

Early Christian Reflections on Human Free Will

The following citations indicate that three centuries of Christian leaders, East and West—Greek and Latin, are virtually unanimous regarding humans being created with a broad range of freedoms and responsibilities, including the freedom to seek or ignore, obey or reject, God’s presence and will. This was not associated with humans beings “saving themselves” apart from grace. Rather, human freedom to reason and deliberate, to weigh evidence and to consider options was all taken to be part of God’s honoring us by creating us in the first place, i.e., grace. That the Greek philosopher Parmenides asked, “why is there something and not nothing” is a mystery planted in the human heart by the Creator that we might seek him.

The Pagan Background

Zeus controls the fulfillment of all that is, and disposes as he will. . . . we live like beasts, always at the mercy of what the day may bring, knowing nothing of the outcome that God will impose upon our acts. Semonides of Amorgos

No man, Cynus, is responsible for his own ruin or for his own success: of both these things the gods are the givers. No man can perform an action and know whether its outcome will be good or bad. . . . Humanity in utter blindness follows its futile usages; but the gods will bring all to the fulfillment that they have planned. Theognis

Above citations from E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks And The Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951)

For it is impossible for any man by prayers or sacrifices to overcome what was fixed from the beginning and alter it to his taste; what has been assigned to us will happen without our praying for it, what is not fated will not happen for our prayers.

Vettius Valens, 2nd cent AD

Cited in A. D. Nock, *Early Gentile Christianity and Its Hellenistic Background* (Harper, 1964, orig. 1928)

Early Christian Reflections

Justin Martyr (160)

God, wishing men and angels to follow His will, resolved to create them free to do righteousness. But if the word of God foretells that some angels and men shall certainly be punished, it did so because it fore knew that they would be unchangeably (wicked), but not because God created them so. So if they repent all who wish for it can obtain mercy from God. *Dialogue CXLi*

We have learned from the prophets, and declare as the truth, that the penalties and punishments and good rewards are given according to the quality of each man's actions. If this were not so, but all things happened in accordance with destiny, nothing at all would be left up to us. For if it is destined that one man should be good and another wicked, then neither is the one acceptable nor the other blameworthy. And if the human race does not have the power by free choice to avoid what is shameful and to choose what is right, then there is no responsibility for actions of any kind. . . . God did not make man like other [beings], such as trees and animals, which have no power of choice. For he would not be worthy of rewards or praise if he did not choose the good of himself, but was so made, nor if he were evil would he justly deserve punishment, if he were not such of himself, but was unable to be anything different from that for which he was formed.

First Apology, 43

Tatian (c. 165)

And each of these two orders of creatures was made free to act as it pleased, not having the nature of good, which again is with God alone, but is brought to perfection in men through their freedom of choice, in order that the bad man may be justly punished, having become depraved through his own fault, but the just man be deservedly praised for his virtuous deeds, since in the exercise of his free choice he refrained from transgressing the will of God. Such is the constitution of things in reference to angels and men.

Address to Greeks

Irenaeus of Gaul (c. 130-200)

. . . there is no coercion with God, but a good will is present with Him continually. And therefore does He give good counsel to all. And in man as well as in angels, He has placed the power of choice (for angels are rational beings), so that those who had yielded obedience might justly possess what is good, given indeed by God, but preserved by themselves . . .

If then it were not in our power to do or not to do these things, what reason had the apostle, and much more the Lord Himself, to give us counsel to do some things and to abstain from others? But because man is possessed of free-will from the beginning, and God is possessed of free-will in whose likeness man was created, advice is always given to him to keep fast the good, which thing is done by means of obedience to God. *Against Heresies, XXXVII*

Athenagoras of Athens (c. 177)

Just as with men who have freedom of choice as to both virtue and vice (for you would not either honor the good or punish the bad; unless vice and virtue were in their own power, and some are diligent in the matters entrusted to them, and others faithless), so it is among the angels.

Embassy for Christians XXIV

Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215)

But we, who have heard by the Scriptures that self-determining choice and refusal have been given by the Lord to men, rest in the infallible criterion of faith, manifesting a willing spirit, since

we have chosen life and believe God through His voice.

Stromata, Bk ii ch. 4

But nothing is without the will of the Lord of the universe. It remains to say that such things happen without the prevention of God; for this alone saves both the providence and the goodness of God. We must not therefore think that He actively produces afflictions (for be it that we should think this!); but we must be persuaded that He does not prevent those that cause them, but overrules for good the crimes of His enemies.

Stromata, Bk iv ch. 12

Nor shall he who is saved be saved against his will, for he is not inanimate; but he will above all voluntarily and of free choice speed to salvation. Wherefore also man received the commandments in order that he might be self-impelled, to whatever he wished of things to be chosen and to be avoided. Wherefore God does not do good by necessity, but from His free choice benefits those who spontaneously turn.

Stromata, Bk vii ch. 7

Tertullian of Carthage (c. 155-225)

I find, then, that man was by God constituted free, master of his own will and power; indicating the presence of God's image and likeness in him by nothing so well as by this constitution of his nature . . .

—you will find that when He sets before man good and evil, life and death, that the entire course of discipline is arranged in precepts by God's calling men from sin, and threatening and exhorting them; and this on no other ground than that man is free, with a will either for obedience or resistance.

. . . Since, therefore, both the goodness and purpose of God are discovered in the gift to man of freedom in his will . . .

Against Marcion, Bk II ch. 5

Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 350)

And you must know your soul to be endowed with free-will, and to be God's fairest work in the image of himself, its maker. It is immortal in as far as God grants it immortality. It is a rational living creature not subject to decay, because these qualities have been bestowed by God upon it. And it has the power to do what it chooses. For you do not sin because you were born that way, nor if you fornicate is it by chance. And do not take any notice of what some people say, that the conjunctions of the stars compel you to fall into unclean living. Why should you avoid acknowledging that you have done wrong by blaming it onto the stars that had nothing to do with it?

Catechetical Lectures IV.18 (109)

Learn this also, that before it came into this world, your soul had committed no sin, but that we come into the world unblemished, and, being here, sin of our own choice. Do not listen, I say, to anyone who expounds "If then I do that which I would not" in the wrong sense, but remember who says, "If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land; but if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword," and what follows.

Catechetical Lectures IV.19

Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-395)

Being the image and the likeness . . . of the Power which rules all things, man kept also in the matter of a free-will this likeness to Him whose will is over all. *On Virginity* (ch. XII)

John Chrysostom (347-407)

All is in God's power, but so that our free-will is not lost . . . it depends therefore on us and on Him. We must first choose the good, and then He adds what belongs to Him. He does not precede our willing, that our free-will may not suffer. But when we have chosen, then he affords us much help . . . It is ours to choose beforehand and to will, but God's to perfect and bring to the end.

On Hebrews, Homily 12

Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

It does not follow, therefore, that there is no power in our will because God foreknew what was to be the choice in our will. For, He who had this foreknowledge had some foreknowledge.

Furthemore, if He who foresaw what was to be in our will foresaw, not nothing, but something, it follows that there is a power in our will, even though he foresaw it.

The conclusion is that we are by no means under compulsion to abandon free choice in favor of divine foreknowledge nor need we deny—God forbid!—that God knows the future, as a condition for holding free choice. We accept both. . . . For no one sins because God foreknew that he would sin. In fact, the very reason why a man is undoubtedly responsible for his own sin, when he sins, is because He whose foreknowledge cannot be deceived foresaw, not the man's fate or fortune or what not, but that the man himself would be responsible for his own sin. No man sins unless it is his choice to sin; and his choice not to sin, that too, God foresaw.

The City of God Bk V ch 10