

# OpenTheo

## Q&A#122 More on Election, Predestination, and the Freedom of the Will

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Follow-up remarks, in response to questions and comments raised by my previous two episodes on election and predestination (<https://adversariapodcast.com/2019/03/29/what-does-romans-8-11-teach-about-election/>) and the freedom of the will (<https://adversariapodcast.com/2019/03/30/free-will/>).

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### Transcript

Welcome back. Today I thought I'd respond to some of the questions and comments and other things like that that have been written engaging with my previous videos on election, predestination, and free will. In a number of areas, these comments that I made within those videos weren't entirely clear to some people.

Other people had disagreements with them, and at other points they could have done

with elaboration, qualification, clarification, whatever. I thought it would help to do a video in which I cleared up some of the issues, clarified some matters, and went a bit further in unpacking certain of the positions that I hold. The first question is concerned with Romans 8-11 and the Calvinist use of it.

The question is, is it an issue of right doctrine, wrong text, or right doctrine, right text, wrong way of going about it? I'm not sure. I wouldn't express it that way. I think that there is more going on here.

I see it very much as a deeply misplaced emphasis. This is primarily in popular Calvinist treatments. There is no one Calvinist treatment of these texts.

There are many Calvinist treatments that vary significantly concerning the reading of these texts. Many who read it as a sort of abstract treatise on predestination and election, they're badly misreading it. I think that's generally acknowledged by biblical scholars today.

This is not something that is a strange position to hold. This is the general consensus among biblical scholars. It's a very bad misreading of those texts if you're reading it as an abstract treatise on election and predestination.

Now, what happens if you take the history of Israel and use that and extrapolate from that doctrine of predestination? Well, you're going to hit a number of problems. I think one of the big problems is the attempt to escape from the central gravity of the text and to construct a soteriology that is very much abstracted from the biblical form of soteriology where the centre of gravity is situated quite differently. That is very much what I've been pushing for.

So if you look at my account of election and predestination, you'll see very much front and centre is the issue of unconditional grace. Of God's sovereign work in history, in moulding Israel, in forming his people, that's very much front and centre. There's no doubt about unconditional grace.

In the same way, a significance of God's work in calling, that God's work in call precedes anything that prepares us for that. We've not prepared ourselves for that. Rather, God acts upon us in an efficient call that brings us to faith and that calls us to trust upon him.

And that again is something that is an important part of my position. Likewise, there's a significance in election as something that is conditioned upon nothing that we have done. The need for God to act because of human sin, again that's clear.

The problem comes in the central gravity of soteriology. First of all, is the central gravity in a sort of atemporal realm that's detached from human history? Or is it within the realm of human history in the work that Christ is doing and in response to the Christ event? Now, some can say Christ provides for salvation. And so for that reason, it seems

to make sense that when we're talking about salvation, obviously we're talking about what Christ has accomplished in history.

But then that is applied in a way that's the same in every time and place. That it doesn't really matter where and when you are, you're still going to be saved in fundamentally the same way. And so we can establish a more individual soteriology.

But that's not actually the way the Bible talks about these things. It's very much focused upon God's work in forming a people. And the doctrine of election is a redemptive historical doctrine.

Within the Old Testament, it's focused upon God's calling of Abraham, God's establishment of his people, his bringing of Israel out of Egypt, these sorts of events. It is a historical doctrine in that sense. It's very much about God's choice of a specific people.

And Romans 9 bears this out. In Romans 9, what we're seeing is God's formation of a people through history. That is the doctrine of election.

How did God choose Israel? It's about his formation of a people and his choice of one line rather than another, things like that. How does that apply to us today? Well, it's related to Christ being the seed, the true seed, the one that fulfills the promises to Abraham, things like that. And as a result, what we have is the central gravity of the doctrine of election is found in Christ as Abraham's seed, as the one who fulfills the promises.

And as the one who from the beginning of time was foreordained to be God. God's purpose was to form a people, a new humanity in his son. And in the fullness of time, he's brought this about.

Now, that is not the same thing as a timeless doctrine of election. A doctrine of election in which there's a set of individuals chosen before time begins and elected to be united to Christ at a particular point in history. What you have there is a focus upon a set of detached individuals.

And then Christ becomes the means by which that doctrine of election is rendered efficacious. What I'm presenting is a very different one. The doctrine of election centres in Christ and people are brought into that.

