Salvation, the Gospel, and Free Will

Introduction

Few questions have shaped Christian theology more deeply than how God's saving grace relates to human freedom. Scripture clearly proclaims that salvation is entirely the work of God, accomplished through his Son, Jesus Christ, and received by grace through faith. At the same time, the biblical witness repeatedly calls people to repent, believe, persevere, and respond to the gospel in ways that assume genuine human agency. Throughout Church history, faithful Christians have refused to choose to hold these truths together without diminishing either God's sovereignty or the meaningfulness of human responsibility.

This paper seeks to articulate how Legacy Church understands salvation, the gospel, and free will within that historic conversation. By examining the testimony of the early church, the developments of the Reformation, and the range of mainstream contemporary Christianity, we aim to present a biblically grounded and historically aware position that affirms both God's initiating grace and the real call for every person to respond to faith. Our goal is not to resolve every mystery but to clarify the theological convictions that shape our teaching, preaching, and pastoral practice as we proclaim the good news of Christ.

The Early Church on Salvation

The earliest Christians proclaimed salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The Apostolic Fathers emphasized both God's gracious initiative and human responsibility to respond.

Polycarp (ca.69–155)

Set under the Apostle John and taught that salvation is grounded in God's mercy rather than human righteousness, which commonly allowing believers to live in obedience as the proper response to God's favor (*Philippians* 1-3).

Irenaeus (c. 130–200 AD)

Taught that salvation originates entirely in Christ's grace and not in human self-effort, while insisting that grace calls forth a willing and faithful response (*Against Heresies*).

The Pelagian Controversy and Augustine

Pelagius (c. 360–418 AD) taught that human powers the inherent ability to achieve moral perfection independently of grace. Augustine of Hippo (354–430 AD) responded by articulating strong doctrines of original sin, the necessity of prevenient and effectual grace, and unconditional election. While Augustine affirmed human responsibility to salvation, he views on repentance were complex and later developed more fully by subsequent theologians.

However, Augustine's extreme views were not universally accepted. John Cassian (c. 360–435 AD) sought to strengthen that human will cooperates with divine grace. Vincent of Lerins (d. c. 445 AD) and Jerome believed Augustine's doctrine denied human responsibility. What later came to be labeled "Semi-Pelagianism" reflected earlier pastoral emphasis on cooperation with grace that predated both Pelagius and Augustine.

The earliest Christian writers spoke of salvation as wholly grounded in God's gracious initiative, yet received through a genuine human response of faith and obedience, reflecting a broadly synergistic understanding without the later technical frameworks of monergism or determinism.

The Reformers and Salvation

Martin Luther (1483–1546)

Recovered justification by faith alone (sola fide), emphasizing that righteousness is received by faith in Christ, not achieved through works.

John Calvin (1509–1564)

Articulated a comprehensive theology of **divine sovereignty** and **predestination** within the Reformed tradition, emphasizing God's eternal decree as the ultimate ground of salvation. While Calvin strongly affirmed unconditional election and the necessity of divine grace, his teachings were later systematized and sharpened by subsequent Reformed theologians. In the early seventeenth century, these doctrines were formally codified in response to attentions objections at the Synod of Dort (1618–1619), resulting in what became known as the Five Points of Calvinism (TULIP).

In this framework, God's sovereign will is understood to decisively determine the salvation of the elect, a view often described as theological **determinism**.

Luke H. Mallory (c.g.) stated

His view of divine sovereignty rightly exalts God's, and affirms God's unconditional election, a doctrine well-known by Calvinists, which sought to reconcile God's exhaustive sovereignty with genuine human freedom through the concept of **middle knowledge**. *Middle knowledge refers to God's perfect knowledge of what any free creature would choose in any possible set of circumstances. By this knowledge, God sovereignly orders history by actualizing a world in which the purposes are accomplished through free human decisions rather than by coercion. While Arminianism addressed the biblical and theological concerns of salvation, Molinism provided a framework for understanding how God can providentially govern all things without negating human responsibility. Together, these views reject theological determinism while affirming God's foreknowledge, providence, and the real responsibility of human response to grace.*

Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609)

He emerged within the Reformed tradition as a critic of strict Calvinist predestination, arguing that Scripture presents God's sovereign grace as genuinely resistible and effective in all. Arminius affirmed total depravedness as grace for salvation while maintaining that election is conditional upon foreseen faith rather than an unconditional decree. After his death, his followers articulated three controversies in the *Five Articles of Remonstrance* (1610), emphasizing unconditional election, universal atonement, resistible grace, and the necessity of preserving faith.

