

Examining Christian Doctrine

Lesson 30: The Doctrine of Salvation Part 7 – Salvation Controversies

Salvation is a foundational doctrine in Christian theology, yet throughout history, it has sparked significant debate and controversy. Different Christian traditions have developed various understandings of how salvation is obtained, maintained, and assured. In this concluding lesson we will explore several of these controversies. Each of these theological issues touches on essential questions about God's sovereignty, human responsibility, the nature of grace, and the believer's relationship with Christ. Understanding these differing perspectives helps illuminate how Christians across traditions interpret the Bible's teachings on salvation.

1. Law vs. Grace (Works vs. Faith)

The controversy of **Law vs. Grace** revolves around the relationship between the Mosaic Law (the commandments given to Israel in the Old Testament) and God's grace as revealed in the New Testament through Jesus Christ. This debate explores the role of the Law in salvation, Christian living, and the covenant between God and His people. Key questions include: *Are Christians bound to follow the Old Testament Law? How does grace function in salvation compared to the Law?*

Law Perspective: The Law, particularly the Mosaic Law, includes moral, civil, and ceremonial commandments given to Israel. In some traditions, aspects of the Law are seen as a standard of righteousness that people should uphold, even in the New Covenant. Some believe that obedience to the Law is essential for maintaining salvation or even contributing to it.

- **Key Beliefs:**

- **Covenant Relationship:** The Law, though central to Israel reflect God's character and are timeless moral truths.
- **Obedience and Blessing:** Many of the Old Testament passages emphasize that obedience to the Law results in blessings, while disobedience brings curses (Deuteronomy 28).
- **Jesus and the Law:** Some point to Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:17 ("Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them") as proof that the Law still has a role in the life of a believer.

Grace Perspective: In contrast, the grace perspective argues that salvation is entirely a gift of God's grace, and the Law cannot contribute to one's righteousness or salvation. Christ's death and resurrection have fulfilled the requirements of the Law, liberating believers from its demands. Grace refers to the unmerited favor of God, which is received through faith in Christ, not through human effort or adherence to the Law.

Key Beliefs:

- **Salvation by Grace Alone:** Paul makes clear in Ephesians 2:8-9 that salvation is by grace through faith, not by works of the Law. Grace, in this context, is God's unearned favor, given freely to sinners. The Law, while holy, cannot bring salvation or justify people before God (Romans 3:20).
- **Freedom from the Law:** Paul argues in Galatians and Romans that Christians are no longer under the Law's authority but under grace (Romans 6:14). In Galatians, he rebukes the Judaizers who taught that Gentile Christians must be circumcised and follow the Mosaic Law to be saved. Paul insists that adding the Law to faith nullifies grace (Galatians 2:21).
- **Purpose of the Law:** The Law's primary function is to show humanity its need for a Savior (Romans 3:19-20). It reveals sin but does not have the power to save. Grace, however, brings about salvation through faith in Christ's finished work on the cross.

History of the Debate: This debate emerged prominently in the early church, particularly with the Judaizers, who taught that Gentiles must be circumcised and obey the Mosaic Law to be saved. This led to the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), where the apostles decided that Gentiles did not need to follow the Law of Moses to be saved, affirming salvation by grace through faith. The Law vs. Grace debate became central to the Protestant Reformation, especially in Martin Luther's rejection of salvation by works. Luther's teaching on "justification by faith alone" rejected any notion that the Law or good works could contribute to salvation.

Key Perspectives within the Controversy

- **Legalism:** Legalism is a position where salvation or Christian sanctification is viewed as depending on strict adherence to laws or rules. Legalists often emphasize obedience to the Law as essential for maintaining or earning God's favor.
- **Antinomianism:** The opposite extreme, antinomianism, suggests that since believers are under grace, they are not bound by any moral law, leading to a life without accountability.

Key Scriptural Debates

- **For the Law:**
 - **Matthew 5:17-19:** "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."
 - **Romans 7:12:** "So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good."
 - **James 2:10:** "For whoever keeps the whole Law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it."
- **For Grace:**
 - **Ephesians 2:8-9:** "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."
 - **Galatians 2:16:** "We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified."
 - **Romans 6:14:** "For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace."

