

The Fallacy of Predestination

My topic is predestination, but I want to get to it via a strange pathway, the old debate between Catholics and Protestants over whether we are saved by faith or by faith and works both. The connection between predestination and the faith/works debate might not seem clear, but I'll try and show how these two topics are related. I recently watched a teaching by the great reformed theologian R.C. Sproul, who insists, with Luther and Calvin, that we are saved by faith alone. Sproul's primary text is Paul, letter to the Romans, chapter 4, verses 1-5.

Paul invokes the example of Abraham and cites Genesis 15: 6 "Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness." What Paul says here is that Abraham didn't do anything to receive salvation; he merely believed or had faith in God, and this faith—this faith alone—was sufficient. This faith was counted in God's eye as righteousness.

Now R.C. Sproul is a very intelligent fellow, and he realized that Catholics wouldn't simply sit stupefied in the face of Luther's biblical exegesis. Catholics would produce biblical passages of their own, and they did so at the Council of Trent, which exemplified the Catholic Counter-Reformation. Catholics cited the Book of James. Here's James 2: 14. "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?" Even demons, James says, believe in God and in Jesus, but that does not save them.

Faith, James argues, is completed in works. Here's James 2: 21-24. "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?" And therefore, quoting again, "You see that faith was active along with his works...You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone." In verse 25, James gives a second example. "And in the same way," he writes, "was not also Rahab the prostitute

justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?" The point is that Rahab did something, and her works no less than her faith were part of her justification.

R.C. Sproul recognizes the power of this Catholic rebuttal. The passages in James seem to settle the issue. No wonder Luther distrusted the book of James, and at one point wanted to remove it from the Bible. But Luther later recanted on that. James is in the Bible, just as Paul is. So how to reconcile the apparent conflict between Paul and James? Some people think it's irreconcilable, and that's why we had a split in the church, and that's why we have Catholics and Protestants today. But R.C. Sproul argues the two passages can be reconciled, despite their apparent incompatibility.

The problem is compounded by the fact that both Paul and James use the same word: "justification." Of course they aren't writing in English; what I mean is that they use the same Greek term. Had they used two different Greek terms, it could be argued that each of them was talking about something different. But they use the same term. Moreover, both Paul and James use the same Old Testament case, Abraham, to prove their point. Paul cites Genesis 15 and contends that Abraham was justified by faith alone. James cites Genesis 22—the binding of Isaac passage—to insist that Abraham was justified by faith and works. Not one or the other, but both. Even so, R.C. Sproul argues that the term "justification" can be understood in two ways. He puts the point this way. What question, he asks, are Paul and James trying to answer? Further, who is the audience that each of the two writers has in mind in their discussions. Let's start with James. I quote again the line I cited earlier. In reference to Abraham, James writes, "You see that faith was active along with his works." It's so easy to miss the beginning of the line. "You see."

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So James is asking the question, how do we know that Abraham was justified before God? How can we verify or see that for ourselves? James knows, of course, that we can't see Abraham's heart. We can only see what he does. And so naturally we see Abraham's inner heart—his relationship with God—through the fruits of that relationship, through his work of obedience when he takes his son Isaac to the top of the mountain to kill him.

"By their fruits ye shall know them." This fundamental principle is upheld throughout the Bible, and this is the principle James is invoking. Faith and works go together, because genuine faith will manifest itself in actions or deeds, and we can see the deeds and infer that they arose from that genuine faith in God. Paul, R.C. Sproul argues, is raising a different question that has nothing to do with how we know someone—Abraham, Rahab or anyone else—is justified before God. Paul's question, rather, is what God requires in order for someone to be justified before Him.

To this question, Paul gives a resounding answer. Since God knows the inner heart, since God doesn't have to wait for deeds to manifest genuine faith, God is satisfied with faith alone. The justification is by faith, and the deeds that follow are the expected and natural consequences of that faith.

Now while James and Paul appear to give different answers to the same question, in reality they are giving different answers to the same question posed in front of two different audiences. Sure, from the human point of view, we can only see faith manifested in deeds which show us faith and works operating together. But from the God's eye view, faith is sufficient, and justification does not require works, although works necessarily follow from all who truly believe.

