

BRIEF  BOOKS

THE EVERLASTING PURPOSE

Understanding predestination

BROUGHTON KNOX



In just under 50 pages, former Principal of Moore Theological College Broughton Knox provides an extraordinarily clear and encouraging explanation of the Bible's teaching on predestination. He shows the comfort, assurance and blessing that flow from understanding the nature of God, the nature of man, and the means of our salvation in Christ.

Broughton Knox's clear thinking and steadfast commitment to the Scriptures will help you make sense of a topic that just about every Christian struggles to understand—let alone explain to others.

This material was first published as 'God who is rich in mercy', a chapter in Broughton Knox's book The Everlasting God.



THE EVERLASTING PURPOSE

Understanding predestination

BROUGHTON KNOX

The Everlasting Purpose
© Matthias Media 2015

This material was first published as 'God who is rich in mercy',
a chapter in Broughton Knox's book *The Everlasting God*.

Matthias Media
(St Matthias Press Ltd ACN 067 558 365)
Email: info@matthiasmedia.com.au
Internet: www.matthiasmedia.com.au
Please visit our website for current postal and telephone
contact information.

Matthias Media (USA)
Email: sales@matthiasmedia.com
Internet: www.matthiasmedia.com
Please visit our website for current postal and telephone
contact information.

A note on Bible versions

In the course of his lectures and writings, Dr Knox characteristically
quoted from either the King James Version or the Revised Version,
and sometimes in a combination of both. We have retained this
feature.

ISBN 978 1 922206 69 5

All rights reserved. Except as may be permitted by the Copyright Act,
no part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any
means without prior permission from the publisher.

Cover design and typesetting by affiniT Design.

BRIEF  BOOKS

THE EVERLASTING PURPOSE

Understanding predestination

BROUGHTON KNOX



matthiasmedia

*‘The everlasting purpose of God to deliver
those whom he has chosen in Christ’¹*

The subject of predestination is one that often puzzles Christians. The question of how to think about predestination is an important one; it affects our whole attitude to life and salvation and to our trust and joy in God. The doctrine of predestination is simple to state. It is that from eternity God has chosen some for salvation in Christ, but has left others to their own choice of rebellion against him. On some he has mercy, drawing them to Christ; others he has hardened by allowing them to harden themselves, or rather to be hardened and blinded by Satan, whose slaves they have willingly become.

We do not by nature like the doctrine of predestination, for it appears to make us puppets on the

¹ This opening quotation is from the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles, article 17, ‘Of Predestination and Election’.

THE EVERLASTING PURPOSE

one hand, and it appears unfair on the other. Yet it is a doctrine that is amply taught in Holy Scripture. It is based on the nature of God, who is sovereign and merciful; it is based on the nature of men, rebellious and dead in sin; and it is based on the character of salvation, which is a free gift.

The basic concept of the Christian faith is that God is gracious. This is clearly revealed in the Old Testament when God declared his character to the children of Israel in the early days of the desert wanderings: “Yahweh, the God Yahweh, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin”.² God’s tender mercies are over all his works.³ The love of God is the motive for salvation: “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son”.⁴

But an equally important truth to remember (and one that we are much more ready to forget) is that God is Creator of everything, and sovereign Lord over all that he has created. His sovereign

2 Exod 34:6-7

3 Ps 145:9

4 John 3:16

UNDERSTANDING PREDESTINATION

lordship is not only over the impersonal happenings of nature but also over the lives of men and women, who are a part of his creation. His sovereignty in our lives is not exercised in an impersonal way, but through our natures that he himself has made. To think that God has withdrawn from any area and given over his sovereignty would be an unbearable thought. To think that God is unable to remain sovereign, having created men and women with true human natures and human wills, is, of course, absurd. The Bible teaches clearly, and common sense confirms, that God is sovereign over every aspect of his creation, over the great and over the minute, over men and women, their actions, thoughts and wills, and even over evil men and their wills.⁵ He is sovereign over death—he can bring the dead to life by his word as easily as he brought creation into existence out of nothingness in the first place. His sovereignty is not diminished because of man's rebellion against him.

Alongside the goodness of God and the lordship of God, the Bible places the rectitude of God. He

⁵ For more on this see DB Knox, 'God of infinite power, wisdom and goodness', in *The Everlasting God*, Matthias Media, Sydney, 2009, pp. 27-56.