Comparison of Law vs. Grace

Issue	Law View	Grace View
Salvation	Achieved by obedience to the Law (or God's commandments)	Received by faith in Christ alone , apart from the Law
Justification	Works of the Law are necessary for justification before God	Justification is by faith alone in the finished work of Christ (Romans 3:28)
Role of the Mosaic Law	The Law remains central to the believer's life for salvation and righteousness	The Law served to show human sinfulness, but salvation comes through God's grace (Galatians 3:24)
Old Covenant vs. New Covenant	Believers are still under the Mosaic covenant and its requirements (e.g., circumcision, dietary laws)	Believers are under the New Covenant , where righteousness is imputed through Christ's work (Hebrews 8:13)
Sanctification	Sanctification is achieved through obedience to the Law and fulfilling its requirements	Sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit through grace, producing fruit in the believer's life (Galatians 5:22-23)
Key Scriptures	Matthew 5:17-19 (Jesus fulfills the Law, does not abolish it), James 2:10 (keep the whole Law)	Romans 6:14 ("you are not under law, but under grace"), Ephesians 2:8-9 (salvation by grace through faith)
Criticisms	May lead to legalism or reliance on human effort, minimizing Christ's atonement	May lead to antinomianism (disregard for moral living), where grace is abused without understanding of holy living

2. Baptism for Salvation

This controversy concerns whether water baptism is a *means* of salvation or simply a *sign* of salvation that has already occurred through faith in Jesus Christ.

Baptismal Regeneration (Baptism as Necessary for Salvation): This view holds that baptism is not just a symbolic act but an essential part of the salvation process. Baptism is the means through which grace is conferred to the believer. Proponents argue that through baptism, a person's sins are washed away, and they are spiritually reborn. In this view, salvation is incomplete without baptism. In some traditions, infant baptism is practiced, and it is believed that even infants, through baptism, receive the grace of salvation.

- **John 3:5:** "Jesus answered, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.'"
- **Acts 2:38:** "Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"
- **Mark 16:16:** "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."

Faith Alone (Baptism as a Symbol of Salvation): In contrast, this view holds that salvation is by **grace through faith alone**, and not by baptism (which can be seen as a work), and that baptism, is important as a public declaration of faith, but is not a requirement for salvation. Baptism is viewed as a sign of the salvation already received by faith and not the means by which it is conferred. Many Protestant denominations, particularly **Baptists**, practice **believer's baptism**, which holds that only those who have personally professed faith in Christ should be baptized. Infant baptism is rejected in these circles since they believe infants cannot yet exercise personal faith.

- **Ephesians 2:8-9:** "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."
- **Romans 10:9-10:** "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."
- **Luke 23:42-43:** The example of the thief on the cross is often cited. Jesus tells the repentant thief, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise,"
- **Acts 10:44-47:** Cornelius and his household receive the Holy Spirit and begin speaking in tongues **before** they are baptized.

Comparison of Baptism for Salvation

Issue	Baptism as Necessary for Salvation	Baptism as Symbol of Salvation (Non-Essential)
Role of Baptism in Salvation	Essential for salvation; part of the saving process (often called Baptismal Regeneration)	Non-essential for salvation, but an outward symbol of an inward reality (faith in Christ)
Regeneration	Baptism is seen as the moment when regeneration (new birth) occurs (e.g., Acts 2:38)	Regeneration happens through faith alone in Christ, baptism is a subsequent act of obedience
Forgiveness of Sins	Baptism is necessary for the forgiveness of sins (e.g., Acts 22:16: "be baptized and wash your sins away")	Forgiveness of sins happens at the moment of faith, and baptism serves as a public declaration of that faith
Infant Baptism	Some traditions (e.g., Catholicism, some Protestant groups) practice infant baptism as part of salvation	Only believer's baptism is practiced, where individuals are baptized after professing faith in Christ
Examples of Practice	Found in Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Churches of Christ.	Found in Baptist, Evangelical, and Reformed traditions.
Criticisms	May be seen as adding a work (baptism) to faith for salvation	Critics argue this view minimizes the importance of a clear command to be baptized

3. Predestination and Election (Calvinism vs. Arminianism)

The debate over **predestination and election** revolves around whether God unconditionally chooses (or elects) certain individuals for salvation (as in Calvinism) or whether God's election is based on foreseen faith or human response (as in Arminianism). This controversy is foundational to how different theological traditions understand God's sovereignty, human free will, and salvation.

