

**“Human curiosity renders the discussion of predestination, already somewhat difficult of itself, very confusing and even dangerous. No restraints can hold it back from wandering in forbidden bypaths and thrusting upward to the heights. If allowed, it will leave no secret to God that it will not search out and unravel.”**

**“First, then, let them remember that when they inquire into predestination they are penetrating the sacred precincts of divine wisdom.”**

*John Calvin from Institutes of the Christian*

*Religion*

## **“Understanding Scripture and the Theological Concept of Predestination”**

### **Part I**

*By Reverend Steve Garrett*

Growing up in a Southern Baptist church with a strong emphasis on evangelism and mission work inevitably brought the question out frequently about how God would treat “the little children of Africa who never heard the Gospel message.” Out of the minds and mouths of children came a deep theological issue that has been an issue of discussion, intense debate and multiple doctrinal treatises. How humanity comes to a knowing and saving faith in Jesus Christ is a deep and profound question that serves as a basis for religious and denominational differences the world over. Since the days of Jesus Christ, the question of who and how one can attain salvation and eternal life has sparked not just lively debates, but schisms and divisions within the Christian community. In essence, we still continue to try to put human understanding to the mysteries of God. One of these mysteries is the doctrine of predestination and how scripture speaks of it and the relationship between God and humanity. Has it already been decided that God is for some people and against others? Is salvation an inclusive or exclusive facet of Christian doctrine? Has God, before creation, determined who is destined to live forever, while others, regardless of belief, are facing eternal damnation? This is a complex issue of basic Christianity that speaks to the heart of

everything that we believe about God and ourselves in relationship to God. Can we, as Christians read John 3:16 as well as Romans 8: 29-30 and believe both as the inerrant Word of God? I think that we can as long as an open heart and mind is given to the Holy Spirit’s revelation.

In discussing the doctrine of predestination, we need to define the issue and some terms that accompany it. “Properly understood, the doctrine of predestination does not have to do with any and everything that happens. It has specifically to do with the *history of salvation* – with God’s plan and work for our relationship with him and with other people.”<sup>1</sup> In this paper’s discussion we will use the term “doctrine of predestination” to deal specifically and only with the redemption and salvation of the soul. Predestination is a biblically sound doctrine that defines God’s plan and involvement in our relationship as God and child of God. It defines the relationship that exists between God and all of humanity. It also attempts to define who is and is not included in the covenant of the redeemed in Christ. In a later section, we will see how theologians, assemblies and dogmatic edicts have defined doctrinal interpretation of this covenant relationship through the years. In this discussion it is also important to define several other terms and words that are intricately involved in the understanding of this doctrine and how they relate to it. The term *elect* or *election* is used to refer to God’s choice of certain people or groups of people to receive grace. At this juncture it is important to remember that election is a choice based on God’s sovereign pleasure, not on the value or goodness of those who have been chosen. In the Old Testament, there was theocratic election as when God chose Abraham to be the father of Israel or when God made Israel the elect nation of God. God also offered vocational election such as the selection of the tribe of Levi to serve as priests, the disciples when called to follow Jesus or the apostle Paul as the missionary to the Gentiles. And then there is salvational election, which is God’s sovereign election of those who are to be saved to eternal life.<sup>2</sup> *Foreknowledge* is an omniscient God’s ability to know everything prior to its occurrence, which is frequently revealed by prophets such as Isaiah’s revelation of Jesus, the Messiah in Isaiah 53. John MacArthur believes that foreknowledge is the beginning of God’s purpose for the need of salvation for humanity while predestination is the ending for that same purpose.<sup>3</sup> Essential to an understanding of the origins of the doctrine of predestination is *justification* and *sanctification*. Justification acknowledges a declaration of righteousness by God, and God alone, in both the Old and New Testament as illustrated by Paul in the fourth chapter of his Romans letter. Sanctification in

relationship to predestination is a New Testament ideal and by definition is God's purpose for the believer to be set apart as God's own by the direction of the Holy Spirit and live in a state of grace based on the belief of Christ's sacrifice at Calvary (Acts 26: 1718; 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians 2:13). These terms all lead to helping to understand the doctrine of predestination and make sense of it in our lives as born-again Christians.

