



# The Reformations

## Predestination, Election, Grace, and Free Will

Why are some people saved and not others? Is it because they don't choose God, or because God didn't choose them? Such questions lead to the topic of predestination. In the language, the positive side of "predestination" is *election* while the negative side of *condemnation* or *perdition*. That being said, what do we mean when we speak of "predestination?" And that depends upon who is answering the question. And it depends on how you read Scripture. How would you read this passage?

Consequently, he [God] has mercy upon whom he wills, and he hardens whom he wills. You will say to me then, "Why (then) does he still find fault? For who can oppose his will?" But who indeed are you, a human being, to talk back to God? Will what is made say to its maker, "Why have you created me so?" Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for a noble purpose and another for an ignoble one? What if God, wishing to show his wrath and make known his power, has endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction? (Romans 9:18-22)

**John Calvin and Predestination.** When the Swiss Reformer, John Calvin read this and other passages, he answered the question in a way that made clear there were growing theological distinctions within the ranks of leaders and theologians leading a reform of the Christian church in the west. For John Calvin, his read of this and other passages is that even before one is born into the world, God has predestined some people to election and some to perdition. Our salvation is entirely dependent on God's unchangeable will. Calvin held that the free will of which the Catholic Church speaks was unbiblical. The conclusion was that to remain in the Catholic Church was a sign of one's perdition. How about joining Calvin? You could, but even that was no more than perhaps a sign of what was already predestined.

This idea of predestination was a departure, not only from Catholic thinking, but also from the Lutheran mainstream and from the earlier Swiss Reformers.

***The Catholic Church and Predestination.*** Perhaps you are relieved that the Catholic Church does not hold the idea of predestination. Most Catholics today are surprised that the Church, in fact, does teach “predestination” – largely because the working definition in the popular mindset is that “predestination” means that God has already decided someone’s *election* or *perdition* – apart from a person’s will, love or intent, choice or action (the Catholic Church would refer to this as double predestination.) But all that is not our Catholic meaning of “predestination.”

For Catholics, when God “establishes his eternal plan of ‘predestination,’ he includes in it each person’s free response to his grace” (CCC 600). Thus, anyone who is finally saved will have been predestined by God because it was God’s predestined plan and God’s grace that went before him and enabled him to be saved. However, this does not mean that God has predestined anyone for hell. Indeed, the Bible cannot be any plainer than to say God is, “not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pt 3:9). To be damned, a person must willfully reject God’s “predestined plan” for his salvation (cf. CCC 2037).

God wills all to be saved (1 Tim 2:4) – that is God’s eternal plan. And His grace and our free will are part of that plan.

*That was just to offer the briefest of explanations of some of the factors involved. But all of this has “a history!”*

### **Predestination In Church History**

But well before the intra-reform debates about predestination, church people were already grappling with the how to understand the meaning

Origen (185–254 AD) and John Chrysostom (347–407 AD) said that God does not predestine us, but rather God foreknows who will choose him of their own free will. Both of these are “eastern” writers – and they carry a different understanding of time. The eastern thinkers held that eternity was one divine moment of time when past, present, and future were “fused” together in a single moment of time before God. This was *kairos* (God’s time) as opposed to *chronos* (sequential time in which humanity lives) where past, present and future are quite distinct. In their thinking grace and free will are very much operative, it is just that God foreknows.

Pelagius (354-440 AD) – or at least his adamant followers – said that people are born sinless and pure like Adam and can simply choose God and a life of holiness – not that it is likely to happen, but it could, if only people choose rightly. And this happens apart from grace – and original sin is of no consequence. God does not predestine us, we simply choose God. In other words, people basically save themselves. He was condemned as a heretic.

It is important to know about Pelagius in order to have a context for St. Augustine. Augustine (354–430 AD) was the leading opponent of Pelagius. During the period of the Reformation, Augustine was one of the western Church patriarchs that was being well received among the Humanists of Germany and Switzerland.

Many of the reformers looked only to Augustine’s writings contra Pelagius for their understanding of predestination. Augustine’s language is meant to draw an unmistakable contrast with Pelagian teaching that “people are born sinless and pure like Adam.” In his early works, Augustine will hold out the view that all people, because of Adam, are born sinner and are condemned (*massa damnata*) – and thus deserving of nothing except perdition. The Reformers argue that, in pure grace, God seems to have selected from the *massa damnata* some wholly undeserving people for salvation by Jesus. These are the elect. Meanwhile, those who are not graced experience the natural course of sin, which leads to death and hell – but that was the starting point anyway.

Is that Augustine's teaching? Strangely Augustine never talks about the reason people end up in hell in his works *contra* Pelagius. But lots of people began to speculate that Augustine's *massa damnata* pointed to an implied "double predestination" in Augustine's thought. In any event the 2<sup>nd</sup> Council of Orange (529 AD) condemned "double predestination," Pelagianism, and even semi-Pelagianism (man's faith was an act of free will unassisted by previous internal grace). The Council of Orange was simply affirming the condemnation of these position as had happened in 418 at the Council of Carthage and again at the Council of Ephesus in 431.

The Council of Orange defined that faith, though a free act, resulted even in its beginnings from the grace of God; that grace enlightened the human mind and enabled belief. The council denied double predestination, stating, "We not only do not believe that any are foreordained to evil by the power of God, but even state with utter abhorrence that if there are those who want to believe so evil a thing, they are anathema." The conclusions of the Council received papal sanction.

