

THEOLOGY CLASSES · SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY V: SOTERIOLOGY

Lecture 2: Unconditional Election

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Lecture by C. Michael Patton, Th.M., and Rhome Dyke, Th.M., from The Theology Program, published on their public channel. Study notes below from Medina Community Church.

BEFORE YOU WATCH

Patton opens with a confession: everyone remembers where they were when they first heard the doctrine of election, the way people remember where they were for great public events. His own mother handed him Romans 9, and he spent three hours in his room trying to prove it could not be true. This session makes the strongest case the Reformed tradition can make, that God's choice of his people is unconditional, grounded in nothing in them. Listen for how Paul answers his objectors in Romans 9, and notice that the teachers are as disturbed by the doctrine as you may be.

THE LECTURE, SECTION BY SECTION

1. A doctrine you remember meeting

Patton recalls being handed Romans 9 by his mother, reading it with disgust, and retreating to his room for three hours to figure out how it could not be true. He never managed it. The teachers' first point is pastoral: Paul taught election to every church he planted, often very early, and referred back to that teaching in his letters. Most churches today do the opposite, hiding the doctrine for years, so that people build their whole picture of God on its opposite and then cannot bear the shock when they finally meet it. Whatever position you take, they argue, election must be taught early, to children and to new disciples, because everything else will be built either on it or against it.

2. The question is what election means, not whether the Bible teaches it

The issue in this section is framed carefully: it is not whether the Bible teaches election, since everyone who reads the Bible sees that it does. The issue is what it means to be elect or predestined, and how one answers that question places them in one theological tradition or another. Two positions have divided most of church history: unconditional election and conditional election, with a third mediating position saved for the end of the unit.

3. The Bible's vocabulary of choosing

The lecture walks through the word group. To elect, from the Greek for calling out or choosing, appears in Romans 8:33, who will bring a charge against God's elect; in Romans 11:7, the chosen obtained it and the rest were hardened; in 2 Timothy 2:10, Paul endures everything for the sake of the chosen; and in 1 Peter 1:1, Peter writes to the chosen ones. To predestine, meaning to mark out beforehand, anchors Romans 8:29 and 30. To choose appears in 2 Thessalonians 2:13, God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation. To foreknow appears in 1 Peter 1:2, chosen according to the foreknowledge of God. And to appoint appears in Acts 13:48: when the Gentiles heard, as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. The teachers press the plain force of that last verse: those appointed and those who believed are one and the same group, not two, so that without the appointing there is no believing. At face value, they conclude, these texts present God choosing by himself; it takes some other theology to make them mean something else.

4. Two definitions of freedom

Everything turns on what freedom means. Libertarian freedom, the Arminian definition, is the power of contrary choice: whatever the circumstances and influences, you can go the other way. The Reformed definition says people are free only to act according to their ability, and fallen people have no ability to choose God; they are free to sin, with a wide variety of sins to choose from, but the one thing they cannot choose is God. Unconditional election is then defined: God's choice of people for salvation from the beginning, conditioned on nothing in them, good or evil, foreseen or present, resting on his sovereign purpose alone. It is not arbitrary, the teachers insist; God has reasons, but the reasons are in him, not in us.

5. The tradition behind the doctrine

A timeline carries the position through history: Augustine, whose debates with Pelagius established it; the Council of Orange in 529, where the church affirmed it and condemned both Pelagianism and the halfway house of semi-Pelagianism associated with Cassian; Thomas Aquinas; then Luther, Calvin, Whitefield, and Spurgeon. Augustine's summary line is quoted: the human will does not attain grace through freedom, but freedom through grace. The lecture also places the doctrine in the TULIP acronym: total depravity leads to unconditional election, and the course will fill in limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance as it goes, since the acronym happens to track the whole order of salvation. The teachers add a historical caution: Arminius himself thought he was refining the Reformed tradition rather than founding its rival, and both camps have pushed their founders further than they went.

6. Argument one: total depravity demands it

The first argument is logical rather than textual: if man is totally depraved, election must be unconditional and individual, because if election waited on man's choice, no one would be elect. Romans 3 says there is none righteous, no one who seeks God, not even one. Jeremiah 13:23 asks whether the Ethiopian can change his skin or the leopard his spots; neither can those accustomed to evil do good. Titus 3 describes us as enslaved to various lusts, not merely fond of them. So even if Scripture never used the word election, the doctrine would follow from the doctrine of man: the God who finds no seekers must himself do the seeking.