THE EVERLASTING PURPOSE

is upright in his thoughts and actions and he has implanted the same sense of rectitude in our minds and consciences. We approve righteousness and justice, and the Bible is very clear that God approves righteousness and justice. He is the vindicator of the right, and the awarder of rewards and punishments in accordance with desert. How frequently we read in the Bible that God will judge every man according to his works!⁶

It is here that the human problem becomes acute. Our own sense of rectitude and our own conscience tell us that we do things which deserve not reward but punishment. Our future is a fearful expectation of judgement whenever we remember that God is righteous and sovereign, and that he will judge the whole creation in righteousness and truth. God's rectitude will ensure that justice and right are vindicated. Our problem is that in a world where justice will be vindicated we are unjust. The Bible is clear that there is none of us righteous, no not one; we have all turned aside,⁷ we are all under God's condemnation and without power of self recovery.

⁶ For example, Romans 2:6; 2 Timothy 4:14.

⁷ Rom 3:10-12

UNDERSTANDING PREDESTINATION

None of us can be saved unless God saves us. As Jesus said, “No man can come to me, unless the Father who sent me draws him”.⁸ As Jeremiah put it, “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then you also can do good who are accustomed to do evil”.⁹ Or, in Paul’s words, “The mind of the flesh is hostile towards God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God”.¹⁰ Because we choose to do what we know to be wrong, God gives us up to our choice. That is fair, but it means hell for all of us; it means eternal separation from God; it means the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. There is no difference; all have sinned.¹¹ By disobedience, we all cut ourselves off from God, the source of life. We have involved ourselves in death—in physical death—but more importantly in spiritual and eternal death. We are dead, says Paul, in our trespasses and sins.¹² We are by nature children of wrath, under God’s eternal condemnation of death.

8 John 6:44

9 Jer 13:23

10 Rom 8:7-8

11 Rom 3:22-23

12 Eph 2:1-3

THE EVERLASTING PURPOSE

Dead people cannot save themselves. We need new life, a completely new start, a new creation, as it were, a spiritual resurrection, a new birth, as Jesus told Nicodemus.¹³ And it is God, the Creator, the sovereign Lord, who alone can bring about this radical change and this new start, this new creation, this spiritual resurrection. We must be born by the power of God's Spirit.¹⁴ The doctrine of predestination is simply the consequence of man's nature (dead in trespasses and sins), and of God's nature (goodness and mercy), and of his sovereignty and power, through which he recreates those who are dead in their sins, to be his sons and daughters, choosing according to his own wise and loving and righteous will.

The biblical foundation

Passages of Scripture which teach the doctrine of election and predestination are many. One or two illustrations will suffice. Paul wrote,

He [God] chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined

¹³ John 3:3

¹⁴ John 3:5-8

UNDERSTANDING PREDESTINATION

us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to himself, according to the kind intention of his will, to the praise of his grace, which he freely bestowed on us in the beloved... In him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to his purpose who works all things after the counsel of his will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ should be to the praise of his glory.¹⁵

In 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14 the apostle wrote, “God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. And it was for this he called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Peter wrote his letter to those whom he described as having been “chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father”.¹⁶ Luke described the result of the preaching of Paul and Barnabas with the words: “As many as had been appointed to eternal life believed”.¹⁷ Likewise Paul wrote, “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose. For whom he

¹⁵ Eph 1:4-12

¹⁶ 1 Pet 1:1-2

¹⁷ Acts 13:48

THE EVERLASTING PURPOSE

foreknew, he also predestined to become conformed to the image of his son.”¹⁸ But it is in the next chapter, Romans 9, that Paul wrote most fully on the doctrine of predestination. First, he stated that God chose Jacob rather than Esau simply because of God’s own decision. There was nothing in the children which evoked that choice. The apostle concluded, “He has mercy on whom he desires, and he hardens whom he desires.”¹⁹ Then in the rest of the chapter the apostle made clear by the way he answered objections that God’s choice is not conditioned by anything in those who are predestined.

The intellectual problem

The doctrine of predestination provides an intellectual as well as an ethical problem. The intellectual problem is that of the relationship of our wills, which we know to be real wills, with the sovereign will of God who chooses for salvation. The ethical problem is the question of the fairness of God’s choice: why one and not the other?

First let us look at the problem of the intellect—

¹⁸ Rom 8:28-29

¹⁹ Rom 9:18