

Predestination and Free Will

By David E. Utsler

ISSUE: What is meant by “predestination” within a Calvinist understanding of salvation? Does this exclude free will?

RESPONSE: In general, predestination refers to God’s sovereign will over all things, for He accomplishes everything according to the counsel of His will (Eph. 1:11). According to Catholic teaching, predestination and free will are not mutually exclusive. Rather, God created man in His image to share in His divine nature by a communion of love.¹ Freedom of the will holds a necessary place in the mystery of God’s eternal, sovereign and predestined plan, which is to unite all things in heaven and on earth in him (I Cor. 15:28; Eph. 1:10). In contrast, the Calvinist approach to predestination denies the full freedom of will God gives each person.

DISCUSSION: Most theologians discuss the question of predestination and free will in terms of soteriology (the doctrine of salvation). Because there are so many issues related to the question, this FAITH FACT cannot address every point fully. Often, the belief in predestination is one of the first issues a Calvinist will want to debate with a Catholic. Because a proper understanding of predestination demands a proper understanding of many other truths, this issue is best left alone until more pertinent questions are addressed. Some of the issues that should be discussed before tackling the question of predestination include: the nature of man in relation to God; man’s sharing in the attributes of God; the intrinsic good of man; the effects of sin, especially Original Sin; the use of the will; an understanding of grace.

The Calvinist belief often associated with the term “predestination” is that the eternal destiny of each individual soul is “predestined” (determined beforehand) by God. Thus, persons do not respond freely to God’s grace, but are moved by His grace to eternal salvation or denied it unto damnation. In short, God chooses whether a soul spends eternity in heaven or hell. This is also known as “double predestination.”

For a simple statement defining predestination as taught by Calvinists, we turn to John Calvin himself. In his *Institutes*, Book III, Ch. XXI, sec. 5, Calvin says,

Predestination we call the eternal decree of God, by which He has determined in Himself, what He would have to become of every individual of mankind. For they are not all created with a similar destiny; but eternal life is foreordained for some and eternal death for others. Every man, therefore, being created for one or the other of these ends, we say he is predestinated either to life or death.²

To understand Calvin’s belief, we must examine what is commonly called the five points of Calvinism, and within that framework study certain key Calvinist arguments.

The “five points of Calvinism” are conveniently outlined with the acronym TULIP: T- Total Depravity; U- Unconditional Election; L- Limited Atonement; I- Irresistible Grace; P- Perseverance of the Saints. As each one is examined individually, their relationship and dependence on one another will also be clear.

Total Depravity

Another term for total depravity is “total inability.” Simply stated, it means that due to Original Sin man cannot love God, choose anything good or do anything at all meriting salvation. It does not mean that man does not have a free will, only that his will is not capable of choosing anything good. His will, then, is limited. Man is born into Original Sin and his entire person is directed to evil.

Admittedly, this simple approach is not what most Protestants will mean by “inability to do good.” Our direct experience demonstrates that those without faith can apprehend with their reason what is good, know

it is good in itself and then do it. In other words, there are purely natural goods and values that man can perform. Recognizing this, Reformed Calvinists explain that fallen men can do good things by virtue of “common grace.” Scripture says that God “makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust” (Mt. 5:45). From such passages it is construed that there is a grace common to all men that is described as “general influences of the Holy Spirit which to a greater or lesser degree are shared by all men.... [However, this grace] is not capable of producing a genuine conversion.”³ Apparently, it is just a grace given to make him do good things, not to redeem man.

Neither Scripture nor the whole of Christian thought prior to the Reformation supports such a notion. Catholic teaching has always affirmed that “every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above” (Jas. 1:17), coming to us from God. Our very existence comes from God and is sustained by Him, so we must give Him glory for our good works. Yet, they are “our” good works and performed by the free will that God also gave us. The grace of God in no way negates, either prior to or after the fall, our will which is itself a gift of God’s grace and a necessary part of our being. This gift of free will is required if we are to love God, for how can you love if you are not free? Yet, to love God is why we were created.

The question is not whether God’s grace must necessarily precede the will. The Catholic Church affirms and has always affirmed this (Catechism, no. 2001). The question is the nature of man’s free response. The Calvinist understanding of total depravity is further unfolded in the remaining four points. If we stop at the proposition that the grace of God is necessary for a man to choose Christ, there is no disagreement here by the Catholic Church. However, the real question is whether man freely cooperates with God’s initiative or if even his response is because God predetermined what it would be?

Unconditional Election

This is defined as one’s election to share in eternal life being completely the choice of God’s sovereign will. It is not based on any goodness in or good act from the one elected. Nor is it a result of God foreseeing man’s choice and electing him on that basis. The point of “unconditional election” is that we do not earn regeneration. It is a free gift from God. As the Council of Trent explained, “[N]one of those things that precede justification, whether faith or works, merit the grace of justification.”⁴ While the Church defends such an understanding, this is not all there is to Calvinist thought.

