

Whitefield wesley and predestination



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

John Wesley's sermon, entitled "Free Grace" was published in August, 1739. In it he attempted to show how God's grace is "free in all and free for all." His message was strongly directed toward the doctrine of predestination and election, which was held to by many believers in Wesley's day. He believed that this doctrine was a dangerous one and that it blasphemed the very person and nature of God. In response to Wesley, George Whitefield wrote "A Letter from George Whitefield to the Rev. John Wesley. Whitefield saw Wesley's doctrine of "free grace" as being the one that was blasphemous and dangerous to the faith.

He argued that the Bible clearly presents the doctrine of predestination, and that any doctrine that stated otherwise led to the heresy of universalism. The two men had worked together in the ministry for quite some time when these two documents were published. Wesley adopted many evangelical views of Christianity when he was converted, but he retained some of his pre-conversion beliefs concerning predestination. When Whitefield left England on a trip, Wesley quickly published his sermon on "free grace. When Whitefield returned, he was determined to respond and set the record straight. Both of these men presented strong arguments supporting both of their views. It is difficult to compare the two equally, because Whitefield only addresses certain issues in Wesley's sermon and not its entirety. That being said, I believe that George Whitefield's arguments concerning predestination and soteriology are superior to John Wesley's due to how he handles Scripture and logical thought. Wesley's sermon on "free grace" had six major points.

For the purpose of this paper, I have selected for discussion only the points that Whitefield directly addressed in his letter of response. In doing so, I hope to make apparent that Whitefield had a much stronger argument and a much more biblical understanding of predestination in soteriology. Wesley begins his sermon with a fair and accurate assessment of the possible views a person might hold, concerning predestination. He clearly shows that while many people may say that they only hold to certain parts of the doctrine, they ultimately believe in the whole.

He defines the doctrine as, " As virtue of an eternal, unchangeable, irresistible decree of God, one part of mankind are infallibly saved, and the rest infallibly damned; it being impossible that any of the former should be damned, or that any of the latter should be saved. " This is a very good and biblical definition of predestination, but the implications Wesley draws from it are not. The first error that Wesley concludes is that predestination eliminates the need for evangelism. He says, "[Preaching] is needless to them that are elected; for they, whether with preaching or without, will infallibly be saved. In other words, if God will unconditionally elect some people, then it is unnecessary for those people to be evangelized. The same goes for the non-elect. If they are to be unconditionally damned to hell, then evangelism will have no effect in saving them. In Predestination Calmly Considered, he says: " His ministers indeed, as they know not the event of things, may be sincere in offering salvation to all persons, according to their general commission, ' Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. But how can God or Christ be sincere in sending them with this commission, to offer his grace to all men, if God has not provided such

grace for all men, no, not so much as conditionally? ” I believe that Whitefield has a much clearer understanding of Scripture when he responds to Wesley’s statement concerning evangelism. He asks, “ Hath not God, who hath appointed salvation for a certain number, appointed also the preaching of the Word as a means to bring them to it? ” Whitefield understood that evangelism is the means that God uses to bring His elect to salvation.

Whitefield goes on saying, “ Since we do not know who are elect and who are reprobate, we are to preach promiscuously to all. For the Word may be useful, even to the non-elect, in restraining them from much wickedness and sin. ” Whitefield could see how beneficial the Word is for both the elect and reprobate. Scripture supports Whitefield on this matter, especially in Romans 10. Paul explains that “ faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ,” and earlier he asks, “ How are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? The Bible clearly states that the only way that the elect will come to faith in Christ is through evangelism. John Calvin also viewed evangelism and predestination in the same light as Whitefield. He concluded: “ Since we do not know who belongs to the number of the predestined and who does not, it befits us so to feel as to wish that all be saved. So it will come about that, whoever we come across, we shall study to make him a sharer of peace... even severe rebuke will be administered like medicine, lest they should perish or cause others to perish. But it will be for God to make it effective in those whom He foreknew and predestined. Calvin would have supported Whitefield’s view of evangelism over Wesley’s for certain. The second point of argument concerns predestination and holiness. Wesley says, “[Predestination] has a

manifest tendency to destroy holiness in general; for it wholly takes away those first motives to follow after it, so frequently proposed in Scripture, the hope of future reward and fear of punishment, the hope of heaven and fear of hell. " According to Wesley, those who hold to the doctrine of predestination do not have the same desire to seek holiness as those who do not hold to it.

