

Predestination

letting God be God

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Suggested Reading

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Introduction

All Christians Believe in Predestination

1
Week

At the time of the American Revolution, almost every Christian denomination in America affirmed the Reformed doctrine of predestination. Christians believed that God alone was to be credited with their salvation—even their cooperation with God’s grace was brought about by God’s grace. God had chosen some for eternal life and not others, and only God knew his reasons for the selection. Baptists, Anglicans, Congregationalists, Dutch Reformed, and (of course) Presbyterians—all stood solidly upon this biblical teaching. One thing, however, was sure—God didn’t choose us because he knew we would believe. Rather, we believed because God chose us. God was God, and all the glory would go to him.

After two centuries of immersion in American culture, however, American Christianity has entered the new millennium in a state of crisis. Few Americans today believe in predestination. They may say they do, but they then define predestination as based upon God’s foresight of our faith. In the end, the reason I’m saved was because of my free will, not God’s sovereign choice. I guess the reason I believed when my neighbor didn’t is because I was just better than my neighbor. I was good enough to believe by my own free will. I thank you, Father, that I had the good sense to cooperate with you....

I’ll say this right at the outset. Free-will Christianity is a bastardization of biblical Christianity. It is inconsistent Christianity. Perhaps “heresy” is even a fair term for it. All this “free will” thinking is just another form of legalism, making salvation depend upon us rather than upon Jehovah. Don’t get me wrong—many who buy this thinking are genuine, sincere believers and will be with the Lord forever. After all, a major point in this class will be that God’s grace is more powerful than our blindness. But there has been a lack of biblical teaching here for decades. The result of this dearth has been an even bigger problem, a problem so terrifying as to threaten the very vitality of the American church. We have lost sight of God’s greatness. How rare today is a sermon on God’s majesty, his sovereign power, his wrath, his judgment, his overpowering rule over history, his supremacy, his fierceness, his eternal predestination. If we’re really, really honest with ourselves, Do we truly *know* God anymore? We have tamed God. Castrated him, perhaps. As one theologian laments... our thoughts of God have become far too human.

This should come as no surprise in America. For two centuries, the church has existed in an American culture whose highest values are personal liberty and individual rights. It would be quite natural for Christians here to filter the Bible through such a lens. The kingdom of God has to be all about *me*. It has to be relevant to *my* life, right? And if I am saved, it has to be because of *my* decisions, right? My will has to be free, right? God would be unfair to have it any other way. God has to be an equal opportunity Savior. Isn’t God a democracy? Didn’t Jesus preach about the Republic of God? All this is to suggest that American churches don’t teach predestination because they are more American than they are Christian. We have come to think that our God is small. Now it’s time for a new Reformation in the churches, a Reformation in which we honor God as God, not just as mascot. We need a Reformation in which God is glorified *as God*, and not just as someone who “fills our needs.” Enough about our needs! It’s far past time we let God be God. I know of no “need” more pressing than this.

Still, even with all this misunderstanding about predestination, nearly every major Christian denomination in history has felt compelled to have *some* doctrine of predestination. Our generation is not the first to have to work through this biblical issue. About the year 400, Augustine and Pelagius fought over this doctrine—and Pelagius was condemned as a heretic for his doctrine of free will. Then at the Council of Orange in 529 AD, the Christians united to reject free will in favor of God’s sovereign grace. And again in 855, the Council of Valence affirmed a double predestination. During the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, Martin Luther called the doctrine of predestination the *cor ecclesia*, the heart of the Church. Luther wrote more about predestination than did John Calvin, even though the term “Calvinism” was unfortunately applied to the doctrine. If one looks at the greatest theologians in the 2,000 years of Christian history—Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Edwards—although these men disagree on other issues and are by no means infallible, *all* of them agree on this question of predestination.

“We confess a predestination of the elect to life, and a predestination of the wicked to death; that, in the election of those who are saved, the mercy of God precedes anything we do, and in the condemnation of those who will perish, evil merit precedes the righteous judgment of God.”

—Council of Valence, 855

“Predestination to Life is the everlasting Purpose of God, whereby (before the foundations of the world were laid) He hath decreed by His counsel secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom He hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation, as vessels made to honor.”

—Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, 1563

“From all eternity God decreed all that should happen in time, and this He did freely and unalterably, consulting only His own wise and holy will.... The angels and men who are the subjects of God's predestination are clearly and irreversibly designated, and their number is unalterably fixed.”

—The Baptist Confession of 1689



St. Augustine (354-430)

The term *predestination* itself is clear enough: the eternal destinies of men and women were determined beforehand (*pre*) by God. Before the creation, God chose who would go to heaven and who would go to hell. Christians believe in predestination for one simple reason. The Bible teaches it. No other reason will suffice. In Ephesians 1:5-6, for example, Scripture tells us when this choice took place—before creation, in eternity. And the Bible tells us what this predestination is unto—adoption through Jesus, to be holy and blameless before God. And it tells us here *why* God chose us—so that his glory could be praised.

“For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will-- to the praise of His glorious grace.”

Three views on Predestination

The real question is not whether or not Christians should believe in predestination—the Bible clearly teaches predestination. The real question is this: *whom* did God predestine to eternal life, and (even more importantly) *why* did God choose those He predestined?



John Calvin (1509-64)

1. *The optimistic view:* God has predestined everybody to eternal life. Satan has predestined everybody to eternal death. God is for you, the Devil is against you—you have to cast the tie-breaker. The problem with this view is that it has absolutely nothing to do with *the Bible's view* of predestination. The Bible clearly states that not everyone is predestined, but only those who will eventually believe and enjoy eternal life. Christians are frequently called the *elect*, as opposed to the non-elect, and are said to be the *chosen* ones (see Rom 8:33; 11:7; 1 Cor 1:27-29; Col 3:12; 2 Tim 2:10; Tit 1:1; 1 Pe 2:8-9)—God has not chosen everyone. God has chosen some for eternal life and rejected others. But *on what basis* has God chosen some?

2. *The Arminian view:* God has predestined some to eternal life because He saw in advance that such persons would cooperate with the Holy Spirit and believe by their own free will. God gives everyone an equal amount of grace, and those willing to take it are saved. God chose us because we were going to choose Him.

