

“Whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son.” (Rom 8:29)

✠ Lecture V: Predestination in The Orthodox Concept ✠

✠ St. Augustine & Predestination:

Grace is a gift, not a reward. This insight is fundamental to St. Augustine. If grace were a reward, humans could purchase their salvation through good works. They could earn their redemption. Yet this, according to St. Augustine, was totally contrary to the New Testament proclamation of the doctrine of grace (Please review the previous lecture: ‘Grace in the Orthodox Concept’). Affirming the gift character of grace was a bulwark against inadequate theories of salvation. St. Augustine’s insight had much to commend it. However, on further inspection, it proved to have its darker side. As the Pelagian controversy became increasingly hardened and bitter, the more negative implications of St. Augustine’s doctrine of grace became clearer. In what follows, we shall explore those implications.

If grace is a gift, God must be free to offer it, or not to offer it, on the basis of any external consideration. If it is offered on the basis of any such consideration, it is no longer a gift – it is a reward for a specific action or attitude. Grace, according to St. Augustine, only remains gracious if it is nothing more or nothing less than a gift, reflecting the liberality of the one who gives. But the gift is not given to all. It is particular. Grace is only given to some (It is actually offered to all, but not all accept it). St. Augustine’s defense of the graciousness of God, which rests on his belief that God must be free to give or withhold grace, thus entails the recognition of the *particularity*, rather than the *universality*, of grace.

If this insight is linked with St. Augustine’s doctrine of sin, its full implications become clear. All of humanity is contaminated by sin, and unable to break free from its grasp. Only grace can set humanity free. Yet grace is not bestowed universally; it is only granted to some individuals. As a result only some will be saved- those to whom grace is given. St. Augustine emphasized that this did not mean that some were predestined to damnation. It meant that God had selected some from the mass of fallen humanity. The chosen few were indeed predestined for salvation. The remainder were not, according to St. Augustine, actively condemned to damnation; they were merely not elected to salvation. However, as his critics pointed out, the decision to redeem some was also a decision *not* to redeem others.

This question surfaced with new force during the predestinarian controversy of the ninth century, in which the Benedictine monk Godescalc of Orbais (c.804-c.869, also known as Gottschalk) developed a doctrine of double predestination similar to that later associated with Calvin and his followers. Pursuing with relentless logic the implications of his assertion that God has predestined some to eternal damnation, Godescalc pointed out that it was thus quite improper to speak of our Lord Jesus Christ dying for such individuals; if he had, he would have died in vain, for their fate would be unaffected. Hesitant over the implications of this assertion, Godescalc proposed that our Lord Jesus Christ died *only for the elect*. The scope of his redeeming work was restricted, limited only to those who were predestined to benefit from his death. Most ninth-century writers reacted to this assertion with disbelief. It was however to resurface in later Calvinism. (Alister E. McGrath, ‘*Christian Theology: an Introduction*’).

✠ The Universal Saving Will of God:

- “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.” (Ezek 33:11)
- “God our Savior, who desires **all men** to be saved.” (1Tim 2:4)
- “God so **loved the world** that He gave His only begotten Son, that **whoever** believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” (Jn 3:16)
- “He Himself is the propitiation for our sins and not ours only but also for the whole world.” (1Jn 2:2)
- “Go into **all the world** and preach the gospel to **every creature**.” (Mk 16:15)

✠ Human Free Will:

- “I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore **choose life.**” (Deut 30:19)
- “**If you are willing** and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but **if you refuse** and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword” (Is 1:19-20)
- “**If anyone desires** to come after Me, let him deny himself.” (Mt 16:27)
- “**If you want** to enter into life, keep the commandments.” (Mt 19:17)
- “**If you want** to be perfect, go sell what you have and give to the poor.” (Mt 19:21)
- “Behold, I stand on the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him and he with Me.” (Rev 3:20)
- “How often **I wanted** to gather your children together... but **you were not willing!**” (Mt 23:37)
- “**You are not willing to come to Me** that you may have life.” (Jn 5:40)
- “The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who arranged a marriage for his son and sent out his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding; and **they were not willing to come.**” (Mt 22:2-3) – “He came to His own, and His own **did not receive Him.**” (Jn 1:11)

✠ God’s Foreknowledge:

God, through His divine foreknowledge and recognition of what would take place in the future, knows who would do the things that please Him in righteousness and goodness using their free will. God also knows who would choose to do evil and disobey Him misusing the gift of free will.

