

IF ONE LOVES GOD, ONE IS KNOWN BY HIM (I COR 8:3)

GOD'S PREDESTINATION AND FOREKNOWLEDGE IN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN TEACHING

GOD, in Christ, has chosen His faithful before the foundation of the world and predestined them in love to be His sons through Jesus Christ, that they might be holy and blameless before Him,¹ and might become brethren for His Son, among whom the Lord Jesus might stand as first-born.² They have obtained this inheritance in Christ only after being forechosen by God, in accordance with His own counsel and regardless of any merit on their part, since God had elected them even before He created the world.³

Predestination is a profound Scriptural expression of God's eternal purpose for all creation, man in particular. It speaks not only of the goal but also of the plan which God has made for its accomplishment, one that encompasses every created thing and that shapes the whole movement of time. But because of its profundity, it is not something easy to comprehend.

For us who swim within the sea of time and know no other world of being, it is difficult, and perhaps even impossible, to understand realities that transcend time. The mind of man is limited in what it can know because it is likewise limited in what it can ask. Our success at answering a question is dependent upon our success at framing it, and there are some questions we cannot answer because we cannot adequately frame them, our field of experience being so limited. As such, we must never make the mistake of thinking that logical coherence is a hallmark of spiritual truth. Often it only indicates an ignorance – or ignoring – of one or more facets of reality. No writer of the New Testament valued strict logical coherence; rather, they used antinomy and illustration. Many spiritual realities, and many of God's deeds, do not fit nicely into our categories of thought, yet this denotes not a deficiency on the part of God but of man. Does not the Lord for this reason say, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways; for as the heavens

¹ cf. Eph. 1:4-5

² cf. Rom. 8:29

³ cf. Eph. 1:11 & 2:8-9

are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts?”⁴

We must have in mind these limitations when we ask what is the mystery of Predestination. And in seeking an answer, we must realize from the outset that, this being so, we may not be able to provide an entirely satisfying one. Still, however, this mystery is not wholly beyond explanation. After all, the Scriptures themselves give us much to examine and reflect upon, and many Christian writers have said something about it that we may find helpful. But as we begin, it will be helpful to remind ourselves of two important principles of interpretation when approaching the Biblical text. The first principle is that any passage of Scripture must always be understood in the light of the whole scope or sense of Scripture. Any explanation that seems to make sense of a particular passage but at the same time does violence to the rest of the Bible cannot be accepted. This is nowhere truer than with difficult and enigmatic passages. When we reverse the proper order and instead understand the whole sense of Scripture according to an individual passage or series of passages, then we will necessarily fall into error. This was the case with the Arians; they had many proof texts to support their theological position, but they interpreted them in a way that contradicted not only other passages of Scripture, but also the Bible as a whole. There are some who have fallen into this same pit in their attempt to understand Predestination.

A second essential principle we must observe when interpreting Scripture is that any given interpretation must accord with the Church’s experience. By this is meant two things. Firstly, it must not contradict what the Church has always held. If it is a novel interpretation, one previously unknown to the Church and one which stands in opposition to her historical exegesis, then it must be rejected on that basis. Secondly, it must not contradict the Church’s experience and understanding of God – who He is and how He acts. The Scriptures themselves, it is good to recall, are not a sourcebook for doctrine. They are, rather, a record of man’s personal encounter with God. The beginning and foundation of this encounter lies in the Scriptures, but it continues in the Church to this day. It is this continuing encounter that we refer to as Tradition, a living experience that is handed

⁴ Is. 55:8-9

down from one generation of believers to another. This occurs first and foremost in the Liturgy, and it is exemplified in the saints. For this reason, the Tradition can be understood, perhaps best understood, as a hermeneutical principle by which we interpret the Bible. Both – the Scripture and Tradition – are grounded in the personal encounter with God and not simply academic study. If, therefore, a certain interpretation presents to us a vision of God that is not consonant with what we see in the life of the Church, the Body of Christ, then it cannot be accepted.

There are some Christians who understand Predestination in a way that cannot be reconciled with either of these principles. Because of this, we cannot accept their interpretation, though it is a popular and, at least on one level, a convincing one.⁵ Therefore, this short paper will take up this subject, hoping to present an understanding of Predestination that accords with these two principles and reflects the teaching of the Orthodox and Apostolic Church as found in the Scriptures. In order to do this, we will begin by discussing the perspective from which the New Testament writers speak of Predestination. We will next discuss the object of God's predestining, what the Scriptures call His "purpose" and the "counsel of His will."⁶ We will consider the question of man's freedom of choice and moral responsibility in relation to this, and finally, seek to clarify precisely what it is to which man is predestined.

This essay, we should add, is merely an explanation meant to make the student of theology more familiar with an often misunderstood theme of Scripture. It is not intended to be an academic paper or argued proof in favor of a position, neither is it meant to be polemical in nature, though admittedly, a discussion of one position sometimes requires criticism of another.

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Predestination is a translation of the Greek word προόριζω, which is a combination of the prefix προ, meaning *before* and the word 'ορίζω, meaning variously to *determine, decide,*

⁵ v. Appendix I

⁶ v. Eph 1:11; in Greek, πρόθεσις and βουλὴ τοῦ θελήματος.

appoint, limit, set a bound, or separate, coming as it does from the word ὄπος, that is, *a boundary or limit*. The English convention is to translate this word as *predestine*, though it could also be translated as *predetermine, pre-appoint, pre-ordain*, or even something like *limit or separate beforehand*.

