

Canon, Creeds, & Revivals

How the Church Preserved our Christian Beliefs

Class 7 - Predestination and Free Will

Gregory Chao, MDiv., Fuller Theological Seminary



One Person's Struggle/Perspective

Statement 1: God is sovereign (in charge of all things) (Eph. 1:4-5)

Statement 2: Humans make choices and are responsible for their decisions (Jn. 3:16)

Statement 3: God desires all humans to be saved (I Tim 2:4)

- **Mystery** - All three of the above statements are true according to Scripture. There is mystery here such that no simple answer can fully resolve it.
- **Traditions** - Reformed tradition and Lutherans will tend to emphasize first statement. Arminian traditions (Methodist) will tend to emphasize second statement. Both viewpoints acknowledge the third statement. Baptist, Charismatic, & other traditions will vary.
- **Danger** – If one over-emphasize statement 1, humans become robots where fate determines one's course of life. If one over-emphasize statement 2, God becomes very weak/passive following the lead of human will.
- **Major or Minor Doctrine?** - This difference of opinion is not a doctrine that determines salvation or in the Creeds (Apostle, Nicene, Chalcedon). It is not one that divides Christians from Non-Christians.

Some Practical Results (Human Nature)

- **Both traditions** acknowledge that humans were created in the image of God and are fallen (mix of good and evil).
- **Reformed** - Reformed tradition will emphasize the depravity of our human condition. Humans are unable to save themselves because of their sinful heart (Rom 3:10-11). The tendency of the human heart is toward self-centeredness and self-absorption (tainted, idolatrous, depraved, wicked, or evil.) This tendency remains even after salvation (although a new godly nature begins to take root and grow (sanctification, regeneration). This viewpoint keeps us humble.
- **Arminian** – Humans are given enough goodness to make a decision toward salvation and are responsible for maintaining that decision throughout life.

Some Practical Results (Salvation)

- **Reformed** people believe that one cannot lose their salvation. It is a work of God (Eph. 2:8-9) that cannot be undone. There is great assurance with this viewpoint. Since it is a gift and not based on performance, one cannot boast.
- **Arminianists** believe that one can lose their salvation if they backslide.

Some Practical Results (Motivation)

- In Reformed thinking, the assurance that one is a “child of God” makes the primary motivation to God one of gratitude.

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! - 1 John 3:1

- It brings great relief that sin can no longer result in death.
 - It brings joy in living.
 - It results in good works.
 - It secures our hope for the future.
- In contrast, Arminianist can never be assured of their salvation living in fear of losing it.

Which one do you believe?

- Which picture of human nature best fits what you know as true?
- Which picture best fits how you were saved?
- Which picture best fits your understanding of your inner motivation as a Christian?

An Interesting Twist - Degrees of Rewards after Salvation

- You cannot lose your salvation BUT you can lose your rewards. A kind of...salvation by faith but sanctification by works.
- My two cents - I believe it is a return to works-based thinking. It has the danger of sapping our motivation of gratitude back to fear again. I believe our reward is our salvation...and that is enough!
 - **(Tainted Works)** Our works on earth are too tainted with mixed motives to be the basis of rewards. In Phil. 3, Paul's goal/reward is not a high status in heaven...it is to obtain resurrection (salvation).
 - **(No Jealousy)** If there are degrees of rewards in heaven, it will be a very different system. Since there will be no jealousy in heaven, we will be happy if someone gets more rewards than us. Rewards, therefore, have no motivational value. We will be so glad to be in the presence of God the Father, we will have no need to compare with others.

Further reading - Craig Blomberg, "Degrees of Reward in the Kingdom of Heaven?"