But we're not elected as detached individuals. That doesn't mean that God isn't sovereignly at work in bringing us to him, that there isn't a choice in history, that there isn't a matter of, that there isn't God's decision and determination and overruling of the events of history involved in bringing us to faith. That's all involved.

But that's not the doctrine of election. That's not the centre of gravity of soteriology at all. Rather, the centre of gravity of soteriology is the people that God is forming in his son.

Individuals are brought into that by the work of the Holy Spirit. And that work is a sovereign work. But it's a very different sort of thing.

Teleologically, for instance, in terms of God's purpose, the centre of God's purpose is forming a people in his son. Whether that includes a particular set of individuals or another set of individuals is not actually of primary importance. It's not necessary for the fulfilment of that purpose that it be one set of people rather than another.

And so our relationship to the doctrine of election is not the same as it is within many Calvinist accounts, which would place our election as the most immediate and primary thing and then Christ as the one who brings that into effect. And that is something that I have a problem with. Other things I have a problem with are the imaginary pictures that are established in order to argue for this.

The imaginary pictures that shape the way people talk about this. So I've mentioned on occasions the idea of the doctrine of election as this eternal decree that exists in eternity past. And what we have is, in essence, something like God has something, a list of people up on the cosmic computer screen and then history is just the printout of that.

Everything deterministically flowing from what God has determined in eternity past. Like our time frame just extended infinitely back and in the infinite reaches of that past, God has determined everything that will happen in our history. I think that way of conceiving things is misguided for various reasons.

I don't think it takes into account just how different created time is from God's own being, that God's existence in himself is not within created time, even extended beforehand. It's not something that can be extrapolated from that. And so I've used the analogy of an author and a novel, that all the events of the novel can be determined by the author, but within the time frame of the novel, within that timeline, nothing is determined by the author within it, moving within it.

Rather, it's determined, as it were, perpendicularly to that. That if you have the action of the author determining the events, it's determined through establishing the characters themselves. And it's important that those characters be acting from within themselves.

Now, this is obviously a limited analogy because we're not like characters in the novel in the sense that we have existence in ourselves. We're not just words on a page or anything like that. And we don't have existence in ourselves, but we have existence that we have, that God sustains us in a true existence.

We're not just words on a page that are a matter of someone's imagination that they have to sustain in that sort of way. Rather, we're far more real. We're far more... I mean, God creates in a far richer sense than a human novelist can create.

But that, I think, helps us to see some of the ways in which many Calvinist doctrines of

election are extrapolated out from the text. So they're trying to maintain things that are very important within the text. So the unconditional character of grace, the prior character of grace, that grace precedes anything that we do.

That's, again, very clearly within the text. They also try to defend the need for grace, that there's nothing within ourselves that renders us fit recipients of grace, nor any capability within ourselves to render ourselves worthy of God's grace or anything like that. We're totally depraved.

There's no part of us that is not spoiled by sin. And when we talk about God's work in history, we're also talking about God's providential involvement in every single event. That every single event... There's no event that occurs in the world that's autonomous, that's outside of God's action.

God sustains everything in every single moment. So it's not as if any action is autonomous or detached from God. No action can be detached from God and still exist, because that's what it means to be created.

And so these points of Calvinism, well, those... not the five points, but these emphases of Calvinism are important. They're things that are very clearly within the text. But yet, when we extrapolate out from those, within certain mental pictures that may seem commonsensical, we may find ourselves losing the way.

The other thing we find is, I've mentioned the center of gravity being placed outside of history, in this more timeless realm, and Christ then making that thing efficacious. The other problem is when we think about election as centered upon the individual, whereas when we look in Scripture, it is centered upon God's formation of a people, and a people in Christ. And that formation of a people leads to a very different way of conceiving the way that the individual relates to this.

Now, I believe that God is involved sovereignly in causing certain people to respond, bringing certain people to the capacity to respond. We respond ourselves, but God enables us, gives us the capacity to respond to something that we'd normally reject. But that is a matter of God's providence, and the work of his spirit, is not the same thing as election.

It's not the same thing as the emphasis upon predestination that we find in Romans 8-11. That's more about God's work in forming the people, not saving individual persons. Now, individual persons are saved as part of that people, but there are different emphases here.

What it means to save me, to bring me into that people, involves a sovereign work of God, God's work of his spirit in moving me, enabling me to respond to his truth, enabling me to see things that I hadn't seen otherwise, and God's work in providence, in bringing

certain people across my path, in shaping me in particular ways, etc. etc. Now, all of that is part of what's involved in God's forming a people.