Mainstream Christianity Today

In contemporary Christianity, views on salvation, grace, and divine sovereignty generally fall into several broad theological streams, often influenced along denominational lines. **Reformed and Presbyterian traditions** (such as the PCA, OPC, and many churches within the conservative Reformed conference) typically affirm some form of Calvinism, emphasizing unconditional election and God's determining sovereignty in salvation. **Methodist, Wesleyan, Free Will Baptist, Church of the Nazarene, and many Holiness traditions** (and briefly within the Arminian tradition, affirming universal atonement, resistible grace, and conditional election.

Many Baptist and evangelical churches hold a range of views, including classical Arminianism, modified Calvinism, Molinism, and a blended position that varies across congregations. **Roman Catholic theology**, shaped by Augustine and later clarified at the Council of Trent, affirms the necessity of grace for salvation while teaching a synergistic model in which human cooperation with grace plays a role in receiving both Justification and Protestant sola fide. **Eastern Orthodox Christianity** likewise emphasizes synergy, viewing salvation as participation in the life of God through grace and human cooperation rather than a formal justification decree. Across these traditions, significant differences remain regarding the mechanics of salvation, yet all historic branches of Christianity affirm that salvation is ultimately rooted in God's grace and accomplished through Jesus Christ.

Legacy Church: An Arminian Position with a Molinist Touch

The Arminian Position of Legacy Church

Legacy Church holds a gracious Arminian understanding of salvation. Some of our elders couple this with a Molinist account of God's knowledge and providence (more on this in the following section). Together, these convictions seek to uphold the full witness of Scripture by affirming both God's absolute sovereignty and the genuine responsibility of human beings, without collapsing one into the other.

Our Arminian Convictions

Legacy Church affirms the following core Arminian commitments:

Humanity is Fallen and in Need of Grace

All people are born in sin and are incapable of saving themselves apart from God's gracious initiative (Romans 3:23, Ephesians 2:1–3). Salvation is never earned, but always a gift received by human effort.

God Desires the Salvation of All People

Scripture teaches that God desires all people to be saved and has made salvation available to all through Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9, John 3:16).

Christ Died for All

The atoning work of Christ is sufficient for all and offered to all. Jesus's death was not limited in scope but universally provided, though only effective for those who believe (1 John 2:2, Hebrews 2:9).

Grace Enables, But Does Not Coerce

God's grace precedes, accompanies, and enables faith, yet it does not override or negate human response. The call to repent and believe is a genuine invitation, not a predetermined inevitability (Acts 17:30, Matthew 23:37).

Faith is the Condition of Salvation

Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Faith is not a meritorious work but a humble trust in God's promise (Ephesians 2:8–9, Romans 4:5).

Believers Are Called to Persevere

Scripture repeatedly exhorts believers to remain faithful, warning against falling away while also offering strong assurance to those who continue in Christ (Hebrews 3:12–14, John 10:27–29). Legacy Church affirms the reality of assurance while taking warnings to be taken seriously against apostasy.

Our Molinist Convictions

Alongside our Arminian soteriology, some elders at Legacy Church also affirm Molinism as a faithful and biblically consistent account of God's knowledge and providence. We believe this best represents the sovereignty and attentiveness of God.

Molinism teaches that God knowledge can be broken down into **three categories**.

Natural Knowledge

God knows all possibilities, everything that could happen. Not just everything that has happened, is happening, or will happen, but what happen.

Middle Knowledge

God knows what any free creature would choose in any given circumstance. This is not theoretical knowledge, this is an educated guess. God knows everything. There is nothing hidden or unknown to Him.

Free Knowledge

God knows everything that will actually happen in the world He chooses to create.

Through this knowledge, God sovereignly orders history without violating human freedom.

Why This Matters

Molinism allows us to affirm several biblical truths simultaneously:

God's fully sovereign over history (Isaiah 46:9-10)

Human choices are real and meaningful (Joshua 24:15)

God's plans are never frustrated by human freedom (Proverbs 19:21)

God does not cause sin nor tempt sin (James 1:13)

God's not trying to frustrate human sin but using them. Rather, in His perfect wisdom, He sovereignly brings about His purposes through genuinely free human choices. To use this to the higher value of sovereignty, that God "wrote" pages" over this particular story, even when the point-to-point choices and events from thoughtful were given, and weave them together for His ultimate plan, saving all those would be saved.

