

Calvinism and Arminianism Explained

# FREE WILL VS. PREDESTINATION



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# FREE WILL OR PREDESTINATION?

The expression “being saved” points to the beginning of a wonderful relationship with God. These words mean much to Christians because they encompass much: A new relationship with God and other people, the renewal of our hearts and minds, the growth of faith and obedience in our lives, and much more. How does this salvation happen? More importantly, once we are saved, can we lose our salvation? Is sharing the good news of the gospel even necessary? Do we have to do anything to be saved?

Before seeing two ways to answer these questions, let’s focus on the points with which all Christians agree. Regarding God’s merciful work of salvation, Christians agree that:

1. Because of sin, all humans need God’s grace.
2. Salvation from sin and condemnation is an act of God.
3. Salvation is accomplished only by grace through faith in Christ.
4. Works, good works or works of the Law, cannot lead one to salvation.

However, Christians do not agree on how God’s sovereignty and human freedom (free will) relate to each other in connection to salvation. Two views answer these questions quite differently: from a Calvinistic (predestination) or an Arminian view (free will). Although the answers available are not simple, they are important for our understanding of God’s mission in the world and our responsibility as believers.

## SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

This pamphlet will define and explain the terms in the following table.

<i>See:</i>	<i>Arminianism</i>	<i>Calvinism</i>
p. 4–5	Total depravity and free will (also called human ability)	Total depravity, also called “radical depravity” or “total inability”
p. 6–7	Conditional election	Unconditional election, also called “sovereign election”
p. 9–10	Universal redemption (also called general atonement)	Limited atonement, also called “particular, purposeful, or definite atonement”
p. 10–11	Grace can be resisted	Irresistible grace, also called “efficacious or effectual grace”
p. 12–13	Possibility of falling from grace	Perseverance of the saints, also called “preservation of the saints or believers”

# PREDESTINATION IN HISTORY

## *Augustine* (354-430)

He was the Bishop of Hippo (a city in Northern Africa, present-day Annaba, Algeria). An influential Christian thinker, his works continue to be studied. In his book *Confessions*, Augustine concluded, among many other things, that every area of the human nature was corrupted by the effects of sin.

## *Martin Luther* (1483-1546)

As a German priest and professor of theology, his objections to church doctrine and practice initiated the Reformation. In *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther debated the great philosopher Erasmus of Rotterdam. Luther argued that original sin—Adam and Eve’s sin in Eden—had so corrupted human nature, that now unaided, we are unable to do any good. Any righteousness we may have comes from God’s grace.

## *John Calvin* (1509-1564)

As a Reformer, Calvin had a profound influence on Protestant theology. Calvin believed that all the glory of salvation belonged to God. Calvin brought God’s sovereignty and mercy together in the historical doctrine of predestination: After the fall, humanity stood condemned before God. In his mercy, God decided to save many people from this condemnation; in his sovereignty, God chose and called those who would be saved. Humans, being unable to reach out to God, received God’s salvation without deserving it. That this election happens according to God’s will is proof of God’s sovereignty, mercy, and love. Calvin’s views are well presented in his debate with the Dutch theologian Albert Pighius and in his book *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will*.

## *Reformed churches*

These are churches that follow Calvinistic teachings. They originated in countries like the Netherlands, Switzerland, France, and Germany. The Presbyterian churches, also Calvinistic, originated in the United Kingdom.

## *Synod of Dort* (1618-1619)

Almost ten years after the death of Arminius (see next page), the Reformed theologians in the Netherlands called a Synod (assembly) in the town of Dordrecht. This synod responded to a document named “The Remonstrance of 1610,” which Arminius’s disciples drafted. The *Canons of Dort*, a confessional document for Reformed churches, outlines their view on God’s sovereignty, election, grace, and salvation.

Augustine’s  
*Confessions*  
(397–398)

Augustine’s  
reply to Pelagius  
(412–415)

Martin Luther’s  
*The Bondage of the Will* (1525)

John Calvin’s  
*The Bondage and Liberation of the Will* (1543)

Synod of Dort  
(1618–1619)

# FREE WILL IN HISTORY

Pelagius's response  
to Augustine  
(c. 405)

**Pelagius** (354-420/440).

Pelagius argued that sin had no effects on human nature. In his view, humans retained their ability to choose between good and evil. Since humans could choose good, Pelagius proposed that humans could act in a way that they can obtain God's grace. This grace would lead them to salvation and holiness. The church agreed with Augustine and declared Pelagius's teaching heretical.

**Erasmus of Rotterdam**

(1466-1536). He was a Dutch scholar, known for his humanist and theological works. Although an early sympathizer of Luther's ideas, Erasmus objected to Luther's views about human free will. He presents his views in his book, *The Freedom of the Will*.

**Albert Pighius**

(1490-1542). He was a Dutch Catholic theologian, mathematician, and astronomer. Among his works, Pighius argued against the Reformation. In his *Ten Books on Human Free Choice and Divine Grace*, Pighius argued that original sin did not corrupt human nature.

**Arminius** (1560-1609)

Arminius agreed with Calvin and the other Reformers that God's grace is essential for the beginning, the continuation, and consummation of faith. He agreed that human nature was so tainted that it is impossible for people to seek God on their own. However, Arminius considered that Christ's death conveys grace to all people. This grace, which John Wesley later called "prevenient grace," enables people to choose or reject God's offer of salvation. Arminius rejected Pelagius's views, in favor of the position that, although God's prevenient grace allows people to exercise their free will, humans cannot do such choosing without God's grace.

**Remonstrants**

The term was used for Arminius's students who drafted the strong protest against the Reformed church's teachings about election, predestination, and God's grace. Their writing became the basis for Arminian theology that many still hold.

Erasmus's *The  
Freedom of the  
Will* (1524)

Albert Pighius's  
*Ten Books on  
Human Free  
Choice and  
Divine Grace*  
(1542)

Remonstrants  
1610