

## Session 1

### Chapter 1 Polemics over Soteriology



In the church we use great sounding terms that are often not clearly understood by the Christian or the world (regeneration, justification, foreknowledge . . . infralapsarianism, supralapsarianism, historic millennialism, post millennialism, etc.) One unfortunate result is that the communication of great Biblical themes is misunderstood due to the lack of understanding of the biblical and theological terms and words in context.”<sup>1</sup>

Though no one readily says it, what complicates this picture is that, except for a few essential doctrines, such as the Trinity and deity of Christ, most theological matters are adhered to by two more positions that, at times, are antithetical to each another.

Since most believers usually get their theological information from their pastors who, for the most part, don't have enough time on Sundays to present any views other than their own, they may not have the most balanced theological views.

#### I. Soteriology

There are several disciplines within the field of theology, beginning with the study of doctrine of God, Christology, pneumatology (i.e., study of the Holy Spirit), eschatology (study of the last days), ecclesiology (study of church) to name a few. This course is delimited soteriology.

##### A. Definition

1. The English word “soteriology,” deriving from two Greek words *sōtēria* (σωτηρία) and *logos*, means doctrine or study of salvation.
2. Its root verb *sozō* (σώζω), meaning “I save,” has several connotations.

As in English, it could mean “material and temporal deliverance from danger and suffering” (Matt. 8:25<sup>2</sup>, Mk. 13:20), or even from sickness (Matt. 9:22<sup>3</sup>).<sup>4</sup>

3. Soteriology, however, is mainly concerned with its spiritual implication, that is, “the spiritual and eternal salvation granted



<sup>1</sup> RS107 Christian Theology Syllabus 1 (Vision School International), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Matt. 8:23-5: “And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. <sup>24</sup> And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him, saying, “Save us (sozō), Lord; we are perishing.”

<sup>3</sup> “Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, ‘Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.’ And instantly the woman was made well” (sozō).

<sup>4</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1992), p. 958.

immediately by God to those who believe on Christ.”<sup>5</sup>

This verb is used in the well-known Ephesians passage in which Paul declares, “For it is by grace you have been *saved*, through faith—and this not from yourselves; it is the gift of God—not by works” (Eph. 2:8-9<sup>a</sup>).

**Discussion<sup>1</sup>:** What are some biblical/theological terms that you use that you aren’t quite sure what they mean?

## II. Differing Ideas over Soteriology

It is a simple term but the issue becomes quite complicated when different interpretative communities attempt to define it.

There are at least four major groups whose soteriological views differ substantially; the following is a brief description of their core soteriological positions.

### A. Calvinism

As the basis for the soteriology of the Reformed theology, this position, named after the famed Reformer John Calvin (1509-1564), is captured in the acrostic TULIP:



Total depravity of man, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of saints.

1. Centered on God’s sovereignty, it espouses “double election” that predestines some to be saved and others to be lost forever.
  - a. Though Calvin called it an “awful decree,” he, nevertheless, advocated this doctrine since nobody deserves salvation and only through God’s grace and mercy that some are saved.
  - b. Once saved, God gives the elect the grace to persevere in faith until the very end; that is, the truly saved will not renounce their faith because God perseveres with them.
2. What about those who seemed to believe but did not persevere in faith?
  - a. In reference to them, the Reformed theologian Michael Horton writes:
 

“Did they ever really possess saving, justifying faith, or were they likely the seeds that fell on rocky ground or were choked by the weeds before they took root (Lk. 8:14-5)? Apparently the latter.”

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

- b. Then, he quotes 1 John 2:19 in which apostle John alluded to those who used to worship and possibly served with him, but now they were part of the *Docetics* who denied the true humanity of Christ (1 Jn. 4:3; 2 Jn. 1:9):

“They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us.  
For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us;  
but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.”

To Horton, their failure to persevere showed that they were just pretenders.

## B. Arminianism

The 17<sup>th</sup> century theologian Jacobus Arminius, who felt that Calvinism made God the author of sin, focused on man’s responsibility.



