Notes on Predestination

 We begin with the Scholastic Distinction Between *Ordo Cognoscendi* (Order of Knowing) and the *Ordo Essendi* (Order of Being): The order in which we come to know things is the opposite of the order in which they exist.

Applied to theology: The basic principle of theology is that God is *in se* who he is in his revelation. In *ordo essendi*, God exists necessarily and freely as eternal Triune identity. In *ordo cognoscendi*, we come to know God through his economic acts in history, recorded and witnessed by prophets and apostolic eyewitnesses. Knowledge of God as Triune follows knowledge of God as incarnate in Christ, which follows the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. We know God is and has always been Triune because God the Father raised his Son Jesus from the dead.

Scripture is the inspired prophetic and apostolic witness to the Triune God's economic revelation in history. In the *ordo cognoscendi*, we come to know who God is first through this prophetic and apostolic witness. Scripture is referential in two directions: history (the economy of redemption — the economic Trinity); ontology (God *in se* — the immanent Trinity).

The primary language of Scripture is not the language of ontology, but the language of symbol, metaphor, and narrative.

The proper object of Christian faith is the subject matter of revelation (the Triune God *in se*), but this knowledge is mediated to us through the biblical language of symbol, metaphor, and narrative. Our subsequent knowledge of the Triune God as the subject matter of revelation enables us to re-read Scripture in light of its economic conclusion. We know how the story begins (with the Trinity) because we know how it ends (God the Father raised Jesus from the dead).

The language of Scripture is the language of "common sense" realism (symbol, metaphor, and narrative), of realities in relation to us (*pro nobis*). The language of ontology is the language of "critical realism," of things in themselves (*in se*). In the *ordo cognoscendi*, the move from the economic to the immanent Trinity is the move from common sense to critical realism, from narrative, symbol, and metaphor, to history, and then to ontology. Phil. 2:5-11 and Nicea are not saying different things, but one speaks in the language of common sense realism (narrative and symbol); the other speaks in the language of critical realism (ontology).

What does this have to do with predestination?

The language of Scripture about election and predestination is not the language of ontology, but the language of narrative, symbol, and metaphor (economy). Scripture tells us that Jesus Christ saves; Scripture does not provide a metaphysics or ontology of salvation.

The basic biblical teaching about election and predestination: 1) Jesus Christ is the Elect One; 2) Election is in Christ — there is no election outside of Christ; 3) Some are saved (because of God's redemption in Christ); There is an elect Community (Israel and the Church) and they are chosen in Christ; 4) God has an eschatological goal for his people, chosen in Christ, that they be conformed to the image of his Son (salvation); from all eternity, God predestined his chosen people to attain this goal; 5) Some are lost (through their

own fault) and thus do not attain the predestined goal.

In the history of the church, the discussion of election and predestination has been primarily concerned not so much with the question of God's election of a people in Christ, but with the question of the ontology of the salvation of the individual Christian. How is it that human beings come to have faith? Why do some believe and not others? What is the relationship between grace and human freedom?

In terms of ontology, this is simply one instance of the general problem of the relation between the Creator (eternal, necessary) and creation (dependent, contingent). Other examples in the history of theology: 1) the incarnation (Nicea, Chalcedon); 2) the sacraments; 3) sanctifying grace.

Some basic metaphysical principles:

1) The distinction between God and the world. God is not an item "in the world" and must not be conceived as such. God and the world do not "add up." God is not a competitive "other" in the world. God does not become "greater" because of creation, but neither does creation mean that God needs to "limit himself" for created being to exist.

2) The eternal Triune God is complete in himself and has no unsatisfied needs. God creates freely out of love in order to share with creatures the goodness of the inner Trinitarian life. God is entirely gracious and always acts in accord with his character as good. God does not need us. God does not create because he has an unfulfilled need to demonstrate attributes of "justice" and "mercy."