He even makes the assertion that followers of predestination are more temperamental, especially when confronted with opposition to their doctrine. I believe that Whitefield has the stronger argument when he simply asks how this can be so? Wesley ultimately presents no proof of his assertions, but instead makes accusations from what Whitefield suspects is an experience of debating men who hold to predestination. Those men must have had a strong religious zeal that Wesley misunderstood as narrow-mindedness and hostility that flowed from their doctrinal beliefs.

Wesley explains that it is expected that those who " contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints" will bring strong opposition to error. Thirdly, Wesley says predestination " tends to destroy the comfort of religion, the happiness of Christianity. This is evident as to all those who believe themselves to be reprobated, or who only suspect or fear it. " He claims that those who hold to the doctrine of predestination do not have the comfort of the assurance of salvation since they can never be sure if they are one of the elect or not.

They will at some point and time become doubtful of their salvation, even when they have the witness of the Holy Spirit. Wesley also claims that many people throughout the world who do not hold to predestination " enjoy the

uninterrupted witness of his Spirit, the continual light of his countenance, from the moment wherein they first believed, for many month or years, to this day. " Once again, I believe that Whitefield tears down Wesley's argument when he asks, " How does Mr. Wesley know this, who never believed election? In other words, how could Wesley have understood the heart of a person who believes in predestination if he never believed in the doctrine himself? He presents a selection from the reformers that show how they were holders of predestination and yet still described the Christian life as being " full of sweet, pleasant, unspeakable comfort to godly persons, and such as feel in themselves the working of the Spirit of Christ..." Evidently the heart of the elect is not full of turmoil and despair after all.

In response to Wesley's belief that some people in the world experience uninterrupted assurance, Whitefield asks how he could ever have known such a thing. There is no way that Wesley could have made contact with people all over the world that had these experiences. Whitefield understood that everyone goes through doubts and never as a life-long period of assurance of salvation. Even Jesus Christ experienced times of doubt in the garden, and what greater moment of darkness has ever been experienced than that of His time on the cross, crying, " My God! My God!

Why hast thou forsaken me? " Wesley then asks, " How uncomfortable a thought is this, that thousands and millions of men, without any preceding offense or fault of theirs, were unchangeably doomed to everlasting burnings! " To Wesley, the doctrine of predestination is a terrible one because it condemns men to hell that are undeserving of such punishment. He does not see original sin as being the cause for people's damnation. In his

work, *Predestination Calmly Considered*, he says, “ Perhaps you will say they are not condemned for actual but for original sin.

What do you mean by this term? The sin which that Adam committed in paradise? That this is imputed to all men, I allow...But that any will be damned for this alone, I allow not. ” Whitefield had a better understanding of this matter. He viewed all men as being deserving of hell due to the imparted sin of Adam’s rebellion in the garden. He charges that if Wesley denies the doctrine of original sin, then he must take on the doctrine of reprobation for whether Wesley believed it or not “ the Word of God abides faithful: ‘ The election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded. ” The final issue of debate is over the doctrine of predestination and the Bible. Wesley says, “[Predestination] hath also a direct and manifest tendency to overthrow the whole Christian Revelation. The point which the wisest of the modern unbelievers most industriously labour to prove, is, that the Christian Revelation is not necessary. ” According to Wesley, the Bible is not necessary because the elect would find faith without it since their salvation is decreed by God.

This is very similar to his argument concerning predestination and evangelism. Whitefield again has a great answer saying, “ It is only by the Christian revelation that we are acquainted with God’s design of saving his church by the death of his Son. Yea, it is settled in the everlasting covenant that this salvation shall be applied to the elect through the knowledge and faith of him. ” He goes on saying that the Bible is a necessity because it is only through Scripture that God’s eternal decrees of salvation take effect.

