

# The Early Church Fathers on Free Will and Salvation

Reformer John Calvin wrote: "For the will is so overwhelmed by wickedness and so pervaded by vice and corruption that it cannot in any way escape to honorable exertion or devote itself to righteousness" (*The Bondage and Liberation of the Will*). He wrote elsewhere: "So depraved is [man's] nature that he can be moved or impelled only to evil" (ibid). Man, according to Calvin and other reformers, cannot cooperate in his salvation. But whenever God gives man a choice, He is affirming that man can make good choices. In Deuteronomy 30:19 we read: "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore, choose life, that you and your descendants may live." Even those who do not know God can do some good: "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same" (Luke 6:32). Nature itself orders man to a degree of right thinking: "Ever since the creation of the world His invisible nature, namely, His eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So, they [wicked men] are without excuse" (Romans 1:20). This does not mean that we can be saved without grace. Only that man is not totally depraved and lacking in free will.

## Justin Martyr

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 be 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 (*First Apology* 43 [A.D. 151]).

## Clement of Alexandria

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 (*Stromata* 7:7 [A.D. 202]).

## Tertullian

Judas likewise was for a long time reckoned among the elect (apostles), and was even appointed to the office of their treasurer; he was not yet the traitor, although he was become fraudulent; but afterwards the devil entered into him (*Treatise on the Soul* 11 [A.D. 209]).

## Dionysius

Wherefore he also became an enemy to His Catholic Church; and besides that, he alienated and estranged himself from the mercy of God, and fled to the utmost possible distance from His salvation (*Extant Fragments* Letter 11:3 [A.D. 251-253]).

## Archelaus

All the creatures that God made, He made very good. And He gave to every individual the sense 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 judgment.... 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 (*Disputation with Manes* 32-33 [A.D. 277]).

## Methodius

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 Banquet of the Ten Virgins* 8:16 [circa A.D. 311]).

### **Athanasius**

Moreover, if we believe man to be, as the divine Scriptures say, a work of God's hands, how could any defiled work proceed from a pure Power? and if, according to the divine Acts of the Apostles, 'we are God's offspring,' we have nothing unclean in ourselves. For then only do we incur defilement, when we commit sin, that foulest of things (Letter 48 **[A.D. 373]**).

### **Cyril of Jerusalem**

For we shall not tolerate those who give a wrong meaning to that saying, Hereby know we the children of God, and the children of the devil, as if there were by nature some men to be saved, and some to be lost. Whereas we come into such holy sonship not of necessity but by choice: nor was the traitor Judas by nature a son of the devil and of perdition for certainly he would never have cast out devils at all in the name of Christ: for Satan casteth not out Satan. Nor on the other hand would Paul have turned from persecuting to preaching. But the adoption is in our own power, as John saith, But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the children of God (*Catechetical Lecture 7:13* **[A.D. 348-350]**).

### **Gregory of Nyssa**

That some are saved and some perish depends rather upon the deliberate choice of those who hear the word (*Refutation of Apollinaris 29* **[post A.D. 385]**).

### **John Chrysostom**

Hence, he says, that it is not the calling alone, but the purpose of those called too, that works the salvation. For the calling was not forced upon them, nor compulsory. All then were called, but all did not obey the call (*Homily 15 on Romans 28* **[A.D. 391]**).

### **Jerome**

Remember how thou hast received, and didst hear, and keep it, and repent, and so on, were of course believers, and baptized, who once stood, but fell through sin (*Against Jovinianus 2:3* **[A.D. 393]**).

### **Augustine**

What is so established in free will as what the law says, that we must not worship an idol, must not commit adultery, must do no murder? Nay, these crimes, and such like, are of such a kind that, if any one should commit them, he is removed from the communion of the body of Christ (*Two Letters of the Pelagians 4:26* **[A.D. 426-428]**).

### **John Cassian**

It cannot then be doubted that there are by nature some seeds of goodness in every soul implanted by the kindness of the Creator: but unless these are quickened by the assistance of God, they will not be able to attain to an increase of perfection, for, as the blessed Apostle says: "Neither is he that planteth anything nor he that watereth, but God that giveth the increase" (*Conference 13:7* **[circa A.D. 430]**).

### **Fulgence of Ruspe**

Those, therefore, who go away from God and commit fornication perish forthwith by sinning of their own evil will, which is not God's doing (*To Monimus 1:19:2* **[post A.D. 512]**).

### **Gregory the Great**

For one could not be drawn to God after death who had separated himself from God by evil living (Letters 7:15 **[inter A.D. 590-604]**).