



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Predestination

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Predestined – foreordained – selected – called – chosen – from the beginning.

God has it all planned, and it is going to come out just as God has planned. Human beings make choices, but, in the long run, God has already chosen. If God is omniscient (knows all things) and omnipotent (is all powerful), it follows, doesn't it, that God already knows, has it all planned, and it will come out that way. What does that make me, and what is my role in life?

It is small wonder to me that counselees ask me, "What does Predestination mean anyway?" Certainly, it is a frequently discussed Doctrine of the Reformed Faith, and, I think, as little understood as any doctrine of our Faith.

Let me say up front that I have no expectation that I can clear up the confusion and uncertainty that appears to be so prevalent about what Predestination really means – nor is it my purpose to do so in writing this paper. Rather, it is to see if I can write something that makes the meaning of the Doctrine clearer to me.

Just now, I am reading the book, *CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE*, by Shirley C. Guthrie, professor of Systematic Theology at Columbia Seminary, Decatur, Georgia. The chapter, "What Does God Want With Us? The Doctrine of Predestination" caught my eye. Doctor Guthrie is considered to be an authority in his field. He has recently revised the book, which has been a classic for 25 years. It is well worth both reading and studying. While I want to share with you my efforts to make the Doctrine clearer to me, I am not so presumptuous as to suppose that I could improve on what Dr. Guthrie writes. At the same time, I do not plan to quote from the book, but rather go with my own explorations.

The view of the Doctrine of the Predestination with which I grew up – then referred to as the Doctrine of Election – was clearly stated and unequivocal. It had to do with the course of my life, as well as whether or not I was one of the Elect – that is, one chosen to be saved. God is the decider. God has already decided all about my life. God has already laid out the course of my life. God has already decided if I am saved or damned. There was nothing I could do about it to make it come out any differently.

At the same time, the Doctrine of Free Will was equally clearly stated, and not to be questioned. I have Free Will. I am free to decide about my life. If I wanted to gain heaven and avoid hell, I must choose Jesus Christ, and obey the commandments of God. God would accept and reward me, or judge and condemn me, according to what I decided and did.

A specific instance of the dilemma presented by these two Doctrines centers in the struggle through which I went before I decided that I was called to be a minister. For all sorts of reasons, I didn't want to be a minister. Yet, as a result of an experience with an illness from which I should not have recovered but did, I believed that God had given me my life again. Therefore, if God wanted me to be a minister, I owed it to God to respond to that call.

Given what I believed about the Doctrine of Predestination, God had already decided that I was to be a minister. But, given what I believed about the Doctrine of Free

Will, I must decide whether or not I was to be a minister.

Of course, I could see no way to reconcile these two points of view. Contradictory through they were, I was supposed to believe that both were true, and I wasn't supposed to raise any questions at all about the seemingly reality that if one were true, the other couldn't be.

So what did I do? I struggled mightily both mentally and spiritually over the issue. For me, my seventeenth year was a nightmare of indecision and turmoil. Finally, I surrendered, saying, "God, if ministry is what you want for me, then I will be a minister." Interestingly enough, from that day all the doors that needed to be opened for me to become a minister were opened – sometimes in most unexpected ways.

Did I have Free Will, or not? Was my struggle and turmoil a charade, since God had already decided, or did I really have a decision to make? If I did, did that mean that I actually was the decider, and not God? If that were the case, what about being predestined and foreordained?

Do I have the answers worked out yet? That remains to be seen, doesn't it?

Among all the Bible passages that bear upon the view that God has already chosen – or elected – those who are to be saved, I cite just two here.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, 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 firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Ro. 8:28-30)

Just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will... (Eph. 1:4-5)

You know, of course, that I have lifted these quotes from their setting. In each setting, Paul has a lot more to say about God's choosing and intent for God's creation. It may be helpful to you to read these in their entirety, as well as to turn to other scripture passages that have to do with the issue of predestination and God's will.

Predestined to be conformed to the image of God's Son – called – justified – glorified – all of God's doing, and having little or nothing to do with the will (the free will?) of human beings. Chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world – destined for adoption. Certainly these words point toward the selection of some for salvation, and the rejection of others.

If I approach this issue from the point of view of my future salvation, I come up with a different set of answers than if I see it from the point of view of my daily life. I'm going to try to do both, and see how it all comes out.

From the point of view of my future salvation.

Predestination. God has chosen me – or hasn't chosen me – to be saved. I don't have a choice. No matter how good – or bad – a life I live, the matter of my salvation is out of my hands. And yet the Bible has a great deal to say about the demands upon me to be obedient to God's Law and Will. Salvation, it seems, is not a "done deal." Or, at least, I have a lot of obeying to do. If I don't, I get punished – and hell is the worst of the punishments.

Does that mean that God, having chosen me for salvation, also sees to it that I make the right choices and do the right things so that my behavior supports my being chosen? Does it mean that God, having chosen me for damnation, also sees to it that I behave in such a way as to deserve damnation? Does it mean that my free will is, in fact, an illusion when it comes to the matter of my salvation?