The translation *predestine* has, admittedly, a good deal of baggage, since a certain interpretation of the word was already well-established by the time of the translation of the Bible into English and no doubt influenced the translators. Because of this, one might wonder whether it is better to use another and fresh translation of this word. Nonetheless, because the English convention is to translate it thus, and for other reasons that we will see below, we will continue to use *predestine*, hoping instead to reclaim the word rather than re-translate it. Still, the reader would do well to bear in mind the other nuances which the original Greek word can hold.

As a concept, Predestination does not originate with the New Testament. It is, in fact, a concept of Jewish theology that predates the coming of our Lord in the flesh. As an idea it appears only in later Judaism and is first seen in earnest in a number of works from the late Second Temple period of Judaism, that is, the period of Jewish history falling roughly two centuries before Christ and one century after (200 B.C. –A.D. 100). In particular, it is a theme arising from Jewish apocalyptic, whence it became a part of the Jewish theological idiom of the first century A.D. While this is not the place to review in depth its use in Jewish apocalyptic, we must nonetheless say something about this strand of Judaism if we are to discuss with any success Predestination as it is found in the New Testament.

Apocalyptic is that genre of Jewish and Christian writings concerned with the encounter with God and His angels and the revelation of heavenly realities and eschatological mysteries. In a wider sense, it refers also to the whole complex of ideas and symbols, pervasive in this period, that lay behind those writings.⁷ In the first sense, it is represented in the New Testament by the *Revelation of John*, an apocalyptic work; in the second sense, it is present throughout the New Testament, and apocalyptic material can be found in

⁷ For a better understanding of what characterizes apocalyptic writings, the reader should see Martha Himmelfarb's *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*. Oxford University Press, 1993.

nearly every book.⁸ Indeed, the categories of thought in which many New Testament teachings are framed are those of the apocalyptic tradition. This is certainly the case for Predestination.

In apocalyptic writings, Predestination has the purpose, if we might refer to it in this way, of showing that history is entirely determined before ever it started and that man need only wait for it to unfold. The End was determined even before the Beginning. God has ordained the world and all the times for a definite end, an end to which they have been inexorably advancing. God controls all things, in terms of both space and time, and there are no surprises for Him. No matter how great man's wickedness and perversion, it cannot undo God's purpose.

The idea that history has a purpose and a goal is itself rather unique. It is not an idea the Jews shared with their pagan neighbors. For the latter, history is random and, according to some, cyclical. The Jews, however, held the conviction that there is a clear purpose and design behind all the seemingly haphazard events of history: invasions, conquests, liberations, natural disasters, the movement of peoples, and the rise and fall of nations and empires. As God brought the world into being, so He was infallibly guiding the whole of its history to the fulfilment of a specific and definite end.

Thus, to speak of God's predestination, pre-determining, and pre-appointing, is a Hebraic way of speaking of His omniscience and omnipotence. God knows all things, even the hidden things, whether they be the secrets of men's hearts or those things which have not yet come to pass. In this way, the God of the Jews is different not only from men and angels, but also from the pagan gods. For the pagan, even the gods are subject to fate; for the Jew, however, God is high above all things, and is the master of fates and of destiny.

As such, one of the chief concerns of Jewish apocalyptic is "the preexistence of eschatological realities hidden in God before time was, and only to be revealed at the end."⁹

⁸ To understand better how apocalyptic language is so important to the New Testament, see, *inter alia*, Jean Danielou's *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, Darton, Longman & Todd: London, 1964; and Alan Segal's *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee*, Yale University Press: New Haven, 1990.

⁹ Danielou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, p. 298.

From this point of view, the realities of the End Times, things which for us have not yet come to pass, are already existent for God. This is a very important notion, though one admittedly difficult to grasp. The eschatological realities, though they do not yet exist *in time*, do exist in God's *mysterion*, His purpose or plan hidden from all ages.¹⁰

For God knows all things beforehand, both past and present at once, and everything which is going to happen in the future up to the end of the world. He sees them as already present, because in and through Him all things hold together.¹¹

These realities are already present, then, in God's counsels and purpose and foreknowledge, and the Hebrew mind, in its concrete manner of thinking, refers to this as an *existence*. From the perspective of apocalyptic, then, the eschatological realities (such as the Incarnation and saving work of Christ, the Church, the apostasy of Israel, the calling of the Gentiles, the Last Day, the names of all the saved, etc.) exist already in one mode of being, though they have yet to be revealed or manifested in time. They are not or will not be new things, but rather the manifestation of ancient, preexisting things, existing until now only in God's intention.

It is for this reason that Paul can say God has given the faithful grace in Christ Jesus ages ago, before any of them came into being, but only now has that grace been manifested with the appearing of Christ in the flesh.¹² In the same way, the Scriptures can say of the Lamb that He is "slain from the foundation of the world" and of the elect that they are chosen by God since "before the world existed."¹³ This is also why early Christian writers could speak about the preexistence of the Church,¹⁴ which is an eschatological reality, and why later writers could even say that man was fashioned according to the image of the incarnate Christ and not vice-versa.¹⁵ Such an approach, obviously, reinforces an im-

¹⁰ v. Rom 16:25-6, Eph 3:9, Col. 1:26, and I Pet 1:12

¹¹ *ibid.* 1.

¹² II Tim 1:9-10

¹³ Rev 13:8, Eph 1:4

¹⁴ v. *II Clement* xiv 1 & *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Vision ii 4, 1.

