

Doctrine of Election

Of all the doctrines of the Christian faith, the least understood and most controversial is the doctrine of election. For some, the doctrine is nothing but fatalism. They claim that it kills the evangelistic zeal of the church. For others, the doctrine of election is the heart and soul of the Gospel. If pulpits become silent on this doctrine, the church will suffer.

The Synod of Dort, held in 1618/19 in the Dutch city of Dort (Dordrecht), re-affirmed the doctrine of election. This synod called by the Estates General of Holland included delegates elected by the synods of various provinces. Also present as advisers were delegates from Calvinist churches in England, Scotland and German states. It was truly a Reformed ecumenical gathering. The Synod made five pertinent statements, which were directed against the Remonstrants or Arminians. Arminianism is a theological system named after Jacobus Arminius (Jakob Hermandszoon), a Dutch theologian (1560-1609). When he was pastor in Amsterdam he came to question some aspects of the doctrine of election. In 1610 his followers issued the Remonstrance against unconditional election.

Arminianism has been and still is very influential in North American evangelical and fundamentalist circles. What binds them together is the belief that election is based on God's foreknowledge on what men and women endowed with a free will decide to do with the Gospel invitation. Calvinism believes that God saves men and women in accordance with His plan formulated in eternity past. Events in history don't happen by chance. God uses them to unfold His plan and purposes, which will lead to Christ's coming again.

The acronym Tulip has been devised to help us remember the five points of Calvinism. To show the difference between Calvinism and Arminianism I will place them beside each other.

Arminianism	Calvinism
1. The decree of salvation applies to all who believe on Christ and who persevere in obedience and faith.	1. Total depravity.
2. Christ died for all men.	2. Unconditional election.
3. The Holy Spirit must help men to do things that are truly good (such as having faith in Christ for salvation.)	3. Limited Atonement. (Christ's death for the elect.)
4. God's saving grace is not irresistible It is possible for Christians to fall from grace.	4. Irresistible Grace.
	5. Perseverance of the saints.

What are today's prospects of Calvinism in North America? Not encouraging. Its critics call its view of God undemocratic, even harsh. And its doctrine of salvation is considered deterministic. If God elects sinners to salvation, why preach the Gospel? Don't you make God the author of sin? And is election really fair? Why should some be saved and others not?

In our age of science, we find mysteries hard to accept. Everything is supposed to be explainable. But neither science nor theology is without their mysteries. In Scripture we find the tension between God's choice of the sinner and the sinner's choice of God. Salvation is from beginning to end the work of God, who is merciful, gracious, just and loving. We are saved by grace. God reaches out to us before we had any intention of reaching out to Him. But doesn't the doctrine of election hinder mission work? Why missions if God chooses whom He wills? But contrary to popular opinion, Calvinism has done more for missions and evangelism than any other "branch" of Christianity. North America's greatest theologian, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), became one of the most important leaders of the Great Awakening, a revival movement which changed the course of American history. His book *A Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People in Extraordinary Prayer* drew attention to prayers of a group of Scottish ministers for a general revival in the church. And the spread of the kingdom of God stimulated many all over the world to new missionary interest. The greatest service Edwards rendered to the cause of missions was his emphasis on God's electing grace and his firm belief in the general offer of salvation. This same emphasis is also found in John Calvin's writings. In missions we work as if everything depends on man, while knowing that salvation is entirely of God. A tremendous comfort for any missionary! Probably no one ever preached the doctrine of election more consistently and persuasively over a longer period of time than the Calvinist Baptist Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892). Great crowds came to hear him and many came to know Christ through his ministry.

Why teach election? Because this doctrine is Scriptural! Many lengthy volumes have been written on this subject. For a brief but excellent overview I suggest *Calvinism, Hyper Calvinism & Arminianism* by Kenneth G. Talbot and W. Gary Crampton, published by Still Waters Revival Books, 12810-126 St. Edmonton, AB. T5L 0Y1.

How times have changed! In 1902 theologian Francis L. Patton of Princeton Seminary, which was still a bastion of Reformed orthodoxy at that time, proclaimed, "...we believe that if Christendom shall have one unanimous faith, it will be the Calvinistic faith." But today Calvinism is not only greatly misunderstood but even opposed by many in Christian circles. Calvinism has always been associated with predestination; its strong adherence to and affirmation of God's sovereign, unconditional election of sinners unto salvation. In the minds of many people this arouses an image of a God who cruelly determines in an arbitrary manner who will be saved and who will be lost. For many, Calvinism is synonymous with fatalism. If God is totally sovereign in salvation then man's freedom is totally eliminated. Dr. Leslie Weatherhead (1893-1976), one of London (England's) most popular liberal preachers, was convinced that it was the "stern" views of God which were the supreme reason for the alienation of people from Christianity. He also blamed

Calvinism's insistence on the infallibility of Scripture for "wrong" ideas of God. In the mind of many evangelicals Calvinism is unconcerned with missions and discipleship. They think that belief in predestination rules out passion for the lost. Why spend time, money and energy on seeking out hell-bound sinners if God has determined already who will be saved? This belief is a result of limiting to and misunderstanding of the famous five points of Calvinism, the TULIP doctrine.

Calvinism-rightly understood-teaches the whole counsel of God. Edwin H. Palmer argued that "Calvinism has unlimited number of points: it is as broad as the Bible." The Lord God Almighty in His goodness and mercy reaches out to sinners unable to save themselves. Everyone would be lost if God in His love had not elected some for salvation. When the Scriptures are seen in their totality evangelism is not only compatible with Calvinism, it is even mandatory. The Gospel begins with God and His glory and not with man and his happiness.

Johan D. Tangelder