

Book Summary Report: *Biblical Predestination* by Gordon H. Clark (Report Date: March 2019)

In *Biblical Predestination* Gordon H. Clark addresses the oft-neglected biblical doctrine of predestination and does so through a careful analysis of the relevant texts of Scripture. That is not to say that the book is a running list of proof-texts, however. Rather, Clark outlines his work according to chapter headings covering areas such as creation, God's omniscience, the eternal decree, and regeneration. Throughout the book he contends that God's predetermined will encompasses all things everywhere. In other words, everything that occurs does so by God's decree (hard determinism).

The author curiously begins his argument with the doctrine of creation, which he calls God's first act in time. Accordingly, the author begins with the Genesis creation account. However, Clark admits that the Genesis account alone is not enough to demonstrate that God created all things, such as the angelic host. To demonstrate that God is the Creator of all things the author turns to other texts of Scripture, such as Psalm 89:12, 104:24-30, 148:5; Nehemiah 9:6; Isaiah 42:5; Acts 17:24; Colossians 1:13-16. Further, Clark cites Isaiah 45:7 which states that God creates light and darkness, peace and evil. The fact that God is the creator of evil, the author contends, has a direct bearing on the doctrine of predestination. Moreover, Clark states without hesitation that the "Bible therefore explicitly teaches that God creates sin."¹

The author returns to the concept of creation proper by addressing the meaning of the Hebrew *bara* in its relation to fiat creation. This, the author contends, undergirds the omnipotence of God: "God could predestinate everything—there is no limit to omnipotence."² Creation is for God's good pleasure (Proverbs 16:4) and this is especially true as it relates to the church (Ephesians 3:8-10). Curiously, Clark spends several pages in exegetical meanderings through the latter passage in his attempt to prove that God's purpose in creation was to demonstrate His wisdom in glory to the heavenly realm and, secondarily, to humans.

¹Gordon H. Clark, *Biblical Predestination* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 12.

²*Ibid.*, 18.

Clark then turns to the omniscience of God, which he states must be understood if predestination is to be also. “The reason is that predestination relates to God’s purposes and intentions, and these are by definition limited by knowledge.”³ All of God’s attributes work in harmony and the author includes the perfection of omnipresence (and providence) in his chapter on omniscience. What God creates by His omnipotence He intimately knows in His omniscience (Psalm 104:24, 139:2,15-16; Proverbs 3:19; Jeremiah 10:12).⁴ In addition, God exercises his providence according to His knowledge. Providence includes the minutia of life and unless God knows even the smallest matters His sovereign providence over all things would be impossible.

While not mentioning “open theism” by name, Clark does address the idea that some may be tempted to deny that God knows all things, past, present and future. He correctly observes that this may solve the problem of predestination for those who wish to eschew the doctrine, but it does so at the expense of God’s perfect nature, even His deity. Indeed, God’s knowledge is eternal; He does not learn or grow (contra process theology) but knows all things at once. “In philosophical language this means that God’s knowledge is not empirical. He does not discover the truth. He always has the truth.”⁵ Something else that Clark doesn’t mention by name but by concept is “middle-knowledge.” He knows all things that are theoretically possible.

Lastly, the author addresses foreknowledge. What God foreknows, in the sense of prescience, cannot be divorced from His predestination. God foreknows what He decrees. And what He foreknows as certain will inevitably come to pass in time. God foreknew that Joseph’s brothers would not kill him, but would instead sell him into slavery. Had his brothers killed him, then God would have been mistaken, an impossibility.⁶ That which God knew had to take place. Clark asks if that means God foreordains sinful acts. It certainly means that the acts were determined as certain by God from all eternity. While this may leave the door open to an aspect

³Ibid., 31.

⁴Note also Acts 17:24-28.

⁵Clark, *Biblicial Predestination*, 39.

⁶Cf. Genesis 50:20.

of God's will commonly referred to as "permissive" Clark elsewhere rejects that categorization.⁷ Neither does God merely look ahead and see what occurs independently of Him. Nothing is independent of Him.