¹⁵ It is true that St Paul speaks of the first-created man as the first Adam and of Christ as the second, and says that the physical comes first and then the spiritual, for on the plane of time this is true (v. I Cor 15:45-6). But as Nicholas Cabasilas remarks, "it was not the old Adam who was the model for the new, but the new Adam for the old... For those who have known him first, the old Adam is the archetype because of our

portant aspect of apocalypse, namely the revelation of certain events that have not yet come to pass but without doubt will. It is because of this absolute certainty of God's purposes that we prefer translating the Greek προόπιζω by the 'strong' word *Predestination*, as noted above.

The notion of Predestination presupposes this Semitic, apocalyptic perspective. It is not a perspective common to us now, and so, lacking this conceptual foundation, we can easily misunderstand the Scriptural meaning of Predestination and, as a result, fall into error in our exegesis. As such, an imaginative reconstruction of the original context, such as we have attempted here, can be of considerable benefit in understanding Predestination itself, as well as why it is present in the New Testament.¹⁶

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To proceed further in our discussion, we must next ask what, according to the Scriptures, is God's purpose, foreseen and foreordained by Him from before the ages but hidden in the intention of His will until now. The Jews would answer His chosen people, Israel, and their well-being.¹⁷ They believed that God's righteousness was to be manifested to them, and through them to all the world. For this reason, they were given the "sonship, the glory, the covenants, the Law, the worship, and the promises," and from them was to come the Messiah.¹⁸ And yet, with the coming of that Messiah, Jesus, a new understanding of the Jewish expectations emerged, necessitated by the event of the Incarnation. For all the promises made to Israel found their sole fulfilment when the Son of God came among men, wrought His saving work, and was raised and glorified in the flesh. As St Gregory Palamas remarks, "the finest of God's works was accomplished when the Lord became

fallen nature. But for Him who sees all things before they exist the first Adam is the imitation of the second" (*The Life in Christ*, p. 190).

¹⁶ When the Church began to recast her theology into the categories of Greek thought – a process that began very early on and can be seen in the opening verses of the Gospel of John – the apocalyptic, eschatological perspective began to be replaced by the philosophical perspective, which borrowed its key concepts from Platonism. As such, the context for understanding Predestination disappeared. This may be the chief reason why it did not continue as a prominent theme in later theology.

¹⁷ According to II Esdras, for instance, God created the world for the sake of Israel (7:11).

¹⁸ Rom 9:4-5

man. Every good and noble thing that God had done for our sake before the Incarnation, as part of His saving plan, was directed towards this end... and even more so, its outcome: the saving Passion and Resurrection.”¹⁹ All was done for the sake of Christ, and it was in Christ Himself that God’s eternal purpose was brought to pass.²⁰

For God’s plan, according to St Paul, was to unite in Christ “all things, things in heaven and things on earth.”²¹ Everything was made through Him and for Him:

He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the Church; He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything He might be preëminent. For in Him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His Cross (Col 1:17-20).

God’s purpose, then, was to unite all of creation in Christ and to put all things under His feet, making Him “the head over all things for His Church.”²² But the Church, according to Paul, is the New Israel and, moreover, Christ’s own Body, the “fullness of Him who fills all in all.”²³ For this reason, it too is the object of God’s eternal purpose, as also the means by which that purpose is revealed.²⁴

In the apostolic thought, therefore, Predestination refers first and foremost to the person of Jesus Christ, who was “destined before the foundation of the world but made manifest at the end of times.”²⁵ God’s preëternal plan centers not around the old Israel, as the Jews believed, but around the person of their Messiah. He is the “chosen remnant,”²⁶ and in Him humanity, predestined for union with God, has fulfilled its destiny. Moreover, in Him there is also a predestined people, the elect. And all those who ‘become’ Christ, that is, a member of His Body, the Church, also enter into God’s act of Predestination, for they become co-heirs with Christ, being conformed to Him, in order that He might be the

¹⁹ *Hom* 41.11

²⁰ Eph. 3:11

²¹ Eph 1:9-10

²² Eph 1:22-23

²³ *ibid.*; v. also Gal 6:16, I Cor 12:27, Eph 5:30, and Col 1:18, 24

²⁴ Eph 3:10

²⁵ I Pet 1:20

²⁶ cf. Rom 11:5 & St Symeon the New Theologian, 2nd *Ethical Discourse* 2.

first-born among many brethren.²⁷ Therefore, the key to understanding Predestination is the key to understanding every other aspect of God's saving work – *in Christ*. Justification is in Christ, adoption is in Christ, salvation is in Christ, and likewise predestination is in Christ.

We must here understand Christ to be both head and body: *totus Christus, caput et corpus* in the words of St Augustine. Christ is the new Adam, and all those who are in Him are new as well, a new creation through baptism.²⁸ The mystery of two, husband and wife, becoming one flesh is profound, according to St Paul. But, this mystery, he continues, refers not to the marriage itself, but to what it represents: Christ and the Church.²⁹ The union between head and body, between Christ and His Church, was planned before all ages, and in the Age to Come there will be an unceasing celebration of the wedding feast.³⁰ For this reason, just as Paul said above that all things were created for the sake of Christ,³¹ so we can also say, as does the *Shepherd*, that all things were created “for His holy Church’s sake.”³²

According to Jewish thought, as we saw above, the promises of God and the working of providence was for the sole benefit of the old Israel, that is, Israel after the flesh. The first Christians knew that this was no longer so, believing that only those who were in Christ were truly of Israel, but they still thought that membership in the Chosen People was limited to Jews. They soon realized, however, with a measure of astonishment, that God had called the Gentiles into the new Israel also. Peter was the first to receive this revelation, in his meeting with Cornelius.³³ Paul, reflecting on it, wrote to the Gentile converts in Asia:

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ.

