



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Chapter 16

The Doctrine of the Election of Grace (Predestination)



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Lesson 16.1 – The Doctrine of the Election of Grace (Predestination)

The Possibility of Losing Our Faith and Falling from Grace

Before we study what God's Word says about God's election of grace, it is important that we look at another truth that God reveals to us in His Word. That is the truth that it is possible for Christians to fall from grace and lose their faith. It is important that we teach this truth together with our teaching of God's election of grace, even though these teachings seem to contradict one another according to our human reason.

Jesus never told His disciples that trusting in Him and following Him would be easy. He said to them: **"You will be hated by all for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved"** (Matthew 10:22). It is not sufficient for a person to believe in Christ at some point in their life in order to be saved. It is necessary for them to persevere in that faith to the end of their life or to the day of Christ's return, whichever comes first. Just a few days before His own death Jesus told His disciples: **"You will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved"** (Matthew 24:9-13). The message of the Lord to Sardis contained this encouragement: **"Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life"** (Revelation 2:10).

Because of these many dangers and temptations, Jesus and His apostles often warned believers in Christ to be on guard against the possibility of falling away from Christ. Jesus' parable of the sower and the seed, in particular, presented this danger. Jesus spoke of the seeds that **"fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them"** (Matthew 13:5-7). Jesus then explained what He meant. He said: **"He who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles. Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful"** (Matthew 13:20-22).

Some might say that these persons who dropped out only gave the impression of being believers in Christ without ever really believing in Jesus at all. But in His explanation of this same parable Jesus Himself said: **"They ... believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away"** (Luke 8:13). Then also there were those disciples who were repelled by what they called Jesus' hard sayings. Of them the evangelist John wrote: **"From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more"** (John 6:66).

When Jesus was arrested, **"all the disciples forsook Him and fled"** (Matthew 26:56). In the case of the twelve, this showed their weakness of faith, except for Judas Iscariot, who had lost his faith. This disciple who betrayed Jesus was chosen by Jesus Himself to be an apostle after a whole night of prayer. Was he not a true believer at one time in his life? And yet, as Peter said, Judas **"became a guide to those who arrested Jesus"** but still **"he was numbered with us and obtained a part in this ministry"** (Acts 1:16-17). The fact is that **"Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place"** (Acts 1:25). Jesus warned Peter that the same thing could happen to him: **"I say to you that this night,**

before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times” (Matthew 26:34). And that is exactly what did happen. Peter repented and turned to Christ for forgiveness, but Judas did not. Judas’ fall from grace was permanent.

The apostle Paul earnestly warned the Christians of his time against the possibility of falling. He wrote to the Corinthians: **“Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall”** (1 Corinthians 10:12). The Galatians were troubled by false teachers who told them that faith in Christ is not enough for salvation; they must also be circumcised and keep the laws of Moses if they wanted to be saved. Paul wrote these strong words to them: **“I say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace”** (Galatians 5:2-4).

Paul warned the Gentile Christians in Rome that they could fall away just as many of the Jewish Christians had fallen away. He wrote: **“You will say then, ‘Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.’ Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off”** (Romans 11:19-22).

As the apostle Paul awaited his death at the hands of the Roman authorities, he wrote to Timothy: **“All those in Asia have turned away from me, among whom are Phygellus and Hermogenes”** (2 Timothy 1:15). **“Hymenaeus and Philetus ... have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some”** (2 Timothy 2:17-18). **“Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world”** (2 Timothy 4:10).

In the Old Testament there is the sad example of King Saul. He began his rule as a loyal servant of the Lord who had made him king, but in later days it is clear he fell away in spite of repeated warnings from the Lord through His prophet Samuel and through David, who replaced him as king. Surely Saul’s life story, as recounted in 1 Samuel 10-31, is presented to us in Scripture as a warning to believers today.

Despite these clear warnings against the dangers of falling away, John Calvin and the Calvinists have taught and still teach the doctrine that is summarized with the words: **“Once saved, always saved! Once a believer, always a believer!”** The Calvinistic Synod of Dort decreed: **“God, who is rich in mercy, does not entirely take His Holy Spirit away from His own in such deplorable instances, nor does He permit them to lapse to a point where they would fall from the grace of the adoption to sonship and from the state of being justified”** (*Decrees of the Synod of Dort*, chapter 5, #5).

Martin Luther did not agree with this teaching. He wrote: *“Some ... maintain that all who once have received the Spirit or the forgiveness of sin or have become believers, should they sin after that, would still remain in the faith, and such sin would not harm them. ... They say, in addition, that if someone sins after receiving faith and the Spirit, then that person never really had the Spirit and faith. I have encountered many such foolish people, and I am concerned that such a devil is still present in some”* (*Smalcald Articles*, Part III, Article III, *Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, pp. 318-319).

Dangers and temptations that lead to falling away come from many different directions. When we think we are safe from one temptation from Satan, he comes at us in a different way, with the opposite temptation. That is why it is necessary for us to be on guard at all times. It may be persecution, false teaching, pride, the temptations of the flesh, laziness, lack of prayer, the love of money, or worldliness.

The warnings in Scripture against all these sins are many; we must take these warnings seriously. After listing the many sins of the Israelites during their days of wilderness wandering, Paul wrote to the Corinthians: **“Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition”** (1 Corinthians 10:11).

Satan may use persecution to wear down believers and destroy their faith. Jesus said: **“When tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles”** (Matthew 13:21). **“Because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold”** (Matthew 24:12). Therefore Peter says: **“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world”** (1 Peter 5:8-9).

