

February 7, 2010

# Westminster Presbyterian Church

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## Sermons

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**T.U.L.I.P.**

**Sermons on the Five Points of Calvinism**  
**U. = Unearned and Unconditional Election**  
by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

This is the 500th year since John Calvin's birth. Because John Calvin is recognized as the "Father of Presbyterianism," we have been looking at his theology. We began this series of sermons on Heritage Sunday. With the onset of Lent in just a few days, we will revisit Calvin after Easter. Last week we began to discuss the second of Calvin's two points: Unconditional and Unearned Election. Today we will continue that discussion.

First, another pop quiz: If you had to choose between these two ways of looking at election which would you choose?

1. Some of us are included and some are excluded. Some of us are predestined to everlasting life and others of us are foreordained to everlasting death. God chooses some folks but not all.
2. God loves and is gracious toward all people. God chooses all, and rejects none. Everyone is included; no one excluded.

Last week before all the snow and winter weather returned to Dayton, we started a discussion on the second of the “Five Points of Calvinism.” We agreed that God has done some choosing: Abraham, Jacob, the nation of Israel, Mary, Paul are all biblical examples of people chosen by God. We affirmed that **we** had been chosen - chosen by God to be in relationship to him, to be God’s servant people.

Along the way I said this:

*Many of Calvin’s contemporary followers seem embarrassed by his doctrine of election. While the doctrine of election poses difficulties, it would be a mistake to give up on it altogether. Belief in election is in many ways a logical extension of the Reformation belief in grace alone. Election teaches that each of our lives is rooted in the gracious will and intentionality of God. In other words, election is meant to be a practical doctrine that gives us encouragement and hope. It is not meant to become a matter of speculative debate.*

Why is the doctrine of election an embarrassment to some Presbyterians? Why would election become a matter of speculative debate?

The embarrassment at least for some of us is that Calvin is clearly in the first group of the two options I just offered you.

According to Calvin some folks are included or elected to salvation by God and some are excluded. It’s right there in Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book three, chapters 21-24. In fact, the title to chapter 21 is *Eternal Election, by which God Has Predestined Some to Salvation, Others to Destruction*. According to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, “By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestined to everlasting life, and others fore-ordained to everlasting death.” (3.3) Thus, there is a “double” predestination, one negative, one positive, one to life and salvation and one to death and damnation. God is for some people (about 20%, Calvin once estimated) and against all the rest.

In his novel *The Light and the Dark*, C.P. Snow expresses a theological challenge in the words of a tormented man name Udal. At one point in the novel Udal addresses a friend named Ralph: “I’ve had the absolute conviction—it’s much more real than anything one can see or touch—that God and his world exist. And everyone can enter in and find their rest. Except me. I’m infinitely far away forever. I am alone and apart and infinitesimally small—and I can’t come near.”

“...could there be a world, Ralph, in which God existed—but with some people in it who were never allowed to believe?”

“It would be a tragic world,” replied Ralph.

“Why shouldn’t it be tragic?” Udal cried. “Why shouldn’t there be some who are rejected by God from the very beginning?”

What these two fictional characters are discussing is the question of predestination. How does salvation work? Has it been decided in advance that some are included and others excluded? Are some destined now and forever to loneliness and death while others are destined to life in the fullest sense? Is it a tragic world we live in - for some people at least?

Calvin, the architect of our reformed movement, would say, "Yes." Simply put predestination for Calvin means some are included and some are excluded. It is a double predestination - the elect and the reprobate; and since this interpretation of predestination is often considered the one position you are supposed to believe if you are a good Presbyterian, I hope you'll stay with me on what can be a heavy, but important topic.

Calvin would say that according to God's eternal purpose, Christ died only for the elect. Only the elect are given the gift of faith, forgiveness for their sins, and the ability to live as children of God. The non-elect are rejected or "passed over." Christ did not die for them. God "withholds his mercy" from them. They are ordained to "dishonor and wrath for their sin." (*Westminster Confession*, 3.7) God has decreed to "leave them in the common misery into which they have willfully plunged themselves." (*Canons of the Synod of Dort*, Art. 15) It is not unjust of God to choose to be for some and against others because all have willfully disobeyed God's commandments and deserve God's wrath, judgment, and condemnation. If God damns the non-elect, they only get what they deserve. On the other hand if God decides to love, help, and save the elect, it is not because they are more deserving than the non-elect, but because God chooses to be gracious to them despite their sinfulness.

