

THE HISTORICAL ELECTION – FREE WILL DEBATE:  
REFLECTIONS ON THE CHEMISTRY OF THE CONFLICT

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A chemist sits down at his lab bench, and slowly he pours the contents of one beaker into the contents in a second. With careful observation he notes the reaction and the resulting contents. But this chemist is not content with the simple knowledge that Formula A + Formula B = Reaction C + Resulting Formula D. Rather he scrutinizes the composition of Formulas A and B to determine which elements were actually reactants, and looks for other elements that could have played the part of precipitant, catalyst, etc.

A seminary student sits down at his desk, and slowly he pores over the historical writings of the Election – Free Will Debate. As each author in turn adds his contribution to the mix, this seminarian carefully watches for reactions. Like the chemist he is not content to simply observe the reaction and leave, but he ponders the whole process, wondering about which factors contributed to the outcome and initiated the process in the first place. This being a theological debate, the two opposing doctrinal perspectives might legitimately be considered the main reactants, but were there additional elements that factor into the reaction? Were there any precipitants that initiated the reaction? Were there catalysts that increased the intensity of the reaction? Were there other influencing elements in the mixture?

Historians and theologians alike have examined and rehashed the validity of each side of this doctrinal debate. While appreciating such efforts, this study will instead focus not upon the two doctrinal reactants, but upon the other elements that may have factored into the reaction known as the Election – Free Will Debate. In particular, the goal of this study is to consider non-

doctrinal elements of the debate, with a special interest in attempting to determine such elements that were instrumental in precipitating the debate.

Before investigating for these elements, some definitions must first be established. As will shortly be evident to the reader, my personal comprehension of election is not a totally Calvinistic one. Rather, I subscribe to an understanding of free will that echoes that of Erasmus: “By freedom of the will we understand in this connection the power of the human will whereby man can apply to or turn away from that which leads unto eternal salvation”<sup>1</sup> – although for clarity I would add, “once God has drawn him.” However, placing these personal understandings aside this study chooses to follow the common and historic nomenclature used by Peterson<sup>2</sup> and others which equates “election” to “Calvinistic election.” The expression “free will” has historically had a broad range of meanings, and this study will use the expression within this broad spectrum of meanings, either as the collective whole or specific individual parts being considered.

### General Issues

Christendom is no stranger to conflicts, and this debate no doubt shares factors common to most any theological dispute. The “normal suspects” include simple differences in Biblical interpretation, simple human error, antagonists from without – the “wolves among the flock” (Acts 20:29) – the “vain janglers” (1Tim. 1:6 KJV) within. While there were probably plenty of such factors in this debate, the readings didn’t highlight such problems. However, below are some areas that my reading suggests may have significantly factored into the debate.

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<sup>1</sup> Erasmus, “The Free Will,” in *Discourse on Free Will*, ed. Ernst F. Winter (New York: Continuum, 1999), 20.

<sup>2</sup> Robert A. Peterson, *Election and Free Will: God's Gracious Choice and Our Responsibility* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Pub., 2007).

### Nature of the Biblical Material

One difficulty that factors into the election – free will debate arises from the type of Biblical texts available on the subject, and specifically the improper methodology at times used in handling them. In a sense it is surprising that for all the arguments over election and free will through history, there are no primary texts on the subject. In other words, the Biblical instruction about election and free will actually comes from verses which primarily focus on some other topic.

To illustrate the impact this has, and especially on interpretation methodology, consider a man describing the process of changing an automobile tire. If the purpose of his description is to teach his twelve-year old son the correct way to do the job, then tire-changing is the primary focus and one would rightly expect all significant factors in that process to be adequately covered. However, if the man's description is to explain to his wife why he is so dirty (which was because of his changing a tire), tire-changing per se is not the primary focus. Thus one would not be surprised if the man's story omitted key factors in the changing process if those factors had no bearing on his primary purpose. In similar fashion, a Bible passage making incidental or even secondary reference to election cannot be viewed with the same scrutiny for detail as a passage in which election is the primary purpose. For one thing, the arguments and conclusions based upon silence, like Peterson commonly uses,<sup>3</sup> are unwise and often unfounded when dealing with passages of this nature.

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<sup>3</sup> An example of such an argument may be found in the following: “It is true that the ‘many . . . people’ referred to in Acts 18:10 had not yet believed. But the text says nothing about God’s foreseeing their faith” and Peterson thereby concludes the passage weighs in against a God-foreseen faith (emphasis added; Ibid., 71). While Peterson is right that the verse says nothing on the subject, that silence does not imply the conclusion that he makes from it. The silence simply means that God did not speak to the issue, and that gives no support to either side.

### Changing Convictions

It is the nature of man to change, and that applies to his theology as much as most any other area. Because of either growing spiritual maturity or progressing spiritual blindness, it is not uncommon for a person to change his understanding of particulars in his theology as the years go by.

