narrow the scope of Divine salvation to dependence on the human response to God's overtures of mercy. In the Westminster Confession, perhaps, the last of the great Reformed creeds, the systematized Calvinistic thought, as it percolated through the preceding creeds with refining influences, is seen in the replacement of reprobation by preterition without impinging on the Divine prerogatives, the affirmation of human freedom without abatement of God's absolute supremacy; and the liberty or contingency of second causes is affirmed as wholly compatible with Divine Sovereignty.

These were the principles that operated in the formative period of post-Reformation civilization alike in the temporal and spiritual spheres. These states were created by simple obedience to the divine will and by them Kings were constrained to rule and princes to decree justice. They vanquished the claims of human absolutism in government and taught the ethical function of civil power. In the economic sphere the sense of stewardship as a divinely ordered responsibility made exploitation an unjustifiable anomaly and the acquisition of wealth as an end a contradiction of universal Divine Sovereignty. In the subsequent tension between the attractive powers of accumulated wealth and the Divine ownership of all things the former prevailed. The reason for this is found not in anything inherent or justly applicable in the predestination idea but in a widespread defection from this idea caused by the claims of a rationalistic enlightenment.

In the most formidable conflict that was ever waged round our sublime theme the humble faith and superb intellect of Jonathan Edwards vanquished the combined critical and cultured forces of New England incipient Unitarianism. The genius of Edwards did not disdain the Scriptural anthropological method

of free use of sanctified reason. His achievement may be summarized as consisting of a reconciliation, as far as that is humanly possible, of the Divine decrees in terms of the universality of the law of causality and free will which is free to act, but which in the power to will is controlled by causes outside of itself which it ultimately obeys. The Divine motive of predestination rested in the Divine glory. Consequently God's self-communication is a display of the freedom of this glory and in controlling man's power to will it is creative of the religious affections of believers who show in their loving obedience to God's will the reality of predestinating grace. It is sometimes alleged that Edwards paved the way for modern theology with its tendency to separate the Fatherhood and Sovereignty of God, by emphasis on God's moral personality and by making "love of being" the controlling principle of God's activities. But Edwards carefully safeguarded the harmony and unity of the Divine attributes in the self-manifestation of God by making Fatherhood and Sovereignty inseparable with mercy and justice kissing mutually in all Divine transactions and grace resting ultimately in God's glory. On the other hand modern Theology is committed to an exaltation of mercy at the expense of justice inevitable in the disjunction of Fatherhood and Sovereignty under the influence of a philosophical emphasis on Divine immanence and changed spiritual values effected by a narrowing of the testimony of Revelation in response to the claims of critical scholarship and the anthropology of natural science.

V

This Edwardian interpretation of our theme dominated the thought and life of the American Churches till nearly the middle of last century. The great undenominational revival under Whitefield which had our subject at its heart, not only rescued English Nonconformity from extinction, but vitalized and expanded it so as to become and continue a vigorous and influential force in the religious, intellectual and political life of England as long as it continued loyal to its Calvinistic tradition. In the Church of England it directly and indirectly quickened sanctified scholarship and personal piety so widely and deeply as to make the era of its ascendancy a period of outstanding beauty and impressive effectiveness in the history of that great Church. The diasporas of the Reformed people of Europe

to foreign lands reared their own religious and civic lives on this doctrine as enshrined in their creeds and applied in the places of their nativity.

We are now, however, candidly informed by liberal theologians that our subject has so much faded from view as to be even ignored as a controlling principle in the scientific theology of the modern Church. This is attributed by them to an alleged discovery of the Fatherhood of God, interpreted with the help of psychology, the philosophy of immanence and a multiform social theory.

But the Fatherhood of God was not hidden from Reformed vision for its content is affirmed not merely by implication but explicitly in their interpretation of Divine will motivated by love. Moreover both in their thought and experience of God Sovereignty and Fatherhood were to them inseparable and perfectly harmonious in their activity. The Gospel is a revelation of the righteousness and power of God the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is love; and the Reformers recognizing these attributes in the expression of God in the Gospel safeguarded their conception of Sovereignty from an arbitrariness that might issue in tyranny and Fatherhood from an indulgence that might result in anarchy. Concomitant with a latitudinarianism in religious thought which the new scholarship fostered, there has been, as always appears in history, a frustration of the Christian hope and a decline in self-restraint in every department of human activity with challenging consequences to the Church of Christ.

Here we meet as a Congress of Members of different Churches, with our theme as the venerated heritage of all but the exclusive possession of none, to exchange our respective nuances of thought, not as heroic divisors but as humble co-operating members of a fellowship which our subject raises above the boundaries of our people and binds together in a common guilt through sin, and a common salvation through Sovereign grace, and to a solemn obligation to engage in a holy warfare for the souls and bodies of men. As inheritors of the achievements of our subject under God in the past, can we offer a stimulant to the debility of the Christian witness and an uplifting solace to the world of our time to which the glut of sordid worldliness from the removal of restraint and the release of all the powers of temptation has become wan, insipid and comfortless?

Predestination is of high birth and has descended to us through a royal lineage. The supremacy of its privileged birth-right sets boundaries to the ambitious encroachments of human presumption. It is ours however, not as an isolated royal diadem to breed admiration or revolt in a detached gazer but as an instrument of God to be used among us and by us for the glory of God.

Christ's humiliation consisted in his assuming not only a reasonable soul but also a true body acting through the perfect freedom and harmony of all its members functioning in their appointed spheres. Similarly the Scriptures exhibit the gracious condescension of the Holy Spirit. The divinity of our subject also abides among men demanding our constant, energetic and vivid recognition of the fact. The body of its humiliation should be worthy of this divinity as the humanity of Christ and the Scriptures are worthy of theirs. National aspirations however varied in their expression should reflect the grace and beauty of this divinity. The conditions of life should not contradict it. Governments, economies, industrial enterprises and all human activities should vibrate in harmony with the Divine freedom and glory. This is God's work. It is also one in which the people of God, in virtue of being what they are, must display the activities of a living faith as participants and not as benumbed observers of an awesome phenomenon with the obligation of activity held in suspense. Who is sufficient for these things! Well may we exclaim with the Prophet :

O Lord, I have heard thy speech, and was afraid : O Lord, revive thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known ; in wrath remember mercy.—Hab. iii. 2.

D. MACLEAN.

Edinburgh.