

## Martin Luther and the Doctrine of Predestination

by Don Matzat

The doctrine of predestination or election has confused and separated Christians for generations. To believe in predestination is to believe that we are "saved," born-again, or brought to faith in Jesus Christ because God has chosen us for salvation. Both Luther and Calvin believed in predestination. But if the doctrine of predestination is logically "pushed," many difficult questions arise: Does God choose people for damnation? Can the grace of God be resisted? Did Jesus die for all sinners or only for the elect? Can a Christian fall away from the faith?

These questions have caused a major debate within Protestant Christianity. Let us consider the participants and the particulars.

### John Calvin:

The French theologian John Calvin (1509 - 1564) was, after Martin Luther, the key figure in the Protestant Reformation. "Reformed" churches follow Calvin's interpretation of Scripture. His massive *Institutes of the Christian Religion* set forth his systematic theology. Other Protestant predestination positions, with the exception of the Lutheran position, were formulated out of reaction to Calvinism. Calvin's understanding of predestination is summarized by five points. The first letter of each definition comprises the famous **TULIP** of Calvinist theology:

- **Total Depravity:** Because of the fall, man is unable of himself to savingly believe the gospel. **The sinner is deaf, blind, and dead to the things of God;** his heart is deceitful and desperately corrupt. His will is not free, it is in bondage to his evil nature, therefore, he will not—indeed he cannot—choose good over evil in the spiritual realm.
- **Unconditional Election:** **God's choice of certain individuals unto salvation before the foundation of the world rested solely in His own sovereign will.** His choice of particular sinners was not based on any foreseen response or obedience on their part, such as faith, repentance, etc. On the contrary, God gives faith and repentance to each individual whom he selected.
- **Limited Atonement:** **Christ's redeeming work was intended to save the elect only** and actually secured salvation for them. His death was a substitutionary endurance of the penalty of sin in the place of certain specified sinners. The gift of faith is infallibly applied by the Spirit to all for whom Christ died, therefore guaranteeing their salvation.
- **Irresistible Grace:** In addition to the outward general call to salvation which is made to everyone who hears the Gospel, the Holy Spirit extends to the elect a special inward call that inevitably brings them to salvation. The external call (which is made to all without distinction) can be, and often is, rejected; whereas the internal call (which is made only to the elect) cannot be rejected; it always results in conversion. **By means of this special call the Spirit irresistibly draws sinners to Christ.**
- **Perseverance of the Saints:** All who are chosen by God, redeemed by Christ, and given faith by the Spirit are **eternally saved.** They are kept in faith by the power of Almighty God and thus persevere to the end.

John Calvin's logical system of theology built upon the doctrine of election or predestination has resulted in two primary reactions: **Universalism and Arminianism.**

### Universalism:

The major criticism of Calvin's understanding of predestination was: *It is not fair!* Would God simply choose to send people to hell without offering them any opportunity for salvation? Some reacted against Calvin by the extreme teaching of "universal salvation".

John Murray (1741 - 1815) believed that every individual shall in due time be separated from sin. Of Calvinist background, he was influenced by the Methodism of John Wesley but was converted to

Universalism, the doctrine of universal redemption. He organized the first American Universalist Church in 1779 at Gloucester, Mass.

Hosea Ballou (1771 - 1852), a New England theologian and clergyman, formulated the basic tenets of Universalism. Upon reacting against the Calvinist position on salvation of the elect only, he began teaching that all people are saved (universal salvation) and that there is no eternal punishment.

The Universalist Church of America and the American Unitarian Association merged in 1961 to form a single denomination—the Unitarian Universalist Association—which currently has about 173,000 members. Unitarian Universalists, because of their rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity and distortion of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, are not regarded as a Christian denomination.

### Arminianism:

Arminianism, which takes its name from Jacobus Arminius (Jakob Harmensen), is a theological revision of Calvinism that limits the significance of the doctrine of predestination. Arminius (1560 - 1609) was a Dutch Reformed theologian who taught that God's sovereign will and human free will are compatible. The name Remonstrants was given to his followers who in 1610 drew up a document known as the Remonstrance. This document set forth a revision of Calvinism: Christ died for all, not only for the elect; divine grace is not irresistible; Christians can fall from grace, through free will, and be lost. These affirmations constituted a rejection of the most extreme Calvinist interpretation of predestination. The Remonstrants were condemned by the Dutch Reformed Church at the Synod of Dort (1618 - 1619).