²⁷ Rom 8: 17, 29

²⁸ v. Gal 6:15

²⁹ Eph 5:21-32

³⁰ Rev 19:6-9

³¹ Col 1:16

³² Vision I 1, 6

³³ Acts 10

For He is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in His flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that He might create in Himself one new man in place of two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the Cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end ... So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God ... fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise of Christ Jesus through the gospel (Eph. 2:12-17, 19; 3:6).

What is more, entry into the Chosen People was not to be by the Law of Moses, as the Jews supposed, but rather by faith in the Messiah. The Jews based their relationship with God on the Law, but, again, the early Christians realized that this was not God's intent. The Law was a provisional revelation and availed nothing after the coming of Christ; rather, justification before God came only through Christ and faith in Him.

Summing up then, the preëternal plan of God, the eschatological mystery revealed at last to men and angels, was the union of all men in Christ, both Jew and Gentile, on the basis of faith, and the creation of a new humanity, the Church, which is the new Israel of God. Therefore, any discussion or mention of God's Predestination in the New Testament (and in subsequent early Christian literature) has as its object the affirmation that it is not the Jewish people, but rather Christ, the seed of Abraham³⁴ – and all those 'in Him' – who is the sole inheritor of the promises of God and the perfect expression of His preëternal design. This affirmation, coupled with the rejection of the Jews on account of their hardness of heart and the subsequent realization by the Jewish Christians that, except for a small remnant, the old Israel was not predestined to life, was a shocking and troubling turn of events.

Yet, despite the fact that many of the Jews had rejected Christ, thus making themselves vessels of wrath,³⁵ this did not make the purpose of God of no effect, neither did it make the calling of the Gentiles and their justification by faith instead of Law an after-thought.³⁶ Rather, God had ordained this from the very beginning, having foreknown the obstinacy of the Jews. Indeed, Paul saw it prophesied long before in both the rejection of

³⁴ Gal 3:16

³⁵ Rom 9:22

³⁶ Gal 3:8

Ishmael and the election of Isaac and the rejection of Esau and the election of Jacob, as also in the words of the Lord to Elijah about the remnant that He had reserved for Himself.³⁷

Therefore, when we encounter a reference to Predestination, we must have in mind chiefly two things about God's purpose: i) the coming of Jesus Christ to recapitulate all things in Himself and reconcile them to God, and so open a way into heaven for man; and ii) the tragedy of the apparent failure of God's purpose on account of the rejection of Christ by the Jews, but the assertion by the Apostles instead that this was long foreseen by God and that the calling of the Gentiles by faith and their incorporation into Christ is God's purpose. So, according to the mystery long hidden but at last revealed, Christ's coming was ordained by God from all eternity and the Gentiles were chosen in Him from before the creation of the world.

God's plan, then, contrary to expectations, has in fact been fulfilled. And what the Christians of the first generations were witnessing with regard to the rejection of Christ and His Gospel on the part of the Jews was in fact ordained by God and was a part of His deep and mysterious purpose whereby the privileges of ancient Israel were transferred to the Church and the Gentiles were made partakers thereof. This truth was, doubtless, a source of great comfort and reassurance for the small and embattled community of the earliest Christians, alienated alike from Jewish and Gentile society.

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Predestination, moreover, emphasizes that both the initiative and the means of salvation are God's, and that His call to salvation in Christ is not dependent on what we have done, but is wholly gratuitous and undeserved. We only love God because He first loved us, and He showed His love in that while we were yet sinners, He was willing to die for us and so reconcile us to Himself.³⁸ Not only so, but God has loved us from before the creation of the world and has appointed us for adoption into Christ, and has made all ages and

³⁷ v. Rom 9:6-13, 11:2-5, & Gal 4:21-31. v. Appendix II.

³⁸ I Jn 4:10, 19; Rom 5:8

times to serve this particular end – our salvation in Christ. This is a grand and staggering truth.

We know that God has established His Church ‘from the ages;’ but this gives rise to new questions. For the Church is not an abstract concept but a concrete reality made up of the saints, men and women adopted by God. They are the Body of Christ, and God has predestined them for membership in her and salvation in Christ. This being so, how is God’s choice related to man’s choice? And how is what a man does related to what God predestines? Indeed, is it related at all? These are the questions that usually dominate any discussion of Predestination, and for this reason, it is necessary for us to examine them next.

Predestination ought not be equated necessarily with Determinism, that is, the belief that all a man’s actions and choices are determined by causes external to his will. Nor should it be equated with the belief that God controls everything absolutely and that it is His choice, and His alone, wholly independent of man, that determines who will be saved and who will be condemned. Some do hold this position. It seems to be the solution taken by the Koran, as also by some Christian theologians.

The relationship between God’s actions and man’s choices is, admittedly, mysterious and hard to fathom. For the Jew of the first century, there was always a certain tension present. At times it was possible to speak as if salvation were God’s action; yet at other times it was spoken of as if it were up to man to choose to believe and obey, with everything depending on him. The Jewish religious was not a speculative philosopher, and while these two elements needed to be distinguished, they were never neatly reconciled. They were seen as two sides of the same coin, and just as you cannot see the back side of a coin if you are looking at its face, so it was difficult to understand man’s part when speaking of God’s, and vice versa. But the Jewish mind was comfortable with this antinomy and its resulting tension.³⁹

So was the early Church. The New Testament itself approaches the question in the same way.⁴⁰ Our Lord makes clear that “without Him we can do nothing,” and the Apost-

³⁹ v. E.P. Sanders, *Judaism: Belief and Practice*, pp. 247-51, 373-76 & 418-9.

