

# Salvation, the Gospel, and Free Will

*A Position Paper of Legacy Church*

## 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 the life, death, and resurrection of 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 responsibility. Throughout church history, faithful Christians have wrestled with how to hold these truths together without diminishing either God's sovereignty or the meaningfulness of human response.

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 views present in 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 in 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.

## I. 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 in faith.

### **Polycarp (69-156 AD)**

Sat under the Apostle John and taught that salvation is grounded in God's mercy rather than human righteousness, while consistently exhorting believers to live in obedience as the proper response to grace (Polycarp, *Philippians* 1-2).

### **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* IV).

## II. The Pelagian Controversy and Augustine

Pelagius (c. 360-418 AD) taught that humans possess 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 predestination to salvation, his views on reprobation 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) taught synergism; that human will cooperates with divine grace. Vincent of Lerins (d. c. 445 AD) and Jerome believed Augustine's doctrines denied human responsibility. What later came to be labeled "Semi-Pelagianism" reflected earlier patristic emphases 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.**

## III. The Reformers and Salvation

### Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Recovered justification by faith alone (*sola fide*), emphasizing that righteousness is imputed 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 Arminian 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**.

### Luis de Molina (1535-1600)

He was a Catholic theologian writing slightly earlier, and offered a philosophical account of divine knowledge now known as Molinism, 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 His 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 offered to all. Arminius affirmed total dependence on grace for salvation while teaching that election is conditional upon foreseen faith rather than an unconditional decree. After his death, his followers articulated these convictions in the *Five Articles of Remonstrance* (1610), emphasizing conditional election, universal atonement, resistible grace, and the necessity of persevering faith.

## IV. Mainstream Christianity Today

In contemporary Christianity, views on salvation, grace, and divine sovereignty generally fall into several broad theological streams, often reflected along denominational lines. **Reformed and Presbyterian traditions** (such as the PCA, OPC, and many churches within the continental Reformed confessions) 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** stand firmly 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, or blended positions that resist strict systematization. **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 real role, rejecting both Pelagianism 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 forensic justification alone. 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.

## V. Legacy Church: An Arminian Position with a Molinist Touch

### The Arminian Position of Legacy Church

Legacy Church affirms a historic 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:

1. **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 2:1-5). Salvation is never earned, initiated, or completed by human effort.



2. **God Desires the Salvation of All People**

Scripture teaches that God genuinely desires all people to be saved and has made salvation available to all through Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:3-6, 2 Peter 3:9, John 3:16).

3. **Christ Died for All**

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

4. **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).

5. **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).

6. **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 seriously the biblical warnings 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 omniscience of God.

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

1. **Natural Knowledge**

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

2. **Middle Knowledge**

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

3. **Free Knowledge**

God knows everything that will actually happen in the world He chose 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 is 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 or coerce sin** (James 1:13)

God is not reacting to human decisions nor forcing them. Rather, in His infinite wisdom, He sovereignly brings about His purposes through genuinely free human choices. To us, this is the highest view of sovereignty, that God would “juggle” every free decision ever made, every free action ever taken, and every free thought ever 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 relational (Romans 8:29, 1 Peter 1:1-2). 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 in 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 (Romans 10:14-17).
- **Prayer matters**, because God works through means He has ordained (James 5:16).
- **Obedience matters**, because our choices carry real spiritual weight (Galatians 6:7-9).

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

## VI. What We Reject

Legacy Church explicitly rejects:

- **Any form of works righteousness** that teaches we can earn God's favor, 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 persistent, unrepentant sin has no spiritual consequences. Grace is free, but it is never hollow, it transforms.



- **Perfectionism** that implies a believer can arrive at sinless perfection in this life, or that ongoing struggle with sin proves someone is not truly saved. We affirm real growth and real holiness, while also acknowledging the ongoing fight of sanctification.
- **Decisionalism that reduces faith to a moment**, as if walking an aisle or praying a prayer automatically guarantees salvation apart from continuing faith in Christ. We emphasize that saving faith is living and persevering.
- **A “God owes me” view of salvation**, where faith is treated like a mechanism that obligates God. Salvation is covenant mercy, not a transaction we control.
- **Any view of election, atonement, or grace that undermines the sincerity of the gospel offer**, as though God’s invitations and warnings are only rhetorical rather than genuinely meaningful calls to all people.
- **Any view that portrays God as the author of sin.** This being the idea that God would cause someone’s disobedience and rebellion for His glory.