It would be erroneous to say that God foresees something as if He were some sort of fortuneteller. God is not bound by time or space. All time and all things are present to Him as “present.” He cannot be spoken of in terms of time or space. While this is a mystery, and cannot be fully understood by us, there are some important points that we do understand about this. Because there is not a time or place that He is not present, God cannot “look to the future.” It would likewise be erroneous to say that God merely knows your choice beforehand and on that basis chooses you. That would be reducing God’s work to a mere stacking of the deck based on his having the “inside track” on the future.

Furthermore, to believe that God “antecedently to any difference or desert in men themselves separates the human race into two portions and ordains one to everlasting life and the other to everlasting death”⁵ is to believe an error. In St. Augustine’s *On the Spirit and the Letter* he writes:

To yield our consent, indeed, to God’s summons, or to withhold it is (as I have said) the function of our own will. And this not only does not invalidate what is said, ‘For what hast thou that thou didst not receive?’ but it really confirms it. For the soul cannot receive and possess these gifts, which are here referred to, except by yielding its consent. And thus whatever it possesses, and whatever it receives, is from God; and yet the act of receiving and having belongs, of course, to the receiver and possessor.⁶

It is God who extends salvation to mankind for no other reason than His goodness and His love for us. He does not seek to save us in response to any act on our part. God alone initiates salvation. Yet, it is false to say that God only extends that unconditional summons to some and denies it to others (2 Pet. 3:9). It is equally false to say that the grace given manipulates the will to respond with a yes or makes it impossible to resist with a no. The next two points of TULIP will highlight these points.

Limited Atonement

This point essentially addresses the question, “For whom did Christ die?” Did He die for the sins of all mankind or only for those previously chosen (predestined) for eternal life? Boettner argues in chapter XII, section 1 of his text that limited atonement is not to be understood in terms of a limited value. He states that Christ would not have “suffered more if more were to have been saved” and would have suffered just as much if fewer were predestined.⁷ The value of the suffering is measured by the value of the one who suffers. Therefore, Christ’s suffering is of infinite value. Thus, we cannot look at this doctrine as if Christ’s sacrifice works like a mathematical equation or a business transaction where cost equals the price paid. However, Boettner makes clear that though Christ suffered enough to save all men, He only makes that grace effective for the predestined elect.

Boettner claims that though the “value of the atonement was sufficient to save all mankind, it was efficient to save only the elect.”⁸ The teachings of the Church on hell and free will admit that the sufficiency of Christ’s death is unlimited, and that the efficiency is limited by man. Namely, God’s grace is sufficient to save all, and He desires all to be saved. However, not all are saved because man chooses to reject the grace.

In contrast, Boettner reasons that if God offered salvation to all men, but some are lost, then the inherent value of Christ’s sacrifice is destroyed. The power of the atonement is limited if it only made salvation possible, but it did not really secure salvation. He quotes Charles H. Spurgeon as saying that if God received payment for sin by Christ, how could He then demand it a second time from the sinner himself who does not repent? He later says that the “atonement of Christ does not extend to all men but that it is limited for those for whom He stood surety.”⁹ In essence, the error is that God limits the efficacious acts of grace, not man.

Scripture refutes the error that Christ’s death could save all men, but does not because God wills otherwise. 1 Timothy 2:4 states clearly that God desires *all* men to be saved.

Irresistible Grace

If God predestines an individual to eternal life, by what means does He bring them to faith? Calvinists call God’s grace “irresistible” or “efficacious.” As stated above, the Catholic Church affirms the necessity of God’s grace prior to our response. However, Calvinists go further in asserting that this grace of salvation always produces conversion, because it is “effective.” Thus, the Calvinist would accuse those who believe man can decline God’s offer of salvation and resist grace to be guilty of saying God is ineffective or cannot get the job done. They view grace much in the same manner one would determine the “effectiveness” of a washing machine.

Boettner quotes the Westminster Confession, question 31, which says that by efficacious grace God renews the will and “doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ.” The Catholic Church would agree with the terms “persuade and enable” because to persuade is a means appropriate to the nature of persons and the Church affirms the enabling power of grace. However, as Calvinist doctrine is explained, it must be concluded that the word persuade should be exchanged for “coerced” and enabled is much to light a word for irresistible grace. To the Calvinist, man is much more than enabled, he has no choice. Thus, man does not truly “embrace” Christ, as the Westminster Confession says, because it is not done freely.

