

Predestination and Free Will

If I write in this issue of *Ekklesia Then & Now* that there is no predestination and I am wrong, am I responsible for this error since I was predestined by God to make it? More to the point, if God is sovereign and omnipotent, and He wants all people to be saved, why isn't everyone saved? Or if only a few, predestined people will be saved, what ultimate difference does anything we do make?

These are concepts that have been debated for centuries without any unambiguous resolution, and it will certainly remain that way at the end of this issue of *ET&N*.

In the well-known 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul writes "we know in part." Even though God has revealed Himself through the Bible, mankind cannot hope to perfectly understand everything. "*For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,*" declares the LORD. *'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.'*" [Isaiah 55:8-9]

It seems to me that the tension between predestination and free will is precisely one of those things that we can only know in part. Yet it would be wrong to just write off the subject because our understanding of free will and predestination is inexorably tied to the nature of God.

Then

The debate centers on seemingly contradictory biblical passages. For example:

- *So then it [God's mercy and compassion] does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.* [Romans 9:16]
- *"I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants..."* [Deuteronomy 30:19]
- *The LORD has made everything for its own purpose, Even the wicked for the day of evil.* [Proverbs 16:4]
- *This [prayer] is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.* [1 Timothy 2:3-4]

Two of these verses point to predestination, while two point to free will. We'll come back to these and other verses later (in the NOW section), but for now we'll turn to the debate within the early church (since that's really the purpose of this publication).

And here's the surprising news: There is no evidence of a significant debate about predestination and free will within the early church. The Ante-Nicene (pre-Constantine) writers did, however, have a great deal to say—primarily in response to prevailing pagan and emerging Gnostic beliefs, and they overwhelmingly testify to the reality of free will. Here are but a few of many examples:

- Justin Martyr (110-165 AD)

We have learned from the prophets, and we hold it to be true, that punishments, and chastisements, and good rewards, are rendered according to the merit of each man's actions. Since if it be not so, but all things happen by fate, neither is anything at all in our own power. For if it be fated that this man, e.g., be good, and this other evil, neither is the former meritorious nor the latter to be blamed. [First Apology, Chapter 43]

For God, wishing both angels and men, who were endowed with freewill, and at their own disposal, to do whatever He had strengthened each to do, made them so, that if they chose the things acceptable to Himself, He would keep them free from death and from punishment; but that if they did evil, He would punish each as He sees fit. [Dialogue with Trypho, Chapter 88]

- Titian (110-172)

We were not created to die, but we die by our own fault.³¹ Our free-will has destroyed us; we who were free have become slaves; we have been sold through sin. Nothing evil has been created by God; we Ourselves have manifested wickedness; but we, who have manifested it, are able again to reject it. [Address to the Greek, Chapter 11]

- Melito (ca 177)

There is, therefore, nothing to hinder thee from changing thy evil manner of life, because thou art a free man; or from seeking and finding out who is the Lord of all; or from serving Him with all thy heart: because with Him there is no reluctance to give the knowledge of Himself to those that seek it, according to the measure of their capacity to know Him. [Discourse to Antoninus Caesar]

- Irenaeus (120-202)

God made man a free [agent] from the beginning, possessing his own power, even as he does his own soul, to obey the behests (ad utendum sententia) of God voluntarily, and not by compulsion of God. For there is no coercion with God... [Against Heresies 4.37.1]

- Clement of Alexandria (ca 153-217)

But we, who have heard by the Scriptures that self-determining choice and refusal have been given by the Lord to men, rest in the infallible criterion of faith, manifesting a willing spirit, since we have chosen life and believe God through His voice. [The Stromata 2.4]

- Tertullian (145-220)

I find, then, that man was by God constituted free, master of his own will and power; indicating the presence of God's image and likeness in him by nothing so well as by this constitution of his nature. [Anti-Marcion 2.5]

- Hippolytus (170-236)

