

# On Man's Free Will: What The Early Church Fathers Believed

[Quotes are from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; 1885-1887; repr. 10 vols. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994. They are cited in *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David W. Bercot, Hendrickson, 2000]

(Compiled by Frank A. DeCenso, Jr., 5/18/2010)

- In the beginning, He made the human race with the power of thought and of choosing the truth and doing right, so that all men are without excuse before God.  
**(Justin Martyr, 160 AD, 1.177)**
- Unless the human race has the power of avoiding evil and choosing good by free choice, they are not responsible for their actions.  
**(Justin Martyr, 160 AD, 1.177)**
- We maintain that each man acts rightly or sins by his free choice....Since God in the beginning made the race of angels and men with free will, they will justly suffer in eternal fire the punishment of whatever sins they have committed.  
**(Justin Martyr, 160 AD, 1.190)**
- It was God's desire for both angels and men, who were endowed with free will...that if they choose the things acceptable to Him, He would keep them from death and from punishment. However, if they did evil, He would punish each as He sees fit.  
**(Justin Martyr, 160 AD, 1.243)**
- He created both angels and men free to do that which is righteous. And He appointed periods of time during which He knew it would be good for them to have the exercise of free will.  
**(Justin Martyr, 160 AD, 1.250)**
- I have proved in what has been said that those who were foreknown to be unrighteous, whether men or angels, are not made wicked by God's fault. Rather, each man is what he will appear to be through his own fault.  
**(Justin Martyr, 160 AD, 1.269)**
- Each of these two orders of creatures [men and angels] was made free to act as it pleased. They did not have the nature of good, which again is with God alone. However, it is brought to perfection in men through their freedom of choice. In this manner, the bad man can be justly punished, having become depraved through his own fault. Likewise, the just man can be deservedly praised for his virtuous deeds, since in the exercise of his free choice, he refrained from transgressing the will of God.  
**(Tatian, 160 AD, 2.67)**
- We were not created to die. Rather, we die by our own fault. Our free will has destroyed us. We who were free have become slaves. We have been sold through sin. Nothing evil has been created by God. We ourselves have manifested wickedness. But we, who have manifested it, are able again, to reject it.  
**(Tatian, 160 AD, 2.69)**
- There is, therefore, nothing to hinder you from changing your evil manner of life, because you are a free man.  
**(Melito, 170 AD, 8.754)**

- But man, being endowed with reason, and in this similar respect similar to God, having been made free in his will, and with power over himself, is himself his own cause that sometimes becomes wheat, and sometimes chaff.  
**(Irenaeus, 180 AD, 1.466)**
- For God made man free from the beginning, possessing his own power, even as he does his own soul, to obey the commandments of God voluntarily, and not by compulsion of God. For there is no coercion with God.  
**(Irenaeus, 180 AD, 1.518)**
- Because man is possessed of free will from the beginning, and God is possessed of free will (in whose likeness man was created), advice is always given to him to hold fast to the good, which is done through obedience to God. God has preserved the will of man free and under his own control. This is not merely in works, but also in faith.  
**(Irenaeus, 180 AD, 1.519)**
- Nor, again, does God exercise compulsion upon anyone unwilling to accept the exercise of His skill.... They have been created free agents and possessed of power over themselves.  
**(Irenaeus, 180 AD, 1.523)**
- We...have believed and are saved by voluntary choice.  
**(Clement of Alexandria, 195 AD, 2.217)**
- Each one of us who sins with his own free will, chooses punishment. So the blame lies with him who chooses. God is without blame.  
**(Clement of Alexandria, 195 AD, 2.226)**
- Neither praises nor censures, neither rewards nor punishments, are right if the soul does not have the power of inclination and disinclination and if evil is involuntary.... In no respect is God the author of evil. But since free choice and inclination originate sins,...punishments are justly inflicted.  
**(Clement of Alexandria, 195 AD, 2.319)**
- We have heard from the Scriptures that self-determining choice and refusal have been given by the Lord to men. Therefore, we rest in the infallible criterion of faith, manifesting a willing spirit, since we have chosen life.  
**(Clement of Alexandria, 195 AD, 2.349)**
- To obey or not to obey is in our own power, provided we do not have the excuse of ignorance.  
**(Clement of Alexandria, 195 AD, 2.353)**
- Sin, then, is voluntary on my part.  
**(Clement of Alexandria, 195 AD, 2.362)**
- The Lord clearly shows sins and transgressions to be in our own power, by prescribing modes of cure corresponding to the maladies.  
**(Clement of Alexandria, 195 AD, 2.363)**
- Their estrangement is the result of free choice.  
**(Clement of Alexandria, 195 AD, 2.426)**
- Believing and obeying are in our own power.  
**(Clement of Alexandria, 195 AD, 2.527)**
- Nor will he who is saved be saved against his will, for he is not inanimate. But above all, he will speed to salvation voluntarily and of free choice.  
**(Clement of Alexandria, 195 AD, 2.534)**

