

Watch Your Step! One Christian's Journey through Predestination

Predestination. Disagreements abound over this subject! Just the word strikes fear and disgust in the hearts of many Christians. Yet others seem to find endless delight in the idea that God has predestined those who are his people. So why am I venturing into such perilous territory?

I've decided to put down my thoughts on this subject for three reasons. First, the Bible does use the word *predestine* on more than one occasion. If Christians want to be true to God's Word and have their understanding of God and his actions shaped by the Bible's teaching, they must sooner or later deal with this difficult subject. Second, I am frequently asked about my thoughts on predestination, but rarely do I have enough time to talk to any one individual about all of the dimensions of the topic. This paper is my attempt as a pastor to summarize my thoughts briefly but adequately. Third, I have wondered about predestination ever since I was first confronted with it as a young believer in Christ. Here is my personal journey toward understanding what the Bible teaches about predestination.

An Invitation

If you would like to join me on this journey, I welcome your companionship. But perhaps we need to come to an agreement before we start down the road. My desire is to increase in my understanding of God's truth, to grow in wonder at God's love, and to be renewed in my walk with God's Son. I'm not interested in quarreling over words or engaging in long and bitter arguments. If you think that we might get caught up in those kinds of things along the way, then maybe it would be better for us not even to start the journey together. But if you want to explore this subject with me and learn where my study has taken me, then please feel free to come along. I realize that at the end of the journey you and I might come to different conclusions, but we will, at least, part as friends and sincerely wish God's rich blessing on each other.

You and I are, of course, not the first people to travel this road. Many who are wiser have gone before us. We should be open to learning from their study and experience even if we don't necessarily follow their path or arrive at precisely the same theological destination. You should know in advance that in this paper I often rely upon the insights of those who have gone before us. I even quote some of them. Little if anything that you find here will be brand new. But I am not going to mention the names of those earlier travelers. Even to mention their names or the schools of thought they represent can provoke misunderstanding and anger. So let's allow those earlier travelers to remain anonymous. After all, it is their ideas and conclusions that are most important. Whoever they are and whatever theological name they might be called is secondary. The issue we need to face is whether they have fully grasped the complete teaching of God's Word.

Welcome to Predestination!

The first time that I can remember ever thinking about this subject was in my junior year in high school. In an English class we were learning about the Puritans and how they believed that God had predestined them to be saved and how that affected the way that they approached life. Our teacher tried to explain it as best he could, but it didn't make any sense to me. And, to tell you the truth, I didn't worry about it a great deal either. The Puritans were long gone, and all I wanted to do was pass the test anyway.

But that summer I became a Christian. I trusted in Jesus as my Lord, and I started to grow in my knowledge of the Bible and in my faith in Christ. A couple of years after my conversion I was in college, and I was invited by some Christian friends to go and listen to some seminary students who were visiting the campus. So I went along, and I heard these students talking about predestination. And to my utter amazement they believed in it! They believed that God had chosen who would become Christians and who would not. Not only that but they were saying that believing in divine election was really important for a healthy Christian life. I walked away from that meeting amazed to think that any Christian really believed that. I was also mad—mad at those seminary students and mad at my friends who said that they believed in predestination too. I couldn't believe it. I knew that I was not a puppet in God's hands! I had made a decision to trust in Christ! God hadn't forced me to do that. I had made a choice!

That was decades ago, and I have thought about the subject of predestination a lot since then. I've been forced to do so because the Bible does have some things to say on the subject. So let's get started and see what God's Word teaches.

Three Questions

Question #1: Do Humans Make Choices?

On a subject like predestination the student of the Bible could start in several different places. I've observed that with this subject the starting place often determines the ultimate destination. One aspect of the Bible's teaching is presented so forcefully that other teaching in the Scriptures then gets neglected. So we need to be careful. Nevertheless, we have to start some place.

What does the Bible teach about human choice? That was the issue that caught my attention when I heard those seminary students talking about predestination. Does the Bible teach that human beings make actual choices about God?

When God calls upon Abraham, the father of all who believe (Rom 4:11), to sacrifice his son Isaac, he is calling on Abraham to make a choice. After he sees Abraham's willingness to obey regardless of the cost, God stops Abraham from carrying out the sacrifice.

¹² "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." (Gen. 22:12)

Abraham's experience is just one example of God testing his people to see what choices they will make.

During the exodus from Egypt, God gives instructions to the Israelites to see whether they will obey.

⁴ Then the LORD said to Moses, “I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions.” (Exod. 16:4)

Consider the instruction that Joshua gives to the Israelites when he renews the covenant with them:

¹⁴ “Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.
¹⁵ But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” (Josh. 24:14-15)

The prophet Isaiah issues a passionate plea to the people of his day to make the right choices about obeying God:

¹⁹ “If you are willing and obedient,
you will eat the best from the land;
²⁰ but if you resist and rebel,
you will be devoured by the sword.” (Is. 1:19-20)

These and other verses in the Old Testament show that God gives people the opportunity to make choices. He tests them to see if they will obey, and he holds them responsible for the choices that they make.

We find the same thing in the New Testament. At the end of his earthly ministry Jesus laments the choices that the Jews have made and highlights the sad significance of their choices.

³⁷ “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.” (Matt. 23:37)

On the day of Pentecost, Peter urges the people to make the right choice in response to what he has told them about God’s Messiah.

³⁸ Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.” (Acts 2:38a)

Later in Acts we read of the apostle Paul’s missionary work and the approach that he uses with people in order to convince them to trust in Christ. He appeals to their reason and tries to persuade them to make a decision.

² As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. (Acts 17:2-3a)

⁴ Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. (Acts 18:4)

In his letter to the Romans Paul indicates that God calls upon people to make choices about Jesus Christ.

⁹ If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. . . . ¹¹ As Scripture says, “Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.” (Rom. 10:9,11)

These and so many other verses underline the fact that humans do make choices about God (2 Chron. 32:31; Jer. 27;13; Ezek. 18:30-32; 33:11; John 3:36; 7:17; Acts 7:51). Those choices are significant, and God holds us responsible for them.