...man possesses the capacity of self-determination, inasmuch as he is able to will and not to will, and is endued with power to do both. [The Refutation of All Heresies, 10.39]

- Origen (ca 185-254)

This also is clearly defined in the teaching of the Church, that every rational soul is possessed of free-will and volition; that it has a straggle to maintain with the devil and his angels, and opposing influences,7 because they strive to burden it with sins; but if we live rightly and wisely, we should endeavour to shake ourselves free of a burden of that kind. [De Principiis, Preface.5]

Later in the same work, Origen includes a lengthy discussion of free will, including an explanation of Romans 9, the proof-text for Calvinism, in which he makes a very different argument. The passage is much too lengthy to be included here, but [click here](#) to read it.

[Note: in collating these passages, I gratefully acknowledge the prodigious work of David Bercot in [A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs](#) (available in my [bookstore](#)).]

Four important points to remember about these passages from the writings of early church leaders:

1. These are not canonical works and therefore not inerrant. That does not mean, however, that they are not accurate. Remember that the "[canon](#)" is a standard or a measuring stick against which to judge other works. If a work harmonizes with the canon, it may be judged as accurate.
2. Many of these passages and a number of others were written to counter Gnostic claims. One of the basic tenets of Gnosticism involves the absolute separate of spirit and flesh and therefore posited a lower or bad god who created the world. Because of this, the Gnostics believed that humanity was totally depraved and unable to do anything whatsoever to participate in salvation. As you can see by the quotes above, this view was unequivocally rejected by the early orthodox church.
3. The other reason these early writers issued such strong statements about free will was that they were countering the dominant pagan thought of their time; i.e., that people's destiny was pre-determined by fate (or the gods). They found such an argument, whether determined by fate or by God, to be contrary to the Scriptures.
4. These writers all wrote about the free will of men and women while also completely acknowledging the sovereignty of God. They unanimously upheld the inerrancy of Scripture and recognized that God is omnipotent and fully capable of shaping events at both the universal and individual level. They recognize that, throughout history, God has stepped in at key moments to further His divine purposes.

It was not until Augustine (354-430) that the doctrine of predestination was birthed. When Augustine formulated the doctrine of original sin (the sin of Adam and Eve passed down generation to generation), he sided with early Gnostic thought and created grace through unconditional election.

Now

Modern thought about predestination is divided into two major camps—Calvinism and Arminianism—with many flavors in between (and beyond). More recently, Open

Theism has introduced new ideas into the debate, and Universalism is another minor school of thought.

Calvinism, the seeds of which were planted by Martin Luther in the Augustian tradition, espouses the so-called TULIP doctrine, formulated in the Canon of Dort in 1619. These "Five Points of Calvinism" are:

- Total Depravity - men and women are totally incapable of saving themselves, nor even actively contributing to their own salvation. Proof texts include: Romans 5:12 (*Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned*) and 1 Corinthians 15:22 (*For as in Adam **all** die, so also in Christ all will be made alive*).
- Unconditional Election - God chooses who is saved without reference to anything a man or woman does. Proof texts include: Ephesians 1:4-5 (*He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will*) and Romans 11:5-6 (*...there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace*).
- Limited Atonement - the purpose of Christ's atonement is specifically for the salvation of His elect alone. Proof texts include: Romans 8:31b-33 (*If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies...*) and John 10:14-15 (***I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep.***)
- Irresistible Grace - The elect are incapable of refusing God's sovereign gift of grace. Proof texts include: John 6:37 (***All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out.***) and Acts 13:48 (*When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.*)
- Perseverance of the Saints - the elect cannot fall away. Proof texts include: John 10:27-28 (***My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand.***) and Romans 8:38-39 (*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*)

Some modern Calvinists would cringe at the absolutism of these statements, but this is precisely what the Canon of Dort states. All theological systems have errors because they are devised by men who have, at best, partial understanding. Just because a system is systematic does not make it true—it's possible to be systematically wrong.