We cannot separate God's means from His ends or His ends from His means. Wesley then goes on to say that Scripture in light of predestination contradicts itself. He uses the case of " Jacob have I loved, but Esau I have hated," as implying that God " in a literal sense hated Esau, and all the reprobated, from all eternity. " He sees this as a contradiction due to Scripture saying that " God is love. " He did not view this passage as being a literal hating of the persons of Jacob and Esau, but instead of the temperament within them.

In *Predestination Calmly Considered*, he states, " According to Scripture [God's] unchangeableness of affection properly and primarily regards tempers and not persons; and persons only as those tempers found in them. " I believe Whitefield has a better argument since he holds to a more literal interpretation of the Bible without contradiction. He argues that it is not changing God's character to love Jacob and hate Esau. He says, " Might not God, of his own good pleasure, love or show mercy to Jacob and the elect—and yet at the same time do the reprobate no wrong?

But you say, " God is love. " And cannot God be love, unless he shows the same mercy to all? " In the same way, Wesley argues that, in the eyes of the person who holds to predestination, the passage " I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy" means that God is love only to the elect and not to the non-elect. He says that this is in direct contradiction to Psalm 114: 9, saying, " The Lord is loving unto every man; and his mercy is over all his works. " If God is loving to everyone, then how can He show mercy to only some?

Whitefield says that this mercy mentioned is not saving mercy. He is loving to all in that he sends his rain upon the evil and upon the good, but He only sends his saving grace to the elect. He has the right to do this because, as Whitefield puts it, “[He] is a debtor to none, and has a right to do what he will with his own, and to dispense his favours to what objects he sees fit, merely at his pleasure. ” He uses Romans 9: 15 and Exodus 33: 19 to back up this statement: “ I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. ”

Overall, Wesley tries to tear down the doctrine of predestination in light of his doctrine of “ free grace. ” To Wesley grace is free to every individual person in the world, and it is on the basis of acceptance or rejection of that grace that a person is sent to hell or heaven. He explains the unchangeable decrees of God in light of free grace in *Predestination Calmly Considered*: “ He has unchangeably decreed to save holy believers, and to condemn obstinate, impenitent unbelievers. ” According to Wesley, a person’s eternal destiny lies solely in whether or not he accepts God’s “ free grace. ”

I believe Whitefield sums Wesley’s argument up well when he states, “ You plainly make salvation depend not on God’s free grace, but on man’s free-will. ” If this is the case then like Whitefield said, “ It is more probable Jesus Christ would not have had the satisfaction of seeing the fruit of his death in the eternal salvation of one soul. Our preaching would then be in vain, and all the invitations for people to believe in him would also be in vain. ” Both Wesley and Whitefield knew the Scriptures well, but I believe it is Whitefield that truly understood how important election is in the believer’s theology.

Wesley tried to use Scripture to back up his points, but his interpretation of passages led him into the territory of universalism. I believe that due to this dangerous direction it is Whitefield who had the correct understanding of predestination and soteriology. On my honor, I have neither given nor taken improper assistance in completing this assignment.

[1]. Ibid.

[2]. Wesley, *Predestination Calmly Considered*, 268.

[3]. Whitefield, George. “ A Letter from? George Whitefield? to the? Rev. Mr. John Wesley,” 59.

[4]. Ibid.

[5]. Calvin, John, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (London: James Clarke and Co. , Limited, 1961), 138.

[6]. Wesley. “ Free Grace,” 117.

[7]. Whitefield. 61.

[8]. Wesley. “ Free Grace,” 119.

[9]. Ibid.

[10]. Whitefield. 62.

[11]. Ibid.

[12]. Wesley. “ Free Grace,” 119.

[13]. Wesley. *Predestination...*, 263.

[14]. Whitefield. 68.

[15]. Wesley. “ Free Grace,” 120.

[16]. Whitefield. 68.

[17]. Wesley. “ Free Grace,” 120.

[18]. Wesley. Predestination..., 279.

[19]. Whitefield. 69.

[20]. Ibid.

[21]. Wesley. Predestination..., 279.

[22]. Whitefield. 71.

[23]. Ibid.