

Double Trouble: Is Double Predestination Biblical?

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It happens all too often. A small home Bible study is moving along quite well until someone brings up the subject of “predestination”. Heated arguments swirl around the room as everyone interacts with the thought of men losing their freedom to choose for themselves salvation and others taking the side of protecting the sovereignty of God. And then it happens again. Someone in the room brings up “double predestination.” Not only is predestination a doctrine of demons to some, but the idea of double predestination is twice the trouble! Unfortunately, the Word of God is often left out of such heated conversations and the arguments are based upon human logic and emotional responses. The questions that must be asked are: does the Bible speak of double predestination or what theologians sometimes call the doctrine of reprobation? Does a belief in predestination automatically require a belief in double predestination? Does the Bible teach double predestination directly or must it be inferred from a logical construct?

Predestination is the doctrine that is classically understood by the reformed traditions as the act by which God decreed for his own good pleasure (Is. 46:10) to bring some men to eternal salvation (Matt. 22:14; 1Cor. 1:27-29) through unmerited grace (Eph. 2:8-9) from before the foundation of the earth (Eph. 1:4). That the Bible attests to the truthfulness of this doctrine cannot be denied. But there have been some who have taken this doctrine taught in Scripture to

also teach that not only does God predestine some to salvation, but that He also predestines the remainder of mankind to hell.¹

The logical argument given for double predestination is usually given as follows:

SINCE All men are justly destined to hell because they are totally depraved, and

SINCE God is sovereign and nothing happens outside of His divine decrees, and

SINCE God has elected some to salvation

THEN God has elected the remainder to damnation.

It must be noted that not all who believe in double predestination are comfortable with leaving the above definition without clarification and caveats. R. C. Sproul warns that when seeking to understand double predestination, we must be careful not to confuse “Equal Ultimacy” with “Unequal Ultimacy.”² Equal ultimacy is the teaching that it is God who draws a person to Himself in order to bring him salvation *as well as* God actively hardening the heart of the non-elect so that he will not come to salvation. The logic of this teaching says that since God decrees some to heaven, He must equally decree others to hell. God is then not only ultimately responsible for the destination of every man, but He is directly responsible. Sproul also speaks of “Unequal Ultimacy,” which he says is the classical reformed understanding. In unequal ultimacy, God elects some to salvation, but he passes over the remainder to let them continue on in their sins and the wages that lead to destruction. The decree of God is said to be active in salvation

¹ Examples of those who hold to double predestination include: Lorraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Phillipsburg, NJ: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1979), 105; Arthur Pink in Richard P. Belcher, *Arthur W. Pink: Predestination* (Columbia, SC: Richbarry Press, 1983), 89-100; and R. C. Sproul, *Chosen By God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1986), 142.

² Sproul, 140.

and passive in damnation because God is still ultimately responsible for those who eventually end up in hell by virtue of His withholding grace from them.

It is a curious matter that it is difficult for one to read through the volumes of literature on the subject of predestination and not come across abundant quotations of John Calvin as if his words were divinely inspired themselves. To be sure, the great reformer was a great theologian deserves in many regards to carry much weight, but to what extent? One must be careful not to regard Calvin, Augustine, Luther, Zwingli, Knox, the Westminster Confession, the Canons of Dort or any other reformer or any man for that matter to be on par with Scripture. Although, this would never be the case, per se, in reformed circles it is not unusual for an argument to stand solidly upon the reformation fathers while ever so weakly supported by Scripture. In regards to the matter, Calvin himself warned, “Let this, therefore, first of all be before our eyes: to seek any other knowledge of predestination than what the Word of God discloses is not less insane than if one should purpose to walk in a pathless waste, or to see in darkness.”³ So then, if double predestination is a doctrine, then it must be found explicitly taught in Scripture. The confusion often comes when someone quotes someone else on the issue, says Calvin, as a proponent of double predestination. In Calvin’s *Institutes* he can be quoted as writing that God’s reprobation of the non-elect is simply a passive act of God passing over the non-elect by withholding grace,⁴ while he can be quoted in another section as a proponent of double predestination!⁵ The same holds true of the Westminster Confession’s statement that God “withholdeth mercy as He

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles, Edited by

John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), III:XXI:2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, III:XXI:1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, III:XXI:5.

