

THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF PREDESTINATION, FOREORDINATION, AND ELECTION

by

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INTRODUCTION

The task of this study is to present an exegesis of Ephesians 1:4,5,11, Romans 8:28-30, 2 Thessalonians 2:13, Acts 2:23, and Acts 13:48—passages that frequently occur in discussions about the biblical doctrines of predestination, foreordination, and election.

THE PRINCIPAL PROBLEM CONCERNING THESE PASSAGES

The principal difficulty concerning these passages centers on the controversy between the advocates of the free will (free moral agency) of man as opposed to the advocates of the view of a deterministic foreordination and predestination of man (i.e., those who stress that both the saved and the lost were “elected” before the foundation of the world). This conflict has had a long history. For a brief review, one might consult the article on “predestination” by James Lindsay in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (1939, 4:2435-2437).

The view of deterministic predestination and foreordination that has affected the religious world most profoundly over the past five centuries was set forth by John Calvin. Calvin defined predestination as the eternal decree of God by which He decided before the foundation of the world what is to become of each and every individual. On the other hand Arminius, Wesley, and numerous others modified or directly opposed the Calvinistic interpretation. These opposing views strongly stressed the free will and free moral agency of every person.

In trying to arrive at the truth taught by these passages (or, for that matter, any passage), it is necessary to practice five basic principles of exegesis (see Chamberlain, 1941, pp. 1-4). First, one must exegete lexically—that is, study and understand the meanings of the words as they were understood and used by the original author. Second, one must exegete syntactically—that is, understand the syntax or grammar as it was used and practiced by the original author. Third, one must exegete historically—that is, study and

understand the historical background of the original author and his audience. Fourth, one must exegete contextually—that is, study the passage carefully in both its immediate and remote contexts. Fifth, one must exegete harmoniously—that is, the final interpretation placed upon the passage under consideration must be in harmony with all other passages of Scripture. Obviously, such a thorough exegesis is impossible in a brief manuscript such as this. However, I will present some key ideas and concepts upon which the serious student may build.

A STUDY OF CERTAIN KEY WORDS

First in order of importance is to discuss the meaning of certain key words and phrases (found both in these passages and elsewhere) that constitute the heart of the problem of understanding what the Bible teaches concerning free moral agency as opposed to predestination and foreordination.

The first key word is *eklektos* (Wigram and Winter, 1978, p. 228), which is translated in the standard versions by such English terms as elect, chosen, and occasionally other synonyms. The word (used 23 times in the Greek New Testament) is employed as a substantive, ranging in function from participle to noun. Another form, *eklogēe*, functions as an adjective and is used 7 times in the Greek New Testament. The verb form, *eklegomai*, is used 21 times in the New Testament. It is the only form occurring in one of the texts being considered in this study (Ephesians 1:4). However, many of the other 51 verses could well have been included in this study because they relate to the idea of election, foreordination, and predestination.

The verb form is used in Luke 6:13 to describe how Jesus chose from among His disciples twelve men who later became His apostles. Luke 10:42 states: “Mary hath chosen that good part.” Thus the word’s principal use is simply to describe the act of selecting or choosing one (or a few) from several other options and possibilities. There is nothing inherent in the word which suggests that the choice has been made long beforehand, or that in any way suggests predestination with regard to the choice. On the other hand, there is nothing inherent in the word that forbids the one doing the choosing from choosing on the basis of predetermined standards or criteria.

One or another of these words is used on a number of occasions with respect to God's choice (Acts 6:5; 13:17; 15:7; 1 Corinthians 1:27,28; Luke 18:17; Romans 8:33; etc.). Ephesians 1:4 says: "Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world for us to be holy and unblemished before him in love." While reference is made here in the context to the act of choice being made before the foundation of the world, the context also indicates that the act of choice was as much centered on the kind of life style as on individuals. The passage is saying simply that God chose—before the foundation of the world—that those whom He would bless with every spiritual blessing would be the ones who would be holy and without blemish before Him in love. The election has to do with selecting or predetermining holy characteristics, not individuals.