Think of the dangers presented by false teachers. The prophet Jeremiah describes them as those who cause God’s people to stray from God’s ways. **“Behold, I am against those who prophesy false dreams ... and tell them, and cause My people to err by their lies and by their recklessness. Yet I did not send them or command them”** (Jeremiah 23:32). Jesus Himself warned: **“Many false prophets will rise up and deceive many”** (Matthew 24:11). Paul warned against two such false teachers, Hymenaeus and Philetus, saying: **“Their message will spread like cancer. ... They overthrow the faith of some”** (2 Timothy 2:17-18).

False self-confidence and pride in one’s own strength of faith may cause faith to weaken and be threatened, as was the case with Peter, who bragged: **“Even if all are made to stumble because of you, I will never be made to stumble”** (Matthew 26:33). Sometimes Christians fall asleep spiritually in their complacency, and before they realize it, their faith is starved for lack of nourishment, and they slip back into unbelief. **“Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober”** (1 Thessalonians 5:6).

Jealousy and envy led Jesus’ enemies to reject Him, and He was **“grieved by the hardness of their hearts”** (Mark 3:5). Their envy led them to hate Jesus, and finally to persecute and torture Him and finally call for His crucifixion. Do some people turn away from Jesus today because of their religious pride and self-righteousness? Even one-time believers in the Lord may turn away from Him because He in His holiness exposes their sinful hearts. Psalm 95 is directed to **“the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand”**. And what does God say to them? **“Today, if you will hear His voice: do not harden your hearts”** (Psalm 95:7-8). That is what the Israelites did in the wilderness, and so the Lord had to describe them as **“a people who go astray in their hearts”** (Psalm 95:10).

One of the greatest dangers is the believer’s own sinful flesh. Think how King David, who was so highly blessed by God, fell a victim to his own lust for a beautiful woman and ended up committing adultery, deception, murder, and a cover-up that continued for many months. Paul said: **“Sin ... dwells in me”** (Romans 7:20). **“The flesh lusts against the Spirit”** and produces **“the works of the flesh”** that are listed in the fifth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Galatians (Galatians 5:17-21). Paul is writing to believing Christians when he warns: **“Those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God”** (Galatians 5:21). Why would the apostle warn them against these sins if there was no possibility that they could fall into such sins and being led away from their Savior? The Christian is involved in a war with all the forces of evil, and for this war he needs to **“take up the whole armor of God”** (Ephesians 6:13), which includes prayer. **“Continue earnestly in prayer, becoming vigilant in it with thanksgiving”** (Colossians 4:2).

Questions

1. Why is it so important that we endure to the end?
2. How does Jesus' parable teach us that faith in Christ can be lost?
3. Relate the tragic account of Judas Iscariot and his final destiny.
4. How could the Galatians fall from grace?
5. What do Calvinists teach about the possibility of losing faith?
6. Why did Martin Luther oppose the teaching of "once saved, always saved"?
7. What are some of the ways Satan uses to lead Christians astray?
8. Which of these ways poses the greatest danger to your own faith?
9. Which works of the flesh are especially prevalent in your locale?
10. What weapons has our Lord given us to use against Satan and his crowd?



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Lesson 16.2 – The Doctrine of the Election of Grace (Predestination)

How Believers Are Preserved in the Faith

When believers lose their faith and fall from grace, it is their own fault. But when they continue in the faith and remain in grace, this is not to their credit. They owe this entirely to the grace of God. The fact is that we do not and cannot keep ourselves in the faith. It is God who keeps us in the faith. This is an activity of the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace. The apostle Peter praises the Lord for bringing people to faith and for keeping them in that faith. He says that believers in Christ **“are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time”** (1 Peter 1:5). He wrote: **“May the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen”** (1 Peter 5:10-11).

The apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: **“May the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it”** (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24). **“The Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil one”** (2 Thessalonians 3:3).

Paul wrote to the Philippians in a similar way, saying that he was **“confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ”** (Philippians 1:6). **“It is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure”** (Philippians 2:13).

Jesus Himself said concerning His sheep: **“I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father’s hand”** (John 10:28-29).

Just as God calls us by the Gospel and brings us to faith in Him through the means of grace, so also He keeps us in the faith through the same means of grace: the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. Jesus said that the rich man in hell was concerned about his five brothers who were still living on earth. He wanted the beggar Lazarus to rise from the dead and warn them, so that they might not suffer as he was suffering. But he was told: **“They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. ... If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead”** (Luke 16:29, 31). There is nothing more powerful than the Word of God. It is the only things that can bring people to faith in Christ and keep them in that faith.

On the night before He died Jesus told His disciples: **“The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you”** (John 14:26). The Holy Spirit has taught us these things in the words of our New Testament. Jesus said: **“He will guide you into all truth”** (John 16:13). When Peter and John wanted to encourage the Christians in their care and keep them faithful to the Lord, how did they do it? They wrote to them and talked to them; they used the Gospel words of their Master. Peter wrote: **“I have written to you briefly, exhorting and testifying that this is the true grace of God in which you stand”** (1 Peter 5:12). John wrote: **“Having many things to write to you, I did not wish to do so with paper and ink; but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, that our joy may be full”** (2 John 12). The tools the Holy Spirit uses to keep us in the faith so that we persevere to the end are the Gospel words of encouragement and comfort that are written in the Bible (and in books based on the Bible) and

spoken face-to-face by one Christian to another. Through written and spoken means the Holy Spirit keeps us **“mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior”** (2 Peter 3:2). Since baptism and the Lord’s Supper are Gospel sacraments that convey the forgiveness of sins won by Christ, the Holy Spirit also uses these sacraments to sustain our faith in Christ.

