

# OpenTheo

## #102 Does God predetermine everything?

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### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

What does Tom think of the Calvinist view that God predetermines everything? What is his view on Open Theism? What about the idea that Christ only died for some people? These and more questions are explored in the latest show.

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### Transcript

(upbeat music) - The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast. - Hello and welcome back to the show that brings you the thought and theology of New Testament scholar NT Wright right as we answer the questions that you've asked and you can send your question in by visiting our show page [askNTWright.com](http://askNTWright.com) and simply registering there for our newsletter. I'm Justin Bralley and as ever the program is brought to you in partnership with NT Wright online, SBCK, Tom's UK publisher and the ministry I head up, Premier Unbelievable and we'll be revealing a new look website from Premier Unbelievable very soon where you can explore faith with Tom and many others in the coming year.

Thank you for all the kind words on the talks from London Bible Week that we re-aired in the last few weeks. It was good to hear Tom in full flow wasn't it? And even though those were recorded a few years ago they felt just as relevant as they could be for today. On today's show we're taking your questions on Calvinism, Divine Determinism and predestination versus human freedom.

Do rate and review us in your podcast provider if you enjoy the show, it helps others to discover it as well. Thanks to people like Dennis who tweet out about the show as well saying another great show, thanks. Wise words from you both as usual.

"Kina anticipation every Thursday for each new one." Really glad it's weekly now. Thank

you very much, Dennis. And by the way, if you want to follow either myself or Tom on Twitter, it's @unbelievablejb for me.

@profntwrite is the official Twitter account of Tom Wright as well. So let's get into today's questions looking forward to hearing what you had to ask.

(upbeat music) Welcome back to today's edition of the show.

Always a pleasure to be joined by Tom to take your theological questions. But it's only really encountered this when I started especially engaging with US theology as well. But there are some very specific camps and quite hard sort of lines that are drawn around issues around divine sovereignty, pre-determinism, election and so on.

And a number of people get in touch all the time with the show with questions on this. So we've got a few different areas. In the general sort of ballpark of does God pre-determine everything? So why don't we go before we sort of get to the Calvinism questions that we've had in on this? One on a slightly different tact from Garrett in Durham, North Carolina who asks, want to say I love the podcast, very insightful, straightforward, comprehensible.

Glad to hear that to Garrett. But my question is, are we responsible for our own sin? And Garrett says with advancement in neurological studies and social behavioral analysis, it seems that much is predetermined. And I've never been able to accept the logic of determinism, but that often seems where the science points.

So what are your thoughts? So yeah, it's a very interesting question because there are a lot of, you know, biologists, neurologists claiming that we effectively don't really have any personal agency control over what we do with sort of programmed by our DNA or even just by the physical, you know, causation of the universe to do what we will do. And therefore, you know, that raises all kinds of interesting ethical questions around whether we, any kind of blame or praise can be attributed to anybody. Whether the justice system should be reformed on that basis and all kinds of interesting philosophical quandaries.

But this, this, I suppose for Garrett, applies to the sin. Are we responsible for our own sin? If it was my biology, my DNA, the past history of the universe that actually caused me, if we're predetermined in some sense. Yes, what do you think about all of this, Tom? The main thing I think is that this is one sharp edge of a big ancient and modern philosophical question and that again and again philosophical questions, which are important, turn out to be two-dimensional versions of a three-dimensional theological question because in certain in Christian theology, it isn't a zero-sum game between God or the cosmos on the one hand and me on the other that either the cosmos is doing this to me or I'm doing it all by my little self.

That somehow the Christian doctrine of creation rooted in Israel's scriptures and their doctrine of creation has to do not only with the way God set everything up, but with God's working within the world as it is and at the heart of that is the picture of humans made in God's image and called to be, yes, precisely, responsible agents within God's world. What's happened in philosophy is that people have tried, as it were, to simplify the issue by saying, it's either this or that and we run into this on many things. We run into it in epistemology, we run into it in ontology and here we run into it in terms of predestination or determinism, the determinism question, either we're all determined or we have free will and both of those seem a bit odd because if we're not determined at all, does that mean that we are simply like random subatomic particles whizzing around, bumping into things without any rhyme or reason? Most people I think would say that neither the fully determinist position nor the fully random atomic particle freedom position is what we feel.

It's counterintuitive, as they say, and often philosophers say counterintuitive when they mean there's no way we can go there, although some of the tough-minded ones would say, it may be counterintuitive, but we have to reform our intuition. So those are the sort of things that we've got to deal with. But what I want to say is that humans are made precisely within God's cosmos with a vocation to be God-reflectors within and to that cosmos.

The vocation to be image-bearers is to reflect God into the world and to reflect the praises of the world back to God. The problem is that humans have become idolaters, we have worshipped bits of creation rather than the God who made us, and as a result, our humanness has deconstructed. Now, when that happens, various chain reactions are unleashed and within those chain reactions are all sorts of bits and pieces of human wickedness, folly, blindness, malice, et cetera, which can seriously warp not only ourselves but others, and not only our generation but subsequent generations.