The Bible’s teaching about human choice is often referred to as “free will.” That phrase expresses the idea, but I question whether it is the best term to use. Trying to define human freedom is often trickier than it first appears. Do we really have a will that is totally free? Doesn’t the Bible teach that sin makes us its slaves?

³⁴ Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.” (John 8:34)

¹⁴ We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. (Rom. 7:14.)

Human beings by themselves cannot escape from the power of sin; therefore, “free will” does not accurately convey the teaching of the Bible.

As we have seen, however, God’s Word teaches that we do make choices. Some have suggested that we use the phrase, “free agency.” I would suggest that we avoid the word *free* entirely and speak of “genuine choice” instead. The Bible teaches that sinful human beings do make genuine choices about God.

Question #2: Does God Make Choices?

What about God? Does he make choices too? More specifically, does the Bible teach that God chooses those who will be his people?

Let’s start by looking at the general idea of God’s rule over the world. The Bible provides plenty of evidence for believing that nothing happens on this earth outside of God’s direction.

³³ The lot is cast into the lap,
but its every decision is from the LORD. (Prov. 16:33)

In 1 and 2 Kings we read of events that take place under God's direction. King Rehoboam chooses to listen to the advice of his young friends instead of the advice of the elders. The writer of Kings comments:

¹⁵ So the king did not listen to the people, for this turn of events was from the LORD, to fulfill the word the LORD had spoken to Jeroboam son of Nebat through Ahijah the Shilonite. (1 Kgs. 12:15)

Even the decisions of pagan rulers and the maneuvers of foreign armies are under God's command.

³⁷ In those days the LORD began to send Rezin king of Aram and Pekah son of Remaliah against Judah. (2 Kgs. 15:37)

² The LORD sent Babylonian, Aramean, Moabite and Ammonite raiders against him to destroy Judah, in accordance with the word of the LORD proclaimed by his servants the prophets. (2 Kgs. 24:2)

Psalms 105 summarizes the picture that we are given in the Old Testament about how God rules his own people and even his people's enemies.

²⁴ The LORD made his people very fruitful;
he made them too numerous for their foes,
²⁵ whose hearts he turned to hate his people,
to conspire against his servants. (Ps. 105:24-25)

The New Testament provides a similar picture. In Revelation we're told about the beast who opposes God's people. His anger is fierce, but his capabilities are "given" to him; they do not arise simply from his own power.

⁷ [The beast] was given power to make war against God's people and to conquer them. And it was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. (Rev. 13:7)

God rules! God does make choices about what will happen on this earth. That is the teaching of both the Old and New Testaments. But does that rule and direction of God include choosing those who are his people?

In the Old Testament God chooses Abraham to be the father of his people. The account in Genesis 12 where God establishes his covenant with Abraham and his descendants provides no evidence that he did so on the basis of some noteworthy characteristic within Abraham. It was God's choice pure and simple.

Before entering the Promise Land, Moses speaks to the Israelites and emphasizes the reason that God chose the Israelites as his people. It had nothing to do with their numbers or their righteousness.

⁶ . . . The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

⁷ The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. ⁸ But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deut. 7:6b-8)

⁴ After the LORD your God has driven them out before you, do not say to yourself, "The LORD has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness." . . . ⁵ It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; . . . ⁶ Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people. (Deut. 9:4a, 5a, 6)

Psalms 33:12 states in brief form the Old Testament evidence for God's choice of the Israelites.

¹² Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD,
the people he chose for his inheritance.

This Old Testament evidence, of course, does not entirely settle the question for us. God's choice of Abraham and his family is not an end in itself; it has a purpose that goes beyond their welfare. At the first announcement of God's purpose for Abraham and his descendants, God states that his ultimate purpose is to make his goodness and love a reality not just for Abraham's family but also for those outside of Abraham's family. ". . . all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Gen. 12:3b). The question remains whether God chooses those who will experience the blessing that God brings to earth through Abraham.

Even a quick reading of the New Testament leads to important discoveries on this subject. For example, both Paul and Peter refer to Christians as "the elect."

¹⁰ Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. (2 Tim. 2:10)

¹ Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ to further the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness . . . (Titus 1:1)

¹ Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,
To God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia . . . (1 Peter 1:1)

The term itself is not difficult to understand. Today we hold elections to choose our government officials. An election is nothing more than an officially sanctioned opportunity to choose. Those who get the most votes are elected. "The elect" is just another way of saying "the chosen." The term in the New Testament is shorthand for "those who are chosen." Who does the choosing? At first reading it naturally seems that it is God who is doing the choosing, but let's examine that issue more carefully to see if that is true.

In the New Testament we do find verses that teach about God's choice of believers in Christ. In John's Gospel, Jesus teaches about those who become his followers.

³⁷ "All whom the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. (John 6:37-39)

" . . . ⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day. . . ." (John 6:44)

⁶⁵ He went on to say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them." (John 6:65; see also John 17:2, 6, 9)

In the book of Acts the writer Luke uses an intriguing expression to describe those who became Christians in the city of Pisidian Antioch.

⁴⁸ When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and *all who were appointed for eternal life* believed. (Acts 13:48 emphasis added)

Paul's letter to the Ephesians begins with a long section of praise to God for the way that he has chosen his people.

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will . . .

¹¹ In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will . . . (Eph. 1:3-5, 11)

Some other verses often cited in connection to the theme of God's choice of his people are found in Romans 8.

²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. (Rom 8:29-30)

These verses spell out how people come to Christ and receive justification or forgiveness for their sins and glorification or admission into heaven. God predestines them to receive salvation. Then he calls them to himself. Then he justifies them and pronounces them innocent through Christ. Finally, he glorifies them and removes every trace of sin as they enter into heaven. The logic of the verse is straightforward. The only ones who are forgiven and accepted into heaven

are those whom God has first predestined. In other words, salvation is entirely a matter of God's choice.