I am in general agreement with Sproul all this way, and I would like to leave it here, but Sproul concludes his teaching by raising a second point where I part ways with him. Sproul asks a further question, "So where does that saving faith come from? Does it come from us, or does it come from God?" To put it differently, "Is our salvation our choice or God's choice?" To this question, Sproul gives the appropriate Calvinist answer. It is 100% God's choice. We are the ones who have faith in order to be justified and saved, but God is the one who gives that faith to us as a free gift. In other words, God chose us before we chose Him. God made us part of his chosen ones, his elect. And what about those who don't have faith? Sproul doesn't really go here, but the obvious implication is that they don't have the faith to be justified and saved, because God didn't give it to them. In other words, they are unable to choose God because God didn't choose them to be among his elect.

This is the doctrine of predestination, and I confess I find it as shocking today as when I first heard it many years, well decades, ago. It's shocking because of its implications. God, evidently, plays favorites. God made us all, but at the very beginning he picked some for Heaven and others for Hell. God graciously hands out the gift of salvation, but not to everyone. I'm shocked because of what this says about the character of God. I find it unbelievable, unendurable.

Now I recognize that there are passage in the Bible, Old and New Testaments both, that seem to support predestination. Of God the Bible says that "Jacob he loved but Esau he hated." This implies that God hated Esau at the outset, and that's why Esau missed out on his father's blessing. That's why Esau plotted to kill his brother. That's why Jacob continued God's chosen line. Here's Paul in Romans 8:29. "For those who he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." In reformation theology this is called the golden chain of salvation. Divine foreknowledge leads to

predestination which leads to calling which produces justification and finally glorification.

But I think there are broken links in this chain. Let's start with the very first link. Divine foreknowledge leads to predestination. The implication is that because God knows beforehand whether each of us will be saved or not, therefore He has predestined us. This seems convincing, because if something is known beforehand, how can it turn out differently? If God knows now, as He surely does, how the midterms will turn out, then how can the midterms produce a different result? If God know in advance who will win the Superbowl, how can any other team win the Superbowl? But this reasoning rests on a fallacy. Divine foreknowledge, as it turns out, is entirely compatible with free choice. Even human foreknowledge is compatible with free choice. Let's say that I know my daughter very well, and knowing her as well as I do, I know that she will marry a Christian, or go into the arts. I know that she will not become a doctor or engineer.

And so my daughter goes into the arts, and she ends up marrying a Christian. Does it follow that I forced her to do those things? Of course not. She chose for herself. I merely knew in advance, because I knew the choices that she was going to make. Another example. I'm standing on the terrace of a tall building, and I can see that a car is approaching a pedestrian and about to hit that person. I know it's going to happen, because I can see it from above. There is no way it's not going to happen. And yet my knowledge doesn't cause the accident. The driver and the pedestrian are both moving of their own accord. Their actions cause the accident; I have nothing to do with it. My real objection to predestination, however, does not arise out of some sort of philosophical puzzle. I think it contradicts the central premise of the entire Bible. It is incompatible with the core message of the gospels.

What is the central premise of the Bible? That God made man in

his own image. That God loves us so much that he created us to be in eternal fellowship with Him. And what is the core message of the gospels? That Jesus died for our sins. Not just for your sins or my sins. Jesus died for the sins of the world. Jesus came to save mankind, because all mankind is in need of a savior. Now how is that compatible with the idea that God made man, but he never intended some to be in eternal fellowship with him? Or that Jesus died for all mankind, but Jesus refused to give many—perhaps a majority of human beings—the faith necessary to recognize that, and believe it.

Jesus did the work, but he withheld the faith so that his saving deed would not benefit people who were marked at the outset for damnation, not salvation? Well in that case it means that Jesus did not die for all our sins. As a practical matter, Jesus died for the sins of those he chose to save, and only for those people.

Now R.C. Sproul and other advocates of predestination would strongly deny that anything I have said here reflects God's injustice. So did Calvin, the inventor of the predestination doctrine in its strongest form, deny it. What Calvin, Sproul and others would say—I have read them say—is that God owes us nothing. He made us, and He has every right to mark us for salvation or damnation.

I'll go along with this, but it carries an important corollary. If God is the one who decides who is saved and who is damned, then we cannot credit in any way those who are saved, but we cannot blame in any way those who are damned. Of the damned we must say, quite literally, it's not their fault.

Why not? Well, because they didn't have any other choice. They didn't accept God's saving grace, but that's because God didn't give them the faith to accept it. They are damned not because of their own volition, but because of God's choice. They cannot have an eternal relationship with God, because God chose not to have an eternal relationship with them. God, and

only God, is the author of their eternal destiny.

