

Some Thoughts on Predestination

Benjamin B. Warfield (1851-1921)

A GREAT man of the last generation began the preface of a splendid little book he was writing on this subject, with the words: "Happy would it be for the church of Christ and for the world, if Christian ministers and Christian people could be content to be disciples-learners." He meant to intimate that if only we were all willing to sit simply at the feet of the inspired writers and take them at their word, we should have no difficulties with Predestination. The difficulties we feel with regard to Predestination are not derived from the Word. The Word is full of it, because it is full of God, and when we say God and mean God—God in all that God is—we have said Predestination.

Our difficulties with Predestination arise from a, no doubt not unnatural, unwillingness to acknowledge ourselves to be wholly at the disposal of another. We wish to be at our own disposal. We wish "to belong to ourselves," and we resent belonging, especially belonging absolutely, to anybody else, even if that anybody else be God. We are in the mood of the singer of the hymn beginning, "I was a wandering sheep," when he declares of himself, "I would not be controlled." We will not be controlled. Or, rather, to speak more accurately, we will not admit that we are controlled.

I say that it is more accurate to say that we will not admit that we are controlled. For we are controlled, whether we admit it or not. To imagine that we are not controlled is to imagine that there is no God. For when we say God, we say control. If a single creature which God has made has escaped beyond his control, at the moment that he has done so he has abolished God. A God who could or would make a creature whom he could not or would not control, is no God. The moment he should make such a creature he would, of course, abdicate his throne. The universe he had created would have ceased to be his universe; or rather it would cease to exist—for the universe is held together only by the control of God.

Even worse would have happened, indeed, than the destruction of the universe. God would have ceased to be God in a deeper sense than that he would have ceased to be the Lord and Ruler of the world. He would have ceased to be a moral being. It is an immoral act to make a thing that we cannot or will not control. The only justification for making anything is that we both can and will control it. If a man should manufacture a quantity of an unstable high-explosive in the corridors of an orphan asylum, and when the stuff went off should seek to excuse himself by saying that he could not control it, no one would count his

excuse valid. What right had he to manufacture it, we should say, unless he could control it? He relieves himself of none of the responsibility for the havoc wrought, by pleading inability to control his creation.

To suppose that God has made a universe—or even a single being—the control of which he renounces, is to accuse him of similar immorality. What right has he to make it, if he cannot or will not control it? It is not a moral act to perpetrate chaos. We have not only dethroned God; we have demoralized him.

Of course, there is no one that thinks at all who will imagine such a vanity. We take refuge in a vague antinomy. We fancy that God controls the universe just enough to control it, and that he does not control it just enough not to control it. Of course God controls the universe, we perhaps say—in the large; but of course he does not control everything in the universe—in particular.

Probably nobody deceives himself with such palpable paltering in a double sense. If this is God's universe, if he made it and made it for himself, he is responsible for everything that takes place in it. He must be supposed to have made it just as he wished it to be—or are we to say that he could not make the universe he wished to make, and had to put up with the best he could do?

And he must be supposed to have made it precisely as he wished it to be, not only statically but dynamically considered, that is, in all its potentialities and in all its developments down to the end. That is to say, he must be supposed to have made it precisely to suit himself, as extended not only in space but in time. If anything occurs in it as projected through time—just as truly as if anything is found in it as extended in space—which is not just as he intended it to be—why, then we must admit that he could not make such a universe as he would like to have, and had to put up with the best he could get. And, then, he is not God. A being who cannot make a universe to his own liking is not God. A being who can agree to make a universe which is not to his liking, most certainly is not God.

But though such a being obviously is not God, he does not escape responsibility for the universe which he actually makes—whether as extended in space or in time—and that in all its particulars. The moment this godling (not now God) consented to put up with the actual universe—whether as extended in space or as projected through time, including all its particulars without exception—because it was the best he could get, it became his universe. He adopted it as his own, and made it his own even in those particulars which in themselves he would have liked to have otherwise. These particulars, as well as all the rest, which in themselves please him better, have been determined on by him as not only allowable, but as actually to exist in the universe which, by his act, is actually realized.

That is to say they are predestinated by him, and because predestinated by him actually appear in the universe that is made. We have got rid of God, indeed; but we have not got rid of the

Predestination, to get rid of which we have been willing to degrade our God into a godling.

We have passed insensibly from the idea of control to the idea of Predestination. That is because there is no real difference between the two ideas at bottom. If God controls anything at all, of course he has intended to control it before he controls it. Exactly the control which he exerts, of course he has intended to exert all long.

No one can imagine so inadvertent a God, that he always acts "on the spur of the moment," so to speak, with no manner of intention determining his action. Providence and Predestination are ideas which run into one another. Providence is but Predestination in its execution; Predestination is but Providence in its intention. When we say the one, we say the other, and the common idea which gives its content to both is control.

It is purely this idea of control which people object to when they say they object to Predestination; not the idea of previousness, but purely the idea of control. They would object just as much if the control was supposed to be exercised without any previous intention at all.

They ought to object much more. For a control exercised without intention would be a blind control. It would have no end in view to justify it; it would have no meaning; it would be sheerly irrational, immoral, maddening. That is what we call Fate. Say intention, however, and we say person; and when we say person we say purpose. A meaning is now given to the control that is exercised; an end is held before it.

And if the person who exercises the control be an intelligent being, the end will be a wise end; if he be a moral being it will be a good end; if he be infinitely wise and holy, just and good, it will be an infinitely wise and holy, just and good end, and it will be wrought out by means as wise and holy, just and good as itself.