Of course, that interpretation skips over one key phrase. Verse 29 talks about "those God foreknew." What does "foreknow" mean? Some say that it is obvious that foreknowledge describes something that God knows about before it actually takes place. God knows beforehand who will and who will not choose to trust in Christ. God has a plan for those whom he knows will choose Jesus. Based on his foreknowledge of their decisions, he predestines them and calls them and justifies them and glorifies them. Therefore, Romans 8:29-30 does not describe God as acting alone; it actually shows how God powerfully and effectively ratifies the choices that people make about Jesus.

Debates over the precise meaning of foreknowledge can become extremely emotional and alienating. The question has to be settled by a careful study of how the term is used in the Bible.

In Semitic thought, "to know" a person carries overtones of intimacy. A husband "knows" his wife in the sense of having sexual intercourse with her. "Knowing" is not a matter of mere mental information but of significant interpersonal action.

In the Old Testament "know" sometimes carries the idea of God making a loving covenant with his people.

¹⁹ "For I have chosen [Hebrew *known*] him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." (Gen. 18:19)

⁵ "Before I formed you in the womb I knew [NIV and TNIV margin: *chose*] you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." (Jer. 1:5)

² "You only have I chosen [Hebrew *known*] of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins." (Amos 3:2)

We should note further that in Romans 8:29, Paul indicates that God foreknows people, not that he foreknows something about them. Paul uses the same term in the same way later in Romans 11:2. "God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew." God foreknows his people, not their faith.

My study of how the Bible describes foreknowledge leads me to conclude that "foreknow" is nearly a synonym for "love." It refers to particular interest, delight, affection, and action in regard to a person. The passage is another piece of evidence for God's choice of those who are his people.

Questions still remain. For example, does God choose his people or does he choose the individuals who make up his people? We could maintain that God chooses what he will do for his people as a whole through his Son Jesus but that becoming a member of God's people is dependent on an individual's decision about Jesus Christ. To put it simply, do election and predestination have a corporate or individual meaning?

The best answer to that question is: Both! “The elect” can refer to all Christians, but the Bible also refers to individuals as chosen by God. We find both corporate and individual aspects addressed in John 6.

³⁷ All [referring to the elect corporately] the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. . . . ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none [no individual] of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. (John 6:37, 39)

In John 6 we find both plural and singular expressions. God chooses his people as a whole and chooses the individuals who make up his people.

Some people suggest that the New Testament emphasis is on being chosen “in Christ.” After all, Paul writes to the Ephesians 1:4, “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.” Could it be that God chose to bless people “in Christ” and all those who then choose Christ become part of God’s elect? Careful examination of the verse in Ephesians, however, shows that such an interpretation is reading a foreign meaning into the text. Ephesians 1:4 says that “he chose us in him.” The direct object of the verb, “chose,” is “us.” Furthermore, 2 Thessalonians 2:13 says much the same thing as Ephesians 1:4 but with no mention of “in Christ.”

¹³ But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.

In spite of what we have seen so far, some people may want to object strongly: “If God elects or predestines those who are to be his people, then it cannot be said that God truly loves all humans! The idea of election destroys the Bible’s teaching about God’s love for the whole world!”

That is a weighty objection, but it is not one that should be accepted without careful examination. Distinctions within human practices of love should prepare us for the idea that there might be distinguishable elements within the love of God. We recognize the difference between love for parents, love for children, and love for a spouse. In fact, we insist that they be different; the sexual dimension of married love must not be part of a parent's love for children! Could there also be distinct dimensions to divine love?

The New Testament’s teaching about God’s love is not simplistic. It teaches at least five different aspects of God’s love.

1. *God’s Father-Son love:* The unique love between the persons of the Trinity that is impossible for humans to comprehend because it is not affected in any way by sin (John 3:35; 5:20).
2. *God’s providential love:* The care that God shows for all of his creation (Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:17).
3. *God’s saving love:* The yearning, longing, and pleading call of God to sinful creatures to repent and trust in Christ (John 3:16).
4. *God’s covenantal love:* The unearned and unchanging love of God for his elect (Eph. 5:25; Col 3:12).

5. *God's conditional love*: The continuing experience of God's love that depends upon his people's obedience (John 15:9-11; Jude 21).

Drawing such distinctions between the various dimensions of God's love is not only true to the Bible's teaching. It allows us to embrace God's covenantal love for the elect without in any way detracting from God's saving love, which embraces all of his creatures.

Our examination of the Bible's teaching about election and predestination has been detailed and perhaps tedious. To do justice to the New Testament teaching has required us to do some in-depth investigation. Does God make choices? Does he actually choose those who will become his people? Over the years my study of this subject has led me to a conclusion that I did not expect when I was a young Christian. Election by God is a teaching of Scripture that we must adhere to as firmly as the Biblical teaching that humans make genuine choices.

Question #3: Can Humans Understand Human Choice and Divine Election?

But how can that be? How can the Bible teach two opposite things? How can the Bible say that God chooses his people and that his people choose him? It has to be one way or the other. It can't be both ways!

Those questions lead to a third and crucial element in our study. One of the amazing things about the Bible is that it gives examples that demonstrate that humans make genuine choices *and* that God directs those choices.

Consider the well-known story of Joseph in the book of Genesis. His brothers make a sinful choice to sell him into slavery. God did not force them to make that choice. They are responsible for it. Yet God was somehow involved in what they decided to do to their brother. When Joseph reveals his true identity to his brothers, he tells them without any hesitation about God's role.

"I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! ⁵ And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. ⁶ For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. ⁷ But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

⁸ "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God." (Gen. 45:4b-8a)

That is a remarkable statement. Joseph says twice that his brothers did sell him into slavery, but then he also says three times that God sent him to Egypt.

In Genesis 50 the lesson is repeated. After their father Jacob dies, the brothers are worried that Joseph will take revenge on them. Joseph assures them that they have no reason to worry.

¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? ²⁰ You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." (Gen. 50:19-20)

In the New Testament we find Jesus teaching his disciples with words that stress both the Father's choice of his people *and* the people's choice to accept his invitation.

