

Predestination, Election, and Free Will

The Quarrel That Divides Protestants, and the Distinction That Dissolves It

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I. Two Answers, One Bible

Does God choose who will be saved, or do we? The question has divided Christians since Augustine argued it with Pelagius and Luther with Erasmus—and it divides Protestants from one another as sharply as from Rome. The Calvinist and the Wesleyan give opposite answers, each from the same Bible, each certain the other has misread it. There is no single "Protestant view" of predestination to answer, and any argument that treats Protestantism as one voice on this question has already lost the thread. This essay sets both systems out at full strength, lets them do to each other what they do, and then offers the Catholic position, which is older than the quarrel and refuses its governing assumption.¹

II. The Reformed Doctrine

On the Calvinist account, fallen man is spiritually dead and cannot, of himself, choose God; if anyone is saved, God must first have chosen him. And God chose him *unconditionally*—not on the basis of any foreseen faith or merit, for even faith is God's gift, given to those he elected. "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4); "those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified" (Rom. 8:30); "so it depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God who has mercy" (Rom. 9:16). Grace, in this system, is efficacious and finally irresistible, and the truly elect cannot fall away. To make salvation hang on man's choice, the Reformed theologian argues, is to steal glory from God and give man ground to boast—the one thing the gospel forbids.²

III. The Wesleyan Doctrine

On the Arminian and Wesleyan account, this makes God the author of the reprobate's damnation and flatly contradicts his revealed heart. God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4); Christ is the propitiation "not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2); the Lord is "not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). Grace, on this view, goes out to everyone—*prevenient* grace, which heals the will enough to make a free response genuinely possible—and that response can be refused, for the whole Bible pleads with people to choose ("I have set before you life and death... therefore choose life," Deut. 30:19), and pleading is a farce if the outcome was fixed before the world began. Election is real but *conditional*: God elects those he foreknows will believe, and a believer who abandons faith can be lost. To make grace irresistible, the Wesleyan argues, is to make love mechanical and God cruel to the many he supposedly passed over.³

IV. The Premise Both Share

Each system reads the other's proof-texts as decisive against it, and neither has convinced the other in four centuries. The Calvinist owns Romans 9; the Wesleyan owns 1 Timothy 2 and 2 Peter 3:9. The Calvinist secures God's sovereignty and imperils his universal love; the Wesleyan secures the love and imperils the sovereignty. But notice what they share, because it is the thing that traps them both. Both assume that grace and human freedom are quantities in competition, dividing a fixed sum: whatever grace contributes, freedom loses, and whatever freedom contributes, grace loses. Given that premise, the Calvinist protects God's glory by shrinking the creature to zero, and the Wesleyan protects the creature's freedom by making grace resistible enough to fail. The premise forces the choice—and the premise is false.

V. Both Truths, Neither Denied

The Catholic position is older than the quarrel and declines its arithmetic. Grace and free will are not two forces splitting one hundred percent between them; grace is what *makes* the will free to choose God, so that a saved man's free "yes" is one hundred percent his own act and one hundred percent God's gift, with no remainder and no competition. Get that wrong and every proof-text on both sides is misread.

So the Church holds both things the two systems tear apart. God's initiative is absolute: "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16); "no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44); we are chosen "before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). And God's universal saving will is equally revealed: he "desires all men to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:4), is "not wishing that any should perish" (2 Pet. 3:9), and in Christ died for all (2 Cor. 5:14–15). The Calvinist secures the first by explaining away the second; the Wesleyan secures the second by softening the first. The Catholic keeps both at full strength, because both are the word of God, and confesses that *how* absolute election and universal saving will cohere in the divine eternity exceeds the human mind—a mystery to be adored, not a contradiction to be resolved by cutting away half of Scripture.⁴

VI. Predestined to Glory, Never to Hell

On the hardest point the Church is decisive, and her decisiveness is precisely where she parts from strict Calvinism. God predestines no one to hell. The *Catechism*: "God predestines no one to go to hell; for this, a willful turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end." God positively wills the salvation of all and gives to all grace sufficient for salvation; the saved are saved by that grace alone, and the lost are lost by their own final resistance to a grace that was truly offered them. This is not the Calvinist double decree, in which God from eternity ordains some to reprobation—a teaching that makes God the author of the damned man's ruin. Nor is it a denial of election. It is the asymmetry Scripture itself preserves: salvation is God's work from first to last, and damnation is the creature's own doing. "O Israel, you are destroyed, because you are against me, against your helper" (Hos. 13:9)—the help is his, the destruction ours.⁵

VII. Grace That Frees

The Reformed instinct that fallen man cannot save himself is correct, and Catholic teaching is emphatic about it: apart from grace we can do nothing toward salvation ("apart from me you can do nothing," John 15:5), and even the first stirring of faith is God's gift, not our achievement. The Church condemned the contrary view—that the beginning of faith might be our own unaided act—at the Second Council of Orange in 529,

a thousand years before Calvin was born. So the Catholic does not owe the Calvinist the doctrine of prevenient grace; he already holds it, and held it first.

But grace perfects freedom rather than bypassing it. When the Lord opened the heart of Lydia "to give heed to what was said by Paul" (Acts 16:14), the opening was entirely his and the heeding was entirely hers, and there was no rivalry between them, because it was his grace that liberated her to heed. Irresistible grace and mere autonomous human choice are two halves of one false picture; the reality is a will set free by God and, so freed, truly moving itself. This is why the New Testament's warnings mean what they say—Paul disciplines his body "lest... I myself should be disqualified" (1 Cor. 9:27); branches are cut off "if you do not continue in his kindness" (Rom. 11:22)—and why the believer lives neither in presumption nor in despair but in hope, "work[ing] out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12–13). Both clauses, in one breath: the whole Catholic doctrine in a sentence, and the reason the quarrel between Geneva and the Wesleyans need never have begun.⁶

Endnotes

1. Scripture quotations, unless noted, are from the Revised Standard Version.
2. Ephesians 1:4; Romans 8:30; 9:16 (RSV); Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), ch. 3.
3. 1 Timothy 2:4; 1 John 2:2; 2 Peter 3:9; Deuteronomy 30:19 (RSV); the Five Articles of the Remonstrants (1610); John Wesley, "Free Grace" and "On Predestination."
4. John 15:16; 6:44; Ephesians 1:4; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Corinthians 5:14–15 (RSV); *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§600–605.
5. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §1037; Hosea 13:9 (RSV); on the sufficiency of grace given to all, the Second Council of Orange (529) and the Council of Trent, Session VI.
6. John 15:5; Acts 16:14; 1 Corinthians 9:27; Romans 11:22; Philippians 2:12–13 (RSV); Second Council of Orange (529), canons on prevenient grace.

For Further Reading

On Grace and Free Will, by St. Augustine, A.D. 426—both truths held together. Free online at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1510.htm>.

Council of Trent, Session VI (1547)—justification, grace, and free will. Free online at <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/trent/sixth-session.htm>.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§600–605 on predestination; §§1996–2005 on grace.
Can You Know You Are Saved?, on this site—the pastoral sequel.

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"God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."

—1 Timothy 2:3–4

Ad maiorem Dei gloriam
To the greater glory of God

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of *the Catholic doctrine of grace, election, and free will*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.