

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. Dr. Spencer, at the end of our session last week we dealt with the very difficult material in Romans Chapter 9, where Paul tells us quite clearly about God's sovereign election of some to be saved and others not to be saved. How would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to say a little more about the presentation in Romans 9 and then defend the biblical view of God's sovereign unconditional election against some of the most common objections. The doctrine of unconditional election says that God chooses whom he will save based on his own good pleasure and not any merit in us.

The last thing we looked at in Romans 9 was God's response to man's objection that it isn't fair for God to judge him given that God is completely sovereign in deciding whom to save.

Marc Roby: And God's answer, in essence, was to shut your mouth. As a mere creature you have no business questioning the Creator.

Dr. Spencer: That was the answer. And then Paul went on, in Romans 9:21-24 to say, "Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?"¹

Marc Roby: Those verses are extremely difficult for people to accept. We spoke at length about them recently, in Session 109.

Dr. Spencer: And interested listeners can go to the archive and read or listen to that podcast. I don't want to repeat it all here. But we noted there that an unbeliever will *not* accept the answer. He will continue to accuse God of being unfair. But a believer *will* accept God's answer, even though it is still hard.

Marc Roby: Yes, it is very hard to understand. When we are born again, we are given a new worldview, which accepts God's Word as our ultimate standard for truth even though God has not revealed a complete answer to the question of how to reconcile his sovereignty and our freedom.

Dr. Spencer: The tension between man's freedom, or responsibility, and God's sovereignty is one of the most difficult things for us to deal with. And I say "deal with" rather than

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“understand” because we can’t fully understand it. We can see that it is not a true contradiction, but we cannot fully resolve the tension.

In his commentary on Romans, the Rev. P.G. Mathew wrote that “The point of contention in Romans 9-11 is the conflict between the sovereignty of God and human responsibility. Paul never offers a logical solution to this tension, except when he concludes ‘Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! ‘Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?’ ‘Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.’”²

Marc Roby: And that says about all that we, as creatures, can say in regard to this issue. As we are told in Deuteronomy 29:29, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.”

Dr. Spencer: That’s quite true. We cannot fully explain how to reconcile God’s sovereignty and man’s freedom and responsibility. But we certainly can say a bit more about whether or not the Lutheran and Arminian position avoids this complication. Remember that Lutherans and Arminians claim that every human being has the ability to accept or reject God’s offer of salvation. They assume that by doing so, they protect God from the charge of being unfair by electing some to salvation while leaving others to pay for their sins in hell.

We have already shown that this is at odds with the biblical teaching, but we can say even more, because even if it were a possible interpretation of the biblical data, it doesn’t shield God from man’s charge of being unfair.

Marc Roby: Well, please explain why not.

Dr. Spencer: The 19th-century theologian Charles Hodge said it well, so let me quote him. He wrote that “If it be right that God should permit an event to happen, it must be right that He should purpose to permit it, i.e., that He should decree its occurrence.”³

Marc Roby: That’s a very important point, and a great way of putting it. If we think we are somehow isolating God from a charge of being unfair for his eternal election by leaving it up to men, we still have to face the problem that according to the Lutheran and Arminian view God permits some people to refuse his offer and go to hell. The end result is the same, not everyone is saved. So, as Hodge says, if it is right for God to permit such an event, it must also be right if his *purpose* is to permit it, or we could say, if he foreordains it.

Dr. Spencer: And Hodge draws a very reasonable conclusion from this observation. We must remember that he refers to the reformed view of the decree of election as the “Augustinian system”, since it was also the teaching of St. Augustine. Hodge wrote that “The Augustinian

² P.G. Mathew, *Romans: The Gospel Life* (Volume 2), Grace and Glory Ministries, 2014, pp 62-63

³ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, Vol. II, pg. 336

system, therefore, is nothing but the assumption that God intended in eternity what He actually does in time.”⁴

Marc Roby: And that sounds eminently reasonable. The only logical alternative is that God is no longer sovereign over his creation, which would be a frightening thought.

Dr. Spencer: That would be a very frightening thought. We would not be able to trust any of God’s promises. And so, as you said, Hodge’s conclusion is completely reasonable. He goes on to write that all “anti-Augustinian systems”, which certainly includes Lutheran and Arminian theologies, “assume that God is bound to provide salvation for all; to give sufficient grace to all; and to leave the question of salvation and perdition to be determined by each man for himself. ... The question is not which of these theories is the more agreeable, but which is true.”⁵

Marc Roby: That’s a critically important point. We should want to know the truth, even if that truth is in some way less agreeable to us.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we certainly should. Especially when we take into account the fact that we are finite, sinful creatures, so what we think of as being agreeable certainly should not be the standard we use. But Hodge goes on to make a very good point about which view is true.

Marc Roby: Alright, please proceed.

Dr. Spencer: He writes, “And to decide that question one method is to ascertain which accords best with providential facts. Does God in his providential dealings with men act on the principles of sovereignty, distributing his favours according to the good pleasure of his will; or on the principle of impartial justice, dealing with all men alike? This question admits of but one answer. ... the fact is patent that the greatest inequalities do exist among men; that God deals far more favourably with some than with others; that He distributes his providential blessings, which include not only temporal good but also religious advantages and opportunities, as an absolute sovereign according to his own good pleasure”.⁶

Marc Roby: I’m afraid I have noticed that “the greatest inequalities do exist among men”, we certainly aren’t all equally capable in virtually any endeavor I can think of.