But that formation of a people is not centered upon the work of bringing particular individuals in. Rather, it's about the formation of a people. And as regards the formation of that people, there's no reason why I'm necessary for that.

It could be any other person. The contingency of my being part of this, is something that is just a sheer fact of God's grace. There's nothing that I can't say that in eternity past, God determined that his purpose was to save me as an individual.

I don't think that's the case. I don't think that's the way that election is presented in scripture, even in Ephesians 1. That doesn't mean that God isn't sovereignly involved. What we're talking about is teleological order here.

And so God's purpose from the beginning is not a matter of the question of whether God is sovereignly involved in every single event in history. That's a different thing. The question is whether this is an event of teleological priority.

And I'm arguing no, it's not. That God could have formed his people in a great many different ways. And from our vantage point within history, there is genuine openness in history.

Now that does not mean that it's open and completely indeterminate with respect to God's purpose. But God's purpose is not exercised upon history in the same way as my actions and my purposes are. Rather, it's exercised through me in many ways, that God establishes causes of different kinds.

He establishes causes that are free causes, like myself and like yourself. That we are individuals that have the power of will. And as a result, we cause things in a different way than other sorts of creatures and other sorts of entities within the world.

A rock falling down a hillside causes things in certain ways. Now that's not the way I cause things. I'm a different sort of cause because I cause things by the free exercise of my will, among other things.

And so God establishes us in our causation and he achieves his purpose through all these different sorts of causes. And he is sovereignly active in every event in history towards his final end. But if we extrapolate out from that into certain pictures that really aren't, I think, taking into account enough of the difference between God and creator and creature, I think we'll find trouble.

And I think a lot of Calvinist understandings of election and other things like that have taken that approach. They've also been driven by a very individualistic frame, by a frame that's focused upon my salvation. What shall I do to be saved? And that's an important

question, but it's not the central question within the New Testament.

What we find within the New Testament is a story that's focused upon God's work in the fullness of time in Jesus Christ informing a people. And the story of Romans 8 to 11 is not focused upon individuals being saved. It's focused upon the question of Israel and the revelation of the sons of God upon overcoming the futility of the creation, upon the question of why and how the Gentiles are being brought in and what that means.

These are questions that preoccupy the New Testament, but yet for people who are very much focused upon individual salvation, we can miss a lot of that. And that is genuinely to, I think, distort the biblical message. Now, is it true that God is involved in every single event in history? Yes.

Is it true that God is, that no event has an outcome that God has not in some sense determined? Yes, that's true too. And I believe that strongly, but I don't believe it's determined in a way that many would see it, that would, I believe, undermine the validity of the secondary causation that we exercise and other creatures exercise. Our creaturely causation is upheld by God's action and God's determination.

God determines things through things, by our free actions. And so it's not a matter of a competition between these two things, nor is it a matter of God's choice preceding ours in time, as it were, rather God's choice, God's determination is prior to ours, but prior to us in the sense of the foundation of us, our acting in that free way. And I think we'll get into all sorts of problems when we start to mistake this and we end up with a will of God that is in direct competition with human will.

Now, at its best, reformed thought has been very clear in trying to uphold the truth of human freedom alongside God's determination, that these things aren't in competition with each other. And that's strongly what I hold. Other further questions have to do with human freedom and certain things like libertarian free will, other questions like how this relates to the views of Maximus the Confessor.

Now, I think the person who asked those questions was maybe mistaking my particular position. What I was trying to avoid was the idea that freedom is to be found in detaching the will from any sort of tether in the world, in our human nature, in relationship to God, etc. Now, if you read Maximus, he's very clearly against that.

He's very clearly talking about the non-autonomy of the will. There's no reserve of autonomy. That's not where freedom is to be found.

And if you actually think about freedom that way, which is what I was challenging, if you think about freedom that way, ultimately you get into the question of, is that will that is free really my will? What makes it my will rather than just a random, as it were, popping of volitional popcorn? I mean, why am I choosing this rather than that if it's just a matter

of indeterminacy that people are looking for? You can have indeterminacy in a way that undermines the fact that my will is mine. The connection of my will with my nature is an important thing. Now, within the thought of Maximus, you have the nomic will and you have the natural will, and the nomic will is the hypostatic expression of the natural will, and it's characterized by deliberation, uncertainty, things like that.

And that's an important part of the picture, I think, and that's something I was trying to bring out in various ways. Also, the difference between causes and reasons, that natural causes like the stone rolling down the hill that I mentioned earlier, that causes things in particular ways. There are a certain form of efficient causation exercise there.

