

Doctrines

Ephesians 1:3-14

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, 5 having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved. 7 In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace 8 which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence, 9 having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, 10 that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth--in Him. 11 In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, 12 that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory. 13 In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, 14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory. (Ephesians 1:3-14 (ESV))

In the latter years of the 1400s and then following on into the 1500 and 1600s, God began to bring great changes within the hearts of men within the church. Why He chose that time period and those men, we can't know, but He did. Had He been working in the hearts of men in other time periods? I am sure that He had been, but those years seem to be what is referred to in other scriptures as being the "fullness of time", and it was then that devout men responded to the "unction" of God, and deeply "Spiritual" changes began to take place within the church.

Who were those men and what were those changes? The most prominent of the men who stepped forward and brought about those changes were men like Martin Luther, a Roman Catholic Priest, born in 1483 and lived until 1546. Led by God's Holy Spirit, Luther began to discover truths within the scriptures that most men had not even imagined before, truths that were there all along, yes, but somehow had been veiled from men's understanding, truths like those given by the Apostle Paul in Romans 1 which read

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. 17

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith." (Romans 1:16-17)

For many years, as a devoutly believing Catholic monk and priest, Martin Luther had fully accepted the Catholic traditions that embraced the belief that salvation could come only through works of penitence and good deeds. But then, after much study and pursuit of the truth, God brought new understanding of these precious words of Romans 1:17 to Luther, "The just shall live by faith."

From these simple words, Luther came to understand that salvation and eternal life, were not a reward that a person earned by his or her works, or through any of the other activities of life, but rather, salvation and eternal life was an unmerited and undeserved "free gift" from God; and it could only be received through "faith in the Lord Jesus Christ", nothing more, nothing less.

Though it was unknown to Martin Luther at the time, his bold new stand on the truths of scripture, would bring on an avalanche of new doctrinal beliefs, beliefs that would herald the beginning of what is now called the "Protestant Reformation", the beginning of all the church denominations that are common to us today, the Presbyterian, the Baptist, the Methodist, the Assemblies of God denominations, and on and on.

May I quickly note that Martin Luther was not entirely alone in his pursuit of the truth! In those same years several other great Reformation leaders rose to prominence, William Tyndale, John Knox, John Calvin, Jacobus Arminius, and others. Of those men, two, John Calvin and Jacobus Arminius, became zealous firebrands who, through their teachings have defined most of the Protestant doctrines and traditions that we hold to in most of our churches today.

But may I also add that just as in all such pioneering efforts of men, their zealousness also brought about division within the Protestant ranks. And those divisions have developed right along these exact lines that are being drawn within the scripture text that we have in front of us in Ephesians chapter 1 . . . and especially regarding these words of verses 4 and 5 and 11. Listen to these words again, beginning in verse 4,
4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, 5 having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will. (Ephesians 1:4-5 (ESV))

And verse 11,

In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will.
(Ephesians 1:11 (ESV))

In particular, it is the implication that is put forth within the words, “chosen” and “predestined” that brings the most controversy, with the questioning centering around exactly “when” and “by whom” and “in what context” our salvation takes place.

May I pause for a moment and remind ourselves that these two men, John Calvin and Jacobus Arminius, even with all of their differences were devoutly believing men, men who had fully and completely surrendered their lives, their intellect, their wisdom to Christ, men who were solemnly consecrated to the giving of a correct and accurate interpretation of these scriptures. But unfortunately, within their reading and their understanding of these scriptures they developed widely opposing viewpoints of belief.

May I present a question to us as we begin to look into these opposing viewpoints preached and taught by these men, the question being, “does opposing viewpoints, even as diverse as these two points of understanding seem to be, make one of the viewpoint wrong and the other right.”

May I repeat myself and ask the question in a slightly different way, “must all opposing views always have a wrong view and a right view, or could it be that within the miraculous mysteries of God, there might be other, more agreeable resolutions?”

I will leave that question unanswered for the present as I give us some of those opposing viewpoints developed by these two men. And perhaps as we consider these viewpoints, God will bring you and me a fresh new understanding of His word. One of the two viewpoints, generally referred to as being “Reformed Doctrines”, are the tenets to which this and other Presbyterian churches subscribe. The second, generally referred to as “Arminian Doctrines”, are the tenets to which our brethren in the Methodist, Baptist, Charismatic, and other churches subscribe.

One more thing . . . as we examine these doctrines, it would be good for us to acknowledge that not all of the individual members within these church denominations subscribe word-for-word to the doctrines of their churches. Some hold strongly to some of the doctrines but waver on others. But as a general rule, they do accept their particular church doctrines!

May I begin by reminding us again of “how” and “through whom” these two sets of doctrines originated? And please do bear with me. I hope that these explanations will not be too tedious.