In and of ourselves we are helpless, for, as the prophet Jeremiah says, **“the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked”** (Jeremiah 17:9). But our faithful God in His governance of the universe controls all temptations that confront us and He protects us against our own sinful flesh. The psalmist David teaches us to look to our God for help, when he prays: **“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me”** (Psalm 51:10-11). It is God who must work in us to keep us faithful. Therefore we pray to Him: **“Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes, and I shall keep it to the end. Give me understanding, and I shall keep Your law; indeed, I shall observe it with my whole heart. Make me walk in the path of Your commandments, for I delight in it. Incline my heart to Your testimonies, and not to covetousness”** (Psalm 119:33-36).

The apostle Paul tells us: **“No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear”** (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Because our God keeps us in the faith through the Gospel, we need to focus at all times on the salvation God has worked for us through Christ and His precious Gospel promises, especially as we face all the difficulties of the Christian life. We can say with Paul: **“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: ‘For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.’ Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, no powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord”** (Romans 8:35-39).

Questions

1. Who is it that preserves believers in their faith in Christ?
2. Why is it that they cannot keep themselves in this faith?
3. What does God use to preserve us in the true faith?
4. Prove from Scripture your answer to the previous question.
5. How did the apostles Peter and John encourage the Christians in their care?
6. Whose fault is it when believers lose their faith?
7. Explain why believers should not take the credit themselves for continuing in the faith.



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Lesson 16.3 – The Doctrine of the Election of Grace (Predestination)

The Scriptural Basis for the Doctrine of the Election of Grace (Predestination)

We have already learned from God's Word that it is impossible for any person to save themselves or to contribute anything towards their salvation. We have learned from God's Word that we are saved by God's grace alone through the redemption of Christ. We have learned from God's Word that it is the Holy Spirit who brings us to faith in Christ through the means of grace. The blessed doctrine that God chose us to be His before time began underscores and establishes these truths. This doctrine of God's election of grace in eternity (or predestination) is specifically taught in many Scripture passages and alluded to in many others. Let us now consider this doctrine that is intended to strengthen a Christian's faith and comfort him, especially in times of tribulation and temptation.

Already in the Old Testament God told His people of Israel that they did not deserve to be His people. God's choosing them was entirely a matter of His grace (His undeserved and unmerited love). As the people were about to enter the promised land of Canaan Moses addressed them: **"You are a holy people to the LORD your God: the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt"** (Deuteronomy 7:6-8). Notice that the reason God gives for His choosing them is that He loves them, and that He is determined to keep His promises to their fathers. There is nothing in them or about them that led God to choose them as His people instead of choosing some other nation or people. God loves because He loves; there is no other reason.

Later in the same address Moses said to them: **"Do not think in your heart, after the LORD your God has cast them out (the peoples of Canaan) before you, saying, 'Because of my righteousness the LORD has brought me in to possess this land': but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is driving them out from before you. It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you go in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD your God drives them out from before you, and that He may fulfill the word which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Therefore understand that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stiff-necked people"** (Deuteronomy 9:4-6). God's choice (or election) of Israel as His people was entirely a matter of God's grace.

What was true of God's Old Testament people is also true of God's New Testament people, His Church, which is made up of those who trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin. The congregation in Corinth was in danger of considering themselves better than others because of the many spiritual gifts they had been given. The apostle Paul therefore reminds them: **"Who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?"** (1 Corinthians 4:7). Believers are no better than others by nature. Whatever gifts they have are just that: gifts received from a gracious God. They have nothing to boast of or to be proud of except God's grace.

God's choice to bring these Corinthians and others to faith in Christ was entirely a matter of grace. Paul tells them: **"God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence. But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God – and righteousness and sanctification and redemption – that, as it is written, 'He who glories, let him glory in the LORD'"** (1 Corinthians 1:27-31).

Why is it that at times almost all those who are called Christians go astray and yet there are some who remain faithful? This happened in Israel's Old Testament history time and time again. Most of the people fell into idolatry and other gross sins and forgot their God. Yet there were some who remained faithful. Were they better than the rest? Paul answers: **"Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace"** (Romans 11:5-6). The election of grace is entirely by grace; there is nothing in us that causes God to choose us.

There are two longer sections of Scripture that tell us almost all we need to know about God's election of grace. We consider first the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. After his brief introduction Paul writes: **"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved"** (Ephesians 1:3-6).

First of all, Paul praises God for the spiritual blessings God has given to the Christians in Ephesus. The Gospel of Christ had been brought to them and they accepted it. They now knew that God loved them and gave them a Savior from sin, and that their sins were forgiven. But then he tells them something very wonderful indeed. He tells them that these spiritual blessings they now enjoy in time were actually theirs already from eternity. God had chosen them to be His before the world was made, He had chosen them in eternity, and in His grace, He determined to give them a Savior and to bring them to faith in that Savior through the Gospel. God predestined them to be His adopted sons and daughters by faith in Christ Jesus. They are not being praised for these blessings, but God is being praised, because all of these blessings (whether in time or eternity) come because of God's grace and God's grace alone.