Additional key words are those from the root, *horizo* (Wigram and Winter, 1978, pp. 539,656; Arndt and Gingrich, 1957, pp. 584,716; Kittel, 1964, 5:452-453,456). This basic root means "to limit or to set limits, to fix or to appoint." This verb form seems to be derived from the articular noun form meaning "the boundary." The key word relating to this discussion is *proorizo*, which occurs in the New Testament 6 times. Of these occurrences, 4 are in the texts under consideration here—Romans 8:29-30 and Ephesians 1:5,11. The word itself simply means that God predetermined or set beforehand certain bounds, limitations, or criteria to be met. Greek scholar E.W. Bullinger said of this word: "When *proorizo* is used, the question is not who are its objects, but what they are predestined to do. *Proorizo* precedes history, and knows who, in history, God 'foreknows' are the subjects of what he has before all history prepared and counseled for them" (1975, p. 597).

Another word to consider is *haireomai*, which occurs 3 times in the New Testament (Wigram and Winter, 1978, p. 180). This derives from a root that means "to take or to sieze" (in the middle voice). It has the meaning of "to take for, or to, oneself; to select or choose." When Paul told the Thessalonians that "God chose you as first fruits unto salvation by sanctification of the spirit and faith in the truth" (2 Thessalonians 2:13), he simply was saying that in God's providence these were provided the opportunity to hear, believe, and obey the gospel. There is here a textual problem concerning *aparchee* (Moffatt, 1974, 4:50). The *Textus Receptus* and many later manuscripts show the word divided and meaning "from the

beginning.” However, many ancient manuscripts, and the most recent Greek texts of Nestle and the United Bible Society, show it as one word that means “first fruits.” Many scholars support the translation of “first fruits” as being the most accurate representation of the best text. Thus, this passage simply relates to choosing **where** and **to whom** the gospel should be preached first. It has nothing to do with a preselection of the saved and the lost before the foundation of the world.

From the above facts we can see that there is nothing inherent in some of the key words to suggest that individuals were selected before the foundation of the world to be saved, while others were selected before the foundation of the world to be lost. To determine if the passages under consideration teach such a deterministic foreordination and predestination, it is necessary to examine them in their immediate context and to exegete them in harmony with the entire teaching of Scripture.

THE HARMONIOUS TEACHING OF THE BIBLE CONCERNING ELECTION

In the fullest sense, the larger context of every passage of Scripture is the entire Bible. Since God is true, His Word is truth. There can be no contradiction between truth, and the interpretation of a single passage of Scripture must be in harmony with the whole.

The clear teaching of the Bible is that God “would have all men to be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). God does not wish “any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). Peter, who at one time thought only a particular race of people was chosen of God, had to be taught a thorough lesson on this very point. Through the vision he experienced, he learned “of a truth I perceive God is no respecter of persons; but in every nation he who fears him and works righteousness is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-35).

From these and numerous other passages it is clear that: (a) the Bible teaches that God loves every human being and has acted to make possible the salvation of each one; and (b) the death of Christ was for every man, and makes it possible for every man to receive atonement for his sins.

“God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes on him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Christ, demonstrating God’s love, tasted “of death for every man” (Hebrews 2:9). He “gave himself a ransom for all” (1 Timothy 2:6).

The great commission is aimed toward all men (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16). The invitation is extended to all, according to Revelation 22:17: “And the spirit and the bride say, come. And he who hears, let him say, come. And he who is athirst, let him come: he who will, let him take the water of life freely.”

Clearly, the atonement is not limited (as Calvin taught). The plain teaching of Scripture is that election is conditioned by man’s response, or failure to respond, to God in faith and obedience. It is not conditioned by God’s arbitrary choice, before a man is born, as to whether he will be saved or lost. Such a concept is totally out of harmony with the plain expressions of Scripture regarding the care and concern of God and Christ, and of their actions in order to save mankind from sin.

Robert Shank authored a monumental work titled *Elect in the Son*. In his chapter on “The Election of Grace,” Mr. Shank stated three important theses, and then proceeded to prove them true by the Scripture as representing the clear, general teaching of the Bible. First, he affirmed and proved that the salvation election comprehends all men potentially. Second, he demonstrated that the salvation election comprehends no man unconditionally. Third, he stressed that the salvation election of grace comprehends the Israel of God efficiently. Shank’s summary on these matters is excellent.