Or does it mean that the exercise of my free will is limited to what happens in my lifetime, and has nothing to do with whether or not I am saved? If this is the case, then the threat of eternity in hell as punishment for wrongdoing would not be hanging over me – that issue having already been decided by God.

As I try to resolve this dilemma, another is also involved. According to Scripture, does God choose some and reject others? Of course, the answer is, "Yes and No" because Scripture supports both the point of view that only some are saved, and that all are saved. The passages I have already quoted appear to support selection – that is, some are saved and others are not.

The following Scripture passages seem to support that God desires salvation for everyone – perhaps that God has chosen all for salvation.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. (Jn. 3:16)

This is right, and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (1 Tim. 2:4-5)

The Lord is not slow about his promises, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

If it is true that God predestines – foreordains – selects who will be saved and who will not, then I wonder how it works out that God wants everyone to be saved. It is a dilemma, isn't it?

Maybe Predestination isn't about whether or not I have been chosen for future salvation. Maybe it doesn't have to do with whether heaven or hell is to be my place of abode after I finish this life. Maybe it has to do with what I do with my life here and now.

Maybe Predestination has to do with God having chosen me (maybe all of us) to be servants in this time of my life. Maybe it has to do with God choosing me, and, at the same time, placing on me the responsibility for deciding what I do about God's having chosen me. Maybe I am free – not free, but required – to decide for or against being a servant of God. Maybe I am God's person now, and God requires of me that I decide what to do about being God's person.

Maybe the issue is neither whether or not I am saved, nor whether or not God has chosen me to serve God. Maybe God has chosen all of us to be saved, and all of us to serve God. Maybe God is wise enough to have said to me, "I have chosen you to be saved. I have chosen you to serve me. Your choice is to accept or reject your salvation, and to decide to or refuse to serve me. You can make these choices. It is necessary that you make these choices. If you decide against me, you choose to separate yourself from me and from the fullness of life that I have prepared for you. Your salvation and fullness of life with me mean nothing to you if you do not make the choice. I love you too much to take that choice away from you."

I would never presume to speak for God. I speculate about God's intent and come to this point of view when I think about my relationship to my children. I long for my children to have satisfying and fulfilling lives. It is my choice for them. I have done what I know to do so that they will have that kind of life. However, I am very clear that each of them must choose her/his course of life. If I try to impose my choices on them, I destroy them. If that is true for me in relation to my children, I can easily envision that it is true of God in relation to God's children.

Maybe I take liberties with my understanding of the meaning of the passages from Scripture that I have quoted. From the beginning, God has known me. God has predestined me to be conformed to the image of God's Son. God has called me to be a member of the family, and both justified and glorified me. God has selected me, and equipped me, before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before God in love. That's who I am created to be. However, I cannot be who I am created to be unless I choose to be. For I am also created to make choices. I am not greater than God. I am not more powerful than God.

I do not infringe upon God's power to choose, and to cause to happen. Since God can cause things to happen, God can also refrain from causing them to happen.

Now I see a way to resolve the dilemma to which I referred at the beginning of this paper.

From the beginning, God has chosen me to be God's person, as I believe God has chosen all of us. I am chosen to be, in this life, all that God as created me with the

capacity to be. If you will, I am predestined to be what God has created me able to be. God has not predetermined that I be anything. But I am predestined to confront my life and make my decisions about my life. That's why I could be in such turmoil over whether or not I would choose to be a minister.

God had not predetermined, or predecided, that I was to be a minister. God had certainly equipped me to be. My exposures to God, the church, and to the world all had their influences when I was deciding what I wanted to do with my life.

How did it come about that I felt so strongly impelled to be a minister, rather than to pursue another profession? I do not know. I think God was involved, but I am well aware that I can't explain God's involvement in the details of my life, or in the process that went on when I struggled so hard to decide against ministry as my profession.

So I believe that I was predestined to be a minister. I believe, further, that it was up to me to decide for or against being a minister. Would I have been punished had I made another decision? I do not believe that I would have been.

If I had chosen another profession, would I have been as happy and fulfilled in my life as I have been in ministry? I do not know the answer to that question, even as I do not ever know the answer to any "would have been" question. Insofar as I can tell, it is impossible for me to know how decisions other than those I actually made would have turned out.

I grew up believing that God had already decided all about my life. I also believed that I was free to decide about my life. I believe differently now.

I now believe that I am predestined, in this life, to be God's person. God has chosen me to belong to God. God has equipped me to be one of God's children. I believe that I cannot escape that reality. I believe, further, that God has created me with the capacity to make decisions, and that I have no freedom not to make decisions. I wasn't free to decide about my life. I had to decide – one way or another.

All my life, I've had to decide. Did I make the right decisions? I do not know. I decided, and the course of my life was set.

From the beginning, God chooses me to be God's person in the world. I don't have a choice about that. From the beginning, I choose how I go about being God's person in the world. One option is to refuse to function as if I am God's person in the world. But I am still God's person, even as my child is still my child, no matter what choices she/he makes about her/his life.

As it turns out, this writing makes the Doctrine of Predestination clearer to me. I guess that means I have succeeded in my endeavor.