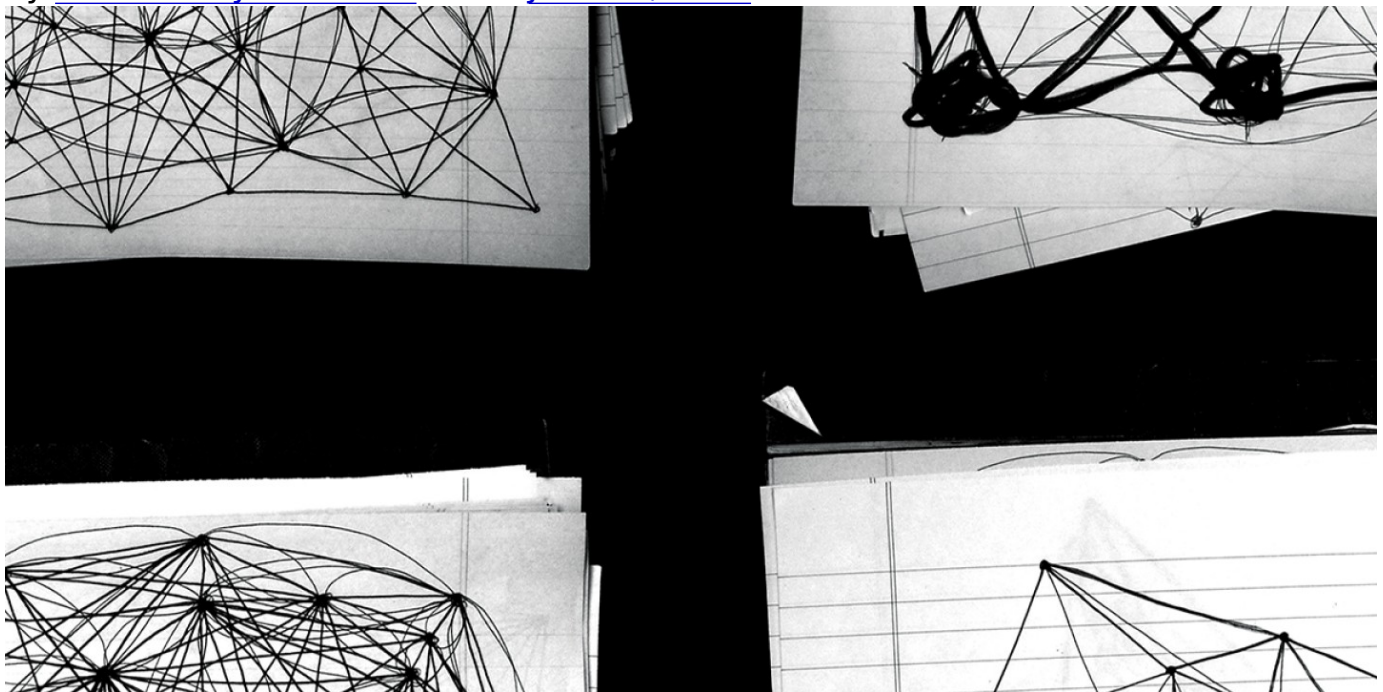


Was my father right to embrace predestination?

If we take the doctrine seriously, then we dare not draw the circle of salvation along religious lines. Or any lines at all.

by [Matthew Myer Boulton](#) in the [June 15, 2022](#) issue



(Illustration by Daniel Richardson)

One of those old carousel slide projectors, circa 1970, rattles on with a click, a whirr, and a hum.

First slide: Madison Square Garden, 1957. Dad is 16, sitting next to his father, surrounded by a sea of thousands. Billy Graham is at the podium, declaring that God has chosen *you*, loves *you*, is calling *you* to come down front, to embrace the call. The atmosphere is electric, and here and there, people are beginning to make their way down the aisles. Graham's voice is rising. Dad stands up.

Second slide: Dad is 74, doing some gardening, and feels a strange discomfort in his back. A week later, we're all talking about pancreatic cancer. The parade of doctors

begins. In two and a half years, he'll be gone.

Third slide: Dad's in the basement again, mid-60s and healthy, making notes on a new book project. This one's on destiny—predestination, to be exact, one of Christianity's most notorious, unpopular ideas.

Unpopular may be an understatement. The notion that God predestines some to heaven and others to hell is abhorrent on its face; even its most famous defender, John Calvin, called predestination a "horrible decree." It can seem to contradict human freedom, stir anxieties about who's in and who's out, and carve up the world into the chosen and the lost, the saved and the damned. Domineering, disquieting, and divisive. When Dad first told me about his new book project, I was sure I hadn't heard him right.

