

## "MISUNDERSTANDING PREDESTINATION AND DETERMINISM"

(Romans 8:29-30)

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There is, perhaps, no subject more thoroughly debated, and at the same time were completely misunderstood, than the great question of predestination. To the average person, it tends to suggest that everything has been decided by God in advance, which seems to make any activity on our part redundant. After all, this logic goes, if what we do is going to happen anyway, why do it? The issue has been especially contentious in the field of evangelism, where it has sometimes been thought that people who have a strong belief in predestination will find preaching the gospel unnecessary because, if God has already decided whom he will save, nothing we say or do will make any difference. We think that people who make a profession of faith ought to do so of their own free will, since otherwise it is hard to see how such a profession could be genuine. Free will seems to be an essential condition of our humanity because, if it is not, then neither Adam nor any of his descendants can be blamed for a sinfulness that they could not have avoided. In response to this, Christians have always affirmed that human beings must take responsibility for their sins, but they have also insisted that God is in sovereign control of the universe. How these things can be reconciled is a mystery, but many people think that to put the emphasis on predestination is to diminish the part people must play in their own salvation. There is also the danger that some people may convince themselves that they are not predestined, and may lose any hope of redemption as a result. That, too, hardly seems right, and so for all these reasons, many people believe that the doctrine of predestination ought to be avoided, even if it contains important elements of the truth.

This is somewhat ironic because most secular ideologies in the modern world are deterministic, which is to say that they have a predestinarian flavor to them. According to this way of thinking, the order of the universe is governed by fixed laws that are built into it. There may be various explanations for these laws, including ones that allow for a divine Creator, but wherever it may come from, the system functions according to its own inner logic. Human beings are products of their heredity and environment, and they cannot be any different from what they are. To believe otherwise is to introduce an anomaly or element of randomness into the system which is alien to its nature and would cause it to collapse if it were true. Since the system clearly does not collapse, such unpredictable interventions do not occur and everything that happens can be explained by studying the patterns that govern the way things work.

To a large extent, modern science has been built on this assumption. It is true that, as time goes on and new discoveries are made, the system is revealed as being much more complex and subtle than was previously thought. The physics of someone like Sir Isaac Newton, for example, have been considerably qualified by more recent developments, notably by the theory of relativity associated with Albert Einstein. That famous example can be replicated hundreds of times over in virtually every scientific discipline, and no scientific researcher would suggest that the way we view things now is the definitive explanation of the way things are. Every scientific theory is open to falsification, at least in principle, and one of the aims



of researchers is to come up with better theories by falsifying the currently dominant theories. Nevertheless, a belief in determinism remains fundamental to the whole enterprise, which would not be possible without it.

It will be obvious that Christians cannot accept a deterministic view of the universe. For a start, we cannot believe that human beings are incapable of being changed, because that is precisely what happens when a person becomes a believer. Nor can we agree that the universe is a closed system that is unable to tolerate anomalies, because if that were so, miracles would be impossible.

People who do not accept that there is such a thing as a miracle in the true sense of the term will, of course, regard Christians as naive, obtuse, or intellectually lazy. Christians, by contrast, are frightened by what they see as a mechanistic, clockwork universe that reduces people to the level of robots and leaves no room for a sovereign God who is free to operate outside the system he created. To the atheist, science is a liberation from the superstitions of the past, but to a believer it is a prison in which human freedom is crushed by impersonal forces in a way that it never is by a doctrine of divine predestination.

Given this background and these arguments, what can we say? Can we rescue predestination from the clutches of determinism, or do we have to abandon the idea (as many Christians have done) because it is fundamentally incompatible with human freedom and therefore is dangerous to our sense of who we are? In seeking to resolve this issue, the first point we must grasp is that, as the word itself suggests, predestination is not about where we have come from but where we are going. The two things are related, but the primary emphasis of predestination is on the future, not on the past.

The next thing we have to understand is that, in the New Testament, predestination is usually mentioned in connection with our salvation in Christ. It is not to be seen as an iron law built into the mind of God or the structure of the created universe, but as a word of assurance from God that our experience of his saving power is both real and purposeful. We have been saved for a reason and are heirs to a promised eternal glory, which we know we shall enter into when the time comes.