[Note: John Calvin was not unaware of the Council of Orange decrees, he was selective in what he thought they got correct. He was happy to use the decrees of Orange to show that the Church had always taught original sin and total human depravity. He rejected the principle conclusions of Orange – as well as Carthage and Ephesus]

Not that any of the condemnations ended the discussion. "Double predestination" is taken up 400 years later by Gottschalk of Orbais (804–869 AD) a Benedictine monk. A student of St. Augustine, he was the most influential proponents of double predestination in the history of Christian theology. Simply put, Gottschalk's position was that God creates some people for hell and some for heaven. He was condemned as a heretic at the Council of Quierzy (853 AD) on charges that he declared God was the author of human sin. Calvin seems to have been highly influenced by Gottschalk.

Gottschalk is, in a way, typical of followers of Augustine. I would argue that what Gottschalk and later reformers did to not read Augustine's other works on grace with the same gravity as his *Contra-Pelagius*. Consider that in the same year as his *contra* Pelagius, Augustine writes: "The merciful God, wanting to deliver men, if they are not enemies to Him and do not resist the mercy of their Creator, sent His only—begotten Son."

But why would they be "enemies to Him?" Augustine writes, just a few years after the Pelagius controversies, "Men are not willing to do what is right either because the fact that it is right is hidden from the, or because it does not please them. It is from the grace of God, which helps the wills of man, that that which was hidden becomes known, and that which did not please become sweet. The reason why they are not helped [by grace] is in themselves, not in God, whether they are predestined to damnation because of the wickedness of their pride, or whether they are to be judged and emended, contrary to the wickedness of their pride if they are sons of mercy." What is clear in this passage is that God's grace, human will and human freedom are operative in Augustine's idea of "predestination."

And even later in his life, Augustine writes, "Those, then, who do not belong to that most certain and most happy number [of the predestined] are judged most justly according to their merits. For they either lie under the sin which they contracted originally by generation... Or they receive the grace of God, but are temporary, and do not persevere: they desert and are deserted. For they were let go in their free will, not receiving the gift of perseverance, by a just and hidden judgment of God." Why would God have to judge anyone by "according to their merits" if double predestination was part of Augustine's true thinking?

### **Predestination in some elements of Reformation Thinking**

**Martin Luther** (Germany) understood the impasse at which one arrives by joining the "total depravity of man," universal grace, and God's election of individuals, but he never tried to harmonize the

teachings. He feared that he would be forced to make concessions that would violate biblical truth. Luther believed that divine election was the cause of our salvation. The doctrine was for the comfort of the believer. He wrote: “The human doctrine of free will and of our spiritual powers is futile. The matter (salvation) does not depend on our will but on God’s will and election... Since salvation is totally of God’s doing, the doctrine of election comforts those who believe. We can say, ‘I belong to God! I have been chosen by God. I am one of his sheep!’”

While accepting divine election, Luther refused to embrace the logical conclusions that led to an atonement limited to the elect and irresistible grace. He retained universal grace and man’s power to resist and reject the Gospel. For Luther, it was a mystery.

**John Calvin** (Switzerland) was influenced by the writings of both Augustine and Gottschalk and did teach the concept of double predestination. It deserves mentioning, however, that Calvin did not stress the doctrine of predestination in such writings as *The Institutes* as much as Luther and later Calvinists did. Furthermore, for him the doctrine of predestination was used primarily as a pastoral answer to the question of why some people trust in Jesus for salvation while others do not. Admittedly, his teaching was quite controversial; some of his opponents even named their dogs “Calvin” in mockery. Nonetheless, Calvin wrote of the doctrine in his will: “I have no other hope or refuge than His predestination upon which my entire salvation is grounded.”

**Jacobus Arminius** (Holland, the generation after Calvin) commended the writings of John Calvin but did not accept Calvin’s understanding of election and predestination. Arminius taught that election was a corporate, not individual, concept in Scripture, according to the Old Testament precedent that Israel was the elect people of God. Furthermore, he taught that God has not predestined people to salvation, but, rather, predestined the conditions of repentance of sin and faith in Jesus as the grounds for joining the elect.

**John Wesley** (England, 200 years after Calvin), the founder of Methodism, popularized the teachings of Arminius. He echoed much of Arminius’ teaching, especially the concept of prevenient grace, or first grace that is always there – a grace that “comes before”. According to Wesley, prevenient grace is a grace that God gives to open up the will of a sinner so that everyone has the opportunity to freely choose or not choose to trust in Jesus Christ for salvation. The idea of prevenient grace is often attributed to Wesley or the earlier Arminian thinkers, but the same idea has long been a part of Catholic theology and was discussed in Canon 18 of the Council of Orange back in the 6<sup>th</sup> century – and reaffirmed at the Council of Trent in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### **A Reformation Distinction: Predestination**

The tradition of predestination essentially fell into two broad streams of thought about predestination:

Five Points of Arminianism (predestination)

1. Free Will
2. Conditional Election
3. Universal Atonement
4. Resistible Grace
5. Perseverance of Some Saints (you can give up Salvation)

Five Points of Calvinism (double pre-destination)

1. Total Depravity
2. Unconditional Election
3. Limited Atonement
4. Irresistible Grace

5. Perseverance of All Saints (once saved, always saved)