In the chapter entitled "The Eternal Decree and its Execution" the author demonstrates that God has an eternal plan that He orchestrates in time according to His will. Psalm 135:6 says, "Whatsoever the Lord pleased, that did He in heaven and on earth, in the seas, and all deep places." Clark extrapolates verses like this one to encompass everything that happens (or has occurred) in heaven and on earth. Speaking of atrocities like those which occurred under Hitler, Clark writes: "Had God pleased, these things would not have happened."⁸ The author further writes that God causes evil events. For example, He hardened the hearts of Sihon, King of Heshbon as well as that of the Pharaoh of Egypt. Further examples include King Saul in 1 Samuel 16:14 and 1 Kings 22:20-23. Clark writes:

"Not only did God cause Pharaoh to hate the Israelites, he caused Cyrus to send the captives back to build Jerusalem. He also caused Hitler to march into Russia and he caused Johnson to escalate a war in Viet Nam. God turns the mind of a ruler in whatever direction he wants to."⁹

Pertinent New Testament verses that the author addresses include Matthew 26:53-54; Luke 22:22; Acts 2:23, and 4:27-28 (what Clark calls "Perhaps the most explicit and most emphatic verse along these lines").¹⁰ In that latter passage Luke goes to great lengths to demonstrate that the people willingly came against Jesus but were doing only that which God had foreordained.

Ultimately, salvation is of the Lord. Beyond that, all things are from the Lord, both good and evil. God determines everything. However, the evil that God causes (not authors) is

⁷See, for example, p. 53.

⁸Clark, *Biblical Predestination*, 50.

⁹Ibid., 60.

¹⁰Ibid., 63.

ultimately for the good of the saints. “God causes evil. God also causes good. And God causes the evil as a means of blessing his people.”¹¹

Clark turns to passages that directly use the words “predetermine” or “predestinate.” Romans 8:28-30, begins with a “universal proposition” that all things work together for good. Every detail of life, everywhere, at any time, works according to God’s grand design. This is particularly the case for those that “love God and are called according to His purposes.” While the word “foreknew” is used in conjunction with the word “predestine” in this passage, foreknowledge is not mere prescience. Once again, God’s omniscience cannot be bifurcated from His sovereignty.

Ephesians 1:5-11 is another passage the author addresses. God chose Christians *because* He has predestined¹² them to adoption. This predestinating work is accomplished “according to the good pleasure of His will.” Clark allots much ink to the word εὐδοκία which, according to the author, is used nine times in the New Testament. Central to the author’s point is the fact that predestination is solely according to the purpose of God. Nothing external to Him factors into His decree.

While the word group related to προορίζω is not used in the ninth chapter of Romans, this passage is one that indisputably resonate with predestination. The chapter begins with the question of Israel. Has God’s Word and promise failed because Israel has rejected the Gospel? By no means! For not all Israel is Israel. God’s Word does all that He intends, never returning without its intended effect (Isaiah 55:11). God has mercy upon whom He wills, Jacob and Esau being the example set forth. Christianity went through periods of advance and decline, yes, but even these were by God’s design. Christ builds His church according to His time and in His way.

¹¹Ibid., 68.

¹²Note the use of the aorist passive participle προορισθέντες.

God has mercy on whom He wills and hardens whom He wills. God is the sovereign ruler. No law is superior to Him and no one can lay fault at His feet.¹³

Does this mean that men are mere puppets? No, for puppets are mechanistic objects operated by strings. The Bible does not portray fallen men in this fashion. As Clark aptly observes:

“In Puritan times the Reformed writers constantly attacked the mechanism of Thomas Hobbes. John Gill, a great Baptist Puritan, defended Calvinism against such an objection and declared that man is ‘free not only from a necessity of coercion or force, but also from a physical necessity of nature.’ In modern language this means that life is not a physico-chemical product, nor are human actions explicable by the laws of physics. The actions of puppets are.”¹⁴

The doctrine of regeneration complements that of predestination. Moreover, while regeneration occurs in time, predestination is an eternal act coordinate with the decree of the Father to grant to the Son an elect company of fallen men redeemed by the Lamb “slain from before the foundation of the world.” Jesus, in John chapters 6 and 17 undergirds the fact that the Father has given to Him a select number of people. It is for these alone that He prays (John 17). Salvation is a gift. Regeneration, or the new birth, is logically antecedent to salvation, as well as an integral part of it. This presupposes sin. Apart from the fall there is no need for the Cross. Those whom God sovereignly regenerates are birthed from death to life. That this divine work is also predetermined by God is also evident in the words of John 1:12-13.

After a discourse on the historical debate between John Wesley and George Whitefield on the former’s desire to publish a sermon decrying divine election, the author turns to the doctrine of irresistible grace. Ezekiel 11:19 states that it is God who will put a new spirit and a new heart within those whom He chooses (cf. also 36:26-27). No one has the ability to transplant his or her own heart. No one has the ability to birth themselves. It is clear that this work of grace is

¹³No interpretation of Romans 9 can conflict with what Paul has already established in chapter 8, or anywhere else for that matter—particularly as it pertains to the great doctrine of justification by faith alone. Romans 9 reinforces Romans 8!

