

Discussion: Berkhof's "Systematic Theology"

Let us begin with prayer.

Lord, we commit our class time to You. Give us alert minds and teach us. Help us test everything by Your Word. We ask these things and we thank You through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Amen.

We studied Romans 8 and Ephesians 1 in the last lecture. Now we want to go to Romans 9 and study that together. Continuing our Bible study, we will seek to reap some fruit from Berkhof's book and then begin to connect things. This is, after all, a course in systematic theology. Our theology ought to come from the Bible, but we need to systematize at some point. Remember that we do not need to agree with everything we may read and hear in this class, but rather we should evaluate everything by Scripture.

Let us look at Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*. Augustine taught double predestination. This is not something he started out believing, but through study he came to this conclusion. This does not mean that we should or should not believe it, but it is valuable historical background. The church fathers before Augustine based election on intellectual foresight. Therefore it is not accurate to say that the church has always agreed with Calvin's understanding of predestination. One could say the early church fathers did not give great attention to the matter of predestination and election but just assumed their conclusion. I think that is fair. But it is important to see that there is not a monolithic conclusion here. Augustine is a gigantic figure in the history of the church who dominated theology for the next thousand years. In fact, Luther and Calvin both credited him with teaching them the Gospel from his writings. In the late Middle Ages Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Bradwardine, and Gregory of Rimini all taught predestination according to Augustine's understanding. This is historical theology. What is its value? It gives us background. Most cults and false teachings, for example, are not new. It is possible that there is some entirely new cult, but usually they are founded by people again bringing up old errors. Controversy dominates the history of the theology of the church, which on the one hand is very sad. But it also seems to be the way the Lord has directed His church—these false teachings have forced the church to search the Scriptures and take a stance on important doctrinal issues. This has something to do with the effects of sin on the human mind. The reformers in general taught predestination, Martin Luther no less than John Calvin. The canons of Dort, the official doctrinal standards of the council of Dort in Holland, gave the five points of Calvinism in response to the Arminian position on predestination. Karl Barth had a unique view on predestination. He held that Christ was the condemned man for everyone and the elect man for everyone, as well. He has influenced others since then, but this is certainly not the traditional reformed view of election.

Berkhof says that the decree of predestination is the concurrent act of the Trinity. He says that Scripture almost always presents the Father as the author of election, so Berkhof is not denying the Father's special province in predestination. But as God is three in one we can make distinctions—such as saying that it was the Son who died on the cross, not the Father or the Spirit—but we cannot separate them. Thus in one sense predestination is the Father's special work, but in another sense as God is triune it is the concurrent act of the Trinity. That discussion by Berkhof along with another book I read showed me that I was overemphasizing the three-ness of God at the expense of His oneness, the unity of God. Although we can sometimes say that one or the other of the persons of the Trinity is mainly responsible for the acts of God, any of the acts of the Trinity are the acts of the whole Trinity. For example, it was Jesus who died on the cross. But God is inseparable. The Trinity is one. Therefore 2 Corinthians 5 can say, concerning the work on the cross, "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself." The Father was active. He did not die on the cross, but He was active. And Hebrews 9 can say, "The Son offered himself up to God as a sacrifice by the eternal Spirit." I take this to be a reference to the Holy Spirit.

Who is the major worker in regeneration? The Holy Spirit—He is the one who actually gives us new life. But 1 Peter 1:3 says, “Praise be to the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope.” Here the Father is the one responsible for giving us new birth. We could say He planned to give us new life. It is the Father’s will and plan that we should be regenerated through the work of the Holy Spirit. The Father is the planner of the new life, the Spirit is the giver of the new life, and the Son is also involved. In 1 Peter 1:3, in its entirety, Peter says, “Praise be to the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” It is Christ’s resurrection that unleashes the life that becomes ours in the new birth. Berkhof is right when he says that although election is the special work of the Father, because God is triune, three-in-one, all His works are concurrent. We never separate the persons of the Godhead. The doctrine of adoption, spoken of in Galatians 4 and Romans 8, speaks again of the Father in His love choosing us to be His sons and daughters, the Son redeeming us with His blood, buying us out of slavery to become the children of God, and the Spirit, called the Spirit of adoption, bearing witness with our spirits that we are children of God.

Berkhof says that God gave a special gift of perseverance to some angels. I cannot exactly say this is wrong, but it is speculative. In 1 Timothy 5 Paul mentions the elect angels, which shows that there are some, but we are told almost nothing else about that. This may be the way God has done it—He certainly is the Lord over the faith of angels too. We know that there is no salvation for angels, so there is a difference between elect humans and elect angels. But if there are chosen angels then presumably they are the ones who did not fall with Satan. To say that God gave them a special grace of perseverance is not necessarily wrong, but I would not say that it is a biblical fact that is proven by Scripture.