3. *The Reformed (Calvinist) view:* God predestined some to eternal life, not because He saw that they would have believed on their own (They wouldn't have!), but because of His own good pleasure. God chose us despite our rejection of Him, not because we would be cooperative. God chose to change our hearts, and he has done so and will continue to do so until all of his elect are gathered.

Calvinists and Arminians agree that only some are elect, and that those who are elect will come to faith and believe until the end (if, in fact, they are elect). And everyone agrees that those who turn from sin to follow Christ are saved. The question is this: *On what basis* did God predestine them? Did God predestine some because He knew they would believe of their own free will, or did He predestine without regard to human choices? Was *God's* choice based on *our* choice, or is *our* choice itself as a result of *God's* choice?

The Five Points of Calvinism

In 1610, a group of the followers of James Arminius, a Dutch professor, presented a list of five grievances to the Dutch Parliament. Imbued with the humanism then arising within Europe, these “Arminians” were not pleased with the direction the Protestant Reformation had taken—objecting particularly to the doctrine of predestination as the Reformers (Luther, Calvin) had taught it. After eight years of biblical study and reflection, however, the Reformation churches meeting at Dort rejected the five Arminian objections as unbiblical. Their response followed the five Arminian objections, and has been passed down to us as the “Five Points” of Calvinism, known for its acronym, TULIP:

Total depravity, **U**nconditional election, **L**imited atonement, **I**rresistible grace, and the **P**erseverance of the saints. There are better titles for each of these doctrines—and this class will not deal with the extent of the atonement (that will have to be dealt with later). The two theological systems may be compared as follows:

The Arminian Objections to Protestant Theology “The Five Points of Arminianism”	The Reformed Response to the Arminian Objections “The Five Points of Calvinism”
1. Human Ability (Free Will)	1. Human Inability (Total Depravity)
2. Conditional Election (Predestination warranted by Faith)	2. Unconditional Election (Predestination unwarranted)
3. Unlimited Atonement (Jesus died to <i>make salvation possible</i>, and therefore did so for everyone)	3. Particular Atonement (Limited Atonement-- Jesus died to <i>actually assure salvation</i>, and therefore died only for His elect)
4. The Holy Spirit’s work limited by human will	4. Invincible Grace (Irresistible Grace)
5. Possibility of losing salvation once gained.	5. Divine Preservation of all true believers (Perseverance of the Saints).

The name “Five Point of Calvinism” is a little misleading, of course. Calvinist churches teach more than five points—the vision is to teach the whole counsel of God! These particular five points were simply the five under fire in the seventeenth century. One might suggest that these are *five* of the *hundred* or so points of biblical Christianity. Yet the one great point behind all five points is the supreme point that *salvation is of the Lord, from beginning to end*. God is God, and he does as he pleases. And if he has chosen to give us salvation, we’re going to make sure that we give all the glory for it to him, not to ourselves. Predestination is not just a Presbyterian thing. As the nineteenth century English Baptist preacher C.H. Spurgeon exclaimed, “I love to preach the strong old doctrines nicknamed Calvinism, but which are surely and verily the revealed truth of God as it is in Christ Jesus.”

Concurrence

A key biblical principle that helps illuminate God's sovereignty is called *concurrence*. People have plans, which may be good or may be evil, and people are responsible for the plans they make. God also has a plan, a plan which overrules all other plans. God's eternal purpose and humanity's purposes concur—they take place at the same time. As J.I. Packer explains, "God's control is absolute in the sense that men do only that which He has ordained that they should do; yet they are truly free agents in the sense that their decisions are their own, and they are morally responsible for them." While our motives may be impure, even our attempts to thwart God's eternal plan in fact only serve to further it. We see this principle of concurrence active in several biblical passages.

- In Acts 2:23 and 4:27-28, God plans the murder of Jesus, the worst sin in history. God tells us that Christ's murderers were working out his eternal plan, then goes on to say that they will be judged for their actions.
- In Genesis 45:5 and 50:20, God plans the attempted murder and enslavement of Joseph so that God could eventually rescue millions of people from famine. Joseph tells his brothers that their plan was wicked—"You intended to harm me." But God's plan trumped their plan, Joseph explains, "But God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."
- In Job 1, we see the Sabeans and Chaldeans—spurred on by Satan—killing Job's cattle and livestock, even though we know what Job could only perceive by faith—that their actions were in fact a part of God's plan, who had chosen to allow Satan to inspire these actions.

In light of the biblical principle of concurrence, we understand how God even ordains evil and the suffering that follows from living in a sin-sickened world. This may seem ironic, since God hates sin and forbids people from sinning. God hates death too—Jesus even wept at the sight of death. But God also ordains death—it's his curse on all of us for the sins of our first parents (Genesis 3). God ordains sin and suffering, even though he despises them. That's the mystery of concurrence. This does not make human beings simply "puppets"—puppets do not have desires or wills; puppets do not make choices. People do—but God is the invisible hand at work in, behind and through the plans of mice and men, always accomplishing his eternal and unchanging purpose.

This has practical implications. Don't tell someone who is suffering that God had nothing to do with his or her suffering. The last thing *I* want to be told when *I'm* suffering is that my pain has no significance! God ordains every disappointment, loss and sorrow just as surely as he ordains every joy. This was Job's faith: "The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. May the name of the LORD be praised." God has a purpose—even when we can't always understand it. Our sufferings and even our sin have significance greater than themselves. They are the black stitches that God includes in the beautiful tapestry of his plan.

The greatest idol in American culture today is the idol of personal self-determination. Personal choice is cherished above God. Perhaps the reason it is so hard to teach the doctrine of predestination is because to preach this doctrine is to pierce the very heart of man's rebellion. "In Him we were chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will" (Ephesians 1:11). Who decides? God does, and He doesn't care how you feel about it. God is holy. God is sovereign. God is God. Bow the knee and fear the Lord. Fall before him and worship.

