

Chapter One

The Struggle

Baseball. Hot dogs. Apple pie. Chevrolet. These are all things American. To complete the mix we must add the great American motto: “We will not discuss religion or politics.”

Mottoes are made to be broken. Perhaps no American rule is broken more frequently than the one about not discussing religion or politics. We embark on such discussions repeatedly. And when the topic turns to religion it sometimes gravitates to the issue of predestination. Sadly, that often means the end of discussion and the beginning of argument, yielding more heat than light.

Arguing about predestination is virtually irresistible. (Pardon the pun.) The topic is so juicy. It provides an opportunity to spar about all things philosophical. When the issue flares up we suddenly become super-patriotic, guarding the tree of human liberty with more zeal and tenacity than Patrick Henry ever dreamed of. The specter of an all-powerful God making choices for us, and perhaps even against us, makes us scream, “Give me free will or give me death!”

The very word *predestination* has an ominous ring to it. It is linked to the despairing notion of fatalism and somehow suggests that within its pale we are reduced to meaningless puppets. The word conjures up visions of a diabolical deity who plays capricious games with our lives. We seem to be subjected to the whims of horrible decrees that were fixed in concrete long before we were born. Better that our lives were fixed by the stars, for then at least we could find clues to our destiny in the daily horoscopes.

Add to the horror of the word *predestination* the public image of its most famous teacher, John Calvin, and we shudder all the more. We see Calvin portrayed as a stern and grim-faced tyrant, a sixteenth-century Ichabod Crane who found fiendish delight in the burning of recalcitrant heretics. It is enough to cause us to retreat from the discussion altogether and reaffirm our commitment never to discuss religion and politics.

With a topic people find so unpleasant, it is a wonder that we ever discuss it at all. Why do we speak of it? Because we enjoy unpleasantness? Not at all. We discuss it because we cannot avoid it. It is a doctrine plainly set forth in the Bible. We talk

about predestination because the Bible talks about predestination. If we desire to build our theology on the Bible, we run head on into this concept. We soon discover that John Calvin did not invent it.

Virtually all Christian churches have some formal doctrine of predestination. To be sure, the doctrine of predestination found in the Roman Catholic Church is different from that in the Presbyterian Church. The Lutherans have a different view of the matter from the Methodists.

The fact that such variant views of predestination abound only underscores the fact that if we are biblical in our thinking we must have some doctrine of predestination. We cannot ignore such well-known passages as:

Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will . . . (Ephesians 1:4-5)

In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will . . . (Ephesians 1:11)

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. (Romans 8:29)

If we are to be biblical, then, the issue is not whether we should have a doctrine of predestination or not, but what kind we should embrace. If the Bible is the Word of God, not mere human speculation, and if God himself declares that there is such a thing as predestination, then it follows irresistibly that we must embrace some doctrine of predestination.

If we are to follow this line of thinking, then, of course, we must go one step further. It is not enough to have just any view of predestination. It is our duty to seek the correct view of predestination, lest we be guilty of distorting or ignoring the Word of God. Here is where the real struggle begins, the struggle to sort out accurately all that the Bible teaches about this matter.

My struggle with predestination began early in my Christian life. I knew a professor of philosophy in college who was a convinced Calvinist. He set forth the so-called “Reformed” view of predestination. I did not like it. I did not like it at all. I fought against it tooth and nail all the way through college.

I graduated from college unconvinced of the Reformed or Calvinistic view of predestination only to go to a seminary that included on its staff the king of the Calvinists, John H. Gerstner. Gerstner is to predestination what Einstein is to physics or what Tiger Woods is to golf. I would rather have challenged Einstein on relativity or entered into match play with Woods than to take on Gerstner. But . . . fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

I challenged Gerstner in the classroom time after time, making a total pest of myself. I resisted for well over a year. My final surrender came in stages. Painful stages. It started when I began work as a student pastor in a church. I wrote a note to myself that I kept on my desk in a place where I could always see it.

YOU ARE REQUIRED TO BELIEVE, TO PREACH, AND TO TEACH WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS IS TRUE, NOT WHAT YOU WANT THE BIBLE TO SAY IS TRUE.

The note haunted me. My final crisis came in my senior year. I had a three-credit course in the study of Jonathan Edwards. We spent the semester studying Edwards's most famous book, *The Freedom of the Will*, under Gerstner's tutelage. At the same time I had a Greek exegesis course in the book of Romans. I was the only student in that course, one on one with the New Testament professor. There was nowhere I could hide.