Christ was the object of predestination in some sense. He was not predestined in the way that we were. We were sinners predestined unto eternal life and the forgiveness of sins. He was not a sinner—never was and never will be—but He was chosen by the Father before the creation of the world to do the work of salvation, to accomplish redemption. In that sense He was foreknown or predestined (1 Peter 1). God does not choose men to salvation based on foreseen merit. Bible believing Wesleyans and Calvinists agree on this. Wesley would say that God chooses men to salvation based on foreseen faith, not merit. Wesleyan theology is not merit theology. Election renders the salvation of the elect certain, according to Berkhof. I agree with this, but we need to be careful not to confuse our part and knowledge with God’s. He is the one who chooses; He is the one who knows infallibly. The way we know people are elected, from 1 Thessalonians 1, is when the Gospel comes to them with power and they believe. We cannot know any other way. Election to salvation is eternal. It is not temporal—it is not in time. Calling, on the other hand, is temporal—it is in time. The Bible connects election and calling in some places, such as Romans 9 where Paul talks about people being chosen and called by God. The whole application of salvation is temporal, but election is that which took place before the creation of the world (Ephesians 1:4), before the beginning of time (1 Timothy 1:9). The final aim of election is the glory of God; this is not to be confused with the more immediate aim, which is the salvation of the chosen. God is the supreme being of the universe. Ultimately everything exists, including us, for His glory.

God did not relinquish His sovereignty at the Fall, but at the same time He is not the responsible author of the Fall. He is sovereign at all times, and so in some sense He stands behind the Fall, but not in the sense of being chargeable with it. We cannot say that God is the author of sin because the Bible is plain on that. On the other hand, we cannot solve the problem of how sin came into the world by saying that God completely relinquished His hands and let this happen without His control of anything. Thus we end up having to say something like God planned or decreed to permit the Fall. We really do not know how to explain this because it is a mystery. But He certainly is not responsible or blamable for sin. Some

would say that God predestined some unto sin and some unto holiness. This is not true. He predestined some of us to holiness or we would never be holy, but He does not predestine people unto sin. That is putting God too close to sin. Rather, contemplating the human race as a mass of sinners, He was proactive on behalf of multitudes and chose to give them what they do not deserve: grace, eternal life, and the forgiveness of sins. He was under no obligation to save us. On the other hand, contemplating the human race as a damned mass of sinners all deserving condemnation, for reasons hidden in His own will, He decided to allow some of them to suffer the punishment for their own sin. That is not saying that He pushed them or predestined them into sin. Rather, Berkhof is right to say, already in His mind planning to permit the Fall and viewing everyone as a sinner, He rescues many and allows others to receive what their sins deserve. If anyone is saved, the glory goes to God. If anyone goes to hell, they end up there because of their sins. Their punishment is not chargeable to God. Does that mean God does not stand behind the fate of those who end up in hell? No, He does stand behind their fate. He stands behind the fate of every person, the elect and the reprobate. He is the Lord of both. But He does not stand behind the fate of people who are lost in the same way that He stands behind the fate of people who are saved. In the case of the fate of the elect, He gets the credit. Without Him, they would never be saved. In regard to the fate of the reprobate, we know that God cannot be chargeable with sin. He is still Lord of their fate. The best we can do is say He planned to pass over them, to allow them to receive what they deserve. He could have done that with all of us. If we cry out for justice saying that God is not being fair, if we really sought justice then we would all be damned. Instead, God gives multitudes what they do not deserve. Is that unfair? The Bible calls this grace. We will be singing about this forever! And there is mystery. I cannot say that God does not stand behind the fate of everyone, and yet He is certainly not chargeable with sin. I therefore understand reprobation (when God passed some over) not to be proactive, as election is. He is proactive when He chooses His people in a way He is not with the reprobate. He merely decrees to give them what they deserve and in their fallen nature even desire.

God does not withhold common grace, His general goodness and benevolence from the reprobate. Friends, we live in God's world! Here are people who do not acknowledge God, they do not give Him thanks for their food—but it comes from a good God, whether they give Him thanks or not. They are not glorifying God, but He still does not withhold that from them. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, said, "Your Father in heaven gives the sunshine and the rain to the just and the unjust alike." Unbelieving farmers get rain for their crops just as much as believing farmers do. The Lord does do special things, as with the plagues on Egypt, but that is not His general practice. God gives His common grace to all people, even to those who hate Him and will hate Him all their lives, because He is a good God. As an example, consider a man and woman who honor God's institution of marriage and get married, are faithful to one another, respect and love one another, and take care of their children. There will be all kinds of blessings that attend those good choices that are ultimately accredited to the good God whose world this is. When we follow His principles, whether we know Him or not, we will reap certain blessings from that. When we say that God has chosen some and passed over others, we are not saying that He is good only to His people. His people know His grace, His forgiveness of sins, while the unsaved do not know those blessings though they may think they do. God's people get special blessings and a relationship with God through Christ, but by no means are the others excluded from the goodness of God. It is impossible to be on earth and be completely beyond His goodness. This is God's world and in following His principles blessing will be found, even by unbelievers. For example, the Mormons' emphasis on family and taking care of people is good. But unfortunately their doctrines are wrong, especially on the most important points of the deity of Christ, the way of salvation, and our final destinies. Even atheistic presupposition or starting points can help people in counseling, for example, if they search out God's principles in His world.

The Bible does speak on reprobation, which is something we will study more in another lecture. I seek to teach you from the Scripture. My position on this point is not as firm as on others. The Bible says much more about positive election than it does about negative election or reprobation. Romans 9 is the one very clear place where the Bible talks about this. First Peter 2 and maybe Jude 4 and some other places also talk about this. But Romans 9 is what convinces me on the truth of this doctrine. If I cannot convince you of this from Scripture, then I do not want to convince you.