



Born to Win

On Predestination

by Ronald L. Dart

What did the First Christians believe about predestination? Did they believe that a person's life is completely mapped out before they are born? Did they believe that one person is born—listen carefully now—*destined to be saved*? If so, then that means that another is born *destined to be lost*. Now, I emphasize, I am talking not about your belief, or my belief, or any present-day belief. I'm talking about what did *the First Christians* believe. It is a fact that much of Christian belief today differs from what the First Christians believed. Times change. Circumstances change. So does religious practice—maybe for the better...or maybe not.

So, that's my question today: What did the First Christians believe about predestination? The question was prompted by an email from a listener to KRNT in Des Moines, Iowa. She had heard from her brother that the Lord has chosen who will be saved. But you have to understand, if that's true, then it follows that he has chosen who will *not* be saved. Now, we know there's a wide streak of Protestant thought that believes in predestination *at some level*, and we presume that they came by this belief from Scripture. That being the case, we should be able to find it readily enough.

But before I start examining anyone's proof-texts we need to think about this for a moment. Let's suppose I'm driving to work tomorrow morning, and I come to an intersection where I *always* go straight ahead. But on this occasion I hesitate, I remember an errand I have to do, and I turn left. My decision forces the car behind me to wait just a moment longer before he follows. That moment, those few seconds, will later put him squarely in the path of a *cement truck* that has lost its brake and it broadsides him. Now, a Muslim might say that it was *written* that the man had to die on this occasion. I think some believe in Christian predestination at the same level. Is it true that I had *no choice* in the decision I made—a decision that cost a man his life? Was it written? Or was I free to make a different decision from what I usually did, and thus spare the man's life? You know, life and death often hangs on *such small threads*.

But here's another side to that question. How can we possibly criticize a man for getting drunk and driving *if he had no choice*, if it were already written that he was going to do that? One source acknowledged that the doctrine of predestination poses some difficult intellectual problems. (And it really does; I just left you with one just now.) Does that matter? Well, yeah, it really does. After all, we are made in the image of God. We're given a system of logic that is *like his* (although obviously nowhere near the power). But we are given this so we can understand God, so he can communicate with us, so we can understand the world he has made, and so we can see how he works. Now, if something seems illogical, we are given the freedom—even the *obligation*—to *think it through*.

Predestination then raises several other issues. For example, the issue of *omnipresence* of God, *omniscience* of God, and *omnipotence* of God. Omnipotence: The atheist, quickly seeing the problem with this—if God is all-powerful—wants to know if it's possible for God to create a rock *so big* he can't lift it. I mean, that's really an old saw. Either answer, you see, leaves us with something God *can't do*; and therefore, he says, God cannot be omnipotent.

Then there's omnipresence: God is everywhere. "So you mean to say", the atheist replies, "that God is in every blade of grass? So you can go out there and walk on him? Was he in the gas chambers at [Belzec] or Auschwitz?" Why did he let that happen, then, if he was *present* there at the time and has all power?

Then there is the matter of omniscience: God knows *everything*, even the future. But if God knows the future, then the future *is already written* and we can't change it. Now, do you see what I mean by the issues that are raised by this whole question of predestination? It's this last one, omniscience, that poses the biggest challenge of predestination. One of the intellectual challenges posed by this can be illustrated by a famous prophet. I'll be willing to bet you have heard of "Jonah and the big fish". The part of the story that has received *less* attention is what happened after the fish spit him out and he went on into Nineveh to do his job. He was sent there to give a warning to Nineveh. He went into the city marching along and preaching,

Jonah 3

NKJV

⁴ [...] "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

Where is the intellectual challenge in this? Well, was the future of Nineveh written in advance or not? If Nineveh was predestined to be destroyed, what was the point in sending Jonah *in the first place*? There was nothing anyone could do to change it. Well, according to Jonah, something truly remarkable happened. Jonah 3, verse 5:

Jonah 3

AKJV

⁵ So the people of Nineveh believed God, [...]

Now, say, *that is remarkable*.

Jonah 3

AKJV

⁵ [...] and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them.

⁶ For word came to the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

⁷ And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water:

⁸ But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God: [...]

Oh, wow! I can see them going out there and throwing ashes and sackcloth on the old cow; and not giving her anything to drink, anything to eat. Yes, the cows would be crying mightily to God from that. And then the king said this:

Jonah 3

AKJV

⁸ [...] yes, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands.