And for instance, those who were born and bred at a time of great war and rumors of wars and upheavals, et cetera, often live their whole lives with emotions that have been battered and shaped by the horror of war and brutality. And they find that their instinctive reactions, which they would say they just can't help, are within a framework which itself is destructive. Now, I believe in the power of God's Holy Spirit to restore and recreate and regenerate people.

But this sometimes happens very quickly. In some respects, often happens very slowly and people because God wants us to be humans, not puppets. God doesn't want to cancel our responsibility and simply pull the strings and make us be good little puppets doing what he wants.

Now, he wants us to be, yes, free, responsible agents. So as we deal with our increased self-knowledge and one of the fruits of the Spirit really ought to be seen as increased

awareness of who we are. The fruit of the last and in the list of fruit of the Spirit is self-control, but self-control involves self-knowledge, awareness of my own emotions, my own emotional reactions, et cetera.

And then taking responsibility for them. That's something we have to grow into and often it takes help, pastoral help, praying friends, et cetera. So I want to say yes, we are responsible, but it's more complicated than that.

It isn't just an either or, it's part of a much larger trial log between God, ourselves and the world. And we have to live with that and happily as children of God in Christ and dwelt by the Spirit within the body of Christ. We are given the means bit by bit, sometimes in large steps, sometimes more often in tiny ones to take responsibility and to act as genuine God-reflectors in God's world.

- Thank you very much. We'll come to the sort of aspect of whether God predetermined things as well with some questions of Calvinism in a moment. - Let's start with a very different theological perspective on divine sovereignty, open theism.

Now, I think you've come across this perspective, but Rob in Blue Mountains, Australia, wants to know your thoughts on open theism, Tom, saying, "I was introduced to the idea "through the sermons of Greg Boyd." I think you're familiar with Greg, you've shared a stage with him once or twice and have since read about it from others too. I have to say that I find the arguments quite compelling, yet I realize that the majority of the church's leaders do not ascribe to this way of seeing things. Is there something I'm missing? Now, for those again who are not familiar with this, I'll do my best to briefly encapsulate open theism, but as I understand it, it is a way of understanding God's sovereignty in which there is still a freedom in creation to that God doesn't necessarily know the future, essentially, but that nevertheless, an open theist would say, God's desires and ultimate purpose will be done, even if there is a genuine freedom in terms of what the future may hold.

Now, this is in direct opposition to someone like John MacArthur or a Calvinist who would say, "No, every detail is prescribed by God, "determined in advance." And that is the way in which God is glorified through this meticulous, if you like, pre-determinism, if you like, that exists, including the fate of people who are either saved or damned and so on. So, a very different perspective here. What do you make of the open theism perspective before we move our thoughts to Calvinism? - It is fascinating.

I've not read much of the open theist movement, but I do recall John Polkinghorm, the great Cambridge scientist turned theologian, talking about God leaving all sorts of things wide open because he wants his human creatures to contribute materially and intelligently to the way the world is going. God actually wants cooperation. Part of the difficulty here is that a lot of our discussions still take place in the wake of 17th and 18th century dayism.

And within America, particularly, you get a deist framework. There's God, hears us, how does it all work? But with a rationalist mentality, which says we've got to reason this out, which in Britain, certainly in England, Scotland may be a bit different. In England, we really don't have that tradition in the same way.

And sometimes the things that puzzle me when I hear so much ranting and raving in America on particular themes, I realize, no, the American tradition in public life and how people have talked about things, ever since people like Jonathan Edwards, is something which we in Britain just haven't been doing and on the continent likewise. So there are a lot of seismic movements underneath these questions which are going on, and it's good to be aware of them, even though I've only just hinted at them there. I recall a passage which made a lot of sense to me and still does, somewhere in C.S. Lewis, I have no idea where somebody can look us up and find it out, where Lewis talks about God like a chess player, like a grandmaster chess player, and with us as sitting the other side of the table and making our little moves.

And the grandmaster knows how he's going to win the game, but then the novice, the person who doesn't really know much about chess, makes a very bizarre move at which the grandmaster thinks, "Oh, well, I wasn't expecting you to do that, "but granted you've done that, then I will move like this, "and then I will move like that." In other words, you have the freedom to do all kinds of things, but my ultimate plan is not going to be thwarted. Now, that makes a lot of sense to me. When I read Romans 8, the great promise about creation being set free from its slavery to decay.

When I read Revelation 21 and 22, I happen to be reading Revelation 22 just a few hours ago in my morning prayer this morning, then I want to say, "This is God's plan, "and it's gonna happen. "There is no why and wherefore. "We do not have the capacity as human beings "to thwart that ultimate intention.

"But how we get from here to there "is precisely as people who, indwelt by the Spirit, "are enabled to become creative participants in God's plan. "And that creativity is a genuinely new thing. "It isn't that we are puppets "and that God is secretly pulling the strings from behind.