pleaseth” and “to pass by” then further defines this as God “ordain[ing] them to dishonor and wrath for their sin.”⁶

One of the chief texts used by proponents of double predestination is found in Paul’s discourse regarding the sovereign will of God in Romans 9:6-29. Within the framework of this text, Paul gives two examples of God’s use of men for His own divine purposes. God hated Esau, not on account of any sin he committed, but in order that the sovereign purpose of God would stand (Rom. 9:11; 13). Pharaoh is also mentioned as one who God predestined to judgment when God raised him up in order that He could show His power and might through Pharaoh’s rebellion and hardened heart. That the text says these things cannot be denied. Indeed God is the sovereign over all and has a great overarching purpose for why He does what He does. So, does Romans 9 refer to a double predestination of all reprobate mankind (other passage used to support this view include Josh. 11:18-20; Prov. 16:4; and Matt. 7:23; 1 Pet 2:8; 2Pet. 2:12; Jude 4)? It is not difficult for one to accept that God is ultimately responsible for the destiny of all men. It is the conclusions that are extended from this that produce predestination. Does God place within men a hardened heart so that he creates evil in them? This would be no less than stating that God is the author of evil in man’s heart and that man is not responsible for his reprobate state. Thus, Esau, Pharaoh, Judas Iscariot and all other non-elect vessels of wrath were merely victims of God’s predetermined plan for their destruction. But this cannot be! God is not the author of sin in man’s heart. Man himself is responsible both through his Adamic nature and his personal experience and he cannot deny his guilt (Rom 5:12). Ezekiel 18:32 tells us that God takes no pleasure in anyone who dies, but rather calls for repentance so that the reprobate might live. In 1 Timothy 2:3-4 we are told what is good and acceptable, that God desires that all men would be

⁶ Chapt. III:7

saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Of course Scripture teaches that not all men will come to salvation, and that God only draws some to Himself, but it must be stated plainly that nowhere does Scripture state that unregenerate man is sent to hell because God actively predestined Him there. God did not place the wickedness into Pharaoh's heart, it was already there. God cannot be blamed for Judas betraying the Lord. Did God ordain the betrayal of His Son? Yes, to the last detail. So how are these two correlated? Scripture is not clear. There is a tension here as there is in all of the great doctrines of the faith. We may desire to fix this tension with a logical or rational solution, but we must be careful not to state more than Scripture does.

Since God cannot be held accountable for man's sin, what are we to make of Pharaoh and the others who are said to have been set apart for God's purposes even in their evil scheming? Can it not be concluded that God in some passive way directed the wickedness of these men to their own demise? Since God extends common grace to all mankind and it is this grace alone that holds back the full brunt of man's evil inclinations, what would occur if he withheld his restraining hand in the heart of certain men? Would not the evil of men's hearts run rampant? Pharaoh was already a son of Adam and thus had inherited a sinful nature. He had turned his heart from God and made himself out to be god. Judas, likewise was not truly a follower of Christ, but a worshiper of self. God passed over these men and all others who are not elect and thus they will be held responsible for their own sins. But some men have been chosen out in order to show the power and might of God, as Romans 9 states. These men have been allowed to wallow in their sins so that they might magnify the justice of the Lord when He crushes them under foot. God gives them over to their own depravity and allows them to give full vent to their sinful desires. These men are allowed to hang themselves with their own wicked ways and God does not hold them back. Yes, God is responsible passively. But He does not create the evil. He

allows these men to do what they naturally want to do, what all men would do if not constrained. God is then glorified in both His goodness and righteousness. This seems to be what John meant when he wrote the words of our Lord in Revelation 22:11 that the one who does wrong should still do wrong, as well as those who practice righteousness continue as well. God holds back the wicked and He sustains the righteous. It is all in His guiding hands and all in His divine plans.

Although some would argue that if the doctrine of predestination were taken to its logical extreme that one cannot deny the doctrine of double predestination. This may be true, but since the Scripture is silent on this issue and other passages seem to contradict its message, it must be denied. The wages of sin is death, and this is the action of a just God because man has willfully rebelled against Him. Man is not coerced or forced in any way to behave wickedly; it comes to him naturally. When God so chose to display His loving-kindness and grace to a small group of His elect, He passed over many who would inherit the just rewards for their wickedness. This is the biblical doctrine of predestination.

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