²⁷ “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

²⁸ “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matt. 11:27-29)

The manner in which those two teachings are placed next to each other boggles the mind. How can Jesus state so boldly that God chooses those to whom he will reveal his Son and then immediately afterward give an open invitation for people to come to him?

As astounding as those examples are, the teaching of the apostles in the book of Acts is even more shocking. On the day of Pentecost, Peter addresses the crowd.

²² “People of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. ²³ This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.” (Acts 2:22-23)

Notice how Peter holds the people responsible for Jesus' crucifixion. “. . . you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.” The people are responsible and culpable for Jesus' unjust execution. But Peter also says that the choices that were made by the people came about “by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge.” Amazing! It's not either human responsibility or divine choice. It's both!

Later in Acts we find a prayer in which the Christians led by Peter and John make an equally astounding statement about Jesus' crucifixion.

²⁷ “Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. ²⁸ They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.” (Acts 4:27-28)

In this passage we notice the same unsettling combination of human responsibility and divine direction. They acknowledge that Herod and Pilate conspired against Jesus, but they also readily affirm that those two men could only do “what [God's] power and will had decided beforehand should happen.” Incredible!

Joseph and Jesus and the apostles show no hesitation in simultaneously affirming both human choice and divine rule. How can they so boldly teach such opposing ideas? What do they know that we apparently don't?

Could it be that they can hold on to beliefs that seem to contradict each other because they realize that God is so much greater than their ability to understand him? Could it be that the problem is our pride? We assume and insist that we must be able to understand how God works. We demand that God do nothing that we cannot comprehend and explain. Perhaps we need a healthy dose of humility before God!

Think of Job's experience in the Old Testament. All the way up to chapter 38 Job asks for and demands an explanation from God for the suffering that he has had to endure. Finally God responds.

¹ Then the LORD spoke to Job out of the storm. He said:

² “Who is this that obscures my plans
with words without knowledge?

³ Prepare to defend yourself;
I will question you,
and you shall answer me.

⁴ Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?
Tell me, if you understand.” (Job 38:1-4)

On and on God goes. His questions continue without a break. Finally Job squeaks out a feeble response.

³ Then Job answered the LORD:

⁴ “I am unworthy—how can I reply to you?
I put my hand over my mouth.

⁵ I spoke once, but I have no answer—
twice, but I will say no more.” (Job 40:3-5)

Job has learned his lesson. But God does not stop. The interrogation continues for two more chapters. Then Job is allowed to speak to God again.

¹ Then Job replied to the LORD:

² “I know that you can do all things;
no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

³ You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?’
Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me to know.

⁴ You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak;
I will question you,
and you shall answer me.’

⁵ My ears had heard of you
but now my eyes have seen you.

⁶ Therefore I despise myself
and repent in dust and ashes.” (Job 42:1-6)

God's interrogation of Job is a powerful reminder of the need for humility before the living God. God does explain many things to us in his Word. Perhaps we have gradually learned to take God's revelation for granted and have slipped into thinking that we have a right to demand an explanation from God. If so, Job's experience provides a needed correction to our

pride. We have no right to demand any explanation from God for the way that he works in his world.

In chapters 9 through 12 of his letter to the Romans the apostle Paul discusses the way that God has worked with the nation of Israel. He discusses God's election of Israel and also the Jews' refusal to respond to God's grace. Paul concludes his lengthy discussion with an expression of awe at the way that God works to accomplish his purposes. He gladly acknowledges that God's ways are beyond his ability to understand fully.

³³ Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!

³⁴ "Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?"

³⁵ "Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay them?"

³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things.

To him be the glory forever! Amen. (Rom. 11:33-36)

Paul's final statement about election and predestination is nothing but a worshipful confession of human inadequacy. The ways that God accomplishes his purposes are beyond the human ability to comprehend!

When we study this subject, we end up not smugly asserting that we now understand. Rather, we end up on our knees humbly confessing how puny our finite human brains are and how conceited we have been to think that we might be able to understand and explain all that God does!

The word that must be introduced into our vocabulary at this point is *mystery*. A theological mystery is something that the Bible assures us is true even though we cannot grasp how it can be true. The Bible teaches us that human beings make genuine choices. The Bible also teaches us that God elects or chooses those who become his people. To our human minds those two truths contradict each other! But the Bible does teach both of them to be true. How they can fit together is beyond our ability to comprehend. It is a mystery!

This may be hard for us to swallow. It may even sound at first like an excuse to avoid investigating a difficult subject. But it shouldn't come as a complete surprise to us. Aren't there other mysteries in the Bible that we have grown to accept? The most common one is the mystery of Jesus Christ himself. The Bible teaches that he is both fully human and fully God. But who can take such a teaching in and fully digest it? It is truly beyond us, and it will remain so not just during our time on this earth but also throughout eternity in heaven.

The relationship between genuine human choice and election by God is also a mystery. Should that really surprise us? Who do we think that we are talking about? The living God! God cannot be reduced to a simple formula. As one person has suggested, we are, so to speak, gazing at the sun, whose brightness makes it impossible for us to see fully. Or, as another person put it: "Let us not be ashamed to be ignorant in a matter in which ignorance is learning." God is so much more than we can ever take in!

Would we really want it to be otherwise? Would we want God to be so limited that he could do nothing more than what our minds can comprehend? Let us gladly admit our ignorance! Let us hold on without any hesitation to both sides of the mystery. Humans do make genuine choices, and God does choose those who become his children.

Where Does This Leave Us?

So where does the element of mystery lead us? To some it may seem as if we are more lost and confused than ever. We seemed to be making progress in understanding the Bible's teaching, but then we got sidetracked with the suggestion that we should somehow rest content with two things that stand in contradiction to each other. Where do we go now?

As with any journey there is a time to stop and look back over the territory that has already been covered. Instead of immediately forging ahead, we need to slow down, pause, and then move forward with caution. In fact, some who have traveled this road before urge us to do that very thing:

The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care . . .

. . . when they inquire into predestination, let them remember that they are penetrating into the recesses of the divine wisdom, where he who rushes forward securely and confidently instead of satisfying his curiosity will enter an inextricable labyrinth.

