

# **Issues in Reformed Theology**

## **Determinism**

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This class on Determinism is based upon Calvinism and the sovereignty of God. The teaching of the Bible regarding God's predestination of mankind has been a doctrine that has divided people since the New Testament age and particularly since the Reformation. It is not a simple doctrine and it opposes the natural thinking of mankind. Within Calvinism there is confusion regarding the degree of freedom that man has and what God has predetermined.

Determinism is a theological belief that all events are pre-ordained and destined to occur. There is a hard version of Determinism that views all things as necessarily occurring and there is no freedom of choice on the part of man. In another sense, all things are within the knowledge of God and those things will occur in time. There are also various aspects of what God has determined and what those mean in light of biblical teaching. This class will look at these issues in theological determinism and seek to align our thoughts with the teaching of the Bible.

It is important to note that all of Reformed Theology does not necessarily suffer from each of the aspects of Determinism that we will discuss. Those adhering to Reformed Theology do not all reach the same conclusions regarding theological determinism and there are nuances within their beliefs. Some in Reformed Theology are able to successfully communicate without falling into some of the errors we will assess. Nevertheless, these issues are important to understand because many Reformed teachers espouse them.

The rhetoric used in support of the doctrine of election by many necessitates clarification regarding the Bible's teaching on God's sovereignty and man's free will. There is a tendency among people to be so forceful in defense of the doctrine of election so as to overstate certain aspects of doctrines related to election and predestination. We ought to be careful to communicate what the Bible teaches and this becomes particularly true regarding doctrines that are more difficult for our natural mind to comprehend.

### **1. Determinism in respect to salvation**

The view that man is morally neutral and able to choose to believe in God was known as Pelagianism. The view that man is fallen and God's grace is provided to mankind in general to allow them to believe became known as Arminianism. The view that man is fallen and unable to respond to God unless God unconditionally chooses man for salvation, which cannot be resisted, is Calvinism. It is only Calvinism that struggles with the issues of theological determinism since it alone views man as unable to choose to believe in God apart from divine election.

Determinism in salvation is rooted in the teaching of the Bible and is found taught by the early church. Augustine in particular became a champion of this doctrine around 400 AD. Early in the Reformation, Determinism in salvation became an issue as Martin Luther's *On the Bondage of the Will* (1525) was in response to Roman Catholic teaching by Desiderius Erasmus that man had free will in their belief in God. Most of the leading Reformers and their followers held to the biblical doctrine of predestination, which became a subject of controversy soon after the Reformation era.

Coming out of the Reformation, Calvinism became most closely associated with the doctrine of predestination. It teaches the doctrine of election, that God has predestined before the foundation of the world those who would believe (Ephesians 1:4-5). Calvinism often speaks of the total depravity of man, meaning that man is completely unable to respond to God apart from God's irresistible grace.

This belief is taught remarkably often in the Bible and is based upon man's sinfulness rendering him incapable of seeking God (Romans 3:10-11). Being dead in sin (Ephesians 2:1-3) requires God's grace to act on man's behalf. This work of God is unilateral and cannot be thwarted by man's will since men are sinful and would reject God apart from God's intervention on their behalf.

It is important to note that the biblical doctrine of predestination speaks to the cause of man's eternal salvation. God determined who would believe and all those who are predestined will be glorified (Romans 8:29-30). It is in this sense that theological determinism is valid.

## **2. Determinism in respect to man's free will**

In its hardest form, Determinism views that man has no free will. The concept of a free will for mankind has become synonymous with Arminianism. It is viewed by many as undermining the doctrine of election and should be a term that we avoid.

The subject of free will has been a source of confusion and clarity comes only when we define what we are referring to by free will. Some Calvinists will object to the mere mention of man's free will as somehow limiting the sovereignty of God. However, the belief in free will is not inconsistent with the doctrines of election, predestination and sovereignty from the perspective of most Calvinists.