"God puts us in a position where, if we are prayerfully "seeking to be collaborators in his purposes, "things will happen and God will say, "'I'm glad you picked up on that because I was hinting "'that maybe you might go that way. "'But it's not a matter of determining. "'And I think that determinist thing has come, "as I say, into American Calvinism particularly.

"In a way which has become quite unhelpful. "It feels very reasonable and rational "and we can argue it out. "But actually put it into a trinitarian framework.

"And with humans as made in God's image, "and you'll see that actually things are much

more rich "and rounded and multidimensional than you might have imagined." - Well, let's turn to a few questions on Calvinism just as we wrap up today's show as well. Joshua and Illinois get in touch. And first of all, wants to say that you answered one of his questions on an earlier episode on Eastern Orthodox theology, which he found very helpful and appreciated, so thanks for that.

But wants to simply now, as a New Testament scholar, what are your thoughts on Calvinism in terms of strengths and weaknesses? Stephen Guilford has a specific question though, which is, how can I come to Jesus in faith when he may not have taken my sin, i.e. he only takes the sin of the elect? I can't come in faith knowing he took my sin because he may not have. It's troubling me a lot. So this is a very particular spiritual, pastoral dimension of someone who's obviously taken on board.

Well, at least the way they understand a particular doctrine of Calvinism, the idea of only Jesus only dies for the elect. - But particular determinant, all limited determinant. - Okay, so perhaps some commentary on that particular issue and then some general commentary on the way you see Calvinism being expressed in these sorts of circles.

- Yeah, yeah. I understand how you get to particular atonement. If you start in a particular place and reason in a particular way, that looks quite reasonable.

I have good dear friends who have taken that position and we've had those discussions and I briefly took that position myself about 52, three years ago sometime and then gradually it fell apart didn't work because I was reading the New Testament which it doesn't actually sustain it, I believe. Part of the problem there is, as I say in my book, the day the revolution began, which we discussed in an earlier episode, the way in which the Western tradition has presented the death of Jesus for our sins has been within a narrative of are we going to hell or are we going to heaven? Once you put it in the biblical narrative of God becoming king on earth as in heaven, defeating the powers of evil by taking us in in order to do that becoming king on earth as in heaven, everything starts to look different and we need to revise all sorts of schemes accordingly. So that would be my position on particular atonement, that the death of Jesus in the place of sinners is the death of Jesus in the place of sinners and 2 Corinthians 5 Paul is very clear about, Jesus dying for all, Jew and Gentile alike, come on, get used to it.

And so when I then pan back and say, well, what about Calvinism as a whole, I would put it like this, if we have to choose between Western medieval theology and the Reformation of Luther and Calvin and Tyndale and Cranmer and so on, we must choose the Reformation. If I have to choose between Luther and Svingley and even beloved Tyndale and Calvin, I probably would have to choose Calvin. But that is to say that Calvin's agenda, which is here are the big questions, let's study scripture for all its worth in the original languages and see how best we can respond to them, that has been my agenda from day one, studying scripture to address the great questions.

The problem is that Calvin particularly was still very much in a platonic, medieval mode. I probably the most, one of the most placanist of the Reformers and it seems to me that medieval Platonism and indeed Aristotelianism is the real underlying problem. And as long as we are seeking solutions within that philosophical framework, instead of going back to scripture itself, we're gonna be in trouble.

This is a major issue right now in many contexts with people who are retrieving Aquinas and saying, this is what we need in order to stand up to modern secularism. No, that's wrong, we are just digging our own graves again. We've gotta get back to scripture itself and many systematic theologians and philosophical, philosophically minded preachers are simply in my view, failing to understand what older New Testaments are really all about.

- Thank you so much, so much all that could be said. But again, there are previous episodes in the podcast archive that deal with this as well. And to Steve, I'm sure you would echo this, Tom.

If you come to Jesus in faith, he will not refuse you. That is, if you need... - Absolutely, yeah. - Absolutely.

And any man, woman, child, who simply says to Jesus, here I am, I'm helpless, I'm a sinner, things are a mess, please be with me, rescue me, et cetera, those who come to him, he will never, ever, ever cast out. - Thank you for answering some of these tricky, philosophical, theological and pastoral questions on the show today, Tom, and look forward to catching up with you again. Same time next week.

(upbeat music) - Thank you for being with us on this week's edition of the show. Next time, when is it right for Christians or the church to disobey the government? What about things like vaccine mandates and so on? What about the call to pacifism and not taking up arms? These and more issues will get discussed with Tom. Just a reminder that one of our show partners, NtRight Online, are offering a free ebook from Tom on the Book of Acts to podcast listeners.

Links are with the show notes. You can also receive news from the show by registering at our website, [askntright.com](http://askntright.com). You can ask a question too if you do that. For now, thank you so much for being with us and until next time, have a good week.

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