“Without any doubt, the most important systematizer of Protestant theology in the sixteenth century was John Calvin.”<sup>4</sup> While obviously the idea of predestination had been dealt with minimally over the centuries, it was not until the period of the Reformation that doctrinally it gained the amount of attention that John Calvin placed upon it. Influenced by Augustine, John Calvin took Martin Luther's doctrines and systematically created a cohesive Protestant document titled Institutes of the Christian Religion. While Martin Luther was a trailblazing reformer, John Calvin preferred a calm environment in which he could study the scriptures and write about them and their meaning to the newly formed Protestant movement. Interestingly enough, during his lifetime, predestination was not the controversial issue. His views on the consecration of the Holy Eucharist – consubstantiation versus transubstantiation were the major issue. “Therefore, during this early period the main characteristic of the ‘Calvinist’ or ‘Reformed’ was not their doctrine of predestination, on which they generally agreed with the Lutherans, but rather their understanding of communion. It was the following century, as we shall see as our story unfolds, that predestination came to be seen as the hallmark of Calvinism.”<sup>5</sup>

During the seventeenth century, the Reformed tradition determined and established its doctrine of beliefs in two assemblies that produced the orthodoxy that best expressed the theological elements of Calvinism. As with all doctrinal decisions, debate and argument ensued. To alleviate the debate in the Netherlands, the Dutch government called the Synod of Dort in 1618 to develop the tenets of the Reformed orthodoxy once and for all. Jacobus Arminius, a devout Calvinist, was asked to refute the opinions of Dirck Koornhert, another theologian who rejected some of John Calvin's ideas presented in Institutes of the Christian Religion. Instead of being able to refute them, after study, prayer and soul searching, Arminius concluded that Koornhert was right. Thus began the continuing argument over the meaning of predestination. Challenging Arminius was a Calvinist who believed in predestination in the strictest sense – Francis Gomarus. The issue finally came to the forefront concerning the real meaning of the doctrine of predestination. There was never any question of whether or not there existed such a doctrine,

but in what it meant. The debate was centered on how predestination takes place. Arminius argued that predestination was based on God's foreknowledge of who would have faith in Jesus Christ in the future while Gomarus believed that faith came only to those whom God had predestined to have it according to the sovereign will of God. Both sides issued documents stating their beliefs, and to put an end to this debate the Synod of Dort was convened. The five doctrines that were affirmed at this assembly became the benchmarks of orthodox Calvinism. These five doctrines stated that the election of the predestined is based solely on God's unfathomable will, that Jesus Christ died only for the elect, human nature is so corrupt that even with the light of Christ within that light cannot be used correctly, irresistible grace and the preservation of the elect meaning that they are incapable of falling from grace.

During the approximate time that the Synod of Dort was taking place on the continent, The Westminster Assembly was convening in England due to the rise in the Puritanical revolution. This assembly developed a more extensive and detailed document known as “The Westminster Confession.” Essentially “The Westminster Confession” proclaimed the same doctrinal issues as the Synod of Dort. These strict interpretations gave rise to continued dissent on the meaning of predestination.

<sup>1</sup>Guthrie Jr., Shirley C. *Christian Doctrine*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1968, pp. 125-126

<sup>2</sup>MacArthur, John F. *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary—Ephesians*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1986, pp. 10

<sup>3</sup>MacArthur, John F. *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary—Romans 1-8*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1986, pp. 497

<sup>4</sup>Gonzalez, Justo L. *The Story of Christianity—volume 2*. San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1985, pp. 61

<sup>5</sup>Gonzalez, Justo L. *The Story of Christianity—volume 2*. San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1985, pp. 69