

THEOLOGY CLASSES · SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY V: SOTERIOLOGY

Lecture 4: Compatibilism and the First Theories of the Atonement

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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

After two weeks of arguing each side, the teachers now say where they stand, and it is not a compromise so much as a refusal: they will not let go of either divine sovereignty or human responsibility, because Scripture will not. The session then walks into the doctrine's darkest room, whether God predestines people to hell, before turning a corner into the course's next great subject: why did Christ die? Listen for the single verses in which both sovereignty and responsibility stand side by side, and for the two small words Patton finds missing from Romans 9:22.

THE LECTURE, SECTION BY SECTION

1. Where Patton stands, and why

Patton opens by owning his position: unconditional election is the true biblical teaching, not because it sits well, but because his stage of truth puts Scripture in front and he cannot get past the texts exegetically. If experience and emotion stood in front, he says plainly, he would be an Arminian. But the same Scriptures teach that humans are responsible, so the position the course lands on is compatibilism: God unconditionally and sovereignly elects, and humans are genuinely responsible, two realities Scripture teaches that finite minds cannot fit together and must hold in tension. Calvinists cannot twist the texts to make God love only some and man not responsible; Arminians cannot twist away unconditional election. Better to change your stage of truth openly, he says, than to quietly bend the text.

2. What compatibilism is not

The teachers guard the definition carefully. Compatibilism does not hold in tension that God elects unconditionally and conditionally; that is a contradiction, not a tension. Nor does it pair God's sovereignty with libertarian free will; that too is contradiction, two sovereigns over one choice. The pairing is God's sovereignty and man's responsibility: man will stand before a real judgment, fully accountable for actions, thoughts, attitudes, and unbelief, and will not be able to plead non-election. Tension is not contradiction, they insist, any more than confessing Christ as God and man is contradiction, and only postmodernism shrugs at real contradictions. Dyke offers his own phrasing of where the mystery lives: in man's responsibility, God remains sovereign.

3. Compatibilism in single verses

What Patton loves about the doctrine is that Scripture teaches both sides in one breath. Luke 22:22: the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed. John 6:37: everyone the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes I will never cast out. Acts 2:23: this man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross, and the hearers were cut to the heart precisely because they were responsible for what God had determined. Philippians 2:12 and 13: work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you both to will and to work. Paul, the teachers say with a smile, was a compatibilist, though he never used the word; theological terms are labels we invent later to describe what the text was already doing.

4. Romans 9 and 10 side by side

The strongest presentation of God's sovereign election in Scripture is Romans 9; the strongest presentation of man's full responsibility is Romans 10, and Paul wrote them as one flowing document without chapter divisions. After it does not depend on the man who wills or runs, and he hardens whom he desires, you would expect Paul to explain Israel's unbelief by God's not choosing them. Instead, at the end of chapter 9, he lays all the responsibility on Israel: they did not pursue righteousness by faith but as by works, and stumbled over the stumbling stone. So who is responsible for your salvation? God. Who is responsible for your damnation? You. And chapter 11 completes the argument: God has kept his promise because he always works through a remnant. All one can say with assurance, the teachers conclude, is that if anyone is saved, all credit goes to God for electing them, and if anyone is lost, all credit goes to them for rejecting him.

5. The witnesses to the antinomy

The teachers call two Reformed voices to seal the point. Anthony Hoekema: to understand the Scriptures we must accept the concept of paradox, trusting that what our finite minds cannot square is harmonized in the mind of God. And J. I. Packer, in *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, which they commend as a classic: God's sovereignty and man's responsibility are taught side by side, sometimes in the same text; they must be held together and never played off against each other; man is a responsible moral agent though divinely controlled, and divinely controlled though responsible; such antinomies find their reconciliation in the mind and counsel of God. The teachers add their own formula: the Bible is fully God's and fully man's, Christ is fully God and fully man, and salvation is one hundred percent the sovereignty of God and one hundred percent the responsibility of man. No Calvinist in the history of the church, they note, has actually denied man's responsibility, whatever the caricatures say.

6. Single and double predestination

Then the hard question the unit cannot skip: does God predestine people to hell as he predestines people to life? Terms first. The reprobate are those destined for judgment. Single predestination: God predestines the elect to life and passively passes over the rest, leaving them in their sins. Double predestination: God actively predestines the rest to hell, hardening and preparing them for unbelief, the position of what the teachers call extreme Calvinism. Some read Calvin himself as holding it; Patton doubts that reading, and notes that the Council of Orange, for all its Augustinianism, denied double predestination.

