§ 11. Doctrine of Salvation
Lecture 5
Evaluation of Calvinism and Arminianism

Over the past few weeks we’ve been looking at the doctrine of salvation from the perspectives of Calvinism and Arminianism. Today we want to come to some evaluation of these competing views.

It seems to me that the Arminian notion of corporate election does make good sense of many of the biblical passages that we surveyed, particularly Romans 9 and 10. As I’ve previously explained, it seems to me that Paul’s burden in Romans 9 is to emphasize that it is up to God whom he will save and whom he will damn and that Paul wants to broaden out the scope of God’s salvation as wide as possible to include the Gentiles as well as the Jews. So God has decided to save all who place their faith in Christ Jesus regardless of their ethnic origin. That is why in chapter 10 Paul can say, “Therefore everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved” – a statement that would be impossible on a Calvinistic interpretation because only those who are elect and are effectually and irresistibly called can be saved. So the view of corporate election, I think, makes very good sense out of Romans 9 and 10 as well as the many corporate metaphors that Paul uses in his epistles such as the body of Christ, the church, the olive tree with branches broken off and grafted in, and so forth.

Having said that, however, I do not think that corporate election is the whole story. I say this on the basis of passages like Acts 13:48. Here Luke is describing the response to the apostles’ preaching, and he says, “And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of God; and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.” What a remarkable statement that is. “As many as were ordained to eternal life believed.” That can’t plausibly be construed corporately. He is talking there about individual people who responded to the preaching of the Gospel. As many as were ordained to eternal life believed in the Gospel.

The verb here is the past-perfect of the Greek word *tasso* which means “to appoint” or “to designate” or “to set aside.” It indicates that those whom God has set aside or appointed or designated to salvation or eternal life will be saved. The Arminian attempts to interpret this passage by saying that what it means is as many as were disposed to eternal life believed. So if you had the disposition toward eternal life, then you believed in the Gospel. Therefore, it was of your own free will.

But I’m not persuaded that this is a plausible interpretation of this passage. Let me give two reasons why I think that that is incorrect. First, the verb here is in the passive voice. That indicates that God is the subject. The use of the passive voice is indicative that God is the active subject of the verb. That is to say, it concerns all of those whom God had
ordained to eternal life. Second, the context of the theology of the book of Acts as a whole doesn’t sit very well, I think, with the Arminian interpretation. The context of the book of Acts shows that Luke believes that people are foreordained to eternal life as individuals. Look, for example, at Acts 4:24-28. Here the early church is at prayer and Luke records,

> And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said,
> “Sovereign Lord, who didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who by the mouth of our father David, thy servant, didst say by the Holy Spirit,

> ‘Why did the Gentiles rage,
> and the peoples imagine vain things? 
The kings of the earth set themselves in array,
> and the rulers were gathered together,
> against the Lord and against his Anointed’—

> for truly in this city there were gathered together against thy holy servant Jesus, whom thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever thy hand and thy plan had predestined to take place.

Isn’t that remarkable? Herod and Pilate are named as individuals along with the people of Jerusalem and the Gentiles, to do whatever God’s hand and plan had foreordained to happen. The expression in the Greek here is *hosa hē cheir sou kai hē boulē proōrisen*. *Proōrisen* means “to ordain something in advance.” Whatever your will foreordained to happen is what took place in Jerusalem.

Also, take a look at Acts 2:23 for a similar statement. Here Peter says, “this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.” Notice here he speaks of the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, which included the crucifixion of Jesus. The Greek here is *tē hōrismenē boulē* (that is to say, “your foreordained will”). It’s from the same Greek word as *proōrisen*. The foreordained will and (and then here comes the word for foreknowledge) *prognōsei tou theou*. The foreknowledge of God. So the foreordained will and the foreknowledge of God. This is what the individuals named carried out.

Compare with this Galatians 1:15. Here Paul is talking about his own call. He says, “But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me,” etc., etc. Here the word in the Greek is *aphorisas* which means “to set apart” or “to put aside.” He says that God had set him aside even before he was born, clearly as an individual. We are not talking corporate election here.
Finally, go back to the book of Acts again, chapter 9, verse 15. It also speaks about God’s call of the apostle Paul. Here the Lord says to Ananias, “Go, for he [that is, Paul] is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel.” The Greek phrase here is skeuos eklogēs which means “a chosen vessel” or “an instrument” that God has chosen to use.

So both Paul and Luke think of Paul himself as someone set apart by God, a chosen instrument or vessel that God then called at the appropriate time. Again, this cannot be thought of as primarily corporate.

