



Speaking of Election

The beginning of Paul's letter to the Ephesians has many familiar themes. He identifies himself as an apostle, speaks words of blessing on the saints of God, and praises God for His grace and goodness in Christ. But for many there is a less familiar and less comprehensible theme in Ephesians 1:1-6 – the theme of *election or predestination*. Yet election is not an incidental or avoidable element in Paul's words. Rather election is *central* and unifies these opening verses of Ephesians. Like Romans 8, Ephesians 1 provides us with a golden chain of blessings from the Lord in which predestination is a crucial link.

Paul in these few verses not only teaches us something of the content of the doctrine of election, but he also teaches us *how to speak about election*. He speaks so naturally, so easily, so confidently about election, that he teaches us also how to speak about election. He does not analyze every aspect of election here. But he does show us here something of (1) *what* to speak, (2) *when* to speak and (3) *why* to speak of predestination.

What to Speak

Paul begins his letter by celebrating God's action in choosing "us" – His own people – for salvation. Paul writes that God blesses His saints with every spiritual blessing (v. 3), that God chose us to be holy (v. 4), and that He predestined us to be adopted as His children (v. 5). God clearly chooses us to salvation in Christ. But on what basis? Does God choose us to salvation on the basis of something in us or only on the basis of His own will?

Paul's answer is clear throughout these verses. *First*, he says that God chose us "*before the foundation of the world*" (v. 4). Since He chose us *before we were*, that certainly implies that the reason for choosing us is *in God, not in us*. *Second*, Paul says that we are chosen *in Jesus Christ* (v. 5), in the One God loves (v. 6). In ourselves and on our own God does not love us. He loves us *only in Christ*, the One who deserves His love. *Third*, Paul says that we are chosen in accordance with *God's pleasure and will* (v. 5). Paul uses the same word for "will" here that he used in verse 1 to describe himself as an apostle *by the will of God*. Calvin called Paul a mirror of election. As Paul was chosen sovereignly to be an apostle, so we are chosen sovereignly to salvation. Paul was not chosen because of his superior goodness, but only because of God's merciful will. Finally, Paul says that we are chosen *freely* (v. 6). God is free in election. He is not moved or compelled by anything external to Himself. He chooses freely in accordance with His good pleasure.

God is utterly sovereign in election. His will, not ours, is determinative in salvation. Paul says nothing here about human free will as a factor in election or salvation. In fact *nowhere in the Bible is the phrase "free will" to be found*. The idea of free will is never used as a factor in the salvation of sinners. God is always at the center of Biblical discussions of election and salvation. The Bible calls us to be radically *God-centered* in our thinking. The doctrine of election is a crucial way to keep us theocentric.

When to Speak

When is it appropriate to speak of election? Even among those who believe in election some seem to believe that we should speak of predestination seldom if ever. They treat election as our guilty secret. The less said the better. Others believe that we should talk of election, but only with mature

Christians. Election is a doctrine that should be introduced only to those already well grounded in the faith.

Both of these approaches to election assume that election is a *problem*. What kind of a problem is election? Some say election is a problem because it is a *mysterious* and *difficult* doctrine. In some ways it is, but so is the Trinity. Yet no true Christian suggests that we ought to avoid teaching all Christians about the Trinity.

Others note that election is *controversial* and *unpopular*. But so is the doctrine of Hell, and Christians have always felt a responsibility to make clear the reality of final judgment.

Still others say that election is a problem because it can so *easily* be *misrepresented*. Yet that is true of nearly every Christian doctrine. The evangelical doctrine of justification, for example, has often been misrepresented as leading to an indifference to holy Christian living. Yet we continue to believe that we must teach that we are justified by grace alone through faith alone.

Election has been misrepresented and not only by those who reject it. Some have *twisted* the doctrine of predestination into a kind of *fatalism* and an *excuse* for a *lack of concern with evangelism*. One such group, known in the nineteenth century as "Hard Shell Baptists," even wrote hymns misusing the doctrine of election. One such hymn, quoted in a speech by the Baptist church historian Timothy George, went:

*"We are God's elected few;
let all the rest be damned.
There's room enough in Hell for you.
We don't want Heaven crammed."*

Such arrogant indifference is completely foreign to the genuine character of election.

A final reason why some see election as a problem – perhaps the most important reason – is that election strikes many as being *unfair*. Yet ordinary human standards of fairness conflict with several elements of Christian revelation. The doctrines of original sin and total depravity strike many as unfair, but are clearly taught in Scripture and are essential to the structure of Christian theology. The doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to sinners is not "fair," but is at the very heart of the gospel. Election may not always or fully seem fair, but it is foundational to God's mercy to sinners.

The effect of not talking about election in the contemporary church has been disastrous. Today religion has often become more man-centered than medieval Christianity before the Reformation. At least in the Middle Ages the stress on human ability was focused on overcoming sin and meriting eternal life. Today in too many churches the focus is on using one's human potential to gain health, wealth and happiness. This man-centeredness is found in many churches that consider themselves evangelical.

When we compare our relative silence about election with the Bible, we find that *the Bible speaks frequently and frankly about predestination*. If we want to be biblical, we too must talk about it. And we must talk about it with the biblical confidence that election is *a solution, not a problem*. Election is the solution because it glorifies God at every point in salvation and draws us away from ourselves to God.

We must of course speak of election in a clear, sensitive, and careful manner. As Calvin in his sermon on this passage said, *"We know that our wisdom ought always to begin with humility."* But our humility should not lead us to silence, but rather to imitate Paul in his joyous expression of God's electing love.

Why to Speak

Paul speaks of election because it *glorifies God* (v. 6). Election glorifies God because it shows that at every point salvation is God's work. He originates the plan of salvation in eternity. He elects specific sinners whom His Spirit will bring to faith in His Son.

The glory of His saving work leads us to praise God. Our minds in the first place should not focus on our needs or our strengths, but should break into thanksgiving to God for all He has done. As Paul begins the letter to the Ephesians with a long prayer of praise, so praise and adoration should be a more prominent feature of our lives. As Calvin so powerfully put it in his sermon, *"...all who would do away with God's predestination or are loth to hear it spoken of, thereby show themselves to be mortal enemies of God's praise."*

We should also speak of election because it is a constituent part of *our assurance of salvation*. Election reminds us that any grace that is present in us comes from God and that *God will complete in us the work that He has begun*. If we are in Christ, it is because we are elect. We know we are elect and are strengthened in faith by contemplating Jesus. Again as Calvin said in his sermon on Ephesians 1:4-6. *"...Jesus Christ is the mirror in which God beholds us when He wishes to find us acceptable to Himself. Likewise, on our side, He is the mirror on which we must cast our eyes and look, when we desire to come to the knowledge of our election."*

Today Reformed believers are tempted to see their doctrine of election as a peculiarity, almost as a sectarian notion. We must remember that in the history of the church great theologians from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas to Martin Luther as well as the many Reformed theologians have believed in predestination. Election is a glorious truth of God's Word with great practical importance for the life of individual Christians and of the church. Let's continue to be biblical and speak freely of God's electing work.

W Robert Godfrey

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