We also considered in Chapter IV the matter of predestination, affirmed in Romans 8:28-30 and Ephesians 1:3-14, and found it to be not a decree of unconditional election and reprobation marking certain men for salvation and all others for damnation, as Calvin and his disciples have assumed, but rather God’s predetermination of the purposes and objectives and eternal circumstance of election: sonship, inheritance, and glorification with Christ.

We have observed that the election is corporate rather than particular and comprehends all men potentially, no man unconditionally, and the Israel of God (all the faithful) efficiently.

The above considerations imply the authentic universality of the Gospel call as against Calvinism’s thesis of a “general” call addressed to all men and a hidden “special” call arbitrarily granted to some men and withheld from others (1970, pp. 91-158,162).

Thus, for one to interpret Ephesians 1:3-14 and Romans 8:28-30 (and other similar passages) as teaching that God chose who should be saved and who should be lost before the foundation of the world is to place an interpretation upon them that brings them into violent conflict with the overall teaching of the Scriptures. The Calvinistic doctrines of election, foreordination, and predestination are incorrect and violate the truth of the Gospel.

How, then, have good and honest men who were seeking the truth come to believe a doctrine that is so contradictory to the Bible as a whole? Perhaps it is because they have had too limited a concept of the act of foreordaining and predestinating. If one could see that there are at least two different models in which the concepts of foreordination, predestination, and election may be viewed, perhaps it then would be helpful in understanding these concepts and in applying them to various passages so that the entire concept is then in harmony with God's Word.

One model for understanding the concepts of foreordination, predestination, and election may be called the "particularistic" or "individual" view. In this model, one predetermines or foreordains that he will bestow certain blessings upon some, and certain curses upon others, regardless of what they do, determined solely upon arbitrarily ordained factors (of which the individuals know nothing). For example, a teacher might predetermine that all the students who enroll in the class will receive grades on a random basis having nothing to do with their performance in the class. The teacher designates in his own mind that all who sit in the first row will receive "A's," all who sit in the second row will receive "B's," all who sit in the third and fourth rows will receive "C's," all who sit in the fifth row will receive "D's," and all who sit in the sixth row will receive "F's." The students enter the class at the beginning of the semester and take their seats according to various choices and circumstances, but they know nothing of the teacher's plan for grading. Anyone with a sense of fairness immediately would conclude that the teacher's system of grading was unfair. Someone might say, "But the students had a free choice of where to sit." However, such might or might not be the case, but to the extent free choice was involved, it became more and more limited as more seats were occupied (in fact, the last student to arrive had only one seat to take). This model would be even more limited if one envisioned the teacher as having a list of students beforehand and simply, on the basis of going down the list, deciding in advance what grade would be assigned to each student (determined by, let's say, whether or not the teacher liked the student's name). Everyone recognizes that this teacher's system would be unfair. How, then, could God operate in such a model?

A second model for foreordination, predestination, and election would be the "general" or the "criteria" view. Under this model, which is basically the model that all teachers use, one would predetermine

what knowledge and what skills should be expected on the part of the students. It then would be predetermined that those who achieve this knowledge or these skills to a better than 90% degree would receive an “A,” while those who developed them to better than 80% degree would receive a “B,” those with better than 70% a “C,” those with better than 60% a “D,” and those below 60% an “F.” Then, when the students came to class, the teacher would attempt to communicate what the students were expected to know and the skills they were expected to develop, and would assist them as much as possible in learning and developing. We recognize this model as fair and just—and rightly so because it is the model presented in the Bible.

Another illustration of this model would be any situation wherein a person or a group predetermined the characteristic and criteria needed to fill a post that was vacant. A football team, for example, might assess the needs of the team and determine the characteristics of the person that it needs to fill a vacant spot. On the basis of certain criteria then, the team would make its first-round draft pick, and so on with all the other teams through the entire draft. A young Christian man or woman who is seeking a mate likely will predetermine that their mate should have certain characteristics and meet certain qualifications, especially in the spiritual realm. Then, as they meet others, they “measure” them by these characteristics and qualifications and make their choice accordingly.

Thus it is with God, which is why it is in this model that the passages under consideration can best be understood and harmonized with the teachings of the entire Bible.

