

THEOLOGY CLASSES · SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY V: SOTERIOLOGY

Lecture 3: Conditional 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

This session runs on an unusual rule: the teachers put on the other side's hat. Having argued unconditional election last week, they now argue conditional election as well-informed Arminians would, and they invite the class to fire Calvinist objections at them. Before the debate, they linger on something bigger than the debate: the difference between living with tension and twisting texts, and the discipline of letting rightly interpreted Scripture outrank emotion. Listen for which Arminian argument the teachers call the foundation the whole position stands or falls on.

THE LECTURE, SECTION BY SECTION

1. Two wills in God

The session opens with the week's reading, John Piper's paper *Are There Two Wills in God?* The class found it helpful, and the teachers explain why: it distinguishes God's will of decree, what he ordains to happen, from his will of desire, what he wishes. God desires all people to be saved, yet decrees only some things. This is no novelty, they note, but a distinction deep in the church's tradition that ordinary teaching rarely reaches. It also models a balance the course keeps returning to: neither the mysticism that gives up on understanding, nor the rationalism that must understand everything, but honest labor that ends, where it must, in trust.

2. Tension without postmodernism

A caution frames everything that follows. We must be willing to live with tension in a few great doctrines, the Trinity, the union of Christ's two natures, divine sovereignty and human freedom, but that is not the same as the postmodern mood in which everything is tension and nothing is worth debating or dividing over. The genuinely irresolvable things can be counted on one hand. Both pure Calvinism and pure Arminianism, the teachers suggest, try to dissolve the tension by neglecting one side of it, and the course will end this unit with a third position, compatibilism, that refuses to.

3. The stage of truth

The teachers bring back the stage of truth from the first course in the program: *sola Scriptura* means Scripture stands at the front of the stage and everything else bows to it, but it does not mean the stage is empty. Reason, tradition, experience, and emotion all play their parts, and rightly so, as long as they square with Scripture. The Reformed critique of Arminianism is precisely that emotions have slipped to the front and begun interpreting the text. The teachers illustrate how easily that shift happens with the way Christians discern God's will about buying a house: nothing in Scripture names the house, so we consult our sense of peace, and emotion quietly takes the lead role. A rightly interpreted Scripture, they insist, trumps experience and emotion, however hard the text.

4. Faith seeking understanding

Dyke adds a wider frame: Christianity is finally a matter of faith, not of reason alone, though reason shows faith to be reasonable. Take either extreme and you err: refusing to study because it is all faith, or refusing to believe anything not proven. A creator dying for his creation is not, in the world's sense, reasonable. The theology program exists to fill in the content of what we believe, but the believing itself remains trust in the God who has spoken.

5. Conditional election defined

Then the hats go on. Conditional election: God's election is based on his foreknowledge; he looks ahead, sees who will freely place faith in him, and elects to save them. A contemporary variation says God elects Christ, and all who are found in Christ by their free choice share his election, drawing on Ephesians 1, where every blessing is in him. Salvation can be lost, but the better Arminians say only one way: not by committing some grave sin, but by willfully abandoning the faith, a deliberate walking away, and many hold, with the language of Hebrews, that the one who so falls cannot be restored. The teachers also note, without defending it, that some contemporary Arminians have gone further and denied that God exhaustively knows the future, reasoning that a foreseen choice could not have been otherwise; the position they will defend keeps full foreknowledge and grounds it in our free decision.

6. Faith is a hand, not a work

To the Calvinist jab that conditional election smuggles in works, the Arminian answer is firm: receiving a gift is not a work. Faith is the open hand; no one who takes an offered gift is said to have earned it. God did not owe salvation to anyone who believes; out of goodness he pledged to save all who will trust him. That pledge before time, they argue, is exactly what predestination means: a settled, gracious decision that whoever believes will be saved.

7. The history: fatalism and responsibility

Why did the early church lean this way? Because its first great enemy on this front was fatalism. Gnostic dualism and the wider pagan world taught that events simply fall out as the fates decree, a mood the teachers illustrate from the sailors in Jonah crying out to their gods, from the star-crossed framing of Romeo and Juliet, and from fatalistic religion across the world today. Against that, the fathers preached responsibility: you chose, so you are accountable, and that is why you need a Savior. Augustine's debates with Pelagius swung the church the other way, and the Council of Orange in 529 affirmed his position; his famous prayer, asking God to grant what he commands and command what he wills, enraged those who heard in it an excuse for sloth. The medieval church drifted back toward human ability, Luther recovered Augustine and debated Erasmus over the freedom of the will, and Arminius, a Protestant who kept faith alone, pulled back toward human responsibility without returning to Rome. Arminians and Calvinists, the teachers add, both confess God's sovereignty; they define it differently, meticulous control on one side, general oversight on the other.