⁴⁰ cf. II Tim. 2:19.

tle stresses that God is at work in us “both to will and to work for His good pleasure,” for He has “saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of His own purpose and the grace which He gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago”, having “chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world.”⁴¹ Yet at the same time, we are told to “work out our salvation with fear and trembling,”⁴² and to be “zealous to confirm our call and election, for if we do this we will never fall; so there will be richly provided for us an entrance into the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Saviour.”⁴³ Man then, can do nothing to save himself, only God can; but salvation is only given to those who believe God and keep his commandments.

Some may find that this is an inadequate solution to the question. Certainly many have been tempted to analyze this relationship more precisely, with conclusions all-too-often erroneous. Still, something more can be said. But in seeking an answer, we must first define the bounds of our inquiry by noting two fundamental theological premises, one that concerns God and the other man.

The first is God’s antecedent desire that “all men should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth;” for He “takes no pleasure in the death of a sinner but rather desires that he should turn from his way and live.”⁴⁴ The second is man’s power of self-determination. This is an essential property of the human person and one of the chief ways in which man is made in the image of God. Without it man is no better than an unreasoning beast; with it he is a rival of the angels. Without such a freedom, there can be no responsibility and so no guilt. Every call to repentance and obedience and every threat of punishment in the Scriptures is made absurd if man has no real ability to choose either virtue or vice. Apart from freedom of will, there can be no genuine love, which alone is the basis for a true relationship with God.

Obviously, these two realities – God’s will to salvation and man’s freedom of choice – can be at odds with one another. God may always will the salvation of man, but man may

⁴¹ Jn. 15:5; Phil. 2:13; II Tim. 1:9; Eph. 1:4.

⁴² II Pet. 1:10; Phil. 2:12.

⁴³ II Pet. 1:10-11. See also II Thess. 2:10-13, where Paul makes both God and the will of man the cause of salvation (or perdition).

⁴⁴ I Tim 2:4, Ezek 33:11; cf. St Symeon the New Theologian’s discussion in his 2nd *Ethical Discourse* 1.

choose not to accept it. Thus it was said of the Pharisees and the Scribes, when they refused the baptism of John, that “they rejected the will of God for themselves.”⁴⁵ While it is true that it is only by God’s grace that we can trust Him and love Him, for without Him we can do nothing, still God’s grace does not make us love Him, it only enables us to do so. The choice remains ours.

And should we choose to reject God, then He, in His ineffable condescension and loving humility, out of regard for His creature whom He has endowed with the gifts of reason and free-will, lays aside His own will. For God simply stands at the door and knocks, waiting for us to open.⁴⁶ He never forces man’s consent, even if it means that man’s freedom will bring him to Hell. This is the inalienable power – albeit a potentially tragic one – of God’s gift of freedom. It is, incidentally, for this reason that the Church cannot accept the so-called *Apocatastasis*, the belief that, in the end, all men will necessarily be saved. For such a doctrine denies man’s freedom by not allowing for the possibility that he can reject God’s saving love even on the eternal plane. The reality of man’s freedom must allow for the possibility of eternal damnation.⁴⁷

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Having laid this foundation, we can now turn to attempting a solution to the problem of the relationship between God’s act of Predestination and man’s freedom of choice. The Scriptures are clear in asserting that God has made a selection from humanity and has chosen some to be joined to His Son,⁴⁸ the obvious implication being that He has not chosen others. So some He has predestined to life and others He has not. But why? On what basis does He predestine some but not others? And what does this predestining entail? We will spend the rest of this paper attempting an answer to these questions.

St Paul gives us the beginning of a solution when he writes to the Christians in Rome:

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He fore-

⁴⁵ Luke 7:30

⁴⁶ v. Rev 3:20

⁴⁷ v. Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *St Silouan the Athonite*, p. 109

⁴⁸ v. Acts 13:48, I Thess 1:4

knew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom He predestined He also called; and those whom He called He also justified; and those whom He justified He also glorified.⁴⁹

We see here that the process of man's salvation begins not with *predestination* but with *foreknowledge*. God predestined those whom He knew beforehand. But what does it mean to say that He foreknew them? Surely God, who is all-knowing, knows all men before He fashioned them, and knows the hearts of both the good and the wicked. What then is meant here?

In the language of the Scriptures, knowing has a special meaning. The sacrifices were said to bring to God's remembrance His people, so that thinking on them, He would regard them kindly and forgive their sins.⁵⁰ The same is true of the high priestly vestments, upon which was engraved the names of the twelve tribes "as a continual remembrance before the Lord."⁵¹ The angel sent to Cornelius uses the same language when he assures him that his "prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God."⁵² In the same way, it is said by the Psalmist that the "righteous man shall be in everlasting remembrance."⁵³ This is remembrance not by future generations, but by God. Because of this, the righteous man shall have no fear, knowing God is ever mindful of him. It is for this reason that we pray for the departed in Christ that their memory would be eternal with God. Iniquity, too, can be brought to remembrance before God, but this provokes His wrath and brings about punishment.⁵⁴

Our Lord Jesus says of His sheep that He knows them and, moreover, that He is known of them.⁵⁵ That is, they recognize one another. Yet of the unwise virgins in the parable, He says He does not know them, and still, to some others, men who prophesied and worked miracles in His name, He says that He *never* knew them, a terrible sentence

⁴⁹ Rom. 8:28-30

⁵⁰ v., *inter alia*, Lev 2:2, where 'remembrance' is connected with the notion of a sacrifice offered by fire becoming a 'pleasing odor to the Lord.'

