

An Introduction to Predestination

by R H Johnston

This paper examines aspects of the biblical doctrines concerning predestination, foreknowledge, calling and human responsibility.¹

Calvinistic and Arminian Theology are both flawed

There are two extreme views about predestination. Calvinism (named after Calvin), sees each Christian as being individually "effectually called", and picked out by God, because God has known him from the beginning of the world. This view strongly emphasises God's part in man's salvation. Having been thus "effectually called" and chosen by God, Calvinism teaches that each Christian must be eternally secure, with the implication that regardless of what a person does later he will not be finally lost. Although most Calvinists do remain careful to go on walking with God, the security doctrine can lead to smugness and complacency. The main difficulties seen by detractors, is that man's responsibilities and freedom appear to be undermined. A more serious objection concerns those whom God chooses not to save, with the implication that some men were always destined by God to damnation. Most (but not all) Calvinists reject this "double-predestination" view, as it appears to undermine the God's justice.

The alternative view, commonly referred to as Arminianism (named after Arminius), puts a much greater emphasis on human freedom and responsibility, but at the expense of God's sovereignty. The eternal security doctrine is rejected as being inconsistent with the warnings of scripture. The views of this school of theology were condemned by the Synod of Dort, a council of protestant churches summoned to assess its validity. People who have Arminian tendencies tend to ignore predestination issues, and regard it as a particular obsession of Paul arising from his Jewish background with its emphasis on being the chosen people.

(The practical differences between the two schools of thought are most evident in evangelism. Arminians are inclined to present the gospel as a "free offer" from God which He invites people to accept. The implication is that people can become Christians as a result of their own decision to do so. As a result they are inclined to use a wide variety of evangelistic methods to make the gospel attractive. Calvinists strongly deny that anyone can become a Christian by his own choice, since Christ made it clear that no one could come to Him unless the Father draws him (John 6:44). Calvinists therefore put the emphasis on God's

¹ The author acknowledges the input of Denis G Clark, who introduced him to this way of looking at predestination. See the section on Predestination in his book "You were asking...". http://denisgclark.pbworks.com/w/file/fetch/128359554/you_were_asking.pdf

command to men to repent and believe in Christ. They usually avoid gimmicks in their presentations of the gospel and put more emphasis on intellectual content in preaching. As far as practical evangelism is concerned, the Calvinistic approach is more in line with New Testament practice.)

This paper considers the underlying theology concerning predestination. Neither school of theology does justice to scripture: the Calvinistic school errs through its emphasis on the predestination of individuals to be saved, while Arminians more or less deny predestination as a concept. It will be shown that a right understanding of predestination not only exalts Christ, but also reveals the plan and purpose of God for His people.

God's Predestination is the fruit of His covenants with people who pleased Him

After the Fall, Adam was thrown out of the garden. Since then God has been on the look out for people who please him and whom He could bless. This is a recurrent Old Testament theme. God looks for man after his own heart (1 Samuel 13:14). After Enoch, who walked with God until God took him (Genesis 5:24), there was Noah who was righteous: God saved him and condemned the world. God saved Noah (and his family with him) because he was righteous: this was not a random or arbitrary choice. The next to find God's favour was Abraham: he lived in a pagan situation: but he heard God, so he must have had a desire for reality, to meet God. God called him out of Ur of the Chaldees, and took him through various trials, and gave him many promises. God gave him the promises after he had been through the trials, and had demonstrated that his heart was towards God. God particularly tested Abraham (Genesis 22) over the promise He had already given him concerning Isaac, the one through whom he was to have many descendants. After this God made promises to Abraham concerning his seed (Genesis 22:16-18). The New Testament reveals that in Genesis 22:18 the "seed" refers to Christ (Galatians 3:16).

David was not someone that men would pick out to be king when he was a young shepherd boy, but God did. Men choose someone with obvious talents like king Saul, or even David's brothers. Samuel was nearly taken in by them (1 Samuel 16:6), but God told Samuel that God's criterion is the attitude of heart (1 Samuel 16:7). David knew God, he knew the power of God to deliver him (1 Samuel 17:34-37), he had set his heart to seek the LORD, and what God could do. God said of him "Here is a man after my own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14). God gave David promises concerning his seed (2 Samuel 7:12- 15): although these words had some application to his immediate descendants, they obtained their real fulfilment in Christ (this is true even of 2 Samuel 7:14: Christ bore the stripes of men on our behalf).