"I claim credit for nothing. Everything is determined, the beginning as well as the end, by forces over which we have no control. It is determined for the insect as well as the star, human beings, vegetables, or cosmic dust. We all dance to a mysterious tune, intoned in the distance by an invisible piper." —Albert Einstein

"Nothing, therefore, happens unless the Omnipotent wills it to happen: He either permits it to happen, or He brings it about Himself." —Augustine

"We must always start with this principle: that everything in nature depends upon the will of God, and that the whole course of nature is only the prompt carrying out of His orders." —Calvin

"How different is the God of the Bible from the God of modern Christendom! The conception of Deity which prevails most widely today, even among those who profess to give heed to the Scriptures, is a miserable caricature, a pathetic travesty of Truth. The God of the twentieth century is a helpless, effeminate being who commands the respect of no really thoughtful man. The God of many a present-day pulpit is an object of pity rather than of awe-inspiring reverence."

—A.W. Pink, 1928

Letting God be God, part 2

The Supremacy of God in God's Heart

THE TRIAL

DEFENDANT: God

OCCUPATION: Maker, ruler, judge of heavens and earth

ADDRESS: Everywhere, particularly "the heavens"

CHARGE: Being selfish

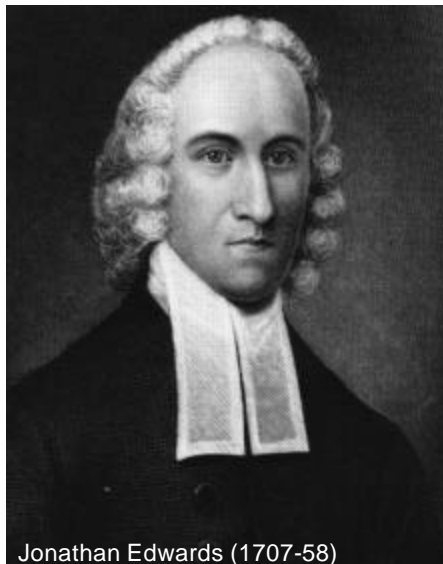
THE EVIDENCE:

1. Hell, Fires of. Billions will suffer there, and the Defendant says he will do it to "display his wrath."
2. Intolerance of non-Christian religions. He calls them idolatry and says he will punish them.
3. Intolerance of numerous behaviors that people enjoy.
4. Insistence that people focus all attention on Defendant all the time. Intolerant of those who do otherwise.
5. Multiple unexpected outbursts of anger.
 - a. Nadab & Abihu, whom Defendant burned with fire while they offered sacrifices in Defendant's temple.
 - b. Uzzah, whom Defendant struck dead while trying to keep Defendant's ark from falling to the ground.
 - c. Ananias and Sapphira, whom Defendant killed while they were donating money to Defendant's church.
 - d. Christians in Corinth whom Defendant killed because they ate their communion bread too quickly.
6. Repeated remarks that everything must happen for Defendants own glory. Refusal to share glory with others.

DEFENDANTS PLEA: Guilty as charged.

There are lots of passages in the Bible that honestly trouble a lot of Christians—passages where God kills people, punishes people, says things that seem intolerant, offensive, even selfish. Whenever a passage in the Bible rubs us the wrong way, it should give us pause, because the problem is not with the Bible, but with us. What is it we don't understand about God's character that makes some of God's actions seem so unfair? There is one simple truth

that—once grasped—makes us see things as God sees them and unlocks a renewed understanding of God and God's ways. One single passion drives God's heart. That passion, as teachers like Augustine and Jonathan Edwards have helped us to see, is this: *God's primary concern in everything he does is to bring glory to himself.*



Jonathan Edwards (1707-58)

God is chiefly concerned with his own fame. God is self-centered. Selfish, one might even say. If there's one thing we know from the Bible, it's that God is chiefly concerned with the honor of his name—just look at the prayer Jesus taught us to pray. Before ever getting to ourselves and our needs, we pray for God's name to be honored, for God's rule (kingdom) to be furthered and for God's will to be done. Even when God saves sinners from their sins—a supreme act of generosity—God insists that he's doing it for his own benefit more than for theirs. Observe how God speaks of salvation in Isaiah 48:11:

"For my own sake, for my own sake, I do this. How can I let myself be defamed? I will not yield my glory to another."

Think about it. If it is man's highest purpose that he glorify God, how can we expect God to have a lesser purpose? Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love God with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength. God has not disobeyed this commandment. The first commandment was to have no other gods before the LORD. God is not an idolater. The most passionate heart for God in all the universe is God's heart. God's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy himself forever. God is not an *instrument*, but the *end* for which we exist. This is why the English revivalist George Whitefield cried, "Let the name of Whitefield perish, so long as God is glorified!"

God is ultimate, not us. And true religion ultimately exists not for humanity, but for God. This is only reasonable. It is wrong for a man to be self-centered because man is not actually the center of the universe. God is, has always been, and always shall be the center of the universe. Were God to act as if another were central to the universe, that "other" would be God. It is wrong for man to judge, as if he were God, because he isn't God. But God is God, and it is right for him to perform the functions that are only worthy of God. Besides, God is God, and his perfect character is the very standard of good and evil. Whatever God desires is good. And God chiefly desires himself. The biblical doctrine of predestination will make no sense until we grasp this central aspect of God's heart.

The ultimate answer to every question is "to glorify of God":

- Why did God create us? Isaiah 43:6-7
- Why did God rescue the Israelites from Egypt? Psalm 106:7-8
- Why did God raise up Pharaoh? Romans 9:17
- Why did God defeat Pharaoh? Exodus 14:4
- Why did God spare Israel in the wilderness? Ezekiel 20:14
- Why will God not reject believers? 1 Samuel 12:20-22
- Why did God restore Israel after the exile? Ezekiel 36:22-23, 32
- Why does God answer our prayers? John 14:13
- Why does God forgive sins? Isaiah 43:25
- How could David ask God for forgiveness? Psalm 25:11
- What is the Holy Spirit's ministry? John 16:14
- What should motivate everything we do? 1 Corinthians 10:31
- Why did God strike Herod dead? Acts 12:23
- Why is Jesus coming back? 2 Thessalonians 1:9-10
- What is God's plan for the earth? Habakkuk 2:14



George Whitefield (1714-70)

God even ordains evil for the greater good of the display of God's character. Look at Romans 9:19-24. God ordains human sin so he can make his wrath known. This display would be impossible without evil. God also allows our evil choices so he can make his mercy known. This too would be impossible without evil. A world with evil is thus eternally significant in a way that a world without evil would not be. It can bring a greater display of God's character. Again, in all he does, God's chief concern is to bring honor to himself.