God’s foreknowledge does not interfere with our given free will. Moreover, the divine universal saving will of God is different from His foreknowledge in case of those who perish. In other words, God wants them to be saved but He knows that they will take the wrong decisions.

✠ Predestination in The Orthodox Concept:

St. Paul said, “All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose ... for whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom 8:28-30). Notice that St. Paul said that all things work together for good to *those who love God*, he did not say, *to whom God loves*. Because it depends on them not on God.

Likewise he said, “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have come into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him” (1Cor 2:9). He did not say ‘*whom He loves*’ because their salvation depends on their response to the grace of God.

Therefore, we believe that God’s predestination for salvation is not due to His will (for God wants all to be saved) but rather due to His divine foreknowledge, “Whom He foreknew, He also predestined”. The same is clear from the words of St. Peter, “**elect according to the foreknowledge of God**” (1Pet 1:2). → The key point is to differentiate between God’s will and His foreknowledge. ←

✠ Example (1):

It is written, “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated” (Rom 9:13).

Both Jacob and Esau were called to salvation, for God loves all equally and He doesn’t show partiality (Deut 10:17). But God foreknew how these two individuals would **freely** respond to His call: Esau was hated (rejected), only because God foreknew he would choose wrongly and be wicked. Jacob was loved (accepted) because God foreknew he would participate in the faith of Abraham and serve God’s purposes. God’s foreknowledge did not interfere with their free will. Therefore, St. Paul said, “What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? **Certainly not!**” (Rom 9:14).

Similarly, though at one time St. Paul persecuted the Church, God foreknew he would repent and had elected him before he was born, “God who separated me from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace” (Gal 1:15). St. Paul’s persecution of the Church is a clear manifestation of free will, for obviously God’s Predestination (from the womb) did not interfere with his free will.

✠ Example (2):

It is written, “Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?” (**Rom 9:21**).

The potter (God) has power over the clay to make whatever he wants from it whether a vessel for honor or dishonor. But the potter (God) is also wise and just. It is absurd that a wonderful lump of clay comes into the hands of this wise potter and he makes it a vessel of dishonor. On the other hand, if the clay is rough and not fit to be a vessel for honor, the potter, then, will be obliged, due to its bad state, to make from it a vessel for dishonor. Thus it all depends upon the condition of the clay because the potter’s will is to make all the clay vessels of honor.

→ Consider the following verses:

“Look, **as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel!** The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down. And to destroy it, if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it. And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it, if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good which I said I would benefit it” (**Jer 18:6-10**).

It is clear from the above passage that God (the potter) is even willing to revoke His judgment if a person turns from his evil way and seeks his own salvation. The story of Nineveh is a clear example.

The principle of predestination and election, as the Protestants teach it, implies injustice and partiality. It also leads sinners to despair, feeling that their striving to repent is in vain and useless since they are vessels predestined for dishonor and damnation. As for the righteous, it leads them to slackness and negligence. Moreover, it leaves many questions unanswered:

1. Why did God give the world His commandments, if indeed people were predestined for salvation and damnation?
2. Why would the devil toil in tempting the elect, if they will certainly be saved?
3. On what basis would reward be given to the elect, if they had no choice in their destiny?
4. Why would God punish a person predestined to perdition?

The doctrine of predestination, as the Protestants (Calvinists) understand it, leads the world into confusion and contradicts God’s love and justice and humans’ free will.

* This lecture is adapted from, ‘*Salvation in The Orthodox Concept*’ by H.H. Pope Shenouda III.