Some notable players exhibited significant change in their theology during their lives. There is a marked change in tone – suggesting to many a change in theology – in men such as Jerome, and especially Augustin. To what degree did this impact the debate? The degree that this impacted the debate of their day is not known, however it certainly adds to the confusion as both sides of the debate since then claim the same man as a champion of their arguments.

### Human Logic

Another major contributor to the debate is tendency to build certain elements of one's theology upon nothing more than human logic. It is so ironic how writers claim the need to base all of the teachings on election and free will upon *sola scriptura*, and in short time are building their theology on human thinking about the scriptures, but not on the clear, intended truths of the scriptures themselves. Calvin<sup>4</sup> in particular seemed given at times to pursue human logic into the extra-biblical, assuming it theologically sound.

### Situational Context

Proper hermeneutics requires the Bible student to understand the Biblical writers in light of the times and circumstance in which they lived and wrote. Yet these same practices are often forgotten when dealing with other writers. In order to best know the writer's intentions, his writings must be understood in light of his circumstances.

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<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, The Library of Christian Classics, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960).

No major player associated with the election – free will debate wrote in a vacuum. Pelagius took his stance in response to the lax morals of the churchmen in Rome. Augustin’s personal life experiences impacted his perspective, and his dealings with the Pelagian controversy shaped it even further. The reformers were shaped by their conflict with Rome, and others that came after them – such as Arminius and Amyraut – were shaped in response to the reformers. Each of these must be understood within the context of his unique setting. To read the words of any of these removed from their context would likely paint an inaccurate picture of their ideology or their intentions. And yet, it seems all too common for earlier writers to be quoted without due regard for the context in which they wrote, giving the appearance that he said something that was quite different than his original meaning.

Overstating. One type of situational context that deserves specific notice is “overstating.” Sometimes the intensity of one’s circumstances results in his overstating his position, whether intentionally or unintentionally. The ocean wader, noticing the approaching large wave, leans heavily against that wave in order to better endure its impact. Such leaning does not mean the person no longer knows how to stand aright, but rather he is simply bracing himself in preparation for the impacting force he anticipates. The same happens to theologians who anticipate the force of their opposition.

It is my impression that at least a portion of Augustin’s perceived theological shift is due to such circumstantially driven overstating. Some believe Augustin’s later writings show an increasing tendency away from free will. However, the expression “free will” during his later days seems virtually equated with Pelagianism, implying an extreme form of free will that Augustin could not support. Nevertheless, even in those advancing years Augustin did continue to show support – albeit less frequent and less vocal – for some forms of free will. Under the

heading *Free Will Has Its Function in the Heart's Conversion; But Grace Too Has Its*, Augustin begins this discourse by saying,

“Lest, however, it should be thought that men themselves in the matter do nothing by free will, it is said in the Psalm, ‘Harden not your hearts;’ and in Ezekiel himself, ‘Cast away from you all your transgressions, which ye have impiously committed against me; and make you a new heart and a new spirit; and keep all my commandments....’<sup>5</sup>”

Unquestionably in this document written in 426/427 A.D. – about the same time as his retractions in *On the Predestination of the Saints* – Augustin finds room for the exercise of free will in the “heart’s conversion” – a stance which runs counter to Calvin’s theory of irresistible grace. This evidence clearly indicates that as late as three years before his death Augustin had not rejected all aspects of free will. Rather, it seems possible that the nature of the conflict in his advancing years forced him to more loudly proclaim what would defend against the predominant error, and downplay that which might be erroneously understood to show his support of that error.

Agendas and Biases. Sometimes the overstated emphasis is driven by an underlying balanced view, and sometimes it is not. The constant focusing on a limited scope of truth or countering a specific error can cause one to unknowingly develop an agenda or bias. Schaff well notes, “It remains the exclusive prerogative of the inspired apostles to stand above the circumstances of their time, and never, in combating one error, to fall into its opposite.”<sup>6</sup> In this scenario a person is drawn off theological center by an attraction for an error or possibly an overreaction to another error – leaving not just his external arguments but his internal perspective

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<sup>5</sup> Augustin, "On Grace and Free Will," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: A Select Library of the Christian Church (First Series)*, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), v5: 456.

<sup>6</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 6th ed., 8 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), v3: 817.

off balance. I am hesitant to base conclusions on second-hand resources, but Pelagius may have fallen into this trap as he reacted to the vices of the churchmen of his day.

### Communication Difficulties

In my observation, this category accounts for no small degree of confusion within the election – free will debate, and comes in a number of forms.

