



## Election and the Christian Life

It is often missed that the doctrine of God's sovereign election of sinners to life is presented in the Bible, not as a puzzle to solve, far less as a truth to make us proud, but rather as a truth to humble us and then to inspire us to live lives to God's praise and glory. This is not grasped by many in the church, let alone outside. The doctrine of election is thought to breed pride and a careless attitude to godly living. If I am an elect sinner (so the thinking goes) then I must be better than the rest, and it does not matter how I live, because I am one of God's 'chosen ones'. This thinking is diametrically opposed to the thinking and teaching of God's Word and is nothing short of blasphemy.

In Colossians 3:12-13 Paul exhorted God's *'holy and dearly loved'* people to clothe themselves *'with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience'*. He went on to encourage them to *'Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances (they) may have against one another'*, just as the Lord had forgiven them. What is striking is the truth that Paul sets before them as the foundation for this exhortation to godliness: *'Therefore, as God's chosen ones (his elect), holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility ...'*

### Exhortation Rests on Doctrine

Paul was following here the invariable grammar of Holy Scripture, grounding his exhortation in gracious doctrine. We see this pattern in Exodus 20:2-3. First, the Lord reminds his people that he is the God who brought them out of the land of bondage (verse 2), who carried them on eagles' wings and brought them to himself (Exod. 19:4). It is only then that he commands them, *'You shall have no other gods before me.'* God graciously provides his people with a powerful incentive to obedience. He chooses not to constrain obedience by divine fiat only. Rather, he resolves to 'woo' them to a life of believing obedience by reminding them of his great grace towards them. Failure to appreciate the gracious context of the giving of the law has led throughout the centuries to a practical dislocation of law from grace. This has resulted in 'legal obedience', which is the religion of devils, not the religion of the God of grace. The same principle operates in Col. 3:12. Paul reminds the Colossians who they are, *'God's chosen people'*, his elect ones. They are the recipients of God's sovereign, distinguishing love. They did not first choose him; he chose them. But for God's distinguishing, electing love, they would yet have been *'children of wrath like the rest'* (Eph. 2:3). But sovereign, electing love intervened and rescued them from their hell-bound state. For Paul this was a wonderful incentive to godly, Christ-like living. Godliness of life is the response of love to love, of forgiven love to forgiving love.

Too often sanctification, likeness to Christ, is divorced in our thinking from God's electing love and becomes in the process a duty more than a desire. Of course sanctification is our Christian duty; but it is a duty of love, not a duty of mere demand. The same principle operates in human relationships. A wife is under divine obligation to submit to her husband (Eph. 5:22). But how is that submission to be drawn out from her? Yes, it is a divine command she is to obey whether she feels like it or not. But in the theological grammar of the Scriptures, what follows in Eph. 5:25-28 is surely to be connected to verse 22. Husbands are to *'love (their) wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her'*. As husbands self-denyingly love their wives, cherishing them to the point of laying down their lives for them, wives have gospel submission sweetly drawn from them. Love responds to love.

This was Paul's unvarying pastoral methodology. You see the point more panoramically in Rom. 12. For 11 chapters Paul had expounded the astonishing grace of God in Christ. As he concluded his exposition of this grace his heart and mind overflowed in soaring doxology (11:33-36). At this critical point Paul summoned the Romans to *'offer (their) bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God'* (12:1). The call to sanctification is rooted and grounded in the prior *'mercies of God'* (12:1a) a). Election is not conceived for one moment as a deterrent to sanctification; in fact the exact opposite. For Paul the one inevitable response of a forgiven sinner to the wonder and mystery of God's sovereign election was undivided surrender and whole-hearted commitment. The response of a believing sinner to God's sovereign, electing love is well expressed in McCheyne's hymn:

*Chosen, not for good in me,  
Wakened up from wrath to flee;  
Hidden in the Saviour's side,  
By the Spirit sanctified,  
Teach me, Lord, on earth to show,  
By my love, how much I owe.*

Where this song of adoring wonder at God's electing love is absent from our lives it is hardly possible that such love has captured our hearts and our wills. Nothing less than a transformed life is the evidence of electing love truly experienced. Paul told the Ephesians, *'We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do'* (2:10). He told the Thessalonians, *'We know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction'* (1Thess 1:4). In the previous verse Paul highlighted the fruit this produced in their lives: *'... your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ'*. In similar vein, Peter told the exiles of the Dispersion, *'(we) have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood'* (1 Pet. 1:2). Where life-transformation is absent, electing love is not present. Election inevitably produces a morally transformed lifestyle, because election is 'in Christ' (Eph.1:4) and makes us, through faith, partakers of the life of Christ.

### **Godliness Assures of Election**

This is why gospel imperatives to godliness are never bare commands, but commands that highlight and are rooted in our new identity as men and women who have died with Christ and been raised with Christ to live a new life (Rom. 6:1-14). The doctrine of election is not part of Calvinism's quirkiness; it belongs to the warp and woof of God's self-disclosure in the Bible. It is a wonderful assurance to the Christian believer that, come what may, our salvation rests secure because it is anchored in God's invincible, electing grace.

In *The Old Evangelicalism* Iain Murray reminds us that, *'It was no accident that in the sixteenth century the experience of assurance revived simultaneously with the recovery of the truths called Calvinism.'*<sup>1</sup>

He goes on to quote Calvin: *'We may rejoice in this, that God will have pity upon us until the end, and that he will keep us: and although he suffer us to stumble, yea so as to fall, we shall be recovered and upholden by his hand. And how is it that we can trust in this? Without election it is impossible: but when we know that the Father has committed us unto the keeping of his Son, we are certain that we shall be maintained by him unto the end.'*<sup>2</sup>

Is election, then, a doctrine to make man proud and arrogant? God forbid! It stirs forgiven sinners to cry out, *'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him'* (Eph. 1:3-4a). Election is always known by the transformation it effects in a person's life. Where moral and spiritual transformation is absent, election to life is not present, because election unites us to Christ! Above all else, the grace

of election produces humility before God and adoration of God. What do we have that we did not first receive (see 1 Cor. 4:7-8)? It is this truth that lies at the heart of the Christian believer's assurance. Nowhere do the Scriptures display this truth more eloquently than in Rom. 8:28-39. Since God works all things for the good of those who are called according to his purpose (verse 28); and since no one can bring any charge against God's elect (verse 33); and since no one can condemn us because Christ Jesus died, was raised, and is now at God's right hand interceding for us; Paul could draw the glorious conclusion, *'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?'* His answer is that nothing and no one *'will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord'*. God's electing love, his wholly gracious and ill-deserved love, in Christ, is the solid ground on which our faith rests. Our faith may rise and fall; but the Lord's love is unfailing. He loved and chose us from before the first of time; he will love us and preserve us to and beyond the last. *Soli Deo Gloria*.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Iain H Murray, *The Old Evangelicalism* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2005), p. 198.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., quoting John Calvin, *Thirteen Sermons on Election and Reprobation* (reprint, Audubon, N.J.: Old Paths, 1996), p. 281).