Paul continues: **"In Him (Christ) we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence, having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth – in Him. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things, according to the counsel of His will, that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory"** (Ephesians 1:7-12). We should not be praised for the fact that we trust in Christ because our faith is not something we produce. God must get all the praise, because what He planned in eternity for us in Christ He carried out in time, according to His good will and pleasure. He is the Giver; we are nothing but receivers.

The other long section in Scripture that deals with the election of grace is the 8th chapter of Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome. This chapter has to do with the sufferings and troubles that Christians endure in this life. Things sometimes get so confusing and troubling that we do not even know what to pray for. We begin to think that we are not going to be able to persevere in our faith, and we long for relief from the problems of life. In such situations Paul first reminds us of the presence of the Holy

Spirit within us who intercedes for us when we do not know what to pray for, and we can be sure His intercessions for us will be accepted.

Then Paul shows us the comfort and assurance that is ours in the doctrine of the election of grace (predestination). First he says: **“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose”** (Romans 8:28). He is talking about believers in Christ. They are the ones who love God because they know God first loved them. After all, God called them. That is, God brought the Good News of Christ to them. They learned that God loved them and sent His Son as the Lamb of God taking away the sin of the world. Through the Gospel the Holy Spirit not only invited them to put their trust in Christ, but also persuaded and convinced them to believe it.

We have an example of how the Holy Spirit does His calling in the report of the work done by the apostle Paul in the book of Acts. When Paul came to Thessalonica he **“went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ.’ And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas”** (Acts 17:2-4).

We read in Romans 8 that these who were persuaded were **“the called according to His purpose”**. This introduces the topic of predestination. For God’s eternal purpose was to call them to faith in Christ, and what He purposed in eternity He carried out in time. For Paul explains God’s purpose like this: **“For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these he also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?”** (Romans 8:29-31).

Paul speaks of five steps or stages: two before the calling and two after the calling. The called are those whom the Holy Spirit has brought to faith in Christ through the Gospel. Those who have been called should know that their calling is a result of two things that preceded their being called. The first is that God foreknew them or chose them in love before time began. The second is that God predestined them to be His children. Each individual Christian should say to himself: “I believe Jesus died for my sins. This means that God knew me from eternity and chose to bring me to faith in Christ. Not only did He foreknow me in love; He predestined me to be a member of His family of believers, who have the image of God being restored in them. Thus, God chose me to be a brother or sister of Christ Himself, a member of the holy family of God.”

The called should then realize that since God foreknew and predestined them from eternity to be His, God will continue to concern Himself with them in love and fulfill what He began. After being called, the Christian immediately receives the justification (the forgiveness) that Christ has provided for all sinners. We are declared righteous in the sight of God. This is true of every person who believes in Jesus. Everyone who is called by the Gospel is also declared righteous and has the forgiveness of sins. Then we should realize that since the first four steps have already taken place, the fifth one is inevitable, and we can count on it: **“These He also glorified.”** As far as God is concerned, it is already done. The glory of being children of God is already ours by faith, and the glory that is promised for the hereafter is a sure thing, no matter how many difficulties, problems, tragedies, and persecutions we have endured and must still endure before the full glory of eternal life arrives.

Listen to Paul’s concluding words in this chapter: **“If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us”** (Romans 8:31-34). Those who believe in Jesus should know they are God’s elect, God’s chosen ones – God’s chosen ones from eternity.

This does not mean our life on earth will be easy. Paul himself was subjected to extreme persecution, and he knew the Christians in Rome would certainly experience many difficulties as well. But their knowledge that God predestined them in Christ would help sustain them to the end. So he asks: **“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: ‘For Your sake we are killed all day long: we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.’ Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord”** (Romans 8:35-39).

After warning the Thessalonians about the coming Antichrist, the apostle Paul wrote to them: **“We are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our Gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14). Notice how God carried out His choice to save them. He called them by the Gospel. He sent the Holy Spirit to work in their hearts so that they would believe the truth about Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life.

God wants everyone who has been called by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel to believe that they are one of the elect and to call themselves elect, God’s chosen ones. The apostle Peter writes to all the Christians in his care: **“You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light”** (1 Peter 2:9). He addresses his readers as **“elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ”** (1 Peter 1:2).

The apostle Paul addresses the Christians in Colosse in the same way, calling them **“the elect of God, holy and beloved”** (Colossians 3:12). He uses the expression **“God’s elect”** in his letter to Titus (Titus 1:1). In his second letter to Timothy he writes: **“I endure all things for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory”** (2 Timothy 2:10).

Jesus Himself used the same expression in His explanation of the parable of the widow and the unjust judge. If even the unjust judge finally helps a persistent widow who continually keeps asking him for help, **“Shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily”** (Luke 18:7-8). In speaking of the many tribulations to be endured when Jerusalem and its temple would be destroyed, Jesus said: **“Unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened. ... For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect”** (Matthew 24:22-24). God’s chosen ones, His elect, will be preserved through all tribulations, for **“His angels ... will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other”** (Matthew 24:31).

Because Jesus’ sheep are safe in the hands of the Savior and His Father and are being preserved for the ultimate glory of heaven, we can say with Paul: **“Our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body”** (Philippians 3:20-21). Since we are citizens of heaven, Paul urges us: **“Seek those things which are above. ... Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth”** (Colossians 3:1-2).

