

Predestination vs Freewill

Pt 1: Calvinism vs Arminianism

It's been a long-standing debate! The controversy rages over just what is meant in Scripture by the oft-repeated statement that the believer has been *chosen* by God. Although there have always been differing views, stretching back to the very beginning of the church age, it has only recently become a hot topic for debate due to the world-wide resurgence of *Reformed Theology*.

Let me begin by clarifying the terminology that forms part of this debate:

Strictly speaking, *Predestination* and *Election*, though essentially integral to the same act, are *not the same thing*. Read carefully [Eph. 1:4-5](#) (and I am translating literally from the Greek):

[Eph. 1:4-5](#)

[Just] as he chose us [to be] in him before the foundation of the world, so that we might be holy and blameless before him; in love *having* predestined us for (unto) sonship through Jesus Christ unto himself according to the good pleasure of his will.

You can clearly see that *Predestination to Sonship* came first (*having predestined us*) and *to accomplish this*, God chose us (to be) in Christ!

So the Father *firstly (logically - not chronologically)* predestined us for full Sonship in His family and *then*, in order to fit us for this destiny, He *chose to place us in Christ* (popularly known as *Election*).

However, to avoid confusion, I intend to defer to popular usage and to designate God's *calling (choosing)* of the believer as simply: *Predestination!*

So now to the question at hand: did God choose me or did I choose God? Am I saved by an act of (my) free choice or because God (from eternity) decreed that I (personally) should be saved?

Am I therefore responsible for my own salvation? Do I contribute to my salvation in any way or do I have no say whatsoever in the matter?

Depending on where you stand on this question, your view can most likely be categorised as *hyper-Calvinistic* (our salvation depends *entirely* on Divine election), *moderately Calvinistic* (Divine election *and* man's free will work together in a way we simply don't understand) or *Arminian* (our freewill choice alone determines our eternal destiny).

Let me state from the onset that such a blanket characterization will not always be an entirely fair representation of any one of the above views: there are many nuances of Calvinism as there are shades of Arminianism - not to mention the (essentially) middle ground of Molinism.

I therefore ask your forgiveness if I fail to state *your* position accurately in every detail. I can only hope that I have at least captured the *essence* of the differences between the two opposing views in what is a complex and often convoluted discussion.

Chosen by God

What everyone will agree on is that we, as believers, have been *chosen* by God. Consider the following verses (*all italics mine*):

Eph. 1:4-5

For he *chose us* in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love having predestined us to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will.

Eph. 1:11

In him *we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.*

An equally striking verse is **Acts 13:48**

When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honoured the

word of the Lord; and *all who were appointed (ordained, assigned a place) for eternal life, believed.*

It certainly *appears* as if God has chosen certain people to be saved: these souls are referred to in Scripture as *the elect (chosen ones)*.

In [2 Tim. 2:10](#), Paul says this:

Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect...

and in [2 Pet. 1:10](#), the apostle urges:

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election.

And the Scriptures don't end there! [Romans 9](#) contains individual statements that, at first glance, seem to present a deterministic God who saves whomever He wishes - leaving the individual with no choice in the matter! (See also [Romans 8:29-30](#); [John 6:37, 44](#)).

All seems quite straight-forward thus far, but we are then presented with a very real paradox! This is because, as the Arminian claims, the Scriptures equally appear to present *man's free will* as being the determining factor in our salvation:

Saved by free-will choice

[Deut.30:19](#)

This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.

[Isa.55:1](#)

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

[John 3:16](#)

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

John 5:39-40

You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

Romans 10:13

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Now, as we said before, these apparently contradictory truths have led to two very different schools of thought on the nature of predestination: *Arminianism* and *Calvinism*.

This series of messages are going to form a critique of the Calvinist belief-system but first we need to clarify the history and nature of the two opposing view-points:

A. Calvinism

John Calvin, a contemporary of Martin Luther, was a French theologian (1509-1564) who pastored and taught during the Protestant Reformation (1517-1648). Calvin's views on *Predestination* and *Freewill* are believed to have been first formulated by one of the early Christian theologians, St Augustine, who served as bishop of Hippo in Algeria from 396-430.

Many great theologians (as well as those in the early church) have espoused views similar to that of John Calvin. These include the famous initiator of Reform Theology, Martin Luther (1483-1546), the Swiss religious leader Zwingli (1484-1531) and more recently, Charles Spurgeon and Jonathan Edwards. Contemporary proponents of Calvinism include John Piper, John McArthur, the late RC Sproule, James White and many others.

It is only fair to note, however, that Calvinist doctrine has also many eminent critics. These include (inter alia): Norman Geisler, James Brown and Ravi Zacharias.

Broadly speaking, Calvin's views (*as interpreted by Calvinist's today*) run along these lines:

"Man, depraved because of sin, cannot, in his natural state, respond to God: only those chosen by God are given the ability to respond to the gospel. Accordingly, salvation is not left up to the exercise of individual free will but is dependent on God's choice alone. His grace is visited on the chosen and His sovereignty ensures that His call is *always* effectual!"

Calvinists, as we shall see, are not unanimous in their understanding of every detail. In fact there is a considerable range of views in the 'Calvinist camp'. Some, like John McArthur, are those whom we describe as *moderate Calvinists*, holding a *paradox view* which says that both *choice* and *free will* are equally valid truths, and are only irreconcilable in terms of human logic - therefore each must be equally accepted by faith!

Again, most Calvinists believe that those not chosen for salvation (and therefore simply left to themselves), will, of course, go to hell because this, after all, is the just punishment for their sins. Others believe in what's called *double predestination*: that God has created some people whom He has actually fashioned for damnation - actually chosen beforehand to be sent to hell (although if you're like me, you'd find it hard to spot any practical difference).

B. Arminianism.

The Arminian interpretation of *Predestination* is named after a Dutch theologian, Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609). Arminius strongly opposed Calvin's teachings on the subject - believing that the Bible affirms the pivotal role that *free will* plays in our salvation.

In 1610, shortly after the death of Arminius in 1609, his adherents classified Arminian doctrine under five headings of so-called *Remonstrance* - as follows:

1. *Partial depravity*: man is not so depraved that he *cannot* seek God.

2. *Conditional Election*: God chooses individuals to be saved on the basis that He knows beforehand who will accept Christ by faith.

3. *Unlimited Atonement*: Christ died for the sins of all.

4. *Resistible grace*: few are saved because the majority exercise their free will in rejecting the provision so made for their salvation. In other words, God's call in the gospel can be resisted and/or rejected.

5. *Perseverance*: our salvation is only guaranteed if we persevere in our faith. If salvation is conditional upon faith, then a believer can lose his/her salvation by choosing to no longer believe! In other words, we have the obligation to maintain our salvation.

The Calvinist response

The rise of Arminianism was opposed by the Dutch Reformed Church. In 1618-1619 an international church council (the synod of Dort) was held and produced what is known as the *Canons of Dort (Dordt)*. These canons reaffirmed the teaching of Calvin and rejected the five points of Arminianism.

As we alluded to earlier, Calvinism is a very complex and intricate area of doctrine but fortunately we can grasp its essentials by the acronym of TULIP which was formulated in 1932. TULIP not only encapsulates the five main points of Calvinism but is very useful in demonstrating the continuity of logic that runs throughout:

T - *Total* depravity

U - *Unconditional* election

L - *Limited* atonement

I - *Irresistible* grace

P - *Perseverance* of the saints

The chain of logic is clear: if man is so depraved that he cannot choose God (*Total Depravity*) then he can do *nothing* to

contribute to his own salvation, which must therefore be the product of mercy and grace *alone* (*Unconditional Election*). And because God has chosen only a few to be saved, Christ must have only died for this chosen few (*Limited Atonement*) - otherwise his suffering on the cross would be, in a large part, gratuitous and unwarranted. However, not all Calvinists agree on this point! In fact it must be pointed out that few Calvinists agree with every one of the five points: there are 'two-point Calvinists', 'three-point Calvinists' and so on!

And the chain of reasoning goes on! If man is incapable of turning to God, and given that salvation, initiated solely by God, is clearly limited to a chosen few, it now follows that the chosen individual will then be unable to resist God's calling (*Irresistible Grace*). To suggest otherwise would be to imply that mere human beings can assert their wills above God's Will and thereby thwart His Divine purposes.

Finally, how do we know for sure who are chosen by God and who are not? This brings us to the last letter of our acronym: P. This stands for *Perseverance* (of the saints) which, according to the Calvinist, is the only sure indicator of genuine Salvation!

So this entire line of thought begs the question: if we're not chosen by God, does this mean we don't really have an option - we're going to hell? And if we *are* chosen, does the principle of *irresistible grace* mean that we'll be saved, no matter what?

As we have said, this discussion can become quite complicated, so I'd like to begin by introducing a couple of *ground rules*:

A. **The 'Analogy of Faith'**. There is a sound rule of *hermeneutics* (interpretation of Scripture) known as: *The Analogy of Faith* and it goes like this:

'No Scripture can be taken in such a way as to render it in conflict with what is clearly taught *elsewhere* in Scripture'.

Nowhere does this become more applicable than in the continuing debate between *Predestination* and *Free will*!

B *Exegesis v Eisegesis*

In approaching a passage (or even a single verse) we will (to some degree or other) do one of two things:

1. We will (and should) accept the plain meaning of the text (with appropriate regard for its context) - not reading into its meaning any presuppositions we might have. In other words: not construing the text to make it say what we want it to say but humbly accepting what *it* has to say to us. This is the heart of good *exegesis* (*ex* = *out of*: [getting the meaning *out of* the text])

Or

2. We will come with previously-formulated ideas or beliefs - reading and interpreting the text in such a way as to make it support these already-held views. This is known as *eisegesis* (*eis* = *into* [reading what we already believe *into* the text]).

It follows from this that if we're confronted with a verse that *appears* to contradict another passage of Scripture, then we should ask two questions:

1. Is there anything in the *internal context* of this verse (eg structure, original root-word meaning etc) that would impact my understanding of its plain meaning?

2. Is there anything in the *external context* of this verse (the writer, audience, purpose, place or time of the writing) that might legitimately affect my understanding of its plain sense?

If I have to answer *no* to both these questions, then I am logically forced to take the statement on face-value - and accordingly, find a way (if possible), to harmonise that statement with any other that may seem to conflict with it! Naturally I must do the same with the opposing text!

What I *cannot* do - must *not* do - is add further words of my own, in order to *change its meaning* so as to bring it into line with some other apparently conflicting statement of Scripture. That is tantamount to rising above the Word of God and rewriting the Divinely-inspired Scripture! If we claim to take a *high view* of

Scriptural authority, we must do so consistently: not just when it appears to support our particular argument!

Before concluding this introductory message, I'd like to mention two honest (but very different) attempts to bow to the authority of Scripture and reconcile two such apparently mutually exclusive truths as *Predestination* and *Free will*. The first is what we term the *Paradox view* of Predestination and those that hold to it are known as *Moderate Calvinists*. The second is a very plausible variation of the classic Arminian view.

A: The Paradox View

This is a view that I was brought up with, heartily subscribed to and taught from time to time until just a few years ago.

The *Paradox view* runs like this:

A sovereign God, for reasons unknown (and knowable only to Himself) has chosen certain individuals to be saved ([Eph.1:4, 11](#); [1 Pet.1:2](#) etc). Nothing *in us* has influenced this choice: we have been '**justified freely by His grace**' ([Rom.3:24](#)). At the same time, however, the free gift of salvation is available to *all* who, *of their own free will*, respond to the gospel call!

And here's the thing! The *Paradox view* makes no attempt to reconcile these two apparently-opposing truths: both are revealed in Scripture and each must be equally accepted by faith! I was always told that: it *just so happens* that every person who has been chosen by God, is some-one who accepts Christ entirely by the exercise of his/ her free will! In other words: *God chooses me* and *I choose God* - and the paradox is this: neither choice influences the other!

Proponents of the *Paradox view* are very biblical in justifying this approach with verses such as:

[Isaiah 55:8-9](#)

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. **“As the heavens are higher than**

the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts".

Genesis 18:25

Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?

There have been many sincere attempts to illustrate this *Paradox* view. Here are three of them:

1. Two men approach an archway. Over the apex are written the words: '*Whosoever will may come*'. The one man, of his own free-will, responds to the invitation and passes through the archway. The other, equally by free choice, refuses and remains outside. When the man who has entered looks back, he sees, written above the *inside* of the archway, the words: '*Chosen before the foundation of the world*'.

2. The two truths are like two sides of a mountain. From ground level (ie man's perspective) we can see only one side at a time. From *above* the mountain (God's perspective), both sides are seen simultaneously.

3. The two truths are like the two sides of a railway track. From where we stand (ie in time) they are separate and distinct. But when we look down the track and into the distance (the perspective of eternity), they merge into one!

The *Paradox* view is a laudable attempt to humbly submit to God's Word and accept Scripture for what it appears to say! I must confess, however, that I have one or two difficulties with it. I believe that it fails to address the issues of *impartiality on God's side* (Deut.10:17; Rom.2:11) and the fact that *on man's side*, we do *not* come to God without Divine aid (John 6:65; 1 Pet.1:2). Otherwise the reasoning appears to be sound!

B: Down the tunnel of time - an Arminian explanation

According to this view, that is based on the (very Biblical) premise that God knows the end from the beginning (Isa.46:10), God looks down the corridor of time *into the future*, and sees

who will accept Christ freely and who will not! He accordingly chooses those whom He sees will respond to Him!

The objection traditionally raised to this explanation is that if God responded purely on the basis of a sinner's exercise of free will, then this wouldn't constitute a *choice* at all! It would be, at best, a *rubber-stamping* of something decided entirely by the individual!

I cannot agree with this objection - for reasons I'll discuss in the final message of this series dealing with the nature of choice. What I *do* find disturbing, however, is the assumption (actually made by Calvinists and Arminians alike) that God, in His election of the believer, was acting *in the past* - in fact, at the very beginning of creation's timeline!

Now I understand that God's Word tells me that I was chosen '*before the foundation of the world*' but this is *not* an expression of time: rather it is meant to convey the notion of *eternity* - as does the Hebrew word *Owlam* (*from old / everlasting*) which is used in the Old Testament to describe the eternal Godhead ([Psa.90:2](#); [Micah 5:2](#)).

The relevance of this most important point will be brought out in the next message discussing the *Sovereignty of God* and in the final message which will deal with *the nature of Choice*'.

This final message will, in fact, present exactly what I believe the Bible teaches about *Predestination*! I believe the answer will surprise many of you. I hope to show that, if we approach this issue with open minds, then we'll find that no tension or *paradox* exists in Scripture at all!

You must judge for yourselves!

May God bless His Word to each one of us.

Amen!