Election and Foreknowledge

Legacy Church affirms that election is **grounded in God's foreknowledge**, *not arbitrary decree. God's choosing is informed, purposeful, and deliberate (Romans 8:29, 1 Peter 1:2). Through middle knowledge, God knows who would freely respond to His grace in any circumstance and orders the world accordingly.*

This preserves both:

God's initiative in salvation

Human responsibility to responding to the gospel

Evangelism, Prayer, and Assurance

Our Arminian and Molinist convictions fuel, rather than diminish, Christian mission and prayer.

Evangelism matters, because real decisions are being made (Ezekiel 33:11-17).

Prayer matters, because God works through means He has ordained (James 5:16).

Obedience matters, because our choices carry real spiritual weight (Colossians 1:7-8).

God's sovereign knowledge does not make these things unnecessary. It ensures their effectiveness.

What We Reject

Legacy Church explicitly rejects:

Any form of coercive enforcement

that teaches sin can cure God's choice, secure salvation, or maintain salvation by our performance. Obedience matters, but it is the fruit of grace, not the foundation of it.

Moralism without the gospel

the idea that Christianity is mainly about becoming a better person rather than being rescued, forgiven, and made new through union with Christ.

Cheap grace

the claim that repentance and obedience are optional, or that grace, in fact, compromises or has no spiritual consequence. Grace is free, but it is never shallow or breakable.

Perfectionism

the mistake a believer can arrive at makes perfection in this life, or that aligning straight with my person-concern is not really sound. We affirm real growth and real holiness, while also acknowledging the ongoing fight of sanctification.

Determinism that reduces faith to a moment

as if nothing is under my control, presupposes God's guarantees salvation apart from continuing faith in Christ. We affirm that perseverance matters, but God's grace is not fragile.

"Good enough" view of salvation

where faith is treated like a checkbox that obligates God. Salvation is a covenant mercy, not a transaction we control.

Any view of election, assurance, or grace that undermines the necessity of the gospel offer

Although God's sovereignty and meaning are real, theological orders that generally meaningful calls of the gospel.

Any view that portrays God as the author of sin

This being the idea that God would create someone's disobedience and rebellion for His glory.

Why We Reject Determinism

Determinism, the view that all events are causally determined by God's decree, we reject for three reasons (1) It makes God the author of sin and God's "secondary cause" excusing the consequences (2) It undermines moral responsibility, since responsibility requires alternative possibilities. (3) It contradicts Scripture's continual invitations and warnings (Ezekiel 33:11, 1 Peter 3:9, 1 Timothy 2:4). If determinism is true, then calls are insincere in the worst sites. (4) It contradicts our moral intuitions and experiences (we instinctively know we make real choices). (5) It makes God's commands insincere as intended for the hypocrites, insincere. Scripture portrays God as genuinely for and pleased by obedience, but if God decreed all those things, His commands are theater, not genuine responses.

While some of Reformed theology's best protestants have sought to maintain this by appealing to **compatibilism**, we believe these models still fail to preserve genuine alternative possibilities necessary for moral responsibility.

A. Separate to Make Clear the Gospel Offer

If God unconditionally decrees all things, including spiritual ends, this is theologically responsible but cold. Calvinists say God "permits" sin while rendering it certain, but this appears to be a distinction without a difference.

B. Contradicts God's Revealed Character

Scripture declares that God "desires all people to be saved" (1 Timothy 2:4) and is "not wishing that any should perish" (2 Peter 3:9). If God unconditionally elects only some to salvation, His universal wing will is merely hypothetical not genuine.

C. Undermines Genuine Human Responsibility

If human beings cannot do otherwise than what God has decreed, how can they be held truly responsible? If God accomplishes His purposes without regarding human choice.

D. Diminishes the Gospel Offer

If Christ died only for the elect, and if only the elect can believe, then the gospel offer is not genuinely universal. This raises serious pastoral concerns about the sincerity of the gospel offer to those who are not among the elect.

E. Portrays God as Insincere

If God desires to save some and desires others based on nothing in them, this appears arbitrary. Justice requires that moral judgments be based on moral actions.