To say Predestination is to say all this. It is to introduce order into the universe. It is to assign an end and a worthy end to it. It enables us to speak of a far off divine event to which the whole creation is moving. It enables us to see that whatever occurs, great or small, has a place to fill in this universal teleology; and thus has significance given it, and a justification supplied to it. To say Predestination is thus not only to say God; it is also to say Theodicy.

No matter what we may say of Predestination in moments of puzzlement, as we stand in face of the problems of life—the problem of the petty, the problem of suffering, the problem of sin—it is safe to say that at the bottom of our minds we all believe in it. We cannot help believing in it—if we believe in God; and that, in its utmost extension, as applying to everything about us which comes to pass.

Take any occurrence that happens, great or small—the fall of an empire or the fall of a sparrow,

which our Lord himself tells us never once happens "without our Father." It surely cannot be imagined that God is ignorant of its happening-nay, even if it be so small a thing as the fall of a pin.

God assuredly is aware of everything that happens in his universe. There are no dark corners in it into which his all-seeing eye cannot pierce; there is nothing that occurs in it which is hidden from his universal glance. But certainly neither can it be imagined that anything which occurs in his universe takes him by surprise. Assuredly God has been expecting it to happen, and in happening it has merely justified his anticipations.

Nor yet can he be imagined to be indifferent to its happening, as if, though he sees it coming, he does not care whether it happens or not. That is not the kind of God our God is; he is a God who infinitely cares, cares even about the smallest things. Did not our Savior speak of the sparrows and the very hairs of our heads to teach us this?

Well, then, can it be imagined that, though infinitely caring, God stands impotently over against the happenings in his universe, and cannot prevent them? Is he to be supposed to be watching from all eternity things which he does not wish to happen, coming, coming, ever coming, until at last they come-and he is unable to stop them?

Why, if he could not prevent their happening any other way he need not have made the universe; or he might have made it differently. There was nothing to require him to make this universe-or any universe at all-except his own good pleasure; and there is nothing to compel him to allow anything which he does not wish to happen, to occur in the universe which he has made for his own good pleasure.

Clearly things cannot occur in God's universe, the occurrence of which is displeasing to him. He does not stand helplessly by, while they occur against his wish. Whatever occurs has been foreseen by him from all eternity, and it succeeds in occurring only because its occurrence meets his wish.

It may not be apparent to us what wish of his it meets, what place it fills in the general scheme of things to which it is his pleasure to give actuality, what its function is in his all-inclusive plan. But we know that it could not occur unless it had such a function to perform, such a place to fill, a part to play in God's comprehensive plan.

And knowing that, we are satisfied.. Unless, indeed, we cannot trust God with his own plan, and feel that we must insist that he submit it to us, down to the last detail, and obtain our approval of it, before he executes it.

Least of all will the religious man doubt the universal Predestination of God. Why, what makes him a religious man is, among other things, that he sees God in everything.

A glass window stands before us. We raise our eyes and see the glass; we note its quality, and observe its defects; we speculate on its composition. Or we look straight through it on the great prospect of land and sea and sky beyond. So there are two ways of looking at the world. We may see the world and absorb ourselves in the wonders of nature. That is the scientific way. Or we may look right through the world and see God behind it. That is the religious way.

The scientific way of looking at the world is not wrong any more than the glass-manufacturer's way of looking at the window. This way of looking at things has its very important uses. Nevertheless the window was placed there not to be looked at but to be looked through; and the world has failed of its purpose unless it too is looked through and the eye rests not on it but on its God. Yes, its God; for it is of the essence of the religious view of things that God is seen in all that is and in all that occurs. The universe is his, and in all its movements speaks of him, because it does only his will.

If you would understand the religious man's conception of the relation of God to his world, observe him on his knees. For prayer is the purest expression of religion and in prayer we see religion come to its rights.

Did ever a man pray thus: "O God, Thou knowest that I can do as I choose and Thou canst not prevent me, Thou knowest that my fellowmen are, like me, beyond Thy control, Thou knowest that nature itself goes its own way and Thou canst but stand helplessly by and watch whither it tends"?

No, the attitude of the-soul in prayer is that of entire dependence for itself, and of complete confidence in God's all-embracing government. We ask him graciously to regulate our own spirit, to control the acts of our fellowmen, and to direct the course of the whole world in accordance with his holy and beneficent will. And we do right. Only, we should see to it that we preserve this conception of God in his relation to his world, when we rise from our knees; and make it the operative force of our whole life.

I know, it is true, an eminent theologian who will shake his head at this. God cannot control the acts of free agents, he says, and it is folly to ask him to do so. If we go gunning with an unskillful friend, he may awkwardly shoot us; and it is useless to ask God to protect us; he simply cannot do it. If we are at work at a dangerous machine by the side of a careless companion, he may destroy us at any moment, and it is useless to ask God to avert the mishap; God cannot do it.

If this were so, we certainly would be in a parlous case. Or rather the world would long ago have broken down into chaos.

Every religious man knows full well that it is not so. Every religious man knows that God can

and will and does control everything that he has made in all their actions, and that therefore-despite all adverse appearances-it is all well with the world.

All well with the world, which is moving steadily forward in its established orbit; and all well with us who put our trust in God. For has he not himself told us that all things-all things, mind you-are working together for good to those that love him? And how, pray, could that be, except that they all do his bidding in all their actions?

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