

Chapter 2

Early Christian Authors 95–400 CE

Early Christian authors unanimously taught *relational* divine eternal predetermination. God elected persons to salvation based upon foreknowledge of their faith (predestination). These Christians vigorously opposed the *unilateral* determinism of Stoic Providence, Gnosticism, and Manichaeism.^[48] So early Christians taught predestination,^[49] but refuted Divine Unilateral Predetermination of Individuals' Eternal Destinies (unilateral determinism). This unilateral determinism can be identified in ancient Iranian religion, then chronologically in the Qumranites, Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, and Manichaeism. "Christian" heretics such as Basilides who taught God unilaterally bestowed the gift of faith to only some persons (and withheld that salvific gift to others) were condemned. Of the eighty-four pre-Augustinian authors studied from 95–430 CE, over fifty addressed this topic. All of these early Christian authors championed traditional free choice and relational predestination against pagan and heretical Divine Unilateral Predetermination of Individuals' Eternal Destinies.^[50]

This can only be understood and appreciated by reading comprehensively through the sizeable number of works by these authors. Some persons triumphantly cite ancient Christian authors claiming they believe Augustine's deterministic interpretations of scripture, *but without* reading the entire context or without understanding the way in which words were being used.^[51] I am not aware of any Patristics (early church fathers) scholar who would or could make a claim that even one Christian author prior to Augustine taught Divine Unilateral Predetermination of Individuals' Eternal Destinies (DUPIED, i.e., non-relational determinism unrelated to foreknowledge of human choices).

A. Apostolic Fathers and Apologists 95–180 CE

Most of these works do not directly address God's sovereignty or free will.^[52] The *Epistle of Barnabas* (100–120 CE) admits the corruption of human nature (*Barn.16.7*) but only physical death (not spiritual) results from Adam's fall. Personal sins cause a wicked heart (*Barn.12.5*). Divine foreknowledge of human choices allowed the Jews to make choices and remain within God's

plan, resulting in their own self-determination (*Barn*.3.6). God's justice is connected with human responsibility (*Barn*.5.4). Therefore, God's foreknowledge of human choices should affect God's actions regarding salvation.

In *The Epistle of Diognetus* (120–170 CE) God does not compel anyone. Instead, God foreknows choices by which he correspondingly chooses his responses to humans. Meecham writes of *Diogn*.10.1–11.8, "Free-will is implied in his capacity to become 'a new man' (ii,I), and in God's attitude of appeal rather than compulsion (vii, 4)."^[53] Aristides (ca.125–170 CE) taught newborns enter the world without sin or guilt: only personal sin incurs punishment.^[54]

I. Justin Martyr and Tatian

The first author to write more specifically on divine sovereignty and human free will is Justin Martyr (ca.155 CE). Erwin Goodenough explained:

Justin everywhere is positive in his assertion that the results of the struggle are fairly to be imputed to the blame of each individual. The Stoic determinism he indignantly rejects. Unless man is himself responsible for his ethical conduct, the entire ethical scheme of the universe collapses, and with it the very existence of God himself.^[55]

Commenting on *Dial*.140.4 and 141.2, Barnard concurred, saying God "foreknows everything—not because events are necessary, nor because he has decreed that men shall act as they do or be what they are; but foreseeing all events he ordains reward or punishment accordingly."^[56] After considering 1 *Apol*.28 and 43, Chadwick also agreed. "Justin's insistence on freedom and responsibility as God's gift to man and his criticism of Stoic fatalism and of all moral relativism are so frequently repeated that it is safe to assume that here he saw a distinctively Christian emphasis requiring special stress."^[57] Similarly, Barnard wrote: "Justin, in spite of his failure to grasp the corporate nature of sin, was no Pelagian blindly believing in man's innate power to elevate himself. All was due, he says, to the Incarnation of the Son of God."^[58]

Tatian (ca.165) taught that free choice for good was available to every person. "Since all men have free will, all men therefore have the potential to turn to God to achieve salvation."^[59] This remains true even though Adam's fall enslaved humans to sin (*Or*.11.2). The fall is reversed through a personal choice to receive God's gift in Christ (*Or*.15.4). Free choice was the basis of God's rewards and punishments for both angels and humans (*Or*.7.1–2).