Predestination? Dusted off and polished up for the 21st century? As we met to discuss the book's early drafts, my main goal was to gently talk him out of it. And yet the more we talked, the more intriguing it seemed. Quixotic and unconvincing, yes. But intriguing.

Here was one of Christianity's historic doctrines, taught not only by Calvin but also by Aquinas and Augustine and, arguably, Paul. At the same time, here was a teaching that today is widely despised or ignored or otherwise kept in the attic, even by many of its intellectual heirs, liberal and conservative alike. Could there be a baby somewhere in all this bathwater? Weren't those distinguished doctors of the church themselves deeply concerned, after all, with freedom, anxiety, and social division? Could it be that the doctrine's critics have somehow misunderstood it, at least in key respects? It began to seem plausible, if unlikely, that Dad was onto something.

His cancer diagnosis dropped into our lives like an ominous package in the mail, complete with a ticking clock. No numbers on the clock, of course; just the incessant ticking. Dad and I started meeting weekly, then twice weekly, to work through the manuscript—and even more, to spend time together, a father and son absorbed in one last good-natured wrestling match. Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick.

Predestination? Dusted off and polished up for the 21st century?

In brief, the doctrine of predestination declares that human salvation is always and only based on God's graceful decision: it's an undeserved gift, rather than a reward

for good behavior, a perk of membership, or a privilege reserved for the best and the brightest. As a graceful decision, salvation transcends the logic of exchange: its *quo* precedes every *quid*. And as a divine decision, salvation transcends the logic of time: God decides before any of our good behaviors, memberships, or talents even has a chance to emerge.

Insofar as this decision determines our destiny, it predestines us. It originates before every antecedent, before there was a before—or, as the author of the letter to the Ephesians puts it, “before the foundation of the world” (1:4). In a word, the doctrine of predestination declares that when it comes to salvation, grace always comes first.

So far, so good. The trouble comes when this idea is knit together with the claim that God saves only Christians, or indeed that God saves only some Christians and not others—effectively ordaining some to salvation and others (often many others) to outer darkness. Once this knitting is complete, what looks like gratuitous generosity from the point of view of the so-called elect looks like gratuitous cruelty from the point of view of everyone else.

A traditional answer to this objection is that sin’s gravity and ubiquity make outer darkness the fitting fate for all, and so God cannot be faulted for mercifully rescuing whomever God chooses to rescue. But this answer is hardly satisfying, not least because it casts God as both capricious and callous. A firefighter who saves a child from a burning building may be hailed as a hero; but if it’s well within her power to save the child’s many brothers and sisters as well yet she chooses not to, we’d call her not a hero but a monster. What’s more, any portrait of divine caprice inevitably breeds human anxiety, and anxiety is a petri dish for the world’s most divisive, clannish promises: *Join us, not them, and God will save you!*

But as Dad and I talked, it became clear that he was refusing to get on board this train of thought in the first place. His point of departure was to deny the underlying premise that we stand in a position to know anything at all about the ultimate scope of salvation. On the contrary, he insisted, the door to such speculation is barred by none other than the doctrine of predestination itself. Properly understood, it declares in the strongest possible terms that salvation is God’s work, not ours; God’s decision, not ours; God’s generous, providential action, taken before any of us was even around to wonder about it, never mind define and declare its limits. Viewed from this angle, the act of knitting together predestination with the notion that God saves only a subset of humanity is a presumptuous, disastrous false start.

For if salvation really is a matter divinely decided “before the foundation of the world,” then it follows that we, who have appeared on the scene so long after that foundation, can only maintain a humble, rigorous agnosticism about salvation’s ultimate scope. In plain terms, the poetry of “before the foundation of the world” amounts to a way of saying that salvation’s scope is none of our business. It’s beyond our ken. For all we know, in the end God’s saving love may well extend to all humanity, and to all creation besides. We cannot definitively declare universal salvation, for that, too, would be to claim to know too much. But by the same token, we cannot rule it out.

As the Creator of time and space, God isn’t bound by temporal and spatial constraints.