Supremely, Christ is the One whom God has chosen because He pleased Him: "This is my Beloved Son, with whom I was well pleased" (Luke 3:22, literal translation). He was the one who was the expected "seed" (Galatians 3:16), introduced to us at the start of the New Testament as the Son of David, the Son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1). He was also the only begotten God (John 1:18), the second Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45) who would bring life. Jesus could give life only because He pleased God with His testimony: "I always do the things that please him" (John 8:29).

Thus we see that when God chooses particular men there is nothing arbitrary about the choice. If the choice had been arbitrary salvation would be a lottery, with God "playing dice" and saying, "I will have this one and that one, but not this one". It would be then very difficult to see how God could be said to be just, or how under those conditions man could be held responsible for his actions. Moreover what room would there be for the expression of our love?

Having chosen particular men for their special faith (which God accounts a virtue or righteousness) He not only blesses them, but those who are "in" them. Usually this means those who will be their natural descendants (see Hebrews 7.10), but could also include those who trusted them. Thus Noah saved his immediate family and in them everyone now living. Noah also saved his son's wives who had trusted him. Abraham's descendants were special to God, and they continue to be so (Romans 11:2). Through David's greater Son, Jesus Christ, all are blessed who will believe in Him (Ephesians 1).

God picked out men who pleased him and then gave them promises of what He would do **because** of their faith. This is how we are blessed by being "in Christ". God seeks to perfect a people for Himself (Romans 8:28-31), but Paul, having seen this great intention of God, had sorrow in his heart over the Jews because they had not turned to Christ (Romans 9:2 onwards).

Predestination is corporate rather than individual

A fact often overlooked by modern English readers is that while Timothy, Titus and Philemon were written to individuals, letters such as Romans, Ephesians and Colossians were written to churches and not individuals. Thus Ephesians reveals God's purposes for the church, that through it He would demonstrate His wisdom. We tend to read the letters to churches as if they were written to us as individuals because modern English does not distinguish between the 2nd singular and the 2nd plural, both are "you", whether we are speaking to individuals or to a group of people corporately. But scripture does make this distinction: in New Testament Greek, like most languages, the "thou" or "you" form is used where appropriate.

In Romans 8-11 all the teaching about predestination uses verbs in the plural form, with one highly significant exception, the section Romans 11:17-22, which speaks about someone who is arrogant. Some people try to use Romans 11:29: "the gifts and calling of God are without repentance" as a proof text to say that it is impossible to fall away. Yet Romans 11:22 says the exact opposite at the individual level: "*.. and God's kindness to thee, provided thou continuest in his kindness, otherwise thou too will be cut off.*" It is important to appreciate that the Bible gives no absolute assurance of eternal security at the individual level (this matter is considered further below).

If there is no such assurance at the individual level, who is spoken of as foreknown in Romans 8:28-30? The blessings that follow depend on being foreknown. The only other reference to being foreknown in Romans 8-11 is in Romans 11:2 "*God has not rejected his people whom He foreknew*". The foreknowing is of a people for a purpose, and that among that people is (a part of) Israel. In Romans 11 the main focus is certainly Israel. In Romans 8 it is not necessarily Israel, but as we read Romans 9-11 it becomes clear that the faithful remnant of Israel is the focus of this whole passage. God foreknew Israel because of the promise He had made to Abraham. After the Fall, once God had found a suitable man, he said, "Aha! I have found a man after my heart. His shall be my people". God predestined Israel to receive His glory solely on account of Abraham. God knows them, not as individuals but as a people, because God is calling out a people for His own possession (1 Peter 2:9 - Greek "*a people for possession*"). Provided we can somehow be among that people we will share the blessings.