The combination was too much for me. Gerstner, Edwards, the New Testament professor, and above all the apostle Paul, were too formidable a team for me to withstand. The ninth chapter of Romans was the clincher. I simply could find no way to avoid the apostle's teaching in that chapter. Reluctantly, I sighed and surrendered, but with my head, not my heart. "OK, I believe this stuff, but I don't have to like it!"

I soon discovered that God has created us so that the heart is supposed to follow the head. I could not, with impunity, love something with my head that I hated in my heart. Once I began to see the cogency of the doctrine and its broader implications, my eyes were opened to the graciousness of grace and to the grand comfort of God's sovereignty. I began to like the doctrine little by little, until it burst upon my soul that the doctrine revealed the depth and the riches of the mercy of God.

I no longer feared the demons of fatalism or the ugly thought that I was being reduced to a puppet. Now I rejoiced in a gracious Savior who alone was immortal, invisible, the only wise God.

They say there is nothing more obnoxious than a converted drunk. Try a converted Arminian. Converted Arminians tend to become flaming Calvinists, zealots for the cause of predestination. You are reading the work of such a convert.

My struggle has taught me a few things along the way. I have learned, for example, that not all Christians are as zealous about predestination as I am. There are better men than I who do not share my conclusions. I have learned that many misunderstand predestination. I have also learned the pain of being wrong.

When I teach the doctrine of predestination I am often frustrated by those who obstinately refuse to submit to it. I want to scream, "Don't you realize you are resisting the Word of God?" In these cases I am guilty of at least one of two possible sins. If my understanding of predestination is correct, then at best I am being impatient with people who are merely struggling as I once did, and at worst I am being arrogant and patronizing toward those who disagree with me.

If my understanding of predestination is not correct, then my sin is compounded, since I would be slandering the saints who by opposing my view are fighting for the angels. So the stakes are high for me in this matter.

The struggle about predestination is all the more confusing because the greatest minds in the history of the church have disagreed about it. Scholars and Christian leaders, past and present, have taken different stands. A brief glance at church history reveals that the debate over predestination is not between liberals and conservatives or between believers and unbelievers. It is a debate among believers, among godly and earnest Christians.

It may be helpful to see how the great teachers of the past line up on the question.

It must look like I am trying to stack the deck. Those thinkers who are most widely regarded as the titans of classical Christian scholarship fall heavily on the Reformed side. I am persuaded, however, that this is a fact of history that dare not be ignored. To be sure, it is possible that Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Edwards could all be wrong on this matter. These men certainly disagree with each other on other points of doctrine. They are neither individually nor collectively infallible.

We cannot determine truth by counting noses. The great thinkers of the past can be wrong. But it is important for us to see that the Reformed doctrine of predestination was not invented by John Calvin. There is nothing in Calvin's view of predestination that was not earlier propounded by Luther and Augustine before him. Later, Lutheranism did not follow Luther on this matter but Melancthon, who altered his views after Luther's death. It is also noteworthy that in his famous treatise on theology, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin wrote sparingly on the subject. Luther wrote more about predestination than did Calvin.

The history lesson aside, we must take seriously the fact that such learned men agreed on this difficult subject. Again, that they agreed does not prove the case for predestination. They could have been wrong. But it gets our attention. We cannot dismiss the Reformed view as a peculiarly Presbyterian notion. I know that during my great struggle with predestination I was deeply troubled by the unified voices of the titans of classical Christian scholarship on this point. Again, they are not infallible, but they deserve our respect and an honest hearing.

Among contemporary Christian leaders we find a more balanced list of agreement and disagreement. (Keep in mind that we are speaking here in general terms and that there are significant points of difference among those on each side.)

I don't know where Chuck Swindoll, Pat Robertson, and a lot of other leaders stand on this point. Jimmy Swaggart has made it clear that he considers the Reformed view a demonic heresy. His attacks on the doctrine have been less than sober. They do not reflect the care and earnestness of the men listed above in the "opposing" column. They are all great leaders whose views are worthy of our close attention.

My hope is that we will all continue to struggle with the truth. We must never assume that we have arrived. Yet there is no virtue in sheer skepticism. We look with a jaundiced eye at those who are always learning but never coming to a knowledge of the truth. God is delighted with men and women of conviction. Of course he is concerned that our convictions be according to truth. Struggle with me, then, as we embark upon the difficult but, I hope, profitable journey examining the doctrine of predestination.

For Further Study

The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, Like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes. (PROVERBS 21:1)

For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done. (ACTS 4:27-28)

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. (ROMANS 8:28-30)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved. (EPHESIANS 1:3-6)