7. The three texts, and Patton's loophole

The evidence claimed for double predestination comes down to three passages. Romans 9:17 to 23: Pharaoh raised up for this purpose, mercy on whom he desires and hardening whom he desires, the potter with rights over the clay, vessels of wrath prepared for destruction. 1 Peter 2:8: they stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. And Jude 4: certain men long ago marked out for condemnation. Patton answers with a close reading of the potter text. Set verses 22 and 23 in parallel and two things appear in the second that are missing from the first: the vessels of mercy he prepared beforehand for glory, but the vessels of wrath are simply prepared for destruction, no he, no beforehand. In Greek parallel constructions that asymmetry lands the emphasis where the words are, and Patton takes it as deliberate: God actively prepared the vessels of mercy before time, while the vessels of wrath are being prepared, passively, in time, turning themselves over to the destruction they are heading toward. He calls it, with disarming honesty, his loophole out of double predestination, and adds the wider point: three texts, none unambiguous, are far too thin a base for so terrible a doctrine, and if God actively forced unbelief the whole structure of human responsibility would collapse into contradiction.

8. The order of the decrees

A brief tour of an old formal exercise, the divine decrees: in what order, before time, did God purpose what he purposed? The Arminian and Wesleyan order: create, permit the fall, provide atonement for all, elect those who believe, give grace so all can believe, save all who do. The supralapsarian order, which the teachers identify with hyper-Calvinism and the edge of unorthodoxy: first elect and reprobate, then create, then permit the fall so the non-elect will fall. And the moderate order Patton holds: create, permit the fall, elect some out of fallen humanity and pass over others, provide salvation for the elect, save all who believe. The difference sounds scholastic but matters: on the moderate order, God's purpose in creating was never to damn; election is his answer to a fall he permitted, not the reason he made men.

9. The unevangelized, and not defending lions

A question from the class turns the sovereignty discussion pastoral: Dyke tells of serving where the gospel had arrived only in living memory, and being asked why God saved none of my people until now. He had no answer. Even prevenient grace, the teachers observe, does not help there: what does a balanced scale mean in a culture where every influence is pagan? Only God's sovereignty explains the pattern, and our obligation is to hold the truth of Scripture without pretending to explanations we lack; as Spurgeon quipped about defending the Bible, one might as soon defend a lion. Turn it loose.

10. The atonement: the question and the struggle

The session then opens the course's next great doctrine. Why did Christ die on the cross, and what did his death accomplish? These are the most basic questions of Christianity, and, the teachers warn, the doctrine was not settled from the beginning; the church struggled toward it as it struggled toward the Trinity. The struggle is not ancient history: Patton recounts a phone call with a man angry at the very idea that God required a payment, protesting that a God who demands satisfaction before forgiving is worse than the baseless forgiveness he commands of us. Six main theories will organize the study: recapitulation, ransom to Satan, satisfaction, moral example, governmental, and penal substitution, and the method is the course's motto: in contrast there is clarity.

11. The recapitulation theory

The first theory the early church produced, associated with Irenaeus and still living in Eastern Orthodoxy. Christ lived the perfect life Adam failed to live, recapitulating, doing over, every stage of human life, birth through manhood, in perfect obedience, and by that perfect life salvation is made possible. It grew in a particular soil: against docetism and Gnostic dualism, which denied Christ's real humanity, Irenaeus insisted Christ had to be truly human, living every bit of our life, to save us. The parallels with Adam are drawn from Scripture itself: Romans 5, through one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so through the obedience of the one many will be made righteous, obedience, notice, not death; and 1 Corinthians 15, the first Adam a living soul, the last Adam a life-giving spirit. Adam disobeyed in a garden and failed at a tree; Christ submitted in a garden and won at a tree.

12. True but not enough

The teachers' verdict sets the pattern for the whole unit: the theory is true but incomplete. Christ really is the second Adam; his sinless life really is part of the atonement, not a byproduct, for he had to qualify by the time he reached the cross, and a Christ who died in infancy could not have atoned as Scripture describes. The church rightly refuses to call Irenaeus a heretic for taking the first step. But the weakness is decisive: if Christ came only to recapitulate a perfect life, the cross becomes irrelevant; he could have died a natural death and still atoned. None of these early theories, they stress, doubted the history of the cross; the church was working out its meaning, and revelation was complete while understanding was still growing. Next: the ransom to Satan theory.

SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

1 Corinthians 15 · 1 Peter 2 · Acts 2 · John 6 · Jude · Luke 22 · Philippians 2 · Romans 10 · Romans 11 · Romans 5 · Romans 9

KEY TERMS

Compatibilism

The position the course lands on: God's unconditional sovereign election and man's genuine responsibility are both realities taught in Scripture, held in tension though our finite minds cannot fit them together.

Antinomy

Packer's word for two truths taught side by side that we cannot reconcile: God's sovereignty and man's responsibility, held together and never played off against each other, reconciled in the mind of God.

Reprobate

The term for those destined for judgment. How they come to be so, by God's active decree or his passive passing over, is the question dividing double from single predestination.

Single predestination

God predestines the elect to eternal life and passively passes over the non-elect, leaving them in their sins. The position Patton holds, defended from the asymmetry of Romans 9:22 and 23.

Double predestination

God actively predestines the non-elect to hell, hardening and preparing them for unbelief. Identified in the lecture with extreme Calvinism, resting on three ambiguous texts, and denied at the Council of Orange.

Supralapsarianism

The order of decrees in which God first purposes to elect and reprobate, then creates, then permits the fall. The teachers place it at the edge of unorthodoxy: on this order, God creates in order to damn.

The divine decrees

The old formal exercise of ordering God's eternal purposes: creation, the fall, election, atonement, salvation. The moderate order Patton holds puts creation and the permitted fall before election.

Recapitulation

The earliest atonement theory, from Irenaeus: Christ did over what Adam did wrong, living every stage of human life in perfect obedience, so that salvation rests on his perfect life. True, the teachers say, but incomplete: it leaves the cross irrelevant.

Docetism

The error recapitulation was built against: the Gnostic claim that Christ only seemed human, since flesh is evil. Irenaeus answered that Christ had to be truly human, living our whole life, to save us.

COMPREHENSION CHECK

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

1. Why does Patton say he holds unconditional election?

- A. Because it is the most comfortable position
- B. Because his tradition requires it
- C. Because with Scripture at the front of his stage of truth he cannot get past the texts exegetically; were emotion in front, he admits, he would be an Arminian
- D. Because Arminianism has no biblical arguments

2. Which pairing does compatibilism actually hold in tension?
 - A. Unconditional and conditional election at once
 - B. God's sovereignty and libertarian free will
 - C. Faith and works as grounds of justification
 - D. God's sovereignty and man's responsibility; the other pairings are contradictions, and tension is not contradiction
3. What will no one be able to plead at the judgment, according to the lecture?
 - A. Non-election; man will stand fully accountable for actions, thoughts, attitudes, and unbelief
 - B. Ignorance of the law
 - C. The weakness of the flesh
 - D. The failure of the church to reach them
4. How does Luke 22:22 teach both sides in one verse?
 - A. It teaches only God's determination
 - B. The Son of Man goes as it has been determined, God's sovereignty, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed, real responsibility
 - C. It teaches only Judas's freedom
 - D. It is a later scribal addition
5. Why were Peter's hearers cut to the heart in Acts 2?
 - A. Because the crucifixion had been a Roman act only
 - B. Because Peter withheld the plan of God from them
 - C. Because they were charged as responsible for nailing up the very man delivered by God's predetermined plan
 - D. Because they had never heard of Jesus
6. At the end of Romans 9, how does Paul explain Israel's unbelief?
 - A. God did not choose them, so nothing more can be said
 - B. They lacked the Scriptures
 - C. The Gentiles crowded them out
 - D. He lays the responsibility on Israel: they pursued righteousness as by works, not by faith, and stumbled over the stumbling stone
7. What single sentence of assurance do the teachers draw from Romans 9 through 11?
 - A. If anyone is saved, all credit goes to God for electing them; if anyone is lost, all credit goes to them for rejecting him
 - B. Salvation and damnation are both finally man's work
 - C. Salvation and damnation are both finally God's work
 - D. No assurance is possible on these questions
8. What is Packer's counsel about the antinomy, as the teachers present it?
 - A. Choose sovereignty and let responsibility go
 - B. Hold both truths with equal emphasis, never playing them off against each other, trusting their reconciliation to the mind of God
 - C. Treat the tension as a translation problem
 - D. Preach responsibility publicly and sovereignty privately