Accordingly, in this view, every person in the world is potentially one of the elect. Do they offend you, disagree with you, actively oppose you? Their shortcomings, like yours, are by no means disqualifying. If anything, such shortcomings demonstrate our suitability for divine rescue, our status as precisely the sort of people God saves—a “wretch like me,” as the old hymn puts it. After all, in each and every case, salvation is the graceful, undeserved embrace of a sinner, not a saint. In this way, rightly grasped, the doctrine of predestination has the effect of sabotaging any religious attempt to build a wall between “us” and “them.” If we take the doctrine seriously, we dare not draw the circle of salvation along religious lines or moral lines, or indeed any lines at all. It’s not our circle to draw.

Well, someone will object, it may be true that we cannot know the full extent of God’s decisions made “before the foundation of the world,” but it’s also true that God has revealed the scope of salvation to us in Jesus Christ and holy scripture. And sure enough, the Bible is peppered with verses that seem to deny universal salvation.

But just as surely, it’s also peppered with verses that seem to insist on it, or imply it, or take it for granted. For every “Many are called, but few are chosen,” there’s a “for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ” (Matt. 22:14; 1 Cor. 15:22). Jesus himself enigmatically declares, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold,” a permanent hedge against any Christian attempt to close ranks (John 10:16). And so on. Taken as a whole, the biblical library does two things at once: it pushes us toward humble agnosticism about salvation’s outer limits and it opens our minds toward the surprising possibility that even our worst enemies may, in the end, be

included within the horizon of God's merciful love.

The ancient story of Joseph is an iconic case in point. Joseph is sold into slavery by his jealous, brutal brothers, and yet, when he eventually rises to a position of authority in Egypt and helps his family in a time of famine, his brothers—that is, his enemies—are saved. God transforms what they “intended for evil” into something God “intended for good” (Gen. 50:20). Midway through this story, if we were to stop and speculate about which characters are destined for outer darkness, exiled beyond the reach of God's salvation, the villainous brothers would be prime suspects. But the story will not let us do it. In the end, the brothers, too, are saved from the famine. Even their betrayal itself is divinely co-opted and put to use, not only for the benefit of Joseph but also, inscrutably, for the ultimate benefit of his betrayers.

Once predestination is unhitched from the specious premise that human beings are in a position to know the scope of salvation ahead of time, the doctrine may appear in a striking new light. Instead of divisively carving up the world into the elect and the damned, the teaching instead encourages us to do the opposite: to treat everyone as if they are beloved, elect children of God, since for all we know that's exactly who they are. The typical categories used to produce sectarian division—religion, ethnicity, race, nationality, even doctrine itself—are outdone by a deeper, broader substrate of solidarity, since in the end, by God's grace, we may all be welcome at the banquet table.

The doctrine of predestination is built for our stretches of struggle. It's a word of assurance.

Even Calvin taught that Christians, in light of our limited knowledge about salvation's scope, should treat each other with what he called “charitable reckoning,” effectively assuming our brothers and sisters are indeed members of the elect. Though he didn't always follow his own advice on this point, the advice itself is sound. Further, we can and should extend the same logic to non-Christians as well, for who knows what the Holy Spirit is up to? The Bible is full of stories of God subverting and expanding the supposed lines between insiders and outsiders. Our ancestors were continually surprised, even scandalized, by God's creative, reconciling love; why shouldn't we be?

Fourth slide: living room carpet, 1974. Dad's in his mid-30s, wrestling with his four-year-old son. It's one of my earliest memories of pure physical joy, stretching and pushing and tumbling across a pea-green-colored sea. Safe and strenuous all at once. Dad letting me feel free, giving me the upper hand and then playfully turning the tables. Laughing, catching my breath, and starting again.

Fifth slide: my desk, piled high with Dad's papers. He's been dead for a year now, and I'm wrapping up the final edit of his manuscript: swimming in his handwriting, scribbled notes, early experiments, blind alleys, printed emails to friends explaining his new project. Here's an anecdote about attending a Billy Graham rally with his father; there's a list of potential titles, with the eventual winner, *God Saves* (the etymological meaning of the name *Jesus*), circled in red.

So far, what's caught me off guard most about death is how porous it can seem. On the one hand, it's an ending, clear and cold and final. On the other hand, even so, the relationship continues to deepen and grow, alive and warm and evolving. Going through Dad's papers was like having a conversation with him. No—not “like” a conversation. A conversation.

Mary Oliver once put it this way: as she navigated a troubled childhood, she frequently sought refuge in the woods as an escape from her house, with Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and an apple in her knapsack. She read Whitman so often, in fact, that she considered him a close friend—not in some figurative, imaginary sense but actually and palpably, a relationship of genuine affection across time and space. And lest we think the fondness only flowed in one direction, in Whitman's celebrated poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” he announces his intimate companionship with people in generations to come, readers he will never personally meet—including, no doubt, a bookish teenager seeking respite in the Ohio woods a century later. I like to imagine Oliver there, poring over that particular poem, dappled sun on the pages. “It avails not, time nor place,” says Whitman. “Distance avails not.” The limits of death, for all their finality, are no match for the power of love.