Dr. Spencer: No, we aren’t. And we need to recognize that God is the one who sovereignly decides what gifts to give to each person. In 1 Corinthians 12 the apostle Paul addresses the issue of gifts given to different people in the church and he writes, in Verse 11, that “All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.” And this isn’t just true of gifts we are given for the edification of God’s church. God is sovereign over all the affairs of men. When Paul was speaking to the people in Athens he declared, as we read in Acts 17:26, that from one man God “made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the

⁴ Ibid, pg. 337

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid, pp 337-338

whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.”

Marc Roby: The Old Testament teaches us the very same thing. For example, in Job 12:23 we read that God “makes nations great, and destroys them; he enlarges nations, and disperses them.” And, in Psalm 139:16 King David declared to God that “All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”

Dr. Spencer: It is a clear teaching of the Bible that God is sovereign over every detail of life. We don’t choose where, when or to whom we are born, and we don’t get to choose how tall we are, what color hair we have, what gifts we have and so on. And the flip side of that is that we have no basis for pride if we possess some particular gift, be it intellectual, musical, athletic or whatever, and we also have no rational basis for thinking that God has been unfair to us if our gifts aren’t as great as we would like. God doesn’t owe us anything. He never treats anyone unjustly.

Marc Roby: Do you think there is someone whose gifts are as great as he or she would like?

Dr. Spencer: Well, I doubt it. I certainly haven’t met the person. But let me finish this discussion by stating Hodge’s conclusion. He wrote, “It is therefore vain to adopt a theory which does not accord with these facts. It is vain for us to deny that God is a sovereign in the distribution of his favours if in his providence it is undeniable that He acts as a sovereign. Augustinianism accords with these facts of providence, and therefore must be true. It only assumes that God acts in the dispensation of his grace precisely as He acts in the distribution of his other favours; and all anti-Augustinian systems which are founded on the principle that this sovereignty of God is inconsistent with his justice and his parental relation to the children of men are in obvious conflict with the facts of his providence.”

Marc Roby: That is a very solid, logical argument. We should avoid having our theology be inconsistent with known facts.

Dr. Spencer: We should avoid holding *any* theory that contradicts known facts, whether we are talking about theology, physics, chemistry or whatever. But in every one of these fields there is a natural tendency to construct theories that are consistent with our own underlying assumptions. And if some of our assumptions are wrong, we are going to come up with wrong theories.

Marc Roby: And when we see that one of our theories doesn’t comport with the facts, it should cause us to go back and reconsider our assumptions.

Dr. Spencer: That’s a good point. We should seek to gather together all of the available data and then find the theory that best explains all of it. That is no less true in theology than it is in physics and chemistry. But in doing this, we have to realize that we need some ultimate standard for determining truth and, as we have said many times, the ultimate standard of truth for a Christian is the Bible.

Hodge wrote, “If the office of the theologian, as is so generally admitted, be to take the facts of Scripture as the man of science does those of nature, and found upon them his doctrines, instead

of deducing his doctrines from the principles or primary truths of his philosophy, it seems impossible to resist the conclusion that the doctrine of Augustine is the doctrine of the Bible. According to that doctrine God is an absolute sovereign. He does what seems good in his sight. He sends the truth to one nation and not to another. He gives that truth saving power in one mind and not in another. It is of him, and not of us, that any man is in Christ Jesus, and is an heir of eternal life.”

Marc Roby: It is interesting that Hodge notes in that statement that God doesn't send the truth to every nation. In other words, not every human being who has ever lived has heard the gospel.

Dr. Spencer: That statement is undeniably true. And it also argues against the standard Lutheran or Arminian position. No one can accept as true a gospel they have never heard, and it is obvious that not everyone in history has heard the gospel. So even if all people did have equal ability to respond in faith, not all have equal opportunity and you're right back to the initial question about God's fairness. We can't let our own idea of fairness overrule what the Bible clearly teaches.

There is one final argument that Hodge makes against those who object to the doctrine of unconditional election.

Marc Roby: What argument is that?

Dr. Spencer: He points out that Paul would not have had to provide the answers he does in Chapter 9 of the book of Romans if the Lutheran and Arminian position were true. Hodge wrote, “What appearance of injustice could there have been had Paul taught that God elects those whom He foresees will repent and believe, and because of that foresight? It is only because he clearly asserts the sovereignty of God that the objections have any place.”⁷

Marc Roby: That's a fantastic point. Paul's asking and answering the question about fairness makes no sense if the Lutheran and Arminian understanding is correct.

Dr. Spencer: The bottom line is that we may think that fairness requires God to give all of us the same ability to accept or reject his gospel offer, but our thinking that does not make it so.

Marc Roby: And perhaps there are good reasons for not giving us all the same ability.

Dr. Spencer: Well, in fact, I would say that there are. We have shown before because of our total depravity, if God didn't do anything, no one would choose to believe and we would all be condemned. Our natures are initially at enmity with God and cannot choose him.

But on the other hand, if God changes our nature so that we love him, which is what happens when we are born again, then we are guaranteed to choose him.

Marc Roby: And it seems like we are right back to the issue of free will, which we have discussed before.

⁷ Ibid, pg. 352

Dr. Spencer: That is exactly the problem. The notion that our will is completely free from any constraint, even our own predispositions, is illogical. As we have discussed before, unless you want to think that your decisions are completely randomly, there must be *some* predisposition one way or the other for us to make any decision. So, in particular, the idea that we could be in some neutral state where we could freely choose either to accept or reject God is, I think, simply impossible. We are either against God, or for him. There can be no neutrality. And, in fact, I would argue that if someone *was* neutral, that would be sinful. How could you not love the perfect God? How could you be neutral toward your Creator?

Marc Roby: I see your point. And it appears as though we have finished discussing the doctrine of unconditional election. Is that true?

Dr. Spencer: For now, yes.

Marc Roby: Very well, then this looks like a good place to stop for today. Let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org, we'd appreciate hearing from you.