

Lesson Six

False Teachings on Predestination

Predestination, pp. 69-81

Goals

1. To understand two basic errors that destroy the teaching of predestination.
2. To realize the importance of guarding against any false doctrine, especially in the teaching of predestination.

Introduction

The apostle Paul warned Timothy, “The time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear” (2 Timothy 4:3).

- Considering our past discussions, why do you suppose the Scriptural doctrine of predestination has often come under attack in the history of the Christian church?

False teachings about predestination and God’s grace have been around since the fall into sin. The teachings of Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism plagued the early church.

After the Reformation, errors about predestination and God’s grace also plagued the church. These errors took on a variety of forms, but they all tended to go in one of two directions:

- 1) The false doctrine of John Calvin, who taught that in addition to electing some to eternal life, God has elected some people to eternal damnation.
- 2) The false doctrine of Jacob Arminius, who taught that there is some quality in people that determines why some believe and go to heaven and others do not.

Both of these positions end up destroying God’s saving grace in Christ as the only basis for the sure hope of eternal life.

John Calvin and the Reformed church

During the Reformation, John Calvin (1509-1564), the influential leader of what became known as the Reformed Church, reasoned as follows: If only some are elected to heaven, it follows that God did not desire to save the others. He taught a “double predestination,” an election both to heaven and to hell.

A handy guide for understanding Calvin's theology is the acronym TULIP. Discuss each of the points. Which are true? false?

T- Total depravity

U- Unconditional election (double predestination)

L- Limited atonement

I- Irresistible grace

P- Perseverance of the saints

1 John 2:2 He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

1 Timothy 2:4 [God] wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

- What two main teachings of Scripture does Calvinism deny?
- The reason Calvin taught a double predestination was so that he could be logically consistent. He didn't want to leave anything out of God's absolute control. Why is predestination an excellent example of the importance of not permitting reason and logic to interfere with the plain words of the Bible?

Arminianism: The popular alternative to Calvinism

In the days after Calvin, some in the Reformed church considered double predestination too harsh a doctrine. Jacob Arminius (1560-1609) taught that God wants all to be saved. But he also taught that the reason why some were saved and not others was because some chose to accept God's grace while others refused.

Long before this, the seeds of this view had infected the Lutheran church. Philip Melancthon (1497-1560), a close friend of Dr. Martin Luther and an important Reformation leader, also tried to answer why some are saved and not others. He suggested the reason some are chosen for heaven is that they did not reject the gospel so forcefully as others had.

- Why would this pervert the whole way of salvation?

The true Lutheran doctrine on election is to say only what Scripture says and to add nothing more. When sinners are chosen for heaven through being brought to faith in Jesus Christ, all credit for their salvation goes to God alone. When sinners remain in unbelief and thus reject Christ and end up perishing in hell, this is their fault alone and never God's. "Between these two statements there is a great gulf fixed by Scripture itself, which it is vain presumption for mere man to seek to bridge by any sort of logical explanations or conclusions of his own" (S. C. Ylvisaker, *Grace for Grace*, Mankato: Lutheran Synod Book Co., 1943, p. 192).

- Why is the question about why some are saved and not others a question that must be left unanswered?

Some later Lutherans who followed Melancthon's view on election taught that a person is elected "in view of his or her faith." In other words, God elects those whom he knows will accept his grace and come to faith. During the 1880s and the early 1900s, a controversy developed in our own country over this issue, especially among the Norwegian Lutherans. This is what led to the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) in 1918.

- Why is the concept of "election in view of faith" harmful?

Romans 16:17 *I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.*

Galatians 1:8 *Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!*

- Discuss and evaluate: Do you think a church body's slight error in the way it composes a doctrinal statement on election is reason enough to leave such a church?

Romans 11:5,6 *There is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.*

- What is the result of any error in the doctrine of predestination?

Summary

Throughout church history the doctrine of election has come under attack.

As with every teaching in the Word of God, predestination must be based squarely on what the Bible says, not on human speculation.

God in his grace chooses people for salvation, and this salvation is realized for the individual only through faith in the Redeemer. When people are lost in unbelief, it is the fault of sinners alone and never that of the all-gracious God who wants all to be saved.

During the week

1. Review chapters seven and eight from *Predestination*. Look ahead to chapter nine, pages 95-112.
2. A person once said, “When you begin to understand that you don’t understand, then you are truly beginning to understand.” Why is this especially true of the question about why some are saved and not others?