

# Calvinism and Predestination vs. LDS Free Will: A Latter-day Saint Defense

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LDS Apologetics Research

ABSTRACT

## 1. Introduction

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The doctrines of Calvinism — often summarized by the acronym TULIP (Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, Perseverance of the Saints) — represent one of the most influential theological systems in Protestant Christianity. Calvinism asserts that salvation is entirely God's work from beginning to end: God chooses who will be saved before the foundation of the world, Christ dies only for the elect, grace cannot be resisted, and the saved cannot fall away. Human free will, in the libertarian sense, plays no role in salvation. The Latter-day Saint position stands in direct opposition: moral agency is eternal, the Atonement is universal in scope, grace is freely offered but must be freely received, and individuals genuinely choose whether to accept or reject God's gift. This document addresses the Calvinist critique of LDS soteriology and offers both a defensive response and an offensive biblical case against the TULIP framework.

## 2. The Criticism (Steelmanned)

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The Calvinist argument against LDS theology runs as follows:

**Total Depravity:** Human nature is so corrupted by the Fall that no person can choose God without prior regeneration by the Holy Spirit. "There is none that seeketh after God" (Romans 3:11). The LDS belief that humans can freely choose God overestimates human capacity and underestimates the devastation of sin.

**Unconditional Election:** God chooses who will be saved based solely on His sovereign will, not on foreseen faith or works. "He hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4). "It is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy" (Romans 9:16). The LDS system makes salvation dependent on human choice, which robs God of His sovereignty.

**Limited Atonement (Particular Redemption):** Christ died specifically for the elect, not for all humanity. "I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:15). If Christ died for all and not all are saved, then either Christ failed or human will is more powerful than divine atonement — both unacceptable conclusions.

**Irresistible Grace:** When God determines to save someone, that person cannot resist. "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me" (John 6:37). The LDS teaching that grace can be rejected makes human will sovereign over God's will.

**Perseverance of the Saints:** Those whom God has truly elected will persevere to the end. "He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). The LDS view that people can fall from grace implies God's saving work can be defeated.

This is a formidable theological system with significant biblical proof-texts. It must be engaged at the textual level, not merely dismissed.

### 3. Biblical Response

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#### *Against Total Depravity*

The Calvinist doctrine of total depravity asserts that fallen humans are incapable of any spiritual good, including the exercise of faith, without prior regeneration. The biblical evidence does not support this:

1. **God commands what He expects humans to do.** "Choose you this day whom ye will serve" (Joshua 24:15). "Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions" (Ezekiel 18:30). "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden" (Matthew 11:28). Every divine command to choose, repent, or come presupposes the capacity to obey. A God who commands the impossible and then condemns for non-compliance is unjust.
2. **Faith precedes regeneration in the biblical pattern.** "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31). "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life" (John 3:36). The biblical order is: hear the gospel, believe, then receive the Spirit. Calvinism inverts this order, placing regeneration before faith — but no text says "you must first be regenerated in order to believe."
3. **Cornelius sought God before receiving the Spirit.** Acts 10:1-4 describes Cornelius as "a devout man, and one that feared God...which gave much alms...and prayed to God always." He was seeking God and doing good works *before* Peter arrived and *before* the Holy Spirit fell on him. If total depravity means no one can seek God without prior regeneration, Cornelius is an unexplainable anomaly.
4. **Romans 3:10-11 is a quotation from Psalm 14, not a metaphysical statement about human capacity.** Paul quotes "there is none that seeketh after God" to establish universal sinfulness and the need for a savior — not to assert that humans are metaphysically incapable of responding to God. The very epistle that contains this quotation commands its readers to "present your bodies a living sacrifice" (Romans 12:1) — an imperative that presupposes the capacity to obey.

#### *Against Unconditional Election*

1. **"Foreknowledge" in Romans 8:29 is relational, not decretal.** "Whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son." The Greek *proginosko* carries the Hebrew sense of intimate, relational knowledge (cf. Genesis 4:1; Amos 3:2). God foreknew *persons*, not merely facts — He entered into relationship with them beforehand. This is consistent with the LDS understanding of a premortal existence where God knew His children.
2. **Ephesians 1:4-5 describes corporate election, not individual predetermination.** God chose *the church* — the body of believers — "in him before the foundation of the world." Entry into that

chosen body is conditioned on being "in Christ," which is conditioned on faith. God predestined the *plan*, not the specific individuals apart from their response.

3. **Romans 9 is about national roles, not individual salvation.** The Jacob/Esau passage (Romans 9:10-13) refers to nations (Israel and Edom), not to the individual eternal destinies of two men. "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated" quotes Malachi 1:2-3, which is about Israel and Edom as nations. The potter/clay analogy (Romans 9:20-21) addresses God's right to use nations as He sees fit in redemptive history, not His right to predetermine individual souls to heaven or hell without regard to their choices.
4. **2 Peter 3:9 directly contradicts limited election.** "The Lord is...not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." If God genuinely wills that none perish, but Calvinist election means many are predestined to perish, then either God's will is contradicted or the text is meaningless.