Cross-Cultural Difficulties. The election-free will debate spans centuries, and documents written long ago may now, removed from their original contexts, imply to the reader something significantly different than what was intended by the original author. The debate also spans a number of languages, and the translation process may misconstrue or hide nuances or add the bias of the translator. For one example, this study found cases where the scriptures used by non-English theologians carried different nuances than the same passage implies in English.

Ambiguity. Even when using the same language among contemporaries, a word or expression may not convey the same connotations to speaker and hearer alike. One such case is the expression “free will.” As stated earlier, to me the expression has always meant the ability to freely accept or reject the offer of salvation once a person has been drawn by God. Others, however, have differing concepts of free will, with some Pelagians going so far as to think that man is free to seek God and find Him of his own initiative – a concept that is totally foreign to this student’s understanding of the term. So, in some instance people are saying the same words, and mean very different things.

Lack of Helpful Distinctions. There is a confusing lack of adequate distinctions in the writings on this debate, and specifically many of those discussing the topic of free will. Consider the position of Pelagius seeing the vice of the Roman churchmen. (Again, I speak as one who has not read Pelagius’ original writings, but presume the correctness of other sources.) In his

decrying their need to choose what they knew to be righteous, he addressed those he had reason to assume were already saved. Yet it seems that his words were taken to apply to the broader context of all people, and this confusion in subjects changed an arguably correct statement to one that is incorrect. The readings have shown that many of the statements written throughout the debate are stated as general principle, and often without the author specifying the specific group he focused upon (e.g., the lost, the saved, all elect, all people). The resulting confusions throw more fuel on the fire of debate.

Another area where adequate distinctions are lacking or not appropriately honored is the differentiating between the various types of election. Not all election is identical, yet many authors readily transfer thoughts and concepts from one type of election to another – even when there is no Biblical evidence to support that kind of transfer. One must question if there is valid reason for assuming that Theocratic Election (i.e., election where “Israel was chosen by God to be His people”<sup>7</sup>) speaks to Soteric (salvation) Election. Or do the principles of Messianic Election force conclusions upon Soteric Election? Since one would be wrong to force the understood need for salvation from Soteric Election into Messianic Election, it seems equally unwise to transfer concepts in the other direction – or between any forms of election – without Biblical justification.

Forced Implications. Sometimes unwarranted implications are forced upon words. While a fuller discussion belongs in the doctrinal study of the debate, it should at least be noted that it is my studied conclusion that some with Calvinistic leanings have forced Biblically

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<sup>7</sup> Ronald V. Mitchell, "Theology 1 Class Notes," *A Life of Lessons: The Complete Collection of Course Notes by Dr. Ronald V. Mitchell* (2008), 120. This study follows the designations used by Mitchell, differentiating between the following three types of election: Theocratic Election, Messianic Election and Soteric Election.

unintended concepts into such terms as election, foreknowledge, God's will.<sup>8</sup> Exegetical studies indicate that these concepts are not inherent to the terms, nor implied by their contexts.

Inaccurate Terminology. Another contributing factor in the confusion is inaccurate terminology. For example, while it is common parlance to equate "election" with Calvinism, this is actually a misnomer for there are perspectives on election other than Calvinism. Even the implication that the debate is "Election versus Free Will" is technically inaccurate, for it pits elements from separate planes against one another – like debating Ford pickups versus four-barrel carburetors. Furthermore, the description presupposes a Calvinistic perspective as the starting point from which all must argue, for other perspectives do not require election and free will be opposing issues. This biased perspective has influenced many who believe in free will to assume all election is unbiblical, leaving them in doubt about how to handle Biblical passages about election. "Do you walk to school or carry your lunch?" may be funny when watching the bewildered children's look while interviewed by a television clown, but the confusion that comes from the built-in bias of a misstated theological question is not a laughing matter.

It is beyond my ability to change the vernacular in this debate label, but "Calvinistic Election versus Free Will" would be a distinct improvement in terminology. I would argue that the more technically correct label would be "Irresistible Grace (or other sub-category under Calvinistic Election) versus Free Will."

#### A Priori & Extra-Biblical Ideologies

One major contributing factor to the debate was observed numerous times through the reading for this study. It is, quite possibly, the single biggest factor in the controversy. This

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<sup>8</sup> A companion paper to this study, focusing on doctrinal issues in the Election – Free Will Debate, considers these and other word meanings and usage in detail: Don Burke, "Toward a Systematic and Exegetical Examination of Election and Free Will," (Potosi, MO: 2009).

factor is a priori and extra-biblical ideologies. Some may consider some items in this category to belong to the doctrinal realm, which is beyond the specific scope of this study. However, if these items are extra-biblical, as I deem them to be, then they are not considered doctrinal, per se, and rightly deserve inclusion in this study.

A priori concepts are not necessarily wrong. For example, from previous study the Bible exegete can know that God is holy, and any new verse he studies will not contradict that truth. He can thus legitimately probe the meaning of a new passage with the concept of God's holiness influencing his understanding. Such a priori theology, when based upon the intended message of one scripture, might legitimately be used in considering another scripture.