Blessings in Christ, true offspring of Abraham

Galatians 3:16-18 explains that the promise to Abraham concerning his offspring was really made only to the Christ (compare Romans 9:7), and that this promise and covenant was not annulled by the law given 430 years later. Galatians 3:29 says that if we are Christ's then we are Abraham's offspring, and heirs of the promise. So if we are in Christ, then we get everything which God promised to the offspring of Abraham. God still loves the natural descendants of Abraham for the sake of their forefathers (Romans 11:28), but even they can only enter God's blessings through faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 9:7-8; Romans 11:23). Christ is the true Israelite: if we are in Christ, we are in Israel and hence sons of Abraham.

The destiny of the children of God, the church, is tied closely to Israel. Gentiles are grafted into Israel (Romans 11:17) along with believing Jews (Romans 11:23). Our joint destiny is in Israel (Romans 11:26), and both are one in Christ (Ephesians 2:14) who takes away our sins (Romans 11:26-28). There is a correspondence in God's mind between Israel and Christ, and the ideas associated with them are intertwined in scripture, particularly in Galatians 3, and

Romans 8-11. In Exodus 4:22 it says "*Israel is my first-born son*", but we know that Christ is God's first-born Son. Again Hosea 11:1 "*When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my first-born son*", which is quoted in Matthew 2:15 in relation to Christ. Christ said "*I am the true vine*" (John 15:1): the vine represented Israel (Isaiah 5). As far as God is concerned Israel and Christ are One in some sense (compare the church being Christ's body). Even if we do not fully understand this identification, it will help us to understand predestination if we accept it.

How we were predestined to be blessed in Christ

God having blessed Christ in begetting Him as His Son, and He went on to make him a promise. From Ephesians 1, it appears that God must have promised something along the following lines, "Son, whoever believes in you, trusts you and comes to you, shall be regarded by me as having special favours and special privileges, and because I love you, Jesus, I will bless them as I am blessing You, and I will give to them everything that I give You, because they are in You". Every blessing we have from God is because of who Christ is and what he does, not because of anything we are or can do.

A helpful analogy concerns a man who has a son. When that son is still a baby, he makes a unilateral covenant with him, saying "Whoever my son marries shall be regarded as a special daughter of mine, and she shall have special privileges, and everything that I can provide her with". At that moment he has no idea who his daughter-in-law will be. But when the son grows up and asks someone to marry him, and she accepts, then she will receive everything that is in that covenant. So it is with us and Christ.

We are like that bride. Suppose the son approaches a certain woman and says to her "Will you marry me?". That is when he has called her. If she refuses him, she loses everything the father had promised. They could have been hers through marrying the son. If the son then calls another, who accepts, and they marry, his wife receives all the blessings. This analogy is imperfect because Christ is marrying a bride which is corporate. But Christ does call us as individuals, to become part of His corporate bride, the church, and it is together as the bride of Christ that we receive all the fullness of what God gives. Our corporate blessing is the perspective in Ephesians: because the Father loves His Son so dearly He gives us all things in Him.

If you read Ephesians 1 as if it were written to you individually, you will probably begin to think "there must be something rather special about me". This focuses attention on self, whereas the chapter seeks to place all the attention on Christ. It is a wonderful chapter, so full of the Lord Jesus Christ. Everything is

"in him": in him is all the fullness of God, in him the Father has given us all things.

A people blessed for a purpose

God has given us this blessing, not for our enjoyment, but for a purpose. God has a wonderful purpose for "all Israel" (Romans 11:26), that we should be zealous for good works (Titus 2:14). We have been appointed to live "for the praise of His glory" (Ephesians 1:6,12,14), and we are to have the beautiful fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23) borne in our lives corporately so that people may see how beautiful Jesus is. God also uses the church to make known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places the manifold wisdom of God (Ephesians 3:10).

This is what we have in Christ. The scope of the idea is so big it is quite hard to grasp all its implications at once. All this plan for fullness and blessing was all designed and poured out before we came on the scene at all. But God knew what sort of people we would be.