This teaching tends to hit people like a ton of bricks. Why? Is this a terrible notion? Not at all—this is it a cause for *joy!* Granted, if we're living for ourselves, then we should be depressed. But if what we really want is for our Father to be honored, then no teaching should thrill us more! God's self-centered majesty is what I find most beautiful about God—that God is God and there is no other! Jonathan Edwards suggested that until God's selfishness is precisely what attracts us to God, we may not yet have begun to love God at all, but only ourselves. The heart of true worship is in line with God's heart, and wants nothing more than for the King to be magnified. Let us remember Henry Blamires' warning:

"If we try to change the face of eternal God, we indulge in the supreme idolatry, beside which perhaps, in the scale of sin, adultery weighs like a feather and murder like a farthing. Yet the sin is committed among us, within Christendom, within the Church-- maybe within ourselves; for are we sure, after all, that we prayed to the true God this morning?"

"If it is right for man to have the glory of God as his goal, can it be wrong for God to have the same goal? If man can have no higher purpose than God's glory, how can God? If it is wrong for man to seek a lesser end than this, it would be wrong for God, too. The reason it cannot be right for man to live for himself, as if he were God, is because he is not God. Those who insist that God should not seek His glory in all things are really asking that He cease to be God. And there is no greater blasphemy than to will God out of existence."

—J.I. Packer

Letting God be God, part 3 Our Part & God's Part in Conversion



A “Free” Will in Bondage to Sin

We all realize that human beings have wills—we have the capacity to make decisions. The glitch is this: Human beings can choose to do whatever they *desire*. Yet our desires are rarely under our control! If this is what is meant by *free will*, then the Bible assumes that we have it. God commands us to be perfect, and we have wills and therefore may choose either to obey or to disobey. But given the choice, does the fallen, sinful human have the *moral and spiritual ability* to incline his heart toward God?

Biblically, the only possible answer is No. As Augustine pointed out, unbelievers are not even able to *cooperate* with God's grace—sinful man is not just mistaken; sinful man is hostile toward God (See chart). If humanity had the opportunity to kill God, it would do so (as it did 2,000 years ago). Human depravity runs far deeper than we realize. Saving faith can only flow from a heart that loves God as He actually is—good fruit cannot come from a bad tree. Yet Scripture teaches that man in his natural, fallen condition does not and *cannot* love God. “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, *no one who seeks God*” (Romans 3:10-11). As Luther argued in his 1524 *Bondage of the Will*, sinful man is incapable of seeking God, for man's free will is in bondage to sin. What do the following passages teach about human inability?

- *Psalm 58:3*
- *Genesis 6:5*
- *John 6:44*
- *1 Corinthians 2:14*
- *2 Corinthians 4:4*
- *Luke 16:19-31*

Michael Horton puts like this, “We cannot find God for the same reason that a thief can't find a police officer.” Sinful man cannot find God because he doesn't want God. R.C. Sproul explains, “Fallen man has the natural ability to make choices but lacks the moral ability to make godly choices.” From conception onward, humanity is spiritually dead, hostile to God, and unable to incline its heart toward God. Free will profits man nothing, for the will is in bondage to sin, leaving human beings helpless.

Pre-Fall Man	Post-Fall Man	Reborn Man	Glorified Man
able to sin	able to sin	able to sin	
able to not sin		able to not sin	able to not sin
	unable to not sin		
			unable to sin

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ when we were dead in transgressions-- it is by grace you have been saved”

—Ephesians 2:1-5.

The New Birth: Spiritual Resurrection

When we were dead in sins, when we unknowingly followed Satan, when we were enslaved to our sinful desires, when we were by our very *natures* objects of wrath, *God* did something. We were unable to do anything. We were unable to believe. We were unable to incline our hearts toward God. We didn't want to! But when we could do nothing, God alone took action. We were dead. (We were not terminally ill; nor were we going down for the count—we were stone cold spiritual corpses.) Yet God made us alive. God gave us new birth (*regeneration*). We were born again. Before we could even believe, God gave us new birth. On a technical level, we were not born again *because* we believed. We were born again and believe as a *result*. When Nicodemus couldn't understand who Jesus was, Jesus taught him that man could not even *see* the kingdom of heaven, let alone enter it, until he was first born again (John 3:3). Even faith itself is a gift given by God to those who otherwise wouldn't want it. The new birth came first. The new birth *caused* the faith to be present. *Regeneration precedes faith*.

Is Faith a Gift of God?

- Matthew 11:27
- Luke 8:10
- Luke 10:21-22
- John 6:35-39, 44
- John 10:24-29
- John 15:16
- Acts 16:14
- Acts 13:48
- Acts 18:27
- Ephesians 2:8-9
- Philippians 1:29

Is Repentance a Gift of God?

- Acts 11:18
- Romans 9:15-16
- 2 Timothy 2:25

“There is a dreadful, violent, and obstinate opposition of the will of natural men to the will of God.”

—Jonathan Edwards

“Man's will is like a beast standing between two riders. If God rides, it wills and goes where God wills.... If Satan rides it wills and goes where Satan wills. Nor may it choose to which rider it will run, or which it will seek; but the riders themselves fight to decide who shall have and hold it.”

—Martin Luther

justice, mercy and injustice

Our conversion to Christ was not a joint venture between us and God, but a unilateral move on God's part to raise us from spiritual death to spiritual life, changing our hearts so that we believed and repented.

Salvation is by grace alone—*sola gratia*, to use the Reformation slogan. Even our willingness to cooperate with the Holy Spirit was given to us by God. Yet this brings us to a sober realization—God does not give this kind of grace to everyone. Not everyone is given faith. Is this unfair?

No. *Unequal*, yes—but not *unfair*. We are sinners and all of us deserve God's justice—punishment for our sins. No one deserves mercy. If mercy were deserved, it would not be mercy—it would be justice!