However, a problem can arise when the a priori theology is based upon (1) a truth in a limited setting that is stretched further than scripturally intended, or (2) a concept that is gained from human logic, observation or assumption apart from scripture. Adapting from what my hermeneutics professor once said, until one is willing to release his most cherished beliefs in the event that he finds they are either in conflict with or unsupported by scripture, he is not yet ready to be a good student of the scriptures. Thus, in order to properly exegete the Biblical teachings on election, one must note his a priori concepts and be willing to dismiss any that are in conflict with scripture or are not founded upon the intended message of scripture. Without such scrutiny, a priori concepts can have the effect of Oz-like emerald-colored glasses – conforming all one sees to the hues of his false conceptions.

### God's Sovereignty

Heading the list of a priori ideologies is the misconception that God's sovereignty inherently rules out any form of free will. Granted, sovereignty does legitimately rule out free will as held by some with more extreme views (e.g., Pelagians), for man's freedom does not

extend to the point that his self-initiated actions bind God's actions – God's sovereignty disallows such an extreme interpretation. However, the Calvinists' overreaction to Pelagianism has made them guilty of putting identical limitations on God as the Pelagians, for they disallow God the sovereignty to initiate a course of action that allows man's free choice to influence the outcome. Nothing in this study – either a Biblical hint or a legitimate extra-biblical argument – has given the first pause that God's sovereignty disallows such freedom of man. God's sovereignty is not the champion of Calvinistic election, in the whole or in any of its individual aspects.

### Foreknowledge

A second a priori ideology that plagues this debate is the assumption that God's foreknowledge<sup>9</sup> in eternity implies that what He knows will happen, must happen – i.e., that man is not free to choose because he is bound by what God foreknows. As Luther words it, "If God be not deceived in that which he foreknows, then that which He foreknows must of necessity come to pass."<sup>10</sup> While the logic behind this is momentarily intriguing, this study concludes that it is only a façade of faulty reasoning which is easily refuted.

The argument says: If God foreknows my salvation from eternity, then my salvation is a given and there is nothing I can do to alter that (thus, no free will, but rather irresistible grace). Now instead of salvation, consider other "decisions" that are normally believed to be one's choice. We choose our spouse, the vehicle we drive, the house we live in, and even the shirt that we put on this morning. But which of these choices did God not have knowledge of since before

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<sup>9</sup> The comments that follow require that "foreknowledge" be defined. This study understands foreknowledge as simple prescience, or literally "to know before," not the Calvinistic "fore-loved." For the linguistic and contextual study behind this conclusion see *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther, "Bondage of the Will," in *Discourse on Free Will*, ed. Ernst F. Winter (New York: Continuum, 1999), 131.

creation – that is, (by definition) have foreknowledge of? Did God’s foreknowledge that I would wear a green shirt this morning remove my ability to freely choose between it and others? Or rather is God’s foreknowledge simply a mirror reflecting back that which I freely choose from available options – equally applicable to my choosing my shirt and my salvation?

Origen concurs with this conclusion:

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.<sup>11</sup>

### The Will of God

Two items must be discussed concerning concepts about the will of God. The first is the clear indication in many Calvinists’ writings that the will of God is the Calvinistic sun around which all the rest of their theological solar system revolves. Calvin himself wrote, “To sum up, since God’s will is said to be the cause of all things, I have made his providence the determinative principle for all human plans and works. . .”<sup>12</sup> (emphasis added), which carries numerous ramifications in the election – free will discussion. But one must ask what scripture proclaims that God’s will is the cause of all things, and what warrants it being the single cornerstone of one’s theology? The doctrinal companion to this study looked extensively at Biblical references to “will” (including God’s will) and found no Biblical basis for such a dogmatic and determinative understanding of the will of God.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Origen, "Origen De Celsus," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers. Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 440.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin, v1: 232.

<sup>13</sup> Burke.

A second problem relative to the understanding and implications of God's will was also observed. It seems Calvinists have created an artificial dilemma and from that have been required to address it with an artificial solution. Insisting that in His sovereignty God's will will always be done, they are then faced with explaining situations when His will is not done. Their solution is the "hidden will of God" to be distinguished from His revealed will. (I admit that I do not thoroughly understand all that this concept, but I have found no Biblical basis for it.) This "hidden will" is believed to bear upon Soteric Election. But even the Reformed Schaff writes that this distinction "...between the revealed will of God, which offers salvation to all, and the concealed or hidden will, which means to save only some . . . puts a contradiction in God, which is impossible and intolerable."<sup>14</sup>

### God's Glory

The writings of Calvin and some Calvinists show a hypersensitivity toward God's glory and a fear of robbing God of that glory. No one in my readings has expressed this as dramatically as Piper who even includes the following phrase in a section title within his book, "The Chief End of God is to Glorify God. . . ."<sup>15</sup> He later notes, "The biblical assumption of the justice of hell is a clear testimony to the infiniteness of the sin of failing to glorify God. . . . Therefore, the weight of infinite guilt rests on every human head because of our failure to cherish the glory of God."<sup>16</sup>

While I question the hypersensitivity in itself, Calvin compounds the problem when he equates free will to robbery: "The doctrine of free will is always in danger of robbing God of his

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<sup>14</sup> Schaff, v7: 431.