We need to handle these truths with care. One person suggested, "Let a man go to the grammar school of faith and repentance, before he goes to the university of election and predestination."

Another compared predestination to a lump of sugar in a cup of tea. "I do not give it alone, and whole; but mixed and diluted." In other words, predestination was part of this person's teaching, but it was not presented as if it stood alone. It flavored the gospel message but not in such a way as to prevent the appetizing aromas of the gospel's tea from being enjoyed and savored.

Yet another has suggested that we think of God's truth as a display in a store window. What do we place in the center of display? Do we place the teaching of predestination in the center and the invitation to trust in Christ in the background? Or should we present the offer to rely upon Christ for salvation as the centerpiece of the display with predestination in the background as something that explains and highlights the good news of Jesus? Both truths deserve a place in the window, but it takes wisdom to know which one should be in the forefront.

This is not an easy task! Our tendency is to emphasize one truth at the expense of another. How many of us at one time or another have taken a partial truth and made it into the whole truth? By doing so we have actually ended up distorting God's truth! It cannot be stated strongly enough that both human responsibility and divine election must be held on to with equal tenacity. Human beings do make choices; they are responsible for the choices that they make! God does elect those who are to be his people; no one becomes a Christian simply by his or her own choice! As much as those truths may seem to contradict each other, we must not sacrifice either one. God can do things that we cannot understand! We must not succumb to the temptation to tame or domesticate God.

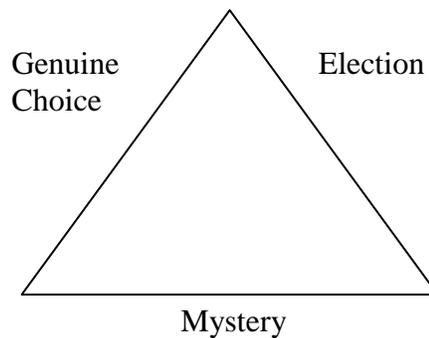
Those who have traveled this road before us have often tried to explain the mysterious relationship between human choice and divine election with various illustrations. One Christian was asked how he reconciled human choice and divine election. He replied, "I wouldn't try. I

never reconcile friends.” Human choice and divine election are not fierce enemies. They’re friends!

Here’s another illustration. Picture a dime. It is one coin, but it has two sides. One is heads and one is tails. When you look at the heads side, you can’t see the tails side. When you look at the tails side, you can’t see the heads side. But even when you can’t see the heads side, you still know that it’s there. And when you can’t see the tails side, you still know that it is there. Suppose that you try to see both sides at the same time. You can move your head back and forth quickly and try to see both sides. Or you can flip the coin and try to see both sides. But no matter what you do, you can’t see both sides of the dime at the same time. Why? Because you don’t have the ability to do that!

That’s the way that it is with divine election and human choice. They are two sides to the same coin. You can only see one side of the coin at a time, but you know that the other side is there. The Bible teaches human responsibility. It teaches that we make choices about God, and those choices are of eternal significance. The Bible also teaches divine sovereignty. God makes choices. The problem comes when we try to see both sides at the same time. We can’t do it. Why? Because our brains just aren’t big enough to do that. Should that surprise us? If we can’t see both sides of something as small as a dime, should we be surprised that we can’t see both sides of how an infinite God works in his creation?

Consider another possible illustration. Think of the three elements that we’ve learned from the Bible as three sides of an equilateral triangle.



In order to have the triangle, all three sides are necessary. If one side is missing, there is obviously no triangle. In order to have an equilateral triangle, the three sides must also be of equal length.

That’s the same way that it is with the Bible’s teaching on this subject. In order to grasp the totality of what God’s Word teaches, we must stress the choices that human beings make and the choices that God makes. But those two teachings are not sufficient. The essential element that unites them is the teaching on mystery. Three sides to the triangle are necessary because the Bible teaches three crucial truths related to the subject. Furthermore, each of those three truths are equally important. That’s why the diagram needs to be an equilateral triangle. We must not overlook the mystery. God’s ways are beyond our ability to figure out, and we must never forget that. Whether we like it or not, we must be willing to admit our ignorance.

Where Do We Go From Here?

We have covered a lot of ground in our journey, but we have not yet arrived at our destination. It is not enough to have a mental grasp of the three sides of the triangle. What do these teachings do for us? What effect should they have on our lives? Or, to put it another way, how do we live with these teachings?

At this stage in our travel, we must honestly admit that the doctrine of predestination has caused serious trouble. Teaching on predestination can come across as hard and cold. It can be presented in a way that seems to show a lack of love for humans and a lack of enthusiasm for evangelism.

Of course, any teaching from the Bible can be misunderstood and misused. Any teaching! Even that very basic and wonderful teaching about God's love can be terribly misused. We tell people that God loves them and accepts them in Christ the way that they are. They don't have to become good to be accepted by God in Christ. All they have to do is believe in Christ, and God accepts them the way they are.

People today frequently use a shorthand expression to convey that idea: God loves people "unconditionally." That is one of the pet phrases of our day. But what does "unconditional love" mean? I've heard people say, "Why should I make any changes in what I believe or in the way that I live? God loves me unconditionally. God loves me whether I believe in Jesus or not. So what if I lie, cheat, or steal? It doesn't make any difference to God. He loves me no matter what I do! He loves me unconditionally."

"Wait a minute," you say. "That's not exactly what we mean." That's exactly the point! Any teaching from God's Word can be misused—even the teaching about God's love. If the doctrine of divine love can be misunderstood and misused, who knows what kind of mischief can come from the doctrine of divine election?

When we look at what the Bible has to say on this subject, we need to be careful not to overemphasize what the Bible hardly touches on or wander down paths that the New Testament writers do not travel. We need to look at what the New Testament does with predestination. What conclusions does it draw?