Some days I've felt Dad's absence like a phantom limb, others his presence like a fire in a woodstove. The tides of grief roll in, then recede. But those weeks I spent working through his files—that was a conversation as real, as tangible, as vital as any other. Distance avails not. I could hear his voice, and at the same time, as the papers eventually spread across the desk, I could see his whole life there, laid out

like sheet music. It was a life he had made; that was perfectly clear. But the deeper question, the one he wrestled with for years as he wrote, was whether it may also be described as a life God had made, a symphony the Spirit had composed in the first place, before the foundation of the world.

Son: But what does “human freedom” mean if not the freedom to shape the future? To create our own destiny?

Father: Yes, of course, that’s what human freedom means. The question is: Is that all it means? Is that the only way we can describe it?

S: What other way is there?

F: Look, on one level, yes, human freedom is the freedom to create our own destiny. But at the same time, on another level, that very destiny—the same one we freely create—is also freely given to us by God as a gift, and by definition, a gift is prepared in advance. It’s on this higher, wider level that we can speak of divine providence and predestination, even as, down on the ground level, we can speak of creating our own destiny.

S: But doesn’t that end up being a form of puppetry? God lays out the path in advance, and then we’re the marionettes, with no choice but to follow that path?

F: No—the puppetry analogy fails because it assumes two distinct, finite entities, the puppet and the puppeteer, operating on the same level in a way that’s mutually exclusive. But virtually the entire Christian tradition holds that the relationship between God and humanity isn’t like that—and in particular, that God isn’t like that. As the Creator of time and space, God isn’t bound by temporal and spatial constraints. As the Spirit of life and freedom, God indwells human beings, acting in, with, and through us in ways that enliven and empower us, not that dominate or cancel us out.

In that famous Franciscan prayer, “Make me an instrument of your peace,” who is the agent in that prospective act of peacemaking? God? Or “me,” the instrument? Obviously it’s both. As the giver of all good things, God gives us our bodies and minds and daily bread and acts of peacemaking—and these really are “ours.” And yet, on another level, they also really are God’s gifts to us, God’s actions in and through us. Both descriptions are true at the same time, from different angles.

S: I remember one of my divinity school professors, Kathryn Tanner, introducing us to the idea that divine agency and human agency are noncompetitive. We often think of collaborations between human beings as zero-sum games: if you do 51 percent of a shared task, I can only do 49 percent. But the situation is completely different when it comes to collaborations with God. If God gives you the inclination and wherewithal and strength to do a task, there's no trade-off. You do 100 percent of the task, and in the bigger picture, so does God. You have acted—and at the same time, God has acted in, with, and through you. Is this the kind of thing you're getting at? That human freedom, too, has this double aspect?

F: Jonathan Edwards called it “efficacious grace.” God gracefully gives you an action to perform, along with the internal and external means to perform it: the desire, the acuity, the endurance, the time, the whole nine yards. And you do it. Have you really and truly and freely done it? Yes. Has God really and truly and freely done it? Yes. Human freedom is grounded in divine freedom.

S: Okay, I understand the choreography, and how predestination need not be understood as puppetry. But doesn't this view run into trouble when we're talking about bad actions? If God lays out everything in advance . . . well, doesn't that make God the author of evil?

F: I don't think so, no.

S: Why not?

F: I don't know.

S: You don't know?

F: Well, I don't think any of us knows. The problem of evil, of theodicy, of explaining how the goodness and power of God can fit together with the reality of evil in the world—that's a problem theologians of all stripes struggle with, whether or not they affirm the doctrine of predestination. What we know is that God is the giver of all good things, and so the good things in our lives—including our good actions—are actually divine gifts. We really and freely do them, and God really and freely does them through us.

S: I guess we could appeal to that judicious agnosticism you're always talking about. Just as we don't know the ultimate scope of salvation, we also don't know how the

reality of evil and the reality of divine providence fit together. It's beyond our ken. The Joseph story offers a permanent possibility but no guarantee. In effect, the story urges us to stay open to the idea that, despite appearances, God may be present incognito, hidden in, with, and under even the most harrowing circumstances—not justifying or abetting them, of course, but rather co-opting and transforming them into their opposites: “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as God is doing today” (Gen. 50:20).

