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Predestination

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Predestination is a key part of a reformed understanding of all that God has revealed in Scripture. This is one of the fundamental doctrines to which all leaders in the Church of England are asked to assent because it is stated clearly in the seventeenth of the 39 Articles. However, like so many of the great reformed doctrines that underlie our National Church it is threatened by neglect as much as by rejection. Moreover, as further talks go ahead with a view to possible merger with the struggling Methodists few Anglicans appear concerned at the potential conflict between the Methodist and Anglican positions on this doctrine.

Article 17 deals with 'Predestination to Life' stating that before creation, God chose those whom he would save through Christ. Those whom he chose are thus saved from damnation and are saved for eternal life. It is the longest of the 39 Articles and in its finished form derives, with a few changes, from the 42 Articles of 1553. The first part of the article states the doctrine whilst the latter, and longer part looks at its practical application.

It is possible to draw theological distinctions between purpose, predestination and election, but that is beyond the scope of this article.

The doctrine of Predestination is inseparable from the absolute Sovereignty of God and both doctrines are clearly taught in Scripture. Though there are many passages that teach predestination, two of the plainest are Romans 8.28-30 and Ephesians 1.5-11. The former passage, set in the context of the loving purposes of God, gives the order of salvation - foreknown by God (in the sense of intimacy not knowing about), predestined, called, justified, glorified. Likewise the latter speaks of God's good will and pleasure according to which he predestines us for adoption, makes us acceptable, redeems, forgives and gathers together - all by, in and for Christ.

But...

Whilst it must be accepted that scripture plainly teaches predestination there are also passages that are not easy to reconcile with the doctrine. For example, we are given many encouragements to pray, and even the indication that we can change God's mind (Abraham praying for Sodom or Moses for Israel for example). These are not impossible things to hold together but we must admit that they serve principally to highlight our ignorance. The temptation is to elevate one truth at the expense of the other. Rather we must say that both are taught in scripture and therefore both should be held and should shape our living.

Humility compels us to say that we cannot fully comprehend these things. We can go a long way to reasoning and understanding the whys and wherefore, but ultimately there comes a point when we must stop and admit that we are not God. The example of Job shows a similar situation. His friends were adamant that he was suffering because of his sin. Job was adamant that this was not the case. Ultimately the book of Job gives no intellectual answer to the problem of suffering except that when Job is finally confronted with the presence of God, the problem that had so occupied him evaporated. No doubt many of the things that we struggle to understand now will disappear when we see Him face to face.

But...

The origin of the doctrine of Predestination is traditionally associated with Augustine of Hippo. Although Augustine does cite earlier writers it does not appear that the leaders in the early church gave much attention to this teaching of Scripture. Often their language when dealing with such passages is unguarded and vague. They clearly believed predestination in a general sense, not least in relation to the predetermined plan of salvation through Christ. However, when it came to individuals, those writers who do mention it seem to assume that predestination equates with God knowing in advance who will accept the call of the gospel. Whilst, of course, God does know this, it is not all that can be said about predestination from scripture and it was not until the time of Augustine that this fact came to the fore.

The full exploration of the doctrine was prompted by the teaching of Pelagius who elevated free-will to the extent of saying that a man could be saved without grace. This was not something most earlier writers would have accepted but it was left to Augustine to expose the error by expounding the full teaching of scripture on the extent of sin and the sovereignty of God. Subsequently Pelagianism has always been treated as a heresy. It is humbling for us Brits that Pelagius is the first known British theologian.

After the Reformation a subtly different position came to the fore, ostensibly from the teaching of Jacobus Arminius. Again this rested on the view that God knows in advance how we respond to the gospel rather than that he predetermines it. In its 17th Century manifestation it was largely a reaction against double predestination (see below). It is argued by some that Article 17 is compatible with an Arminian position. Of course, the article predates the specific Arminian controversy, though it would have been possible for a revised form of the article to be adopted in 1662. Indeed, the Westminster Confession of Faith does deal in much greater detail with the doctrine. Nevertheless, at a straightforward reading Article 17 is a clear reformed statement. It is only with some ingenuity that it can be made reconcilable with Arminianism.

The greatest objection

The greatest objection raised to the doctrine of predestination is the inescapable logic that if God predestines some to eternal life then either all are saved (which clearly the bible denies) or, of necessity, God predestines others to eternal damnation. This double predestination or predestination to reprobation has always been the most controversial part of the doctrine.

It needs to be recognised that whilst the Scriptures do appear to teach predestination to reprobation they do so much less prominently. Even in Romans chapter 9 where it is clearly in view, the language is not forceful (compare the 'what if' of verse 22 with the definite statements of Romans 8 about predestination to life). We may say that scripture is reticent to explore this doctrine and this is reflected in Article 17. The article states clearly the doctrine of Predestination to Life, it deals with the positive impact of this doctrine on the lives of the elect. Then it deals with those who are not Christians (lacking the Spirit of Christ), and essentially issues a warning, that to set this doctrine before such people is dangerous. The implication of the doctrine of predestination to life is thus plain, but it is actually left unstated. *Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! Rom. 11:33*

Living in the purposes of God.

Supremely this doctrine elevates God. It gives to Him the glory that is His due. He is not at the mercy of sinners, but in complete and utter control of their destiny. Reformed theology is marked

by the centrality of the sovereignty of God and it is therefore small wonder that the doctrine of election has become such a significant part of the whole.

Of necessity this doctrine therefore also humbles us as sinners. It forces us to recognise that no part of our salvation is in any way dependent upon us. We cannot turn to God in faith unless the grace of God goes before and this itself is merely the outworking of God's eternal election to life. It is this aspect of the doctrine that is so difficult for us to stomach. We live in a day where self-reliance is dominant, where we assert our rights over against others and where self-gratification is placed constantly above the good of others. In such a climate the message that we are utterly dependent on God is not easily accepted.

As a consequence this truth also shows us that we are no better than anyone else. It is said that the English Reformer John Bradford would weep when seeing prisoners being taken to the gallows and would declare 'There but for the grace of God goes John Bradford'. Since our standing before God is utterly and entirely of grace, we have absolutely no room for boasting. When we encounter the lost, the poor, the foolish, the criminal, we are inclined to look down on them and think that we are better than they. But, left to our own devices, we would be no different. This fact should stir us to praise, to pity and to prayer.

The fact that our salvation does not rest on the strength of our faith or the quality of our works, but rather on the purposes of God it should bring to us great assurance and comfort. This is particularly stressed in Article 17. It gives to us confidence as to our future destiny, which rests on the faithfulness of God and therefore removes the fear, that can easily swamp us, that we may not be able to stay the course.

We must however remember, as was remarked above, that this doctrine does not excuse us from obedience to God's Word. Sadly people have often pushed the logic of this doctrine beyond the revelation of Scripture. God tells us to pray, believing that God will hear and answer, we are called to be transformed, conforming our lives to Christ, and we are commanded to make Christ known in all the world. We cannot ignore these things, indeed we should recognise that they are part of the way in which God is shaping us and so directing His purposes.

Therefore, this great truth of predestination should make us people of destiny. This is not the same as fatalism, rather our destiny is determined and shaped by a loving God. We will therefore know that we are taking our place in the great purposes and eternal plans of God. We will want always to learn what that means for us by learning of God's purposes from His Word and by seeking the guiding hand of God through prayer. In so doing we are fulfilling His purposes and are being directed by Him as we grow in grace.