God is not unjust to anyone—no one gets less than he deserves. Some of us have received mercy; others will receive justice. God is not an equal opportunity Savior. Indeed, from Abraham on, God has always shown more mercy to one people than to another. God chose Abraham in a way he did not choose Abraham's next-door neighbor. God revealed himself to Paul in a way he didn't show himself to Nicodemus. God is sovereign in his exercise of mercy.



Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Foreknowledge

Some object to the concept of predestination by arguing that God predestines the elect because he knows in advance that they will come to Christ by their own free will. As seen in the previous lesson, however, that notion is blatantly unbiblical. No one has the ability to even cooperate with God's grace. Several biblical passages, however, do speak of God's "foreknowledge." While God certainly knows the future (he determines it!), the biblical concept of foreknowledge is something different. The term (???????) is used, not of knowing events, but of knowing people. God tells us that he knew us before we knew him. As God told Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I set you apart" (Jer. 1:5). Indeed, the major Greek lexicon (*BAG*) states that "foresight" or "prescience" is not even a *possible* meaning for "foreknowledge" in passages such as Romans 8:29-30. And in the Great Chain of Salvation in this passage, it should be noted that only those who were foreknown are called by the Holy Spirit—not everyone. Rather, foreordination (choosing) is always meant in the Greek when this term is used of a man with God as subject, as in 1 Peter 1:20, where God "foreknew" Jesus as savior before creation—God *appointed* Jesus as savior, that is. The "foreknowledge" view of predestination is not an explanation of the biblical teaching, but rather a denial of it.

Is Predestination Double?

Up to this point, we have already seen that predestination cannot have been conditioned by faith, as man would never have faith on his own. It is God who gives faith. Our predestination was not on the basis of anything good or cooperative in us-- it was simply for God's good pleasure. God controls who does and does not believe. Those whom God has predestined to eternal life believe; the rest do not. But what of those who do not? Has God *chosen* that they not believe?

1. The Bible teaches that God has chosen or predestined some sinners—his elect—to inherit eternal life.
 - Romans 8:29, 33
 - 1 Corinthians 1:27-29
 - Colossians 3:12
 - 2 Timothy 2:10
 - Titus 1:1
2. The Bible also teaches that God has predestined other sinners—some call them the reprobate—to condemnation.
 - Romans 9:1-24
 - Romans 11:4-10
 - 1 Peter 2:8-9

This predestination to judgment is not one in which God actively works sin into the hearts of the reprobate. As Luther argued, God does not have to place "fresh evil" (Luther's term) into anyone's heart—there's enough there already! God works actively to save his elect, changing their hearts to make them love him. But he does *not* work actively to turn the reprobate against him—they do that on their own. God does harden hearts, but in the sense of handing them over to their own sinful desires—as Paul discusses in Romans 1. God need do nothing—they already have enough rope to hang themselves. As the Bible tells us that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, so too it mentions that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. Both are true—God gave Pharaoh what he wanted—freedom—and Pharaoh used it to destroy himself.



John Calvin (1509-64)

ROMANS 9

Paul discusses this question in Romans 9. In Romans 9-11, Paul is answering an objection raised against the gospel. Paul said in Romans 8:39 that God promises that *nothing* can separate the elect from God's love. But, the objection comes, "What about God's promises to Israel?" Most Jews do not believe, yet they were the chosen people of God! "It is not as though God's word had failed," Paul writes, "for not all who are descended from Israel are Israel." Here Paul begins his first explanation of why some Jews believe Christ and others do not. In chapter 10, Paul will explain that the gospel was offered to the Jews, but that they had rejected it. In chapter 11, Paul will discuss God's future plans for Israel—that God will work among the Jewish people in the future. Thus, Paul answers the problem in three ways: human responsibility (ch.10), God's future grace (ch.11), and in chapter 9, God's sovereign predestination.

9:6-9 In the past, God has chosen some and rejected others. God did this with the children of Abraham. Abraham had two sons—Ishmael and Isaac. Yet God rejected Ishmael; it was Isaac who was chosen by God. God's promise has not failed, but it did not apply to all descendants of Abraham—only to the line of Isaac.

9:10-13 God worked this way with Isaac's twin sons, as well. Even though Esau was born first, Esau was rejected. Paul stresses that God chose the younger (Jacob) *before* either twin was born or had done *anything* good or bad—God's choice was not based on anything good in Jacob. God loved Jacob. God hated Esau.

9:14-18 In Moses' day, God chose some for mercy and hardened others, too. God hardened Pharaoh to display His power before the earth. God owes compassion to no one. He owes no one mercy. Sinners deserve justice, that is, punishment. The fact that God shows mercy to one and not to another is not unfair, because *neither one deserves mercy*. Ultimately, salvation does not depend on man's desire or decision, but on God's choosing to show mercy.

9:19-21 Paul deals with an objection that is never raised against Arminians, but which was raised against Paul: How can God blame people for not believing if He controls who does or does not believe? Paul doesn't answer—he rebukes the question as being impotent. God is God. God created people, and He can do whatever He wants with them. It is the Potter's prerogative to do what He wants with the clay.

9:22-24 Up until this time, Paul has been speaking about God's choosing and rejecting *in the past*, but now he applies it to the present. Today, God has called some Jews and Gentiles (some of each) to become vessels displaying God's glory. God has also prepared other Jews and Gentiles for destruction in order to demonstrate before the world God's wrath and power. *Here is a double predestination: God, without regard to human desire or effort, has chosen some for glory (election) and others for wrath (reprobation).*



The Grand Demonstration

In the end, what makes the difference between one sinner believing & his next-door neighbor not believing? After all else is said & done, the difference lies in God, not in man (See Rom 11:4-10; 1 Pe 2:8-9). God saw two men in rebellion committing spiritual suicide, and chose to rescue only one. The fact must stand: *God is not an equal opportunity Savior*. God shows some a degree of undeserved grace that He does not show to others. But the majesty of grace is that God has shown grace to *anyone!* All of history is the process of God's preparing two peoples to display His character—one to display God's mercy, the other to display God's justice. At the end of history will come the Grand Demonstration of the good and perfect, merciful and just character of Almighty God.

