

# Critique of Doctrine and Theology

## The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination and Predestination as Revealed by God in the New Testament

In 1995 Thomas Nelson Publications brought forth the *New Geneva Study Bible*, a version of what may be called a Reformed Study Bible. On the title page under the title *New Geneva Study Bible* are the words “Bringing the Light of the Reformation to Scripture.” This indicates that the governing view of certain Reformed theologians, such as R. C. Sproul (General Editor) and James Boice, Roger Nicole, and J. I. Packer (Associate Editors), is that in order to understand the Bible, we need the light of the Reformation to shine on whatever portion of the Word we are studying. According to the mindset of these “Geneva” (i. e., Calvinist) theologians, instead of the Scriptures bringing light to Reformation theology, this doctrinal theology brings light to the Scriptures. Clearly, the concept of the editors of the *New Geneva Study Bible* is that only when we are enlightened by the Reformation can we have an accurate understanding of the divine truths revealed in the written word of God. This applies to the subject of this article—predestination. On page 1487 a doctrinal definition of *predestination* is provided:

“Predestination” refers specially to God’s decision, made in eternity before the world existed, regarding the final destinies of individual persons. In general, the New Testament speaks of the predestination, or election, of particular sinners for salvation and eternal life.

Evidently, in Reformed theology the doctrine of predestination is a matter of salvation for sinners rather than a revealed divine truth intrinsically related to God’s will, good pleasure, and eternal purpose. A number of highly regarded Reformed theologians firmly believe that predestination concerns salvation and eternal destiny in heaven or hell.

### The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination

In *Pocket Dictionary of the Reformed Tradition*, there is a succinct description of predestination:

Also known as election, a doctrine dealing with God’s

sovereignty in the salvation of humanity. Although many reformed theologians make a distinction between God’s active will in predestinating the elect and his passive passing by the nonelect, others emphasize a parallel action often called “double predestination,” in which God actively decrees both the salvation of the elect and the damnation of the nonelect. (89)

Here we see that predestination is related to the salvation of chosen human beings, not to the will of God or the desire of God’s heart, His good pleasure, thereby giving the impression that God created man with the intention of saving some and condemning others.

In *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs*, J. I. Packer links predestination to the destination of sinners:

In Scripture and mainstream theology...predestination means specifically God’s decision, made in eternity before the world and its inhabitants existed, regarding the final destiny of individual sinners. In fact, the New Testament uses the words predestination and election (the two are one) only of God’s choice of particular sinners for salvation and eternal life. (37-38)

According to Packer, in eternity past, before the universe existed, the sovereign God looked upon the sinners and decided who will be saved and who will be lost. Supposedly, this is called “mainstream theology,” that is, traditional, systematic theology, a system that shines the light of the Reformation onto the Scriptures.

A leading defender of Reformed theology in the twentieth century was R. C. Sproul, and his writings on predestination are worthy of attention. For him, the doctrine of predestination is at the core of the Christian faith.

What predestination means, in its most elementary form, is that the final destination, heaven or hell, is decided by God not only before we get there, but before we were

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even born...God made a choice—he chose some individuals to be saved unto everlasting blessedness in heaven and others he chose to pass over, to allow them to follow the consequences of their sins into eternal torment in hell. (*Chosen by God* 21)

In Sproul's theology the ultimate question regarding predestination is salvation or damnation (22). The God of R. C. Sproul is the God of heaven or hell, the One who predestinated some human beings to live eternally in heaven and others to suffer eternally in hell. Expressing this thought in another way, Sproul goes on to say, "From all eternity, without any prior view of our human behavior, God has chosen some unto election and others unto reprobation" (136). In his booklet *What Is Predestination?* Sproul develops the notion that predestination is related uniquely to salvation, not to any other aspect of the divine revelation recorded in Ephesians and Romans. "Paul," he claims, "is talking about salvation—a predestinated salvation in which, from the foundation of the world, believers were chosen by God to be saved" (6). Sproul emphasizes his concept of heaven-or-hell predestination by saying, "The doctrine of predestination concerns our final destiny...The focal point of predestination is the doctrine of election we find in the New Testament, and that has to do with God's choosing and making a decision about heaven or hell" (9). In *What Is Reformed Theology? Understanding the Basics*, Sproul reinforces his concept of predestination in a direct and clear way:

We may define *predestination* broadly as follows: From all eternity God decided to save some members of the human race and to let the rest of the human race perish. God made a choice—he chose some individuals to be saved unto everlasting blessedness in heaven, and he chose others to pass over, allowing them to suffer the consequences of their sins, eternal punishment in hell. (141)

This is the Reformed doctrine of predestination, the means by which Sproul and other theologians brought "the light of the Reformation to Scripture." This must be reversed; the light of the Scriptures must be brought to Reformation theology, especially to the theological concept of predestination.