If it knocks into something, it causes it to act in a particular way. And that is a certain sort of causation. Other sorts of creatures act in a different way.

And as human beings, we are rational creatures, and as a result, we act for reasons, not just for causes. And a cause and a reason, we can often use those things interchangeably, but it's different to act for a reason than merely having a sort of billiard ball knocking into each other approach. And the more that we try and understand human beings by reducing them to scientific frames that treat life as if it were non-life, we can't capture the will within that frame, within that scientific frame.

It's always going to be a limited frame within which to perceive what human freedom is, because human freedom exceeds that sort of frame. When we're talking about freedom, then, I think we act for reasons, ideally, and sometimes we're rationalizing things that are a lower form of causation, a lower form of action, action according to instinct, action according to other sorts of things. And I think Maximus was also very alert to the fact, the problem, that if human will is perfect in the beginning, then what happens in the fall? Is the will just something that strays and can go in any direction it wants? And if it constantly strays, then what's to say it won't happen again in the new heavens and the new earth? And his alertness to that problem, I think, gave him a better sense of what it means for the will to be perfected in its character as a will.

It's very much related to the nature. And so it's not just freedom to be found in autonomy of the will from any sort of tethering in any reality, any sort of thing that would direct it one way or another. No, our will should be directed by our nature.

And it's directed by our different faculties. We're always directed towards a perceived good. Now, that perceived good is ill-perceived for many of us.

We do not yet have a clear apprehension of the good of our nature. And the reason why I believe we will have true freedom in the new heavens and the new earth is because we will have a clear apprehension of the good. So it's not in that point a matter of choice constantly between good and evil.



And as I mentioned in my previous video, thinking about things purely in terms of the choice between good and evil is misleading too. Because often the choice that we have is not between good and evil, but it's between good, better, best. It's the choice of how to do the good rather than whether something is good.

And there I think we have a better understanding of what the perfected will or the will that's turned towards God is like. That the will is not absolutely set upon particular things. It must deterministically go from one thing to another.

There is freedom there. There is the ability to choose a number of different roots. Now those roots are all related and tethered in the good of our nature.

And that's what it means for our will to be free. Because if it were not, what we'd have is a will that first of all it might just act randomly. It might just be a will that is doing random things and expressing freedom merely as indeterminacy and autonomy.

And that would not be a good thing. The truly free will is the will that is oriented towards the good of my nature. And I think we know this within ourselves that where we feel most free is where we feel that we are fluidly acting out that which is good for us.

Where we have a clear sense of what we want, what is good for us. And often we have that in a clear vision of something before us. And there are moments when we have an experience of flow or something that, for instance, that experience of being in love where there is something that grabs your attention.

Something that you truly desire and want and that moves your will. And as you will in response to that, it's not coercion, but yet you do feel bound by that in some sense when you love something. It's not as if you can choose all sorts of other things.

You're captivated by it. You're captured by it. But you're captured in a way that makes you more free than you feel otherwise.

Because most of the time you're wavering between opinions. You're deliberating. You're uncertain.

You're not sure what is good for you. And then that moment when you fall in love or that moment where you see something that just captures your attention, you feel free and you can run towards it. And suddenly you feel the wind behind your back, as it were.

And that is what it means to be free in a fuller sense. And that's what the new heavens and the new earth will, I believe, involve. That it's a greater sense of a deep apprehension of what's good for us.

And that deep sense of what's good for us doesn't leave us just with one single thing that we must choose all the time. I believe there are a number of different ways that the

good can be expressed. And that will be expressed in a distinctive way for each person.

Because we each express these things relative to our own specific characters and nature and our own particular form of expression of our nature, human nature. And for that reason, I think what we have is a deeper form of freedom that is not the same thing as autonomous freedom, nor is it the same thing as mere random indeterminacy of the will. But rather it's a will that is set towards a clear object that is the good of our nature.

That brings us into our full flourishing and raises us up to our full stature. But in a way that does not determine every single action what form it must take. Because in reality there are many forms that things can take that are all good.

And when we think about create the act of creation, not the act of creation with capital C, but the act of creating things, there are many different ways that we can create things. And those different creations can be each good in their own way. Do we have to play different things, Michelangelo's David off against the Mona Lisa? They're both wonderful in their own way.