What to do with this Teaching, part 1

Trust God for Perseverance

One major debate within Christian circles is the question of whether or not a Christian can lose his or her salvation. Arminians argue that true believers can sin so much that they lose their faith and perish. Some Christians respond by arguing that once a person professes faith in Jesus, he is eternally secure in his salvation and—even if he commits complete apostasy (“falls away”) and vocally rejects Jesus Christ—will still go to heaven, for “once saved, always saved.” In light of the biblical doctrine of predestination, how should we understand the security we have under God’s care? There have been three main approaches to the question:

1. Classic Arminianism

- *One must persevere in faith to be saved.*
- True believers can lose their faith.
- *Those dying without faith in Christ are condemned.*

2. Antinomianism

- One need not persevere in faith to be saved.
- True believers can lose their faith.
- Those who lose their faith are saved, since they once believed.

3. Classic Calvinism

- *One must persevere in faith to be saved.*
- *True believers cannot lose their faith, since it’s God’s gift.*
- *Those dying without faith in Christ are condemned.*
- *Those who “lose” their faith never had it to begin with.*
- *God will preserve true believers and they will be saved.*

Proponents of the first two approaches quote biblical references, but each must strain to explain away the other group’s biblical data. How can an Arminian read Romans 8, then tell true believers that they may screw up and go to hell??? Then again, how can Charles Stanley read Hebrews 6 and 10 and tell unbelievers who once professed faith not to worry, that they will be saved??? *Any true biblical teaching must “fit” with ALL the biblical data, without pitting one text against another and without having to explain away a single “jot or tittle” of God’s inerrant Word.* I believe that only the classical Calvinist model takes into account *all* of the biblical data.

Arminians are right when they say the Bible teaches that only those who persevere will be saved, and they’re right in accusing Antinomians of easy-believism and cheap grace. Antinomians (they wouldn’t use the term) are right in telling committed believers that they are secure in Christ and “once saved, always saved.” But both of these views are wrong in assuming that a true believer can lose his faith and fall away from Christ. Faith is “a gift of God—not by works, lest any man boast.” Paul was confident that, since Christ had *begun* a good work in believers, He would *continue* that work until completion (Phil. 1). John said that those who fell away were never really true Christians, since true believers don’t leave the faith (1 John 2:19).



Duccio, Temptation of Christ, 1311

Scripture teaches that believers *must* persevere until the end, but also that believers *will* persevere until the end by God’s grace. As the Westminster Assembly concluded, Christians might temporarily yield to Satan’s temptations, even to excess, but like Peter when he denied Christ three times, God will still restore and preserve the faith of the Christian, a faith which God gave in the first place! Peter went on to be chief among the apostles!



The Westminster Assembly, Convened by Parliament 1643-47

1. You Must Persevere until the End: *God's Requirement of His People*

God does not merely command us to *begin* to believe for a time, and then fall away. He requires us to *continue* to believe until the end, living lives of repentance and covenant faithfulness. Granted, He does not ask for a perfect faith, but He does ask for a real faith, one that produces real, lasting change.

- Colossians 1:21-23
- 1 John 1:5-10; 3:3-6
- Hebrews 10:26-31
- Hebrews 12:1

2. You Will Persevere Until the End: *God's Preservation of His People*

We will *persevere* because God *preserves* us. God will keep us from falling—not one will be lost of all those who belong to the Son. True believers are not able to leave Christ, for Christ is at work within them.

- John 6:38-40
- John 10:28-29
- Romans 8:28-39
- Philippians 1:4-6
- Philippians 2:12-13
- 1 John 2:19

This first set of texts cannot be used to refute the second (Arminianism); nor can the second set of texts be used to refute the first (cheap grace). The point that makes the two compatible is the biblical teaching that faith (while commanded of everyone) is a *gift* from God to His elect. If faith is simply a human action of a free will, then it can be lost. But if saving faith is God's gift, then it *cannot* be lost. Can *professing* Christians fall away? Yes, and they will perish. Can true Christians fall away? No, for they are kept by the invincible power of God in Christ. The Bible teaches us that professing Christians who leave the faith were never truly believers (1 John 2:19; and notice the qualification even in Hebrews 10:39).

“They, whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.”

—Westminster Confession of Faith 17.1

What to do with this Teaching, part 2

Pray, Evangelize & Support Missions

“Prayer prompted by the Holy Spirit is the footfall of the divine decree.”

—C.H. Spurgeon

“Prayer is not designed for the furnishing of God with the knowledge of what we need, but it is designed as a confession to Him of our sense of need.”

—A.W. Pink

“The nature of the divine goodness is not only to open to those who knock, but also to cause them to knock and ask.”

—Augustine

“When God intends a great mercy for His people, the first thing He does is set them a-praying.”

—Matthew Henry

“The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ.”

—Westminster Larger Catechism

Predestination & Evangelism

The mistake of God's people has always been to view election as a privilege rather than a responsibility. God warned Israel about this in Deuteronomy 9:6; “Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people.” Rather, while some were destined to disobedience, we have been chosen so as to “declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light” (1 Pe 2:8-9). We were predestined in order that we tell others about Christ. Predestination requires evangelism. This was the realization William Carey came to, a realization that drove him around the world to India to spread the good news about Jesus Christ. Carey's work became the foundation for the modern missions movement, used by God to save millions.

And the Lord does *command* us to spread the gospel to the whole earth. Obedience is never a bad reason to engage in an activity. The same sovereign God who decreed our salvation also decrees that we should be involved in the process. God has chosen to call out his elect from the nations through the voices of his people. God has not only ordained the end of salvation for his elect. He has also ordained the means by which those elect will be saved.