### *Against Limited Atonement*

1. **1 John 2:2** — "He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world." The phrase "the whole world" cannot be limited to "the elect among all nations" without doing violence to the text.
2. **2 Corinthians 5:14-15** — "One died for all." The "all" for whom Christ died is the same "all" in the next clause: "that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves."
3. **1 Timothy 2:3-6** — God "will have all men to be saved...who gave himself a ransom for all." The universal language is emphatic and repeated.
4. **Hebrews 2:9** — Christ tasted "death for every man." Not "every elect man" — "every man."
5. **2 Peter 2:1** — False teachers who deny the Lord are described as those for whom Christ "bought" them — yet they face destruction. Christ's atonement extended even to those who ultimately reject Him.

### *Against Irresistible Grace*

1. **Stephen's accusation in Acts 7:51** — "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost." If grace were irresistible, resisting the Holy Spirit would be impossible. Stephen's charge presupposes that resistance is both possible and culpable.
2. **Matthew 23:37** — "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...how often would I have gathered thy children together...and ye would not!" Christ's will to gather is resisted by human unwillingness. If irresistible grace were true, Christ's lament is incoherent.
3. **Hebrews 10:29** — The possibility of one who "hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace." Grace can be received and then spurned — which is impossible under irresistible grace and perseverance of the saints combined.

### *Against Perseverance of the Saints (Once Saved, Always Saved)*

1. **Hebrews 6:4-6** — Those who "were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost...if they shall fall away" cannot be renewed to repentance. These are

genuinely saved individuals who genuinely fall away.

2. **2 Peter 2:20-22** — Those who "have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" and are "again entangled therein, and overcome" — the latter end is worse than the beginning.
3. **Galatians 5:4** — "Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace." One cannot fall from a position one never held.
4. **Ezekiel 18:24** — "When the righteous turneth away from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity...shall he live? All his righteousness that he hath done shall not be mentioned."

## 4. Early Christian Evidence

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### *The Pre-Nicene Consensus Was Anti-Calvinist*

The earliest Christian writers universally affirmed free will and universal atonement. Calvinism as a system did not exist until the sixteenth century, and its essential doctrines (unconditional election, irresistible grace, limited atonement) were not present in the pre-Nicene period:

**Justin Martyr (c. 150 AD):** "Each man goes to everlasting punishment or salvation according to the value of his actions...fate is not the master of all things" (*First Apology*, 43-44).

**Irenaeus (c. 180 AD):** "God made man a free agent from the beginning, possessing his own power, even as he does his own soul, to obey the behests of God voluntarily, and not by compulsion of God" (*Against Heresies*, 4.37.1).

**Clement of Alexandria (c. 200 AD):** "The Lord does not save unwilling souls...but those who have willingly believed. The power to choose is in the soul" (*Stromata*, 5.1).

**Origen (c. 230 AD):** "The work of redemption was accomplished for the whole world...Christ is the Savior of all men" (*Commentary on John*, 1.35). Origen affirmed both universal atonement and genuine free will — the opposite of limited atonement and irresistible grace.

The Augustinian/Calvinist trajectory represents a departure from the pre-Nicene consensus, shaped by Augustine's conflict with Pelagianism and his Neoplatonic philosophical commitments. Even within Western Christianity, Augustine's predestinarian views were controversial — the monks of Hadrumetum and Marseilles resisted them (the so-called "Semi-Pelagian" controversy), and the Eastern church never adopted them.

## 5. LDS Doctrinal Position

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The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches:

1. **Moral agency is eternal and essential to the plan of salvation.** "Wherefore, the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself. Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh...they are free to

choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death" (2 Nephi 2:26-27).

2. **The Atonement of Jesus Christ is universal in scope.** Christ suffered for all humanity, not merely for an elect few. "He suffereth the pains of all men, yea, the pains of every living creature, both men, women, and children" (2 Nephi 9:21). This is consistent with the biblical witness: "He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2).
3. **Grace is freely offered but must be freely received.** "For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do" (2 Nephi 25:23). Grace is not irresistible — it requires the willing response of faith, repentance, and covenant-making.
4. **No one is predestined to damnation.** "He inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female...all are alike unto God" (2 Nephi 26:33).
5. **It is possible to fall from grace.** "If ye have experienced a change of heart, and if ye have felt to sing the song of redeeming love, I would ask, can ye feel so now?" (Alma 5:26). The possibility of spiritual decline is real, and enduring to the end is essential (2 Nephi 31:20; D&C 14:7).
6. **Human beings existed as spirits before mortality.** The premortal existence provides context for "foreknowledge" and "election" — God knew His children before mortality because they existed as conscious beings in His presence (Abraham 3:22-23; Jeremiah 1:5).

