

**§ 11. Doctrine of Salvation**  
**Lecture 3**  
**Regeneration and Arminianism**

Welcome to Defenders!

We've been talking about a Calvinistic doctrine of salvation. Last time we discussed the doctrine of effectual calling. Today we want to look at a Calvinist understanding of regeneration. Then we will wrap up our discussion of Calvinism and turn to an Arminian perspective on these same biblical passages and themes.

With respect to regeneration, on a Calvinist view those who have been predestined and effectually called by God, God then regenerates. Regeneration means a quickening, of bringing of spiritual life, being born again where before there was simply spiritual death. God makes people spiritually alive.

In the Calvinistic understanding, regeneration is explanatorily *prior* to the exercise of saving faith. It is not something that God does in response to faith. Indeed, it is actually causally prior to faith. A spiritually dead person cannot exercise saving faith. He is spiritually dead. So, God must first do the work of regenerating him, and then he will be able to place his faith in Christ. Now that does not mean that regeneration and faith happen *chronologically* one after the other – as though in the first moment God regenerates someone and then in the next moment that person places his faith in Christ. It *could* happen like that; but regeneration and faith could also be simultaneous – they could happen at the same moment. At the same moment God regenerates the person, and the person places his faith in Christ. That is why I said it is an explanatory or causal priority that is in play here, not a chronological priority. Even if regeneration and faith occur simultaneously, the faith is the *result* of God's regenerating work. It is not that the person has faith, and so God regenerates him as a result.

If you're not familiar with this idea of explanatory priority, let me give an illustration to try to make it clear. Imagine a chandelier hanging by a chain from the ceiling. The chain is explanatorily prior to the chandelier's hanging there in the air. It isn't that the chandelier is somehow forcing the chain up to the ceiling. It is the chain that is holding up the chandelier – even though they occur simultaneously. It is not as though first there is the chain and then later there is the chandelier. They are simultaneous. But the relation of dependence between them is that the chandelier depends on the chain. It is not that the chain depends on the chandelier. So the chain's being there is explanatorily prior to the chandelier's dangling in the air. If you were to say "Why is the chandelier dangling in the air" the answer would be "because it is suspended by the chain from the ceiling." In the same way, even if regeneration and faith occur simultaneously in a person's life, the

person has faith because God regenerates him. A spiritually dead person cannot exercise saving faith in Christ. So he needs to be regenerated in order to place his faith in Christ.

This is a really interesting view, when you think about it, because what it implies is that salvation is *not* given in response to faith. It is not as though you place your faith in Christ, and so God saves you. What really happens with the elect is that God does a secret work in their hearts – he regenerates them – and so they place their faith in Christ. Faith is the result of being regenerated. Only regenerate people can have saving faith in Christ. An unregenerate, spiritually dead person can't exercise saving faith. So on the Calvinist scheme, even if regeneration and faith occur simultaneously, regeneration explains saving faith.

Saving faith for the Calvinist will involve three elements: knowledge, assent, and trust. First a person will understand what there is to be believed; he will have knowledge of the Gospel. Second, he will assent to it – that is to say, he will give his agreement to it. Then, third, he will trust in what he believes to be true. So genuine, saving faith involves these three elements: knowledge (understanding), assent (agreement), and personal trust (trusting in Christ, trusting in God). This kind of saving faith is something that only a regenerate person can exercise.

Conversion then may come about some time later. The person, having been regenerated, may then begin to read the Bible or to pray or to seek out baptism or to identify as a Christian, and so on. These would be the fruits produced in his life by regeneration. A person who has been regenerated by God will experience a life change that will become evident to others.

So by way of summary we have seen that according to the Calvinist interpretation, God sovereignly decides before the creation of the world which condemned sinners he will bring into a love relationship with himself and predestines those persons to salvation. This is a criterionless choice which has no reason other than God's will. Then as history unfolds, he unilaterally causes those persons to respond to his call to repentance and faith. He regenerates them in order that they then may exercise faith in Christ and so be justified by God.

Having looked at a Calvinist perspective on these issues, we now want to turn to an Arminian perspective on these same passages and themes.

Just as I emphasized that in speaking of Calvinism I wasn't trying to explore John Calvin's own personal views but rather the theology that goes under the name Calvinism; similarly, here we are not looking at Jacob Arminius' particular views on these passages and themes but rather that theology that goes under the name Arminianism.

Let's look first at Ephesians 1:3-14, this time from an Arminian perspective. 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. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us. For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

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. In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Two points of interpretation need to be emphasized in the Arminian understanding of these verses.