<sup>15</sup> John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! : The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 21.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

honor.”<sup>17</sup> I make some allowance here, assuming Calvin envisions a Pelagian type of free will, but that hardly warrants discounting all concepts of free will because of the error of the extremists. But to these guardians of God’s glory I ask: What of God’s glory is lost in allowing man the freedom to accept or reject the gift of salvation? Does the recipient of a gift ascribe to himself glory solely because he has accepted the gift? Do bystanders diminish their praise of the giver and laud the recipient because he has freely accepted the gift? The free acceptance of God’s gift of salvation does not diminish God’s glory in the least. Indicating that all free will perspectives remove the glory due only to God had added unnecessary confusion to the debate.

### Faith is a Gift

Throughout scripture faith and its functional equivalents, believing and trust, are lauded in commands and in the examples of the Godly great. Some Calvinists claim that faith is a gift, which precludes free will. But how does the former necessitate the latter? The opportunity to believe may be a gift, but opportunity to believe is not equivalent to exercising that acting of believing. Believing, trusting, and having faith seem to carry inherent tones of actions from within a person, and not something passively received or leveraged from without. The occasion to believe, and probably even the ability to believe, are accepted in this study as gifts from God. But occasion and ability do not in themselves a believer make. Rather, one has to actively, personally – and I would added freely – choose to believe (trust) in order to actually be a true believer, and thus become saved. As Chrysostom said, “What then? Does nothing depend on God? All indeed depends on God, but not so that our free-will is hindered.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Calvin, v1: 267.

<sup>18</sup> Chrysostom, "Homilies on Hebrews," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: A Select Library of the Christian Church (First Series)*, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), v14: 425.

### People Issues

The background of pertinent individuals also figured prominently in the readings. Much of the personal history was superficial and provided no significant insight into the person and heart behind the actions. Due to this limited information as well as limited space, this study will examine factors within three key people – factors that possibly factor into the history of the election – free will debate.

#### John Calvin

Calvin (1509-1564 AD) is such a pivotal player in this debate that a couple of observations are worthy of mention. Calvin's exalting of God's will was mentioned earlier, but the underlying basis for that thinking was not discussed. Schaff may speak to that cause, implicating Luther along with Calvin:

Both [Luther and Calvin] gave undue prominence to their favorite dogma [predestination], in opposition to Romanism, which weakened the power of divine grace, magnified human merit, and denied the personal certainty of salvation. They wished to destroy all basis for human pride and boasting . . . and to lay a firm foundation for humility, gratitude, and comfort."<sup>19</sup>

According to Schaff, Calvin proceeded from an out-of-balance perspective, if not an agenda, driven by his desire to counter Romanistic error.

A second question arose about Calvin – a question worthy of pondering, but one that has to date gone unanswered. As one stirred in soul to be instrumental in the reformation of the church – which was an effort to bring the church back to its former ways – exactly what pattern did Calvin have in his mind to re-form the church to? No doubt he argued for bringing the church back to Biblical standards, but what did “Biblical standards” default to in his eyes.

*Institutes* makes it clear that Calvin did not follow Augustin blindly, but it is just as clear that he

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<sup>19</sup> Schaff, v8: 546.

put great stock in what the older churchman wrote. Is it possible that Calvin defaulted to accepting Augustinian theology except where conflicts with Biblical teachings were identified? Certainly such an approach is feasible in light of Calvin's admiration for Augustin. And such an approach would introduce error in any area where Calvin failed to notice Augustin's flawed theology. But as mentioned, this is only a question presented to ponder, for the answer has not been ascertained in this study.

### Augustin

Augustin (Aurelius Augustinus, 354-430 AD) was considerably remote from Calvinism, per se, but his mark on the (Calvinistic) election – free will debate is undeniable. In fact, because of the impact upon his own time combined with the impact that his works had on Calvin, this study concludes that he is the single most pivotal person in the history of the debate.

One can hardly read Augustin's *Confessions* and not be struck with the regular references to both his shame and struggle, especially concerning sexual issues. He was not the only prominent churchman to struggle with such temptations. Jerome "was tormented by carnal temptations."<sup>20</sup> Origen so despised such ongoing temptation that he underwent "self-emasculatation," although he did later come to repent of this action.<sup>21</sup> So while accepting that Augustin was not the only person to struggle in this area, it is very clear that it was a major issue in his life.

