



Minutes With Messiah

I PROTEST

These days it seems there is always a protest or march for or against something. There are gay pride parades; marches against illegal immigration, or against separating children from parents who immigrated illegally; picketing of abortion clinics; gun rights/control protests. The list seems endless. If there is a cause, real or imagined, somebody is willing to gather to support or protest it. In the light of all this activity, the question arises: What would Jesus do? What would the apostles do? What does the Bible say to do? (OK, that's three questions, but one point.)

There are other questions, as well. What will be accomplished? What is the real motivation? Where is the consistency? What is the method?

Years ago there was a fundamental rift in the American Civil Rights movement. The problems of black people in America were real. There was discrimination; there was violence. In the late 1920s the Ku Klux Klan was reborn, and reached its maturity in the 1960s. (And it is not dead yet.) What was the proper response? What happened in America would affect what happened in other nations. Essentially, two philosophies arose. One was that violence could only be met by violence. This was the attitude of many in the Nation of Islam group. The other philosophy, most notably led by Martin Luther King, Jr., advocated for nonviolent means in dealing with the problems. This dichotomy has existed in approaches to other issues as well. So-called Christians have chosen to bomb abortion clinics or assassinate doctors who perform abortions. Others merely picket outside the clinics, while others merely offer counseling to women about to enter the clinics.

Sometimes the protests lose their focus, and protesters don't even know why they are protesting. Such was the case with the execution of Jesus. That was also the case at least twice in Paul's life (Acts 19:22-41; Acts 21:27-39). This seems to be the case with the protests of military funerals by members of the Westboro Baptist Church. Initially the protests were against those who were deemed (rightly or wrongly) as homosexuals in the military. The protests expanded to include all military funerals of a very public nature, regardless of the sexuality of the deceased. A handful of members of that church (including an 8-year-old girl) protested the memorial

service of Fred Rogers of *Mister Rogers Neighborhood* fame. When a child who probably has little understanding of the ramifications of "gay rights" protests a man whose primary focus was comforting very-young children, the protests have clearly lost their focus. (And that even ignores the question why one would protest one sin to the exclusion of protesting murder, adultery, or even their own hateful behavior.)

The Bible only records two (or possibly three) protests in which Jesus participated. Matthew 21:12 and Mark 11:5 record the expulsion of the moneychangers from the Temple. (It is unclear whether this was one incident or two on consecutive days, considering the timelines in the two accounts.) While this was a very public protest, accompanied by a violent act (the overturning of the tables, and in John 2 the use of a whip), the scriptures are very clear that these protests were prompted by a clear violation of scripture and directed at members of the Temple staff. These examples, then, cannot be used to excuse protests against non-Christians. This is not justification for protesting homosexual behavior or abortion (or any other action or belief) when those being protested do not acknowledge the authority of the scriptures.

I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. (1 Cor 5:9-13)

Contents

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| I Protest | 1 |
| Predestination | 2 |
| Be a Blacksmith | 4 |

PREDESTINATION

Fate can play a trick with the twine
To weave the evil and good
In one design!

(*Fate* from the musical *Kismet*, lyrics by Robert Wright and George Forrest)

Fate, Kismet, the Norns, destiny, karma. Throughout time, peoples have tried to blame their actions on some supernatural being or concept. Even in our own time one of the characters of comedian Richard Pryor famously said, “the devil made me do it.” Shakespere famously had Cassius argue against this philosophy. “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars / But in ourselves, that we are underlings.” (Julius Caesar, I, iii, 140-141)

In Christian circles, the idea of determinism has come and gone, and come again. Most people hear the term “predestination” and equate it with what is properly called determinism. This is the belief that everything that happens has been determined by God beforehand. Either it is caused by God, or God knows what will happen and so it cannot change. Islam holds to the idea that in every moment God causes or creates what is happening. Christian determinism is often expressed in the statement, “God is in control.” Determinism generally denies free

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will in humans. It may acknowledge that humans have free will, but that God already knows what they will choose to do, which ultimately makes free will an illusion. It is unclear whether John Calvin was an absolute determinist, although some of his pupils were.