History - Augustine vs. Pelagius

- Augustine (354-430 AD) - “No other Christian thinker after Paul was to influence so profoundly the Christianity of Western European peoples...he taught, the first man, Adam, fell into sin...this falling away from man’s God given status to a lower level of being is not one from which man can recover by his own effort. Every endeavor of man to restore himself to his primal rank is marred and made impotent by the degradation worked by original sin. Man cannot raise himself by his own bootstraps...Man is free, but only free to sin, to sink even lower. He is not free to turn wholly to God...freedom can come only by the grace of God. This grace of God was in Christ, Christ who was in God incarnate, fully God and yet fully human. The man Christ Jesus is the only mediator between God and man.”*

A History of Christianity Volume 1 - Kenneth Scott Latourette, p. 178



History - Augustine vs. Pelagius

- “Pelagius differed from Augustine in denying that the taint of Adam’s sin and the impairment of the will brought by it have been transmitted to all Adam’s descendants, but in contrast declared that each man at birth has the ability to choose the good. In other words, they denounced “original sin.”...some men before and after Christ have so used their free will that they have been sinless. God’s grace, so at least some Pelagians held, is seen in giving man free will at his creation, in giving man the law as a guide to his choice, and in sending Jesus Christ who by his teaching and good example assists men to do good.”*
- Note - The Catholic church eventually condemned Pelagianism

A History of Christianity Volume 1 - Kenneth Scott Latourette, p. 181

History - Calvin/Luther vs. Arminianist

- John Calvin (1509-1564)/Martin Luther(1483-1546) sided with Augustine on “original sin”, man’s inability to save himself, and salvation as a work of grace. Believer are predestined by God to be his children. Calvin focused on the sovereignty of God.*
- Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609)/John Wesley (1703-1791) - God’s sovereignty is by foreknowledge. “Although human nature was seriously affected by the fall, man has not been left in a state of total spiritual helplessness. God graciously enables every sinner to repent and believe, but He does not interfere with man’s freedom. Each sinner possesses a free will and his eternal destiny depends on how he uses it...Those who believe and are truly saved can lose their salvation by failing to keep their faith”** John Wesley embraced the ability of one to become sinless where the “love of God reigned supreme in their hearts”

*(Note - Both Calvin/Luther rejected the Augustinian belief (Catholic) that baptism the mechanism for negating “original sin”, rather, salvation by faith is the only method.

**https://www.fivesolas.com/cal_arm.htm

Secular vs. Christian



- Secular Philosophies have the same issues - Determinism (not Predestination) vs. Free will
- Christians try to acknowledge both sides with the tension due to mystery. It is actually a very nuanced position.

ECO Essential Tenets

- (Excerpt on Predestination) The call of God to the individual Christian is not merely an invitation that each person may accept or reject by his or her own free will. Having lost true freedom of will in the fall, we are incapable of turning toward God of our own volition. God chooses us for Himself in grace before the foundation of the world, not because of any merit on our part, but only because of His love and mercy. Each of us is chosen in Christ, who is eternally appointed to be head of the body of the elect, our brother and our high priest. He is the one who is bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh, our divine Helper who is also Bridegroom, sharing our human nature so that we may see His glory. We who receive Him and believe in His name do so not by our own will or our wisdom, but because His glory compels us irresistibly to turn toward Him. By His enticing call on our lives, Jesus enlightens our minds, softens our hearts, and renews our wills, restoring the freedom that we lost in the fall.
- We are all sinners who fall short of God's glory, and we all deserve God's eternal judgment. Apart from the saving work of Jesus Christ, we are incapable of being in God's presence, incapable of bearing the weight of His glory. We rejoice that Jesus Christ offers us safe conduct into the heart of God's consuming and purifying fire, shielding us with His perfect humanity and transforming us by His divine power. Having received such grace, we extend grace to others.

Some Miscellaneous Technical Points (for the hardcore aficionado)

- Foreknowledge – In Reformed thinking, God goes beyond foreknowledge. Foreknowledge says that God knows beforehand the choices humans make and then set history in motion based on it. In Predestination, God sets history in motion not based on human decisions but only based on his own good will. God is in charge and in control of all things.
- TULIP (Five Point Calvinism) – Many have used the acronym to explain predestination (Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Perseverance of the Saints). I personally have not had good success explaining it using this method. It is too simplistic and easy to be misunderstood. God can be seen as an arbitrary and cruel judge. Richard Mouw, in his excellent book *, explains the acronym in a nuance manner.

