

Liberty Theological Seminary

Free Will versus Predestination:
Peaceful Coexistence

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By

William D. Corbitt

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THESIS STATEMENT

Contrasting and comparing free will versus predestination to critically detail and describe if one is more accurate than the other and, more possibly, that both can coexist in harmony without being contradictory to one another.

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INTRODUCTION

First, predestination must be defined to keep the free will a direct contrast. If predestination is defined as one being predestined once they receive Christ as their Savior then predestination and free will become somewhat superfluous. The previous statement could call into argument that free will is acceptable until one accepts Christ as their Savior then is predestined by God's purpose after salvation. For this paper predestination will mean the act of selecting one person which has not selected Christ to be their Savior, but is inclined to do so or not do so out of the lack of free will therefore rendering them unable to choose and the choice having already been made for them by God their Creator. Free will, however, will be defined to mean a person which has the ability and cognition to choose whether they will accept Jesus Christ as their Savior or not.

As this paper delves deeper into how free will and predestination can cohesively exist harmoniously it will seek to muddy the line of separation between the two camps of thought. A statement so simple, yet profound on free will by John Calvin, "That some believe in the gospel and others remain unbelieving is a difference, they hold, arising not from God's free election or His secret counsel, but from the will of each individual."¹ Still others believe in predestination profoundly stated, "Moreover, some determinists say that if one knows the conditions prior to the occurrence of an action or event plus whatever general laws pertain to such states of affairs, one

¹ John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1961), 55.

can *predict* what not only may but must happen.”² Herein lies the conundrum of which is correct free will or predestination and can one concept reign over the other.

If one states that predestination is the only way that God made human beings then we can argue that humans have tricked themselves into believing that they have the ability to make choices in their lives, and if this is true then the choices one makes in their day to day living may be said that those choices were already pre-planned and that person never had the choice from the beginning. Predestination can be broken into numerous sections of absolute deterministic approaches to partial approaches. If one believes in absolute deterministic approaches then each and every choice made has been already preconceived by God and has been somewhat futile to the person making the choice, because now that the choice has been made one cannot go back and make a second choice. If on the other hand one believes in partial deterministic approaches then one could state that there are certain instances and choices that one makes that were pre-known from the beginning of time that no matter what, they were going to be what they were, but there are choices that are able to be made which can also be changed or altered which were possibly unknown or inconsequential.

The thoughts and supporters of free will would say that there is always a choice to make and that the person has the ability to make that choice devoid of what the consequences may be and possibly the better for them. R.C. Sproul explains Pelagius’ statement of free will, “Free will consists chiefly in the ability to choose either good or evil. This ability of possibility is the

² David Basinger and Randall Basinger, eds., et al., *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty & Human Freedom* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986),

very essence of free will...”³ To explain the fall in the Garden of Eden the proponents of free will have said without the ability to select good or evil then the sin of man would have never happened, but predestination says it was already predetermined that the fall would happen.

BODY

So can both free will and predestination coexist peacefully together without conflicting and contradicting God’s word? Edwards states a possible solution to both existing cohesively,

Hereby it becomes manifest, that God’s moral government over mankind, his treating them as moral agents, making them the objects of his commands, counsels, calls, warnings, expostulations, promises, threatenings, rewards and punishments, is not inconsistent with a determining disposal of all events, of every kind, throughout the universe, in his providence; either by positive efficiency, or permission, Indeed, such an universal, determining Providence infers some kind of necessity of all events, such as a necessity as implies an infallible, previous fixedness of the futurity of the event; but no other necessity of moral events, or volitions of intelligent agents, is needful in order to this, than moral necessity...⁴

By Edwards stating God has providence over all matters, but not having a necessity of moral happenings means that predestination does in fact happen, but to an extent where God’s creation can choose what does happen in their lives.

This is where the two camps divide vehemently and begin to draw a line in the sand. Predestination advocates state that God has chosen from the beginning and whatever has been chosen is right and there is no free will for mankind. And on the other side of the line are the free will supporters who state that free will is of the essence and without it mankind becomes a robot without a brain to make such worthy decisions, about or, for himself.

³ R.C. Sproul, *Willing to Believe: The Controversy over Free Will* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 36.

⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will* (Vancouver: Eremitical Press, 1754), 266.

To be fair predestination advocates do have a point about not having full control of decisions which are made by mankind. No man can alter the things which God has put in motion including, but not limited to, the end of the world. This thought process even becomes largely supported by those in its camp quoting Romans chapter nine speaking of divine election. Numerous passages appear at first cursory glance to support a predefined predestination stance which speaks of election and God's sovereignty about who He has chosen and events He has made to happen a specific way that will not be changed.

However, free will supporters do well in passages leaning on Numbers 14:11, "Then the Lord said to Moses: 'How long will these people reject Me?'"⁵ One cannot refute the passages which allude strongly to mankind's free will of either accepting God's will for their lives or denying His will for their lives. The emphasis that most supporters of free will like to make is the point of love and how love is practically impossible without free will. One such quote sums up the idea, "Furthermore, we agree that God could have created a world in which he precisely controlled and determined all things, including the choices of human beings. But we believe such a world would make true human love impossible. True human love requires libertarian freedom."⁶ Can God have love without free will? Most theologians would say no because of God's sovereignty. Geisler expresses his thoughts, "Of course, God cannot do what is actually impossible to do...God cannot make a square circle. Nor can He make a triangle with only two sides...Nonetheless, God can do whatever is possible to do."⁷ This reason at first glimpse

⁵ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1997), 217.