8. The six Arminian arguments

The defense proper is a set of objections, since, as the teachers note, if the Calvinist arguments were not there, everyone would be Arminian; it is the natural way to think. One: unconditional election is not fair, and fairness is not a value God discards; he is a righteous judge. Two: why would God create people he did not elect, making them only to perish? The teachers, still in character, call it borderline blasphemy to attribute that to God. Three: the Bible says God loves all and wants all saved, 1 Timothy 2, that he takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, Ezekiel 18, that he is patient, not wishing any to perish, 2 Peter 3. If he wanted all saved and could elect all, why did he not? Four: responsibility. God's wrath burns against unbelief in Psalm 78, and John 3 says the unbeliever is condemned already for not believing; how can people be held responsible for a faith they were never able to have? Five: unconditional election nullifies free will. Six, the foundation: election is based on foreknowledge, and the order of Romans 8:29 proves it, those whom he foreknew he predestined, as does 1 Peter 1, chosen according to the foreknowledge of God. The Arminian defender concedes openly: if foreknowledge does not mean foreseeing, the position falls.

9. And is evangelism needless?

A seventh worry rounds out the list: if God has already chosen, why witness, why pray? The Arminian presses the logical edge of the other side too: if God wants something and it does not happen, have we not weakened God by definition? The whole exchange displays the class's method: each side pushing the other toward the texts it prefers to avoid.

10. The Calvinist responses

The hats come off, and each argument is answered. Fairness: the only truly fair outcome is that all die for their own sin; and the Arminian world is no fairer, since people are born into times and places with no gospel at all. Why create the non-elect: honestly, no answer; Patton confesses he would love to be a universalist and the Scriptures will not let him. Why not choose everyone he loves: the two wills of God is the only way through; push any system far enough and you reach the tree in the garden, placed there for choice. Responsibility: God does not condemn people for being non-elect; he condemns them for their sins and their unbelief, and the mystery is not why he passes over some but why he chooses any. Free will: there is no libertarian free will to nullify; everyone always chooses according to their greatest desire, and no one has ever chosen against it. Foreknowledge: studied exegetically, when foreknowledge is linked to predestination it is always personal, God foreknows people, not facts, and the word carries the sense of setting love upon beforehand; even lexicons with no stake in the debate say so. And evangelism: God ordains not only who will be saved but the means, and prayer and evangelism are among the means, a privilege rather than a necessity, which is why the angel told Cornelius to send for Peter and why blinded Paul still needed Ananias. Even Aquinas, quoted with a smile as a good old Calvinist before Calvin, taught that whatever helps a person toward salvation falls under the order of predestination.

SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

1 Peter 1 · 1 Timothy 2 · 2 Peter 3 · Acts 10 · Ephesians 1 · Ezekiel 18 · Genesis 12 · John 3 · Psalm 139 · Psalm 78 · Romans 8 · Romans 9

KEY TERMS

Conditional election

The belief that God's election rests on his foreknowledge: seeing who will freely believe, he elects to save them. A contemporary variation: God elects Christ, and all who are freely found in him share his election.

Will of decree and will of desire

Piper's distinction from the week's reading: God ordains some things and desires others, so he can genuinely desire all to be saved while decreeing the salvation of some. The teachers call it the only way through 1 Timothy 2.

The stage of truth

The program's picture of authority: Scripture at the front of the stage with reason, tradition, experience, and emotion behind it. Trouble comes when emotions slip forward and begin interpreting the text.

Fatalism

The pagan mood the early church fought: events fall out as fate decrees and no one is responsible. Every Christian tradition rejects it, and the early emphasis on responsibility grew out of the fight against it.

Prevenient grace

The Arminian answer to depravity: grace that goes to all people, restoring the fallen will just enough that a genuine choice for or against God becomes possible.

Meticulous and general sovereignty

The two definitions hiding under one word: Calvinists confess God's meticulous control of all things; Arminians confess his general oversight of all things. Both call it sovereignty.

Foreknowledge as fore-love

The Calvinist reading of the decisive word: linked with predestination, to foreknow is always personal, God foreknowing people rather than facts, with the sense of setting love on someone beforehand.

Open theism

The contemporary move, noted but not defended, of denying exhaustive foreknowledge to protect libertarian freedom, on the reasoning that a foreseen choice could not be otherwise.

The bondage of the will

The Reformation flashpoint behind this whole debate: Luther against Erasmus on whether the fallen will is free, Luther recovering Augustine's answer that freedom comes through grace.