Modern Protestant Arminianism, greatly influenced by 19th century Revivalism, counters the five points of Calvinism by declaring:

- Although human nature was seriously affected by the fall, man has not been left in a state of total spiritual helplessness. Each sinner possesses a free will, and his eternal destiny depends on how he uses it.
- God's choice of certain individuals unto salvation before the foundation of the world was based upon His **foreseeing that they would respond to His call**. He selected only those whom He knew would of themselves freely believe the Gospel.
- Christ's redeeming work made it possible for everyone to be saved **but did not actually secure the salvation of anyone**.
- The Spirit calls inwardly all those who are called outwardly by the Gospel invitation; He does all that He can to bring every sinner to salvation. but inasmuch as man is free, he can successfully resist the Spirit's call, The Spirit cannot regenerate the sinner until he believes; faith (**which is man's contribution**) precedes and makes possible the new birth.
- Those who believe and are truly saved can lose their salvation by failing to keep up their faith, etc. All Arminians have not been agreed on this point; some have held that believers are eternally secure in Christ, that once a sinner is regenerated, he can never be lost.

This is the conflict. What does the Bible say about these issues?

### What does the Bible teach?

The Scriptures clearly teach that fallen man is not capable of cooperating with God in spiritual matters. He is spiritually dead and an enemy of God. For example:

- *Ephesians 2: 1: And you [hath he quickened], who were **dead in trespasses and sins**.*
- *Ephesians 4: 18: Having the **understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them. because of the blindness of their heart:***

To say that man is not dead in trespasses and sin and is capable of making a decision, or cooperating with God is an example of the heresy of Pelagianism (see *Pelagianism* in the "Glossary.") Charles Finney, the father of modern Evangelical Revivalism, taught that faith is a decision based on persuasive argumentation and that man decides to be born-again. Finney rejected the necessity of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to the believer, claiming that such imputation hindered moral reform. To deny **human total depravity** in spiritual matters is a return to the theology of Rome.

There is clear biblical evidence to support a doctrine of predestination or election. For example, in Romans 8: 28-30 we read:

- *And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to [his] purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate [to be] conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.*

Of course, this biblical teaching raises many questions which confound human reason. If a person is saved because he is chosen for salvation, what about those who are not saved?. Do they wind up in hell because they have been chosen for damnation or, to put it another way, not chosen for salvation? Has God limited his great salvation only to the elect?

While in the Old Testament God specifically chose the nation of Israel from whom the Messiah would appear, when it comes to the application of the great salvation won for us by the promised Messiah, the biblical witness is clear. It is God's desire for everyone, not simply a certain chosen people, to be saved. God's grace is universal. The entire message of the New Testament is inclusive. To limit the scope of God's grace to merely a select group of people is a major distortion of the divine intention. The following verses, together with many other verses in the New Testament, speak of God's universal grace.

- *1 Timothy 2: 3-4: For this [is] good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; Who will have **all men to be saved**, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.*
- *John 3: 16: For God so loved **the world**, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*
- *2 Corinthians 5: 15: And [that] he died **for all**, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again.*
- *2 Corinthians 5: 19: To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling **the world** unto himself not imputing their trespasses unto them: and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.*
- *1 John 2: 2: And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for [the sins of] **the whole world**.*

Those who believe that God's grace is limited to the elect and that the atonement was only for the elect interpret the words "all men," or "all," or "the world" to mean the Christians or the elect. In so doing they are imposing their preconceptions on Scripture and not allowing Scripture to simply speak. It is what is called *eisegesis* (reading a meaning into the text) rather than *exegesis* (pulling the meaning out of the text).

The Bible clearly teaches that sinful man is able to resist the Holy Spirit and reject the grace of God. A person who ends up in hell is not there because he has been consigned to hell by God's sovereign choice, but rather because he has rejected the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For example:

- *Matthew 23: 37: O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, [thou] that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under [her] wings, and **ye would not!***

- *Mark 7: 9: And he said unto them, Full well ye **reject the commandment of God**, that ye may keep your own tradition.*
- *Acts 7: 51: Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always **resist the Holy Ghost**: as your fathers [did], so [do] ye.*
- *2 Timothy 3: 8: Now as Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses, so do these also **resist the truth**: men of corrupt minds, reprobate concerning the faith.*
- *Hebrews 4: 7: Again, he limiteth a certain day saying in David, To day, after so long a time; as it is said, To day if ye will hear his voice, **harden not your hearts***

Finally while God promises to keep us from falling (Jude 1: 24) and to complete the work of redemption in us (Philippians 1: 6), because of the reality of our sinful nature, the Bible teaches that we can reject and turn away from the truth of the Gospel. If falling away was not possible, there would be no reason for all the New Testament admonitions and warnings. Jesus himself, in the parable of the sower, speaks of those who believe but later fall away.