⁹ Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?

Now, who would ever imagine that God would “repent”? But listen to how Jonah records the result:

Jonah 3

AKJV

¹⁰ And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do to them; and he did it not.

Now, how about a little applied logic here? Why was Jonah sent to Nineveh with this warning in the first place? Well, you read the story; obviously the object was to bring about repentance on the part of Nineveh, or at least to give them *a chance* to repent and avoid the outcome. But if that’s correct, then the future of Nineveh was *not written in advance*. It was still open to influence by the decisions of the king and of the people.

Now look at the other side of this. Perhaps it was written that Nineveh would repent. In other words, the future is out there. It exists. What’s going to happen is going to happen. So the future is Nineveh will repent, and Nineveh will not be destroyed. Well, if that’s the case, and you send Jonah in there preaching, “Yet 40 days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown”, what are you doing? Bluffing? What are you doing: trying to present some scare to the people? You know, in that case, Jonah was a liar. It was *not true* that Nineveh would be overthrown in 40 days. *They weren’t*.

Now, assuming that the Bible is one book, and that the First Christians believed all of it, then they cannot believe that Jonah’s prophecy is compatible with what I would call “hardcore predestination”, could they? Outcomes can be changed by human decisions. If not, what is the point in prayer? If, as I have seen on a bumper sticker once, “prayer changes things”, then these things cannot already be written, or prayer couldn’t change them. Now, perhaps you begin to see the intellectual problems that hardcore predestination poses, and the reason that some modern-day believers are beginning to question it. But aren’t there scriptures that teach predestination? For example, what about Judas?

So what about Judas then? He also poses some intellectual problems. Scripture says that Jesus “knew from the beginning” who would betray him [**John 6:64**]. But does that mean necessarily that Judas had no choice? Consider the implications of that. Here’s a fellow going about minding his own business. Jesus calls him and decides that Judas will be the one who betrayed him. Does that make sense? Look at it from another angle. The prophecy said that there would be one of Jesus’ closest friends who would betray him. What if, out of 100 people, say, who were there for Jesus to pick from, he spotted *one man* who was a thief and with a character flaw that would lead to treachery? If he had to have a traitor in the twelve, why there was his obvious pick.

So is it necessary for the future to be already written for God to know it? Not really. God knows the hearts, and you know, we *really are* a very predictable lot. For example, how often do you see some girl marrying a young man, and you *know* that young man is a lout, and you wonder why in the world she can’t see it, and you *know* it’s not going to work. And sure enough, in years to come, it doesn’t. Well now, you’re not perfect, of course; and once in a while, it just might work. I think someone predicted that my wife and I...our marriage would last six months. Well, it’s lasted 55 years. They were wrong. But that’s the *human* level of prediction. If you add *God’s* power to the prediction process, you’re going to get some different results. Now add to that—that God has the ability to make particular things happen when he wants them to, and you’re all the way to God being able to foretell the future with no difficulty whatsoever, *and* without the future being already written.

Now, I would think that the First Christians knew from examples like these that the future was not already written. It was being written one day at a time from the choices that Men and God made. But isn’t there a category of people called “the elect”? Well, yes there is. But how did they get to be that? Now, this is a question Jesus answers in one of his Kingdom Parables. He said (this is Matthew 22, by the way, verse 2),

Matthew 22

AKJV

² The kingdom of heaven is like to a certain king, which made a marriage for his son,
³ And sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come.

Now, you don't send an invitation to people who do not have a right to choose whether or not to come, do you? The invitees had a choice: come/don't come. Normally, that would be the end of it, but in this case it wasn't. He wanted them there. And he was a great king, by the way. This is no small guy.

Matthew 22

AKJV

⁴ Again, he sent forth other servants, saying, Tell them which are bidden, Behold, I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and my fatted calves are killed, and all things are ready: come to the marriage.
⁵ But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise:
⁶ And the remnant took his servants, and entreated them spitefully, and slew them.

The result of this was predictable. This is a *really powerful man* we're talking about here that they have snubbed.

Matthew 22

KJ2000

⁷ But when the king heard thereof, he was angry: and he sent forth his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city.

