

“PCC History 101: A Primer on Predestination”

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Text: Romans 8: 28 - 39

Rev. Peter Coutts

If you asked people 100 years ago on the streets of Calgary what was the most distinctive doctrine of the Presbyterian Church, people would have told you it was Predestination – our perspective on how people become Christians. It was the one doctrine that made us stand out compared to Anglicans, Methodists and Baptists. It is a doctrine that our denomination pretty much laid aside by the 1950's, and yet some of its fundamental elements are still maintained. So this morning I want to walk you through predestination to give you an appreciation of our heritage of beliefs. This is something that would have been preached from Presbyterian pulpits from the 16th century until its slow disappearance after 1925.

For us, all our doctrine historically flows from two essential starting points: 1] the Sovereignty of God and 2] what Scripture says...in that order. The idea that God is sovereign—in control—historically has been the lens through which we have read scripture. As a Monty Python fan myself, I recall one Python sketch that captured this sense of God in a prayer: “Ooh God, you are so very, very big. Gosh, we're all really impressed down here”. It's flippant, I know, but it expresses our theological core. AND if God is all-powerful and all-knowing, then that idea would imply God must have some control on who becomes Christian. A very Biblical conclusion, actually, that arises mostly out of the writings of Paul.

So here is the mechanics of Predestination, as it was defined in the Westminster Confession of 1647. God, at the beginning of time, extended God's all-powerful, all-seeing qualities to ordain and order all that was to take place over time. This included those who would obtain everlasting life or everlasting death. It was God's determination, at the beginning of time, who would be on each list (as it were), and unchangeably so. For our human nature (“sin”) makes us totally incapable to make ourselves right before God. So it can only be through God's initiative, God's power, and God's graciousness that any of us become brothers and sisters of Christ: redeemed. And so, before the foundation of the world was even established, God determined who would be predestined unto eternal life (those the Westminster Confession calls “the elect”)... and in that choice also determined who would not (those called “the reprobate”). Then, over time, in God's appointed moment, each member of the elect is sought out by God's Spirit to be brought to faith as a gift of God's grace. It is not dependent on our worthiness, our actions or our choices. It is solely the choice and work of a Sovereign God. In the minds of the Westminster Divines (those who prepared the Westminster Confession) every human deserved to go to Hell, but God chooses to save some in order to drive home that very point with people.

Now how does that sound to you? It can sound a little scary! And for us in our individualistic world of democracy and freedom of choice, it can sound downright crazy! But it is a very Biblical idea, with some foundations in the Gospels, but with substantial description by the Apostle Paul.

Given this simple summary of the doctrine of Predestination, hear what Ephesians says: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who... chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love God predestined us to be adopted as his sons and daughters through Jesus Christ, according to his pleasure and will” (Eph. 1:3-5). The passage we read from Romans walks through this idea in a stepwise way. For those God foreknew (that is, those God chose at the beginning of time) God predestined (at the beginning of time) for them to be conformed to become as Christ. Paul logically argued that once predestined, that in time they would be called to faith by God, and once called made right with God, and those whom God has justified are also glorified (Rom. 8:29-30). Even the gospels seem to allude to this kind of understanding at times. In John 6 we hear Jesus say, “All that the Father gives to me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away” (vs. 37). “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me” (vs. 44). “No one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father” (vs. 65). Presbyterians read these words of scripture, in light of their understanding of an all-seeing, all-powerful Sovereign God, and concluded that humans had no role to play in whether they became Christian or not.

OK. So this idea of Predestination has some Biblical basis and centuries of belief among Presbyterians. But the thought of God pulling out an iPhone, checking the calendar and saying, “Ah, 10:15 today is Peter Coutts’ time”. That can be hard for us to accept. What about freedom of choice? Where is our act of faithfulness if faith is only a consequence of God’s actions? It seems to make us no more than automatons, robots, running on God’s program. In fact, this idea would imply that even God is not free. For if God indeed decided all at the beginning of time, then even God is a prisoner of those decisions. Besides, what should we make of verses like, “for God so loved the world, that God sent the only Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” Or what the apostle Peter declared on Pentecost, “Repent, and be baptised, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Scripture also talks about us having a role in becoming Christians. So why were we so hidebound to believe that it was all only about God?