7. Argument two: John 6 and John 15

John 6 is called the strongest teaching on election outside Romans 9 and Ephesians 1. No one can come to Christ unless the Father draws him, and Christ will raise that one up on the last day: the drawn and the raised are the same people, none lost. No one can come unless it is granted by the Father. All that the Father gives to Christ will come, not might come, and none who comes is cast out. And in John 15:16 Christ tells his disciples, you did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to bear fruit. The teachers weigh the standard reply, that this is only about the apostles, and find it hard to sustain: the verse sits in the middle of the upper room discourse, which the church applies broadly everywhere else.

8. Our experience versus the text

A hand goes up in every class at this point: I remember the day I chose Christ. The teachers let the tension stand. Personal experience says we chose; the texts keep saying he chose. Perhaps, they suggest, we should watch the language of our evangelism, whether the biblical way of speaking is being replaced by the language of our experience. The question is left open deliberately: watch how the texts develop.

9. Argument three: Romans 9 and the objector

The heart of the session is a slow walk through Romans 9. After Romans 8 promises that nothing can separate God's people from his love, an objector answers: Israel was chosen too, and look at Israel; your security is worthless. Paul replies that not all Israel is Israel; God's promises were always made to a remnant he chooses, and Jacob and Esau prove it: before the twins had done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose in election would stand, not by works but by his call, the older was set to serve the younger. Then comes the diagnostic feature the teachers prize: Paul anticipates exactly the objections we would make. Is there injustice with God? If God had meant conditional election based on foreseen faith, here was the place to say so and calm everyone down. Instead he goes deeper: I will have mercy on whom I have mercy; it does not depend on the man who wills or runs, but on God who has mercy; he raised up Pharaoh for this very purpose, and he hardens whom he desires. Why does he still find fault? And the answer is Job's answer: who are you, O man, to answer back to God? The fact that Paul's objectors object exactly as we do, the teachers argue, is strong evidence we are reading him correctly.

10. Arguments four and five: active verbs and grace alone

Two shorter arguments follow. First, predestined, chose, elect, appoint, and foreknow all appear in the active voice with God as the actor; one would need a preexisting bias to read them conditionally. Second, salvation is by grace alone and for God's glory alone. If election is conditioned on foreseen faith, then something in me, however small, distinguishes me from the person who is lost, and I could stand in heaven and say the difference was that I believed. The teachers retell an illustration they credit to James Montgomery Boice to make the point: no one in heaven will answer the question why are you here with anything but I do not know, it was nothing in me. Ephesians 2:8 and 9 is exegeted closely: the that in and that not of yourselves is neuter in Greek while faith is feminine, so what is not of ourselves is not merely faith but the whole of salvation, and no one may boast.

11. Argument six: the problem with a fifty-fifty world

The final argument turns prevenient grace against itself. By definition prevenient grace must level the scales exactly, giving every person of every time an equal chance, a genuine fifty-fifty. But then the outcomes should be roughly even, and they are not: in Noah's generation, one man believed. And God himself determines where and when every person is born; being placed in a believing home rather than a home with no gospel is itself part of predestination. The uneven distribution of salvation, the teachers argue, is fatal to the idea that everyone stands at the same balanced scale.

12. Objections, honesty, and the fence around the mystery

The class is invited to object, and the teachers answer as Calvinists while refusing to pretend the position is comfortable. Does election make prayer and evangelism pointless? No; on the other side, if prayer decides salvation, then some people are lost because someone else did not pray enough, and the intercessor shares the glory. Both sides carry baggage; what settles doctrine is what is biblical, not what is palatable, for the palatability of a doctrine does not determine its veracity. Patton then shows his own heart: he holds the doctrine and is genuinely disturbed that God did not choose everyone; he even confesses a hope he calls foolish, that some divine loophole might save all, though he knows the Bible does not teach it. Since the elect are not labeled, as Spurgeon quipped, we evangelize everyone. Believers are as dependent on grace after conversion as before it, and the closing prayer thanks God that, however we define it, he elected us: nothing in us drew his choice, and the mystery can be left in tension before him.

SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

1 Peter 1 · 2 Thessalonians 2 · 2 Timothy 2 · Acts 13 · Ephesians 1 · Ephesians 2 · Jeremiah 13 · John 15 · John 6 · Romans 11 · Romans 3 · Romans 8 · Romans 9 · Titus 3

KEY TERMS

Unconditional election

The belief that God predestined people to salvation from the beginning, conditioned on nothing in them, good or evil, foreseen or present, but resting on his sovereign choice alone. Not arbitrary: the reason exists, but it is in God, not in us.

Conditional election

The rival position, taken up fully next session: God's election is based on his foreknowledge of who will freely believe.

Libertarian freedom

The power of contrary choice: the ability to choose otherwise no matter the influences. The Reformed definition counters that people are free only to act according to their ability, and fallen people have no ability to choose God.

Total depravity

The doctrine, carried in from the previous course, that fallen man never seeks God and contributes nothing to his salvation but sin. It is the logical engine of unconditional election.

Semi-Pelagianism

The mediating view associated with Cassian, condemned alongside Pelagianism at the Council of Orange in 529, which the lecture places on its historical timeline of the doctrine.

TULIP

The acronym for the five points of the Calvinist tradition: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, perseverance of the saints. The course fills in the letters as it moves through the order of salvation.

Foreknowledge

In the biblical vocabulary of election, God's knowing of persons beforehand. Whether it means foreseeing decisions or fore-loving people becomes the decisive question in the next session.

The remnant

Paul's answer to the objector in Romans 9: God's promises were never made to every Israelite but to a chosen remnant within Israel, so the promise has not failed.

The neuter that of Ephesians 2:8

Patton's grammatical point: since that is neuter and faith is feminine, what is not of yourselves is the whole of salvation, not faith alone, leaving no room for boasting.

COMPREHENSION CHECK

Sixteen questions from the lecture. Circle your answers, then check them against the key at the bottom.

1. What pastoral argument do the teachers draw from Paul's practice?

- A. Election should be kept from new believers until they are mature
- B. Paul taught election to his churches early, so we should teach it early, before people build their theology on its opposite
- C. Paul never mentioned election in his letters
- D. Election should only be discussed in seminaries

2. How did Patton first meet the doctrine of election?

- A. In a seminary classroom
- B. Through a Spurgeon sermon
- C. His mother handed him Romans 9, and he spent three hours trying to prove it could not be true
- D. At the Council of Orange

3. How does the lecture frame the real question about election?
 - A. Whether the Bible teaches election at all
 - B. Whether election is a Pauline or a Petrine idea
 - C. Whether election applies to angels
 - D. Not whether the Bible teaches election, which every reader can see, but what it means to be elect, which decides your tradition
4. What point do the teachers press from Acts 13:48?
 - A. Those appointed to eternal life and those who believed are exactly the same group, so the appointing explains the believing
 - B. The verse describes only the apostles
 - C. The Gentiles believed before being appointed
 - D. Luke is quoting a lost gospel
5. How do the two definitions of freedom differ?
 - A. They are identical in practice
 - B. Libertarian freedom is the power of contrary choice; the Reformed definition says people are free only within their ability, and fallen people have no ability to choose God
 - C. The Reformed definition denies that people make any choices
 - D. Libertarian freedom applies only after conversion
6. What happened at the Council of Orange in 529?
 - A. The church condemned Augustine
 - B. The canon of Scripture was fixed
 - C. The church affirmed the Augustinian position and condemned Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism
 - D. The East and West divided
7. What historical caution do the teachers give about Calvin and Arminius?
 - A. Neither man ever wrote about election
 - B. Calvin secretly agreed with Arminius
 - C. Arminius wrote a century before Calvin
 - D. Arminius saw himself as refining the Reformed tradition rather than opposing it, and followers on both sides pushed their founders further than they went
8. Why is the first argument for unconditional election called logical rather than textual?
 - A. Because it rests on philosophy alone with no biblical principle
 - B. Because if total depravity is true and no one seeks God, election must be unconditional even if Scripture never used the word
 - C. Because the biblical texts contradict it
 - D. Because it was invented by Aquinas
9. How does the lecture handle the claim that John 15:16, you did not choose me but I chose you, applies only to the apostles?
 - A. It agrees the verse is limited to the twelve
 - B. It says the verse is a later addition
 - C. It observes that the verse sits in the upper room discourse, which the church applies broadly everywhere else, so the restriction is hard to sustain
 - D. It says the verse concerns Israel, not the church

