

“The worst and best belief”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Romans 8:28-30 and Ephesians 1:3-10*

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Over the summer, you shared with me your biggest questions. One email simply said, “Predestination.” Period. So, I’ve got a question for you: How much time you got? (*Show stack of books*... Don’t worry. I’m not going to give you a lecture on the history of the theology of predestination. Though, I admit it was tempting.)

When I told my wife Jenna about this sermon, she was very supportive and said, “Oh you stupid, stupid man.” She called predestination the third rail, a theological debate so controversial, so charged, that there’s no way to talk about it without getting burned. Someone is going to walk away today thinking I’m a heretic. The good news is... you’re right. Totally a heretic. Now that that’s out of the way, we can have some fun.

Predestination is the Calvinist Presbyterian idea that God has already determined who will be saved and who won’t be. Everything we have—including faith and the promise of eternal life—comes from God alone. We do not earn it; we cannot lose it. God has written your destiny; no choice or action on your part can change it.

Predestination can be a beautiful and a despicable notion. With a nod to Dickens, I’d say, “It was the best of beliefs, it was the worst of beliefs.”

At its best, it is a statement of the inexorable, unconditional, powerful love of God. At its worst, it delivers us to a cruel and capricious god pulling the strings of puppets.

But, I will say this: it sure does make for some good jokes.

What do you call a Universalist with anger issues? A Calvinist.

A Calvinist walks into a bar... but only if God wills it.

How do you confuse a Calvinist? Take him to a buffet and tell him to get whatever he wants.

Or my personal favorite: a Baptist, a Pentecostal, and a Calvinist go to the gates of heaven. Peter tells them that before he lets them in, he needs to interview them privately to make sure they’re qualified. The Baptist and Pentecostal are sweating nervously. Peter talks first to the Baptist for six hours, until finally the Baptist comes out and says, “Whew! I made it!” Even more nervous now, the Pentecostal goes in. Twelve hours later, she comes out and says, “Whew! I made it!” Now, the Calvinist confidently walks into the room and shuts the door behind him. Twenty-four hours pass, and the Baptist and Pentecostal are wondering what’s going on. Finally, St. Peter comes out and says, “Whew! I made it!”

Now, jokes aside, you might be tempted to confine predestination to the dustpan of history and never talk about it again. But we can't. Though our interpretations may widely vary, the root concept of predestination is in Scripture. It resolves in a very basic and important question: Does God have a plan? Is there hope? Much like another story I can think of...<sup>1</sup>

Once upon a time, there was a doll. This doll very much desired to live as a real boy, to love and be loved. The puppet's name was Pinocchio. He could talk. He could walk. But these did not make him real. He was still a puppet. But in the forest lived a fairy of blue shining hair. She took pity on Pinocchio, and even though he was not always a very good puppet—in fact he got into all kind of mischief—she decided to cut his marionette strings and make him a real boy. She gave him life and a destiny—not because he had earned it, not because he was worthy, but just because she loved this little wooden doll.

The Blue-Haired Fairy rescued Pinocchio, adopting him first as her brother, and then as her son.

We are Pinocchio, and Christ is our Blue-Haired Fairy. Predestination, according to Scripture, is not what takes our freedom, but what gives it. We are the lost, pulled on strings of despair, avarice, and pride. We are hurt by the world, and we hurt it back, and for so long as we are on our own, we remain stuck in these wooden limbs. But along comes One who loves us, who believes we are capable of more and makes it so. We become free to live and love.

Ephesians says God “chose us... destined us for adoption as God's children.” Ephesians 2:8: “By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” Romans says “all things work together for good” as we are “predestined... to be conformed to the image of God's Son” and to be his sibling. Romans 9:16: “So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy.”

Or, as Jesus says in John 15:16, “You did not choose me but I chose you.”

We are chosen for love. We are destined for love. It is why we exist. It is what all creation has been moving toward since the first atoms formed. Love. You.

Some have worried that such an idea goes too easy on us. If we don't need to earn our way, what reason is there to do good?

But such a question misunderstands the gift. This gift isn't just heaven; it's a new identity; it's a relationship with God, right now. Rather than clawing our way through guilt and fear to God, we respond in joy and gratitude to the gift of God. When someone gives you a shirt, you wear it. When God gives you love, you live it.

When the Blue Fairy makes Pinocchio a real boy, she does so before he ever has a chance to earn it, but she still needs him to believe it, and behave like it too: she needs him to be brave and good. Her gift is what makes it possible for him to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> The Rev. James Ayers first suggested the story of Pinocchio as an analogy for predestination.

Romans says we are predestined with a purpose. Our destiny isn't just to be loved; it's to love.

Indeed, Luther and Calvin believed that if people didn't have to worry about their salvation, they could focus their energy instead on helping others.

See, predestination is beautiful. At least it would be if that were all there were to it. Now for the despicable: Luther and Calvin tied predestination to the belief that God controls everything. Even our response to God's love is preprogrammed. Thus if there are people who don't have faith, then God must have made them that way. Here's Calvin: "All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation." Life becomes a play, and God its author. For extreme Calvinists, our lines are already scripted. God caused Adam and Eve to fall; God caused the Holocaust; God caused every bad thing that has ever happened to you; and if you're going to hell, God caused that too.

There are sophisticated reasons for believing this, but I find it reprehensible. (Of course, I *am* a heretic.)

The problem is, as logical as double predestination may be, it is not biblical. Even Luther and Calvin acknowledged this. They said this notion contradicted the loving God revealed in Jesus Christ. Luther called this, instead, the hidden God; Calvin called it the secret will of God—a darker, unrevealed side.

I, however, stand with Paul when he says, "I am resolved to know nothing... except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). Everything we need to know about God's destiny for us is expressed in Christ: unconditional love. Christ did not come to condemn but to save. Save everyone.

I do believe, with Calvinists, that God is in everything, including our response to that gift. We have help. Jesus says, "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father" (John 6:44). We are drawn, yes. Brought by the hand. Inspired by the Spirit. But we are still the ones who must answer. That is the gospel meaning of discipleship. Our faith, our assent, our choices matter. Not because they will cost us the gift, but because they determine our capacity to embody the gift.

Love without consent, without freedom—is not love. And Christ tells me that God is, above all things, Love—not power, not control, Love.

The paradox of being destined for love while able to reject that love (and thus seemingly escape our destiny) is rooted in the perception of time. In 2 Peter, it is written, "But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (3:8-9). In our time, we are freely going this way and that, rejecting God's love over and over and over again, but from the vantage of eternity, we are already home. And God's love has drawn us there.

There's a long while we don't know what will happen to Pinocchio. We think he won't make it. He makes so many mistakes, suffers so many hurts. But the fairy of blue shining hair is with

him, and at the end, he finds her dying, much like Christ on the cross, and a love like he has never known before bursts within him, and our selfish little Pinocchio helps the Blue Fairy, becoming the real boy she always knew him to be.

We are destined for love. We make choices. We exercise freedom. And things happen to us over which we (and God) have no control. But no matter the detour, no matter how windy the path, or how long it takes, God gets us there in the end—to that love. We *will* become the real child of God that God made us to be. No death, no pain, no mistakes, no wrongs, can stop that.

Predestination is a guarantee. The guarantee of the shepherd who will cross any distance to find his lost sheep. The guarantee of the father who runs to his prodigal son and welcomes him home. The guarantee that, come what may, God will love you, will find you, will bring you home.

The boy will be real. He will love and be loved. And all—in the fullness of time—will be well.  
**Amen.**