Another analogy may help to illustrate the ideas of foreknowledge, predestination and calling for a purpose. Suppose an employer with an expanding firm does some forward planning, and decides that in six months time he will need a man to do a certain job. The new man will need equipment, and he himself will need certain qualifications and personal characteristics in order to do the job. Because of the job requirement, the employer already has a pretty good idea what sort of person the new man will be. This is pretty much what **foreknowledge** is all about. The employer **predestines** that when this new man comes, he will do this particular job. The employer knows he will have to choose him to do the job, will have to advertise, and from those who are **called** by the advert he will **choose** one (for "many are called, few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14)). Once he arrives, the employer will give him all the necessary resources, and will expect him to continue doing the job until it is complete. (If the man fails to be diligent he will be sacked, and someone else selected (Matthew 25:14-30).) How well the man does the job will largely depend on how well the employer provides for his needs. Romans 8:29-30 presents a similar picture.

All of this the employer can determine well in advance. The employer does not know **who** the job-holder is, but he does know and has pre-determined his **purpose** long before he appears. God's purpose for us is that we should be conformed to the exact likeness of his beloved Son (Romans 8:29).

Once the six months are up, the employer advertises, interviews candidates and picks out the one with the right abilities for the job. He does not pick a **particular man**, just someone with the right attributes **to do the job**. Having picked him the employer gives him everything he needs to do the job. Likewise the Father

chooses us and gives us all we need to do the job (Matthew 6:31-33; Matthew 25:14-30). He gives us of his Holy Spirit so that we can be the likeness of Christ, demonstrate Christ to the world, and the purposes of God to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places.

Man's only choice: rejection

The employer may offer the job to someone who refuses it because the rewards are not good enough. Similarly people say to Christ: "You don't pay well enough compared with the world". In fact, the **only** choice we have towards God is of rejection, because Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless the Father draw him" (John 6:44).

It is the same as with a man and a woman. Traditionally, at least, a woman may only marry if a man asks her. If no man asks, she will never marry. On the other hand if a man asks, she can refuse. This is why God says "Call upon the Lord while He is near": He is not always be near to save. If the man asks the woman to marry him, and she is half-hearted, suggesting he comes back another time, he may never come back. In fact most men probably wouldn't, unless they were unusually keen. Jesus is pretty keen, but we must not presume upon it.

God calls through preaching: God's choice is not arbitrary

God's choice from men today is not arbitrary: God seeks those who are seeking after Him, and it is these that God has promised will find him (Deuteronomy 4:29; Jeremiah 29:13). Romans 10:18-20 reveals that all men know that God is there, so man has no excuse (Romans 1:20) for not worshipping God. Many people mistakenly think we can go to God whenever and however we like and say to God "Hey God...", and that God will hear us. Because our sin and (more especially) our rebellion has made a separation between us and God (Isaiah 59:2), the unregenerate man cannot approach God.

God knows our hearts. In Romans 9:14-16: unless God shows us mercy, we can receive nothing from God. If God does nothing, we get nothing. Jesus said, "*No one can come to me unless the Father draw him*" (John 6:44). Nevertheless God is merciful: "*whoever believes in Him shall not be put to shame*" (Romans 10:11; 1 Peter 2:6). God's promise is to everyone that the Lord our God calls to Him (Acts 2:38-39). The promise of salvation is open to all God calls. God calls through the preachers He sends (Romans 10:13-17). When we preach Christ, God calls people through that proclamation, which is why we must do it: there is no promise of blessing on any other means. God will have mercy on all who are called in that way, and the proof of their response is that they repent and are baptised in water in Jesus Christ.

The peril of continued rebellion

If a man sets himself persistently in rebellion against God, however hard God tries and calls, He cannot get through. Such a man rejects and resists God, saying, "It is my imagination, it isn't God, I didn't hear anything". That is what happened to Pharaoh (Romans 9:17-18). God hardened Pharaoh's heart: it could only be hardened if it had once been soft. God underlines the choices which we make. In Exodus 3:19, God already knew the inclination of Pharaoh's heart, that it was already hardened against God, and God's people. When the plagues first started Pharaoh was in control and voluntarily hardened his own heart (Exodus 8:15,19,32; 9:7), but in Exodus 9:12; 10:20,27; 11:10 the LORD hardens Pharaoh's heart, so underlining Pharaoh's previous choice. It is terrifying: if we resist God in any matter, God will lock us into our choice.