3) God is the supreme Good (*summum bonum*), in whom there can be no evil—not because whatever is, is good, or because something becomes good merely because God wills it, but because God's nature is inherently good, and God cannot will or create evil.

4) That God is *in se* who he is in his revelation means that God's actions toward his creatures are always for their good. There is no "hidden God" behind God's revelation in Christ where he is not gracious (Barth).

5) In discussing the relation between Creator and creature, not only divine aseity and sovereignty, but also created contingency and genuine created reality, must be preserved. God creates and works through created contingencies in such a manner that they retain their integrity as created contingencies.

6) God is sovereign over his creation. God is present to each creature and each created event in that he gives existence to whatever is. If God were to cease creating and sustaining the universe for even a moment, it would collapse back into nothingness.

7) Sin exists, but God is in no way the cause of it. Sin is completely contrary to God's will. God is in no way the cause of the sinful actions of creatures. God permitted, but did not cause, the fall into sin. God does not decree or "efficaciously permit" the fall to happen in such a way that the existence of evil in the world is inevitable. The existence of sin is an entirely contingent event, and truly might not have happened.

8) Although God is not the cause of evil, God is capable of bringing good out of evil, and does so. (This is the doctrine of providence).

9) Eternity and immutability do not mean that God does not "respond" to human actions in the sense that God's actions never vary as a consequence of human actions. (Among other things, this would be an implication of the personalism of Trinitarian theology. The relation between God and creatures is not that of an irresistible force to a passive object, but of the Trinitarian persons who share their love with created

persons who respond to grace with gratitude.) As mentioned above, the fall into sin was an entirely contingent event, and might not have happened at all. Redemption is a response to this human contingency. Any supralapsarian doctrine of redemption that would imply the necessary existence of sin is contrary to 7) above. (Is this a danger for some Barthian formulations of election?)

10) If God is in himself who he is in his revelation, then God's promise of salvation in Christ and his command to all to repent necessarily imply unlimited atonement. That the incarnate Word assumed human nature means that Christ suffered in and redeemed the humanity that is common to all human beings. (If "what is not assumed is not redeemed" is true, its corollary is that "what is assumed, is redeemed.") God commands all to repent because God wills the salvation of all, and Christ assumed the human nature of, and died for all human beings. The gospel can be preached as good news for all because it is. Every human being is someone who has been created in the image of God, is fallen into sin, is redeemed by Christ, and is summoned to the promise of eternal life in Christ.

11) God's gracious initiative is always prior to human response. Faith is enabled by divine grace and is thus a gift. The analogy of "double agency" (Farrer, Hunsinger) is more adequate here than models of determinism, monergism, or semi-Pelagianism, because it is more consonant with the personalism of Trinitarian theology. In grace, God moves the human will in such a manner that wherever God acts, there is more human freedom, not less. In the words of the scholastic dictum, "Grace does not destroy, but perfects nature." We speak, then, not of grace and free will, but of grace and "freed will." Thus, faith is both a divinely enabled gift, but also a vigorous human response—personalism again. Faith is not merely passive. ("Double agency" corresponds to traditional language of "sufficient" and "efficacious" grace; "operative grace,"

"prevenient" and "concursive" grace, etc.)

12) Because God moves the created will according to its nature as will (double agency, not determinism), it is possible for grace to be refused. Although God does not create evil, hell is a genuine possibility. The paradox here is that the sinner's grasp at autonomy is vain, since refusal of grace leads not to freedom, but to the slavery of sin.

13) Election and reprobation are not parallel phenomena, and must not be characterized as such. Scripture speaks of a positive election of redeemed sinners to salvation in Christ. but nowhere speaks of a positive choice of particular sinners from all eternity to damnation. No "double predestination"! Redemption is entirely the work of Christ, and grace enables the elect freely to exercise faith. Damnation is a tragedy because contrary to God's will, and is entirely the fault of those who refuse the divine gift.

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