

Toplady on Predestination

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Of the theological conflicts of the eighteenth century, the predestinarian controversy raged particularly fiercely in the eighth decade of that century, with John Wesley and his followers on one side and Toplady and his admirers on the other. The material out of which the controversy arose was, however, much earlier in the field. In fact, it was the hang-over of the seventeenth century, namely, the opposition between the opinions expressed by Arminius and the current Calvinism of the period. Though the opinions of Arminius were condemned at the Council of Dort (1618), yet they gained favour over the years; and, supported by Grotius, with his modification of the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement to a governmental theory (which omitted the idea of *imputation*), they were whole-heartedly adopted by Wesley and his followers. The influence of Calvinism, however, remained in one particular point at any rate—the ultimate sovereignty of God—and was ably defended and set forth by Toplady and others.

John Wesley, then, adopted the views of Arminius, and, indeed, gave the title of *The Arminian Magazine* to the official organ of the Methodist community, begun in 1778, though the title was changed in 1798 to *The Methodist Magazine*. A sermon of his which he preached at Bristol in 1740 became the basic document of the Arminian Methodists. By studying this sermon, we arrive at a clear understanding of Wesley's position. We shall, therefore, summarize its contents.

The sermon arose out of the different points of view taken by Whitefield and Wesley on the question of predestination. The former had come into contact with strong Calvinistic opinion in his tour in America, and returned to England in 1741. He spoke openly against the Wesleys for their adoption of Arminian views, and a division arose between them, dividing, indeed, the whole Methodist body into two camps. Wesley and Whitefield were personally reconciled in a short time, but the division of opinion remained amongst Methodists generally for many decades.

Wesley's sermon on "Free Grace" is regarded as a masterpiece of clear thinking and forceful expression. The text is Rom. 8:32: "He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" The grace of God, Wesley declares, is "free in all, and free for all". First, it is free in all to whom it is given, for no merit or work of man can claim that grace—it must be given freely by God. This point was not in dispute. The real question being controverted was, Is it free *for* all? Wesley considers the answer given by Predestinarians, who say No to this question. Some of them say No because they hold that God absolutely decreed the salvation of the elect and the damnation of the reprobate by His own will. Others modify this by adding that God's decrees were based on God's foreknowledge of men: knowing that some would receive His grace, He elected them to salvation, and knowing that others would reject it, He predestinated them to damnation. A third group would say God elected those who would receive His grace, and leaves the others to their own devices. Wesley shows the unsatisfactory nature of all these views:

I would ask one or two questions. Are any who are not thus elected saved? Or were any from the foundation of the world? Is it possible any man should be saved, unless he be thus elected? If you say, No, you are but where you was [*sic.*]. You are not got one hair's breadth further. You still believe, that in consequence of an unchangeable, irresistible decree of God, the greater part of mankind abide in death, without any possibility of redemption; in as much as none can save them but God, and He will not save them. (p. 7, London, 1740).

If mankind are in this pass, Wesley goes on to say, "then is all preaching vain". And he roundly declares that the doctrine is not, therefore, a doctrine of God; for it "tends to destroy that holiness, which is the end of all the ordinances of God" (p. 8). It does this because (1) it removes the hope of future reward and fear of punishment, which are the natural incentives to holiness; (2) it destroys such qualities as meekness and love, for it makes them out of place towards those supposed to be outcasts; (3) it tends to destroy the comfort of religion—for those who believe themselves to be reprobate, or fear so, for they cannot embrace Christ, and for those also who believe themselves to be the elect, because it is a speculative opinion; whereas, in contrast to this mere speculation, there should be the *witness of the Spirit* in believers, a very different thing, says Wesley; (4) it destroys our zeal for good works; and (5) it also has a manifest tendency "to overthrow the whole Christian revelation" (p. 12). The rest of the sermon is a demonstration of this last point. We shall give some quotations:

As this doctrine manifestly and directly tends to overthrow the whole Christian revelation, so it does the same thing, by plain consequence, in making that revelation contradict itself. For it is grounded on such an interpretation of some texts (more or fewer it matters not) as flatly contradict all the other texts and indeed the whole scope and tenor of Scripture. For instance, the assertors of this doctrine, interpret that text of Scripture, *Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated*, as implying that God, in a literal sense, hated Esau and all the reprobated from eternity. Now what can possibly be a more flat contradiction than this, not only to the whole scope and tenor of Scripture, but also to all those particular texts, which expressly declare, *God is love?* . . .

