

Getting the Essentials of Election: Acts 17:22-28

Portions adapted from "Straight Talk About Predestination," Ray Pritchard

The old Presbyterian dies goes to heaven... But instead of the pearly gates, he comes to a fork in the road, and a sign pointing down each path.

One sign says '**Believers in Predestination**' and the other says '**Believers in Free Will**'

Well, the guy's always believed in predestination, so he goes down that road, and eventually he comes to a huge wall and a big door with the word **REDESTINATION** written over the top.

He knocks, and an angel opens the door and says, '*What brings you to my door, mortal?*' And the guy says, 'Well, there were these two signs, and I chose the one that said predestination.'

The angel says, '**You chose it?** You can't choose predestination Bub,' and slams the door.

The old guy's heartbroken. Finally he trudges back to the crossroads and goes down the other road. Eventually he comes to another giant wall and a door that says '**FREE WILL**.' He knocks and another angel opens the door and says, 'Why did you come this way, mortal?' And the guy says, '**I had no choice!**'"

In the history of the Christian church, few doctrines have been so hotly debated and caused so much confusion as the doctrine of **Election**, also known as **predestination**.

Throughout the centuries it has been called "that damnable doctrine of predestination."

While others have called Election the sweetest truth in all of God's Word.

Whole books have been written to prove that it is and others that it is not.

And whoever wants to wander down this theological path will be faced with some thorny questions:

1. If Election is true, what happens to free will?
2. Are we just puppets on a string, doing what God ordained in eternity past?
3. Does God predestine some people to go to heaven?
4. If so, does he also predestine others to go to hell?
5. Why bother with evangelism since whoever is going to be saved will be saved eventually?
6. For that matter, if God predestines some people to hell, how can they be guilty of sin since they are only doing what God predestined them to do?

Admittedly, these are difficult questions. Don't expect me to answer any of them today, and some of them we never will get answered in our lifetime.

However, I do need to assert one fact at the very beginning: The Bible does teach predestination. It's a biblical word, used several times in the New Testament. No one can get around that fact.

Romans 8:29 says that those God foreknew, he "also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son."

Ephesians 1:5 says that God "predestined us to be adopted as his children through Jesus Christ."

Ephesians 1:11 adds that "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."

Since predestination is a biblical concept, we must face this doctrine squarely whether we like it or not. It's in the Bible, therefore we must first accept it and then ask how we should respond to such teaching

I love the answer that Charles Spurgeon gave when someone asked him how he reconciles God's sovereignty and human responsibility:

"I wouldn't try," he replied,
"I never reconcile friends."

And you can find both of these friends, election and choice, predestination and free-will woven throughout the Bible. For example, Romans 9 holding perhaps the strongest language on God's election is then followed by Romans 10 which describes human responsibility. Those chapters are way too heavy for us to deal with today, so we must leave them for another time.

But you can also find Jesus blending election and choice in his teachings (John 6:37): "*All that the Father gives me will come to me, [divine election] and whoever comes to me [human response] I will never drive away.*"

And in Acts 2 (23- 40) you can hear the Apostle Peter applying predestination even to Jesus while at the same time holding those of his day responsible for their part in his death andwhile calling for all to repent, still knowing that God had a hand in who would respond: *this man, [Jesus] handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, [Jesus predestined by God] **you crucified** and killed by the hands of those outside the law [human responsibility] ... [therefore] **'repent,** and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. [Human response] For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the **Lord our God calls to him** [divine election].'*

How do we handle this back and forth between God's predestination and our free-will? We accept both and make sure that **we** have responded to every call from God.

The English preacher, Charles Simeon, who lived during the time when the Calvinist-Arminian controversy was quite bitter, warned his congregation of the dangers of forsaking Scripture in favor of either theological system: "*When I come to a text which speaks of election, I delight myself in the doctrine of election. When the apostles exhort me to repentance and obedience, and indicate my freedom of choice and action, I give myself up to that side of the question*" (Stott, page 278).

We can't understand election and free-will complement each other but we must accept it because this is what the Bible teaches.

I like how author/preacher Ray Pritchard has summarized the whole concept. "**God is in charge of what happens, when it happens, how it happens, why it happens, and even what happens**

after it happens. This is true of all events in every place from the beginning of time. He does this for our good and His glory. He is not the author of sin, yet evil serves His purposes. He does not violate our free will, yet free will serves His purposes.

So let us at least begin with a simple working definition. **Predestination /election** – both words express the idea that God chooses those people who are to be the special objects of his grace and thus to receive eternal salvation.

But let's make it even simpler than that: The word predestination is composed to two parts: "**Pre**" meaning "**before**" and "**destination**" meaning "**point of final arrival.**" To predestine something is to determine beforehand where it will end up.