It goes back to that starting point—that God is sovereign: all seeing, all knowing, all powerful... and the logical consequence of that belief. Second, how Presbyterians think about the Christian faith has been significantly influenced by Paul’s letters in the New Testament. And then there is the history of this way of thinking: starting with Paul, then Augustine of Hippo in the 5th century, followed by the reformer Martin Luther and then developed most fully by John Calvin. And as you know, the theology of John Calvin was the doctrinal basis for the formation of the Presbyterian Church in the 16th century. But we started to ease away from this doctrine in the latter part of the 19th century. How we understood

scripture and how we did theology changed significantly in that era—a change that set us on the path to our practices today. As I noted last week, in 1875 the Calvinist and Evangelical Presbyterian denominations merged. Over time the Evangelical emphasis on one's personal responsibility before God moderated the rigidity of Predestination. Early in the 20th century belief in Predestination was fading fast, but then something happened: church union. In 1925 The Presbyterian Church in Canada voted itself out of existence and became a founding member of the new United Church of Canada. We are the descendants of the 30% of Presbyterians who chose not to become United. The following year, in 1926, our General Assembly reaffirmed that The Westminster Confession of Faith described what we as Presbyterians believed...and with that the doctrine of Predestination (which had been fading in acceptance for 50 years) was again declared strongly as our understanding of how people become Christian. But the reasons we had in the 19th century for letting the doctrine of Predestination slip into the annals of history were still valid and alive in 1925. Additionally, there was the influence of Karl Barth (the 20th century's greatest theologian), who greatly reshaped our understanding of Predestination. So by the 1950's Predestination as John Calvin defined it was pretty much forgotten...and this is likely the first time you have heard a sermon preached on Predestination.

But the idea of Predestination has not been lost to Presbyterians; rather, it has been appreciated in a different way. In 2004 our denomination's Church Doctrine Committee gave us a new catechism. A catechism is a teaching tool written in a question and answer style. It speaks of Predestination as the essential intent of God rather than as the mechanism used by God to deal with each of us individually. The catechism states, "Predestination is God's decision from eternity to move savingly towards us in Jesus Christ in whom and by whom we are chosen. As such it is gospel, it is good news. We are chosen for a purpose, to be like Christ and to serve God" (Qu. 54). But the catechism also affirms human responsibility in answering the question "How do we receive God's gift of salvation?" It quotes Romans 10:9: "If we confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord, and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead, we will be saved" (Qu. 53). These answers continue to put us within the Reformed theological tradition by still putting the primacy on God's actions and God's grace. As Living Faith puts it: "Salvation comes from God's grace alone received through faith in Christ" (3.6.1). To restate this in my own words, any of us coming to faith in Christ is first the result of God reaching out to us. And I think this is good news: that God comes after us, and doesn't leave the potential of us coming to know God entirely in our hands. God comes after us, and we have a responsibility to respond to God's love. As it says in the well-loved words of John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that God sent the Son..." Today Presbyterians say "that is Predestination in action: God acting first in love."

This is the second sermon in a short series that is looking at our Presbyterian history. A series that is exploring the dramatic changes our denomination has made over the over the last 100 or so years. My view is that the change in our theological thinking has been our most dramatic change. 150 years ago we were very strict Calvinists (including belief in the Calvinist understanding of Predestination)...an

orientation we officially reaffirmed as recently as 90 years ago. So what are the big lessons we should take away from this recollection of our history? I think there are two in particular.

The first is a definition of theology that comes to us from Anselm. He was the Bishop of Canterbury in the 11th century and an influential theologian. He defined theology as “faith seeking understanding.” For over 300 years our forebearers adhered strictly to Calvinistic thinking, but then in the 19th century we started to shift. New ways of thinking and new ways of reading the Bible resulted in us—essentially—adopting Anselm’s definition. I think theology today for Presbyterians has now become a faithful pursuit (not a fixed collection of doctrine we adhere to) ...a pursuit taken in faith with the aspiration for us to be faithful: faithful to God, faithful to scripture and faithful to the world as we see it around us today. And I, for one, think this is a good thing for the church.

The other thing is that we have not given up on our belief in the sovereignty of God. As it says in Living Faith, “The living God is Lord, Creator of all, Sustainer and Ruler of the universe...All events in the world are under the sovereign care of the eternal God.” That care includes us, thank God! But if God is sovereign, then we are subjects. So in our pursuit of “faith seeking understanding” a question we should always be asking as Presbyterians is, “How am I living as God’s servant? How am I living out God’s will?” As we seek ever better answers to that question, we acknowledge that God rules our lives, and we grow in our discipleship of Jesus Christ. This is how Presbyterianism defines faithfulness. Again, as Living Faith puts it, “We are called to work out the meaning of our own lives and to find our true vocation in the love and service of God...In God’s service true freedom is found.”

Next week, we will look at how dramatically Presbyterian worship has changed.