Most of it seems to have begun with John Calvin 1509-1564 who organized and put into writing the doctrinal tenets of the “Reformed Faith”, which later became known as “The Five Points of Calvinism”. And then, fifty or so years later, Jacobus Arminius, 1560-1609, objecting to the manner in which the Reformed Theology was developing, began to teach and preach alternative points of view, with his teachings becoming known as “The Five Articles of Arminianism”. For the sake of time, I will give us these doctrinal views in a very abbreviated form, but it should be enough for us to gain a good understanding of them.

Listen! Article 1 of “The Five Articles of Arminianism” . . .

Article 1 . . . God has decreed to save through Jesus Christ those of the fallen and sinful race who through the grace of the Holy Spirit believe in him, but leaves in sin the incorrigible and unbelieving. (In other words the predestination mentioned here in Ephesians 1 and in other places in these scriptures is said to be conditioned upon God knowing beforehand who would respond to the gospel. Then He (God) would respond and chose those who have chosen Him.) (May I repeat that? God is able to see ahead in our lives, know who will choose Him, and then on that basis will choose us.)

Article 2 . . . Christ died for all men (not just for the elect), but no one except the believer has remission of sin.

Article 3 . . . Man can neither of himself, nor of his free will, do anything truly good until he is born again of God, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit.

Article 4 . . . All good deeds or movements within the regenerate heart must be ascribed to the grace of God but His grace is not irresistible. (In other words, though He draw us to His Son, we can resist His efforts.)

Article 5 . . . Those who are incorporated into Christ by a true faith have power given them through the assisting grace of the Holy Spirit to persevere in the faith. But it is possible for a believer to fall from grace.

Remember again that these five “Articles” were expressly intended to refute doctrines of the Reformed faith that had been developed earlier by John Calvin and others like him.

Listen! These are the “Five Points of Calvinism” and they are also abbreviated, but should still give us a clear understanding of what each means. Point 1 . . .

1. All men and women are “totally depraved” (we are not absolutely depraved, but are still so much depraved that we are totally incapable of choosing God through our own strength).
2. We are “Unconditionally Elected” “Unconditionally Chosen” (and not because of any righteousness of our own, or because of any choice that we might make, but rather it is an act of free unmerited grace on the part of God).
3. God provides “Limited Atonement” (That yes, the blood of Christ was sufficient to save everyone, but was effectual only for those who receive His salvation, none of His blood was wasted).
4. His grace is “Irresistible” (if God chooses to call us to Himself in salvation, we cannot resist the power of His Holy Spirit).
5. God provides “Perseverance of His Saints” (meaning that once we have received His salvation, we cannot lose it, also known as “Once Saved Always Saved”).

While some of these points of view might not seem so widely divided, they all really are in opposition to each other. And each concept has been thoroughly researched within these scriptures by their advocates, with both sides having firm scriptural proofs to substantiate each belief.

Again, I do hope that our looking into each of these doctrinal stands is not too tedious for us, but I do believe that we must examine them, because they are foundational to the “faith” that I spoke about a moment ago, the “faith” that will bring you and me to eternal life. And perhaps next week we can examine at least one or two of them carefully, but for now may we simply consider how such opposing beliefs and points of view develop between such devout and Godly men?

We can't, of course, really know for sure. There are no clear historical notes left for us. But perhaps it was that men of that day, the 1500 and 1600s were little different from men and women of our day. And in that vein, perhaps their differences were brought on by the thing that seems most to motivate us here in our own day and time, and that is “feelings”, simple “feelings”. Yes, we do read these scriptures regularly, and we do, for the most part really believe them. But our belief system seems to have a propensity toward corruption when “feelings” get added into the mix. By that I mean, as we read a particular verse of scripture, if it does not set perfectly well with the way we feel about a matter, we quickly surmise that “God must have meant something different from the words we are reading”. And we say, “Surely God cannot mean what it seems He is

saying here". I'll give us an example today and then, the Lord willing, we will look more carefully into it next week.

We'll begin with the first of the "Articles" and "Points", the one having to do with the "depravity" of our souls. Folks, I believe that I can safely say that most people, even those within our solid evangelical churches, like to believe that there is at least some "good" within every person's soul. And they quickly reach for obvious scripture contexts like those that tell us that we are created in the image of God, therefore, we must have at least some good within each of us. And it is hard for those individuals to accept other opposing scriptures, like those in Romans 3 that tell us that

10 As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one; 11 There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. 12 They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one."

(Romans 3:10-12 (NKJV))

These words just do not make us "feel very good" about ourselves. They are said to be "condemning and they could actually drive a person into a depression." Are you able to hear what I am saying about the corruption that can be brought on by the intermingling of our "feelings" into our beliefs?

The Lord willing, we will pick back up with these thoughts again next week. And I hope especially to begin our examination of how we can get from this condition of "Total Depravity" into God's "haven of salvation". May I leave you with the encouraging words of Ephesians 2, verses 8 and 9 . . .

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

(Ephesians 2: 8-9)