II. Theophilus, Athenagoras, and Melito

For Theophilus (ca.180), all creation sinned in Adam and received the punishment of physical decay, not eternal death or total inability (*Autol.*2.17). Theophilus' insistence upon a free choice response to God (*Autol.*2.27) occurs following his longer discussion of the primeval state in the Garden and subsequent fall of Adam. Christianity's gracious God provides even fallen Adam with opportunity for repentance and confession (*Autol.*2.26). Theophilus exhorts Christians to overcome sin through their residual free choice (*Autol.*1.2, 1.7).

Athenagoras (ca.170 CE) believed infants were innocent and therefore could not be judged and used them as a proof for a bodily resurrection prior to judgment (*De resurr.*14). For God's punishment to be just, free choice stands paramount. Why?—because God created both angels and persons with free choice for the purpose of assuming responsibility for their own actions (*De resurr.*24.4–5)^[60] Humans and angels can live virtuously or viciously: "This, says Athenagoras, is a matter of free choice, a free will given the creature by the creator."^[61] Without free choice, the punishment or rewarding of both humans and angels would be unjust.

In *Peri Pascha* 326–388, Melito (ca.175 CE) possibly surpassed any extant Christian author in an extended description depicting the devastation of Adam's fall.^[62] The scholar Lynn Cohick explained: "The homilist leaves no doubt in the reader's mind that humans have degenerated from a pristine state in the garden of Eden, where they were morally innocent, to a level of complete and utter perversion."^[63] Despite this profound depravity, all persons remain capable of believing in Christ through their own God-given free choice. No special grace is needed. A cause and effect relationship exists between human free choice and God's response (*P.P.*739–744). "There is no suggestion that sinfulness is itself communicated to Adam's progeny as in later Augustinian teaching."^[64]

B. Christian Authors 180–250 CE

I. Irenaeus of Lyons

Irenaeus of Lyons (ca.185) wrote primarily against Gnostic deterministic salvation in his famous work *Adversus Haereses*. "One position fundamental to Irenaeus is that man should come to moral good by the action of his own moral

will, and not spontaneously and by nature."^[65] Physical death for the human race from Adam's sin was not so much a punishment as God's gracious gift to prevent humans from living eternally in a perpetual state of struggling with sin (*Adv. haer.*3.35.2).

Irenaeus championed humanity's free will for four reasons: (1) to refute Gnostic Divine Unilateral Predetermination of Individuals' Eternal Destinies, (2) because humanity's persisting *imago Dei* (image of God within humans) demands a persisting free will, (3) scriptural commands demand free will for legitimacy, and (4) God's justice becomes impugned without free will (genuine, not Stoic "non-free free will"). These were non-negotiable "apostolic doctrines." Scholars Wingren and Donovan both identify Irenaeus' conception of the *imago Dei* as freedom of choice itself. As Donovan relates: "This strong affirmation of human liberty is at the same time a clear rejection of the Gnostic notion of predetermined natures."^[66]

Andia clarified that God's justice requires free choice since Irenaeus believed God's providence created all persons equally.^[67] In refuting Gnostic determinism (Divine Unilateral Predetermination of Individuals' Eternal Destinies), Irenaeus argues that God determines persons' eternal destinies through foreknowledge of the free choices of persons (*Adv. haer.*2.29.1; 4.37.2–5; 4.29.1–2; 3.12.2,5,11; 3.32.1; 4.14, 4.34.1, 4.61.2). Irenaeus attacked both Stoicism and Gnostic heresies because DUPIED made salvation by faith superfluous, and made Christ's incarnation unnecessary.^[68] Irenaeus taught God's predestination. This was based on God's foreknowledge of human choices without God constraining the human will as in Gnostic determinism.^[69]