Later revisions to Calvinism have included acknowledgement of at least a degree of human freedom, often referred to as “compatible free will” which holds that people make choices but only within the context of their created natures.

Arminianism rejects (or perhaps, substantially modifies) all five TULIP elements. These beliefs were posited by Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) and further developed by Simon Episcopius and Jan Uytebogaert. The Arminian Articles of Remonstrance (reproof) were set forth in 1610:

- God deemed, through Jesus Christ, to save all who believe through the grace of the Holy Spirit in the Son; and to leave those who reject Christ in sin and condemnation. While Man is fallen and sinful, we are capable of believing. Proof texts include:
John 3:16 (*“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”*) and John 3:36 (*“He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”*)
- Christ died for all but only believers are forgiven. Election is conditioned by God's foreknowledge of who would believe, and Christ's sacrifice was for all. Proof texts include:
John 3:16 again;
1 John 2:2 (*He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.*); and
1 Corinthians 15:22 (*For as in Adam die, so also in Christ **all** will be made alive*). This is the same verse that serves as a proof text for the Calvinist idea of Total Depravity.
- Men and women are incapable of doing good unless born again in Christ Jesus. A proof text for Man's inability to do good is:
John 15:5 (*“I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.”*)
- All good deeds by saved men and women must be ascribed to God, but grace is not irresistible. Proof texts include:
Acts 7:51 (*You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did*) and
Hebrews 12:15 (*See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled.*)
- The Holy Spirit gives believers that ability to persevere, but it is possible to fall from grace. Proof texts include:
Luke 8:13 (*“Those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away.”*) and
Hebrews 3:12 (*Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God.*)

The problem with Arminianism is, of course, that it seems to violate the sovereignty of God—the decisions of men and women can frustrate the will of God. But the Calvinist view that God cannot allow free will can be construed as similarly violating His sovereignty. God can do what He wants, including create beings who can resist His will.

Of course, just as with Calvinism, there are biblical passages that seem contradictory to the Arminian position and must therefore be explained. Ultimately, it's a matter of who's explanations seem more consistent with the broad themes of Scripture.

(Christian) **Universalism** is the belief that all men and women will ultimately be saved by the grace of God through the sacrifice of Christ, even those who do not profess belief in Jesus during this life. The principle proof text is 1 Timothy 4:10b (*...we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers*). Universalism is, by and large, a modern invention and has relatively few adherents. Most universalists believe that truth can come from any religious tradition, including Buddhism and Hinduism.

Open Theism, a very recent proposal, introduces a different idea about God and His providence. According to John Sanders, one of the primary proponents of Open Theism:

1. In His sovereignty, God has given us the freedom to collaborate with Him and intends that we experience His love and respond with love for Him.
2. God is influenced by what we do and responds to us.
3. God's overall plan will prevail, but He does not manage every detail of our lives. *"God's plan is not a detailed script or blueprint, but a broad intention that allows for a variety of options regarding precisely how his goals may be reached."*
4. God knows the past and present perfectly, but the future is only partially knowable because it does not yet fully exist. God knows all possibilities, but He does not know precisely how we, as free agents, will act.

Note: for a thorough discussion of Open Theism, I highly recommend [Does God Have a Future](#) (available in my [bookstore](#) and quoted above), a frank and fascinating debate of the merits of the idea. It is also a model for Christian discourse over opposing views—pointedly challenging but consistently respectful.

So where does the truth lie? As Brian McLaren wrote in [A New Kind of Christian](#), we humans see the issues of doctrine along a linear continuum with extreme positions at either end (in this case, radical Calvinism on one and universalism on the other), but the reality is that the truth may well lie above the line itself in a spiritual omnidimensional space that people rarely perceive.