SPECIFIC EXEGESIS OF THE PASSAGES IN CONTEXT

Ephesians 1:3-14. This passage is a great hymn of praise to God for the spiritual blessings He has bestowed upon us in and through Jesus Christ. When Paul says, “According as he has chosen us in him before the foundation of the world,” he immediately follows this by stating the criteria that God had chosen before the foundation of the world—namely, “us to be holy and unblemished before Him in love.” Thus, God predetermined the kind of character upon which He would bestow all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ—namely, a character that would represent a holy and unblemished life. In this way, all have the opportunity to conform themselves to the characteristics that God requires. When Paul

says, “having predestined us to the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself,” he is stressing that God predetermined that those who would be holy and without blemish would be adopted as children. Such is according to the second model mentioned above. Prospective parents who are in negotiations with an agency for adopting a child often predetermine the characteristics that the child should meet. Likewise, the adoption agency predetermines the characteristics that the parents should meet. Prospective parents can discuss these matters with the adoption agency and learn what their criteria are, and can even work to develop their situations so as to meet those criteria. Similarly, especially for older children, since good behavior usually is a desirable characteristic, the adoption agency attempts to teach the children how to behave in a becoming manner. Certainly predestination is better understood, and in harmony with all of God’s Word, under this second model, whereas it would not be in harmony with the rest of the Bible under the first model.

In verse 2 Paul says, “Being predestinated according to the purpose of him who works all things after the counsel of his own will.” The purpose or plan of God, which has been indicated by the entire thrust of the Bible, is the holiness and righteousness of man, so that man will live according to God’s commandments. The “predeterminations” of God, then, are to select those who conform to His holiness and righteousness.

Romans 8:28-30. This passage can be viewed from either of the two models mentioned above. If viewed from the first however, it will be in contradiction with the rest of the Bible. Examining this passage from the viewpoint of the second model, Paul’s statements become clear. “Whom he foreknew” simply means that God foreknew every individual to whom He gave life. This passage does not speak of the specific time at which God foreknew one, but no being has come into existence whom God did not know beforehand because it was by God’s power that the individual came to have life and a soul.

“He also did predestinate to be conformed in the image of his son” simply means that God predetermined, preplanned, and predesired that every human being to whom He gave the right to life should be one who would be like Christ and live a holy and unblemished life.

“Whom he did predestinate, them he also called.” God predetermined what all men should be and He called upon all, through the gospel, to be what He wants them to be.

“And whom he called, them he also justified,” refers to those who actually responded to the call and who constitute the group mentioned in verse 28 as “the called.” Those who accept the call receive the justification from God and finally, the glorification.

Shank, in *Elect in the Son*, (chapter five, “The Called According to His Purpose”), provided an excellent and thorough exegesis of Romans 8:28-30. First he examined the phrase, “whom he called,” and demonstrated extensively how that the call was issued to all, but only those who responded came to be designated as “the called.” Shank’s conclusion on this is worthy of quotation.

Calvinism’s assumption that God has limited the effectiveness of the Gospel call to certain individual men arbitrarily and unconditionally chosen to be the heirs of salvation rests in part on the fact that, in numerous Scripture passages, the words, “called” and “calling” have reference specifically to believers. Such passages, however, simply reflect the fact that those who respond affirmatively to the universal call become in a particular sense “the called.” In like manner, those in whom God’s universal purpose of election becomes realized are spoken of as “the elect” in contrast with the rest of mankind. Reference to believers as “the called” and “the elect” does not in any way imply the positive, unconditional reprobation of other men. The corporate election of Israel to temporal privilege did not constitute the reprobation of the rest of the world, for the way always was open for all men to become proselytes and to share in the heritage of Israel. Furthermore, Israel was called to be God’s channel of blessing for all mankind. In like manner, the corporate election of the Church does not constitute any reprobation of the rest of mankind. To the contrary, the Church is to be the vehicle of grace and salvation for the world. The Israel of God comprehends all men potentially, and the election of grace may be realized in any man. “Look unto me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth, for I am God, and there is none other” (Isaiah 45:22). The call is to all, and all who respond in faith to God’s universal call are “the called according to his purpose” and those whom he justified (Shank, 1970, pp. 197-198).