Sin can be enslaving, even skewing one's perspective. Here I feel Augustin might well be placed. His early life story is of one that was constantly driven by sexual appetites, and "addiction" is probably not too strong a word – what Schaff calls a "bitter experience of its

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., v7: 535.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., v2: 788.

tyranny.”<sup>22</sup> The guilt of his sin would have been removed at this salvation, but that does not necessarily mean that the consequential enslavement of that sin was immediately removed. To any remnants of this enslavement was later added the two errors that likely reactualized or amplified the problem: (1) leaving his wife for the celibate life of the monk (and thus removing his legitimate release of sexual tensions), and (2) accepting the false doctrine that denies human sexuality to a valid gift of God in its own right, considering normal sexual response to be “the rebellious motion of the flesh.”<sup>23</sup>

So by first the sin of improper indulgence, and then the sins of undue abandoning of the marriage bed and despising God-given sexuality,<sup>24</sup> it is not surprising that his writings should reflect an extensive struggle with sexual temptation. Augustin has hereby placed himself as an easy target for Satan’s constant temptation, resulting in the fight for self-control of which Paul forewarned (1 Cor 7:5). He must deal with failure upon failure to rid himself of temptation – if not failure to avoid the sin itself – no matter how hard he wills and works. In short, he has set himself up for a battle that his will is unable to win. And I must therefore wonder if that (unknowingly) self-positioned failure of will skewed his theology of free will. Bettenson’s statement that “Augustine’s doctrine of grace and predestination . . . springs . . . from his

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., v3: 828.

<sup>23</sup> Augustin, "On Forgiveness of Sins, and Baptism," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: A Select Library of the Christian Church (First Series)*, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), v5: 59.

<sup>24</sup> Such disgust and the aforementioned sexual addictions are listed by Allender as signs of sexual abuse. (Dan B. Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, Rev. ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1995), 163.) Were Augustin a victim of such abuse, it might give additional insight into his perspective in questioning the ability of man to overcome his sin by his own will. However, it could also be argued that since Augustin was so free in relating the darker events of his life, it is likely that had he been a victim of abuse he would have shared that as well. It therefore seems best to acknowledge the possibility, but draw no conclusions on the matter.

personal experience of conversion, and from his sense of his own helplessness and dependence on God,”<sup>25</sup> certainly dovetails with this hypothesis.

Augustin also exhibits an overwhelming sense of shame in other areas – far more than I suspect might be normal for a man years-forgiven of those sins. Granted, the Apostle Paul does write, “Wretched man that I am,” and elsewhere calls himself “the chiefest of sinners,” but he acknowledges the shameful behavior and moves on as a forgiven man – Augustin does not seem to share that feeling. Even more telling to me than the remorse for the sexuality he despised was the sense of continued shame for the stolen pears. I’m left to wonder if Augustin may have suffered from scrupulosity, defined as “[t]he habit of imagining sin where none exists, or grave sin where the matter is venial.”<sup>26</sup> Wikipedia notes, “Scrupulosity is obsessive concern with one’s personal sins, including “sinful” acts or thoughts usually considered minor or trivial within their religious tradition. The term is derived from the Latin *scrupulus*, a sharp stone, implying a stabbing pain on the conscience.”<sup>27</sup> Certainly this fits the description that Augustin paints of himself in *Confessions*.

### Pelagius

None of Pelagius’ own writings were a part of the reading for this study, so I am reluctant to evaluate the man on someone else’s comments. However, Schaff – who appears to be quite fair in his history and evaluations – does provide this quote from Pelagius:

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<sup>25</sup> Henry Scowcroft Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2d ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 57.

<sup>26</sup> Trinity Communications, "Scrupulosity," [www.catholicreference.net](http://www.catholicreference.net), <http://www.catholicreference.net/index.cfm> (accessed April 16, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Wikipedia, "Scrupulosity," [en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scrupulosity), <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scrupulosity> (accessed April 16, 2009).

As often as I have to speak concerning moral improvement and the leading of a holy life, I am accustomed first to set forth the power and quality of human nature, and to show what it can accomplish. For never are we able to enter upon the path of the virtues, unless home, as companion, draws us to them. For every longing after anything dies within us, so soon as we despair of attaining that thing.<sup>28</sup>

If we are so bold as to venture that the whole picture of this man is adequately represented in such a small quote, we see a man emphasizing the pragmatic, focusing upon man's ability to accomplish in order to prevent the undermining of hope. "Without hope man assumes he can not, and so he will not," it appears Pelagius is reasoning. But without the broader context it is impossible to ascertain Pelagius' assumptions in his statement. Does he presume the absence or presence of God's help? He doesn't say, and we would be foolish to speculate without additional evidence.