- *Luke 8: 6-8 And some fell upon a rock; and as soon as it was sprung up, it withered away, because it lacked moisture. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up with it, and choked it. And other fell on good ground, and sprang up, and bare fruit an hundredfold. And when he had said these things, he cried, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear*

Jesus explains this parable by saying:

- *Luke 8: 11-14 Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. Those by the way side are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved They on the rock [are they], which, when they hear, receive the word with joy: and these have no root, **which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away**. And that which fell among thorns are they, which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of [this] life, and bring no fruit to perfection.*

### **Martin Luther and Predestination:**

At the *Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals* gathering this past April, a noted Reformed theologian presented a paper on "grace alone." He defined "grace alone," not by the cross of Jesus Christ, but by the doctrine of predestination or election. In the course of his presentation, he attempted to demonstrate that Martin Luther was a participant in the historic Protestant predestination debate. In my estimation he failed to accurately present Luther's position.

Luther's approach to predestination, which I happen to believe is the best approach, can be summarized by three points:

1) In dealing with the issue of election or predestination, **Luther understood the impasse at which one arrives by retaining the total depravity of man, universal grace, and God's election of individuals, but he never tried to harmonize the teachings.** He feared that he would be forced to make concessions that would violate biblical truth.

Luther believed that divine election was the *cause* of our salvation. The doctrine was for the comfort of the believer. He wrote: "The human doctrine of free will and of our spiritual powers is futile. The matter (salvation) does not depend on *our* will but on *God's* will and election."\* Since salvation is totally of God's doing, the doctrine of election comforts those who believe. We can say, "I belong to God! I have been chosen by God. I am one of his sheep!"

While accepting divine election, Luther refused to embrace the logical conclusions that led to an atonement limited to the elect and irresistible grace. He retained universal grace and man's power to resist and reject the Gospel. For Luther, it was a mystery. Concerning investigating the doctrine he wrote: "we are not allowed to investigate, and even though you were to investigate much, yet you would never find out."

Luther believed that Christians are eternally secure, but *in Christ*. After admonishing his readers to continue to look to the cross of Christ, he wrote:

*For if you concern yourself with this alone and believe that it has happened for your sake, you will certainly be preserved in this faith.... Look for yourself in Christ alone. . . . Then you will find yourself eternally in him.*

2) **The doctrine of predestination was not central in Luther's theology.** The substance of *sola gratia* or "grace alone" was not in the doctrine of election but in the cross of Jesus Christ. He believed that one should follow the systematic presentation of

Scripture, especially as illustrated in the Book of Romans. He writes:

*In chapters nine, ten, and eleven (of Romans) the apostle teaches about the eternal predestination of God.... Follow the order of this Epistle: first be concerned about Christ and the Gospel, in order to recognize your sin and his grace; then fight against your sins.... Adam must first be quite dead before a man is able to bear this subject and to drink this strong wine. Watch that you do not drink wine while you are still an infant. Every doctrine has its limit, time, and age.*

Later Lutheran theologians varied in their positioning of the doctrine of election in their systematic presentation of Biblical doctrine. Francis Pieper, for example, in his three-volume *Christian Dogmatics*, presented the doctrine of election at the very end of his work, immediately before his section on the end of the age.

3) **Luther believed that any debate, discussion, or argument over the doctrine of election should be avoided.** He wrote:

*A dispute about predestination should be avoided entirely... I forget everything about Christ and God when I come upon these thoughts and actually get to the point to imagining that God is a rogue. We must stay in the word, in which God is revealed to us and salvation is offered, if we believe him. But in thinking about predestination, we forget God . . . However, in Christ are hid all the treasures (Col. 2:3); outside him all are locked up. Therefore, we should simply refuse to argue about election.*

*Such a disputation is so very displeasing to God that he has instituted Baptism, the spoken Word, and the Lord's Supper to counteract the temptation to engage in it. In these, let us persist and constantly say., I am baptized I believe in Jesus. I care nothing about the disputation concerning predestination.*

Martin Luther did not know of the confusion and contentions that would later exist among Christians and the major heresies such as Universalism and the rebirth of Pelagianism that would arise as the result of the debates over the doctrine of predestination. If he had known, he most certainly would have reminded us of his words: "**For this you should know: All such suggestions and disputes about predestination are surely of the devil.**"

Perhaps the great Reformer John Calvin, if he had been able to see all the contentions that would arise in reaction to his position on predestination, might have stopped where Luther stopped and allowed a mystery to be just that - **a mystery!**

\*All Luther quotes are taken from *What Luther Says* by Ewald Plass under the heading "Election."