If you ask, 'Why then are not all men saved?' The whole Law and the Testimony answer, first, not because of any decree of God, not because it is His pleasure they should die. For, 'as I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth' (Ezek. 18: 32). . . . Secondly (the cause is) that they will not be saved. So our Lord expressly, 'They will not come unto Me that they may have life' (Jn. 5: 40). . . .

I will mention a few of the horrible blasphemies contained in this horrible doctrine. . . . The doctrine represents our Blessed Lord, Jesus Christ the righteous, the only-begotten Son of the Father full of grace and truth, as an hypocrite, a deceiver of the people, a man void of common sincerity. For it cannot be denied, that He everywhere speaks, as if He was willing that all men should be saved. . . . *Come unto Me all ye that are weary and heavy laden.* . . . So doth this doctrine dishonour the Father. It destroys all His attributes at once. It overturns both His justice, mercy, and truth. Yea, it represents the most Holy God as worse than the Devil; as both more false, more cruel, and more unjust. . . . That God condemned millions of souls to everlasting fire prepared for the Devil and his Angels for continuing in sin, which for want of that grace He will not give them, they cannot avoid (pp. 13, 14, 15).

Wesley pursues this thought relentlessly. He addresses Satan:

Thou Fool, why goest thou about any longer, seeking whom thou mayest devour? Hearest thou not that God is the devouring Lion, the Destroyer of souls, the Murderer of men? Moloch caused only children to pass thro' the fire; and that fire was soon quenched. On the corruptible body being consumed, its torment was at an end. But God, thou art told, by His eternal decree,

fixed before they had done good or evil, causes not only children of a span long, but the parents also to pass thro' the fire of Hell (p. 18).

We thus see that Wesley virtually rejected the idea of predestination *in toto*. He would appear to be unwilling to leave it an open question—as far as he himself was concerned. But he did not reject from his society those who wished to hold predestinarian views. The case of John Cennick is sometimes mentioned in this connection. He was one of the lay-teachers in the school at Kingswood, and, adopting predestinarian views under the influence of Whitefield, he openly spoke against John Wesley's teaching. This "insubordination" led Wesley to dismiss him. Cennick continued in Christian work, eventually linking up with the Moravians.

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The contents of this sermon, and other documents produced later by members of the Methodist body—notably, Sellon's *The Church vindicated from Predestination* enraged Toplady, and if we were to judge Toplady's character from the comments he made about Sellon and Wesley in this connection, we should have to judge him as devoid of Christian feeling. Knowing, however, by ample evidence from contemporaries, and by the high spiritual quality of much of his other writings and hymns, the real Christian character of the man, we must isolate this episode in his career, or rather view what he wrote in the way of personal invective as being an echo of his deep spiritual feeling for the honour of God which he felt was being undermined.

"Freewillers," Toplady holds, were the first Dissenters. "The Freewillers were the original, and are to this day some of the most real and essential, dissenters from our evangelical establishment" (*Works*, 1853, p. 59, col. 2). The Church of England was reformed from Popery to Calvinism, he declares: "From such samples, as history has recorded, of the vigour (not to say the rigour), with which Free-will men were proceeded against, in the days of Edward VI, under whom the reformation of the Church was accomplished, it necessarily and unanswerably follows, that the Church herself was reformed from Popery to Calvinism, and held those Predestinarian doctrines, which she punished (or more properly, persecuted) the Pelagians for denying" (*Works*, p. 60, col. 2). Toplady praises Edward VI highly, and enumerates his good qualities, including a religious disposition and mature mind.