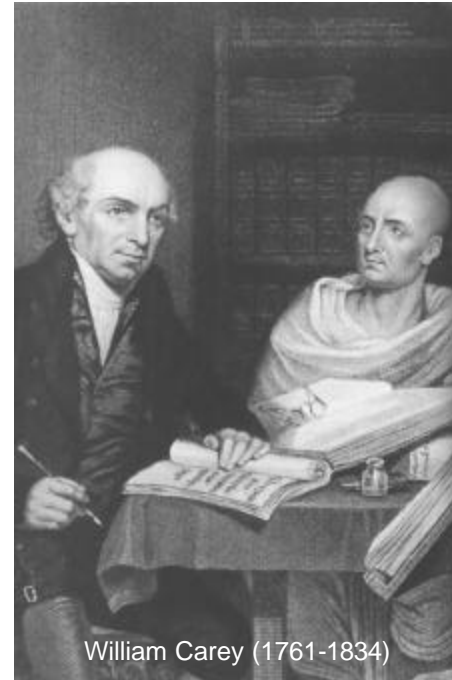
God will not do without evangelism what he has ordained to do through evangelism. We don't want to be foolish and think that God will save the nations without the gospel. Indeed, God tells us explicitly otherwise. In Romans 10:13-15, after discussing predestination for two chapters, Paul tells us that unless we send a missionary, no one will be saved. If we don't send a preacher, no one will preach. And if no one preaches, no one will hear. And if no one hears, no one will believe. And if no one believes, no one will call upon Jesus. And if no one calls upon Jesus (“the Lord”), no one will be saved. We are God's eternally designated instruments of eternal life.

Predestination gives us the confidence to talk about the claims of Christ with other people. Predestination encourages evangelism because we can *know* that the God who sends us into the mission field is the same God who *controls* whatever happens. He is the same God who is able to turn the most sin-hardened heart to faith in an instant! Their stubborn free wills don't matter—God can change them. God could change Paul, the worst enemy of the Christian faith, into the greatest of missionaries in a flash!

And God sovereignly leads us in our evangelism. God could encourage Paul to keep preaching the gospel in Corinth because there were still others appointed to eternal life: “I have many people in this city” (Acts 18:10). Knowing that God is in control and that He can change hearts when we preach the gospel can give us the confidence needed to proclaim Christ with boldness in obedience to the Great Commission (Mt 28:18-20). We have been successful in evangelism when we have communicated the gospel in love and trusted God to do the rest.

We don't have to persuade anybody. We don't need to change anybody's heart. No amount of manipulation will add one soul to the Kingdom of God. We are simply message bearers, and our message is good news to God's elect! The *Holy Spirit* converts people. British evangelist C.H. Spurgeon was known to pray, "I believe in the Holy Spirit" as his foot touched each of the many stairs into the pulpit each week—Spurgeon would preach the truth; God would change the world. God freely offers all men eternal life if they turn from sin to His Son, and he will enable us to spread that message.

In fact, the doctrine of God's sovereignty elevates evangelism to a place of ultimate value. The salvation of human souls is a noble motive for evangelism, but an even higher motive is the glory of God. Souls are not ultimate. God's honor is ultimate. And as we lead other people to join us in worshipping God and honoring him with our lives, God's name is praised upon earth, and all the creatures in the heavenly realms can witness the glory of God on display. There is no higher good than this, and no more powerful motivation for a life committed to evangelism or missions.



Predestination & Prayer

And the same holds true for the life of prayer. God will not do *apart* from prayer what he has ordained to do *through* prayer. Prayer changes things, as James 5:17-18 reminds us. God has given us a central place in carrying out his decrees. Take this as an example:

If God is going to save Sally Elect, he first lays Sally upon the heart of a particularly average believer named Christina—Christina Christian. And God leads Christina to pray for Sally and ask God to give her opportunities to talk about Jesus with Sally. God then leads Christina to ask him to give Sally a heart of flesh, to change her heart and give her new life. God burdens Christina to ask Jesus to save Sally. Christina even secretly fasts one day a week as a prayer of reliance on God to save Sally.

And God leads Christina to ask her friend Bill to pray for Sally too. Bill gets his whole church praying for Sally, because Bill believes that only the Holy Spirit can truly convert Sally. Neither Bill nor Christina try to manipulate Sally, and neither try to hide their own faults—they want God's power displayed in their weakness.

Suddenly God starts bringing Christians into Sally Elect's life. First a new co-worker, and then Christina, and then Bill.

One day, when Christina has five more things to do than she can possibly finish, she remembers she has some library books overdue and runs into Sally in the library parking lot (What a coincidence!). God leads Sally to mention some things have really been rough in her life recently, and Christina asks, "So how have things been between you and God recently?"

A long conversation develops, and after a few weeks of discussions, God pours out his Spirit upon Sally one evening as she's thinking about her discussions with Christina, and Sally commits her life to Jesus Christ.

Sally then joins a Methodist church and learns that it was all about her free will. (Ouch! Sorry—I couldn't help myself!)



C.H. Spurgeon (1834-92)

What to do with this Teaching, part 3

Live by Grace, not by Works

If salvation is all of grace—if God is God and he has chosen us for salvation even though we did nothing to deserve it—then we ought to live by the grace we have received. Of course, some of you will look at that and say to yourselves, “Yeah, I really need to do better at living by grace. I’ve really been a failure there. I hope God will forgive me again.” If that’s you, you still don’t get it. Go back and re-read the last seventeen pages and (if you’re a believer) remember that you’re one of the *elect*!

Our hearts so quickly try to relate to God on a works-basis! It’s our pride, really. I’m convinced that that’s the problem with free-will Arminianism. People naturally process it like this: God requires one work from me, to believe. Once I believe, I’ve done my work and deserve heaven. Of course, in more hard-line Arminian circles, it goes a step further. Unless I’m holy enough, I’ll still go to hell, and maybe I’ve even committed the unpardonable sin and will be damned even if I’m sinlessly perfect from here on out. Legalism. Legalism. Legalism. Such a religion is barely recognizable as Christianity.

But Calvinists can fall into legalism just as easily. You see, I understand predestination. I’m a superior Christian. I’ve got all my theological “t”s crossed and my Reformed “i”s dotted. I sure am close to God. Pride is the Presbyterian’s favorite form of legalism, so watch out! But if God really is for us, and if we had nothing to do with that decision—if even our faith was given to us by the Father—then there’s no room for boasting. God’s sovereign choice of us leaves us free from pride. It leaves us aware of our brokenness and humble before God, but all the while confident that his eternal purpose will stand, that we will glory in God forever as objects of his saving mercy. As God’s eternal blessing really begins to sink from our heads into our hearts, we see a new freedom that we never would have imagined when we first encountered the raw, holy, sovereign power of God. Among the newfound freedoms:



Rembrandt, *Return of The Prodigal Son*, 1669

1. Freedom from shame, guilt & Insecurity

Read Romans 8:28-39. Nothing can separate you from God’s love—nothing in the past, nothing in the future. No one can stand against you. No one can accuse you. Even bad things (“all things”) are working right now to your benefit, to make you more like Jesus. God didn’t choose you because of your faith, and Jesus is not ashamed of you—even at your worst (Hebrews 2:11). He’s proud to have you in the family, proud to call you brother or sister—even knowing what he knows. He’s displaying the glory of his mercy, remember. God’s law is no longer your enemy, but a friend. You can have confidence before God.