- Choice depended on the man as being free. But the gift depended on God as the Lord. And He gives to those who are willing, are exceedingly earnest, and who ask. So their salvation becomes their own. For God does not compel.  
**(Clement of Alexandria, 195 AD, 2.593)**
- I find, then, that man was constituted free by God. He was master of his own will and power....Man is free, with a will either for obedience or resistance.  
**(Tertullian, 207 AD, 3.300, 301)**
- You must necessarily correspond to the seed from which you sprang – if indeed it is true that the originator of our race and our sin, Adam, willed the sin which he committed.  
**(Tertullian, 212 AD, 4.51)**
- God, who created [the world], did not nor does not, make evil....Now, man (who was brought into existence) was a creature endowed with a capacity of self-determination, yet he did not possess a sovereign intellect....Man, from the fact of his possessing a capacity for self-determination, brings forth evil....Since man has free will, a law has been given him by God, for a good purpose. For a law will not be laid down for an animal devoid of reason. Only a bridle and whip will be given it. In contrast, man has been given a commandment to perform, coupled with a penalty.  
**(Hippolytus, 225 AD, 5.151)**
- The Word promulgated the divine commandments by declaring them. He thereby turned man from disobedience. He summoned man to liberty through a choice involving spontaneity – not by bringing him into servitude by force of necessity.  
**(Hippolytus, 225 AD, 5.152)**
- Man is able to both will and not to will. He is endowed with power to do both.  
**(Hippolytus, 225 AD, 5.152)**
- This is also clearly defined in the teaching of the church, that every rational soul has free will and volition....we are not forced by any necessity to act either rightly or wrongly.  
**(Origen, 225 AD, 4.240)**
- It seems a plausible thing that rational natures, from whom the faculty of free will is never taken away, may be again subjected to movements of some kind.  
**(Origen, 225 AD, 4.272)**
- Since those rational creatures themselves... were endowed with the power of free will, this freedom of the will incited each one to either progress (by imitation of God), or else it reduced a person to failure through negligence.  
**(Origen, 225 AD, 4.292)**
- In the preaching of the church, there is included the doctrine concerning a just judgment of God. When this teaching is believed to be true, it incites those who hear it to live virtuously and to shun sin by all means. For they clearly acknowledge that things worthy of praise and blame are within our own power.  
**(Origen, 225 AD, 4.302)**
- When he had given man all things for his service, he willed that man alone should be free. And lest an unbounded freedom would lead man into peril, He had laid down a command, in which man was taught that there was no evil in the fruit of the tree. Rather, he was forewarned that evil would arise if man were to exercise his free will in contempt of the law that had been given him....As a result, he could receive either worthy rewards or a just punishment. For he had in his own power that which he might choose to do.  
**(Novatian, 235 AD, 5.612)**

- The liberty of believing or not believing is placed in free choice. In Deuteronomy, it says, 'Look! I have set before your face life and death, good and evil. Choose for yourself life, that you may live.'"  
**(Cyprian, 250 AD, 5.547)**
- Man was made with a free will...on account of his capacity of obeying or disobeying God. For this was the meaning of the gift of free will.  
**(Methodius, 290 AD, 6.362)**
- I say that God – purposing to honor man in this manner and to grant him an understanding of better things – has given man the power of being able to do what he wishes. He commends the use of his power for better things. However, it is not that God deprives man again of free will. Rather, He wishes to point out the better way. For the power is present with man, and he receives the commandment. But God exhorts him to turn his power of choice to better things.  
**(Methodius, 290 AD, 6.362)**
- I do not think that God urges man to obey His commandments, but then deprives him of the power to obey or disobey.... He does not give a command in order to take away the power that he has given. Rather, He gives it in order to bestow a better gift...in return for his rendered obedience to God. For man had power to withhold it. I say that man was made with free will.  
**(Methodius, 290 AD, 6.362)**
- [Methodius] says that it is in our power to do, or to avoid doing, evil. Otherwise, we would not be punished for doing evil nor be rewarded for doing good.  
**(Methodius, 290 AD, 6.370, as quoted by Photius)**

*Many more quotes can be given. Please consult the references cited on page 1.*

NOTES: