

EARLY CHRISTIANS WERE STRONG BELIEVERS IN FREE WILL

David W. Bercot

The early Christians were strong believers in free will. For example, Justin Martyr made this argument to the Romans: “We have learned from the prophets, and we hold it to be true, that punishments, chastisements, and rewards are rendered according to the merit of each man’s actions. Otherwise, if all things happen by fate, then nothing is in our own power. For if it is predestined that one man be good and another man evil, then the first is not deserving of praise or the other to be blamed. Unless humans have the power of avoiding evil and choosing good by free choice, they are not accountable for their actions – whatever they may be... For neither would a man be worthy of reward or praise if he did not of himself choose the good, but was merely created for that end. Likewise, if a man were evil, he would not deserve punishment, since he was not evil of himself, being unable to do anything else than what he was made for.”

Clement echoed the same belief: “Neither praise nor condemnation, neither rewards nor punishments, are right if the soul does not have the power of choice and avoidance, if evil is involuntary.”

Archelaus, writing a few decades later, repeated the same understanding. “All the creatures that God made, He made very good. And He gave to every individual the gift of free will, by which standard He also instituted the law of judgment... And certainly whoever will, may keep the commandments. Whoever despises them and turns aside to what is contrary to them, shall yet without doubt have to face this law of judgement... There can be no doubt that every individual, in using his own proper power of will, may shape his course in whatever direction he pleases.”

Methodius, a Christian martyr who lived near the end of the third century, wrote similarly, “Those [pagans] who decide that man does not have free will, but say that he is governed by the unavoidable necessities of fate, are guilty of impiety toward God Himself, making Him out to be the cause and author of human evils.”

The early Christians weren’t simply speculating about this matter, but rather they based their beliefs on the following Scriptures, among others:

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- “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).
- “The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, **not willing that any should perish** but that all should come to repentance” (2nd Peter 3:9).
- “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let him who hears say, ‘Come!’ And let him who thirsts come. And **whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely**” (Revelation 22:17).
- “I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore **choose life**, that both you and your descendants may live” (Deuteronomy 30:19).

So originally, it was the pagan world, not the Christians, who believed in predestination. Yet, in one of the strange quirks of history, Martin Luther took the side of the pagan Romans against the early Christians. I do not mean that, **in effect**, he took their side. I mean he **literally** sided with them! For example, Luther wrote concerning fate or predestination:

“But why should these things be difficult for we Christians to understand, so that it should be considered irreligious, curious, and vain, to discuss and know them, when heathen poets, and the common people themselves, have them in their mouths in the most frequent use? How often does Virgil [a pagan Roman poet] alone make mention of Fate? ‘All things stand fixed by unchangeable law.’ Again, ‘Fixed is the day of every man.’ Again, ‘If the Fates summon you.’ And again, ‘If you will break the binding chain of Fate.’

The aim of this poet is to show that in the destruction of Troy, and in raising up the Roman Empire, Fate did more than all the devoted efforts of men... From which we can see that the knowledge of predestination and of the foreknowledge of God was no less left in the world than the notion of divinity itself. And those who wished to appear wise went so far into their debates that, their hearts being darkened, they became fools (Romans 1:21-22). They denied, or pretended not to know, those things which their poets, and the common folk, and even their own consciences, held to be universally known, most certain, and most true.”

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**"WHAT MUST I DO
TO BE SAVED?"**

ACTS 16:30

LEARN THE GOSPEL

John 6:45; Romans 10:17

BELIEVE IN CHRIST

Hebrews 11:6; John 3:16

CONFESS CHRIST

Matthew 10:32-33; Romans 10:9-10

REPENT OF SIN

Acts 3:19; 17:30

BE BAPTIZED INTO CHRIST

Mark 16:16; Romans 6:3-6

REMAIN STEADFAST

1st Corinthians 15:58; Revelation 2:10

**"THE ASSEMBLING OF
OURSELVES TOGETHER"**

HEBREWS 10:24-25

SUNDAY

Worship @ 10:00 a.m.

Studies @ 11:45 a.m.

WEDNESDAY

Studies & Worship @ 7:00 p.m.

THURSDAY

Men's & Ladies' Studies @ 6:20 p.m.

75 Sherrod Boulevard
Belén, New Mexico

**Seekers Welcome.
Members Expected.**

**"IF A MAN IS OVERTAKEN IN
ANY TRESPASS...
RESTORE SUCH A ONE"**

GALATIANS 6:1

CONFESS TRESPASSES

James 5:16; 1st John 1:9

REPENT OF SIN

Acts 8:22

PRAY FOR FORGIVENESS

Acts 8:22

REMAIN STEADFAST

1st Corinthians 15:58; Revelation 2:10

**"A WORD FITLY SPOKEN IS
LIKE APPLES OF GOLD IN
SETTINGS OF SILVER"**

PROVERBS 25:11

"It is necessary, therefore, not only to be called by the name 'Christian' but to actually be a Christian... If we are not ready to die in the same manner as His suffering, His life is not in us."

– Ignatius of Antioch

"WHOLE COUNSEL"

ACTS 20:27

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"HIS OWN DID NOT RECEIVE HIM"

Dylan Stewart, adapted

John 1:11-12 is one of hundreds of passages that disprove Calvinistic unconditional election: "He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name." If unconditional election were true, those whom Christ came to would have received Him. Yet, many did not.

The passage explains who receives the right to become children of God: those who receive Him and those who believe in His name. In other words, belief and reception come first, and the right to become children of God follows. The text does not say people are first made children of God and then believe; rather, belief precedes the adoption (election).

Spiritual adoption is very different from physical adoption. In a physical adoption, a child may have no say in the matter and the decision for adoption is entirely made by the parents. But spiritual adoption is not forced upon anyone. God grants the right to become His children to those who willingly receive Christ and believe in Him.

John 1:11-12 rejects unconditional election. Only after we receive Christ and believe in His name will God grant us the right to become His children. Spiritual adoption is not imposed; it is granted to those who respond to the gospel.

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