13. Predestination and free will

Often heard: "God chose the elect before the world began; you can't lose what God decreed." / "Catholics think you save yourself by your free will."
Also heard: "Calvinist Baptists and free-will Baptists teach opposite things about election from the same Bible. Which one is the Baptist view?"

Election rests on God's grace, not human merit

HELD BY Lutheran election to life only · Reformed unconditional election · Anglican read both ways · Baptist divided

Protestants are divided here. Reformed churches and Calvinist ("Particular") Baptists hold unconditional election: God chose the elect for no reason in them, Christ died effectively for them, and His grace cannot finally be resisted. Most Southern Baptists hold a modified view: God desires all to be saved, grace enables a free response, and those who truly believe are kept secure. Both reject the idea that human merit contributes to salvation.

VERSES CITED

Calvinist: Rom 8:29–30; 9:10–24; Eph 1:4–11; John 6:37, 44; 10:26–29; Acts 13:48. Non-Calvinist: John 3:16; 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9; Ezek 18:23, 32; Matt 23:37; Rev 22:17.

WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM

Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings (c. 412–430) on grace and election; Calvin, *Institutes* 3.21–24 (1559), including double predestination; Jacob Arminius (d. 1609) and the Remonstrance (1610); the Synod of Dort (1618–19). English General Baptists (Smyth, Helwys, 1609–12) were Arminian; Particular Baptists (1630s–40s; 1644 and 1689 confessions) were Calvinist. The acronym TULIP is a 20th-century teaching device.

Grace comes first and can be refused

HELD BY Catholic · Orthodox foreknowledge and synergy · Methodist prevenient grace

God predestines, and His plan includes each person's free response; He predestines no one to hell. Grace always comes first and makes free cooperation possible, but it can be refused. No one can merit the first grace. Within these limits the Church allows different schools: Thomists stress the efficacy of grace, Molinists stress God's foreknowledge of free choices, and Rome has never settled their dispute.

VERSES CITED

1 Tim 2:4; Rom 8:28–30; Eph 1:4–5; Phil 2:12–13; 2 Pet 3:9; Matt 23:37; Deut 30:19; Sir 15:14–17.

EARLY CHURCH AND HISTORY

Justin and Irenaeus defend free will against Gnostic fatalism. The Council of Orange (529) affirmed that grace precedes every good act and condemned predestination to evil. The monk Gottschalk was condemned (Quiersy, 849) for teaching double predestination. Trent, Session 6, canons 4–6 and 17, rejected the view that free will is lost or passive and that God predestines anyone to evil.

CATECHISM AND COUNCILS

CCC 600, 1037, 1730–1742 (freedom), 1996–2005 (grace), 2022; Trent Sess. 6, ch. 5 and canons 4–6, 17.

Across the traditions

How each major tradition answers this question, in its own words and from its own documents.

Catholic

God predestines, and His plan includes each person's free response; He predestines no one to hell. Grace always comes first and can be refused, and the Church allows both the Thomist and Molinist schools. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Catechism of the Catholic Church 600, 1037, 1730–1742, 1996–2005, 2022; Council of Trent, Session VI, ch. 5 and canons 4–6, 17; Council of Orange (529).

Orthodox

Orthodox teaching ties predestination to God's foreknowledge: the Confession of Dositheus says God chose some for glory and rejected others "since He foreknew" how each would use free will. Grace is offered to all and cooperates with the free will, which the Fall weakened but did not destroy (synergy). Philaret's catechism likewise says God gives all "preparatory grace, and means sufficient" for salvation.

Sources: Confession of Dositheus (1672), decrees 3, 14; Longer Catechism of St. Philaret, qq. 121–125, 162.

Lutheran

Lutherans distinguish God's foreknowledge, which covers everyone and causes no evil, from election, which concerns only the children of God and is a cause of their salvation. Election rests wholly on God's mercy and Christ's merit, not on anything in us. Yet God earnestly wills all to be saved and predestines no one to damnation; the only cause of damnation is sin and rejection of the Word. Election is to be sought in Christ and the Gospel, not in God's hidden counsel.

Reformed

Reformed churches teach that God, by an eternal and unchangeable decree, chose some to everlasting life in Christ out of free grace, "without any foresight of faith, or good works," and passed over the rest, ordaining them to wrath for their sin. God is not the author of sin, and creatures' wills are not violated. The Belgic Confession calls God merciful in electing and just in leaving others in their ruin. Dort rejected the Remonstrants' election based on foreseen faith.

Sources: Formula of Concord, Epitome XI.2–5, 8, 10, 17–21; Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration XI.8, 65, 70, 78–81.

Sources: Westminster Confession 3.1, 3.3, 3.5, 3.7–8; Canons of Dort (1619), First Head, arts. 7, 9–10, 15 and Rejection of Errors 5; Belgic Confession, art. 16; Remonstrance (1610), art. 1.

Anglican

Article XVII defines predestination to life as God's everlasting purpose, by counsel secret to us, to deliver from damnation those He has chosen in Christ. It does not mention reprobation, warns against dwelling on predestination, and directs that God's promises be received "as they be generally set forth" in Scripture. Article X teaches that grace must go before the will and work with it. Anglicans have read Article XVII in both Calvinist and Arminian ways; the Calvinist Lambeth Articles (1595) never became official.

Sources: Thirty-Nine Articles (1571), arts. X, XVII; Lambeth Articles (1595), in Schaff, Creeds of Christendom, vol. 3.

Methodist

Methodists hold that grace is "free in all, and free for all." After the Fall no one can turn to God by natural strength, but grace goes before us to give a good will. Wesley taught that this prevenient grace reaches everyone, so no one sins for lack of grace but by not using it. In "Free Grace" (1740) he rejected unconditional election, arguing that it amounts to reprobation. The Methodist Articles contain no article on predestination.

Sources: Methodist Articles of Religion (1784), art. VIII; Wesley, Sermon 128, Free Grace (1740); Wesley, Sermon 85, On Working Out Our Own Salvation, III.3–4.

Baptist

Baptists are divided. Calvinist (Particular) Baptists hold unconditional election and effectual grace, while most Southern Baptists hold that God desires all to be saved and grace enables a free response; both reject human merit. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Baptist Faith and Message (2000), art. V; Second London Baptist Confession (1689), ch. 3.

Where it gets contested: Augustine is cited by Calvinists (Reformed and Calvinist Baptists) and by Catholics. Catholics note that Calvinism is a minority view among Baptists, so a Baptist cannot speak for "the Baptist view" here; Calvinist Baptists note that the Thomist view of grace is close to their own. John 6:44 is cited on both sides: Calvinists read the Father's "draw" as effectual, while others set it beside John 12:32, "will draw all men unto me" (see question 17 for Methodists and question 20 for Orthodox).

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