⁶ Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell, *Why I am Not a Calvinist* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 218.

⁷ Norman Geisler, *Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election* (Bloomington: Bethany House Publishers, 2001), 14.

sounds appropriate and even solves free will unless God can do the impossible. Some argue that free will and predestination can coexist; if this is possible then God can create the impossible since man cannot within himself or his rationale posit two contradictions and make them exist peaceably together. God's sovereignty is even defined with concrete terms that humankind can grasp when God has said that His ways are not our ways and that He is a mystery. This only proves that man is arrogant enough to try and explain God's paradox of free will and predestination.

To describe free will and predestination cohesively existing without boundaries within each other we must begin to think like God. This is in most cases impossible. To say otherwise is plain pride. To begin to think like God we must grasp a total understanding of how God thinks and who God is. God's word states that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.⁸ Most theologians accept that before this God was still there, but there was nothing. R.C. Sproul elaborates, "If we try to think of nothing, we always wind up thinking of something. As soon as I try to think about nothing, I start imagining a lot of 'empty' air. But air is something...Jonathan Edwards once said that nothing is what sleeping rocks dream about."⁹ To accept that we cannot understand nothing, it is then possible to state that man cannot understand two seemingly contradictory terms united in God's terminology which appear to be both present and congruent. Olson describes this, "I am not implying that both are true at every point...Nevertheless, to say that only one honors Scripture is wrong. Neither tradition is the gospel itself; both are fallible attempts to interpret the gospel and Scripture, and both can honor

⁸ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1997), 16.

⁹ R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1998), 7.

them even if one or the other is wrong at certain points.”¹⁰

Before moving forward this paper must identify that it is not distinguishing between the groups of followers from Pelagianism, Arminianism, and Calvinism. To decipher amongst these groups and beliefs numerous pieces have been written and this paper will not delve into the beliefs or philosophies; however, to compare some compare hyper-Calvinism to predestination. “Some non-Calvinists do not think that Calvinists can freely offer the gospel to all persons since they believe in a definite atonement of Christ for the elect alone. Calvinists respond that the extent of the atonement does not come into play in the preaching of the gospel...the evangelist need not preach that ‘Jesus died for you.’ The only group that denies the free offer to all sinners indiscriminately is hyper-Calvinism.”¹¹ This could mean that the term predestination could possibly be interchangeable with hyper-Calvinism if predestination rests solely on a person’s status of God’s choosing whether they will enter into eternity with Him.

Thus free will must have some play within scripture since man is commanded to go and make disciples; if this were not the case then free will might lose this argument. Man would no more need to go tell someone about Christ than breath if predestination were so completely true that free will of the soul did not exist. It is a plaguing thing which causes mankind to choose between two things which God has created and deemed important enough to work together in His own creation. The issue of free will cannot be cast aside as if it were reprehensible to man’s knowledge. In the Garden of Eden there was a choice to not eat of the tree, yet mankind ate and with his disobedience he chose to do wrong against God. This is a prime example of free will if

¹⁰ Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 46.

¹¹ Ray E. Clendenen and Brad J. Waggoner, *Calvinism: A Southern Baptist Dialogue* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2008), 282-283.

ever there were an illustration. “For, if you think the matter of ‘Free-will’ is not necessary to be known, nor at all concerned with Christ, you speak honestly, but think wickedly: but, if you think it is necessary, you speak wickedly, and think rightly.”¹² This is the ultimate thought of man; man either believes free will is of dire importance and thinks that he must understand God’s ways or he believes free will is of no importance whatsoever and treads closely on the line of heaven and hell.

Fearing the separation of free will and predestination spans further and further apart when dropped into the hands of men the scriptures dispute whether free will or predestination exist utterly separate of one another. Again, though there are theologians such as Vance who quotes John Calvin,

We call predestination God’s eternal decree, by which he compacted with himself what he willed to become of each man. For all are not created in equal condition; rather, eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others. Therefore, as any man has been created to one or the other of these ends, we speak of him as predestinated to life or death.¹³

To read the quote appears at first to state the obvious about a man being destined to life or death, heaven or hell, but further research shows that this path of specific predestination focuses on one portion or one path of scripture without encompassing all scripture in its context. When theologians grab at one verse and create it to mean something that suits their arguments mankind can be sure it has perverted God’s law. If belief that predestination is supreme then certain extreme groups can use the scriptures as good rules to abide by and God will do the choosing in the end, which is exactly what other sects, cults, and modified Judaic religions have done in the

¹² Martin Luther and Henry Cole, *The Bondage of the Will* (Feather Trail Press, 2009), 9.