Irenaeus denied that any event could ever occur outside of God's sovereignty (*Adv. haer.*2.5.4), but simultaneously emphasized residual human free choice to receive God's gift, which only then results in regeneration. "The essential principle in the concept of freedom appears first in Christ's status as the sovereign Lord, because for Irenaeus man's freedom is, strangely enough, a direct expression of God's omnipotence, so direct in fact, that a diminution of man's freedom automatically involves a corresponding diminution of God's omnipotence."^[70] Although he exalted God's sovereignty, it was not (erroneously) defined as God receiving everything he desires.^[71] The scholar Denis Minns correctly states, "Irenaeus would insist as vigorously as Augustine that nothing could be achieved without grace. But he would have been appalled at the thought that God would offer grace to some and withhold it from others."

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II. Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian

Clement of Alexandria (ca.190) strongly defends a residual human free choice after Adam (*Strom.*1.1; cf. 4.24, 5.14). Divine foreknowledge determines divine election (*Strom.*1.18; 6.14). Clement understood that God calls *all* (πάντων τοίνυν ἀνθρώπων)—every human, not a few of every kind of human—whereas, "the called" are those who respond. He believed that if God exercised Divine Unilateral Predetermination of Individuals' Eternal Destinies (as the Marcionites and Gnostics believed), then he would not be the just and good Christian God but the heretical God of Marcion (*Strom.*5.1).

Clement refuted the followers of the Gnostic Marcion who believed initial faith was God's gift. Why?—it robbed humans of free choice (*Strom.*2.3–4; cf. *Strom.*4.11, *Quis dives Salvetur* 10). Yet Clement does not believe free choice saves persons as a human work (cf. John 1:13). He teaches God must first draw and call every human to himself, since all have the greatest need for the power of divine grace (*Strom.*5.1). God does not initiate a mystical (i.e., Neoplatonic) inward draw to each of his elect. Instead, the Father previously revealed himself and drew every human through Old Testament scripture, but now reveals himself and draws all humanity equally to himself through Christ and the New Testament (cf. John 12:32; *Strom.*7.1–2).^[73]

Tertullian (ca.205) wrote that despite a corrupted nature, humans possess a residual capacity to accept God's gift based upon the good divine image (the "proper nature") still resident within every human (*De anima* 22). Every person retains the capacity to believe. He refuted Gnosticism's discriminatory deterministic salvation (*Val.*29). God remains sovereign while he permits good and evil, because he foreknows what will occur by human free choice (*Cult. fem.*2.10). Humans can and should respond to God by using their God-given innate *imago Dei* free choice. Therefore, Tertullian did not approve of an "innocent" infant being baptized before responding personally to God's gift of grace through hearing and believing the gospel (*De baptismo* 18). He believed that children should await baptism until they are old enough to personally believe in Christ.

III. Origen of Alexandria

Origen (ca.185–254) advances scriptural arguments for free choice that fill the third book of *De principiis* (*P. Arch.*3.1.6). "This also is definite in the teaching of the Church, every rational soul is possessed of free-will and volition" that can choose the good (*Princ.*, Pref.5). God does not coerce humans or directly influence individuals but instead only invites. Why?—because God desires

willing lovers. Just as Paul asked Philemon to voluntarily (κατὰ ἐκούσιον) act in goodness (Phlm. 1.14), so God desires uncoerced lovers (*Hom. Jer.*20.2). Origen explains how God hardens Pharaoh's heart. God sends divine signs/events that Pharaoh rejects and hardens his own heart. God's hardening is indirect. "Now these passages are sufficient of themselves to trouble the multitude, as if man were not possessed of free will, but as if it were God who saves and destroys whom he will" (*Princ.* 3.1.7). Origen distinguishes between God's temporal blessings and eternal destinies in Romans 9–11, rejecting the Gnostic eternal salvation view from these chapters.