⁵¹ Exod 28:29

⁵² Acts 10:4, 31

⁵³ Ps 112:6 (Heb)

⁵⁴ v. I Kgs 17:18, Ezek 21:23-24

⁵⁵ Jn 10:14

to hear from the lips of Christ.⁵⁶ Why did He not know them? Because they are evildoers, and though they invoked His name, they did not the will of His Father. And according to St Paul, it is possible, in some sense, to be unknown to God and yet come to be known by Him, for he says to the Galatians, “now that you have come to know God, or rather, be known by God.”⁵⁷ But what makes God know us? Paul answers in his first letter to the Christians in Corinth, “if one loves God one is known by Him,”⁵⁸ because our Lord knows those whom He loves and He loves those who love His Son. “He who loves me,” says Jesus, “will be loved by my Father and I will love him;”⁵⁹ and later He says that the Father loves us because we have loved Christ and believed in Him.⁶⁰

To say that the all-knowing God *knows* a person, then, means that He loves that person and has a relationship with him, one of intimacy. Thus, to say that He foreknows someone is to say that He knew from all eternity that such a man would love Him. This seems to be precisely what the Apostle had in mind in the passage quoted above, where he says that “those whom He foreknew He predestined,” for there he also said that “God works for good with those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose.”⁶¹ What again is God’s purpose? The union of all things in Christ, that He may be the head of all creation.

God foreknew those, then, who would love Him and be conformed to His Son. St Symeon, a theologian of the tenth-century, confirms this, saying:

All who have believed in Christ are foreknown and predestined, and become conformed to the image of the Son of God ... He, as God, knew beforehand the disobedience of the Hebrews, by reason of their faithlessness, and the conversion of the Gentiles out of faith. And, before the ages, He predestined that as many as should believe in Him and be baptized in His name, that is, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and eat the pure Body of His Son and drink His precious Blood,

⁵⁶ Matt 25:12 & 7:23, respectively.

⁵⁷ Gal 4:8

⁵⁸ I Cor 8:3

⁵⁹ Jn 14:21, 23

⁶⁰ Jn 16:27

⁶¹ Rom 8:28-9

would be justified from sin, which is to say, would be freed and glorified, and become partakers of life everlasting.⁶²

God foreknew, then, all those who would love His Son and believe in Him, and knowing them beforehand, He loved them and predestined them to glory, and prepared for them His Kingdom from the foundation of the world.⁶³ Note that the Apostle is careful not to say that God foreknew their actions or their choices, for God's relationship with man is always personal; He foreknew *them*, who they are – their 'hearts,' in the idiom of Scripture.⁶⁴ Thus the cause of their being predestined is not their actions, for they were chosen by God before they had done anything either good or bad;⁶⁵ rather, the cause is God's knowledge, and the initiative is His.⁶⁶

This is one of the chief notes of Predestination: that God always takes the initiative. He may foreknow who will love Him, but they only love Him because He has called them. "You did not choose me, but I chose you," says our Lord to His apostles. And "no one can come to the Father unless the Father who sent me draws Him." This is not to deny man's freedom, but to say that the freedom is barren without God's grace. According to one Scriptural commentator:

Saying this, Christ does not deny our free will – far from it! Rather, He reveals how greatly in need of God's help and cooperation is the man who would believe. Furthermore, the Father draws to Himself those who freely incline to Him. He does not coerce those who choose to be disinclined ... God is near to all, but draws to Himself only those who are willing and who show an affinity to Him.⁶⁷

Thus man stands in need of God's grace to do any good. "Apart from me, ye can do nothing" (that is, no good thing),⁶⁸ according to the Lord, for He it is that works in us "both to will and to work for His good pleasure."⁶⁹ To love God, therefore, and to believe in Him

⁶² 2nd *Ethical Discourse* 2 & 7.

⁶³ Matt 25:34

⁶⁴ This is, according to St Peter, the reason God chose Cornelius and his family for regeneration in Christ, because He knew their hearts (Acts 15:8).

⁶⁵ cf. Rom 9:11

⁶⁶ Yet when God's 'knowledge' of someone is negative, often He is said not to know the person but his iniquities. Again, v. I Kgs 17:18, Ezek 21:23-24.

⁶⁷ Blessed Theophylact, *Explantion of the Gospel of John*, p. 108 of the English edition.

⁶⁸ Jn 15:5

⁶⁹ Phil 2:13

and do His will, we are in need of what are called God's *prævenient* and *cooperating* grace, that is, His power must help us both to will what is right and to perform it. For "God is the source and author of all good, and without His cooperation and assistance we are powerless either to will good or to do it."⁷⁰

Here is a conundrum. God loves us because we loved Him, but we are only able to love Him because He first loved us and gave us the help and grace necessary to love Him. Which is it, then? Does God love because He was loved, or do we love because God loved us? Perhaps it is best to sum it up as follows. God foreknew those who, given the grace, would love Him and follow Him; these He loved and chose, before they ever came into being, and gave them the grace necessary for them to love Him. He did not cause their choice nor did He determine who would believe in Him and who would not. God's foreknowledge does not cause man's choice; it simply knows it, even before it is made.⁷¹ But everything starts with God. Strictly speaking, then, the initiative is God's and we only love because God first loved us.

