



Bible & Life

BIBLE TEACHING NEWSLETTER

BIBLICAL DOCTRINE & NEW TESTAMENT ASSEMBLY LIFE

Vol. 16. No. 4

Sept. 1, 2009

Divine Election and John 6:37

John chapter 6, and especially John 6:37, is considered by Calvinist scholars and Bible teachers to be among their most convincing texts. Calvinist author James White believes it to be the strongest Calvinist text in the entire Bible. In his book *The Potter's Freedom* he writes:

"John 6:37-45 is the clearest exposition of Calvinism in the Bible... There is a good reason why non-Calvinists stumble at this point: there is no meaningful non-Reformed exegesis of this passage available."¹

To many, John 6:37 may seem to give strong biblical support to the Calvinist viewpoint of unconditional election and irresistible grace. However, is this section an "exposition" of the Calvinist doctrine? Does John 6:37 unquestionably support the Calvinist view of divine election? Our premise is that this text is taken out of context, misinterpreted by many Calvinists, and does not support Reformed theology. That may seem like quite a statement. Allow us to examine this verse and section under the searchlight of Scripture.

The Biblical Context of John 6:37

The fundamental issue of this passage is not divine election or irresistible grace, but rather the deity of Christ and the unity of the Father and the Son. The debate over Christ's true nature and His relationship with the Father properly begins at John 5:17 and continues until John 6:65. The Jewish leaders clashed with Jesus Christ over statements of His equality with the Father, His miracles, and the repeated assertions that He was doing the Father's will. Theology professors at Asbury Theological Seminary Jerry Walls and Joseph Dongell correctly state:

"The Father and the Son are one in nature, character, and mission; the rejection of the one necessarily involves the rejection of the other. The fundamental issue of this passage is not that of predestination but of Christology and the unity of the Father and the Son."²

The Jewish opposition and rejection of Christ did not lie in God's sovereign election, but rather in their rejection of Christ's deity and the teaching He had received from the Father. In chapter five, the Lord explained that both Moses and John the Baptist testified of Jesus' relationship with the Father, His character and mission (5:33,46). Nevertheless, these Jews were so filled with spiritual pride that they rose up in opposition to the Lord Jesus Christ while dismissing the teaching of Moses and John the Baptist.

If they had received Moses' teaching and had truly come to know the

"There are two things that are absolutely clear in Scripture—one is that God by His foreknowledge has predestinated all who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ 'to be conformed to the image of His Son.' Predestination is never to heaven nor yet hell; but to special privilege in and with Christ."

H. A. Ironside
(1876-1951)

Father (to the degree possible at that time), they would have belonged to the Father's flock, and the Father would have drawn them to the Son and placed them into His shepherd care. However, in rejecting Jesus, they demonstrated that they had never come to know the Father in the first place. Since they did not belong to the Father's flock, they would not be part of the transfer of sheep into the fold of the Son (John 6:37,39). If they were to drop their pretensions and receive Christ's teaching, they would have been taught of God. In time they would come to Christ in faith and prosper under His spiritual care, since Jesus promised that "everyone who listens to the Father and learns from Him comes to Me" (John 6:45). Our Lord's phrase "give to Me" in chapters 6 and 17 of John's gospel expresses a two-fold spiritual truth. The primary meaning of "giving to Christ" meant to come under His shepherd care (John 17:11-12), and secondarily, to come to Christ by faith (John 17:1-2). All that the Father gave the Son would come under His spiritual shepherd care, and the majority would also move from faith in the Father to faith in Christ; but sadly not all, such as Judas Iscariot.

The Calvinist Perspective of John 6:37

All Calvinists are united in seeing unconditional divine election and irresistible grace taught in John 6:37. This text reads, "All that the Father giveth Me shall come to Me; and him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out." Calvinists equate the word "gives" with divine election. They reason that the ones whom the Father gives to the Son are the elect, and the Father will irresistibly draw these to the Son for salvation. The Father draws and elects only some to salvation in Christ; the others are not drawn, and so, they are eternally lost. Representative of this view is Calvinist author Edwin Palmer:

*"Only those whom the Father gives to Christ can come to Him. Salvation is entirely in the hands of the Father. He it is who gives them to Jesus to be saved. Thus, salvation depends entirely upon the Father giving some to Christ. This is nothing else than unconditional election."*³

At first glance this view may seem like the proper teaching of Scripture. However, upon closer examination, several difficulties in the Calvinist interpretation present themselves. Non-Calvinists looking at this text have raised a number of objections to this view. Let us take a look at some of these objections.

CONTEXT OF JOHN'S GOSPEL - Firstly, there are at least seven other verses in John's gospel, which speak of the Father giving individuals to the Son (Jn. 17:2, 6(2x), 9, 11,12, 24). When we compare these verses with each other, we discover that the ones whom the Father gives are not the elect of past and future ages, but rather, these are those for whom the Lord prayed, those to whom the Lord taught the Scriptures.

FAITH - BEFORE OR AFTERWARDS? - Secondly, do those who are given to the Son have faith in God prior to being given or afterwards? Scripture seems to indicate that those who are given to the Son already belonged to the Father and have faith prior to being given to the Son (John 6:45). Jesus says, "Thine they were and you gave them to me..."(17:6).