The patriarchs of old (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) already considered themselves **“strangers and pilgrims on the earth”** and were looking forward to **“a heavenly country”** (Hebrews 11:13, 16). And so we Christians, as citizens of heaven, have already **“come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just**

men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant” (Hebrews 12:22-24). Since the Holy Spirit has called us by the Gospel and made us spiritually alive, we can say already now that God has **“raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,”** but in **“the ages to come”** He will **“show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus”** (Ephesians 2:5-7).

Because of God’s election of grace which He carried out in time we can have the confidence of Paul and say: **“The Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for His heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen!”** (2 Timothy 4:18).

Questions

1. What is meant by the election of grace?
2. When did this election take place?
3. Why is it called the election of grace?
4. Why is it called predestination?
5. On what basis were the children of Israel chosen to be God's people?
6. What is the only thing we really have that we can boast about as Christians?
7. Which statements teach the election of grace in Ephesians?
8. Which is the central statement in Paul's list of five in Romans 8?
9. What should we conclude about the past if we have been called by the Gospel?
10. What should we conclude about the future if we have been called by the Gospel?
11. How does the Holy Spirit carry out our election on this earth in time?
12. Why should we call ourselves strangers and pilgrims on earth?



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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?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 16.5 – The Doctrine of the Election of Grace (Predestination)

Other Related Questions

It is important that we clearly understand the meaning of the word “foreknowledge” and the way it is used in Romans 8. The Bible teaches that God knows everything that will come to pass in the future as though it had already occurred. This is probably the most common understanding of what this word means. From eternity God has known absolutely everything that has happened in time from creation to the present time, as well as what will happen from the present time to the end of the world. Job said to God: **“Since his days are determined, the number of his months is with You”** (Job 14:5). When the prophet Daniel was asked to tell King Nebuchadnezzar his dream and its meaning, he said to him: **“There is a God in heaven who reveals secrets, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days”** (Daniel 2:28). Jesus’ brother James testified at a meeting of Christians in Jerusalem: **“Known to God from eternity are all His works”** (Acts 15:18). It is because of this foreknowledge of God that He is able to make prophecies concerning the future that always come to pass exactly as He prophesied. This is the way God distinguished Himself from the gods of the heathen.

Nevertheless, the word **“foreknew”** in Romans 8:29 does not simply mean that God knew something ahead of time. If that were its meaning, then when the text says: **“Whom God foreknew”**, it would in that case refer to every person in the entire world, for God knows everyone in advance. But not everyone ends up in glory, i.e. is **“glorified”**, which is what Romans 8:30 states will happen to those **“whom God foreknew”**. Instead, the word **“foreknew”** in Romans 8:29 and in other places in Scripture has the meaning of “making a choice in love”, just as the word “know” in the Bible often means more than just plain knowledge. It includes the ideas of emotion and choice. For that reason, we explained the word **“foreknew”** in Romans 8:29 as meaning that God in love chose certain persons from eternity to be His, and He then predestined these same persons to be members of His holy family. These are the ones He then called by the Gospel to learn of Jesus’ sacrificial death for the world and to come to faith in Jesus. It was God’s choice to bring them the Gospel and persuade them to believe it, and all of this was by grace, without any original desire on their part to accept God’s offer. In other words, they were unable to cooperate in their own conversion; their conversion was entirely a matter of grace. In summary, God knows in advance everyone in the whole world from eternity, but in the sense of Romans 8:29 God **“foreknew”** only some persons whom He then predestined, called, justified, and glorified.

The Greek word translated **“foreknew”** (*proginōskō* προγινώσκω) in Romans 8:29 does not mean “to know in advance” in an intellectual way but “to know in advance” in a loving or emotional way. The apostle Peter uses the word in the same way when he calls the Christians to whom he is writing **“elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father”** (1 Peter 1:2). So also Paul wrote: **“God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew”** (Romans 11:2).

There are others who have misunderstood the word **“foreknew”** in another way. They have understood the apostle Paul as saying that God saw ahead of time which persons would believe in Jesus when the Gospel was brought to them, and these persons that God foresaw to be believers are the ones that God then chose to be His own. But this is to add words to Scripture that are not there. They understand Paul to be saying: “Whom God foreknew as believers in Christ, these are the ones He predestined and chose as His.” But the words “as believers in Christ” are not in the text.

Did God choose certain persons to be His own because He saw that they were going to believe the Gospel? In other words, was their future faith in Jesus (which God could see ahead of time) the reason or cause for God to elect or choose them? This may make some sense to our human thinking, but it is not the teaching of Scripture. We read in Acts 13:48: **“As many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.”** Notice that God’s appointing to eternal life is the cause of their faith. It is not the other way around, their faith is not the cause of God’s appointing them. Even some Lutherans misunderstood Paul’s words and taught that God chooses or elects persons to be His “in view of their faith”, even though Scripture does not teach this. In fact this idea is even contrary to our Lutheran confessions, which plainly teach that God’s election is the cause of our faith in Jesus, and not the other way around.

What we teach and confess as confessional Lutherans is contrary to both Calvinists and Arminians. The Calvinists teach that we are saved by grace alone, but they deny the equally Biblical teaching of universal grace. The Arminians teach universal grace, but they deny the equally Biblical teaching that we are saved by grace alone. Both Calvinists and Arminians claim that one must choose between “grace alone” or “universal grace”. They say that one cannot reasonably teach both, because the one teaching seems to contradict the other. But since both concepts are clearly taught in Scripture, we, as confessional, Lutherans teach both: salvation by grace alone and universal grace. It is not our task to harmonize Bible doctrines to make them easier for our human reason, but simply to believe, teach, and confess what God teaches us in His Word.

