



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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An Interpretation of the Presbyterian Doctrine of Predestination

Two people are primarily responsible for providing the stimulus for me to write this Paper on the Presbyterian Doctrine of Predestination. One is the Rv. Paul Hooker, Associate Pastor at Shallowford Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA. The other is my grandson, Tony Stansberry.

On March 25, 1990 Paul preached a sermon – one of a series on the Reformed Faith – on the subject of Predestination. Although I am not all that well-read on the subject, it was, in my opinion, the best treatment that I have encountered. I sort of filed the sermon away for future reference.

A couple of months ago, my grandson, Tony – who is in a Bible interpretation study group – and I got into a discussion centering in Romans 8:28-30, the difficult-to-interpret text most often quoted when discussing Predestination.

As we talked, Paul's sermon came to mind. At the same time, I decided that I wanted to write a Paper on the subject of Predestination. Both Paul and Tony support me in my decision, and had given me permission to use their names and materials.

The passage from Romans is:

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those who he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Romans 8:28-30

The texts says – or seems to say – that God has already chosen (predestined) certain people to be the image of his Son. He has called, justified, and glorified them. They, in a manner of speaking, are God's elect.

If this is an accurate interpretation of the text, then, understandably, it raises questions about the fate of the rest of us. Tony's Bible study discussion group, quite appropriately, was rising the – and were not coming up with answers that were very satisfactory to them.

Maybe that I write won't be any more satisfactory.

My intention is, first, to summarize Paul's sermon, and then to apply my understanding of the sermon – and my understanding of the Doctrine of Predestination –

to the passage from Romans. Where I quote from the sermon, I will use quotes. Otherwise in the summary, I will paraphrase what I think Paul is saying.

“The Doctrine of Predestination is the result of the application of the doctrines of the sovereignty of God and the sinfulness of humanity to the question of salvation.”

“Predestination is one of the least understood, most mis-defined, and therefore most readily avoided doctrines of the Christian faith.”

Typically, people seem to assume that Predestination has to do with God having a specific plan or script for the life of each person. Therefore, whatever happens is inevitable. It is God’s will. It is pre-determined by God. This is not Predestination. It is determinism, and it simply does not fit with Christian theology.

Predestination has to do with our relationship with God, and with our salvation. “Nothing exists apart from the implicit reality of God within it. Another way of saying this is to say that all life – and especially our life – is rooted in the presence and will of this mysterious God.”

“God is revealed to us in Jesus Christ as a God of love and mercy...who seeks to enter and maintain relationships with us. ...a God of love (whose love is) the expression of God’s sovereign will. (Hence) human life is created to be centered in God...the goal and purpose of human experience, the ‘destination’ of the human journey. It is, in the Christian faith, a destination established by God before our creation; hence the name ‘pre-destination’.”

“But there is a problem.” Human beings have gotten sidetracked, and lost our destination. “We are dominated by sin...no longer free...no longer able to come to God.”

Therefore, “salvation – the act of restoring us to freedom and to relationship with God – is completely God’s doing. It is never something we deserve or something we accomplish. ...We do not choose God; God chooses us, and that choice makes possible all our choices. ...God... ‘elects us into love’ in the words of the Reformers, and only then do we find that we are really free to choose God. That’s predestination.”

“God’s work is a gift of the grace of God...our relationship is itself the gift of God to us.Whatever God does, we have confidence that it is ultimately both loving and just, and wise beyond all human wisdom.”

I insert. Human beings have the right and the freedom to reject being elected into love. We are free to live as if we are not “elected.” We choose.

“Election by God is never into privilege, but always an election to service to the will of God. ... It is a gift. But the gift enables us to share with others the good news of God’s love, and to express that love in concrete acts of service.”

Thee doctrine of “predestination is a profoundly comforting doctrine in moments of crisis.” It continually reminds us “that our relationship with God is not our doing, but God’s, and that God does not cease to be at work in (our) life “even with (we) reject God.”

“In the end, predestination points us to God, and teaches us to sing songs of praise; for nothing else can satisfy that sense of wonder and gratitude at the constant, secure, and all-encompassing love of God.”

I wonder if I can now condense two pages into a couple of paragraphs.

By God’s love and sovereign will, we are created to be centered in God and our destination is to be in a relationship of peace and joy with God who created us. It is God’s doing and God’s choosing. Even so, we have the right either to live as God’s chosen or refuse to live as God’s chosen, and, by the very nature of our creation, we must choose one way or the other. From the beginning, Go chooses to love us and to be in relationship with us. While that choosing is God’s doing, our response is our doing. In wisdom, God knows that we must be free to live as if we are not in relationship with God if we are to be free to live as if we are in the relationship.

By God’s doing, I am predestined to be God’s person in the world. God has chosen me – elected me, if you will. God has also chosen that I be in the relationship of my own free will. It is as if God were saying, “I choose you to be my son. You are free to live as if you are not. However, you are my son, no matter how you order your life, or profess to believe, or actually believe. You can’t change that.”

Tony, my grandson, wrote a letter. “Yes,” he wrote, “I am used to the traditional outlook on Christianity that the reason to be a Christian is because of all the rewards.” Of course, in that traditional outlook, the chief reward is to gain heaven after this life – this being the end result of being saved. In this view, the Bible is seen as setting forth the requirements for living this life so as to be assured of a place in heaven.