The Bible teaches determinism, but only in relation to Jesus. That is, it was determined before the foundation of the world that Jesus would die for the sins of man. “Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain.” (Acts 2:23) The one inexorable fact of history was the death of Jesus. Whether certain individuals had the choice to demand his execution or not is open to debate. Jesus was to die on a tree; how and by whose decree may or may not have been predetermined.

What is generally called predestination in theological parlance is usually limited to the choice of salvation or condemnation. They don’t generally argue about whether all events are predestined, but rather whether one is predestined to salvation or not. Even this

form of predestination may be divided further: double predestination, conditional predestination, and corporate predestination.

Corporate predestination

A number of verses in the Bible speak of predestination. How they are interpreted determines the philosophy of predestination.

For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified. (Rom 8:29-30)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved. (Eph 1:3-6)

That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him: In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will: That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ. (Eph 1:10-12)

The interpretation of these statements known as corporate predestination holds that these statements are not about individuals, but rather that they are about a “plan of salvation.” God predetermined the existence of the church and how people would get into that church. He did not predestine individuals to be in the church. The passages from Ephesians may easily lend themselves to this interpretation; the one from Romans a little less so.

Corporate predestination allows for the absolute free will of the individual. Each person may choose to be in the church, and therefore be saved, or choose not to be in the church, and therefore be lost. While God may know “ahead of time” (being outside of time) how each

individual will choose, that knowledge neither causes the choice nor prevents a different outcome. Just as one may see two cars approaching each other on a narrow road at high speed and know they are going to collide, that knowledge does not cause the collision. Neither does that knowledge prevent one of the drivers from swerving at the last second, preventing the collision of the two cars even though he may crash into a tree himself.

Some call this interpretation preordination. That, however, leads to some confusion with the Mormon version, that God preordains certain individuals to certain callings. This is the idea that a person may be destined to become President of the United States, for instance, even though he may have a measure of free will in how he achieves that destiny (except that they generally apply this to callings within the church rather than secular positions).

Conditional predestination

A second interpretation of these scriptures is that God predetermined the conditions under which a person receives salvation, and anyone who meets those conditions will be saved. God knows ahead of time who will meet the conditions, but allows free will to continue to meet them. This is a variation of the corporate philosophy, but on an individual scale.

Some would object to this by saying it allows man to earn salvation on his own merits. They would say it is a form of “works salvation.” Augustine argued, “He Himself makes them to do what He has commanded; it is not they that cause Him to do what He has promised.”

The ultimate distinction between conditional predestination and corporate predestination is that individuals, once they choose a particular course, are chosen for salvation, and in some versions may not choose to do anything that will endanger that salvation. God knows who will be saved, and that foreknowledge makes the salvation an absolute. God, in essence, chooses who will be saved, but not who will be lost. This puts this idea midway between the corporate and the double predestination.

Double predestination

This is the predestination to which advocates of free will most strenuously object. It is called double predestination not because one individual receives two destinies but because God is credited with preselecting people for one of two fates. Either God has selected you to be saved or God has selected you to be reprobate (lost). Thus salvation or reprobation is entirely up to God and entirely out of human hands. It might be less objectionable to some if this decision were made “within time” based on man’s free will. The problem is that the decision is made before a person even comes into existence. If one has been chosen for salvation, he will do those works that will show he is saved. If one is chosen for reprobation, he will, and in fact has no choice but to, walk in sin.

Double predestination comes the closest to a belief in determinism. If God can choose a person’s ultimate path before they are born, then what is the difference between that and choosing every individual action whether or not it relates to salvation? After all, in a sense every action relates to salvation. If a person can choose to do one good deed, then is he not defying God’s predestination? (This question will be discussed in more detail, Lord willing, in the next issue.)

