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"Drawn By The Father (predestined)

The greatest thinkers of Christianity from Paul to Augustine to the founders of Presbyterianism have all rejected determinism. They insist with the Bible that we freely choose God, and at the same time they insist that God first chooses us.

Why some refuse God is a mystery. Faced with that mystery, Paul and the gospel of John give the initiative to God. Before we can love God, God loves us. When our sin prevents us from accepting God's love, God is loving us anyway, and the Holy Spirit is setting the table for us to decide to come to God in Christ. In other words, choosing to accept God is a little like choosing to marry the person we love. It helps to remember that predestination is not an idea that looks into the future, but an explanation for what has happened in our past. Looking back, I can see that many experiences led up to the decision for Debby and me to marry. It was a free choice; but a whole lot of little things moved us both powerfully to that choice. It a similar way, predestination says that it was God who took the initiative to influence us to move toward him.

In the end, we freely choose faith, but that choice did not come out of blue. It came from God's love for us. It came from the work of the Holy Spirit preparing our hearts for faith. It came from Jesus Christ reaching out to us. We were drawn by the Father.

The gospel of John was not written as a theoretical treatise on theology. Its primary concern is not to present a coherent theory of doctrine so much as it wants to present a useful way to understand Jesus the Christ, an understanding that would lead to faith. This gospel is written from faith to faith. The faith of the gospel understands that the only way those first believers came to trust Jesus as the Christ of God is by being drawn to Jesus by their heavenly Father. They would have identified immediately with Martin Luther's comment about proof. Luther said that if we need proof that God has truly welcomed us into eternal life, we need look no further than our own hearts. If we are cheered and softened by God's promises, he says, then we know we are invited and welcomed into God's presence.

John Calvin is famous for tying together the knowledge of God with the knowledge of ourselves. I don't think everybody needs the doctrine of predestination in order to know God. But, I do believe predestination can help us wrestle with the deepest mysteries of human existence, those mysteries encountered at the boundaries of life:

What happens when we die?

Why are we loved?

How can God find us in the vast reaches of the universe?

Does good overcome evil in the world?

Confronted with these mysteries of our existence, some of us cannot explain our blessings without a God who loves us so much that he draws us to himself.

The Protestant Reformation came, not from Luther and Calvin, but instead bubbled up from the grassroots because ordinary Christians knew themselves well enough to understand that they did not deserve God's love and salvation. But, they desperately wanted the assurance that they were forgiven and loved and accepted into God's kingdom. Calvin hoped Christians would find comfort in the knowledge that God chose them before the foundation of the world. God made it happen.

Not everyone needs that reassurance. I know that I did. As a young adolescent in a conservative church, I was haunted by the bad language I used, by the impure thoughts racing through my imagination, by the downright cowardly way I hid my faith in God. Like many others do, I promised myself that I would change. But, the next day I would find myself in the company of other teenagers telling jokes and egging each other on with prank and unkind remarks that we thought were clever. It quickly became apparent to me that my attempts at self-improvement were one step forward and two steps back, or at best two steps sideways. For me, the grace of having been drawn by God meant that I did not have to make myself acceptable to God. Jesus Christ had done that already. I didn't have to summon up the determination to improve myself. God was determined

enough for both of us and God was better at it. My part was to trust God to do it.

The anxiety continued for years, it seemed. There was no flash of insight or sudden conversion. Gradually the slow realization took hold that God did not love me because I was good. God simply loved me.

What a relief that I had been predestined for Jesus Christ. I was welcome.

Dennis Covington tells the story of growing up on a lake in Birmingham, Alabama. Every afternoon Dennis and his neighborhood buds would play on the shore of the lake until they were called home for supper. Back doors would open and voices would call out, "Willie! or "Joe!" or "Ray!" but Dennis was called home by his father; and his father didn't yell. He walked down the alley all the way to lake until he stood at the edge of the water and he looked for his child. "This is how he got me home," Dennis writes. "He always came to the place where I was before he called my name." (*Salvation on Sand Mountain*, p. 240)

That is how God works, coming to where we are before he calls our name. The gospel is not like a public service announcement that we hear on radio or TV, broadcast to everybody in the world but to nobody in particular. The gospel is good news to each one of us, for David and Carol and Ginny and Scott individually. We are drawn one by one to Jesus by the Father.