In our work as ambassadors for Christ we should follow the order of Paul’s letter to the Romans. The main thing is the Gospel of Jesus, as Paul says in Romans 1:16. As preparation for the Gospel, we proclaim God’s condemning law, as Paul does in Romans 1:18 – 3:20. Then Paul goes into detail regarding the Gospel itself, the Gospel of universal grace (Romans 3:24), emphasizing that the only way to receive the Gospel is by faith, not by works (Romans 3:21 – 5:21). The freedom that we have in Christ is explained in Romans 6 – 8. It is only when he speaks of the persecutions and troubles endured by Christians that he brings up the doctrine of election in Romans 8. Thus, the purpose of the doctrine of election is to strengthen our faith in our gracious God and thus preserve us in this faith to the end. Our personal faith in Christ is not the result of chance nor of our own choice but the result of God’s plan for us from eternity.

In Romans 9-11 Paul deals with the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the Christian Church, and in his final chapters (Romans 12-16) he shows how the Gospel of God’s grace affects and changes the way we live as Christians. Rightly taught, the doctrine of election does not lead to carnal security. In Scripture the doctrine is used in order to encourage the living of the Christian life. Paul wrote to the Colossians: **“Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do”** (Colossians 3:12-13).

When we are talking to the general public, including unbelievers, we do not introduce the topic of election, but we present the Gospel of God’s love for all sinners, as demonstrated by His coming into the world and suffering and dying for all on the cross, as well as His glorious resurrection. We call on individual sinners to recognize that since Jesus died for the world, He died also for them. We encourage them, we **“plead”** with them and **“implore”** them to accept God’s gift of forgiveness in Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:20). Afterwards, when believers are troubled by all their difficulties, we present the doctrine of election to assure them that since God has brought them to faith in Jesus, this means that God has chosen them from eternity to be His, that He will be with them and sustain them in this faith to the end, and that we should therefore put our trust in Him. In this way we are teaching the doctrine of election in its proper place.

The *Formula of Concord* of 1577 has an article that explains election according to Scripture, without falling into the ditches of Calvinism or Arminianism on either side of the true path. We present a few

quotations here: *“God’s foreknowledge is nothing else than that God knows all things before they happen. ... This foreknowledge extends equally over godly people and evil people, but it is not a cause of evil. ... Predestination, however, or God’s eternal election, extends only to the righteous, God-pleasing children of God. It is a cause of their salvation, which God brings about. ... This election ... is to be sought in the Word. ... However, the Word of God leads us to Christ. ... This Christ calls all sinners to Himself and promises them refreshment. He is utterly serious in His desire that all people should come to Him. ... He offers Himself to them in the Word. ... He wants no one to be lost but rather that everyone repent and believe on the Lord Christ. ... Paul first of all points people to repentance, acknowledgment of their sins, and then to faith in Christ and obedience to God before he speaks of the mystery of God’s eternal election. ... The reason for condemnation lies in their not hearing God’s Word at all or arrogantly despising it. ... The fault lies not with God and His election but with their own wickedness. ... In Christ we are to seek the Father’s eternal election. He has decreed in His eternal, divine counsel that He will save no one apart from those who acknowledge His Son Christ and truly believe in Him. ... We have a glorious comfort in this salutary teaching, that we know how we have been chosen for eternal life in Christ out of sheer grace, without any merit of our own, and that no one can tear us out of His hand”* (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert edition, pp. 517-518).

Because of a serious controversy among American Lutherans concerning the doctrine of election, confessional Lutherans drew up the *Brief Statement* of 1932, in which the doctrine of election is summarized in this way: *“All those who by the grace of God alone, for Christ’s sake, through the means of grace, are brought to faith, are justified, sanctified, and preserved in faith here in time ... have already from eternity been endowed by God with faith, justification, sanctification, and preservation in faith, and this for the same reason, namely, by grace alone, for Christ’s sake, and by way of the means of grace”* (Brief Statement of 1932: #35).

Questions

1. What does the word “foreknowledge” usually mean?
2. What does “foreknew” mean in Romans 8:29?
3. Which statement is true? Explain your answer.
One: Faith is the cause of election.
Two: Election is the cause of faith.
4. Which statement is true? Explain your answer.
One: Faith comes before election.
Two: Election comes before faith.
5. What teaching is denied by the Calvinists?
6. What teaching is denied by the Arminians?
7. In what way does confessional Lutheranism disagree with both Calvinism and Arminianism?
8. Which teachings of God's Word should we present first to unbelievers?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 16.6 – The Doctrine of the Election of Grace (Predestination)

The Hardening of Hearts

When the Lord, in His grace, brings the Gospel to us in Word and Sacrament, it is important for us to pay close attention to His words and accept what He is offering us. The Holy Spirit warns us in Psalm 95: **“Today, if you will hear His voice: do not harden your hearts”** (Psalm 95:7-8). We do not know how many opportunities for hearing the Gospel we will have in our lives. For this reason, it is urgent that we take hold of God’s promise of forgiveness as soon as we hear it. The apostle Paul explained: **“We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain. ... Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation”** (2 Corinthians 6:1-2).

God is patient and longsuffering, as His Word tells us many times, but eventually we reach the point when His patience comes to an end. It is good for us not to put God to the test in order to see how long we can put Him off before listening to His Word. This continuing resistance to God’s Word is called hardening of the heart against what God says.