Toplady next quotes from a tract by Potter, who, to please Laud, and help forward a reconciliation with Rome, wrote *A Survey of the New Platform of Predestination*. The quotation is that there were "ten Papists, who hold the doctrine of Predestination, from one that denies it". Toplady replies:

Every man who knows what Popery is; every man who is at all acquainted either with the ancient or present state of that Church; must consider such an assertion, as the most false and daring insult that can be offered to common-sense. Have not the doctrines, called Calvinistic, been condemned in form, and the assertors of them pronounced accursed by the Council of Trent? Did any man ever read a single Popish book of controversy, written within a century after the Reformation, in which the Protestants are not universally charged (as we still are by the Arminians) with making God the author of sin, only because they universally hold predestination? And, for the modern Popish books of controversy, I have hardly seen one, in which the writers of that communion do not exult, and impudently congratulate the Church of England on her visible departure from those doctrines. And, God knows, the Church of Rome has, in this respect, but too much reason for triumph. Many nominal Protestants are saving Papists the trouble of poisoning the people, by doing it to their hands. What Heylin quotes,

from a Jesuit who wrote in the time of Charles I, is in great measure true of the present times: ‘The doctrines are altered in many things; as, for example, the Pope not anti-Christ; pictures; freewill; pre-destination; inherent righteousness; the merit (which Heylin softens into, *or reward rather*) of good works. The Thirty-Nine Articles seeming patient, if not ambitious also, of some catholic sense; *Limbus Patrum*; justification not by faith alone, etc.’ (Heylin’s *Life of Laud*, p. 238).

The Thirty-Nine Articles themselves are neither patient nor ambitious of what the Jesuit called a Catholic sense. How patient, or even ambitious of a Popish sense, some of the subscribers to those Articles may be, is another point. Stubborn experience and incontestible fact oblige us to distinguish, with Dr. South, between the doctrines of the Church, and of some who call themselves Churchmen (*Works*, pp. 66 f.).

It is appropriate here to quote from Toplady’s section in his earlier work, *The Church of England vindicated from the Charge of Arminianism*, in conjunction with his present one, to show his demonstration of the opposite sides taken by the Council of Trent, on the one hand, and the Thirty-Nine Articles, on the other, on the questions of *free will* and *predestination*. Toplady placed the statements in parallel columns; and a sample follows:

<i>Church of England</i>	<i>Church of Rome</i>
1. The Godly consideration of predestination and our election in Christ is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons (Article XVIII)	1. No man, so long as he liveth in this mortal life, ought so far to presume concerning the hidden mystery of divine predestination as positively to conclude that he is actually in the number of the predestinate (Sess. VI).
2. The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and good works, to faith and calling upon God (Article X).	2. If any person shall say that since the fall of Adam man’s freewill is lost and extinct....Let him be accursed (Sess. V, can. V).
3. We are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and not for our own works or deservings (Article XI).	3. If any person shall say that men are justified, either by the alone righteousness of Christ, or for a bare forgiveness of sins. Let him be accursed (<i>Ibid.</i> , can. XI).
4. That we are justified by faith only is a most wholesome doctrine, and very full of comfort (Article XI).	4. If any man shall say that the ungodly is justified by faith only, so as to mean that nothing else is required. Let him be accursed (<i>Ibid.</i> , can. IX)
5. Works done before the grace of Christ and the inspiration of His Spirit are not pleasant to God. Yea, we doubt not but they have the nature of sin (Article XIII).	5. If any one shall say that all the works done before justification, in what way soever they are done, are actually sins, and deserving of God’s displeasure. Let him be accursed (<i>Ibid.</i> , can. VII).
6. Good works which are the fruits of faith, and follow after justification ... (Article XII).	6. If any one shall say that justification (<i>justitiam</i>) received is not preserved, and even increased before God by good works, but that these good works themselves are no more than the fruits and evidences (<i>fructus et signa</i>) of justification already obtained. Let him be accursed (<i>Ibid.</i>).

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This presentation of the two sets of doctrinal statements makes very clear Toplady’s contention that Church of England doctrines follow “Calvinistic” thought, and Church of Rome doctrines follow “Arminian” thought (to use the two terms of the eighteenth century

controversy). No wonder Toplady roundly declared: “The religion of the Bible is not the religion of Rome” (*Works*, p. 68, col. 1).

