



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 16.4 – The Doctrine of the Election of Grace (Predestination)

Calvinism and Arminianism and the Doctrine of Election

What we have studied in Scripture about the election of grace is simple enough. Believers in Christ should realize that God chose them from eternity to be His believers. In other words, God chose them from eternity to be His, and therefore God will keep them in that faith to the end and will finally glorify them with full glory in heaven. This makes their salvation entirely a matter of grace. They are saved by grace alone, without their having contributed even the least bit to their salvation.

We run into trouble with this teaching when we try to comprehend it in our minds and try to fit everything together that God teaches us in Scripture. When we do that, we sometimes draw conclusions that are opposed to clear Bible teachings.

At the time of the Reformation John Calvin was a Bible teacher in Geneva, Switzerland. Using his human reason, John Calvin determined that if God elected some persons from eternity to be saved, then He must have from eternity determined the other persons to be lost. This makes sense to human reason, but it is directly opposed to what the Bible teaches about grace, as we have already learned. God teaches us that God has loved the world and shown His love for the world in that He sent His Son Jesus to be the Savior of the world. God wants all persons to be saved; He does not want anyone to be lost. Jesus died not for some, but for all persons. God wants the Good News of what Christ did to be brought to all people, not just to some. The Holy Spirit earnestly desires to convert every sinner in the whole world to faith in Christ for salvation. The Bible does not teach anywhere that God from eternity selected certain persons to be damned and go to hell.

John Calvin's teaching is called Calvinism, and it can be summarized in five points that spell the word TULIP:

- T** – Total Depravity
- U** – Unconditional Predestination (sometimes called double predestination: to heaven and to hell)
- L** – Limited Atonement (Jesus did not die for all, but only for those chosen to be saved)
- I** – Irresistible Grace (If God chose you to be saved, you will be saved even if you resist)
- P** – Perseverance of Saints (Believers in Christ cannot lose their faith; they will always persevere)

The only one of these points that agrees with Scripture is the first point: Total Depravity. The rest of them are directly contrary to the Scriptures we have already studied. The Bible does not teach anywhere that God has predestined some to be damned. In fact, Jesus made a clear distinction between those going to heaven and those going to hell in His description of Judgment Day. To the sheep on His right hand Jesus will say: **"Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world"** (Matthew 25:34). But to those on His left He will say: **"Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels"** (Matthew 25:41). Also, in his letter to the Romans the apostle Paul speaks of **"the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction"** but he speaks of **"the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory"** (Romans 9:22-23). The election

of grace is **“beforehand”**. But damnation is God’s reaction to man’s unbelief afterwards; there is no **“beforehand”**.

Point 3 (Limited Atonement) is a direct attack on universal grace, which, as we have seen, is taught abundantly in the Scripture. There is a great difference between presenting the Gospel by saying that Jesus has suffered and died for all sinners and presenting the Gospel by saying that Jesus died for some sinners. In fact, saying that Jesus died for some sinners is not Good News at all, for a sinner never knows whether they are one of those persons for whom Jesus died, or if they are one whom God from eternity has chosen to be damned. The Gospel of Christ is no longer Good News for that person. That is not the way the missionary Paul preached. Paul said: **“Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man (Jesus) is preached to you the forgiveness of sins: and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses”** (Acts 13:38-39). He said this Good News is preached to **“you”**, not just to some of you. Paul wrote: **“God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them”** (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Point 4 (Irresistible Grace) is also contrary to Scripture. God in His grace desires all to be saved, but His grace can be resisted. Stephen told the Jews who wanted to kill him: **“You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you”** (Acts 7:51). Jesus Himself said: **“How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!”** (Matthew 23:37).

Point 5 presents the theory of **“once saved, always saved”**. But Jesus talked about those **“who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away”** (Luke 8:13).

We acknowledge that there are problems for the human mind in the doctrine of election, as there are problems for the human mind with regard to many other teachings of Scripture, such as the doctrine of the Trinity. It is not for us to try to reconcile the various teachings of Scripture with our reason, but simply to accept every teaching of Scripture, regardless of whether our human reason is satisfied or not.

After John Calvin died, his teaching on predestination was opposed by Jacob Arminius and his followers. Today this teaching (Arminianism or synergism) is much more common among Protestant churches than strict Calvinism. Whereas Calvinism teaches that both salvation and damnation are determined by God from eternity, Arminianism teaches that man is responsible for both his damnation and his salvation. In other words, he is not totally depraved (the first point of Calvinism) but is able to either accept or decline the Gospel when it is presented to him. In other words, one is able to cooperate in one’s own conversion, even though the Bible declares everyone to be **“dead in trespasses and sins”** (Ephesians 2:1, 5). Therefore, it is up to each person whether they will be saved or lost. Because Arminianism teaches cooperation in conversion, this teaching is called synergism, which means cooperation. Today this Arminian teaching is often called **“decision theology”** because it teaches that a person can decide to believe in Jesus or reject Him.

In summary: Calvinism denies the Bible teaching of universal grace, whereas Arminianism denies the teaching that we are saved by grace alone. Many religious people and Bible teachers think that there is no third option possible. A person must be either an Arminian or a Calvinist. But confessional Lutherans are neither Calvinists nor Arminians. We teach what Scripture teaches, namely, that God’s grace is universal, and that we are saved by grace alone. We teach that if a person is saved, it is by God’s grace alone. We teach that if a person is lost it is their own fault. The doctrine of election by grace emphasizes and underscores the teaching that we are entirely saved by grace alone.

Questions

1. Why do Christians sometimes have problems with the doctrine of election?
2. What conclusion did John Calvin draw from the fact that God from eternity chose some to be saved?
3. In what way was his conclusion contrary to Scripture?
4. What does the term TULIP represent?
5. What are the errors in the doctrines represented by L, I, and P.
6. Who was the teacher that opposed the teachings of Calvinism?
7. In what way did he teach contrary to Scripture?
8. In what ways is the teaching of confessional Lutheranism different from both Calvinism and Arminianism?