Schaff describes Pelagius as being rigid and legalistic, noting that as a simple monk, ". . . [Pelagius'] morality was not so much the rich, deep life of faith, as it was the external legalism, the ascetic self-discipline and self-righteousness of monkery. . . . Faith, with him, was hardly more than a theoretical belief; the main thing in religion was moral action, the keeping of the commandments of God by one's own strength."<sup>29</sup> As will be shown, all of these come to bear upon the genesis and evolution of the debate.

### Reconstructing the Reactions

Having considered various factors that played into the election – free will debate, I am particularly curious to know "why?" Why did the debate arise? To determine this, we have to consider the flow of events in the debate, looking for precipitating elements.

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<sup>28</sup> Pelagius, as cited by Schaff: Schaff, v3: 791.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

When did the debate begin? Origen (c.185-254) was the earliest of the church fathers found to speak on the issue, and he held to free will.<sup>30</sup> (There is some evidence that suggests Origen may have been predated in his thinking by Heraclas.<sup>31</sup>) Schaff notes that “The Greek fathers, and Tertullian, Ambrose, Jerome, and Pelagius, had only taught a conditional predestination, which they made dependent on the foreknowledge of the free acts of men.”<sup>32</sup> In Peterson’s brief recounting of the debate’s history<sup>33</sup> he lists the church fathers through the third and fourth century as supporting free will. His first mention of an opposing view was the Augustin – Pelagius dispute, and this study found nothing to suggest the debate predates that point.

Accepting that the debate did begin at that point, we now attempt to reconstruct the events of that period – a process that is made from known events supplemented by a degree of speculation. As just cited, prior to this time churchmen held to “...a conditional predestination, which they made dependent on the foreknowledge of the free acts of men.”<sup>34</sup> It seems that Pelagius and Augustin functionally split that doctrine in two, with Pelagius emphasizing free will and Augustin countering by discrediting the “man” portion (free will) and emphasizing the “God” portion (predestination). Schaff confirms the latter: “[I]n his zeal against the Pelagian

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<sup>30</sup> Origen, "Origen De Principiis," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers. Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 305.

<sup>31</sup> Gennadius, "Chapter XXXIV," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: A Select Library of the Christian Church. (Second Series)*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), v6: 392.

<sup>32</sup> Schaff, v3: 852.

<sup>33</sup> Peterson, 16-17.

<sup>34</sup> Schaff, v3: 852.

error [Augustin] has inclined to the opposite extreme. . . .”<sup>35</sup> In doing so, both men appear to have begun new theologies – Pelagius developing an extreme form of the free will which tremendously varied from the doctrines of the earliest fathers, and Augustin heading into uncharted territory. “In reference to predestination, the fathers before Augustine were entirely at variance with him. . . . Augustine’s doctrine of predestination was opposed to the opinions of the fathers and the sense of the church. . . .”<sup>36</sup>

If allowed some room for speculation, I could see the earliest events of the debate developing like this: After a youth given to various and enslaving vices (as per his *Confessions*), Augustin is saved 386 AD. Still suffering from an overly sensitive spirit – possibly the result of continued battles with sexual temptations or even scrupulosity – he writes his *Confessions* 397 AD. Eight years later (405 AD) Pelagius arrives at Rome, decries the moral condition of the Roman churchmen and citizenry, and demands the people exercise their free will and self-discipline, and thereby overcome their vice. This vice he mistakenly connects to Augustin’s teachings: “Pelagius heard Christians in Rome approvingly repeating the prayer from Augustine’s *Confessions*: ‘Grant what you command, and command what you will.’ Pelagius . . . concluded that Augustine’s view of grace led inevitably to sin. He opposed it out of a concern for proper Christian ethics.”<sup>37</sup>

It is possible Augustin, for years plagued with the inability to exercise some of the same vice within himself, identifies with the struggles of the churchmen and thus finds himself at variance with Pelagius. He also possibly heard that Pelagius blamed the condition of the people

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., v3: 789.

<sup>36</sup> G. F. Wiggers as cited by Schaff: Ibid., v3: 852.

<sup>37</sup> Peterson, 18-19.

of Rome on his teachings. Either way, the further that Pelagius pushes in his extreme view of free will, the stronger Augustin counters with the God-side of predestination. As concluded earlier, Augustin does not remove all forms of free will from his theology. However, he does par it down and is less vocal about the elements of free will he retains while emphasizing the sovereignty of God more and more. Thus, I speculate, the debate began.