It is, however, inconsistent with God's sovereignty in election to view man as free to choose God *on his own volition*. No one seeks God (Romans 3:10-11) and no one is able to make the choice to believe in Christ unless the Father who sent Christ draws him (John 6:44). Calvinists have largely sought to maintain that election is not inconsistent with man's free will. One example of an explanation is from Loraine Boettner, who compared man's freedom that is affected by sin to a bird with a broken wing. Like the bird is free to fly but is unable to do so, "the natural man is free to come to God but not able. How can he repent of his sin when he loves it? How can he come to God when he hates Him?"

Man does have certain freedom to choose what comes natural to him and the sin nature moves the unsaved away from God. But beyond man's ability to exercise free will to choose to reject Christ and man's inability to choose God on his own, what other limits exist? If God determines those who will believe, what other limitations exist in terms of the ability of man to exercise his own choices in life?

Many Calvinists will agree that man does have free will, such as Jonathon Edwards in *On the Freedom of the Will*, where he argued that man has a natural ability to be free (to think, walk, eat, etc.) but this freedom has limits (we cannot fly or live beneath the sea). There are many choices that are within the realm of our God given provision to make. This does not mean that we are able to make any of those choices apart from God since our very existence depends upon God every moment (Colossians 1:17). But in our present state God allows us to make choices in many respects.

Man has a moral ability to be free (to choose rightly) but lacks the ability to desire true righteousness due to his fallen nature resulting in no inclination for righteousness. He is free to choose but the only choice he will make is according to his sinful disposition. So truly man has an active free choice to do what he wants to do, which is apart from God's sovereign work in the heart, to serve himself and not God.

Also, God's foreknowledge of all things does not necessitate that man does not have free will for God is not described as determining all outcomes in the Bible. That God intervenes supernaturally or even providentially at times does not mean that man is not provided the opportunity for free choice at times also. God knowing of the choice in advance neither negates the realness of the choice nor renders God unable to accomplish His will through those choices.

For example, though our salvation is entirely by the grace of God, not as a result of our works (Ephesians 2:8-9), we are created for good works that we *might* walk in them (Ephesians 2:10). It is not predetermined that we will walk in them and when we serve in these opportunities with a right motivation God will reward us accordingly (1 Corinthians 3:10-15). But His work will be done in spite of our choice to walk in those good works.

Finally, even though God has predetermined the election of those who will believe in salvation, the consistent wording of the Bible in the call to salvation implies that man is able to choose to believe. This is one major reason why so many are resistant to accept the Scriptural references to God's election. How can man choose to believe if God as determined their faith before the foundation of the world?

The answer to this question lies in the grace of God enabling their belief. The elect will be led to faith by God's will but this does not necessitate they are not participating genuinely in their faith. God blesses the elect with the grace to believe and they will necessarily respond to God's initiative in exercising their will in faith. No one believes in Christ apart from the involvement of his or her will. Therefore, the exercise of our choice of faith in Christ is not inconsistent with God's sovereign work in election but is our free exercise of our will *because* God chose us in Him before the foundation of the world.

### **3. Determinism in respect to God's sovereignty**

If God is sovereign and if He has given Christ all authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18), then how does man have any freedom to decide anything?

We recognize the Bible's teaching of God's sovereignty in respect to the election of man for salvation. In this respect, God has determined who will be saved from the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4-5).

We also recognize God's sovereignty over all things. God the Father gave all authority in heaven and on earth to His Son, Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:18). Nothing happens apart from His authority.

However, there is an important difference between sovereignty and Determinism. A person can have authority but choose not to exercise that authority. God is able to be both sovereign and opt to allow things to occur.

To equate God's sovereignty with God determining all things leads to the conclusion that some of those things that happen are sinful. We cannot say or even imply that God is the cause of sin. People sin by their own volition, not from God's determination. The sovereignty of God works through the choices of man to achieve God's determined end. This is a testimony to the incredible wisdom and power of God.

Therefore, God's determination extends to what he causes and what he allows to occur. In other words, God determines many things and God *determines to allow* many things. God is fully able to sovereignly intervene and certainly does in salvation and at other times. Also, God is fully able to providentially guide outcomes while allowing for man's choices. Most choices of man, and certainly the sinful choices of man, are of his own volition, not forced or coerced, only foreknown by God. Nevertheless, God is in authority over all and determines to allow mankind to sin.