When the children of Israel were slaves in Egypt, God told Moses to go to the Pharaoh of Egypt, the mighty ruler of the land, and give him God’s order that he should let his Israelite slaves go free. So Moses and his brother Aaron **“went in and told Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD God of Israel: “Let My people go”’** (Exodus 5:1). The Pharaoh responded by saying: **“Who is the LORD, that I should obey His voice”** (Exodus 5:2). This was the first time the Pharaoh resisted the Lord’s command.

Moses and Aaron continued to present the Lord’s demand to Pharaoh, but he kept on resisting. In response God sent ten plagues on Egypt, and after each plague Pharaoh had opportunity to obey the Lord. But in each case, even though he at first promised that he would do so, he changed his mind as soon as the plague came to an end. He refused to let God’s people go. Over and over again, the book of Exodus reports: **“Pharaoh’s heart grew hard”** (Exodus 7:13). **“He hardened his heart”** (Exodus 8:15). **“Pharaoh’s heart grew hard”** (Exodus 8:19). **“Pharaoh hardened his heart at this time also”** (Exodus 8:32).

Finally, after this went on for some time, we read in Exodus: **“The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh”** (Exodus 9:12). When we sinners harden our hearts against God and refuse to listen to His Word, the time may come when God hardens our hearts as a judgment against our hardening our hearts against Him. When God hardens our hearts, this means that God’s patience has come to an end, and there is no more opportunity for us to repent of our sins. In other words, our time of grace has come to an end already in this life.

Thus, the Bible teaches that God at His own time and in His own way hardens the hearts of some who harden their hearts against Him and despise His Word. God, however, is very patient and forbearing towards these enemies of His, as we can see from the history of the Pharaoh of Egypt at the time of Moses (very likely Amenhotep II) and Judas Iscariot.

Jesus told His disciples why He spoke to the people in parables. **“Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: ‘Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing you will see and not perceive; for the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed’”** (Matthew 13:13-15). Our hardening of our hearts

is sometimes followed by God's hardening of our hearts so that we may hear the words of the Gospel but not really hear or understand them.

Is there some way we can tell in advance how long we can harden our hearts before God hardens them? This is something we cannot know. The apostle Paul says: **"Whom He wills He hardens"** (Romans 9:18). Those whom He hardens have no right to complain. Paul says: **"God ... endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction"** (Romans 9:22). Notice that Paul does not say **"prepared beforehand"** (Romans 9:23) with regard to those whose hearts are hardened. But he does say: **"The rest were blinded. Just as it is written: 'God has given them a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see and ears that they should not hear, to this very day'"** (Romans 11:7-8).

It is important that we realize that God's hardening of hearts comes about as a response and a judgment on man's resistance to His Word. It remains true, as we have said before, that **"The Lord ... is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance"** (2 Peter 3:9).

We cannot with our human minds fully understand all the ways of God, such as His eternal election and His hardening of hearts. The human mind asks questions like: Why does God seem to be more patient with some than with others? Why is that some hear the Gospel and are brought to faith while others hear the same Gospel and resist it?

All unbelievers are equally dead in sins when they come into this world. God wants to save them all, and Jesus died for all. Yet only some are brought to faith in Christ, even though God wants all to repent and be saved. At the same time those who are converted are just as sinful and naturally dead in sins as those who are unconverted.

We need to teach what God has told us in His Word, even though we cannot fully understand it. We must say that all who are saved are saved by God's grace alone. All who are lost are lost through their own fault, even though God earnestly desires the salvation of all and Jesus died for all. Our answer to any objection to God's ways must be simply this: **"O man, who are you to reply against God?"** (Romans 9:20). **"Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! 'For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor? Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to Him?' For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen"** (Romans 11:33-36).

Questions

1. What is meant by the hardening of hearts?
2. When does God harden people's hearts?
3. Which came first:
 Pharaoh hardened his heart
 or
 God hardened Pharaoh's heart?
4. What was one reason for Jesus' speaking in parables?
5. Why should we be satisfied with God's teachings even if we can't fully understand them?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 16.7 – The Doctrine of the Election of Grace (Predestination)

The Mystical Union between God and Believers in Christ

The doctrine of the election of grace is a source of great comfort and strength for believers in Christ. Another teaching of God's Word that gives comfort and strength to believers is the teaching that God Himself (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) makes His home in the hearts of all believers in Christ. This teaching is known as the mystical union between God and believers in Christ.

Since there are other unions that are spoken of in Scripture, it is important that we are clear on the differences between these other unions and this mystical union between God and Christians. The apostle Paul told the Athenians that there is a kind of union between God and all persons on earth. This union is a union between the Creator and Preserver of all human beings with the human beings He created. Paul quoted one of the heathen poets who truthfully said: **"We are also His offspring"** (Acts 17:28). Because God **"gives to all life, breath, and all things"** (Acts 17:25), it is true of all human beings that **"He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being"** (Acts 17:27-28). No one, believer or unbeliever, can make a single move or breathe a single breath without the creative and preserving power of God at work within us. We can call this the general cooperation of God with all human beings. We studied this union in chapter 5 on preservation or providence.

Another union that the Bible teaches is the personal union of the two natures in Christ. Jesus is both true God and true man at the same time, and yet He is not two persons but one person. We studied this union in detail in chapter 6 on Christology.