*Richard Mouw, Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport: Making Connections in Today's World, 2004

Some Miscellaneous Technical Points (for the hardcore aficionado) - Cont.

- Double Predestination – It is the belief that God not only predestined those who go to heaven (elect) but those who go to hell (reprobate). In ECO's Confessional Standards, it is only found in one confession, the Westminster Confession/Catechism.
 - It must be held in tension with “God desires all to be saved” (1 Tim. 2:4)
 - Predestination of the reprobate is not directly taught in Scripture (although some passages come close) but it is derived by logic. Some have made a distinction between God's treatment of elect (positive) versus reprobate (do nothing) as the solution.
 - It is OK to struggle with this one...most do....mystery

Some Miscellaneous Technical Points (for the hardcore aficionado) - Cont.

- John Calvin – It is difficult to exactly pinpoint whether John Calvin believed in double predestination or not. Certainly, TULIP did not come from him. He was very willing to live with the creative tension and leave it a mystery. Calvin did not make the doctrine of predestination the centerpiece of his teaching by any means. He made only a few passing references to it in his 1536 Institutes. No single question in his 1545 Catechism is devoted to the subject. He believed it was important because it underscored that salvation is entirely the work and gift of God and that man contributes nothing at all to it. (John Calvin, Pilgrim and Pastor, W. Robert Godfrey, 2009).

Second Helvetic Confession, section 5.052-5.057

- **GOD HAS ELECTED US OUT OF GRACE.** From eternity God has freely, and of his mere grace, without any respect to men, predestinated or elected the saints whom he wills to save in Christ, according to the saying of the apostle, “God chose us in him before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). And again: “Who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago, and now has manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus” (II Tim. 1:9 f.).
- **WE ARE ELECTED OR PREDESTINATED IN CHRIST.** Therefore, although not on account of any merit of ours, God has elected us, not directly, but in Christ, and on account of Christ, in order that those who are now ingrafted into Christ by faith might also be elected. But those who were outside Christ were rejected, according to the word of the apostle, “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are holding to your faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” (II Cor. 13:5).

Second Helvetic Confession, section 5.052-5.057

- **WE ARE ELECTED FOR A DEFINITE PURPOSE.** Finally, the saints are chosen in Christ by God for a definite purpose, which the apostle himself explains when he says, “He chose us in him for adoption that we should be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption to be his sons through Jesus Christ that they should be to the praise of the glory of his grace” (Eph. 1:4 ff.).
- **WE ARE TO HAVE A GOOD HOPE FOR ALL.** And although God knows who are his, and here and there mention is made of the small number of elect, yet we must hope well of all, and not rashly judge any man to be a reprobate. For Paul says to the Philippians, “I thank my God for you all” (now he speaks of the whole Church in Philippi), “because of your fellowship in the Gospel, being persuaded that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is also right that I have this opinion of you all” (Phil. 1:3 ff.).

Second Helvetic Confession, section 5.052-5.057

- **WHETHER FEW ARE ELECT.** And when the Lord was asked whether there were few that should be saved, he does not answer and tell them that few or many should be saved or damned, but rather he exhorts every man to “strive to enter by the narrow door” (Luke 13:24): as if he should say, It is not for you curiously to inquire about these matters, but rather to endeavor that you may enter into heaven by the straightway.
- **WHAT IN THIS MATTER IS TO BE CONDEMNED.** Therefore we do not approve of the impious speeches of some who say, “Few are chosen, and since I do not know whether I am among the number of the few, I will enjoy myself.” Others say, “If I am predestinated and elected by God, nothing can hinder me from salvation, which is already certainly appointed for me, no matter what I do. But if I am in the number of the reprobate, no faith or repentance will help me, since the decree of God cannot be changed. Therefore all doctrines and admonitions are useless.” Now the saying of the apostle contradicts these men: “The Lord’s servant must be ready to teach, instructing those who oppose him, so that if God should grant that they repent to know the truth, they may recover from the snare of the devil, after being held captive by him to do his will” (II Tim. 2:23 ff.).