Initial faith is human faith, not a divine gift. "The apostles, once understanding that faith which is only human cannot be perfected unless that which comes from God should be added to it, they say to the Savior, 'Increase our faith.'" (*Com.Rom.*4.5.3). God desires to give the inheritance of the promises not as something due from debt but through grace. Origen says that the inheritance from God is granted to those who believe, not as the debt of a wage but as a gift of [human] faith (*Com.Rom.*4.5.1).^[74]

Election is based upon divine foreknowledge. "For the Creator makes vessels of honor and vessels of dishonor, not from the beginning according to His foreknowledge, since He does not pre-condemn or pre-justify according to it; but (He makes) those into vessels of honor who purged themselves, and those into vessels of dishonor who allowed themselves to remain unpurged" (*P.Arch.*3.1.21). Origen does not refute divine foreknowledge resulting in election but refutes the philosophical view of foreknowledge as necessarily causative, which Celsus taught:

Celsus imagines that an event, predicted through foreknowledge, comes to pass because it was predicted; but we do not grant this, maintaining that he who foretold it was not the cause of its happening, because he foretold it would happen; but the future event itself, which would have taken place though not predicted, afforded the occasion to him, who was endowed with foreknowledge, of foretelling its occurrence (*C.Cels.*2.20).

Origen explains the Christian interpretation of Rom 9:16.^[75] The Gnostic and heretical deterministic interpretations render God's words superfluous, and invalidate Paul's chastisements and approbations to Christians. Nevertheless, the human desire/will is *insufficient* to accomplish salvation, so Christians must rely upon God's grace (*P. Arch.*3.1.18). Origen does not minimize the innate human sin principle that incites persons to sin. Rather, he chastises immature Christians who blame their sins on the devil instead of their own passions (*Princ.*3.2.1–2; *P. Arch.*3.1.15).

IV. Cyprian and Novatian

Cyprian (d.254 CE) taught God stands sovereign (*Treat.*3.19; 5.56.8; 12.80). Yet, God rewards or punishes based upon his foreknowledge of human choices and responses (*Treat.*7.17, 19; *Ep.*59.2). Humans retain free choice despite Adam's sin (*Treat.*7.17, 19).^[76] "That the liberty of believing or of not believing is placed in freedom of choice" (*Treat.*12.52). Jesus utilized persuasion, not force (*Treat.*9.6). Obedience resulting in martyrdom should arise from free choice, not necessity (*Treat.* 7.18), especially since imitating Christ restores God's likeness.

Novatian (ca.250 CE) teaches a personal responsibility for sin instead of guilt from Adam, because a person who is pre-determined due to (even fallen) nature cannot be held liable. Only a willful decision can incur guilt (*De cib. Jud.*3). Lactantius (ca.315 CE) taught Adam's fall produced only physical death (not eternal death) through the loss of God's perpetually gifted immortality (*Inst.*2.13), as Williams correctly identified.^[77] Yet, mortality in a corrupted human body predisposed the human race to sin (*Inst.*6.13). God loves every person equally, offers immortality equally to each person, and every human is capable of responding to God's offer—without divine intervention (*Div.inst.*5.15) "God, who is the guide of that way, denies immortality to no human being" but offers salvation equally to every person (*Div.inst.*6.3). Humanity must contend with its propensity to sin, but the corrupted nature provides no excuse since free choice persists (*Inst.*2.15; 4.24; 4.25; 5.1). He consistently teaches Christian free choice (*Inst.*5.10, 13, 14).