In *What Is Predestination?* Sproul proclaims, "If we are to grow to maturity in Christ, we must understand the biblical teaching on predestination" (6). Sproul understood the Reformed doctrine and teaching on predestination, but his writings on this subject indicate a great lack of the biblical teaching on predestination. It is crucial for serious students of the pure Word of God to compare the Reformed doctrine of predestination with God's teaching on

predestination. The biblical teaching of predestination brings light to those who cling to and promulgate Reformed theology.

### The Truth concerning Predestination as Revealed in the New Testament

In order to have an accurate understanding of the biblical truth regarding predestination, we need to consider this crucial matter in the context of Ephesians 1. Predestination does not stand alone; it is related to God's will, good pleasure, and purpose (vv. 9-11). In verse 9 Paul speaks of God's "making known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Himself." The divine and spiritual sequence is will, good pleasure, purpose, and predestination. "Understand what the will of the Lord is" (5:17)—this is a divine command that all believers in Christ must obey.

A verse that opens the way for our understanding God's will is Revelation 4:11: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive the glory and the honor and the power, for You have created all things, and because of Your will they were, and were created." God's will, the source of the universe and all positive things, is what God wants and what He intends to accomplish. God has an eternal will, which is the source of His eternal purpose (Eph. 1:11; 3:11). Since God is eternal, without beginning or ending, His will is also eternal; it lies at the heart of the origin of the universe (Rev. 4:11). God created all things for His will so that He might accomplish and fulfill His purpose. The will of God is concentrated in Christ and is for Christ to have the first place in all things, for Christ is everything in God's eternal will (Col. 1:9, 15-18; 3:4, 10-11). God wants to have Christ with the church; thus, the will of God is to obtain the church as the Body of Christ (Eph. 5:32; 1:9, 22-23; 2:2-22; 4:16). God is now working all things according to the counsel of His will (1:11). God's will is His intention, and God's counsel is His consideration of the way to accomplish His will, His intention. According to His will, a council was held by the Trinity before the foundation of the world to make a counsel, a decision, which is His determined will (1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8; Eph. 1:11).

God's will was hidden in Him as a mystery, and so Ephesians 1:9 speaks of "the mystery of His will." In eternity God had a will, but this will was hidden in Him; hence, it was a mystery (3:3-5, 9). In His wisdom God made this hidden mystery known to us through His revelation in Christ, that is, through Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. As Ephesians 1:10 reveals, ultimately God's will in the universe is to head up all things in Christ,

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who has been appointed to be the universal Head. God will subject all things under Christ by heading up all things in Christ through the church as the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 15:20-28).

God has a will, in which is His good pleasure. Ephesians 1:5 speaks of “the good pleasure of His will,” and verse 9, of God making known to us “the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure.” God’s good pleasure is what makes God happy; it is the desire of His heart. The living, loving, and purposeful God surely has a heart’s desire. God’s good pleasure, the desire of His heart, is embodied in His will; His will comes first, followed by His good pleasure and purpose.

**W**ith certain verses as the basis, it is accurate to say that God’s eternal purpose issued from His will and good pleasure (vv. 5, 9, 11). God’s eternal purpose—the purpose of the ages—is the eternal plan that God made in eternity past (3:11). God Himself is the initiation, the origination, and the sphere of His eternal purpose (1:9). In Romans 8:28 “His purpose” refers to the purposeful determination in God’s plan. God’s purpose, according to verse 29, is to produce many brothers of His Firstborn; these many brothers are God’s many sons, whom He is bringing into glory. As indicated in chapter 1 of Ephesians, God’s purpose is to have the church, the Body of Christ, through which He can express Himself in a corporate way.

God’s decision to create man was made in eternity past, indicating that the creation of man was for the eternal purpose of the Triune God (3:9-11). God’s purpose in the creation of man in His image and according to His likeness (Gen. 1:26-27) is that man would receive Him as eternal life and express Him in His attributes (2:9). God’s eternal purpose is to work Himself in His Divine Trinity into His chosen and redeemed people as their life, nature, and everything so that they may be saturated with God (Eph. 3:17; Col. 3:4, 10-11).

Because of falling into sin and death, the man created by God for His purpose needed redemption and salvation. God saved us and called us with a holy calling “according to His own purpose and grace” (2 Tim. 1:9). The purpose of God’s salvation is for His created and redeemed ones to be begotten of Him in order to have the sonship, that is, in order to have the life of the Son of God and then be conformed to the image of His Son so that the Son would be the Firstborn among many brothers (1 John 5:11-12; Rom.

8:29). God’s salvation involves our being saved from a human life that is meaningless (Eccl. 1:2). The gospel of God saves us out of an existence on earth that is without meaning into the meaning of the universe—the will, good pleasure, and eternal purpose of God in Christ. God created a man who had great meaning and purpose, but man fell, and the meaning of human existence was lost. How wonderful it is that with His salvation God in Christ has rescued us and brought us back to His original purpose! This brings us to the biblical truth concerning predestination.