I mean, come on, man? What kind of Christianity are you selling? Are you trying to draw people to the faith, or drive them away? Are you trying to encourage us to love a just and merciful God, or are you trying to repel us with a God whose character seems suspect at best and abominable at worst? Has there ever been a worldview so strange and discomfiting, where virtue loses all her loveliness? Has any religion ever had worse promoters and advocates?

Look, I know why the advocates of predestination cling to the doctrine. They know it's outrageous, and repellent, but they cling to it anyway. Why? Because they are captive to the heritage of the religious wars, and the polemics that came out of those terrible wars. They are hostages to history, and they don't even know it. Predestination as a doctrine arose within Protestantism as an extreme reaction to Catholicism. Catholics were identified with "works," even though in fact they affirmed "faith plus works." And Protestantism took the side of "faith alone."

But if Protestants in the sixteenth century said, "You are saved only by faith," Catholics could in theory respond, "Yes, but we still must choose to believe. We must choose to have faith." And this choice is, in some sense, an action. We must do something to have salvation, even if that something is merely to accept the free gift of salvation. The Protestants said no. No human action whatsoever is required. And therefore they were compelled, by their own logic, to deny human freedom and free choice. They were forced into the position that God makes the choice for us.

There is a more positive reason for why predestination gained such a foothold in some quarters of Protestantism. It was adopted by people who were convinced, and are still convinced, there is no alternative. They think it is required by the sovereignty of God. If God is in charge of everything, he must

also be in charge of our salvation.

If God is truly sovereign, then he must be the one doing the saving, not us. He must do it all. If we have faith, He gave us the faith. Even if we merely receive the faith as a free gift from Him, he implanted in us the desire to receive it, or to ask for it in the first place. As one preacher puts it, "Salvation is either the work of man for God, or it is the work of God for man." Case closed. I too believe in divine sovereignty, but I think this is taking it too far. So let me offer an alternative way of thinking which represents the mainstream of the Christian tradition for two thousand years and, I believe, is far more compatible with the message of Scripture, taken as a whole.

Yes, God made us in His image and wants us all in heaven. Therefore, God implanted in all of us the desire for him and the ability to say yes to Him and be in fellowship with Him. Yes, Jesus died for all mankind, and therefore Jesus' sacrifice atones for all our sins. His grace is sufficient for all, and extends in principle to all.

But there is one condition. We must choose God, as He has chosen us. We must accept Christ's free gift of salvation, because a gift is only beneficial if it is received and accepted. To say that God knows in advance who will say yes and who will say no does not contravene free will. It simply means God is omniscient—God knows what we will freely choose.

Free will is absolutely central to Christianity. It comes into play from the very beginning. Why did Satan rebel against God? Because he wanted to be like God. He chose to rebel. And he could choose to rebel, because he has free will. The loyal angels, by contrast, chose to be with God.

We are similar to the angels in this respect: we have free will. Notice that Christians—including the Christians who profess to believe in predestination—will invoke free will on

a regular basis. When the pastor does an altar call, "Come on up and repent of your sins and receive Jesus," is he not appealing to your free will? Surely he is not saying, "If God has you listed as one of His elect, he'll prompt you to come forward. Otherwise, stay put."

I notice that all Christians, including Lutherans, Calvinists and Calvinist Presbyterians, embrace free will as part of their theodicy. If you ask them why there is so much evil in the world, they will say, "Because man has free will." But then, a few minutes later, they are back to their customary theological determinism. Now they will say that man does not have the free will to say yes to God. When it comes to salvation, they say, free will is an illusion. We think we are choosing God, but we are only reflecting God's prior choice. God deceives us into thinking we are choosing freely. No—I cannot go along with this nonsense. God is not a deceiver. He is not the philosopher Descartes' malign demon, who is out to deceive us. God gave us free will, and we are free to use it for good or for evil, to choose Him or to reject Him. Those who are in hell deserve to be there. They chose to be without God and God has granted them their wish.

In summary, the doctrine of predestination is a fallacy and perhaps even a heresy. We are foreknown by God but we are not predestined by God. Our salvation is a free gift of God. Notice I didn't say it is a free gift from God. It is a free gift of God. God Himself is the gift. But it is our choice whether to accept him or reject him. And therefore our salvation is, to this degree at least, within our choice and in our own hands.

And that's the way I see it.

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