

§ 11. Doctrine of Salvation

Lecture 1

The Doctrine of Election

Today we begin a new locus, or section, in our survey of Christian doctrine. Some of you may remember that years ago when we first began this course I said we would be structuring our material along the lines of the so-called *loci communes* of classical Protestant theology. These *loci communes* were the chief places or chief themes of Protestant scholastic theology. They would include things like the doctrine of revelation, the doctrine of God, the doctrine of creation, the doctrine of man, the doctrine of Christ, and so forth. And we've surveyed these so far. Today we come to a new section in our course on the doctrine of salvation. This locus lies at the very heart of Christian theology. Because it addresses the problem that we've already been discussing; namely, our sin and guilt before a holy and righteous God, and how God has chosen to deal with it in order to bring about our salvation.

As with every aspect of Christian doctrine, the doctrine of salvation is also a matter of controversy. So we want to begin by looking at the doctrine of election, first from a Calvinist point of view and then an Arminian point of view. I am not going to be discussing the original views of the Swiss Reformer John Calvin or the Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius. This isn't an attempt to do historical theology. Rather we are going to look at what passes under their names in theology today which is done in a Calvinist mode or in an Arminian mode. What we will do is look at a couple of key New Testament passages, first from a Calvinistic perspective and then also from an Arminian perspective and see the difference in the way that these two schools of thought interpret these key passages.

Let's begin with the doctrine of election from a Calvinistic point of view. Here I would like you to turn to Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, chapter one. We'll just read verses three to six. Ephesians 1:3-6, Paul writes,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

Let's break down the various features of election as here described.

First, the *source* of our election is God the Father. In verse 3, Paul speaks of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and it is he who has chosen us. So election has its source in God the Father. He is the one who chooses those to be saved.

Second, the *sphere* in which election takes place is Christ. Paul says in verse 4, “he chose us in him,” that is, in Christ. So election is something that takes place “in Christ.” We are elect insofar as we are in him.

When did this election take place? Well, Paul says God chose us in Christ “before the foundation of the world.” So before God ever created the universe, as described in Genesis 1:1, he had already chosen us to be holy and blameless before him and to be his children through Jesus Christ. So from eternity past this decision has already been made. It is not something lately arrived upon by God the Father, but it is an eternal decision that precedes the very foundations of the world, the creation of the universe.

What is the *purpose* of this election? Paul says it is “that we should be holy and blameless before him,” and also to be “his sons through Jesus Christ.” Finally, Paul says it is for God’s glory (in verse 6) “to the praise of his glorious grace.” So the purpose of election is that we might be holy and blameless before God, adopted as his children, to the praise of God’s glory.

What is the *motive* for election? Why did God do this? The motive is love. Paul says that he “destined us in love” to be his sons through Jesus Christ. So election is something that is motivated by God’s love, and it is that love that leads him to elect and save certain persons.

Finally, what is the *basis* of God’s election? It is simply his will. Notice that Paul says he destined us in love “according to the purpose of his will.” It is simply God’s free choice to elect whom he wishes. Therefore, election is unconditional. It is not something that we can merit; it is not something that we can bring about through our actions. This is a decision that was unconditionally made by God according to his free will prior to the creation of the universe, before we ever existed. Look at what Paul says in verses 11-12 of Ephesians 1, “In him, according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will, we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory.” Notice that God is described as the one who accomplishes *all things* according to the counsel of his will. So the ultimate basis of election is simply God’s sovereign free choice to elect those whom he chooses to salvation.

Let’s now turn to Paul’s letter to the Romans 8:28-30. Here Paul says,

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Notice that, according to this passage, God's predestination is based on his foreknowledge. In verse 29, Paul says "those whom he foreknew" he predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.

Now, non-Calvinists will sometimes say that this shows that God looks into the future, so to speak, and sees the free decision of those who would believe in Christ, and seeing how they would freely decide, he then predestines them. But such a view makes predestination look like a sort of fifth wheel – it doesn't really do anything! It doesn't bear any weight. God looks into the future and sees that certain people will freely believe in Christ. But then if they will believe in Christ, there is no need for predestination. They will believe in Christ even "before" God predestines them! So predestination on this view doesn't really do anything. Foreknowledge of our free decisions tells God what is going to happen, and predestination becomes a sort of superfluous exercise on God's part.

But surely there's more to the doctrine of God's predestination than that! That doesn't seem to capture what is involved in God's sovereign election of certain persons. The Calvinist will say that if the object of God's foreknowledge is in fact people's faith, then that faith is itself a sovereign gift of God. God sees that he will bestow saving faith on certain persons, so that what he foresees is, in effect, his own act of bestowing saving faith on those whom he has chosen.

Let's look at some scriptural passages in support of this interpretation. First, John 3:3-8. This is Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus,

Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit."

There's something of a pun here in Jesus' words because the Greek word for "wind" is the same as the word for "spirit." Jesus says the wind blows wherever it wills; you cannot control the wind. You don't know where it comes from; you don't know where it's going. Similarly, he says, it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. The Spirit blows upon whom he wills in order to bring about regeneration and new life.

Turn over to John 6:44-45, Jesus says,

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, “And they shall all be taught by God.” Every one who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.

Here Jesus ascribes the drawing power of God the Father upon people to bring them to Christ. Apart from this work of God the Father, people will never come to Christ. But if he does draw them, then they will assuredly come to saving faith in Christ.

Look at verse 65 of that same chapter as well. Jesus says, “This is why I told you no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.” If God the Father grants that someone should come to Christ, then he assuredly will come; but on the other hand, if it is not granted to someone to come to Christ by the Father, then that person cannot come to Christ. The sovereign decision lies with God the Father.

Look at Paul’s letter to the Ephesians 2:8. Here Paul says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God.” So salvation is not something that you work out yourself. It is from God. He is the one who works it out. That’s why, as Paul goes on to say in verse 9, there is no room for boasting.

Finally, 1 Peter 1:2. The author addresses the exiles of the Jewish dispersion in various places in Asia Minor, whom he describes as “chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood.” Here all three of the persons of the Trinity are involved. It is God the Father who chooses and destines certain persons. It is the Holy Spirit who sanctifies them for obedience to Jesus Christ.

So, returning to Romans 8:28, even if it is true that God looks into the future and sees people’s faith in Christ and predestines them on that basis, still this faith is itself not a human work. It is not something that any natural man can generate. It is itself the result of God’s effectual work in that person.

Next time we’ll continue our discussion of Calvinism before looking at an Arminian perspective on these same passages. Until that time, may God guide you and bless you throughout the coming week.¹

¹ □ Total Running Time: 18:01 (Copyright © 2020 William Lane Craig)