For example, does the New Testament say that God chooses some people to go to hell? Even if that might be a conclusion that some people draw from the Bible's teaching about predestination, is it something that the Word of God emphasizes? We should keep in mind that the Bible is primarily a revelation of how God works to save undeserving rebels. It has far more to say about those going to heaven than those going to hell. So that is where we need to put our emphasis too.

It would be hard to overemphasize the importance of this point. We must study how the inspired Word of God uses the truths that it teaches. In my journey through the land of predestination this insight proved to be a fork in the road. People often take the New Testament's teaching about predestination and draw all kinds of conclusions from it. For example, they may conclude that there is no reason to share the good news of Jesus Christ with people if their eternal destiny has already been determined.

We need to be careful before we allow ourselves to follow those side trails. We need to be sure to stick with the main theme and direction that we find in God's Word. So here is the question that needs to be repeatedly asked: How does the New Testament use this teaching that God chose us and predestined us?

Assurance

I suggest that the New Testament has three purposes behind its teaching on election. The first purpose is assurance. The Bible teaches us about predestination because God wants to assure his children of their relationship to him.

If you are a believer in Jesus, God wants you to be assured of your salvation and to rest securely in his love. He gives you that assurance by telling you that God has taken the initiative in bringing you to himself. It's not just that he provided Christ for you as the sacrifice for your sins—as wonderful as that is. His love for you is even greater than that. He made sure that you came to that point where you actually trusted in Jesus.

When did God make that choice? Was it a last minute choice on his part? God made that choice “before the creation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). God wanted you to experience his love so badly that he had your salvation planned before the world was even created.

One person has explained it this way: God does not just throw out a life preserver to the person who is drowning and tell that person to grab it. Instead he jumps into the water, swims to the person, grabs hold of that individual, and then drags him or her to shore.

Think about it in terms of your own Christian experience. Just why are you a Christian? What is the ultimate reason that you believe in Jesus?

I think about my own Christian experience. I remember very well what happened when I was sixteen years old. I was sitting in a basement room in a building on the southwest corner of 16th and Meridian Street in Indianapolis taking a class on the Bible. I had just looked up Romans 10:9, and I bowed my head and did what that verse said. I told God that I believed that Jesus is Lord and that God had raised him from the dead. I told God that because I decided to tell God that. Nobody made me say it. I didn't hear any voice from God saying, “Hey, kid, I'm going to make you say what I want you to say.” No, I decided to trust in Jesus.

That was years ago. Now I ask myself what or who brought me to that point where I wanted to trust in Christ? The very fact that I was taking a course on the Bible was incredible. I had never shown any interest in the Bible before. I had refused to join the church after going through confirmation class. I had no hesitancy in saying that I wasn't a Christian. But there I was spending every night for two weeks at the beginning of summer vacation studying the Bible. There I was bowing my head and telling Jesus that I wanted him to be the Master of my life. How did I ever get to that point? I look back on that and with every passing year I realize more and more that God himself brought me to that point. There is no other explanation. Yes, I made a decision that night. I know that I did. But I also know that in some way—in some way that words cannot adequately explain—that I only made that decision because God had first worked powerfully within me. I owe my conversion entirely to him. I chose Christ because God had chosen me.

Whether you like that exact terminology or not, doesn't that describe your Christian experience too? Can any of us who are believers in Jesus say that we simply examined the evidence for God and because we were so smart and discerning that we then decided to trust in Jesus? Would any of us dare say that? Don't we owe everything to God?

God saved us. That's the bottom line. God saved us. The reason that we as Christians can look to eternity with assurance and face the ups and downs of this life with confidence is not because we have faith in God. There's something more at work. God has claimed us as his own.

He has saved us, and we rest in him. Our assurance for the future comes entirely from what he has done for us.

“But,” someone might say, “What about the passages of the New Testament that warn Christians from falling away from God?” The Bible certainly does contain those kinds of warnings.

⁴ It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age ⁶ and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. ⁷ Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. ⁸ But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned. (Heb. 6:4-8)

²⁶ If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, ²⁷ but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. ²⁸ Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. ²⁹ How much more severely do you think those deserve to be punished who have trampled the Son of God underfoot, who have treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who have insulted the Spirit of grace? ³⁰ For we know him who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” and again, “The Lord will judge his people.” ³¹ It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Heb. 10:26-31)

Those are strong warnings, and they must be taken seriously. But first we need to be sure that we understand what they are saying. After all, these passages are difficult to explain no matter what viewpoint one adopts.

The warning passages in Hebrews are usually interpreted in isolation from each other and as precise theological descriptions of individual Christians. So Christians are the people who “have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age.” It might be better and more fruitful to step back and look at these descriptions in terms of the whole letter.

Hebrews is written to a group of Christians who are very familiar with the Old Testament story of the Israelites in the wilderness after their escape from Egypt. The writer is giving strong but general warnings about perseverance by providing general allusions to the wilderness experience. His purpose is to urge his readers to remain true to God.

In other words, we should approach those strong warnings remembering that Hebrews is not a textbook on systematic theology. The writer himself describes his work as a “word of exhortation” (Heb. 13:22). That provides us with a significant clue. We need to understand the warnings with a sensitivity to the situation and people being addressed. The writer is speaking to people facing extraordinary pressure not people comfortably sitting in a classroom studying systematic theology. He uses the strongest language he can muster in order to urge them to stay true to their Master.

Listen to someone who has taken the warnings in Hebrews seriously and has summarized their message well.

Our friend puts away from us a cup of arsenic; he does not want us to drink it, but he says, "If you drink it, it will kill you." Does he suppose for a moment that we should drink it? No; he tells us the consequences, and he is sure we will not do it. So God says, "My child, if you fall over this precipice you will be dashed to pieces." What does the child do? He says, "Father, keep me; hold thou me up, and I shall be safe." It leads the believer to greater dependence on God, to a holy fear and caution, because he knows that if he were to fall away he could not be renewed, and he stands far away from that great gulf, because he knows that if he were to fall into it there would be no salvation for him.

In dealing with other believers we need at times to emphasize human responsibility and at other times to emphasize divine election.