Every theological system is flawed because it is based on the application of human intelligence and logic. There are Scriptural passages that create problems for Calvinism, Arminianism, Universalism, and Open Theism, as well as every other theology proposed by Man. There are strong arguments and counterarguments for each. Some of these are impious and insulting to the Word of God, such as this comment from Thomas Paine, the writer of the influential revolutionary pamphlet, [Common Sense](#):

"The absurd and impious doctrine of predestination, a doctrine destructive of morals, would never have been thought of had it not been for some stupid passages in the

Bible, which priestcraft at first, and ignorance since, have imposed upon mankind as revelation. Nonsense ought to be treated as nonsense, wherever it be found; and had this been done in the rational manner it ought to be done, instead of intimating and mincing the matter, as has been too much the case, the nonsense and false doctrine of the Bible, with all the aid that priestcraft can give, could never have stood their ground against the divine reason that God has given to man." [Thomas Paine, Remarks on Romans IX. 18-21, 1820]

Others apply flawed logic, such as this anti-openness diatribe at a Calvinist website:

The hidden agenda of Open Theism is apparent, because it is opening the door for a unification of what are now many divergent beliefs. Open Theism can embrace the Mormon church, which is desperately seeking to appear to be mainstream Christianity, and its concept of God who is imperfect and continually in a state of learning. Recently, Gordon Hinckley, Prophet and President of the Mormon church, has equivocated on the historic Mormon doctrine that man can become a god. Consequently, their teaching that the god of this universe was once a man, might eventually be placed in their archives of convenient forgetfulness, opening the way to a connection with mainstream Christianity. The Positive Confession, Word of Faith proponents, such as Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland, who claim that words and faith have superior power over the will of God and can control the actions of God, and many, many groups holding to Arminian theology in which God is subject to the choice of man, could easily embrace Open Theism with only minor adjustments. With the charismatic experience having already united many Protestant and Catholic groups, the meeting of the charismatic (which is exclusively Arminian in theology) and Open Theistic theologies could further bring about a unity of unprecedented magnitude. To be mainstream is not necessarily to adopt a biblical foundation, and in most cases that is the case. Unity can always be achieved by adopting the lowest common denominator which, in the majority of cases, is to deny the absolute sovereignty of God. Although masquerading under the cloak of historic protestant orthodox belief, Open Theism is a very sinister and deceitful heresy of the highest magnitude. [[On Doctrine](#)]

This kind of guilt-by-association (and *presumed* association at that) argument does nothing to address the legitimate assertions of open theists. Similarly, many Calvinist associate Arminianism with Pelagianism, a fifth century reaction to Augustine that claimed men and women could attain salvation apart from grace, when that is not the Arminian position. Other positions impune the motives or understanding of others with a condescending superiority that is reminiscent of the Pharisees:

(M)uch of 21st Century Christendom really has no idea what they theologically believe. It is not my purpose to condemn all men who hold a title of "Arminianism" since many do not know what the title means, much less believe all the historic aspects of the theological system. Walk into any church and ask the difference between Arminianism and Calvinism, and you will find a variety of answers. Yet, there are some today who do hold to historic Arminianism, and who do believe the depth of Arminian theology historically. There are even a variety of Arminian websites which propagate the doctrines. But for the most part, each "Arminian" must be dealt with individually in order to assess their understanding, or flavor, of theological soup. It may very well be that they are believing a damning heresy. It may very well be that they are simply confused and need help to understand the doctrines of God's grace, or their depravity. [[A Puritan's Mind](#)]

Of course, there are also many solid, respectfully-presented biblical cases for every theology, but each is almost necessarily incomplete. Verses are selected that support positions, while others are either ignored or explained away. More importantly, we know that God has not revealed everything about Himself to us. Some things we could never understand; some things God has withheld for His purposes.

I'm sure as you read the positions and their counter-arguments, you found yourself inwardly cheering and jeering at times, just as I do. We are all constrained to some extent by our individual proclivities and pre-conceptions.

