

WHEN DID CALVINISM BEGIN?

by Jack Cottrell

QUESTION: I have a question about the historical nature of Calvinism. One of my points with my Calvinist friends has been that you really don't see the doctrines of T-U-L-I-P until Augustine. To me that is compelling stuff. If Paul meant total depravity and all that the way Calvinists believe it, then you would think you would find that in the early church fathers. Do you find that argument compelling? I recently read a blog that basically said the ideas of Calvinism are all throughout the early church fathers. What do you think?

ANSWER: You are definitely correct. None of the five points was present in Christendom until Augustine. Total depravity and its negation of free will are the keystone doctrines of "Calvinism," being the logical starting point for the other four points. I have studied this quite a bit, and have found that the pre-Augustinian church fathers taught the opposite of the five points. Augustine created this system. I think this is a very important point.

I have discussed this briefly in my essay, "The Classic Arminian View of Election," in the book, *Perspectives on Election: Five Views*, ed. Chad Brand (Broadman & Holman, 2006), pp. 93ff. What follows is from those pages. In accordance with the subject of this book, my comments are focused on the doctrine of predestination.

The classic Arminian view of predestination, in essence, says that the omniscient God foreknew all who would of their own free choice trust in his saving grace; and on the basis of that foreknowledge he predestined them to eternal life. He likewise foreknew all who would not trust him for salvation, and justly predestined them to eternal condemnation. Though this is called "the Arminian view," it has actually been present in Christian thought almost from the beginning.

Philip Schaff observes that up until Augustine, all the Greek fathers "had only taught a conditional predestination, which they made dependent on the foreknowledge of the free acts of men." [1]

Some second-century fathers acknowledged God's foreknowledge, [2] with "The Shepherd of Hermas" relating it to predestination in a general way. In explaining why all do not repent, he says that to those whose hearts God "saw were about to become pure, and who were about to serve him with all their heart, he gave repentance; but to those whose deceit and wickedness he saw, who were about to repent hypocritically, he did not give repentance." [3] At about the same time Justin Martyr speaks of the end times as the time when "the number of those who are foreknown by Him as good and virtuous is complete." [4] Equating Scripture with the mind of God, Justin says, "But if the word of God foretells that some angels and men shall be certainly punished, it did so because it foreknew that they would be unchangeably [wicked], but not because God had created them so." [5]

In the third century A.D. Origen strongly defends God's foreknowledge in reference to predictive prophecy, saying that it does not affect free will since it is not causative and implies only the simple futurity of an event, not its necessity. [6] He says that Romans 8:29 shows "that those whom God foreknew would become the kind to conform themselves to Christ by their sufferings, he even predestined them to be conformed and similar to his image and glory. Therefore there precedes a foreknowledge of them, through which is known what effort and virtue they will possess in themselves, and thus predestination follows, yet foreknowledge should not be considered the cause of predestination." [7]

Fourth-century writers affirming this view include Ambrosiaster, who says, "Those who are called according to the promise are those whom God knew would believe in the future." [8] Concerning Jacob and Esau in Romans 9:11 Ambrosiaster says, "Therefore, knowing what each of them would become, God said: The younger will be worthy and the elder unworthy. In his foreknowledge he chose the one and rejected the other." [9] Also, "Those whom God foreknew would believe in him he chose to receive the promises." [10] Another fourth-century writer, Diodore of Tarsus, says God does not show mercy to one and harden another "by accident, for it was according to the power

of his foreknowledge that he gave to each one his due.”[11]

As Harry Buis notes,[12] even Augustine in his earlier writing shared this thinking before he arrived at what would become known as the Calvinist view. Pelagius and his disciples continued to emphasize the predestination-by-foreknowledge view. Pelagius says, “Those whom God knew in advance would believe, he called.”[13] He says Romans 9:15 means, “I will have mercy on him whom I have foreknown will be able to deserve compassion.”[14] In the years following the rift between Augustine and Pelagius, the semi-Pelagians rejected Augustine’s new deterministic view of predestination and continued to emphasize “a predestination to salvation conditioned on the foreknowledge of faith.”[15] For example, John Cassian taught that “God’s predestination must be in the light of what He foresees is going to be the quality of our behaviour,” as Kelly summarizes it.[16] Commenting on Romans 8:29-30 Theodoret of Cyr (d. 466) says, “God did not simply predestine; he predestined those whom he foreknew.” I.e., “those whose intention God foreknew he predestined from the beginning.”[17]

[1]Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. III, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 852.

[2]See “An Ancient Christian Sermon Commonly Known as Second Clement,” 9:9, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2nd edition, tr. J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, ed. and rev. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 72: “For he is the one who knows everything beforehand” The same language is found in “The Shepherd of Hermas,” Mandate 4.3.4 (*The Apostolic Fathers*, 219).

[3]“The Shepherd of Hermas,” Similitude 8.6.2 (*The Apostolic Fathers*, 257).

[4]Justin Martyr, “First Apology,” 45, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. I, *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913), 178.

[5]Justin Martyr, “Dialogue with Trypho,” 141 (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, I:270).

- [6]Origen, "Against Celsus," II.xx, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. IV, Fathers of the Third Century, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), 440.
- [7]Origen, Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 1-5, tr. Thomas P. Scheck, vol. 103, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2001), 65-66.
- [8]Ambrosiaster, Commentary on Paul's Epistles, cited in Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament, vol. IV, Romans, ed. Gerald Bray (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998), 233.
- [9]Ibid., 250.
- [10]Ibid., 235.
- [11]Diodore, Pauline Commentary from the Greek Church, in Bray, 261.
- [12]Harry Buis, Historic Protestantism and Predestination (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1958), 9.
- [13]Pelagius, Pelagius's Commentary on Romans, in Bray, 237.
- [14]Ibid., 255.
- [15]Schaff, History, III:858.
- [16]J. N. D. Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines, 2nd edition (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 371.
- [17]Theodoret of Cyr, Interpretation of the Letter to the Romans, in Bray, 236-237.