Calvinism (Unconditional Election and Predestination): Calvinism is rooted in the teachings of the Reformer **John Calvin** (1509-1564) and emphasizes the absolute sovereignty of God in salvation. One of the core tenets of Calvinism is **Unconditional Election**, which teaches that God, from eternity past, chose certain individuals to be saved, not based on anything they would do or believe, but purely out of His sovereign will and grace. This view is closely tied to the doctrine of **predestination**, which asserts that God has predetermined the eternal destiny of every person—either to salvation (the elect) or damnation (the reprobate).

Key Beliefs of Calvinism:

- **Total Depravity:** Humans are utterly sinful and incapable of coming to God on their own. Sin affects every part of a person, including their will, making it impossible for them to choose God apart from divine intervention.
- **Unconditional Election:** God's choice of individuals for salvation is based solely on His will and not on anything foreseen in them, including faith or good works. This election is unconditional, meaning God did not choose people based on any merit or action of their own.
- **Irresistible Grace:** Those whom God has elected will, at some point in their lives, experience God's grace in a way that they cannot resist. The Holy Spirit effectively draws them to faith in Christ.
- **Perseverance of the Saints:** Those who are truly elected and saved by God will never fall away from the faith. They will persevere to the end and will ultimately be saved.

Supporting Scriptures:

- **Romans 8:29-30:** "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son... And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."
- **Ephesians 1:4-5:** "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will."
- **John 6:44:** "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day."
- **Romans 9:16:** "It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy."

Arminianism (Conditional Election and Predestination): Arminianism is based on the teachings of **Jacob Arminius** (1560-1609), a Dutch theologian who rejected Calvin's understanding of predestination. **Conditional Election** is the central tenet of Arminianism, which holds that God's election is based on His **foreknowledge** of who would respond to His offer of salvation. Thus, God predestines based on His foreknowledge of human decisions.

Key Beliefs of Arminianism:

- **Free Will:** Arminians believe that while human nature is corrupted by sin, people are still able, with the help of prevenient grace (grace that comes before salvation), to respond to God's offer of salvation.
- **Conditional Election:** God's election is based on His foreknowledge of who would freely choose to trust in Christ. God predestines people to salvation because He knows they will respond to His grace.
- **Universal Atonement:** Arminians believe that Jesus died for all people, not just for the elect. Salvation is available to everyone, but only those who respond in faith will be saved.
- **Resistible Grace:** God's grace can be resisted by individuals. Unlike in Calvinism, where grace is irresistible for the elect, Arminians believe that people can reject God's offer of salvation.
- **Conditional Perseverance:** Arminians hold that while salvation is secure for those who continue in faith, it is possible for believers to fall away and lose their salvation if they turn away from God.

Supporting Scriptures:

- **Romans 8:29:** "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son..."
- **1 Timothy 2:4:** "God...wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."
- **2 Peter 3:9:** "The Lord...is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."
- **John 3:16:** "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Key Differences Between Calvinism and Arminianism:

Doctrinal Issue	Calvinism (Reformed Theology)	Arminianism (Free Will Theology)
Total Depravity	Humans are completely unable to respond to God or believe in Him due to their sinful nature (Romans 3:10-12).	Humans are affected by sin , but through prevenient grace , they can choose to accept or reject God (John 6:44).
Unconditional Election	God chooses certain individuals for salvation based solely on His will, not human merit (Ephesians 1:4-5).	God foreknows who will freely choose to believe, and on that basis, He elects individuals for salvation (1 Peter 1:1-2).
Limited Atonement	Christ died only for the elect (those predestined to be saved). His atonement is fully effective for those chosen (John 10:15).	Christ's atonement is available to all , but only effective for those who believe (1 John 2:2).
Irresistible Grace	God's grace to the elect is irresistible , meaning those whom God calls will inevitably come to faith (John 6:37).	God's grace can be resisted ; people have free will to accept or reject God's offer of salvation (Acts 7:51).
Perseverance of the Saints	Those who are truly saved will persevere in faith and cannot lose their salvation (John 10:28-29).	Believers can fall from grace by apostasy or persistent sin and lose their salvation (Hebrews 6:4-6).
View of Free Will	Humans have no free will in salvation; God's sovereignty determines who will be saved.	Humans have free will to accept or reject salvation through God's prevenient grace.
God's Sovereignty	God's sovereignty means He actively predestines all things, including who will be saved (Romans 9:15-16).	God's sovereignty works in harmony with human free will, allowing people to freely choose salvation (2 Peter 3:9).
Human Responsibility	Humans are unable to choose God without God's prior work of regeneration (John 6:44).	Humans are responsible for accepting or rejecting salvation based on their free choice (Romans 10:9-10).
Security of Salvation	Eternal security for the elect; they cannot lose their salvation (Philippians 1:6).	Salvation can be lost if a person turns away from God (2 Peter 2:20-21).
Major Historical Figures	John Calvin, Augustine, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon	Jacob Arminius, John Wesley, Charles Finney, Roger Olson
Criticisms	Seen by some as denying human free will , making God seem unjust by predestining people to hell	Seen by some as undermining God's sovereignty , placing too much emphasis on human free will

4. Lordship Salvation

This controversy focuses on the relationship between **faith** and **repentance**, and whether **Jesus must be accepted as both Savior and Lord** for a person to be genuinely saved. Does salvation require belief and obedience?

Lordship Salvation View: Lordship Salvation teaches that when a person comes to faith in Christ, they must recognize and submit to Jesus as both **Savior and Lord**. In this view, saving faith is not just mental assent but includes repentance (turning from sin) and a willingness to follow Christ in obedience.

Key Beliefs of Lordship Salvation:

1. **Faith and Repentance:** Proponents believe that saving faith includes a turning and forsaking from all sin.
2. **Submission to Christ's Authority:** A true Christian must submit to Christ's lordship, meaning that their life will reflect a desire to obey and follow Him.
3. **Evidence of Transformation:** Genuine faith will result in a transformed life. While salvation is by grace through faith, that faith will be evidenced by a change in behavior, attitude, and a desire for holiness.

Supporting Scriptures:

- **Luke 9:23:** "Whoever will be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."
- **Romans 10:9:** "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."
- **Matthew 7:21:** "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."
- **James 2:17:** "In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."

Free Grace View (Opposition to Lordship Salvation): Opponents of Lordship Salvation, believe that salvation is received by **faith alone**, without requiring submission to Christ's lordship as part of the salvation process. They argue that while good works and obedience are important, they are rather are a result of salvation.

Key Beliefs of Free Grace Theology:

1. **Faith Alone:** Salvation is by faith alone, apart from any works or commitment to obedience.
2. **No 'Change' Requirement:** A person can have saving faith without an immediate change in behavior.
3. **Christ as Savior vs. Lord:** They emphasize that while Jesus should be recognized as Lord by believers, a person can believe in Christ for eternal life without fully submitting to Him as Lord.
4. **Obedience as a Fruit:** In free grace theology, obedience, commitment, submission are seen as 'fruits' of faith and not requirements for faith.

Supporting Scriptures:

- **Ephesians 2:8-9:** "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."
- **1 Corinthians 3:15:** "If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames."

Key Differences Between Lordship Salvation and Free Grace Theology:

Issue	Lordship Salvation	Free Grace Theology
Faith and Repentance	Faith includes repentance and submission to Christ as Lord	Faith alone saves, repentance and submission are not required for salvation
Role of Obedience	Obedience is evidence of true salvation	Obedience is a result of salvation, but not required for salvation
Assurance of Salvation	Assurance comes from a life of obedience and perseverance	Assurance comes from trusting in the promise of salvation by faith
Salvation and Discipleship	Discipleship (following Christ) is part of the salvation process	Discipleship is a post-salvation choice, not part of saving faith

5. Eternal Security (Once Saved Always Saved)

The doctrine of **eternal security**, often summarized as "**Once Saved, Always Saved**" (**OSAS**), is the belief that once a person is truly saved, they cannot lose their salvation. This doctrine is often contrasted with the view that a believer can fall from grace and lose their salvation, which is commonly associated with **Arminianism** and certain other theological traditions.

