

## "PREDESTINATION: ANSWERING OBJECTIONS"

(Romans 8:29–30)

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Yet the mysteries remain. And as finite and fallen creatures we have no right to demand explanations from our infinite and perfect Creator. Nevertheless, he has thrown light on our problem in such a way as to contradict the chief objections which are raised and to show that the consequences of predestination are the opposite of what is popularly supposed. I have five examples.

1. Predestination is said to foster *arrogance*, since (it is alleged) God's elect boast of their favored status. But on the contrary, predestination excludes boasting. For it fills God's people with *astonishment* that he should ever have had mercy on undeserving sinners like them. *Humbled* before the cross, they desire to live the rest of their lives only "to the praise of his glorious grace" (Eph. 1:6,12,14) and to spend eternity worshiping the Lamb who was slain (Rev. 5:11ff.).

2. Predestination is said to foster *uncertainty*, and to create in people a neurotic anxiety as to whether they are predestined and saved or not. But this is not so. If they are unbelievers, they are entirely unconcerned about their salvation, until and unless the Holy Spirit brings them under conviction of sin as a prelude to their conversion. If they are believers, however, even when passing through a period of doubt, they know that in the end their security lies only in the eternal, predestinating will of God. Nothing else can bring such *assurance and comfort*. As Luther wrote in his comment on verse 28, predestination "is a wonderfully sweet thing for those who have the Spirit."<sup>1</sup>

3. Predestination is said to foster *apathy*. For if salvation is entirely God's work and not ours, people argue, then all human responsibility before God has been undermined. But again this is not so. On the contrary, it is abundantly clear that Scripture's emphasis on God's sovereignty never diminishes our *responsibility*. Instead, the two lie side by side in an antinomy, which is an apparent contradiction between two truths. Unlike a paradox, an antinomy is "not deliberately manufactured; it is forced upon us by the facts themselves . . . We do not invent it, and we cannot explain it. Nor is there any way to get rid of it, save by falsifying the very facts that led us to it."<sup>2</sup> A good example is found in the teaching of Jesus, who declared both that "no one can come to me unless the Father . . . draws him" (John 6:44) and that "you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:40).



<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Romans* (1515) p. 371.

<sup>2</sup> J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1961), p. 21.

Why do people not come to Jesus? Is it that they cannot? Or is it that they will not? The only answer which is compatible with his own teaching is, "Both, even though we cannot reconcile them."

4. Predestination is said to foster *complacency*, and to breed *antinomians*. For, if God has predestined us to eternal salvation, why should we not live as we please, without moral restraint, and in defiance of divine law? Paul has already answered this objection in chapter 6. Those whom God has chosen and called he has united to Christ in his death and resurrection. Having died to sin, *they now live a new life to God*. And elsewhere Paul writes that "he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight" (Eph. 1:4; cf. 2 Tim. 1:9). Indeed, he has predestined us *to be conformed to the likeness of his Son* (29).

5. Predestination is said to foster *narrow-mindedness*, as the elect people of God become absorbed only in themselves. The opposite is the case. The reason God called one man Abraham and his one family was not for their blessing only, but that through them all the families of the earth might be blessed (Gen. 12:1ff.). Similarly, the reason God chose his Servant, that shadowy figure in Isaiah whom we see partly fulfilled in Israel, but specially in Christ and his people, was not only to glorify Israel but to bring light and justice to the nations (Isa. 42:1ff.; 49:5ff.). Indeed these promises were a great spur to Paul (as they should be to us) when he courageously broadened his evangelistic vision to include the Gentiles (e.g. Acts 13:47; 26:23). Thus, God has made us his own people, not that we should be his favorites, but that we should be his *witnesses*, "to proclaim the glorious deeds of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9f.).

*So the doctrine of divine predestination promotes humility, not arrogance; assurance, not apprehension; responsibility, not apathy; holiness, not complacency; and mission, not privilege.* This is not to claim that there are no problems, but to indicate that they are more intellectual than pastoral.

Certainly the point Paul singles out for emphasis in verse 29 is pastoral. It concerns the two practical purposes of God's predestination. The first is that we should be conformed to the likeness of his Son. In the simplest possible terms, God's eternal purpose for his people is that we should become like Jesus. The transformation process begins here and now in our character and conduct, through the work of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18), but will be brought to completion only when Christ comes and we see him, and our bodies become like the body of his glory (1 John 3:2ff). The second purpose of God's predestination is that, as a result of our conformity to the image of Christ, he might be the firstborn among many brothers, enjoying both the community of the family and the preeminence of the firstborn (cf. Col. 1:18).