Tony wrote further, “Does everyone have a choice as to whether or not they accept Jesus as Lord, or are the Christians predestined to become Christians because God chooses them to be Christians?”

Tony referred to Romans 8:28-29, and commented, “It seems that the Christian is predestined by God to be a Christian, or a chosen one. So, it is up to God, not the man, or woman, or child. What is your opinion?” By implication, and in later discussions, Tony was also wondering about the fate of those who are not chosen.

I am quick to say that I do not know what happens to people when this present life comes to an end, nor do I know any way to find out with any degree of certainty. It seems to me that the issue is important in direct proportion to what a person believes about the purpose of this present life.

If I believe the purpose of this present life is to live so as to gain heaven and avoid hell after this life is over, then the intent of everything I think, believe, and do is to contribute to accomplishing that purpose.

If, in that context, I believe God has chosen some, and not others, to gain heaven, I am in a constant dilemma both as to whether or not I am elected, and whether or not those most significant to me are. I am also constantly uncertain and concerned about the fate of those who are not. This can be a monumental worry with no real resources to alleviate it.

If I believe that God does the choosing, and people have no choice, my life is marked by extreme uncertainty. I can't live so as to gain heaven and avoid hell after this life is over. The matter is out of my hands. There is nothing for me to decide or do. I am helpless to make any difference. I'm either chosen, or I am not. The choosing was done at the beginning and I have no way of knowing if I was chosen or not. No action of mine changes anything.

If God does the choosing as to who is Christian, and who is not, it doesn't make any difference whether I accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. It doesn't make any difference if I practice a Christian life. It might even seem unimportant whether or not I try to win people to Christ, or witness to them about their soul's salvation.

All this has to do with whether or not I see predestination as a doctrine concerned with who gets to heaven, and who does not, solely on the basis of God's choosing.

If I believe the purpose of this present life is to live in this present life centered in God – here and now, then the intent of everything I think, believe, and do is to contribute to the fulfillment of that purpose.

If, in that context, I believe God has predestined me (all God's children) to do exactly this – live centered in God here and now, I am not confronted with a dilemma about whether I or anyone significant to me is chosen of God. It rests with me to decide whether or not I believe this. If I do, all my concern about a future heaven and hell is gone. And I don't have to worry any more about who is elected and who is not.

The doctrine of Predestination doesn't center in God electing some to be Christian, and others not to be. It doesn't center in God choosing some for relationship with God, and others not. It doesn't center in God choosing some to go to heaven, and others go to hell. It doesn't mean people have no choice.

The doctrine of Predestination does center in God having chosen me – us – from the beginning to be God's people. It centers in what God has, from the beginning, destined me – us – to be, and what I – we – decide to do about it. It centers in what God does – has done – to restore me – us – to the relationship with God (salvation), and what I do about that.

I am chosen by God. I am chosen by God to be God's person here and now. I am not chosen to obtain a reward or avoid a punishment. I am chosen to respond to what God has already done for me, and who I already am by God's creating. I accept or reject God's choosing, and live my life accordingly. It is my destiny to do so.

In the light of this understanding of the doctrine of Predestination, Paul's words in Roman 8:28-30, and, indeed, in the rest of the passage, read somewhat differently to me.

I have no way of knowing what Paul actually meant. However, his words are rich to me from the belief position of being chosen by God to live here and now in the full potential of our being the children of God.

Paul's words are very encouraging to me. Being chosen by God, I am always in relationship with God and am destined "to be conformed to image of his son." I assume that "son" here refers to Jesus, and that the picture is of Jesus the "first born within a large family" – the family of God. And I, being chosen by God, am assured of God's involvement and God's support – called, justified and glorified – and I think I have little real grasp of the scope of that support.

And then comes that wonderful question, "If God is for us, who is against us?" (Ro. 8:31) Who, indeed would have the courage to be against us?

The paragraph goes on to tell us just what God has done to stand for and with "God's elect."

And then Paul poses another question, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" (Ro. 8:35) Or from the love of God, for that matter. What a symphony the words are that follow, and they end with "nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Ro. 8:39)

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing will separate me from the love of God.

I cannot believe that God, who loves with that completeness and that intensity, would elect some for salvation and reject others; nor choose some to reside in heaven after this life and others to reside in hell; nor pick some to be Christians here and now and refuse to allow others to be. I cannot believe that God, who created human beings with both the capacity and the necessity to make choices about their lives and to live out those choices, would negate the need for humans to choose about being in relationship with God, and about living in the image of God.

I cannot believe that God, who values human beings so highly and endows us with some tremendous potential for being God-like, would "predestine" some to live as children of God, and others not to.

CHOSEN BY GOD

It makes a lot more sense to me to believe that God, from the beginning, set as my – our – destiny to center my life in God – to center my life in God while I live it on this earth.

I am chosen by God. From the beginning I am chosen by God. I have the freedom to choose to live as if I am not chosen. I can insist that I am not a child of God. I can focus my attention on trying to figure out what to do and how to do it so that I will be chosen by God.

Or I can recognize, believe, and accept that I am chosen by God to center this life that God has given me in God.

I am predestined to do so.