So that being the case, shall we just have a private wedding? Right? That's the thing to do. Let's just get married in a chapel here with the king and queen and friends around, and we'll just go that way. Oh, no. Not this guy.

Matthew 22

AKJV

⁸ Then said he to his servants, The wedding is ready, but they which were bidden were not worthy.
⁹ Go you therefore into the highways, and as many as you shall find, bid to the marriage.
¹⁰ So those servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all as many as they found, both bad and good: and the wedding was furnished with guests.

The king was determined—"We're going to have a big bash here; be a lot of people here, a lot of food, a lot of wine. We're going to have a good time." Now, there's some important stuff here. At this point, *no personal qualities* were required. Isn't that interesting? You didn't have to be a good person. You didn't have to be reputable. You just had to be *present*. That's all. He invited you; show up. But there's a warning:

Matthew 22

AKJV

¹¹ And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment:
¹² And he said to him, Friend, how came you in here not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless.

¹³ Then said the king to the servants, Bind his hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness [*Throw him out in the dark.*], there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

¹⁴ For [*Jesus now summarizes*] many are called, but few are chosen.

Now, here is the question of the hour: What was to happen in order for a person to be one of the chosen? Three things had to happen. First, there had to be an invitation. You know how some invitations often come in the mail for things? They have little letters, “RSVP”, across the bottom — “*Répondez, s’il vous plaît*”. It’s in French. It means, “Please give me a response (so I’ll know how many oxen to kill).” Second, you have to *give* that RSVP. You can’t just ignore it; you have to respond. Third, you have to *take a bath and change your clothes*. None of this makes much sense if one is *predestined* to salvation... or to the other place. That said, it’s *perfectly* logical, isn’t it?

But forget logic. Doesn’t Paul speak about predestination? Well, yes he does, in two places. One of them is found in Romans 8, verse 28. This is interesting. He says,

Romans 8

AKJV

²⁸ And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

These are the ones *invited*, and we know that some of those who were invited didn’t respond. We know that from the parable, okay?

Romans 8

KJ2000

²⁸ [...] all things work together for good to them that love God [*To those that are the invited.*], to them who are the called according to his purpose.

²⁹ For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.

Man, that’s a big statement there. I won’t go down that road today, but it’s *fascinating*. He predestinated them...

Romans 8

KJ2000

²⁹ [...] to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.

³⁰ Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.

These are the little steps that take place along the way toward glorification. Glorification is that moment when you come up out of the grave, or when you’re changed into a spirit being like God, and caught up to meet him in the air. That’s your glorification. And it takes place in steps.

Now, let’s imagine you buy a train ticket from Houston to Chicago. When you get on the train, what’s your destination? Well, Chicago. When did you determine that destination? Well, you determined it before you bought the ticket. Now, does that mean, having bought the ticket, having got on the train, that you can’t get off, jump off, fall off, or be thrown off? (The movie *Silver Streak* comes to mind.) Well, hardly. Remember the fool at the wedding reception who showed up in cutoffs and sneakers when the invitation said “formal”? He gets *thrown out* into the dark. So the fact that you were predestined to

go to Chicago doesn't make it certain that you're going to get there. But in the divine sense, it is certain that the train will get there if you just stay on board and behave. How hard is this? Well, Paul goes on and says,

Romans 8

AKJV

³¹ What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?

³² He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?

I mean, if he's going to go that far to not spare his son and deliver him up, why would he not take us all the way? And that's what this whole scripture is about. *God will do his part*. So, if God be for us, who can be against us?

Romans 8

AKJV

³³ Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifies.

³⁴ Who is he that condemns? It is Christ that died, yes rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us.

There is *work* that has to be done to get us to the destination. I notice that. *He* has got to do some things to get us there. He promises he will do that. Thing is: we have to stay on board, and we've got to behave.

What is the picture being drawn? We can *absolutely* depend on God to do his part. He doesn't start journeys with the intent of breaking off. At the same time, he does not take away from us the freedom to stay off the train or to get off it once we have gotten on. That's what I get from what the early Christians believed. Verse 35:

Romans 8

AKJV

³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

³⁶ As it is written, For your sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.

³⁸ For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come,

³⁹ Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Predestination, then, takes us as far as the invitation and our response, and it guarantees that God will fulfill his part of the deal. But there is another letter where Paul mentions predestination.