## 6. Key Scriptures

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- **2 Nephi 2:11-16, 26-27** — Opposition, agency, and the freedom to choose
- **2 Nephi 9:21** — Christ suffered for all — universal atonement
- **2 Nephi 25:23** — Saved by grace after all we can do
- **2 Nephi 26:33** — God denies none; all are alike unto God
- **Alma 5:26** — The possibility of falling from grace
- **Alma 42:27** — "Whosoever will come may come"
- **D&C 93:29-31** — Eternal intelligence, inherent agency
- **Moses 4:3** — Satan's plan: to destroy agency
- **1 John 2:2** — Christ the propitiation for the whole world
- **1 Timothy 2:3-6** — God wills all to be saved; Christ a ransom for all
- **2 Peter 3:9** — God not willing that any should perish
- **Acts 7:51** — Humans resist the Holy Ghost
- **Hebrews 6:4-6** — Genuine believers can fall away
- **Joshua 24:15** — "Choose you this day whom ye will serve"
- **Ezekiel 18:30-32** — "Repent, and turn yourselves"

## 7. Responses to Common Objections

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### ***"Romans 9 proves unconditional election."***

Romans 9 addresses the question of why Israel as a nation has largely rejected the Messiah — not the question of individual predestination to heaven or hell. The Jacob/Esau reference (9:10-13) draws on Malachi 1:2-3, which concerns nations (Israel and Edom), not the eternal destinies of two men. The potter/clay metaphor (9:20-21) addresses God's sovereign right to use vessels for different purposes in His redemptive plan. Paul's conclusion in Romans 10:9-13 — "whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" — undermines the Calvinist reading of chapter 9, because "whosoever" presupposes a genuine invitation to all.

### ***"Ephesians 2:8-9 says salvation is 'not of yourselves.'"***

Latter-day Saints agree that salvation is a gift of God's grace and is not earned by human effort. The LDS position is not Pelagianism. The question is whether the response of faith — accepting the gift — constitutes "works" or is itself enabled by grace. The LDS view holds that God's grace enables the capacity to respond, but the response itself is genuinely free. Grace initiates, empowers, and completes — but it does not override the will.

### ***"John 6:44 — 'No man can come to me, except the Father...draw him.'"***

The drawing of the Father is universal, not selective. Two chapters later: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me" (John 12:32). The Father draws *all* people; not all respond. The drawing is necessary but not irresistible.

### ***"If humans contribute anything to salvation, it's works-righteousness."***

Receiving a gift is not earning the gift. If someone offers a drowning man a life preserver and the man grabs it, the man did not rescue himself — but he did have to reach out. Faith is the reaching out; it is not a meritorious work but a necessary response to grace. James 2:17 — "Faith, if it hath not works, is dead."

### ***"Calvinism exalts God's sovereignty; LDS theology diminishes it."***

A sovereignty that overrides the will of creatures and predetermines every event — including sin, suffering, and damnation — is not the biblical picture. The biblical God is sovereign *and* genuinely grieved by sin, *and* genuinely desirous that all come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). LDS theology exalts a sovereignty that is powerful enough to accomplish God's purposes without needing to strip His children of their freedom.

## 8. Conclusion

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Calvinism presents a systematic, internally coherent theological framework — but its coherence is purchased at the cost of the biblical portrait of a God who genuinely desires the salvation of all (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9), who sends His Son to die for the whole world (1 John 2:2), who commands all people to repent and believe (Acts 17:30), and who holds them accountable for their response. The TULIP system requires redefining "all" to mean "the elect," "world" to mean "the elect among all nations," and "freedom" to mean "acting according to desires one did not choose." These redefinitions are driven by the system, not by the text.

The pre-Nicene Christian consensus affirmed genuine free will, universal atonement, and the possibility of falling from grace. Calvinism as a system emerged in the sixteenth century, building on Augustinian premises that were themselves a departure from the earlier tradition. The Latter-day Saint position — that agency is eternal, the Atonement is universal, grace is freely offered and must be freely received, and individuals genuinely choose their eternal trajectory — is more consistent with the biblical text, the earliest Christian witness, and the moral intuition that a God who creates beings for damnation without their consent is not the loving Father described in scripture.

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#### **Further Reading and Resources:**

- FairLatterdaySaints: [Grace and Works](#)
- Church of Jesus Christ: [Grace](#)
- Robert Millet, *Grace Works* (2009)
- Blake Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Problems of Theism and the Love of God* (2006)
- Stephen Robinson, *Believing Christ* (1992)
- Roger Olson, *Against Calvinism* (2011) — non-LDS evangelical critique of Calvinism
- Jerry Walls and Joseph Dongell, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist* (2004) — Wesleyan critique