¹⁴Clark, *Biblical Predestination*, 83.

monergistic. Without this divine act, man is hopelessly dead in unbelief. Furthermore, Acts 13:48 states that as many as were appointed unto eternal life believed. The cause of belief is the sovereign appointment of God, not the supposed free-will of depraved sinners. This stands in contrast to the false theology of Arminianism, named after James Arminius, whose doctrines were condemned by the Synod of Dort in 1620. Arminianism, alive and well in today's evangelical church, implies that the death of Christ did not save anyone; no particular individuals were the object of His death, burial and resurrection. Salvation is merely possible for all, not actual for any.

The author also addresses the application of redemption. Faith is the instrument by which sinners are justified. Faith is also a gift bestowed upon those whom God desires, as is evident in Ephesians 2:8-9. Apart from the gift man cannot believe. Philippians 1:29 also reinforces the idea: "For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake." Along with faith, but not to be confused with it, is repentance. The Greek noun *μετανοια* has unfortunately been identified with the idea of "penance" compliments of Jerome's Latin Vulgate. Clark cites the Shorter Catechism as a good definition of repentance:

"Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of it, and endeavor after, new obedience."¹⁵

Clark addresses free will in chapter six, a concept he calls a standard objection to the doctrine of predestination. Opinions vary as to what the term "free will" means, even among philosophers. Descarte, for example, seemingly disagreed with himself, at times contending that there are no limits to freedom, at times stating that much of our freedom consists of ignorance to an external force, and at other times sounding quite Calvinistic. However, the foundational question to be asked is, does the Bible teach free-will theism as typically defined as the power of contrary choice (or that the will is not predetermined)? Historically, this question formed the

¹⁵Cited by Clark, 107. That this gift is not given to all men is evident in 2 Timothy 2:25.

infamous divide between Martin Luther and Desiderius Erasmus. The former forged his defense against the latter in his *On the Bondage of the Will*, a tome that Clark cites extensively from.

Luther, along with Calvin and Augustine, made their appeal from Scripture. The passages are voluminous and cannot be fully represented here. However, Philippians 2:12-13, is clearly a passage that demonstrates God's sovereign working in the salvation of the Christian.¹⁶ Another passage cited by Clark is Ephesians 1:11 which states that God works all things according to His will. Clark boldly declares that "there are no verses in the Bible that assert free will."¹⁷

It is at this point that the author makes an important distinction. The Bible does not deny that man possesses and exercises a will. The Calvinist neither denies will or volition. Further, the will is free from the laws of physics and pure behaviorism. In other words, biology is not destiny. However, the will is not free from God as nothing is independent from Him. Specifically, the Calvinist contends that the will is determined by God. Clark helpfully cites the Westminster Confession of Faith in this regard: "God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty, [so] that it is neither forced, nor by any absolute necessity of nature determined, to good or evil."¹⁸

Clark quotes several passages from the Old Testament to the end that God's will is always the determining factor in human decisions. David answered the call to be king over Israel, but God predetermined the choice. He foreordained Cyrus to rebuild Jerusalem; therefore, Cyrus could not have willed otherwise. Clark contends that "We think what we think, choose what we choose, and love or hate definite objects because God has predetermined such mental actions."¹⁹ The fact that God fulfills prophecy and directs the course of history to those ends mitigates against free will theism.

Clark addresses biblical texts frequently cited by Arminians. Deuteronomy 5:29, for example, which says, "O that there were such a heart in them that would fear me . . . that it might

¹⁶Salvation, as used here, encompasses all of justification and sanctification.

¹⁷Clark, *Biblical Predestination*, 122.

¹⁸As cited by Clark, 123.

¹⁹Clark, *Biblical Predestination*, 126.

be well with them and with their children forever.” Clark points out that there is nothing inconsistent with God wishing to save some men and decreeing to do so. This verse speaks to the Jews, not all men. Indeed it would be contradictory to assert that God wills to save all and wills to save some at the same time and in the same fashion. The Bible does not deal in contradictions. Other passages the author addresses include Deuteronomy 30:19; Psalm 145:9; and Isaiah 1:16-17.

The author approvingly adds an extensive section from John Gill’s *Cause of God in Truth* while addressing some New Testament proof-texts used by Arminians. These include Acts 7:51 and 2 Peter 3:9. As to the latter passage, perhaps the key free will text used by Arminians, Clark allows Gill to speak to the fact that the “any” whom God is not willing should perish consist of the elect. As Jesus said in John 6:37: “All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out.”²⁰

²⁰New American Standard Bible.