F: But we can't know for sure.

S: Well, for most of the Joseph story, no one knows for sure. Even Joseph himself comes to his conviction only in retrospect, once he sees the whole story laid out behind him, like sheet music spread out on a desk.

F: So it is for most of us, for most of our lives; we live in that first 90 percent of the story. We don't hear the music. We wonder if it's there.

S: It's like Kierkegaard said: “Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.”

F: And his point when he wrote that, you know, was that this situation we find ourselves in, this understanding backward but living forward, means we'll never fully understand our lives—and shouldn't expect to. We may get glimpses, hints, flashes of insight along the way. But we'll also have stretches when all we hear is dissonance, when all we know for sure is that we do not know for sure. The doctrine of predestination is built for those stretches of struggle. It's a word of assurance: *Yes, you can trust, despite appearances, despite the dissonance. Your story, too, is like Joseph's. The music is there. God is making—God has made!—a symphony of your life.*

Dad died in February, on a cold morning bright with snow. By then he'd long since left Billy Graham's theology behind, but one core idea stayed with him to the end: that God has chosen *you*, loves *you*, calls *you* to step forward—and that God has done so out of sheer loving-kindness, an act of primordial generosity.

What difference would it make to understand this saving grace as predestination? To rehabilitate the ancient teaching that your destiny is not only something you make but also and decisively something you receive, a gift from God prepared in advance?

Framed this way, the doctrine is a pastoral word of care and consolation. In this age of anxiety, drenched as it is by the idea that my success (or failure) depends on my excellence or righteousness alone (or the lack of it), predestination can serve as a powerful counterpoint, a countercultural inoculation. Indeed, the moment the notion of salvation is introduced in any theological framework, the immediate temptation is to anxiously set about trying to acquire it, secure it, earn it. The doctrine of predestination addresses this anxiety directly, contending that salvation isn't something we acquire; it's something we receive. Or better, it's something we already have received, even before it occurred to us to acquire it.

For the same reasons, the doctrine is also a prophetic word of constructive self-correction—particularly for Christians. In this age of religious hubris, predestination can serve as an indispensable guardrail, since God's graceful decision "before the foundation of the world" precedes the emergence of religion itself, never mind any particular feat of religious fidelity. Understood this way, predestination is the doctrine that doctrine does not save us, that religion does not save us, that sectarian membership does not save us. Only God can do that—and the pastoral, prophetic Good News that God is doing that is what Jesus, whose very name means "God saves," comes to proclaim and embody in his ministry.

Far from an arrogant, disquieting, divisive teaching, then, the doctrine of predestination, properly understood, is the opposite. If we hold it in the right way and pair it with a rigorous, judicious agnosticism about salvation's scope, the doctrine can help cultivate our humility, allay our anxiety, and encourage us to treat everyone as a beloved child of God. These are compelling benefits. But predestination's most tantalizing promise may be how it can help shift the felt quality of our days, allowing us to experience our lives as divine works of art.

A divine symphony, for example, with distinct movements and key themes that reprise and interweave, sometimes in harmony, sometimes in dissonance. Or a divine choreography, an ongoing communion in which the Spirit moves with us and through us, abiding in us as we abide in God. Or a divine stage play, a script brought to life by an ensemble of actors, in which the story's conflicts and difficulties, in the end, contribute to the meaning of the whole. Or a divine poem, with rhyme and meter and beautiful ideas. Or a divine carousel of slides in an old projector, arranged ahead of time, rotating clockwise as we live forward—and also providing a full circle of moments for us to review and understand, looking back.

Sixth slide: the hospice nurse arrives first, helping us clean Dad's body with an almost unbearable tenderness. Before long, the funeral home professionals wheel a stretcher into the bedroom, a quiet, compassionate calm in their eyes. Slowly, slowly, the hearse backs into the driveway to receive the body, crunching down the new-fallen snow.

Seventh slide: at the graveside, under the sun-dappled trees. The page reads, "A Service of Witness to the Resurrection." The people gather in a loose circle; the young pastor reprises the ancient words of comfort and commendation. Distance avails not. The drones of bagpipes, those ancestral echoes, slice and fill the air.

Eighth slide: Madison Square Garden, 1957. The atmosphere is electric. Here and there among the sea of thousands, people are beginning to make their way down the aisles. The preacher's voice is rising. Dad stands up.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Was my father right about predestination?" The author's late father, Wayne G. Boulton, is the author of God Saves: Rethinking Christianity's Most Controversial Doctrine—and Why It Matters.