### **4. Determinism in respect to eternal damnation**

The doctrine of predestination states that God is the sole determiner of those who will be saved and receive eternal life. If God chooses those who will be saved, the logical conclusion is that God also chooses those who will not be saved. The perspective that God chooses people for eternal damnation is known as "double predestination."

John Calvin advocated the doctrine of double predestination, "All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or the other of these ends, we say that he has been predestinated to life or to death." Reformed Theology generally follows this teaching, although the term "double predestination" is more used by critics of the doctrine. Reformed theologians will generally see only one sense predestination that includes both those who receive eternal life and those chosen for eternal damnation.

There is the logical reasoning to conclude that if God predestined some for eternal life it necessarily follows that God chose not to predestine others for eternal life, thus relegating them to eternal damnation. But this explicit statement is not found in the Scripture, it follows by way of human reasoning. This logical conclusion is not found directly in the Bible but is only inferred.

One significant problem with the concept that God elects people for eternal damnation is that when the Bible speaks of election and predestination it does so only in a positive sense. The word of God speaks of God's election as a blessing for the elect. Reprobation is never spoken of in the context of God election or choosing and eternal destruction is depicted as the response of God's judgment, not the as the initiative of God's design.

Some have sought to argue that the Scripture actually teaches double predestination. For example, God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart in Exodus is often used to support this view. When we look at what Exodus says about Pharaoh's heart in each of the ten plagues of Exodus we find an interesting pattern:

1. Blood: Pharaoh's heart "became hard" (7:22)
2. Frogs: Pharaoh "hardened his own heart" (8:15)
3. Gnats: Pharaoh's heart "was hard" (8:19)
4. Flies: "Pharaoh hardened his own heart" (8:32)
5. Livestock die: Pharaoh's heart "was hard" (9:7)
6. Boils: "The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart" (9:12)
7. Hail: Pharaoh "hardened his own heart" (9:34)
8. Locusts: God announces that he has "hardened Pharaoh's heart" (10:1,10:20)
9. Darkness: God "hardened Pharaoh's heart" (10:27)
10. Death of the firstborn: God "hardened Pharaoh's heart" (11:10)

God is described as hardening Pharaoh's heart only after the first six plagues where Pharaoh first hardens his own heart. It is apparent that God confirms the hardening of Pharaoh's heart rather than causes the hardening of Pharaoh's heart.

This corresponds then to the hardening we find in Romans where Paul writes toward the beginning of this epistle where "God gave them over" (Romans 1:24, 26, 28). When people rebel against God, he confirms their choice of unbelief. It is in this sense that God hardens the hearts of men (cf. Romans 9:18).

As we look at Romans 9 and the reference to God's hardening it also describes unbelievers as vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, which seems to indicate that God prepared people for His wrath. Upon closer inspection, there is a contrast between "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" (Romans 9:22) and "vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory." Grammatically, God is specifically attributed as the One who prepared the vessels of mercy for glory (believers) and there is no specific attribution for the preparation of the vessels of wrath. Therefore, the conclusion that the vessels of wrath are prepared for destruction by God is unwarranted.

In the words of John MacArthur,

Listen, God says *I prepare* vessels for glory, but *vessels are prepared* for destruction. And what is happening there in the Greek tense, is God is taking one step away from the responsibility of preparing a person from His creative act for hell. God doesn't take that responsibility. He says there are vessels that have been prepared for destruction. And if you study the Bible very carefully you will see that every where in Scripture the responsibility for such preparation lies right in the very heart of the man who goes to hell.

There is only one book of life (Revelation 21:27). There is not a book of damnation. God actively wrote the names of the elect in the book of life and it is stated more passively that names were not written. This book of life was written before the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8, 17:8), making the elect and non-elect known before their creation. Yet this is more support for the active role of God in elect versus reprobation.

The doctrine of election is always described in the Scriptures in a positive sense of God's blessing, never in a negative sense. Therefore, there is great wisdom in being faithful to what God says about this and resist conclusions that are not provided for us in the Scripture regarding this difficult doctrinal issue.