Next, Shank discussed the phrase, “whom he justified,” and demonstrated that God has acted through Christ to justify all men who will meet the conditions for justification. Shank stressed that the ground of this justification is the grace of God but that full, believing, obedient faith is the condition of the justification. The conclusion of this matter is summarized in Romans 3:26, which states that God acted “that he might be just, and the justifier of him who believes in Jesus.” In Romans 8:30, Paul is saying the same thing he said in Romans 3:26. God justifies all who accept His call, believe on His Son, and have sufficient faith to move them to obey the Gospel.

2 Thessalonians 2:13. This passage already has been explained above, and the misunderstanding of it turns principally on the textual error in the *Textus Receptus* and later manuscripts that lead to the trans-

lation “from the beginning.” The correction of the text in light of the earlier, more accurate texts shows that this should be translated “first fruits.” The passage simply means that God chose, in His providence, that the Thessalonians should be the first to have the opportunity to hear the gospel in that area. The passage in no way implies that others were not eligible to hear, believe, and obey the Gospel. In fact, the context of the second Thessalonian letter indicates exactly the opposite. There were still many others there who needed to hear the Gospel, and Paul had confidence that they would respond.

Acts 2:23. This passage simply affirms that the crucifixion of Jesus was a part of the foreknowledge and predetermined counsel of God. Certainly many passages teach that God knew, before the foundation of the world, that He would redeem many by Christ (cf. 1 Peter 1:17-20). However, this passage has nothing whatsoever to say about particular predestination and foreordination concerning the salvation of individual human beings. No serious and knowledgeable student of the Bible denies that the Bible teaches foreordaining, predestinating, preplanning, and certain types of election on the part of God. What is denied is that the Bible teaches that God chose who would be saved and who would be lost, without giving any of these an opportunity, through personal freedom, to choose concerning their ultimate fate. The Bible teaches “theocratic election,” that is, that God chose the seed of Abraham, the Hebrew nation particularly, for a special mission and purpose, which in the seed of Abraham all families of the Earth might be blessed (Murray, 1975, 2:270-274). The Bible teaches “messianic election,” that is, that God preplanned to send the Messiah into the world and to work through Him to accomplish the redemption of man. The Bible teaches “official election,” that is, that God chose certain individuals for certain tasks and responsibilities. “Official election” is the closest of these three to “soteric election,” but there are clear distinctions. Space here will not allow a thorough consideration of each of these four different kinds of election. This manuscript, however, is concerned primarily with “soteric election.” The Bible teaches soteric election—that is, that God chooses who will be saved. But, the Bible also teaches that this choice is made on the basis of how each individual responds to the Gospel. This soteric election is not based on a decision that God made arbitrarily, before the foundation of the world, concerning each individual who would ever live.

Acts 13:48. There has been much discussion about the correct translation of this verse. Extensive discussion may be found in J.W. McGarvey's *Commentary on Acts*, in T.W. Brent's *Gospel Plan of Salvation*, and in Shank's *Elect in the Son*. The word translated "ordain" in this passage really means "to set in order" or "to place in a certain order." *Tasso* is used 8 times in the New Testament, and elsewhere is translated with the basic meaning of "to appoint," "to designate a place," "to appoint or designate that something be done," "to appoint a day for something to be done," or "to appoint or set in order the powers that rule the world." In its other contexts, the word does not have any inherent signification of foreordination or predestination. Rather, the word pertains to a decision growing out of the situation under consideration—a decision that brings order out of previous disorder. Understood in this light, the passage means "that as many of the hearers as were set in order by the things they heard concerning eternal life believed." Their faith, then, moved them to obedience.

CONCLUSION

The following conclusions may be scripturally drawn regarding predestination and foreordination:

1. The general teaching of God's Word is: that God wants all men to be saved; that Christ died as a ransom for all; that the invitation and call is extended to all; and that whosoever wills may drink of the water of life freely.
2. Therefore, the verses under consideration must be understood and interpreted harmoniously with the general teaching of the Bible.
3. The proper model for understanding these verses is that God predetermined, preplanned, and foreordained that all individuals who corresponded to certain characteristics of holy and unblemished lives of faith and obedience would be those whom He would elect, justify, and ultimately, glorify.

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