C. Christian Authors 250–400 CE

I. Hilary of Poitiers

Hilary (d.368 CE) referred to John 1:12–13 as God's offer of salvation that is equally offered to everyone. "They who do receive Him by virtue of their faith advance to be sons of God, being born not of the embrace of the flesh nor of the conception of the blood nor of bodily desire, but of God [...] the Divine gift is offered to all, it is no heredity inevitably imprinted but a prize awarded to willing choice" (*Trin.*1.10–11). Human nature has a propensity to evil (*Trin.*3.21; *Hom. Psa.*1.4) that is located in the physical body (*Hom. Psa.*1.13). Human free choice elicits the divine gift, yet the divine birth (through faith) belongs solely to God. A human 'will' cannot create the birth (*Trin.*12.56) yet that birth occurs through human faith.

II. The Cappadocians

Gregory of Nazianzus (ca.329–389 CE) writes frequently of the "fall of sin" from Adam (*Or.*1; 33.9; 40.7), including the evil consequence of that original sin (*Or.*45.12). "We were detained in bondage by the Evil One, sold under sin, and receiving pleasure in exchange for wickedness" (*Or.*45.22). Salvation (not faith) is God's gift. "We call it the Gift, because it is given to us in return for nothing on our part" (*Or.*40.4). "This, indeed, was the will of Supreme Goodness, to make the good even our own, not only because it was sown in our nature, but because cultivated by our own choice, and by the motions of our free will to act in either direction." (*Or.*2.17). "Our soul is self-determining and independent, choosing as it will with sovereignty over itself that which is pleasing to it" (*Ref. Conf. Eun.*139). Children are born blameless (*Ep.*206). God is sovereign, and Christ died for all humankind, including the 'non-elect.' (*Or.*45.26; cf. *Or.*38.14). Nevertheless, in matters of personal salvation, God limits himself, allowing humans free choice (*Or.*32.25, 45.8).

Basil of Caesarea (ca.330–379 CE) believed humans do not inherit sin or evil, but choose to sin resulting in death. We control our own actions, proved by God's payment and punishment (*Hom. Hex.*2.4). He promotes God's sovereignty over human *temporal* (not eternal) destinies, including our time of death by "God who ordains our lots" (*Ep.*269) yet he refutes micromanaging Stoic Providence (*Ep.*151). God empowers human faith for great works because mere human effort cannot accomplish divine good (*Ep.*260.9). Basil allowed no place for either Chaldean astrological fatalism (*Hom. Hex.*6.5; *Ep.*236), or Divine Unilateral Predetermination of Individuals' Eternal Destinies. Righteous judgment resulting in reward and punishment demands Christian traditional free choice. In contrast, any concept of inevitable evil in humans necessarily destroys Christian hope (*Hom. Hex.*6.7) because all humans have an innate natural reason with the ability to do good and avoid evil (*Hom. Hex.*8.5; cf. *Ep.*260.7). Basil refuted a dozen heresies, but reserved his strongest denunciation for the one teaching determinism—"the detestable Manichaeian heresy" (*Hom. Hex.*2.4).

Gregory Nyssen (ca.335–395 CE) pervasively teaches a post-Adamic congenital weakness, inclined to evil and in slavery to sin but *without* guilt (*C. Eun.*1.1; 3.2–3; 3.8; *De opificio hom.*193; *Cat. mag.*6, 35; *Ep.*18; *Ref. conf. Eun.*; *Dial. anim. et res.*, etc.). Each person's alienation from God occurs through personal sin and vice, not Adam's sin (*C. Eun.*3.10). Despite an inherited tendency to evil, the divine image within humans retains goodness, just as Tertullian and others had taught (*Opif. hom.*164; cf. *Ep.*3.17).^[78] Humanity's ruin and inability to achieve eternal life by self-effort demanded God initiate the rescue through Christ (*Ref. conf. Eun.*418–20). But Gregory

refutes the idea of a human nature so corrupted that it would render an individual incapable of a genuine choice to receive God's readily available gift of grace offered to everyone equally.