## VII. Why We Reject Determinism

Determinism, the view that all events are causally determined by God's decree, we reject for these reasons: (1) It makes God the author of evil, with no appeal to "secondary causes" escaping this conclusion. (2) It undermines moral responsibility; true responsibility requires alternative possibilities. (3) It contradicts Scripture's universal invitations and warnings (Acts 17:30; 2 Peter 3:9; 1 Timothy 2:4). If determinism is true, these calls are insincere to the non-elect. (4) It contradicts our moral intuitions and experience (we intuitively know we make real choices). (5) It makes God's emotional reactions as revealed in the Scriptures, insincere. Scripture portrays God as grieved by sin and pleased by obedience, but if God decreed all these things, His reactions are theater, not genuine responses.

While some Calvinists distinguish their position from strict determinism by appealing to **compatibilism**, we believe these models still fail to preserve genuine alternative possibilities necessary for moral responsibility.

**It Appears to Make God the Author of Sin:** If God unconditionally decrees all things, including sinful acts, He is ultimately responsible for evil. Calvinists say God "permits" sin while rendering it certain, but this appears to be a distinction without a difference.

**It 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 saving will is merely hypothetical, not genuine.

**It Undermines Genuine Human Responsibility:** If human beings cannot do otherwise than what God has decreed, how can they be held truly responsible? If God decreed evil intentions, responsibility ultimately traces back to Him.

**It 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.



**It Portrays God as Arbitrary:** If God chose to save some and damn others based on nothing in them, this appears arbitrary. Justice requires that moral judgments be based on moral actions.

## VIII. 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; no one can believe apart from God's enabling. The difference between the saved and lost is not that one group generated faith by their own power, but that one group yielded to grace while the other resisted it. Using Roger Olson's illustration: two men are drowning in a well. God pours in the water of grace. One man relaxes and is carried to safety; the other fights the water and drowns. Neither man saved himself; both were helpless. But one yielded to the saving power while the other resisted. We are saved by **faith**, not by works. Therefore it stands to reason that the only way we can forfeit 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 to His creatures while still accomplishing all His purposes.

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

God's eternal plan is not that specific individuals be saved, but that all who believe in Christ be saved. God knows infallibly who will believe (foreknowledge) and has decreed that believers will be saved. Through middle knowledge, God knew before creation exactly who would believe under which circumstances and actualized the world that best accomplishes His purposes while respecting human 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 individual predestination to heaven or hell. Paul's argument centers on God's sovereign freedom to save by 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 destinies of individuals before birth. Likewise, Pharaoh functions as a typological example of hardened resistance to God's redemptive purposes within salvation history.

The "vessels of wrath" (Romans 9:22) are best understood as those who persist in 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.

This reading is reinforced by Romans 10-11, 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 mercy toward both Jews and Gentiles.

### "Scripture Says No One Seeks God" (Romans 3:11)

Romans 3:11 describes humanity in its natural, fallen state apart from grace. We fully agree: no one seeks God apart from grace. However, prevenient grace is given to all, enabling them to seek and respond. The fact that no one seeks God naturally does not mean no one can seek God when enabled by grace.



## "Calvinism Gives All Glory to God"

All glory goes to God in both systems. In Arminianism, the one who is saved can take no credit whatsoever. Faith is enabled by grace. Repentance is a gift. Perseverance is sustained by God. The only "contribution" the sinner makes is to stop resisting grace, and even that is made possible by grace.

## Our Desire is a Humble Posture

While we find Arminian theology, and for some of our elders Molinism, to be faithful and compelling frameworks for understanding Scripture, we do not claim they resolve every mystery. We affirm these views as helpful explanations, not infallible systems. Scripture alone is infallible, and our confidence ultimately rests not in a theological model, but in the saving work of Christ.

Because this subject has been debated by sincere and godly believers throughout church history, we recognize that faithful Christians may come to different conclusions. Therefore, we do not require uniform agreement on these matters for fellowship or membership at Legacy Church. We ask only that all who worship with us share a commitment to the authority of Scripture, the centrality of the gospel, and a spirit of charity toward one another where disagreements remain. We also ask that you be aware that this is the lens through which we will be preaching in the pulpit.

As the Apostle Paul reminds us, "Now we see in 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 is 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.

*Soli De Gloria*