Eternal security is the belief that once a person has genuinely accepted Christ as their Savior, they cannot lose their salvation. This doctrine suggests that salvation is a gift from God, not contingent upon human actions, and that nothing can separate believers from God's love.

Key Beliefs:

- **Irrevocability of Salvation:** Salvation is viewed as a permanent state once genuinely attained. This position is often based on the idea that God's promises are unbreakable. (Eternal life is not eternal if it can be lost)
- **Assurance of Salvation:** Believers are assured of their salvation and can have confidence in their standing before God, knowing that it is secure due to God's grace.
- **Role of Grace:** The doctrine emphasizes that salvation is entirely by grace through faith and not dependent on human effort or merit.

Supporting Scriptures:

- **John 10:28-29:** "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand."
- **Romans 8:38-39:** "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."
- **Philippians 1:6:** "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."
- **Ephesians 1:13-14:** Believers are sealed with the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of their inheritance.

Conditional Security (Salvation Can Be Lost): Is the belief that salvation is a gift of grace **but requires the believer's continued faith and faithfulness**. A person can **fall from grace** or **lose their salvation** through apostasy (abandoning the faith) or persistent, unrepentant sin. While God's grace is sufficient for salvation, believers must **persevere in faith** to remain in God's favor.

Key Beliefs:

- **Perseverance Required:** Salvation requires ongoing faith and obedience. Believers must actively participate in their spiritual growth and relationship with God.
- **Risk of Apostasy:** The potential for falling away from faith is a significant concern. Conditional security holds that true believers can reject their faith and thus lose their salvation.
- **Responsibility of the Believer:** Emphasizes the necessity for believers to remain steadfast in their faith, encouraging a life of holiness and repentance.

Supporting Scriptures:

- **Hebrews 6:4-6:** "It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, and who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance."
- **Galatians 5:4:** "You who are trying to be justified by the law have fallen away from grace."
- **2 Peter 2:20-22:** "If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and are overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning."
- **Matthew 24:13:** "But the one who stands firm to the end will be saved."

Eternal Security vs. Conditional Security: A Comparative Chart

Doctrinal Issue	Eternal Security (Once Saved, Always Saved)	Conditional Security (Salvation Can Be Lost)
Salvation's Permanence	Once saved, a believer is always saved ; they cannot lose their salvation (John 10:28-29).	Salvation can be lost through apostasy or unrepentant sin (Hebrews 6:4-6).
Role of God's Grace	God's grace alone is sufficient to keep believers secure in their salvation (Ephesians 1:13-14).	Grace is necessary, but believers must also persevere in faith (Matthew 24:13).
Human Responsibility	After being saved, there is no human action that can undo salvation. God keeps the believer (Philippians 1:6).	Believers must continue in faith and avoid falling away (2 Peter 2:20-21).
Apostasy	Apostasy (abandoning faith) reveals that a person was never truly saved to begin with (1 John 2:19).	Apostasy is a real danger; even true believers can fall from grace (Galatians 5:4).
Sin After Salvation	Sin does not cause loss of salvation, but believers should seek repentance and restoration (1 John 1:9).	Persistent, unrepentant sin can lead to losing salvation (Hebrews 10:26-27).
Security of Believer	The believer is eternally secure and cannot be separated from God's love (Romans 8:38-39).	The believer must remain faithful to ensure their security in Christ (2 Timothy 2:12).
Historical Figures	John Calvin, Charles Spurgeon, Charles Stanley	Jacob Arminius, John Wesley, Dietrich Bonhoeffer
Criticisms	Seen by some as encouraging complacency or license to sin	Seen as making salvation dependent on human effort