

By Default or By Design?

sermon digest

April 27, 2008

Romans 8:28-39

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According to John Haught, professor of theology at Georgetown University, "The central issue in science and religion today is whether nature in its evolution has any purpose or ultimate meaning. All the other questions that cluster around the topic of science and religion converge on that of nature and purpose." (*The Cosmic Adventurer*, p. 7) All of the hoopla about Intelligent Design and evolution usually boils down to a false perception that the existence of God depends on a particular interpretation of Genesis, on the one hand, or the comprehensive factual basis of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, on the other. Apart from the fact that God's existence does not depend on human opinions, a more basic question gets lost in the shuffle: Does *your* life mean anything? Beyond the debate about biological complexity and the implications of an intelligence behind design and pattern in biology is the very personal issue that keeps demanding a response: Do *you* live on a treadmill going nowhere? Is *my* life an exercise in futility? If I have been called into existence by the expressed will and purpose of God, then I have an obligation to live by design rather than by default.

On both sides of the current debate concerning the curriculum in the public school science class, life gets treated like a blob of goo rather than the particular existence of particular persons. All of the general questions of origins and evolution of life on the planet come down to the primal scream, "What about me? Does my existence have any meaning?" During the short-lived episode of the God-is-dead theologians in the late 1960's, someone cited graffiti found on a New York subway wall. The message "God is Dead, Nietzsche" was followed by a refutation obviously added at a later time in a different script, "'Nietzsche is dead,' God."

Apart from any clear understanding of modern science and without any real connection to later theological debates about predestination in Augustine and Calvin, Paul lived by faith in God. The personal meaning of his life and the lives of his friends was a confident commitment to the God who is "for us." He was not caught up in logical or scientific arguments for divine existence. He was not trying to prove God. He lived with the assumption of God, and he challenged his readers, then and now, to live by the faith assumption of God. The key words are *destiny*, *calling*, and *purpose*. For Paul, the existence of God as a proven fact does not contain the answer our lives demand. We want to know, does God care? Is God involved in our lives beyond the mere fact of our existence?

Don't blame everything on God. Paul's positive affirmation of faith reflects the landscape of uncertainty; he acknowledged, "the creation was subjected to futility." But Paul looks beyond the futility of nature to the horizon of hope. Romans 8:28 has long been an anchor in the lives of Christians caught in the turbulent storms of wars, tyrants, sickness, aging, and death: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." The King James as well as the NRSV translators focused on "things" as the subject. Other recent translators believe that "God" is the subject. "Things" are not in control; "God" is. God's eternal being comprehends the whole creation from beginning to end; therefore, God knew us before we were and God "predestined" the image of our lives. The destiny and purpose of our lives is anchored in the comprehensive knowledge of the Creator. Nowhere does Paul even hint at the kind of detailed fatalism that later emerged in doctrines of predestination. If every event and decision of your life was decided before the creation of the world, as taught by some Calvinists, what is the point of life? Biologist Charles Birch observed: "There is no role for God in a completely mechanical world any more than there is in the workings of my motorcar. There is no role for God in a world completely dependent upon chance events. Nor is there any role for God in a world that is completely determined from start to finish." ("Chance, Purpose, and the Order of Nature") English deists believed in a Creator, but their mechanical world was so self-sufficient that it did not need God. They differed very little from extreme Calvinists who could see no point in trying to do anything about anything, since God had already determined the outcome.

Birch recalls a satire on creation in a song by Sydney Carter: "You can blame it onto Adam, / You can blame it onto Eve, / You can blame it on the apple, / But that I can't believe / It was God who made the devil and the woman and the man, / And there wouldn't be an apple if it wasn't in the plan!" We get something of this compelling picture of life without choice in some parts of the Bible, particularly in the Gospel interpretations of the behavior of Judas at the crucifixion of Jesus. Some see in Judas a subtle suggestion that Judas may have been driven by a desire to force Jesus' hand and confront the powers of evil in the Roman death machine. John seems to be satisfied that neither Judas nor Jesus had any choice about their destiny, that all had been decided in advance by the all-knowing, all-powerful God.

We moved to Louisville in 1974 a few months after devastating tornadoes ripped through the city destroying life and property. Because some of the buildings on the Southern Seminary campus were damaged, a student decided to cease the opportunity to demonstrate. He carried a cross around the large courtyard area of the campus with a sign, "God's judgment on Southern Seminary Liberalism." One of the faculty chuckled and

asked why God had not judged the liberals at Presbyterian Seminary a few blocks away. Are we missing something here?

A perfectly natural question emerges in most of us at crucial points in our lives. We have little difficulty in seeing the guiding hand of God and a wonderful providence in the birth of a child, as long as the child is perfectly formed and healthy. We readily praise God from whom all blessings flow when we win a promotion at work or overcome a great obstacle or illness in life. When bad things happen to good people, when life ends in tragic and ambiguous events, where is God?

Live toward the purpose of God. Hebrews 11:1 calls it faith, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Faith is not fact. It is not absolute certainty. It is not proof of the existence of God or of the meaning of life. Faith sets the direction of life with the assumption that is involved, that God cares, and that the meaning of your existence is located in the center of God’s being.

My father was born in 1910 and came of age with the American automobile. His wheels were about as important to him as his legs, and the love of driving was usually more important to him than the transportation that the family car provided. I still get a chuckle in remembering long family vacations in which half of our time away from home was spent behind the four doors of our sedan. On Sunday afternoons in Houston, family recreation was loading all four children in the car and trying to find a traffic jam somewhere so that we could bake slowly until done. Sunday afternoon drives never went anywhere in particular. They had absolutely nothing to do with a destination; they were about the drive. Occasionally we made a serendipitous discovery of a place that we had never seen or in a conversation that would not have taken place had we been at home, but mostly Sunday drives were trips to nowhere.

A funny thing happened to the Hebrew People on the way from Egypt to the Promised Land. What started out as a journey toward the Promised Land turned out to be forty years of meaningless wandering in the desert of Sinai. Wrong choices turned a purpose-filled journey of life into a treadmill of meandering around a desert of nowhere.

Several years ago our friend Ruth Cates Baird was diagnosed and treated with lymphoma. She survived the surgery and came close to death twice during chemotherapy, but I never heard her say, “God must have sent this cancer for some purpose,” and she certainly did not hear that interpretation of meaning from her pastor. After she got back into life, she did say, “Since I have survived this cancer, God must have something important for me to do. I must find the meaning of my survival.” A couple of years later in her mid-seventies, this frail little lady set out on a journey by train across Siberia with a bag full of Russian Bibles to hand out. She found her mission in life in her Bible class at church and in teaching the Bible in ORICL, adult education. On several occasions she said that she believed her mission was teaching the Bible. I agreed, but we also agreed that we ought to live by design, not by default. The God of creation has set us in a world fraught with dangers and filled with opportunities. We can choose to wander aimlessly in the desert of nowhere, or commit the days of our lives to the purpose of God believing, “that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”