

What is Predestination?

The Catholic Church permits a range of views on the subject of predestination, but there are certain points on which it is firm

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The New Testament teaches that predestination is real. St. Paul says, “those whom [God] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom. 8:29–30).

Scripture also refers to those whom God has “elected” (Greek, *eklektos*, “chosen”), and theologians often link this term to predestination, understanding the elect as those God has predestined to salvation.

Because the Bible mentions predestination, all Christian groups have a belief in the concept. The question is how predestination works, and on this subject there is considerable debate.

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At the time of Christ, some Jews—such as the Essenes—thought that everything is fated by God to happen, so that people have no free will. Other Jews—such as the Sadducees—denied predestination and attributed everything to free will. Finally, some Jews—such as the Pharisees—believed that both predestination and free will have a role. For Christians, Paul rules out the view taken by the Sadducees. But the other two views have found supporters.

Calvinists take the position closest to that of the Essenes and place a strong emphasis on predestination. According to Calvinism, God actively chooses certain individuals to be saved, and he gives them grace that will unfailingly result in their salvation. Those whom God does not choose don't receive this grace, so they are inevitably damned.

In Calvinist thought, God's choice is said to be “unconditional,” meaning that it isn't based on anything about the individuals. Belief in unconditional election also is traditionally shared by Lutherans, with various qualifiers.

Not all Calvinists speak of “free will,” but many do. When they use the term, it refers to the fact that individuals are not forced to do something against their wills. They can choose what they desire. However, their desires are determined by God either giving or withholding saving grace from them, so it is God who ultimately determines whether an individual will choose salvation or damnation.

This view also was held by Luther, who compared a man's will to an animal whose destination is determined by its rider, which is either God or the devil:

The human will is placed between the two like a beast of burden. If God rides it, it wills and goes where God wills. . . . If Satan rides it, it wills and goes where Satan wills; nor can it choose to run to either of the two riders or to seek him out, but the riders themselves contend for the possession and control of it. (On the Bondage of the Will 25)

Advocates of this view sometimes accuse those who disagree with them as teaching, or at least implying, salvation by works, since it is the decision of an individual's will—not God—that determines whether he will be saved. But this relies on an overly broad understanding of "works" that doesn't correspond to the way the term is used in Scripture. Using the freedom that God himself has given an individual to accept his offer of salvation would not be either an action done out of a sense of obligation to the Mosaic Law or a "good work" that would earn one's place before God. It would simply be accepting his gift. Critics of Calvinism often accuse its view of portraying God as capricious and cruel.

They argue that the doctrine of unconditional election implies that God arbitrarily saves some and damns others. They also argue that the Calvinist understanding of free will robs the term of its meaning, since individuals are not actually free to choose between salvation and damnation. They are slaves to their desires, which are determined by God.

Other Christians understand free will not only as freedom from external coercion but also from internal necessity. That is, God has given human beings freedom to make choices that are not strictly determined by their desires. They can thus choose whether or not to accept his offer of salvation.

Being omniscient, God knows in advance whether they will freely choose to cooperate with his grace, and he predestines them to salvation based on this foreknowledge. Non-Calvinists often argue that this is what Paul is referring to when he says, "those whom [God] foreknew he also predestined."

The Catholic Church permits a range of views on the subject of predestination, but there are certain points on which it is firm: "God predestines no one to go to hell; for this, a willful turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end" (CCC 1037). It also rejects the idea of unconditional election, stating that when God "establishes his eternal plan of 'predestination,' he includes in it each person's free response to his grace" (CCC 600).

(1) Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 33: *Career of the Reformer III*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 33 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 65–66.