Another view

The Catholic Church has a version of predestination unlike most others. It has little to do with salvation, since Catholic doctrine is essentially universalist (almost everyone will eventually be saved). Thus it is more deterministic, but with a twist. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* has this confusing entry on predestination:

God, owing to His infallible prescience of the future, has appointed and ordained from eternity

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all events occurring in time, especially those that directly proceed from, or at least are influenced by, man’s free will.

The idea is that God views all events as if they were happening in his now. Since he knows ahead of “time” what will happen, it must happen. While man has free will, because God knows what man will choose to do, that event is predestined to happen. Essentially, God’s knowledge of events is so unknowable that man should not even attempt to understand it. If I have to stop in my bicycle ride to fix the chain, is it because the chain came off because of poor maintenance, or is it because something might have happened to me if I had proceeded without stopping? It is not for man to know why things happen; it is for him to praise God regardless of what happens.

In subsequent issues of *Minutes With Messiah*, I intend to look in detail at the tenets of Calvinism commonly represented by the acronym TULIP. This article was necessary as background because so much of Calvinist doctrine depends upon predestination or determinism.

BE A BLACKSMITH

Having been raised in a rural suburb of a small Southwestern town, I have seen and done some things that many city folk may never see or do. Growing up, it was my chore to take out the trash and separate the metal and glass into one oil drum and the paper into another. Then I had to burn the paper regularly. I have raised rabbits and goats, and ridden the neighbors' horses. I have had a garden snake slither across my bare foot, and faced down rattlesnakes on hikes in the hills. I have collected tadpoles from the horse pond. I have beaten centipedes and tarantulas into nothingness. And I have seen plowshares and pruning hooks.

Some city dwellers may read of those implements in the prophets, and just pass over the unfamiliar implements. Others may look them up in a dictionary or encyclopaedia. I have actually seen them, and even used a pruning hook.

The most ancient plows were straight sticks. Eventually the blade was supplemented by metal to make it last longer (and sometimes cut the earth more efficiently). It was not until about 200 years after Jesus that the Romans developed the plow that could turn the earth rather than just scratch a shallow ditch in the earth. So in the period of the prophets who mention plows and pruning hooks, the plow blade was a straight piece of metal which may or may not have a sharpened edge. The pruning hook, then as now, consisted of a long handle with a curved blade that could saw or chop branches as high as the implement could reach. Modern pruning shears may have a hook and blade system operated by pulling a rope, which allows cutting as with a scissor.

Three prophets made reference to modifying these implements. Joel uniquely gives God's command for the

gentiles to "Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruninghooks into spears." (Joel 3:10) This was part of a promise that Israel would be restored from captivity. (It is unclear whether this was the Babylonian captivity or a much earlier one, perhaps in the period of the judges.) This turning of farm implements into weapons of war implied that Israel would avenge their captivity on the surrounding nations. These nations were to prepare for war, although it would do them no good.

Isaiah and Micah, on the other hand, tell Israel to "beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks." (Isa 2:4; Mic 4:3) These prophecies, which are identical in wording over several of what we designate as verses, were about the "last days." In prophet-speak, that is the messianic age in which we now live and which began with the coming of Jesus. In the last days, the straight sword could be attached to a board and used as a plow. The long-handled spear could be modified into a pruning hook. This was because "neither shall they learn war anymore." This was to be an era of peace, in which God's people no longer needed physical weapons.

Some might say that we have not achieved that era of peace, yet. When you look at the merely physical, that may be true. But Paul said, "We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." (Eph 6:12) He also spoke of "the peace of God, which passeth all understanding" keeping our hearts and minds.

Although we are engaged in a spiritual warfare, nevertheless we know we have won. We can beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks. That is, if you know what those things are.

Timothy J. O'Hearn
737 Monell Dr NE
Albuquerque NM 87123