10. Why do the objections Paul anticipates in Romans 9 matter for interpretation?
 - A. Because our instinctive objections, is God unjust, why does he still find fault, are exactly the ones Paul expects, which is evidence we are reading him the way his hearers did
 - B. They show Paul was uncertain of his own doctrine
 - C. They prove the passage is about nations only
 - D. They were added by later scribes
11. If Paul had meant election based on foreseen faith, what do the teachers say he would have done at Romans 9:14?
 - A. Quoted Deuteronomy
 - B. Explained that God simply foresees who will choose him, which would have calmed the objector; instead he goes deeper into God's freedom, mercy on whom I have mercy
 - C. Withdrawn the example of Jacob and Esau
 - D. Appealed to the emperor
12. What does Patton argue from the neuter that in Ephesians 2:8?
 - A. That faith is a human contribution
 - B. That the verse refers only to baptism
 - C. That the verse was mistranslated
 - D. Since that is neuter and faith is feminine, the whole of salvation, not merely faith, is not of ourselves; it is the gift of God, so no one may boast
13. What is the point of the illustration the teachers credit to Boice?
 - A. If election turned on my believing, I could tell the angel the difference between me and the lost was that I believed; grace alone means the only honest answer in heaven is, I do not know why me
 - B. That angels administer election
 - C. That heaven rewards the strongest faith
 - D. That no one will remember their conversion
14. How does the uneven distribution of salvation argue against prevenient grace?
 - A. It shows that grace is stronger in some centuries
 - B. Prevenient grace by definition levels every scale to fifty-fifty, so outcomes should be even; but in Noah's day one man believed, and God himself sets where each person is born
 - C. It proves that everyone is finally saved
 - D. It shows the gospel has never reached most nations
15. How do the teachers answer the charge that election makes evangelism and prayer pointless?
 - A. They concede the point
 - B. They say evangelism is only for the elect
 - C. They turn it around: if prayer decides salvation, some are lost because no one prayed enough, and the intercessor shares the glory; both sides carry baggage, and palatability does not determine veracity
 - D. They say prayer changes God's decree
16. What honest confession does Patton make about his own position?
 - A. He no longer holds unconditional election
 - B. He believes the doctrine applies only to Israel
 - C. He thinks the question is unimportant
 - D. He holds the doctrine and remains genuinely disturbed that God did not choose everyone, even confessing a hope he calls foolish that somehow all might be saved

Answer key (fold under before you begin): 1 B · 2 C · 3 D · 4 A · 5 B · 6 C · 7 D · 8 B · 9 C · 10 A · 11 B · 12 D · 13 A · 14 B · 15 C · 16 D

TALK IT OVER

1. Patton says everyone remembers where they were when they first met the doctrine of election. Where were you, and what was your first reaction? Looking back, was your objection to the text itself or to what it would mean about people you love?
2. The teachers suggest our evangelistic language, choose Christ today, may owe more to our experience than to the Bible's way of speaking. Compare that language with John 6 and Romans 9. Should the way we present the gospel change, and how?
3. Whenever it comes down to it, the teachers say, the question is what is biblical, not what is palatable. Where in your own theology are you most tempted to let palatability lead? What would it look like to hold the hard text and the tender heart together, as Patton tries to do?

ONE VERSE TO CARRY

Paul asks in Romans 8 who could ever bring a charge against God's elect, and answers his own question: it is God who justifies, so no accusation can stand.

GO FURTHER

The lecture ends deliberately unresolved: the teachers want the conflict alive in your mind for a week, driving you to God in awe, anger, confusion, or pleading, because the doctrine either knocks you off a foundation built against it or settles you deeper into grace. Sit with Romans 9 itself before the next session, where the teachers switch sides and give conditional election the strongest defense they can make.