. . . there is a pastoral dimension to the biblical witness on Christian assurance. . . . No one can long serve as a pastor without coming across, say, a young woman who doubts that she is good enough to be forgiven by Christ, an aging man who wonders if he will be transported to glory when he dies, a church member who is having doubts about his salvation and who (it is discovered) is sleeping with his secretary, some nominal believers who display nothing of the promised fruit of the new covenant but who are convinced by the slogan "Once saved, always saved" that they are in no danger, and a gaggle of young people who are unsure of their spiritual status because they have been confronted by those who claim to have the "full gospel." Anyone who applies exactly the same spiritual remedy to these diverse ailments ought to have his license as a spiritual physician immediately rescinded. . . .

In short, the biblical writers offer believers all the assurance they could ever want, grounding such assurance in the character of God, the nature of the new covenant, the finality of election, the love of God, and much more beside. But they never allow such assurance to become a sop for spiritual indifference.

In talking with people about where they stand with God there is both a place for a sharp warning based on the Bible's teaching about genuine human choice and a comforting assurance based upon the Bible's teaching about divine election. It is the wise Christian who knows what to emphasize at what time. God wants us to be spiritually vigilant; he also wants us to rest in his undeserved and unchanging love.

Worship

There is another use of this teaching that follows immediately on the heels of that first one. According to the New Testament's own example, the doctrine of divine election should lead us to worship. Not to speculation and debate! To worship!

As we have already seen, the Bible's teaching on human responsibility and divine election forces us to peer into a mystery that is beyond our ability to figure out. We need to acknowledge that. We need to insist upon it. And we need to let it humble us.

Let us worship God as we meditate on how huge and astounding the living God really is! In some way that is beyond our finite ability to take in, God chooses and we choose. We can't

explain how those two truths fit together, but we know from God’s Word that they are both true. That leads us to worship this God who is so far beyond our mental capacities!

And there is more! To think that God has brought us to himself! To think that God has claimed us for his own! To think that God’s love goes back to “before the creation of the world.” As we revel in the assurance of our salvation in Christ, we cannot help but worship him and praise him for his love!

Look again at what Paul says in his letters to the Ephesians. Instead of minutely examining and explaining the teaching that he gives in these verses, let’s notice what activity he is engaged in.

³ *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶ *to the praise of his glorious grace*, . . .

¹¹ In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, ¹² in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be *for the praise of his glory*. . . . When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—*to the praise of his glory*. (Eph. 1:3-6a, 11-12, 13b-14 emphasis added)

Paul does not primarily intend his words to be a statement for theological speculation. They are an expression of worship. In the space of twelve verses he mentions praise to God four separate times. We’re considering something that is more wonderful than human words can express. Let’s not argue. Let’s worship!

Are you ever amazed that God loves you? Have you ever considered that his love for you is not just a momentary rush of emotion but a firm decision that he made about you “before the creation of the world”? Does it ever leave you speechless that God claimed you “with his eyes wide open”? He knew the very worst about you. He knew everything sinful that you had ever done in the past. He also knew every sinful thing that you would ever do in the future. And he still decided to adopt you into his family! Isn’t that amazing? Do you ever stand back in wonder that God not only claims you as his own but that he delights in calling you his son or daughter? Let’s worship!

Encouragement

There is a third and final use that the New Testament makes of this teaching. The doctrine of divine election provides us with encouragement. “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight” (Eph. 1:4). God didn’t choose us to stick us on some heavenly shelf as trophies of his love. He chose us to live here on earth as “holy and blameless in his sight.” When we learn about what God has done for us in the past—even “before the creation of the world”—it should encourage us to live for him in the future.

God didn’t choose us so that we could become proud. He didn’t choose us so that we can pat ourselves on the back and say what wonderful people we must be for God to have chosen us. God didn’t choose us so that we could compare ourselves to other people either. This doctrine of

election never gives us grounds to say, “We must be better than somebody else. After all, God chose us!” There isn’t anything that comes even close to that idea in the Bible! God didn’t choose us so that we could be lazy either. “I’ve got it made with God, so I can just sit back and do nothing from now on.” That’s not the Bible’s teaching! God reveals this mystery of election in order to encourage us to live for him. Paul is saying, “Here is what God has done for you. Doesn’t that make you want to live for him from now on?”

What about evangelism? To many people the idea of predestination is an obvious discouragement to evangelism. Why tell someone about Christ and urge that person to trust in Jesus if it has already been decided whether that person will be a child of God or not? What is the purpose of evangelism if the future destiny of a person has already been determined?

Once again we need to consider how the Bible itself treats election and evangelism. It is not enough for us to draw our own quick conclusions. Do the New Testament writers understand predestination to be a brake on evangelism? Does divine election slow the apostles from freely offering the gospel? Or could it be that election actually serves as an encouragement to sharing the good news of Jesus Christ?

The apostle Paul’s longest discussion of predestination is found in Romans 9 through 11. It’s worth noting that those chapters also include Paul’s passionate declaration of his desire to see his own people come to faith in Jesus.

¹ I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit—² I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, ⁴ the people of Israel. . . . (Rom. 9:1-4a)

¹ Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. (Rom. 9:10:1)

Evidently Paul’s teaching about election does not dampen his desire or enthusiasm for seeing other Jews come to salvation through Christ.

“But,” someone may ask, “how can we seriously offer the love of God to people if we don’t know that they are genuinely among the elect? Isn’t that offering something to people that may not be theirs to receive? Doesn’t that make us into liars?”

Once again we have to ask whether we find a universal offer of the good news to people in the New Testament? Does the idea of divine election prevent the apostles from speaking of God’s love for all people?

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul uses a fascinating expression. “We have put our hope in the living God, who is *the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe*” (1 Tim. 4:10b emphasis added). In those words we are reminded of something that we saw earlier. The New Testament speaks of God’s love in different ways. In this passage Paul acknowledges God’s saving love for all. Jesus is the “Savior of all people.” God truly yearns and longs for people to repent and turn to Christ. He pleads with his sinful creatures to come to faith in his Son Jesus. But Paul also recognizes that God’s covenantal love is not the possession of all. The experience of God’s unearned and unchanging love in Christ belongs only to “those who believe.”