But what of those to whom He has not given of His grace? Is this the cause of their not loving God? It is not. For God foreknew that, even given the treasures of His grace, such would choose to reject Him. So the Lord may give grace only where He knows that the will, supplied with this grace, will choose to follow Him. No one can say because of this that his not loving God is on account of not having the needed grace, for if God did not give it, it was because in His foreknowledge He knew that such a person would reject, squander, or betray that grace.

Yet there do seem to be instances where God does give His grace even to those whom He knows will betray it. But in such cases, even this is done in His wisdom and foresight, that such men might be an instructive example, even if against their will. St John of the Ladder explains how in the following anecdote:

⁷⁰ St John Damascene, *On the Orthodox Faith* II 30.

⁷¹ v. St John Damascene, *de Fide Orthodoxa* II 29 & 30. In the latter section, John draws an important distinction between *foreknowledge* and *predestination*: "One should note that God foreknows all things but that He does not predestine them all." The two are not to be identified. v. also St Symeon the New Theologian, 2nd *Ethical Discourse* 1 and cf. the rabbinic maxim attributed to Rabbi Aqiba: "All is foreseen, but freedom of choice is given" (*Aboth* 3.16).

Someone asked one of those who could see: “Why does God, who foresees their falls, adorn some with gifts and the power to work wonders?” And he replied: “In order to make other spiritual men more careful, and to demonstrate the freedom of the human will, and to cause those who fall to be without any excuse at the last judgment.”⁷²

In a similar manner, there may be times when God does give to some grace – that grace needed both to will the good and to do it – but then deliberately withdraws it after a time. This is what is meant when we speak of God hardening someone’s heart.⁷³ But here, too, God withdraws His grace only after those to whom it is given make no proper use of it.

* * * * *

It remains for us to ask, To what is man predestined? The Scriptures give us a number of answers, all variations on a theme: to eternal life (Acts 13:48), to conformity with the image of Christ (Rom 8:29), to adoption (Eph 1:5), to the obtaining of salvation (I Thess 5:9), and to obedience to Christ (I Pet 1:2). In brief, we can say that those foreknown by God are destined to life, as opposed to those who will succumb to judgment and eternal destruction.⁷⁴

A possible understanding of Predestination is to say that God knows who will persevere until the end in the faith and life of Christ, even though they don’t know it themselves, and these are the ones whom He has predestined. While they remain free, on the plane of time, to either choose life in Christ or to reject it, to God this decision and its ultimate, eternal outcome is already known, since He dwells above time. And those whom He sees to have chosen life in Christ and to attain salvation are the ones whom He predestined from all the ages. In this sense, Predestination includes the notion of the *perseverance of the saints*.

However, in developing an Orthodox approach, we must be careful not to let the debates of Western Christianity define our terms and frame our discussion. St Augustine, in the fifth century, was the first to raise this discussion in earnest. He concluded, based on

⁷² *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 26.131

⁷³ cf. Rom. 9:18

⁷⁴ cf. II Thess 1:9

his reading of Scripture, that God gives an irresistible grace to the elect, such that they cannot but will to follow Him. He makes them both will and persevere in willing. Though this grace insures salvation, it is not given to all men, but only to those whom God, according to His own inscrutable purposes, has chosen to give it.⁷⁵ But given this grace, they will, without doubt and exception, remain steadfast in their faith and life and will attain to heaven.

This presents many problems, though this is not the place to examine them.⁷⁶ It is the same line followed by Jean Calvin in the sixteenth century and by his students to this day. For our purposes, it is enough to point out that it considers Predestination to be closed and absolute, by which I mean that one who is predestined will, no matter what, be acquitted at the Last Judgment and enter into the Kingdom prepared for the elect. It is a determination by God, made before creation, and based on His foreknowledge of men, and it is immutable and will, without fail, come to pass.

This is a sensible understanding and an argument can be made for it. However, it is nowhere stated in Scripture. One can argue that it is presupposed or assumed therein; it certainly is in every discussion of Predestination in Western Christian circles. There is, however, another approach that seems to accord better with the Scriptures and the teachings of the Church.

Let us ask again, To what is man predestined? We should not change our answer given above – namely, to life – but we should expand it. In the understanding of the New Testament, the life in Christ, the life of the Spirit, eternal life, is equated with the life of the Church. The Church is God's great mystery, as we saw above, for the sake of which the world was made. Those whom God has foreknown and predestined, He has predestined to the Church. In the Church, in particularly in her sacraments of Baptism, Chrismation, and the Eucharist, man is adopted and conformed to Christ, he is justified and sanctified, and is rescued from eternal death and made a partaker of life everlasting. All the gifts for which God has predestined man are given, at least in seed, at the time he is joined to the living body of the Church.

⁷⁵ v., *inter alia*, his *Treatise on Rebuke and Grace* 34 & 38.

⁷⁶ v. Appendix I

That is to say, the life of the Kingdom is given to man here, even in this life, as an earnest of what he will receive in full on the Last Day. The Spirit, which imparts the life of God, is given now. The realities of the eschaton are anticipated even before the Last Day and, through the sacraments of the Church, most especially the Eucharist, we participate now in the Age to Come. For the Protestant churches, which do not have the sacraments and so do not have this anticipated eschatology, everything is yet to come. There is no participation in eschatological realities here. For this reason, it is understandable that their discussion of Predestination would shift to the end of time. For the Church, however, that time is already present and the good things, which God has promised, are already received, albeit in part, in this life among those who are baptized and who participate in the sacrifice of thanksgiving, the offering of the Lamb.