¹³ Laurence M. Vance, *The Other Side of Calvinism* (Pensacola, Florida, Vance Publications, 1999), 5.

present time. When the church (being born-again believers) divide themselves on something that was never meant to divide God's church then it is the ones who have caused the division that are in dire straits.

How then does a person get back to where free will and predestination can coexist peacefully? Peterson and Williams do a decent job at approaching this subject while siding with Calvinism,

Calvinism and Arminianism do disagree regarding significant issues having to do with salvation...Yet we do not think of Arminianism as a heresy or Arminian Christians as unregenerate. You see, calling someone a heretic is serious business. Heresy is not merely doctrinal error; it is damnable error...The Arminian tradition does neither. The Arminian Christian believes that Jesus Christ is God come to the sinner by way of the grace of God received through faith. Whatever issues relevant to salvation we disagree upon, let us agree on this: the Calvinist and the Arminian are brothers in Christ. Both belong to the household of faith.¹⁴

This statement appears to settle the dispute of the two categories amicably all the while stating the disagreement. This solution appears to cautiously sweep away the thorns under the rug so that no one gets hurt in the process of discussing free will or predestination.

If one sides with free will over predestination one can also inadvertently use hyper-grace as one's pedestal. In current Western theology hyper-grace is poured out from pulpits by pastors who dare not use sin or holiness so as to not infuriate or upset the congregation and to continue to fill seats. This method of free will which states that man has the ability to choose whatever he wants to do, but the blood of Christ washes him clean once he apologizes. Free will in this context allows sin to be cheapened and this is where predestination asks whether someone who

¹⁴ Robert A. Peterson and Michael D. Williams, *Why I Am Not an Arminian* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 13.

treats grace so casually is truly a born-again Christian since they appear to follow God's law loosely, if at all.

CONCLUSION

The separation of free will and predestination will always be prevalent in numerous theological think tanks and among born-again Christians. To bring the two together there must be boundaries set within each. These boundaries are stated in scripture whether directly or indirectly through rational reasoning.

Free will exists within parameters set forth by God from the beginning of creation. The first parameter of free will is the ability to choose within God's framework. This means that man is able to choose whether he lives or dies physically and to some extent in eternity. If man chooses to commit suicide he has the parameter to do so which is a choice to die physically. To further that choice by making that choice (for this paper-without being a born-again Christian to minimize further transcendental arguments) to end his life he chooses to be separated from God for eternity. The opposite of this is also true where the man decides to choose to live for God and become a born-again Christian so that by making this choice he will have life eternally with God. This is the end of the parameters. There is no parameter for man choosing a god or choosing part of life in separation or hell and the other part of eternity with God. Furthermore, free will speaks of making a decision on whether to accept Christ as Savior and having faith in God. If man has free will to accept a Savior or to reject Him then man must have the final say as some would protest mankind does. However, God knew each man before he was formed so God already knew whether that man was going to accept Jesus Christ as his Savior.

This above decision of Christ as Savior leads to the concept predestination. If God already knew that man was going to accept Jesus as Savior then the proponents of predestination would say that only supports their argument for predestination. Predestination must be implemented even in free will to explain how God gives man the ability to accept Him or reject Him as Savior, all the while knowing which one man will choose. This concept of predestination does not conflict with free will though. The concept can be described as a father giving his son a choice of blue candy in his left hand and red candy in his right hand. The father knows that his son will choose one of the pieces of candy, but the son has the freedom to select which one it will be by his own will. If the father's will is for the son to have the blue piece then he will give that one to the son, but if the son truly wants the red one and insists the father, however disappointed, will give the child the red candy. Because the father loves his son he will try his best to make certain the son chooses the blue piece of candy, but in the end the son gets the final decision.

To state that free will exists without predestination or vice versa is to directly conflict with the Bible. MacArthur sums it up:

All right, everybody believes the Bible (he was speaking to believers in a church), right? Then you believe in predestination. You say, 'No, I was raised a Methodist.' I don't care what you were raised, you believe in predestination, if you believe the Bible, because in Ephesians 1, it says, He predestined us before the foundation of the world...The Bible also says, 'Whosoever will may come. Him who cometh to me I will in no wise cast out? You believe that? Okay. So, you believe that too. So, you believe in man's volition. Free will is not a biblical term, because man's will isn't really free. It is bound by sin. When you became a Christian, did you say to yourself, 'Oh, I am elect! I think, I'll get saved.' No. No, you made a decision, didn't you? You made a choice... The problem is not whether you believe those. The problem is how you harmonize them, right? You know how you harmonize them? No, you don't. You don't know how to harmonize them. Because there is no way to harmonize them. And, the way that I like to

illustrate it is this, is Jesus God or man? Both. Is He all man? 100% man? 100% God? How can He be 200%? It is a paradox...You have to leave the paradox.¹⁵

To delineate between free will and predestination may be next to impossible for man, but since God created both they must exist in harmony. The best solution for the two groups of thought and which is right and which is supreme there is but one answer for the question of does God have predestination or does He give free will – yes!

¹⁵ Bible Bulletin Board, “Bible Questions and Answers Part 19,” Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, <http://www.biblebb.com/files/macqa/1301-Q-11.htm> (accessed October 15, 2010).

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