Just as every human theology is flawed, it also contains at least kernels of truth. Perhaps this is part of God's plan, giving us different ways of viewing Him that harmonize with the individual natures He has given us. Perhaps God is saying, "Yes, I'll give everyone opportunities to know Me. Yes, I respond to what you say and do. Yes, I allow you to make choices. Yes, My plan for you will be fulfilled." More than anything else, I suspect He says, "Why don't you stop spending so much time and energy trying to figure it out, and just live it!"

Too many of us use our preconceptions about biblical truth as a hammer against those who believe differently. Personally, I am deeply troubled by Calvinism because, despite the protestations of Calvinists, it removes individual responsibility and reduces the crown jewel of God's creation to mere puppets who go through life doing only what God preordained they would do and then being rewarded or punished based on an arbitrary decision by the puppetmaster. To me, the Calvinist view of predestined election or destruction is not faith-building because I find it unloving and untrust. Perhaps (probably) that is because I do not sufficiently understand the nature of God.

The primary reason, on the other hand, that I cannot reject Calvinism is the many people I have encountered who hold these views yet serve God in incredible ways. Obviously, election works for them and motivates them to be exemplary servants of God. That same belief would make it very difficult for me to worship Him in spirit and in truth.

For that reason, I believe it would be very wrong for me to try to convince a Calvinist that there is no predestination or for a Calvinist to try to convince me that there is no libertarian free will. Both would be faith-damaging experiences.

Certainly, our beliefs in this area affect how we view God, but I think He is wise and patient enough with His children to allow us some latitude. While how we think about God must be assessed by Scripture, the fact that He has left some things hazy may mean that His intention is to allow us to have different views that are more faith-building for our individual natures.

How far our view of God goes before we are effectively serving a different God is a question for another time.

In the meantime, the thing to celebrate is our common ground—that the blood of Jesus washes away our self-inflicted separation from God, and the Holy Spirit empowers us to serve Him. Through the mysteries of God, we have a path to eternal life with Him.

Discussion

Some readers got the impression that I was denying predestination. Part of the reason for that is probably that I left a key word out of one sentence (near the end of the "Then" section), which should have read:

It was not until Augustine (354-430) that the doctrine of **absolute** predestination was birthed.

Admittedly, I took a strong stance on the free will side of the issue, but the Bible clearly teaches predestination. The issue is "what is predestined?" and "what role does human responsibility play?" As I indicated last week, I won't pretend to have definitive answers to that except to say that **both** predestination **and** free will (or, as one subscriber suggested, human responsibility) exist side by side.

Furthermore, as another subscriber pointed out, the ante-Nicene fathers wrote about both predestination and free will. For example:

"We have been predestined by God, before the word was, to [appear] in the extreme end of the times. And so we are trained by God for the purpose of chastising...the world." (Tertullian)

"...what else is fate than what God has spoken of each one of us? Since He can foresee our constitution, He determines also the fates for us, according to the deserts and qualities of individuals." (Mark Minucius Felix)

"For every being destined to believe is already faithful in the sight of God, and set up for His honour, an image, endowed with virtue, dedicated to God." (Clement of Alexandria)

Despite this, it is still true that there was no debate about predestination and free will in the early church. There was no debate because they accepted both without trying to figure out the potential contradictions.

My friend Edward Fudge dropped me this note: *I invite you and your readers to take a look at my article, formerly published in Christianity Today, titled "What Calvinism and Arminianism Have in Common," located at www.edwardfudge.com/written/article1.html.* I read it and recommend Edward's article.

Another subscriber wrote to challenge my comment that Universalism has relatively few adherents. I was referring to Christian Universalism, which suggests that all men and women are saved by the sacrifice of Christ, but the subscriber raises a valid point about a different perspective on Universalism. Unfortunately, his letter is too long to be included here, but I think it's worth taking a look at, so I have posted the content [here](#).



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, post a message so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: The Ante-Nicene Fathers (March 16)

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