If I take a package to the post office, I don't tell the people, "Send this wherever you like." They wouldn't know what to do with it. I write on the front, "To Panama City Florida." Thus I have predestined my package to travel from Bedford to Panama City. By writing the address, I have predetermined that however and wherever else it may travel, its final arrival point will be Panama City, Florida, and I have thereby excluded all other possible destinations.

Seen in that light, we can say that predestination means that God chooses those will be saved and determines in advance that their final destination will be heaven.

Now as soon I say this someone is sure to object: "but what about freewill?"

Doesn't everyone get the chance and have the responsibility to choose?

Like most Christians, I have wrestled greatly with this issue over the years. There is no single statement that can fully bring together the different strands regarding God's sovereignty and human responsibility.

But in thinking about it, I recall a scene from the movie "**Analyze This**," where Billy Crystal plays a psychiatrist who against his better judgment takes on a Mafia crime boss (Robert De Niro) who can no longer control his emotions and starts crying at odd moments.

There is a scene when De Niro's top henchman (a guy named Jelly) comes to fetch Billy Crystal at a very inconvenient moment because the boss is having another breakdown. When Billy Crystal says, "**What is this? You think you can call me any time day or night?**" Jelly replies, "You're part of the family now. When the boss needs you, you come." Billy Crystal starts to protest but Jelly cuts him off with, "**It is what it is.**" That simple truth applies perfectly to this idea of election. It really doesn't matter if we like it or not. It is what it is.

Which brings us to our Scripture lessons for the day.

In the Genesis passage, when the twins within her womb were fighting fiercely with each other Rebekah was told that they represented two different struggling nations but that in the end, the elder would serve the younger.

Then as we hear the stories unfold of Esau the hunter verses Jacob his scheming younger twin, we see how their choices lead each far afield. And yet in the end Jacob's choices bring him back home

to be reconciled with his brother and to also inherit the promises of Israel. In that sense the prophecy was fulfilled – the elder did serve the younger

And in the Gospel portion, you hear Jesus, who long ago invited them to “follow him” now telling his Disciples – “you did not choose me, but I chose you.”

So we do see human choice and divine election as “friends” working side by side. Having said all that, we are still left with one major question.

Why and how does God move us and yet still consider us responsible for choosing or not choosing for Him?

For me, Paul’s sermon on Mars Hill gives the best summary & explanation. It tells us about God’s choosing and doing, it also tells us how we should be responding, but more importantly it tells us **why** God is working things this way.

Paul’s first point is that God, having made “***the world and everything in it***” is the **Lord** of Heaven and Earth. The title “Lord” implies not only God’s authority but also His control of the whole program. Which Paul goes on to explain this way:

From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God

And then Paul concludes with “why God did it this way.

[that He] allotted the times of our existence and the boundaries of the places where we would live, so that we would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him —though indeed he is not far from each one of us (Acts 17:26-27).

In other words, God’s acts of election and predestination were designed to steer us “whosoever will,” back home and into fellowship with Himself.

Like Essau and Jacob, like Jesus and his disciples, how our choices respond to God’s choices remains -- a mystery.

Yet we also know (because it is also displayed throughout scripture) that God is good, God loves the whole world, and that God is seeking to save as many of us as possible.

As I share with many a person, who is worried that their loved one may die (or has died) outside of the Christian faith. Genesis 18:25, declares “***Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?***” I take it to mean that God will make no mistakes in his dealings with humanity. It’s not possible that God will somehow get the files mixed up or hit the wrong button and send someone to the wrong destination. The Judge of the all earth will do what is right—not just in the mega-sense but also in dealing with all our loved ones and with each of us individually.

Think about this. God wants you in heaven. He even paid the price of admission—the blood of his Son, Jesus Christ. Salvation is of the Lord. Those who are saved are all saved by the love and grace of God. It is a gift that is given. It is a gift that you must accept

What does it mean? When you came to Christ, you made a decision of your will. You chose him. Predestination simply states, that God chose you first and if he didn't choose you first, you would never have chosen him.

So it is for all of us. Salvation is of the Lord. It is a work of God from beginning to end. Our choice is a free choice, but it is made possible only by God's Spirit enabling us to believe and be saved.

Charles Spurgeon applied this great truth to himself, he said:

- **I believe the doctrine of election,**
- **because I am quite sure that if God had not chosen me I should never have chosen him;**
- **and I am sure he chose me before I was born, or else he never would have chosen me afterwards;**
- **and he must have elected me for reasons unknown to me, for I never could find any reason in myself why he should have looked upon me with special love.**
- **So I am forced to accept that doctrine.**

So what conclusion should you and I draw from all this?

What is the "essential" that we should believe concerning ELECTION?

Simply, You don't need to worry about election or predestination. Just make sure you have responded to Jesus' gracious offer of salvation – and – that you lovingly live and share that invitation with everyone you know - because that is what determines your eternal and everyone else's destiny.

Whosoever will may come" is still the gospel message.

And when we finally get to heaven, we may look back and discover that we were indeed "chosen before the foundation of the world."
