HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Tracing Christian Doctrine Through Church History

GRACE, FREE WILL & PREDESTINATION

How do divine grace and human will relate?

Reading Packet

Reading 1 - Pelagius: Human Responsibility and the Capacity to Obey

Pelagius, Letter to Demetrias and surviving writings (early 5th century) - condensed reading

Pelagius strongly emphasizes moral responsibility. God's commands are not mockery; therefore human beings must possess a genuine capacity to obey what God requires. He urges Christians not to excuse sin by appealing to the weakness of human nature.

Pelagius also speaks of grace, but he often locates grace in gifts such as creation, free will, divine law, Christ's teaching and example, and forgiveness. His surviving writings do not always match every proposition later condemned under the label 'Pelagianism,' so historical care is necessary.

The core dispute with Augustine concerns the depth of sin's damage to the will. Does fallen humanity retain the natural moral capacity to turn to God and obey, needing instruction and pardon, or must grace first liberate and transform the will before it can even begin to love God rightly?

Reading 2 - Augustine: Grace Does Not Destroy the Will; It Liberates It

Augustine, On Grace and Free Will and On the Predestination of the Saints (5th century) - condensed reading

Augustine refuses to solve the problem by denying human willing. People choose, desire, love, and act. The problem is that the fallen will is not morally neutral. Sin disorders desire so deeply that the person will not choose God rightly unless God first gives healing grace.

Grace therefore does more than offer external assistance to an otherwise independent will. God works within the person so that unwilling sinners become willing. The gift of faith itself belongs to grace, which means that the decisive difference between belief and unbelief cannot finally be credited to autonomous human self-determination.

Augustine connects this saving grace with predestination. God's choice is not a reward for foreseen independent merit. Yet Augustine still holds people responsible for their willing actions. The long Western debate begins with the tension between those two convictions.

Reading 3 - The Council of Orange: Grace Precedes the First Movement of Faith

Second Council of Orange (529) - condensed reading

Orange rejects the idea that fallen human beings can begin their return to God by their own natural power and then receive grace as a response. Even the desire to be cleansed, the beginning of faith, and the willingness to believe are gifts made possible by the Holy Spirit.

The council nevertheless does not teach that human beings are forced against their will. Grace heals and enables the will so that a real human response becomes possible. Christian obedience remains human obedience, but it is grace-enabled from the start.

Orange also rejects the idea that God predestines anyone to evil. Its teaching therefore represents an Augustinian doctrine of the priority of grace without adopting every later form of predestinarian theology.

Reading 4 - Martin Luther: The Bondage of the Will

Martin Luther, The Bondage of the Will (1525) - condensed reading

Luther argues against Erasmus that the human will cannot be treated as a small independent power that finally decides whether God's grace will succeed. In matters of salvation, fallen humanity is captive to sin. People act voluntarily, but their desires are not spiritually neutral.

For Luther, salvation must therefore rest on God's action rather than on a cooperative scheme in which grace supplies most of what is needed and autonomous free choice supplies the decisive final piece. Divine grace creates faith and gives the new heart that the sinner could not produce.

Luther's language is deliberately severe because he believes assurance is at stake. If salvation finally depends on the unpredictable strength of the human will, the promise of God cannot provide firm comfort. If it depends on God's merciful action in Christ, confidence can rest outside the self.

Reading 5 - John Calvin: Election and the Freedom of Grace

John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book III, chapters 21-24 (1559) - condensed reading

Calvin teaches unconditional election: God's saving choice is grounded in God's gracious purpose rather than foreseen human merit. Election magnifies mercy because those saved have no ultimate ground for boasting in a superior natural response.

Calvin also discusses reprobation, making his account more symmetrical and severe than some earlier Augustinian formulations. Yet he insists that God's sovereign decree does not make God the author of sin and does not eliminate genuine human responsibility.

The practical aim of the doctrine is not speculation about God's hidden decree. Calvin repeatedly directs believers to Christ as the mirror of election. Assurance comes through the gospel promise and faith in Christ rather than through attempts to inspect the secret counsel of God.

Reading 6 - Jacob Arminius: Grace Is Necessary and Can Be Resisted

Jacob Arminius, Declaration of Sentiments and related writings (early 17th century) - condensed reading

Arminius rejects Pelagian self-sufficiency. Fallen human beings cannot think, will, or do saving good apart from divine grace. Grace must awaken, assist, and enable the sinner from the beginning.

His disagreement with strict Calvinism concerns whether this grace is irresistible and how election relates to faith. Arminius places election in Christ and speaks of God's decree to save those who believe in Christ. Grace enables a real response but does not operate in such a way that resistance becomes impossible.

The resulting tradition seeks to preserve both the priority of grace and a form of libertarian human response. The later Calvinist-Arminian debate is therefore not properly described as grace versus no grace. It concerns the nature, extent, and resistibility of grace and the basis of election.

Reading 7 - Jonathan Edwards: Freedom as Acting According to Desire

Jonathan Edwards, Freedom of the Will (1754) - condensed reading

Edwards argues that moral responsibility does not require the will to be an uncaused power capable of choosing contrary to its strongest motive under identical conditions. A person is free in the ordinary moral sense when able to act according to what he or she most wants.

The deeper problem is the character of those wants. Fallen people possess what Edwards calls moral inability: they lack a right inclination toward God, not because an external chain physically prevents belief but because sinful desire governs the will. Grace changes the disposition, and the renewed person then comes willingly.

This account allows Edwards to affirm divine sovereignty and human accountability together. God's grace is decisive, yet human choices remain genuine expressions of the person's desires and character.