There is also a union between the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper with Christ's own body and blood. This union is known as the sacramental union. This means that as we are partaking of the bread, we are also partaking of the Lord's body, and as we are partaking of the wine, we are also partaking of the Lord's blood. For there is a **"communion"** or fellowship between the material and spiritual elements of the Lord's Supper. We studied this union in chapter 11 on the Lord's Supper.

We also want to distinguish the mystical union of Christ with His believers from other types of mysticism, such as the concept of pantheism, which makes no distinction between the Creator and His creation. Pantheism says that God is all and that all is God. There are other mystical ideas that have been imagined in the minds of men that bear little or no resemblance to the teachings of Scripture. We must be careful not to add or subtract from what God Himself tells us about this mystical union on the pages of holy Scripture.

We consider first the teaching of Jesus Himself, as He consoled His disciples on that Thursday evening before His arrest. After instituting the Lord's Supper in the presence of His twelve apostles, He had a long discussion with them, as recorded in chapters 14-16 of John's Gospel. This is followed by His high priestly prayer, recorded in chapter 17. There are many references to the mystical union in these chapters.

After speaking of the union between Himself and the Father (**"I am in the Father, and the Father in Me"** – John 14:10-11), Jesus went on to say: **"I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever – the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you"** (John 14:16-17). Then Jesus said to them: **"At that day you will know that I am in My Father,**

and you in Me, and I in you" (John 14:20). In response to a question from His apostle named Judas (not Iscariot) Jesus then said: **"If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word: and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make our home with him"** (John 14:23). The context indicates that **"We"** refers at least to God the Father and God the Son, and possibly also God the Holy Spirit as well, since the Holy Spirit was mentioned in a previous verse. Notice that the union Jesus is talking about is a union between God and those who love Jesus and keep (that is, treasure) His word.

In the fifteenth chapter of John's Gospel we find Jesus using the picture of a vine and its branches to explain the union between Himself and those who believe in Him. **"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing"** (John 15:4-5). The fruit spoken of here is the good that is accomplished by those who are mystically connected to Christ, as the branches are connected to the vine. Without this connection there can be no good fruit. As believers are in Christ, so also Christ is in them, giving them the power and strength to do what is actually good in the sight of God. **"Without faith it is impossible to please Him"** (Hebrews 11:6).

In His prayer to His heavenly Father that followed this discussion with His apostles, Jesus also referred to this mystical union. He prayed: **"I do not pray for these (apostles) alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me"** (John 17:20-23). Notice that as Jesus dwells in each believer individually, and the believers are joined not only to Christ but to one another, as they participate in this mystical union with Christ and God. Since Father, Son, and Holy Spirit dwell in each believer in Christ, so each believer is joined to every other believer, so that all believers together make up a temple of God, the dwelling place of the Most High. This union cannot be seen, even as faith in the heart is not seen, but it is a spiritual reality that we can take comfort in and rejoice in and believe in.

Another illustration that Jesus used to explain the mystical union is the picture of a person eating and drinking. Every believer in Jesus is like a man being sustained by eating Christ's flesh and drinking His blood. Jesus said: **"Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me"** (John 6:54-57). Jesus is not referring to the Lord's Supper in these words, and they cannot be understood in that way. Jesus is referring to faith in Him and faith in His saving flesh and His saving blood as the connection between Him and His believers so that they are in Jesus and Jesus is in them.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians: **"Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me"** (Galatians 2:20). Everyone who trusts in the Son of God who gave Himself on the cross to take away our sins can have the same confidence that Paul had and say with Paul: **"Christ lives in me."** For that reason, Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth: **"Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price"** (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

In his letter to the Romans Paul makes a distinction between **"those who are in the flesh"** (unbelievers) and those who are **"in the Spirit"** (believers in Christ). He writes: **"Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His. And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you"** (Romans 8:8-11).

Paul prayed for the Ephesian Christians **“that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height – and to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God”** (Ephesians 3:16-19).

There is no way we can attain this presence of God in us through some kind of mystical experience by incantation or ceremony or ritual. Since faith comes by the hearing of God’s Word, and this mystical union with God is a gift to all believers in Christ, the Holy Spirit is the One who comes to us through the means of grace, bringing Christ and His Father with Him. Because Christ is in every believer and every believer is in Christ, what Jesus will say on Judgment Day to His believers is certainly true: **“Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me”** (Matthew 25:40). And when Paul was the Pharisee Saul, attempting to persecute believers in Christ, the risen Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus and told him: **“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? ... I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting”** (Acts 9:4-5).

Our Lutheran confession, the *Formula of Concord*, points out that *“this indwelling is a result of the righteousness of faith which precedes it”* (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 572). We should not put our trust for salvation in this indwelling of Christ and the Holy Spirit, but we should put our trust for salvation in Christ’s obedience for us in His life, death, and resurrection. It is through what Christ did for us in His life and death that we are forgiven and enjoy the promise of eternal life. But in times of tribulation and persecution it is a comfort for us to know both that God chose us to be His from eternity and promises to be with us to the end, and that God Himself at the present time is living in us.

Questions

1. What is meant by the mystical union between God and believers in Christ?
2. What is the difference between this mystical union and the cooperation of God with all persons on earth?
3. Prove from Scripture that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit dwell in the believers in Christ.
4. Explain what Jesus meant by the picture of the vine and branches.
5. Explain what Jesus meant by the picture of eating the bread of life.
6. In what way is every believer in Christ a temple of the living God?
7. Why did the risen Christ say to Paul that Paul was persecuting Him?
8. How should we use the mystical union in our daily lives?