



St. Paul's Lutheran Church
Minot, ND
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The Epistle of Romans

The Justification of the Ungodly

Romans 11:11-36

In Romans chapter 8, we heard the good news of God's election. We heard that election is a doctrine of comfort! The Lord chooses us!

However, in view of God's election, why is all of Israel not saved? Well, the simple answer is that they have hardened their heart towards God. This is the focus of chapters 9-11.

But has God had any part of this hardening? Yes, He has. The Lord God hardens hearts as a way of wrath – He affirms or reinforces the wishes of mankind as a way of applying His wrath against sin.

So, is the Word of God – the Gospel – not effective? Has it lost its power if not all are saved? Nope! The Word of God is unchangeable. God's offer of grace stands for all mankind. It has always been the same Gospel, since the very beginning in Genesis chapter 3. God's grace is the same in the Old Testament as it is in the New Testament, as it is in the present day.

When reading through Romans 9-11, it may seem that many of the themes are left unreconciled. For example, if grace is for all, why are not all saved? If God elects, is He responsible for electing some to damnation? And so forth!

While it might be easy to write these questions off as high and lofty theology talk that belongs in the seminaries, it is rather important for the local church to understand. In other words, there have been informal arguments within Lutheran circles that the debate over predestination is a meaningless mystery. It is believed by some that this subject is essentially a pointless debate with no real/practical implications. Is this assertion true? No, this assertion is most definitely false. The reason being, the doctrine of election is not an independent doctrine. Rather the theology contained in the doctrine of predestination impacts one's understanding of faith, resulting in how one understands faith, which results in how one views the doctrine of soteriology (i.e., how one becomes a Christian), which results in how one views the means

of grace, which results in how one views the role of the pastor and the purpose of the church. Otherwise stated, the doctrine of election has dramatic consequences not only to a theological system, but it also has practical implications extending to ministry within the church.

So, how do we make sense of all of this? Well, quite simply, there is an impasse. There is an impasse with universal justifying grace (1 John 2:2), original sin (Ephesians 2:1), and God's election of individuals (Romans 8:29-30). Because of this gridlock, the temptation arises to harmonize and alleviate the tension through diminishing or adjusting one of these tectonic doctrines. It must be stated though, that Martin Luther understood this impasse, but never tried to harmonize the teachings. *"He feared that he would be forced to make concessions that would violate Biblical truth."* Thus, the adjustment or diminishing of one of these doctrines to alleviate the impasse can change one's theological system, which then yields consequences upon the role of the pastoral office and the nature of the church. See the diagram below:



Take a moment and consider the following questions when universal grace, election, or original sin are diminished, adjusted, or tampered with:

- What happens when Calvinists change universal justifying grace to limited atonement?
- What happens when Evangelicals diminish original sin?
- What happens when Evangelicals change God's election to decision theology?