COMPREHENSION CHECK

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

1. What distinction does Piper's paper draw, and what does it explain?
 - A. Between law and gospel, explaining the Old Testament
 - B. Between God's will of decree and will of desire, so God can genuinely desire all to be saved while decreeing only some things
 - C. Between the Father's will and the Son's will
 - D. Between prophecy and providence
2. How do the teachers distinguish healthy tension from postmodernism?
 - A. Healthy tension applies to every doctrine equally
 - B. Postmodernism holds fewer things in tension
 - C. A few great doctrines, countable on one hand, must be held in tension; postmodernism makes everything tension so nothing is worth debating or dividing over
 - D. There is no difference
3. What does the house-buying illustration show?
 - A. That Scripture forbids buying houses
 - B. That God's will is always found through circumstances
 - C. That real estate decisions are spiritually neutral
 - D. How easily emotions slip to the front of the stage of truth, as when we settle decisions by our sense of peace
4. What is the Reformed critique of Arminianism in terms of the stage of truth?
 - A. That while confessing sola Scriptura, it lets emotion move forward and interpret the text, when a rightly interpreted Scripture must trump experience and emotion
 - B. That it denies the existence of tradition
 - C. That it uses too much Greek
 - D. That it reads only the Old Testament
5. How do better Arminians say salvation is lost?
 - A. By committing any mortal sin from a fixed list
 - B. By missing the sacraments
 - C. Only by willfully abandoning the faith itself, a deliberate walking away, which many hold cannot be undone
 - D. It cannot be lost on any Arminian account

6. What contemporary Arminian move do the teachers note without defending?
 - A. A return to Roman Catholic sacraments
 - B. Denying that God exhaustively knows the future, reasoning that a foreseen choice could not have been otherwise
 - C. Restricting election to Israel
 - D. Merging with the Reformed churches
7. How does the Arminian answer the charge that faith is a work?
 - A. By conceding that faith earns salvation
 - B. By denying that salvation is a gift
 - C. By making repentance the work instead
 - D. Faith is the hand that receives a gift, and receiving a gift is not earning it; God graciously pledged to save all who trust him
8. Why did the early church emphasize human responsibility so strongly?
 - A. It was battling the fatalism of the pagan world, which made no one accountable, so it preached that you chose and are accountable, and that is why you need a Savior
 - B. Because Augustine demanded it
 - C. Because the Roman government required it
 - D. Because Pelagius had already been condemned
9. What upset Augustine's critics about his famous prayer?
 - A. It was addressed to Mary
 - B. Asking God to grant what he commands seemed to hand all ability to God and, they feared, excuse human sloth
 - C. It denied the Trinity
 - D. It quoted a pagan poet
10. How do Calvinists and Arminians both confess the sovereignty of God?
 - A. By using different words for it
 - B. Neither tradition confesses it
 - C. With different definitions: meticulous control of all things on one side, general oversight on the other
 - D. Only in their hymns
11. Which argument does the Arminian defender call the foundation of the position?
 - A. The fairness argument
 - B. The evangelism argument
 - C. The free will argument
 - D. The foreknowledge argument from Romans 8:29 and 1 Peter 1: if foreknowledge does not mean foreseeing, the position falls
12. Which texts carry the Arminian argument that God wants all people saved?
 - A. 1 Timothy 2, Ezekiel 18, and 2 Peter 3: God desires all to be saved, takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, and wishes none to perish
 - B. Romans 9, Ephesians 1, and John 6
 - C. Genesis 1, Exodus 20, and Psalm 23
 - D. Only verses from the Gospels

13. How does the Calvinist turn the fairness argument around?
- A. By denying that God is fair
 - B. Strict fairness would mean all die for their own sin; and the Arminian world is no fairer, since people are born into times and places with no gospel at all
 - C. By appealing to purgatory
 - D. By declaring fairness a modern invention
14. What does the exegetical study of foreknowledge conclude?
- A. The word never appears with predestination
 - B. The word always refers to facts, never persons
 - C. Linked with predestination it is always personal, God foreknowing people with the sense of setting love on them beforehand, as even disinterested lexicons acknowledge
 - D. The word was coined by Calvin
15. How does the Calvinist answer the evangelism objection?
- A. Evangelism is unnecessary and may be dropped
 - B. Only ordained ministers need evangelize
 - C. Evangelism creates the elect
 - D. God ordains the means along with the ends; evangelism and prayer are privileges we are invited into, which is why Cornelius was told to send for Peter and Paul still needed Ananias
16. What honest non-answer does Patton give to the second Arminian argument?
- A. He explains exactly why God created the non-elect
 - B. He denies that God created anyone
 - C. He has no idea why God did not choose everyone; he would love to be a universalist and the Scriptures will not let him
 - D. He says the question is illegitimate

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

TALK IT OVER

1. The teachers spent a whole evening arguing a position they do not hold, as fairly as they could. When did you last state an opposing view so well its holders would own it? Pick the Arminian argument you find strongest and try to make it to someone this week before answering it.
2. Where has the sense of peace quietly become your method of discerning God's will? What would change if rightly interpreted Scripture stood at the front of your stage of truth in that decision?
3. God commands what he wills and grants what he commands. Why did that prayer of Augustine's comfort some and enrage others? Which is it doing in you, and what does that reveal?

ONE VERSE TO CARRY

Paul urges in 1 Timothy 2 that prayers be made for all people, for this is good in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

GO FURTHER

The teachers assign nothing new this week; the assignment is the debate itself. Reread the week's paper, *Are There Two Wills in God?*, with both sessions in your ears, and notice which side of the tension you instinctively guard. The next session refuses to choose between the two by neglecting either: compatibilism, and then the doctrine of the atonement begins.