However, the workings of God in relation to man is not mechanistic, but must be understood in the context of divine love. The Catechism contains a short but beautiful explanation of grace (nos. 1996- 2005). In number 2002 the Church explains that “God’s free initiative demands *man’s free response*” (original emphasis) and that the “soul only enters freely into the communion of love.” The Catholic Church is clear on the necessity of God’s grace, without which man would not seek God. However, if this grace is impossible to resist, it is not love. Most importantly, as Jesus Himself teaches in the Lord’s prayer, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven (Mt. 6:10).” This does not mean that man thwarts God’s plans, but rather that God’s plan includes man’s freedom to love or reject Him.

Perseverance of the Saints

Finally, we turn to the fifth point in the acronym. This doctrine quite simply says that whom God chooses for eternal life, cannot fall away, but the same grace that called that person, sustains them to the end. It makes sense enough in light of, for example, Philippians 1:6 that tells us that He who has begun in us a good work, will bring it to completion. There are numerous verses used by Calvinists to support their doctrine.

Scripture has numerous references regarding persevering to the end, and several admonitions not to fall away. These would make no sense if falling away were impossible. Apostasy is a reality. However, the Calvinist believes these verses do not say what man can do but what he ought to do. Furthermore, as explained by Calvinists, he will only act as predestined by God. He is told to persevere but cannot. Thus, these verses seem to have no other point but to reveal the necessity of grace (or affirm Calvinism).

Examining each of these passages and addressing them is beyond the scope of this FAITH FACT. However, if one reads the passages cited by Calvinists within the context of Scripture as a whole, it becomes clear that their conclusions are imposed upon the text. In other words, if you start with a belief in predestination as Calvinists teach, you will interpret the Scriptures accordingly. If you start with Scripture as a whole, there is no support for their position. The true doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is not “those who are saved will persevere to the end,” but rather “those who persevere to the end will be saved.”¹⁰

Double Predestination

One question that often comes up is whether or not Calvinist soteriology actually says that God has created some people, only to send them to hell. This was clearly the teaching of Calvin and the only logical conclusion of reformed thought on predestination. In other words, Calvinist soteriology leaves no room for any other belief except that God created some people for heaven and others for hell.

As Calvinists teach, if God is totally sovereign, then it is safe to say He knew those He did not choose (He created them after all) and by not choosing them He did make a choice concerning them. After all, God could have saved them if He wanted. The grace of Christ’s death was great enough. Unfortunately, God did not so choose. Further, though we all deserve damnation since the Fall, the Fall itself did not take God by surprise. Man in a state of grace was either capable of rejecting grace or God predestined man’s fall. The Calvinist can’t have it both ways. And if the Fall was predestined, God condemns to hell by His own will by creating souls He will not save.

As in the case of all errors, Scripture refutes this notion. For how can man be made in the image and likeness of God and possess intrinsic goodness and yet be destined for hell (cf. Gen. 1:26-31)?

God is Love

While there is much mystery involved in the relationship between God’s gift of salvation and man’s free will, the mystery is welcomed when considered in light of God as Love. Love always leaves the one loved free to accept or reject the love offered. This acceptance or rejection does not alter love itself, but it can change the one loved. When confronted with the error of double predestination, St. Francis de Sales was unable to refute the Calvinist approach with reason. However, when he submitted himself to God in love, the question became moot and his own life transformed. By example, he was able to reconcile a large number of Calvinists back into the fold of the Catholic Church. Following his example, when confronted with questions about salvation, our reply should be simple and focused on God Himself, who is Love and calls all to love.

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Catechism), no. 850.

² As quoted in: Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, (Phillipsburg, NJ, The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1932), 15. Most of the material in this FAITH FACT is taken from this source rather than Calvin’s *Institutes of Christian Religion*. Boettner’s text deals directly with our subject matter and is recognized by Reformed thinkers as a standard text representing their thought. This is witnessed by the fact that almost every Reformed writer

quotes Boettner with regard to predestination.

³ *Op. Cit.*, Boettner, 179.

⁴ Council of Trent, *Decree on Justification*, as found in: *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (Rockford: Tan Books and Publishers, 1978), 35.

⁵ *Op. Cit.*, Boettner, 83.

⁶ St. Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, Ch. 60, as found in: ed. Philip Schaff, D.d., LL.D., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, (Hendrickson Publishers) Vol. 5, 110.

⁷ *Op. Cit.*, Boettner, 151.

⁸ *Op. Cit.*, Boettner, 152 (original emphasis).

⁹ *Op. Cit.*, Boettner, 155 (added emphasis).

¹⁰ Mt. 10:22; 24:13. The literal context of verses deal with enduring to the end those things that were to come upon Jerusalem near the end of the first century. However, in the anagogic sense, we can see the truth about remaining steadfast in faith to the end.

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