According to the Bible's own usage, it is not a misrepresentation of New Testament teaching to say that God loves all people. God's yearning and longing and pleading are genuine expressions of his love. So let us proclaim God's saving love without hesitation!

As one evangelist who had a firm belief in predestination said, "Since we know not who are the elect . . . we are to preach promiscuously to all." What a statement! *Promiscuously* and *promiscuity* are words that almost always have a negative overtone to them as in "sexual promiscuity." But this evangelist uses the concept positively. Preach the good news of Jesus promiscuously! Preach the message of salvation with wild abandon!

One episode in the life of Paul shows that predestination is actually an encouragement to evangelism. Acts 18 tells the story of Paul's ministry in the Greek city of Corinth. During his time in the city Paul encounters strong opposition, but God speaks to him and encourages him.

⁹ One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. ¹⁰ For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." ¹¹ So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God. (Acts 18:9-11)

God assures Paul that in spite of the opposition that he is facing, God will bring "his people" to himself. Therefore, there is no reason to give into fear or to succumb to a sense of futility. Instead Paul should rededicate himself to his evangelistic efforts. It may be difficult and it may at times seem pointless, but God assures Paul that he will use Paul's efforts to bring "his people" to faith in Christ. God's choice of "his people" is an incentive to Paul's evangelism, not a deterrent.

God's election of his people actually provides hope for evangelists. Seeking to make disciples of sinners would be hopeless, pointless, and fruitless if God did not open people's eyes and hearts and draw them to himself. The conversion of others does not depend on the brilliance of our evangelistic presentations and certainly not on our manipulation of people's emotions. Rather, it is the Father who draws people to his Son.

However clear and cogent we may be in presenting the gospel, we have no hope of convincing or converting anyone. Can you or I by our earnest talking break the power of Satan over a man's life? No. Can you or I give life to the spiritually dead? No. Can we hope to convince sinners of the truth of the gospel by patient explanation? No. . . . Regarded as a human enterprise, evangelism is a hopeless task. It cannot in principle produce the desired effect. . . .

. . . What is the cure of our disillusionment? First, we must admit that we were silly ever to think that any evangelistic technique, however skilful, could of itself guarantee conversions; second, we must recognize that, because man's heart is impervious to the word of God, it is no cause of surprise if at any time our evangelism fails to result in conversions; third, we must remember that the terms of our calling are that we should be faithful, not that we should be successful; fourth, we must learn to rest all our hopes of fruit in evangelism upon the omnipotent grace of God.

For God does what man cannot do. God works by His Spirit through His Word in the hearts of sinful men to bring them to repentance and faith.

We have the solemn responsibility to tell others of Christ and to urge them to entrust themselves to him, but we should not fall victim to the idea that it is all up to us and our evangelistic strategies. Knowing that conversion is a work of God means that we can joyfully present the good news of Jesus to people without having to pressure them into making some kind of profession of faith. Responsibility? Yes. Pressure? No.

Divine election does provide genuine hope in evangelism. Listen to the testimony of one veteran missionary.

At the beginning of my missionary career I said that if predestination were true I could not be a missionary. Now after 20-some years of struggling with the hardness of the human heart, I say I could never be a missionary *unless I believed in the doctrine of predestination.*

What Do We Call These Ideas?

When it comes to predestination, I have observed that there is an almost irresistible desire for a label. In this paper I have purposely avoided using the two most common labels because I have found them unhelpful and misleading. And why should there only be two possibilities? Must we pigeonhole everybody by attaching a label to them?

But there is still that gnawing desire for a label. So I will offer a new term to describe the position that I have outlined. Here's a brief summary of the paper:

The Bible teaches three important truths:

- **G**enuine human choice
- **E**lection by God
- **M**ystery

The Bible demonstrates three ways to apply these truths:

- **A**ssurance
- **W**orship
- **E**ncouragement

Taking just the first letters of those expressions produces two words. GEM and AWE. Those words can be easily remembered. A beautiful *gem* produces a sense of *awe*. That's what the Bible's teachings on predestination should do to us. Taking them together should produce in us a sense of awe at who God is and what he has done for us in Christ.

Do you want a label? How about GEM-AWEsome-ism?

The End of the Journey

We have come to the end of our journey together. Thank you for joining me and listening to my conclusions. If you don't find them convincing, I'll understand and won't take offence. May you and I continue to investigate what God's Word says on this subject. May God bless us in that ongoing study and in our daily walk with him.

I leave you with the story of two previous travelers through the land of predestination. Let us take their example to heart.

“Sir, I understand that you [and I disagree in our understanding of predestination]; and therefore I suppose we are to draw daggers. But before I consent to begin the combat, with your permission I will ask you a few questions. . . . Pray, Sir, do you feel yourself a depraved creature, so depraved that you would never have thought of turning to God, if God had not first put it into your heart?”

“Yes,” says the veteran, “I do indeed.”

“And do you utterly despair of recommending yourself to God by anything you can do; and look for salvation solely through the blood and righteousness of Christ?”

“Yes, solely through Christ.”

“But, Sir, supposing you were at first saved by Christ, are you not somehow or other to save yourself afterwards by your own works?”

“No, I must be saved by Christ from first to last.”

“Allowing, then, that you were first turned by the grace of God, are you not in some way or other to keep yourself by your own power?”

“No.”

“What, then, are you to be upheld every hour and every moment by God, as much as an infant in its mother’s arms?”

“Yes, altogether.”

“And is all your hope in the grace and mercy of God to preserve you unto His heavenly kingdom?”

“Yes, I have no hope but in Him.”

“Then, Sir, with your leave I will put up my dagger again; for this is all . . . my election . . . : it is in substance all that I hold . . . ; and therefore, if you please, instead of searching out terms and phrases to be a ground of contention between us, we will cordially unite in those things wherein we agree.”

Dr. Frederic M. Martin
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