1. *Election is Christocentric.* That is to say, it is in Christ that a person is elect. You find this all the way through this passage. For example, in verse 3 he “has blessed us in Christ.” In verse 4, “he chose us in him.” In verse 7, “in him we have redemption through his blood.” In verse 10, “to unite all things in him.” In verse 11, “in him we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed.” In verse 13, “in him you also were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.” So election is Christocentric. It concerns those who are in Christ. Insofar as a person is in Christ he is elected and predestined, as the passage teaches.

2. *Election is primarily corporate in nature, not individual.* That is to say, it is a group or corporate entity that God has elected. Insofar as one is a part of that corporate group or body one shares in its blessings. One who is in Christ is therefore elected and predestined and all the rest.

If you are interested in seeing an Arminian perspective on this passage, I highly recommend this little book by Robert Shank entitled *Elect in the Son*.<sup>1</sup> I want to read a couple of passages from this book on the notion of corporate election. The following is from page 45 of *Elect in the Son*. Shank says,

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<sup>1</sup> □ Robert Shank, *Elect in the Son* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1989).

A second aspect of election is implicit in Paul's Ephesian doxology: the election to salvation is *corporate* as well as Christocentric.

The corporate nature of election has been noted by many. In his comment on Ephesians 1:4 . . . Lightfoot writes, "The election of Christ involves implicitly the election of the church." Westcott comments on Ephesians 1:4, ". . . *He chose us* (i.e. Christians as a body v. 3) for Himself out of the world." Bloomfield comments on Ephesians 1:5, ". . . the Apostle has here no reference to the *personal* election of *individuals*. . . ." Lange comments on Ephesians 1:3,

. . . "us" should be taken in its wider meaning . . . and should not be limited to the Apostle . . . nor to the Jewish Christians, but applies to his people, all men, who have become or will become Christians.

The corporate inference in Lange's words above is substantiated by his comment on Romans 8:28-30, ". . . Christ is the elect in God's real kingdom in the absolute sense, so that all His followers are chosen with Him as organic members, according to their organic relations (Eph. i)."

Obviously, the corporate body of the elect is comprised of individuals. But the election is primarily corporate and only secondarily particular. The thesis that election is corporate, as Paul understood it and viewed it in the Ephesian doxology, is supported by the whole context of his epistle:

[What follows now is Shank's quotation of various phrases from Ephesians that indicate the corporate nature of the election.]

. . . gather together in one all things in Christ . . . the redemption of the purchased possession . . . his inheritance in the saints . . . the church, which is his body . . . who has made us both one . . . to make in himself of twain one new man . . . that he might reconcile both unto God in one body . . . the household of God . . . all the building fitly framed together . . . a holy temple . . . builded together for an habitation of God . . . of the same body . . . the mystery from the beginning of the world [now disclosed in] the church [as fulfillment of] the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord . . . of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named . . . glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages . . . one body . . . the body of Christ . . . the whole body fitly joined together . . . increase of the body . . . we are members of one another . . . Christ is the head of the church . . . the savior of the body . . . Christ loved the church and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church . . . they two shall be one flesh [but] I speak concerning Christ and the church.

So according to Shank, Paul's conception of election is primarily electing this corporate body or group of people that God calls, justifies, and brings to glory. It is up to individuals whether or not they want to be a part of that corporate body. How does one become part of that corporate body? Well, through placing one's faith in Christ.

So insofar as one is "in Christ" – that is to say, part of this corporate body – one is elect.

There is one more passage from Shank on page 48 that I would like to read. Here he contrasts Calvin's doctrine of election with the Arminian doctrine. He says,

A central thesis of Calvin's doctrine of election may be stated thus:

The election to salvation is of particular men unconditionally, who comprise the corporate body incidentally.

[By contrast,] a central thesis of the Biblical doctrine of election [that is to say, from the Arminian perspective] may be stated thus:

The election to salvation is corporate and comprehends individual men only in identification and association with the elect body.

So on Shank's view, the object of God's election is this corporate group. That is the primary object of election. Individuals are elect only in a secondary sense insofar as they are part of, or members of, that group and have identified with it and therefore come to share in its blessings.

That would be an Arminian perspective on Ephesians 1. Next time, we will continue our discussion by looking at an Arminian interpretation of Romans 8:28-30. Until then, have a great week.<sup>2</sup>

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□ Total Running Time: 20:14 (Copyright © 2020 William Lane Craig)