And they're both things that the will can be set upon that are beautiful and good. And in the same way I think that there will be a flourishing of creativity that is expressed as the flourishing of the will. I think we see this more generally.

That the more that someone's will is related to the world, to their nature and to God, the more freedom that they experience. The more freedom of expression and other things like that. I gave the example yesterday of the person playing the musical instrument.

And the freedom of the will is not the freedom to just do things randomly. It's not the freedom from any sort of external constraint or any responsibility to something beyond yourself. Rather it's the ability to master the instrument as you learn the rules, the laws of that instrument to the extent that you are in tune with it.

That it becomes an extension of yourself at a certain point. And then you can express yourself through it. Now that is not the same thing.

It's quite opposite in many respects of just having autonomy in relation to things. Rather it's a matter of mastering things. Of comporting ourselves well to them.

Of recognising that we have a nature and that the world has a nature and we need to relate to things in a way that is fitting to that. And then as we do that I think we'll enter into a more the stage of the virtuoso that can express themselves with a fluidity and a freedom that is always fitting. That you don't have to constantly deliberate at each stage.

Now we find that we, our idea of choice or idea of will is often defined by that notion of deliberation and choice. But yet often that choice is a matter of the weakness of our will.

The weakness of our apprehension of the good.

Our sense, well I'm just not sure whether this is good or not. And so I'm wavering between opinions. Now one respect that shows that we are free with respect to causes.

That we're not just caused to do things by movements of our digestive system and things like that. What we've just eaten determines how we'll choose where to go to university. It can have an influence upon that of course.

We are shaped by all sorts of bodily things and cues and other things like that. But it means that we can deliberate, use reason and have reasons for our action. Now that's a certain sense of freedom.

But what we want is to have a deeper and more internalised reasonable relationship to the world. So it happens more fluidly. That we don't have to pause and deliberate and scratch our heads at each juncture and each fork in the road and second guess ourselves.

What we see there is a weakness of the will. We also see a weakness of the will when we constantly find ourselves battling against ourselves. Where we find the will bringing us into bondage.

That we want certain things and yet we know on one level and we know they're not good for us. And we don't want them on another level. And often that's our experience of war within ourselves.

We're double minded. And scripture I think talks about these experiences of tension within ourselves in Romans 7 and other places like that. Now Romans 7 may not be about the individual experience primarily but it describes something that we all are familiar with.

That we all know this experience of having a bad habit. And it's just not, you want to be rid of it but you can't just get rid of it by snapping your fingers. You just have to take, you have to discipline yourself.

You have to have things that help you to master something. Often we are in bondage to our will which is very much the emphasis that you find within the reformers. This knowledge of the bondage of the will.

And it's not just that our will is in bondage to our lower appetites. That's often part of it. But our minds are also distorted.

Our minds are twisted away from the good. And as our minds are twisted away from the good as well, we find it very difficult to be people who live well. And often we'll find ourselves in bondage to our own natures.

Sinful natures. Our own natures that have been twisted against the good. And so I don't see myself as opposing Maximus at these sorts of points.

I've written on Maximus before on these particular topics. And I'd largely be in agreement with him. I think the important thing is that we recognize that freedom resides in the proper union of God, nature, the world, and our wills.

That these things all relate together. Now our wills are not the same things as natural causes. So there is genuine choice.

There's genuine freedom. It's not just a matter of we have the illusion or the appearance of choice. We genuinely do choose.

And it's not just a matter of natural causes acting upon us. That doesn't mean that those natural causes aren't important for understanding why we choose in the way that we do. I think they have a lot of influence upon us and far more than we'd often realize.

We're often influenced by a lot of factors that we just do not register. So I wouldn't argue for a radical understanding of free will. But there is genuine freedom of the will.

It's not an absolute freedom. And it's not found in autonomy. It's not found in randomness.

But it's found in the ordering of the will towards the good in a way that gives us the freedom to exercise, to do things fluidly in a number of different ways. We don't have to act in just one way. And in that sense, answering the question that was originally asked, I really do believe that we have multiple options.

I don't think that we're determined to just do one option rather than another. I think all of this is in keeping with God's determination of history. I don't think these are at odds with each other.

We're talking about different levels of causation. And we're talking about God's work establishing my action. And so these aren't in competition with each other.

A lot more that I can say. I'm already rambling. Thank you very much for listening.

If you have any further questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account. If you would like to support this and other videos like it, please do so using my Patreon or PayPal accounts. God bless.

And tomorrow I should be back with another of my series on the family of Abraham.