## **5. Determinism in respect to God's decrees**

One of the topics in Calvinist theology is the "logical order of God's decrees." This deals with the question of what God determined first. The three viewpoints are known as Supralapsarianism, Infralapsarianism, and Sublapsarianism. All three are Reformed Theological perspectives with Infralapsarianism being the most popular. The terms are derived from the term "lapse" and deal with timing of God's decisions in respect to the fall of man (the lapse).

- Supralapsarianism ("before the lapse") views that God must have determined who would be saved or lost before He decided to create them. This results in God creating people in order to damn them to hell.
- Infralapsarianism ("after the lapse") views that God determined the elect after he decided to allow the fall of man.
- Sublaparianism ("under the lapse") views that God determined the elect after he decided to provide Christ as the mean of salvation.

If this debate seems esoteric it is because it is entirely speculative. There is nothing in the Bible that defends any of these positions. They rest on our human reasoning of what ought to logically follow in the mind of God. This examination by man into the order of the decrees in the mind of God seems to be closer to human arrogance rather than theological insightfulness.

## **6. Determinism in respect to our rhetoric**

Explaining the biblical truth of God's sovereign election of people for salvation is a difficult enough doctrine to communicate in itself. It is unfortunate when we say things that make this doctrine harder to understand and accept. Unnecessarily confusing statements are not helpful no matter how logical it might seem to us.

Certainly we can all explain things better than we do. If we think and prepare in advance we might improve our communication. As we have more conversations we might be speaking in a more understandable fashion. And since the doctrine of election and predestination is hard for the human mind to accept, using phrasing that adds more difficulty is not helpful.

One way this occurs is when we speculate on areas the Bible does not teach. This can be found in the debate regarding Supralapsarianism and also the issue of double predestination. These might seem logical but are not taught in the Scripture so there is no need to teach things about God that He has not taught about Himself.

Worse is when things are taught based upon speculation when the Bible says something else. One common example that many (not all) Calvinists hold to is the idea that regeneration precedes faith. The reasoning behind this is that man cannot exercise faith apart from God's sovereign act of grace to bring this about. This then comes to mean new birth occurs before a person believes and that regeneration produces belief.

Yet the Scripture frequently places regeneration as occurring on the basis of faith (John 1:12-13, 5:40, 20:31; Acts 11:18, 15:9; Galatians 3:2, 26; Ephesians 1:13; Colossians 2:12; 1 Timothy 1:16). This is an example of a willingness in Reformed Theology to hold to a belief based upon human reasoning even when explicit statements from the Bible indicate otherwise. Our next class will study a more prominent example of this in the doctrine of Limited Atonement.

## **7. Conclusion**

Some things God has specifically determined to occur and He intervenes in order to cause them to happen. We know the work of God in the salvation of the elect is what God determines. Many events are seen in the Bible as supernatural events of God's action in, among and through people. So in this sense, theological determinism is biblical.

Yet there is ample evidence of God allowing people to choose. Simply because God knows all things and has unconditionally elected some for salvation, man's choice is not eliminated. God graciously enables faith to be exercised in bringing our salvation.

Furthermore, God's sovereignty over all does not mean that He is the cause of sin. While many things He has determined, other things He has determined to allow. This willingness on God's behalf to allow man to sin does not mean He is culpable for choosing the sin itself to occur. With regard to the lost, God's role is described as actively judging them, but not in causing them to be lost.

We must exercise care with our words in the realm of the doctrine of election and predestination particularly because of the difficulty the human mind has in understanding this biblical truth. Any failure on our part to be faithful to the biblical text and jump to conclusions makes this understanding more difficult.

The desire to make sense of the doctrine of election has led many in Reformed Theology to explain their beliefs using logic more than Scripture. Support is often derived from historical Confessions of doctrine and the writings of historic and contemporary theologians. As more is said, the plain sense of passages that speak to the responsibility of man and the role of God is lost. The fact of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility may not make complete sense to some but this does not change its truthfulness.