The need to continually abide in Christ

This is of continuing relevance to the choices we make. No one can be saved by a doctrine, nor by an experience, but only by the **Saviour**, Jesus Christ. There can be no "eternal security" in a doctrine which says "once saved, always saved". Even if the proof texts were unambiguous, how could anyone know that they had been "effectually called" to start with so that the doctrine was applicable? Is it not in any case a false faith in something less than God, which avoids the need to rest our continuing confidence and faith in the person of Jesus Christ? As individuals, we have the solemn warning to **continue** in His kindness (Romans 11:22), and further warnings in Hebrews 6:4-8 and Hebrews 10:26-31. We must continue to abide in Christ, in the vine (John 15) to be safe and secure. Otherwise we will be cut off as a branch that withers, and taken out and burned (John 15:6). These are real warnings: God does not needlessly frighten or threaten us. Certainly, no one can snatch us from the father's hand (Romans 8), but our potentially false hearts are our main enemy, against which God cannot entirely protect us, as we have seen.

God's great purpose for His people, chosen in Christ

Repeatedly in scripture it is Israel, the body of Christ, or the church that is focus, rather than the individual. God has wonderful purposes for His church, and it is as a church that he calls us to His praise and glory. When God called out a people, He knew what He wanted to achieve, he wanted a people for his own special possession (Malachi 3:16-18: the AV translation "jewels" in Malachi 3:17 is misleading), a people he could use, a people he could show his glory through, a people who loved him (1 Peter 2:9).

If we can see God's great plan and our proper place in it, we shall enjoy our Christian living so much more. Many Christians are too self-centred in their

assessment of God's dealings with them. As individuals, God does want us to live fulfilled lives (John 10:10) that bring glory and honour and praise to Him, and which will be a blessing to us and bring us joy. But He sees something much greater in the manifestation of these same things in a corporate people, in the Bride of Christ who has made herself ready (Revelation 19:7).

We must come to the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:4): He alone is to be the centre of our attention (1 Peter 2:6 (AV)), the chief corner-stone, elect (= chosen), precious. Christ is the One who has been chosen, the special precious one of God. If we are among God's chosen, it is because we are chosen **in him** (Ephesians 1): we have all we need in the Beloved (Ephesians 1:6).

Our focus is all in Christ, our predestination is in Christ, for the purpose of revealing the glory and wisdom of God. As and when God calls us to believe in Jesus, we can enter freely into this. Whoever believes in Christ (John 3:16), because Christ is chosen, he becomes chosen.

Pre-destination gives assurance that God's purposes will be fulfilled

With this perspective, a special people chosen for a purpose, in Christ, in Israel, we can appreciate Paul's agony (Romans 9:2) as he considers all that God has for his own people, and yet they rejected it. Paul struggles with the idea "Has God given them up?" (Romans 11:2). He has not, God's purpose is quite firm, He will have a people for His possession, a remnant, in Christ, the true vine, the true olive tree. God chose that people, and will cause His name to be praised when they are finally restored (Romans 11:12). In the meantime He has used the rebellion and the present failure of Israel to respond to Christ (Romans 11:11) as a means to bless the Gentiles. Salvation and partaking in God's purposes will not depend on our merits, for whether we are Jew or Gentile we have none (Romans 11:30-32). Instead all has been accomplished in Christ, the One who was chosen. We are like an unworthy bride who clings to her beloved (Song 3:4). No wonder Paul finishes Romans 8-11 by exulting over the amazing character of God's wisdom and knowledge (Romans 11:33-36). God's purposes cannot be thwarted (Job 42:2).

Thus we see that predestination is the most Christ-centred doctrine in the Book, since everything is in Him, through Him and for Him. Alleluia.

These notes are not comprehensive but should stimulate personal bible study. Every effort has been made to be accurate, but the reader should test everything in accord with the example of Acts 17:11 and the command of 1 Thessalonians 5:21. Errors, or queries which are unresolved after consulting the LORD, should be referred to the author (email: rhjbibpap@rhj.org.uk). (v1 1998, v3 2.9.2018) © R H Johnston, 1998, 2018. This paper may **only** be copied **in its entirety** for private non-commercial use. Other usages require the written permission of the author.