Now, you have to keep in mind when you're reading through these things that, first of all, the New Testament is the inspired word of God. The Holy Spirit was with these men when they wrote, and what they wrote is true. That said, they didn't have word processors. They weren't able to go back and correct stuff that they wrote. I think in many cases, they were dictating; they had a scribe over here. And so consequently, there are some things that are a little hard for us to follow from time to time. That coupled with the fact that when they wrote these letters, they knew the audience, and the audience knew

them, and they had a frame of reference that maybe we don't entirely have. Keep that in mind. The apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians—chapter 1, verse 3:

Ephesians 1

AKJV

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ:

⁴ According as he has chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love:

Now, having just read this, “he has chosen us in him before the foundation of the world”, what are we supposed to do? Throw out all the other things we have read? Are we supposed to just dismiss all logic? Are we supposed to ignore what happened with Jonah? What can Paul possibly mean by this? Does it *have to* mean that we were chosen *by name* to be without blame? Well, that's an interesting challenge all by itself. There's *no way* any of us could get to this phase of our life being without blame except through the blood of Jesus Christ. Now, given what else we know, it seems to take away all choice from everyone in our family tree from the beginning of Adam and Eve. In other words, it had to be then predestined, if God had chosen *me* in him before the foundation of the world *by name*, than my mother and father had to be put together at a certain key point in time. *Their* mothers and fathers had to be put together at the point in time. *All that stuff* has to be arranged. The *entire* family tree of *every* saint has to go all the way back to Adam and Eve. (Well, maybe only as far as Noah and the ark.)

So, is that what God did? Consider an alternative. Did you notice what he said? He said, God “has chosen *us* in him”—not *you* in him, not *me* in him, but *us*. Perhaps what Paul means is that God has chosen us as *a class of people*. There will be a class of people to be determined by the invitation and the response to the invitation, and he has chosen that that group of respondees will be holy and without blame before him in love. In other words, that there would be a church, and that *that* decision was made before he ever started. Now, this whole thing is a very long sentence. Paul is *famous* for his long, long sentences; and you have to sometimes work to understand what he's saying. In verse 5,

Ephesians 1

AKJV

⁵ Having predestinated us to the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will,

⁶ To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he has made us accepted in the beloved.

And this sentence just runs on and runs on. Basically, “having predestinated us to the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself”. What do we make of this? Well, I can understand how some people have come to the conclusion that, “Well, God picked us out from the foundation of the world; and therefore, the whole thing is all written before we ever started.” I *understand* how people can get to it, but if you sit down and you think this through, it poses *enormous* problems with other scriptures. Do you have to go that way? Or can you consider in *this* particular context that God chose us as a group, and that the predestination of us *individually* came with the call and the response, and then our destination? That's when we have bought the ticket, when we have got the ticket. Maybe we didn't have to pay for it; it was paid *for us*. He says that...

Ephesians 1

AKJV

⁷ In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace;

⁸ Wherein he has abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence;

⁹ Having made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he has purposed in himself:

That's an interesting addition to this, and maybe it will help us with our problem. Paul says there is a "mystery" of God's will. Whenever you run across these things where you seem to have a contradiction, and the logic says this, the Scripture over here seems to say that—maybe there's something wrong with my logic. Well, maybe there's something wrong with the way you're interpreting the Scripture, too. We have to consider that when those things don't match up, the chances are the problem is with us, not with God or with his Scripture. Anyway, the mystery of his will is...

Ephesians 1

AKJV

¹⁰ That in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, [...]

Now, there is a *real* mouthful. *Everything* in Christ...

Ephesians 1

AKJV

¹⁰ [...] both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him:

¹¹ In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who works all things after the counsel of his own will[.]

The Scofield Bible has this to say about predestination:

Within the total predestined plan of God, it is necessary to distinguish between two classes of decreed events:

(1) events divinely *caused* [...] and

(2) events divinely *permitted*.

To say that God predestined the evil acts of men does not mean that God caused these acts, for this would make God the author of evil. Rather it means that God, foreknowing how men will act under various circumstances, determined beforehand to permit them so to act [...].

The Scofield Study Bible - Predestination, Summary

So, is this what the First Christians believed? Sounds fairly reasonable. At least, it's a step.

Transcript of a *Born to Win*
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DATE: 9/9/08

ID: 08OPD