2. Freedom from destructive Perfectionism

If God really is for you, then you can quit trying to look good. If you’re trying to be good enough for God, he’s not buying it—he didn’t choose you because of your great faithfulness. If you’re trying to be good enough for other people, don’t bother. God wants to display his mercy—that means we have to be broken. God’s glory is not displayed by trying to look like you have it all together. Faith is not a work, and even if it were it still wouldn’t earn you any brownie points. Let God be God. If you won’t show your weakness, then others won’t see God’s power displayed in it.

3. Freedom from legalistic man-made rules

Some of the biggest practical opponents to living by grace are those legalistic little rules that we live by. We love to judge other with them—they make us look good, and help us feel better about ourselves. (Pride again.) Dress this way, not that way. Wear this much makeup, not that much. Work. Don't work. Home school is God's way. Public school is God's way. Christian school is God's way. Drink. Don't drink. Smoke. Don't smoke. Dance. Don't dance. This is God's worship style. If we're all about God's glory, there's no room for any of this. Do whatever you do for God's glory without comparisons. God has freed you from judging others. You don't understand God' sovereign grace until you realize you are a beggar who's been blessed without cause. You had nothing to do with it—you're just a receiver.

4. Freedom from Penance

Even repentance can be a sham if we're trying to approach God with some vestige of self-reliance. Biblical repentance is a freedom we can enjoy daily, while penance is its counterfeit.

Repentance

Comes with empty hands
Acknowledges real sin as against God
Grieves over displeasing God
Asks for help to do better
Is willing to publicly confess, if needed
Relies on God's promises to us
Turns outward, away from self, to God
Produces freedom, joy, and confidence

Penance

Tries to bargain with God
Makes excuses for sin
Grieves over getting caught
Promises to do better
Is too proud to publicly confess
Relies on own promises to God
Turns inward on self
Produces guilty feelings, anxiety

God has obligated himself to receive any repentant sinner who comes to him. Without this realization, true repentance is impossible. Until we realize that God is for us, we cannot truly be for God.



DISCUSSION

You know you don't understand God's grace when you...

...Live with a vague sense of God's disapproval.

...Feel sheepish bringing your needs before him when you've just failed him.

...Feel you deserve an answer to prayer because of your hard work and sacrifice.

...Think that there is no point in confessing your sin to God since you've already failed him so many times.

...Feel more confident before God when you've been "faithful" with your Christian disciplines (prayer, Bible reading, evangelism)

...Cannot honestly say you see yourself as "blameless" in his eyes.

...Aren't experiencing consistent peace and joy in your Christian life.

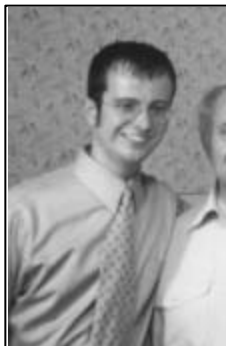
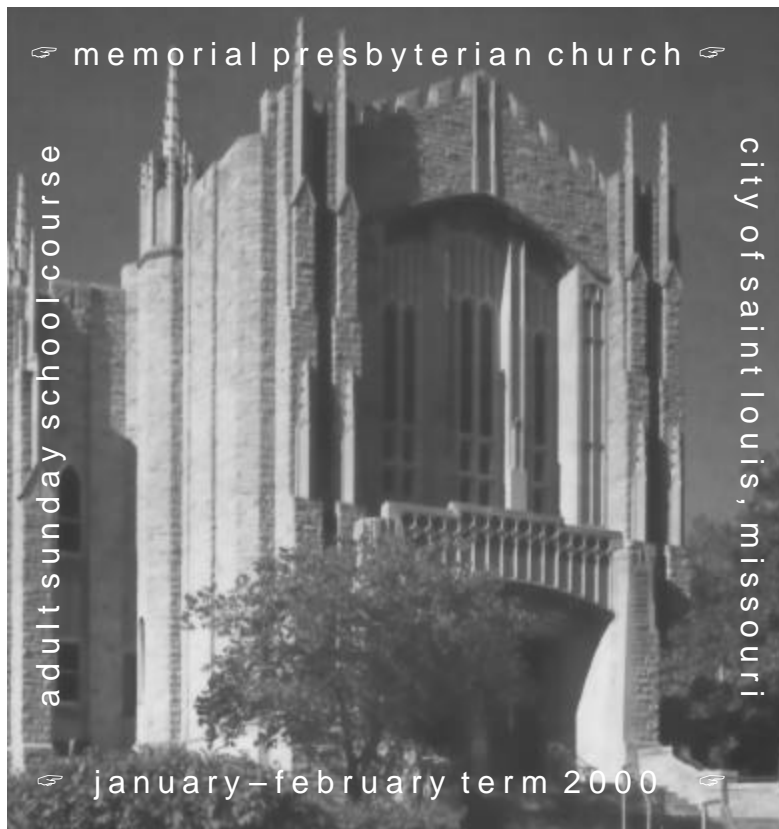
...Don't really believe God likes you.

...Can think of someone you look down on.

...Shy away from asking God for things because you think it annoys him.

...Fear that the day may not go as expected because you missed your quiet time.

(Adapted from a list by Jerry Bridges)



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Greg became a Christian in 1990 through the ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ. He has led Bible studies, taught classes for adults and children, preached in churches of several denominations, and spoken at conferences and retreats. He has taught Theology and Christian Ethics at the Donetsk Regional Theological College in Donetsk, Ukraine. When he's not studying theology, Greg loves old buildings.