**I**n eternity past, before the foundation of the world, God chose those who would be believers and predestinated them according to His purpose as the One who works all things according to the counsel of His will (Eph. 1:11). After God made His eternal plan, His eternal purpose in Christ, “He chose us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world to be holy and without blemish before Him in love” (v. 4). From among the billions of human beings who

would exist, God selected us. God’s choosing is His selection, and He selected us before the foundation of the world, that is, in eternity past. The fact that God chose us in Christ means that Christ was the sphere in which we were selected by God. Apart from Christ and outside of Christ we are not God’s choice. God’s selection took place before

the universe was created. This implies that the universe and the earth on which we live were created for the accomplishment of God’s will and the fulfillment of His eternal purpose. We should praise the Lord for our being among the chosen ones, those who were selected to “be holy.” This matches other verses that command us to be holy even as God is holy (1 Pet. 1:15-16; Lev. 11:44; 19:2; 20:7). God is holy; holiness is His nature. When God chose us to be holy, He selected us to become the same as He is in His holy nature. For us, God’s chosen ones, to be holy requires God’s holy nature to be imparted into us through our partaking of His divine nature of holiness until our whole tripartite being is permeated and saturated with His holy nature. Eventually, in such a marvelous spiritual condition we will be before the Triune God in love—the love with which God loves His chosen ones and His chosen ones love Him. “We love because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

Simultaneously, before the foundation of the world, God chose us to be holy and predestinated us “unto sonship [not simply adoption] through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will” (Eph. 1:5). The Greek word translated “predestinated” can also be rendered

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“marked out beforehand.” God first chose us and then marked us out before the foundation of the world unto a certain destiny—sonship, the position and condition of those who have been regenerated by God to be sons of God with the life and nature of God. God is now in the process of leading many sons into glory (Heb. 2:10). We were not predestinated to spend eternity in heaven and not merely for salvation.

According to the Reformed doctrine of predestination, God’s chosen ones were predestinated for heaven through salvation. In other words, God predestinated us to be with Him in heaven, not for us to do His will, satisfy the desire of His heart, and accomplish His purpose to have a corporate expression of Himself in glory. What a radical departure from the divine revelation recorded in the Scriptures! Ephesians 1:5 does not say that God has predestinated us unto heaven or unto salvation; this verse says that we have been predestinated unto sonship.

**T**o be sure, as fallen, sinful human beings, we need salvation in Christ through redemption, but sonship, not salvation, is God’s goal. We were predestinated before the foundation of the world, but Christ Jesus our Savior, the Lamb of God, was slain for our redemption “from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8), that is, since the fall of man as part of the world. In eternity past there was a council among the Father, the Son, and the Spirit concerning the coming creation and the need for redemption. This is indicated by Acts 2:23: “This man [Jesus], delivered up by the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God, you, through the hand of lawless men, nailed to a cross and killed.” This counsel must have been determined in a council held by the Divine Trinity in eternity past, indicating that the Lord’s crucifixion was a purposeful fulfillment of the divine counsel determined by the Triune God. Christ was foreordained by God to be the redeeming Lamb (John 1:29) for His elect according to His foreknowledge before the foundation of the world (1 Pet. 1:20). In God’s view, the Lord was slain for our redemption from the foundation of the world in order to save those chosen and predestinated for sonship before the foundation of the world. Christ’s redemption is precious beyond description, a necessary procedure to save those who were chosen to be holy and predestinated unto sonship for the fulfillment of God’s eternal purpose. Redemption is a procedure; predestination unto sonship is the goal—the will, good pleasure, and eternal purpose of God.

This is confirmed in Romans 8:28 and 29, where Paul uses two exceedingly important words—*purpose* and *predestinated*: “We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose,” and “Because those whom He foreknew, He also predestinated to be conformed to the image of His

Son, that He might be the Firstborn among many brothers.” Having predestinated us to be conformed to the image of His Son for the fulfillment of His eternal purpose, the wise, sovereign God causes all things to work together for His purpose. The phrase *all things* in verse 28 refers to all matters, things, and persons. In His sovereignty God causes all things, all matters, and all persons to work together for good, the spiritual benefit, to those who have been called by Him so that He may fulfill His purpose. God determined our destiny beforehand, in eternity past before the foundation of the world, and this destiny cannot be reached apart from the divine arrangement that causes all things to work together for us. The eternal purpose of God is that we would be conformed to the image of His Son so that His Son would be not only the only begotten Son in the immutable Godhead but also that His Son would be the Firstborn among many brothers through the resurrection and as a result of the resurrection of Christ. Romans 8:29 tells us that God predestinated us to be conformed to the image of His Son. As called and justified ones (v. 30), our destiny was predetermined before the universe was created. Before the foundation of the world, God predestinated us to be conformed to the image of His Son; this means that being conformed to the image of the Son of God is our destiny and also our destination. Our destiny is not heaven—it is to be conformed to the image of the firstborn Son of God.

**G**od did not predestinate us for heaven or merely to be saved from sin. God predestinated us for the sake of His will, good pleasure, and purpose—to have many sons conformed to the image of the firstborn Son for the corporate expression of the Triune God in the church, the Body of Christ, in the present age; in the manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens in the coming millennial age; in the New Jerusalem, the bride and wife of the redeeming God; and in the new heaven and new earth for eternity.

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