1. Thus, he espoused a view that salvation is open to anyone who chooses to believe in the person and work of Christ.
2. In contrast to Calvinism, the believers can lose salvation if they “embrace again this present world,[] depart from the holy doctrine . . . , [] lose their good conscience and [] neglect grace.”<sup>6</sup>

## C. Free Grace

The crux of this view, largely the product of the advocates of Dispensational theology, is to guarantee eternal security—that is, once saved, always saved, no matter what.

1. All that is needed for salvation is to “believe[] that Jesus is ‘the Christ, the Savior of the world’ (Jn. 20:31). Individuals are saved when they are convinced of that promise and thus are sure they have eternal life.”<sup>7</sup>
2. According to its main advocate Zane Hodges, repentance and “acknowledgment of Christ’s Lordship, or anything else of this kind,” are not needed to be saved.
3. Once a person is saved in this manner, he will always be saved even if he stops believing later. Another advocate of this soteriological view stated:

“Jesus guarantees eternal life to all who come to faith in Him, even if they later stop believing in Him for eternal life. Thus, if a person believes the gospel and is then led astray by [*a wrong theology*—italic mine],

<sup>6</sup> Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 268.

<sup>7</sup> Zane Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1992), p. 19.

he or she is still a Christian, albeit one who no longer believes the gospel.”<sup>8</sup>

#### D. The Lordship salvation

In opposing the Free Grace position, this camp, based on passages like James 2:17 (“In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead”), espouses that “faith encompasses obedience,” that is, “faith is not complete unless it is obedient.”<sup>9</sup>

1. Whereas the Free Grace completely severs saving faith from works as its natural consequences, the Lordship salvation fuses them together as being, in effect, one and the same.
2. Thus, its main advocate John MacArthur Jr., wrote:  
“We must be eager to do whatever [Jesus] asks, or we have every reason to doubt our salvation”<sup>10</sup>; “disobedience is unbelief.”<sup>11</sup>

**Discussion<sup>2</sup>:** How do you feel about discovering that our leading theologians disagree over fundamental issues such as salvation?

### III. What They Agree On

#### A. Their soteriological agreement

While their soteriologies differ from one another, they agree on several important points such as the following:<sup>12</sup>

1. Christ is the sole channel whom God bestows redemption (Acts 4:12; Jn. 14:6).
2. Man is unable to help himself and needs the awakening and empowering touch of the divine Spirit.
3. After his conversion the redeemed and sanctified person generally becomes aware that his conversion was no mere accident.
4. He also discovers God has had a plan for his life.



<sup>8</sup> Robert N. Wilkin, *Confident in Christ: Living by Faith Really Works* (Irving, Texas: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), p. 185.

<sup>9</sup> John MacArthur Jr., quoted in Michael Horton ed., *Christ the Lord: The Reformation and Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), p. 173.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 87

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 47

<sup>12</sup> T. C. Hammond, *In Understand Be Men*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., (London: IVP: 1968), p. 87-8 (the points 1-5).

5. In addition, he is filled with gratitude that he is permitted to be among the redeemed.

### **B. Other general agreement**

They also agree on the importance of

- Regularly praying and reading the Bible
- Being part of Christian fellowship, as essential components of growing as a Christian after the initial salvation.

## **IV. Objectives of the Study**

### **A. What this study does not seek**

The study does not attempt to settle theological and doctrinal disagreements among these groups; this will be addressed in a later study..

### **B. What this study seeks to attain**

1. First: As a foundational course, this study seeks to understand the meaning of the great theological words that these groups all uphold: depravity (or, sinfulness) of man, regeneration, justification, redemption, predestination, sanctification, etc.

Of course, this does not mean that they hold uniform ideas about all these issues; some of the differences will be noted to reach consensus soteriological understanding.

2. Second, ultimately we want the students to become so familiar with these concepts that they are able to explain them to non- theology students with clarity, especially in the context of evangelizing.

## **Homework 1**

Read over the material covered in the last class and the additional Bible reading (if any). If you have any questions, please note them here and ask me later.

1. What is soteriology and why is it important to study this?
2. Summarize the respective positions held by the four major groups that are in feud over soteriology.
3. What would you like to say to each?