There is not supposed to be any discontinuity between membership in the Church here and the inheritance of the Kingdom in the coming age, and in the early Church they were, for practical purposes, almost equated, forming an unbroken continuum. That is the spirit present in the New Testament. A Christian is one who has entered into Christ and become a new creation, is a member of His Body the Church, and living aloof from this life, awaits with eager longing the revealing of the Son of God. What begins here is to be completed there. And a Christian is called to live with his mind set not on earthly things, for he has put to death the flesh with its lusts, but instead on the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of the Father, and he is to walk by the Spirit of God.⁷⁷

And yet, as experience teaches us, it is possible for a Christian to fail in this vocation, and instead to live a life at enmity with the Spirit. Paul reminds the Galatians that “God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man sows that will he also reap. For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.”⁷⁸ Likewise, he warns the Corinthians not to fall into sin, lest they

⁷⁷ cf. Gal 5:24-25 & Col 3:1. This lively expectation was largely preserved in the Church as long as the level of commitment remained high, as it did when the Church was a small and persecuted body. After the Peace of Constantine, however, when motives for joining the Church became very mixed, this sense of anticipation was largely lost.

⁷⁸ Gal 6:7-8

perish and not see the promised inheritance, giving as an example the Israelites who perished in the wilderness of Sinai.⁷⁹ Moreover, he reminds the Gentile Christians in Rome that if they are not humble and do not hold fast to their faith, then though they have been grafted into the people of God, they will be broken off again and be found outside God's promises.⁸⁰

Our Lord gives the same warnings. In a similar analogy, He exhorts His disciples to abide in Him as a branch does in a vine:

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in Me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned.⁸¹

In another place he gives encouragement to the faithful, assuring them that those who conquer in Him will not have their names blotted out from the Book of Life, and that He will confess them before His Father.⁸² What is interesting about this verse is that it implies that the names found in the Book of Life, which is a symbol of predestination, can in fact be blotted out and that the Lord may choose not to confess us before God.⁸³ As the Apostle warns, "If we have died with Him we shall also live with Him; if we endure, we shall also reign with Him; if we deny Him, He will also deny us."⁸⁴ Indeed, the Gospels are replete with examples in which our Lord admonishes us to remain steadfast, for only "he who endures to the end will be saved."⁸⁵

This is the tragedy of apostasy. A pagan who never believes in Christ has lost nothing; he remains as he was. A Christian, however, has been given everything, and as a child soon to come of age, he awaits his inheritance. But he who has denied his Lord has lost all, for he is now cast out and no longer an heir. St Gregory Palamas remarks, "the adoption of sons which takes place here and now often fails;" only the adoption which comes

⁷⁹ I Cor 10:1-13. Recall there that only a remnant of two survived from the original generation, Joshua and Caleb.

⁸⁰ Rom 11:17-24

⁸¹ Jn 15:5-6

⁸² Rev 3:5

⁸³ cf. Luke 12:9

⁸⁴ II Tim 2:11-12

⁸⁵ Mark 13:13

about at the resurrection is truly perfect and sure.⁸⁶ Jesus says even of Judas that he was one of those given Him by His Father, even though in the end he was lost and became a son of perdition. Judas was predestined to life and he received everything that the other apostles did. But he betrayed it, and lost it, and failed to repent.⁸⁷

This is the conclusion of St Symeon the New Theologian, who asserts that:

all who have believed in Christ, both monks and lay people, are foreknown and predestined, and become conformed to the image of the Son of God. Nor this alone, but also that all of them, as predestined, are called; and, as called, they are also justified; and, as justified, they are glorified... Those perish who, after being baptized and believing in Christ, and becoming conformed to the image of the Son of God, do not keep themselves in this state, [but] all who abide in it are saved.⁸⁸

Here he allows for the possibility that those who are predestined and called and justified and even glorified, may still perish eternally. This is why Paul, without contradicting himself, can refer to the faithful as elect and predestined, and at the same time remind the same that those who commit grievous sin, including those among the faithful, will not inherit the Kingdom of God.⁸⁹

Those who are predestined by God, therefore, are predestined to the Church, to adoption in Christ. Entrance into the Church *is* salvation and the Kingdom. It is the Body of Christ, and His life already flows through the members. We can do nothing to earn salvation; everything is given to us as a gift in Baptism. But we must preserve what is given there. We can fail in this, however, and can reject Christ in either word or deed. Those who do so, unless they repent, will have their name blotted out from the Book of Life and will fail in their predestination, “rejecting God’s will for themselves.”⁹⁰ It is for this reason that Peter exhorts the faithful: “be the more zealous to confirm your call and election, for

⁸⁶ *Hom.* xvi 35

⁸⁷ It may be asked whether *all* those who are in the Church, at least in this age, are in fact among those whom God has predestined. I would venture to answer in the negative, in light of the example of some like Simon Magus (Acts 8:9-24) and passages such as I Jn 2:19 and Jude 4. There are those who make a hypocrisy of their faith and are united to the Church for private gain, and in this age, they are mixed with the children of light (*v.* Matt 13:24-30).

⁸⁸ 2nd *Ethical Discourse* II

⁸⁹ *v.* I Cor 6:9, Gal 5:16-21 & Eph 5:5

⁹⁰ Luke 7:30. It may be asked why God still predestines some men to life, even if He knows they will not endure to the end. I would refer the reader back to the selection from St John Climachus above (p. 19), and add this much, that whatever the reason, we know that nothing that God does is to no purpose.

if you do this you will never fall; so there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”⁹¹

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⁹¹ II Pet 1:11