After this survey of the present situation, Toplady goes through the history of the doctrine of predestination from the Apostolic age, showing that the doctrine was present from the beginning. He gives much space to the writings of Thomas Bradwardine, who was personal chaplain to King Edward III (1327-77), and later Archbishop of Canterbury. Toplady says of him:

The Protestant cause is more indebted to this extraordinary prelate, than seems to be commonly known. He was in some sense, Dr. Wickliff’s spiritual father; for it was the perusal of Bradwardine’s writings, which, next to the Holy Scriptures, opened that proto-reformer’s eyes to discover the genuine doctrine of faith and justification (*Works*, p. 80).

Bradwardine had argued that, were men’s salvation dependent on, their own freewill, God would have to follow what man had decided upon. Toplady’s translation of part of the passage from Bradwardine is as follows:

“The number of the elect and predestinate would depend more on man than upon God. Men, by antecedently and casually disposing their own wills to this or that, would leave God no more to do, than to regulate His after decrees in a subservient conformity to the prior determinations of His creatures, and in a way of subjection and subordination to their will and pleasure” (*Works*, p. 112, col. 2).

This is a very straightforward argument, and hard to refute. Toplady then gives the following account of the teaching of the reformer Latimer:

According to Latimer, God’s will is distinguishable into secret and revealed. His secret will is His will of decree, known only to Himself: His revealed will is His will of command, discovered and made known in His written Word. His secret or decreeing will, is the rule of His own conduct. His revealed or perceptive will ought to be the rule of our conduct. Christ, says Latimer, ‘teacheth us to pray, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done. Here we must understand, that the will of God is to be considered after two sorts. First, as it is omnipotent, unsearchable, and that cannot be known to us. Now, we do not pray that His will so considered, may be done; for His will so considered, is, and ever shall be fulfilled, though we would say nay to it. For nothing either in heaven or earth, is able to withstand His will. Wherefore it were but folly for us to pray to have it fulfilled, otherwise than to show thereby that we give our consent to His will, which is to us unsearchable. But there is another consideration of God’s holy will; and that consideration we, and all faithful Christians, desire may be done; and, so considered, it is called a revealed, a manifested and declared will; and it is opened unto us in the Bible, in the New and Old Testament. There God hath revealed a certain will; therefore, we pray that it may be done, and fulfilled of us’ (Latimer’s Sermons, vol. 1, p. 369) (*Works*, p. 113).

This is a very helpful statement from Latimer, and well chosen by Toplady for his purposes. He studies some of the other Reformers—Hooper in particular—and mentions the influence of Martyr and Bucer. Toplady shows the full acceptance of this form of thought in the Elizabethan age by giving Archbishop Parker’s advice (agreed to by other bishops) to the Queen to shut up all incorrigible freewill men “in some one castle in North Wales, or Wallingford” (recorded by Strype). Toplady comments that there cannot have been many of them at that time, if they could be shut up in one castle! (*Works*, p. 205.)

To find Toplady's own defence of the predestinarian position, we can turn to a pamphlet which he published in 1772, entitled, "More Work for Mr. John Wesley, or a Vindication of the Decrees and Providences of God, against a paper called, The Consequence Proved." Toplady is roundly refuting an implication of the doctrine of election expressed in the catchy phrases, *The elect shall be saved, do what they will; and The reprobate shall be damned, do what they can.* Toplady writes:

The doctrine of election is a doctrine of mere revelation. Though human reason, when defecated from prejudice and sanctified by grace, cannot but assent to it as a Scripture truth; yet reason would probably never have discovered it with certainty and clearness had not God expressly made it known in His written Word. Consequently, from that written Word we are to learn the true nature and effects of electing grace: since God Himself must be best acquainted with His own decrees.