On the other hand, Paul apparently did not feel that this call that came to him was irresistible or inevitable. In Acts 26:19 in his testimony to King Agrippa, Paul says, “Wherefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those at Damascus,” etc., etc. So even though Paul felt that God had set him apart as an individual before he was born and then called him at the right time – he was a chosen instrument – Paul didn't seem to think that this was something that was irresistible or inevitable. Rather, he said “I wasn’t disobedient. I obeyed what the heavenly vision told me to do, and I did exactly as instructed.”

So on the one hand we have the affirmation of the sovereignty of God that does seem to extend to individuals. Yet, at the same time, we have the affirmation of human freedom that one is able to resist what God has planned and ordained.

How are we to best put these together? Well, as some of you might surmise, I think that the best way to understand these passages is through divine middle knowledge. This is the Molinist view of divine providence as enunciated by the Jesuit Counter-Reformer Luis Molina (1535-1600). According to Molina, God knows how every possible person he might create would freely respond in any set of circumstances that God might place him in. This provides the key to God’s providence, just as it is stated in the book of Acts. What happens is according to the foreknowledge and plan of God. God knew how Pilate and Herod would freely respond if in positions of authority in first century Judea. He knew how the Jews in the city of Jerusalem would freely behave in those circumstances, and how the Gentiles would behave. So God’s detailed plan unfolds according to God’s foreknowledge, understood here to encompass middle knowledge.

For Molina, the circumstances in which God places people include various gifts of grace and workings of the Holy Spirit to bring people to salvation. God knows whether or not a person would freely respond to his grace in any set of circumstances that he might place that individual in. So, for example, he knew that if he were to appear to Saul of Tarsus as he was journeying to Damascus to persecute Christians, then Saul would freely obey the heavenly vision and become a Christ follower. Therefore, he chose to appear to Saul in this way, not robbing Saul of his freedom, but knowing how Saul would freely respond in
such a circumstance. So God knows which people to create and what circumstances to place them in in order to bring about the salvation of those people. In Acts 17:26-27 we have Paul’s address to the Areopagus in Athens. He says,

And he made from one [man] every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us.

Here Paul says that God has determined the exact times and places that every human being should live in the world with a view toward achieving their salvation. So even before the foundation of the world, God knew which people would freely respond to his grace and be saved and who would reject it. Therefore, he knew exactly the people who had been chosen and set apart to be saved. That is what it says in Romans 8:29, that those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.

Molina also believed that God provides sufficient grace for salvation to every person that he creates. God’s will for human salvation is truly universal. God wants everyone to be saved, and so he bestows grace upon every person that is sufficient for salvation.

Now, what should we say about Molina’s belief in this regard? Does God really in fact want all persons to be saved as Molina believed? Well, I think there are a couple of options here. One of the options is a form of Molinism that is called Congruism. This school of thought says that there is congruent grace for any given individual. That is to say, God knows for any individual person just what gifts of grace would be met with a free, affirmative response by that person. He knows just what circumstances to place that person in in such a way that that person would freely respond to his grace and be saved. If that is the case, we may wonder, if God knows the circumstances under which any possible person would be freely saved, then why isn’t everybody saved? Well, the Congruist could say it is because there is no feasible world available to God in which all of those circumstances are compossible – that is to say, the circumstances may not be able to be cobbled together in such a way that everyone would be saved. It may well be the case that in every world of free creatures that is feasible for God some people would freely reject his grace and be lost. So, although there are possible worlds in which everyone is freely saved, it may well be the case that there are no feasible worlds available to God in which there is universal salvation.

Or, here’s a second alternative. The Molinist could say that God does not in fact want all persons to be saved but prefers a world in which not all are saved, even though he could have chosen to create such a world. He has simply chosen not to create a world in which everybody is freely saved. This view gets you as close to Calvinism as the Calvinist could possibly go, and yet it still affirms libertarian free will. It is to say that God could have
elected to save all persons, but he has chosen to create a world in which he knew some would freely reject him. Why would he choose such a world? Well, let the Calvinist answer that – maybe to bring greater glory to himself somehow by showing his justice or something. I don’t know. But the point is that this view will get you everything that the Calvinist wants to have, but it will not annihilate human freedom.

So there are a couple of options here that are available in answer to the question as to why God’s universal salvific will is not achieved. Either way, it seems to me that a middle knowledge perspective supplements what we’ve already seen with regard to corporate election by showing how people can be predestined and foreordained as individuals and yet it is still fully compatible with human freedom. Therefore a Molinist perspective enjoys a considerable advantage.

Next week we’ll turn to the topic of our mystical union with Christ.¹

¹ Total Running Time: 20:34 (Copyright © 2020 William Lane Craig)