9. What is the difference between single and double predestination?
- A. Single concerns individuals, double concerns nations
 - B. Single is Arminian, double is Lutheran
 - C. Single: God predestines the elect and passively passes over the rest; double: God actively predestines the rest to hell, hardening them for unbelief
 - D. They are two names for one doctrine
10. What does Patton notice comparing Romans 9:22 with 9:23?
- A. The two verses are word-for-word parallel
 - B. Verse 22 names the devil as the preparer
 - C. Verse 23 omits the vessels of mercy
 - D. Verse 23 says he prepared the vessels of mercy beforehand; verse 22 has no he and no beforehand, so the vessels of wrath are being prepared passively, in time, by themselves
11. Beyond exegesis, what wider argument does Patton make against double predestination?
- A. Three ambiguous texts are too thin a base for so terrible a doctrine, and active divine hardening into unbelief would collapse responsibility into contradiction
 - B. The doctrine was invented in the nineteenth century
 - C. No church council ever discussed it
 - D. It is refuted by archaeology
12. Why do the teachers place supralapsarianism at the edge of unorthodoxy?
- A. Because it denies the fall
 - B. Because it makes salvation by works
 - C. Because on its order God elects and reprobates before creating, so that his very purpose in creation is to damn some
 - D. Because it was condemned at Nicaea
13. What question from the mission field could Dyke not answer?
- A. Whether infant baptism is valid
 - B. Why God saved none of my people until now, asked in a culture the gospel reached only in living memory
 - C. Which Bible translation to use
 - D. Whether miracles continue
14. Why was the man on the phone angry at the doctrine of the atonement?
- A. He believed the atonement applied only to Israel
 - B. He denied that Christ died at all
 - C. He thought the doctrine too complicated to teach
 - D. He protested that a God who requires payment before forgiving is worse than the baseless forgiveness he commands of us
15. What did the recapitulation theory teach?
- A. That Christ's death paid a ransom to Satan
 - B. That Christ lived the perfect life Adam failed to live, doing over every stage of human life in obedience, and that his perfect life makes salvation possible
 - C. That the cross satisfied God's honor
 - D. That Christ died as a moral example only

16. Against what error was recapitulation forged?
- A. Arianism
 - B. Pelagianism
 - C. Docetism, the Gnostic denial that Christ was truly human, since flesh was thought evil
 - D. Marcionism
17. What is the decisive weakness of recapitulation?
- A. It denies Christ's deity
 - B. It makes salvation by works
 - C. It confuses Adam with Israel
 - D. If Christ came only to live the perfect life, the cross becomes irrelevant; he could have died a natural death and still atoned
18. How do the teachers relate complete revelation to the developing theories?
- A. Revelation was complete while the church's understanding of it was still growing; the theories questioned the meaning of the cross, never its history
 - B. Revelation itself grew as the theories grew
 - C. The theories were each new revelations
 - D. Understanding was complete from the first generation

Answer key (fold under before you begin): 1 C · 2 D · 3 A · 4 B · 5 C · 6 D · 7 A · 8 B · 9 C · 10 D · 11 A · 12 C · 13 B · 14 D · 15 B · 16 C · 17 D · 18 A

TALK IT OVER

1. Salvation is one hundred percent the sovereignty of God and one hundred percent the responsibility of man, like the Bible and like Christ himself. Which hundred percent does your praying actually reflect? And your evangelism? What would it look like for both to reflect both?
2. Patton confesses that Romans 9:22 and 23 gives him a loophole out of double predestination, and that he wants one. Is wanting a loophole a failure of nerve or a right instinct about the character of God? How do you tell the difference between softening a text and reading it precisely?
3. The man on the phone raged that God will not forgive baselessly while commanding us to. Before the course answers him in the coming sessions, how would you answer him today? What is your forgiveness of others actually based on?

ONE VERSE TO CARRY

Paul holds both truths in one breath in Philippians 2: work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

GO FURTHER

The lecture's own pointers: J. I. Packer's *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, commended as the classic treatment of the antinomy this session leaves standing, and Piper's two-wills paper already in hand. The teachers close by previewing the ransom to Satan theory, a view you can still hear preached today, and the next session carries the atonement's story from Satan's supposed rights all the way to the view the course will defend.