The Holy Spirit, making the Apostle's pen the channel of unerring inspiration, thus inspired him to write: 'According as He (God the Father) hath chosen us in Him (in Christ) before the foundation of the world, that we should (not, 'be saved do what we will,' but) be holy and without blame before Him in love' (Eph. 1:14). Election is always followed by regeneration; and regeneration is the source of all good works: whence the Apostle adds, in the very next chapter, v. 10, 'We (the elect) are His (subsequent) workmanship, created (anew) in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath fore-ordained that we should walk in them.' Consequently it does not follow from the doctrine of absolute predestination that 'the elect shall be saved, do what they will'. On the contrary, they are chosen as much to holiness as to heaven; and are fore-ordained to walk in good works, by virtue of their election from eternity and of their conversion in time. Yet again: 'God hath from the beginning (i.e., from everlasting; see Prov. 8: 23; 1 John 1:1, 2) chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth' (II Thess. 2: 13). All, therefore, who are chosen to salvation are no less unalterably destined to holiness and faith in the meanwhile. And if so, it is giving God Himself the lie to say that 'the elect shall be saved do what they will'. For the elect, like the blessed Person who redeemed them, come into the world not to do their own will, but the will of Him that sent them; and 'this is the will of God concerning them, even their sanctification' (II Thess. 4: 3). Hence they are expressly said to be elect-unto obedience; not, indeed, chosen because of obedience, but chosen unto it; for works are not the fountain of grace, but streams flowing from it. Election does not depend upon holiness, but holiness depends upon election. So far, therefore, is predestination from being subversive of good works, that predestination is the primary cause of all the good works which have been and shall be wrought from the beginning to the end of time. It is only the peculiar people that are truly zealous of good works (Titus 2: 14). The rest may profess that they know God, but even amidst all their noise about works, in their own works they deny Him; being abominable and disobedient, and to every good work reprobate (Titus 1:11). As I have elsewhere observed, they trust in good works, without doing them; while the peculiar people do them without trusting in them (*Works*, p. 735, col. 1).

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Thus Toplady. When, now, we review what the two main protagonists said on each side, we can see that, in a sense, each was leaving out of account what the other strongly asserted. Thus Wesley seems to leave out any conception of the sovereign will of God in the matter of determining who shall be saved. Wesley would seem to lean so much to the side of *free will*, that one might be led to think that even God hardly knows whether a particular individual

will be saved in the end or not. His view of “moment by moment” grace gives this impression. On the other hand, we can appreciate the stimulus to evangelism which Wesley’s views created. He felt strongly that everyone *could* be saved, and he therefore sought to save all he could reach.

In contrast to this, Toplady seems to leave out of account the consideration of what part man can play in receiving the salvation which both sides agree is offered freely by God; and having received it, how he can show it forth in his life by his works. Toplady’s strong point is his lofty view of the sovereignty of God, and the unchangeable nature of His will. And the contribution that Toplady made in his essay on *The Historic Proof of the Doctrinal Calvinism of the Church of England* is deeper and more systematic than anything written by Wesley. Those, therefore, who listened to each side of the controversy without taking sides—as was done by the majority of the “Anglican” Evangelicals (as we now call them), and as we can do at this distance of time—were disposed to agree with the major points of each. Venn, for instance, in the earlier part of his ministry, was largely on the Calvinist side, and was a regular preacher in Lady Huntingdon’s chapels. But when she broke with those who saw anything in favour of Arminianism Venn passed out of her sphere, and he himself ceased to express any strong opinions. Hervey felt strongly disposed towards Calvinism, and remained so all his life, but he was ready to admit that there was something to be said on the other side. His words give admirable expression to that spirit of toleration which, fortunately, has prevailed since:

With regard to the final perseverance of the true believer, I am sensible this point is not a little controverted. . . . As I blame no one for rejecting, none, I hope, will be offended with me for spousing, this particular doctrine. To be of different opinions, at least in some inferior instances, seems an unavoidable consequence of our present state, where ignorance, in part, cleaves to the wisest minds; and prejudice easily besets the most impartial judgments. This may turn to our common advantage; and afford room for the display and exercise of those healing virtues—moderation, meekness, and forbearance. Let me only be permitted to ask, whether this tenet does not evidently tend to establish the comfort of the Christian, and to magnify the fidelity of God our Saviour? Whether, far from countenancing sloth, or encouraging remissness, to know that our labour shall not be in vain, is not the most prevailing inducement to abound in the work of the Lord?

Hervey’s words probably express our sentiments today; but this eighteenth century controversy led to deepened thought and study, not only by Toplady on the side of predestination, but also by the saintly Fletcher of Madeley on the issue of antinomianism. We can learn from all the writings which have come down to us; but perhaps Toplady has all the more interest for us because of his historical study of the doctrine of predestination to his own day, particularly in the writings of the English Reformers. In this he made a valuable contribution to Anglican scholarship.

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