If this theory is correct, the precipitating element in the election – free will debate is found in the combination of these items:

1. The hypersensitive guilt of Augustin;
2. The misuse of Augustin’s prayer by those bent on pursuing their vices;
3. The rigid and legalistic approach of Pelagius; and
4. The undue splitting of the early doctrine (conditional predestination and God’s foreknowledge of man’s free will) into the two opposite extremes of (a) man’s free will in isolation of God’s help, and (b) God’s work in isolation of man’s free will.

While not in itself a precipitating factor at this stage, Augustin’s unbalanced presentation of his own theology – emphasizing the God side to counter the Pelagian error of the day, but de-emphasizing the extent of the portion of the man side (free will) that he still believed in – would arguably be a precipitant for a later flare-up of the debate.

One must wonder if, without these precipitating elements, the debate would have developed at all.

History recounts that the Pelagian Controversy and then the Semi-Pelagian Controversy soon followed. The whole issue was largely settled by the Synod of Orange (529 AD) which condemned Semi-Pelagianism, but did so without fully accepting Augustinian theology. According to Peterson, “What emerged at Orange, then, was something new – neither

Augustinianism nor Pelagianism, nor even semi-Pelagianism, but what has properly been called ‘semi-Augustinianism.’ This is a synergism in which God initiates grace, but people must cooperate via free will.”<sup>38</sup> With due respect to Peterson, instead of something new, this description is virtually identical to the theology of the church fathers prior to Augustin. It would seem Orange simply confirmed the basic historical understanding of election as conditional.

As far as this study discovered, the debate appears to have remained virtually dormant for a millennium. Peterson does mention Thomas Aquinas and others medieval theologians that held to Augustinian theology,<sup>39</sup> but these appear to be relatively isolated, and no debates are noted.

As mentioned, Augustin’s theology might have itself been the precipitant of the second phase of reaction as the Reformation began. James Nichols, who arguably sides with Arminian views, states, “Whether influenced by former prepossessions in its favour, or because it appeared to them better adapted for confuting the dogmas of the Romish Church, and establishing those of the Reformation, Luther and the principal Reformers had hastily embraced the hypothesis of St. Augustine.”<sup>40</sup> Even the Reformed Schaff collaborates at least on the point that “[a]ll the Reformers were originally Augustinians. . . .”<sup>41</sup>

In some senses, this new reaction mimics the older one: One element of the historical conditional election is emphasized to the exclusion or near exclusion of other elements (free will by the earlier Pelagius, and later the Roman church which similarly “weakened the power of

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>40</sup> James Nichols, ed., *The Works of James Arminius*, London Edition ed., 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker; reprint, 1996), v1: xxxiii.

<sup>41</sup> Schaff, v7: p431.

divine grace, magnified human merit”<sup>42</sup>). Churchmen disagreeing with the unbalanced view reacted by over-emphasizing the opposite and balancing element (i.e., God’s sovereignty by both Augustin and the Reformers (including Calvin)). But unlike the earlier flare-up, this reaction was not to be put to rest in time. Rather, various elements and forms of the debate were to be woven into the very fiber of the numerous churches which sprang from the Reformers’ preaching and the churches that followed them.

### Conclusion

In reviewing the findings of this study, it appears that its goals have been accomplished. While not exhaustive, a list of non-doctrinal contributing factors in the election – free will debate have been identified and discussed. Based upon available evidence a plausible beginning of the debate has been determined and the non-doctrinal factors precipitating that genesis considered. Many, especially among my Calvinist brothers and friends, will not draw the same conclusions, but to the best of my ability I have attempted to honestly evaluate the evidence.

This study concludes that conditional election based upon God’s foreknowledge of man’s free act of accepting His offer of salvation is the historic perspective dating back to the earliest available writings on the subject. (Additionally, the companion study<sup>43</sup> concludes that this is in fact the doctrine of the scriptures.) The troubles have come when this doctrine is divided, with unbalanced emphasis placed upon either of its parts – or to use the Biblical expression, when one turns from the (whole) truth to either the right hand or the left.

I suppose that it is too much to hope for that an understanding of the history of the debate and its problems will be an aid to address and correct the errors and thereby to help repair the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., v8: 546.

<sup>43</sup> Burke.

doctrinal rift among brethren. But such a change is not likely to come so easily. Concerning such changes Schaff notes, “A [theological] system can only be overthrown by a system. It requires a theological genius of the order of Augustin and Calvin . . . [who] shall lead us to a system built upon the rock of the historic Christ, and inspired from beginning to end with the love of God to all mankind.”<sup>44</sup> I regret that I am no such theological genius. But maybe there is no need to engineer such a new system, for the system of the earliest church fathers does appear to be built upon the rock of the historic Christ, and is inspired throughout with God’s love to all mankind: “For God so loved the world that His only begotten Son He gave in order than anyone believing in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life.” (John 3:16, emphasis added).

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<sup>44</sup> Schaff, v8: p544.

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