Believe it or not several arguments can be made in favor of this interpretation of predestination: First, it emphasizes the sovereign freedom and power of God. Like the future of the world, the future of every individual person depends finally not on what we are and what we do; it depends on who God is and what God does.

Second, it seems a logical explanation of the fact that the vast majority of people do not know about, accept, and live by God's saving grace in Jesus Christ, while only a relatively few do.

And finally, it tries to take seriously some biblical passages that suggest a double predestination. So, for instance, according to Matt. 22:14, Jesus said, "Many are called, but few are chosen." According to John 17:9, Jesus said, "I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me." And, above all there is Paul's discussion in chapters 9-11 of the letter to the Romans. Paul is not thinking here about the election or rejection of individual persons but about the relation between the Jewish community and the Gentile Christian community. But, he does say some things here that seem to support belief in an individual double predestination. God "loved" Jacob and "hated" Esau (Rom. 9:13). God "has mercy on whomever he chooses" and "hardens the heart of whomever he chooses" (Rom. 9:18). Does that not suggest that God graciously chooses some individuals and groups and rejects others?

Still not convinced? Me either. With all due respect to Calvin and *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, I have a deep aversion to the doctrine of double predestination. Let me assure you, you do not need to believe in double predestination to be a good Presbyterian. Like most other Christian

doctrines Presbyterians approach this doctrine with a wide variety of views. You could answer today's pop quiz either way and be right. What a deal! Everyone gets an A! Other Reformed confessions such as Calvin's own *Geneva Catechism*, the *Scots Confession*, the *Second Helvetic Confession*, and the *Heidelberg Catechism* do not teach it. Nor do any of the 20th Century Presbyterian Statements of Faith. It is only one of several possible views in the Reformed tradition.

One of my favorite seminary professors, Bert Atwood, used to have a test for any sermon. He would ask us, "Where's the good news?" Clearly, the doctrine of double predestination is not good news. For some at least, it is very bad news indeed. Imagine a minister standing before an Easter morning congregation and saying, "Christ died and lives for you - maybe." "God loves you - maybe."

I believe in a loving, merciful, patient God—a God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The God I have come to know in Jesus Christ is eternally inclusive, not exclusive. And, I believe the New Testament when read in its entirety supports such a view.

We read for instance: "God is our Savior, who desires **everyone** to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). The Lord is "patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but **all** to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that **the world** might be saved through him" (John 3:17). Jesus is the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the **world!**" (John 1:29). "As **all** die in Adam, so **all** will be made alive in Christ" (1 Cor. 15:22). "As one man's trespass led to condemnation for **all**, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for **all**" (Rom. 5:18). "For in him **all** the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself **all** things, whether on earth or in heaven" (Col. 1:19-20). "For God has imprisoned **all** in disobedience so that he may be merciful to **all**" (Rom. 11:32).

The Bible is a photo album filled with pictures of God's love for **all**. One striking image is found in the pages of 2 Samuel. The setting is the palace of King David. Gold and bronze fixtures gleam from the walls. Lofty, wooden ceilings crown each spacious room. In the banquet room David and his children gather for an evening meal. Absalom, tanned and handsome, is there, as is David's beautiful daughter, Tamar. The call to dinner is given, and the king scans the room to see if **all** are present. One figure, though, is absent.

Clump, scraaape, clump, scraaape. The sound coming down the hall echoes into the chamber. Clump, scraaape, clump, scraaape. Finally, the person appears at the door and slowly shuffles to his seat. It is the lame, ugly, dumb Mephibosheth seated in grace at David's table. And, the tablecloth covers his feet. Now the feast can begin.

Let us pray - O God, we give you thanks for your steadfast love whereby you accept each and every one of us where we are, as we are. Help us to accept the fact that we are accepted. Amen.