SHEPHERD CARE OR ELECTION?- Thirdly, regarding the individuals that were given by the Father, were they given in the sense of election,

"Someone once tried to persuade me that God has chosen some people for salvation and chosen other people for damnation. Such an idea is monstrous. God does not arbitrarily and sovereignly damn the greater part of the human race into an existence they did not seek, on terms they did not select ...just in order arbitrarily to send people to hell for not choosing a salvation offered only to the 'elect.' "

John Phillips
Commentary on John 6:37
Exploring the Gospel of John, Kregel,
2001) p. 129

or were they given for the shepherd's care and spiritual protection? It seems that these "given ones," the majority of which already knew God, were given to the Son primarily for "keeping" or spiritual protection. In the Old Testament, especially in Psalm 121 and Ezekiel 34, we have many rich images of the guiding, keeping, and "watchman" ministry of God over Israel. In Psalm 121, the words "keep" and "preserve" are each used three times. "He will not suffer thy foot to be moved, He who keepeth thee will not slumber nor sleep. The Lord is thy Keeper...The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil, He shall preserve thy soul" (Ps. 121:3-8). This keeping work of the Father in the Old Testament is given temporarily to the Son in the New Testament

John 17 is a very interesting passage in this regard. In our Lord's High Priestly prayer, our Lord prays, "...these are in the world, and I come to Thee. Holy Father, keep through Thine own name those Thou hast given Me...while I was with them in the world, I kept them in Thy name; those Thou gavest Me I have kept" (John 17:11-12). In these verses, the Lord is returning the ones He has kept back into the Father's spiritual care. Now, this language would be indeed strange if the giving by the Father was only for election; but if it was primarily for special spiritual care while He was on earth, it makes perfect sense. It seems that the Father gave to the Son the special role of "Shepherd Keeper" while He was with His disciples in the world. Even the moderate Calvinist, the late James Montgomery Boice, makes this same point:

*"But God does keep us. That is the point of these verses and the object of our Lord's petition. While He was here, He kept those whom God had entrusted to Him, and He kept them well. None was lost. Now He is about to return to the Father, and therefore, He recommitts those whom He had cared for again into the Father's keeping."*⁴

We would suggest that the giving of some by the Father and the keeping work of the Lord Jesus Christ do not refer to divine election or irresistible grace but to the vital shepherd care of the Lord Jesus Christ for His disciples.

THE CASE OF JUDAS ISCARIOT - Fourthly, if, according to Calvinism, the giving of some to the Son is essentially the same as election, and if the elect can never be lost, then how are we to understand the situation of Judas Iscariot, of whom the Bible says he was "given" by the Father but was also lost (John 17:12). The Father's giving of some to the Son must be something less than sovereign divine election unto salvation. Theologian Dr. Lawrence Vance explains that the giving of the Father does not meet the biblical standard of divine election:

*"That this will of the Father was not a sovereign, eternal decree is apparent from the fact that one of those given to Christ was a devil (John 6:70) who was lost (John 17:12)..."*⁵

Before we move on from this point, we need to look more closely at a detail concerning Judas. In this regard, how do we reconcile the fact that Judas, a "given one," was lost with the words of the Lord Jesus that state that none of the given ones shall ever be lost? The Lord states, "...that of all that He hath given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day" (John. 6:39); and "Those thou gavest Me I have kept, and none of them is lost, but the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled" (John. 17:12). How is it that Judas is lost,

"God's love to the world is manifested on the cross. It is not allowable to narrow this down to a love simply for the elect, as has been only too often done...there cannot be a contrary decree that will hinder the salvation of any."

F. W. Grant
(1834-1902)



A non-profit ministry of
Bible & Life Ministries, Inc.
3116 Gulfwind Drive
Land O' Lakes,
FL
34639

September 2009

• INFORMATION •

Bible and Life is published periodically and sent out free of charge and is supported entirely by the free will offerings of the Lord's people. Checks should be made out to "Bible and Life Ministries, Inc."

Correspondence should be sent to:

BIBLE & LIFE Newsletter
c/o David Dunlap
3116 Gulfwind Drive
Land O' Lakes, FL 34639
(813) 996-1053

e-mail

daviddunlap@earthlink.net
web site
www.bibleandlife.org

considering what the Lord says about keeping all those given to Him? This is important because it touches on the doctrine of eternal security. We would suggest that Judas was "given" but did not know Christ as Savior.

Judas is an example of one who was a follower and believer in God like other Old Testament believers, but did not come to know Christ as his Savior. The Father gave him to the Son, but he was not regenerated and later ended his life without faith in Christ. When we consider the case of Judas Iscariot, it causes us to dig a little deeper to discover the difference between one who was given to Christ and one who was saved through the finished work of Christ.

Conclusion

Many Calvinists have long argued that John 6:37 is one of the best descriptions of Calvinism in the Bible. Non-Calvinists have contended that when this verse is examined within its context, along with other relevant verses in John's gospel, that it does not support the Calvinist viewpoint. This verse shows that the Father gave those who were already believers in God to Christ for spiritual shepherd care and to come to faith in Christ. In addition, those who today come to Christ by faith He will in no wise cast out, but keep also in His divine care.

Endnotes

1. James White, *The Potter's Freedom*, (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press Publishing, 2000), p. 155
2. Jerry Walls, Joseph Dongell, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist*, (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), p. 75
3. Edwin Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1979), p. 27-28
4. James M. Boice, *Gospel of John, vol. 4*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), p. 392
5. Lawrence Vance, *The Other Side of Calvinism*, (Pensacola, FL: Vance Publications, 1995), p. 342

—It is very difficult to adequately comment on this verse in a four page newsletter. This article is excerpted from a larger 5-page paper, this paper may be obtained upon request without charge by emailing Bible & Life Newsletter.