By appealing to the justice of God's recompenses, Gregory refutes those [e.g., Manichaeans] who believe humans are born sinful and thus culpable (*De anim.*120). The choice for salvation belongs to humans, apart from God's manipulation, coercion, or unilateral intervention (*C. Eun.*3.1.116–18; cf. *Adv. Mac. spir. sancto* 105–6; *De virginitate* 12.2–3). Gregory upholds Christian [not Stoic] divine sovereignty (*Ref. conf. Eun.* 169; cf. 126–27; *Opif. hom.*185).

III. Methodius, Theodore, and Ambrose

Methodius (d.312 CE) believed all humans retain genuine free will even after Adam's fall since Christian free choice was necessary for God to be just in rewarding the good and punishing the wicked (*Symp.*8.16; *P G* 18:168d). He championed traditional Christian free choice in a major work against Gnostic determinism (*Peri tou autexousiou*, 73–77).^[79] Cyril of Jerusalem (ca.348–386 CE) taught humans enter this world sinless (*Cat.*4.19) and God's foreknowledge of human responses determines the divine choosing of them for service (*Cat.*1.3).

Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca.350–428 CE) defended traditional original sin against Manichaean damnable inherited guilt (*Adv. def. orig. pecc.*), so that, "Man's freedom takes the first step, which is afterwards made effective by God . . . [with] the will of each man as being absolutely free and unbiased and able to choose either good or evil."^[80] Humans retain the ability to choose good and evil (*Comm. Ioh.*5.19).

Ambrose of Milan (d.397 CE) baptized Augustine in Milan on Easter in 387 CE. He taught traditional (not Augustinian) original sin (*De fide* 5.5, 8, 60; *Exc. Satyri* 2.6; cf. 1.4). Ambrose believed slavery to sin [the sin propensity] was inherited, but this was not literal sin that produced personal culpability and damnation (*De Abrah.*2.79). The scholar Paul Blowers noted, "Ambrosiaster (Rom.5:12ff) and Ambrose (*Enar.in Ps.*38.29) ... both authors concluded that individuals were ultimately accountable only for their own sins."^[81]

Ambrose emphasized God predestined individuals based upon his foreknowledge of the future, concerning which God was omniscient (*Ep.*57; *De fide* 2.11, 97). God compels no one, but patiently waits for a human response in order that He may provide grace, preferring pity over punishment (*Paen.*1.5). He insisted upon residual free choice and views an increase in a

person's faith (not initial faith) as a divine gift given in response to faithfulness. (*Paen.*1.48; *Ep.*41.6).

D. Conclusion

Not even one early church father writing from 95–430 CE—despite abundant acknowledgement of inherited human depravity—considered Adam's fall to have erased human free choice to independently respond to God's gracious invitation.^[82] God did not give initial faith as a gift. Humans could do nothing to save themselves—only God's grace could save. Total inability to do God's good works without God's grace did not mean inability to believe in Christ and prepare for baptism. No Christian author embraced deterministic Divine Unilateral Predetermination of Individuals' Eternal Destinies (DUPIED): all who considered it rejected DUPIED as an erroneous pagan Stoic or Neoplatonic philosophy, or a Gnostic or Manichaeian heresy, unbefitting Christianity's gracious relational God. God's gift was salvation by divine grace through human faith (cf. Eph. 2:8), not a unilateral initial faith gift, as the Gnostics and Manichaeian heretics were claiming. Early Christian literature could be distinguished from Gnostic and Manichaeian literature by this essential element.

In a seemingly rare theological unanimity over hundreds of years and throughout the entire Mediterranean world, a Christian *regula fidei* (rule of faith) of free choice (advocated by Origen as *the* rule of faith) combated the Divine Unilateral Predetermination of Individuals' Eternal Destinies espoused in Stoicism's "non-free free will" and Gnosticism's divine gift of infused initial faith into a "dead will." The loving Christian God allowed humans to exercise their God-given free will.