Responding to Common Calvinist Arguments

"Arminianism Makes Salvation Dependent on Works"

*Absolutely not. Salvation is entirely by grace through faith. Faith itself is enabled by prevenient grace, so even our faith is a gift from God. The difference between the Reformed and Arminian view is that our grace-enabled faith, by their own process, has that one grace-enabled it grace while the other rejects it. Using Roger Olson's illustration: two people are drowning and both are rescued by the same lifeguard. One grabs the life ring, the other refuses. The difference is not that one "earned" the rescue, but the difference is that one accepted the life ring and the other refused. We are saved by **faith**, not by works. Therefore it stands to reason that the only way we can fall is our salvation is through **unbelief**, not works.*

"Arminianism Denies God's Sovereignty"

We fully affirm God's sovereignty. However, sovereignty does not mean meticulous control of every detail. A sovereign king can delegate authority without ceasing to be sovereign. God is sovereign enough to grant genuine freedom, so His sovereignty will accomplishing all His purposes.

"If Salvation Depends on Christ, God's Plan Can Be Thwarted"

God's eternal plan is not that people individually be saved, but that all who believe in Christ will be saved. God knows reliability, who will believe (foreseen faith) and has decreed that believers will be saved. Through middle knowledge, God knows before creation exactly who would believe under which circumstances and established the world that best accomplishes His purposes while respecting freedom.

"Romans 9 Teaches Unconditional Election"

Legacy Church understands Romans 9 primarily as addressing **corporate election**, *namely God's historical purposes for Israel and the inclusion of the Gentiles, rather than the individual predestination to heaven or hell. Paul's argument centers on God's sovereign freedom to use his grace rather than by ethnic privilege.*

The examples of Jacob and Esau are drawn from Malachi and refer to **nations and covenantal roles**, *not the eternal destiny of individual persons. Likewise, Pharaoh's hardening is presented as the example of hardened resistance to God's redemptive purposes, not as evidence of a decree of damnation.*

The "mercy and hardening" language is best understood as those who are prepared to unbelief and opposition to God's purposes, with the text deliberately leaving the agency of their "preparation" undefined. Paul does not assert that individuals are predestined to damnation before birth.

The reading is reinforced by Romans 9:31–33, where Paul explicitly affirms Israel's responsibility for unbelief and God's ongoing redemptive purpose for them, demonstrating that Romans 9 must be read within the broader argument of God's covenant faithfulness to Israel and Gentiles.

"Scripture Says Yet One Soul Will Perish Eternally (c.f.)"

Romans 5:15 describes humanity in its natural, fallen state apart from grace. We fully agree: no one earns God apart from grace. However, the grace-enabled faith that receives salvation is not itself a work worthy of reward. The fact that no one earns God naturally does not mean no one can earn God when enabled by grace.

"Calvinism Gives All Glory to God"

Legacy Church agrees with Calvinists that all glory belongs to God, not sinners who have received salvation. Faith is enabled by grace. Repentance is a gift. Perseverance is sustained by God. The only "contribution" the sinner makes is receiving what God gives and even that is made possible by grace.

Our Desire is a Humble Position

While we hold Arminian theology, and for some of our elders Molinism, we do not claim to be infallible and compelling frameworks for understanding Scripture, we do not claim they resolve every mystery. We affirm these views as helpful approximations, as well-reasoned, scriptural, and coherent, and we confidently affirmed by many and as a theological model, but is the strong work of Christ.

Because this tradition has historically carried significantly hubris throughout church history, we recognize that faithful Christians may come to different conclusions. Therefore, we do not require uniform agreement on these matters for membership or participation at Legacy Church. We ask only that all who teach or preach, whether elders or ordinary members of Legacy Church or Salvation, the centrality of the gospel, and a spirit of charity toward one another, since disagreements over how God acts and what they can be aware that God knows are thoughtful, sincere, and worthy of being in the pulpit.

As the Apostle Paul reminds us, "Now we see as a mirror dimly" (1 Corinthians 13:12). We hold our conclusions with conviction, yet also with humility, trusting that our unity is grounded not in perfect agreement, but in our shared life in Christ.

Conclusion: A Gospel of Grace and Freedom

We proclaim a gospel of grace: salvation is God's free gift, offered to all, received by faith. We proclaim a God of love: He genuinely desires all to be saved and has made provision for all through Christ's death. We proclaim human responsibility: each person will give an account for how they responded to God's gracious invitation.

God's sovereign. His purposes will not fail. Yet He has chosen to accomplish those purposes through free creatures who genuinely choose to love and serve Him. This is not a limitation on God's power but a manifestation of His wisdom and love.