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A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership
Volume 7 • Number 2 • SPRING 1998

ELECTION: GOD'S UNCHANGING LOVE FOR HIS PEOPLE

Steven Fernandez

There is probably no teaching of Scripture that arouses more emotion among Christians than the doctrine of unconditional election. On the other hand, there is probably no doctrine more needed to be preached and taught. Why? There is no teaching so designed to humble man and exalt God's grace.

The fact that election so abases man and exalts God's love and mercy may account for the fact that in nearly every great movement of God, unconditional election and God's free mercy were at the center of preaching. Luther, Calvin and Zwingli, God's primary agents of the Reformation of the sixteenth century, taught and preached it freely. The leaders of the Great Awakening in the eighteenth century, such as George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards (among others), taught it. The leaders of the Puritan movement in the seventeenth century taught it as well. Of course, Charles Spurgeon, whose ministry shook England and the English-speaking world in the nineteenth century, made it a central feature of his preaching in London.

As can be seen, it not only doesn't hinder evangelism, it has been at the center of the great movements of the Spirit of God in church history. God honors the preaching and teaching of unconditional election. It helps people become God-centered and God-dependent. It extols the Lord's great love toward His people. It abases man's pride. It gives a great assurance of being loved perfectly and eternally by the

Lord. With this in mind, we want to look in detail at the importance of preaching and teaching election and its reality as taught in Scripture.

THE DEFINITION AND DEMAND FOR ELECTION

A good place to begin is to give a brief definition. Election can be defined as the biblical teaching that *"God in eternity past, apart from anything foreseen in them, chose the specific individuals who were to be saved."* Election is based upon the reality of man's total depravity in sin. Man is dead in his sin (Eph. 2:1). He is hostile to God, unwilling and unable to subject himself to God's law (Rom. 8:7). He does not seek God (Rom. 3:11). Man is a free moral agent and does as he chooses, but his choices are always sin and self. His will, however, is not free. As a part of his fallen nature, it is enslaved to sin. He always chooses what his nature loves, and he loves darkness and doesn't come to the light. Jesus said it this way, "And this is the judgment, that light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed" (John 3:19-20).

Therefore, recognizing man's slavery to sin, and apart from anything foreseen in them, God chose those to whom He would show mercy and save from among mankind. Any perceived difficulty with God's justice is usually based on a mistaken and deficient idea of man's sinfulness. Man is not knocking on heaven's door desiring to be with God or Christ. He loathes the very idea of a holy Christ and a holy heaven. Spurgeon, speaking of natural men apart from the Spirit's work, said:

If you were elected you would not like it, according to your own confession. If God this morning had chosen you to holiness, you say you would not care for it. Do you not

acknowledge that you prefer drunkenness to sobriety, dishonesty to honesty? You love this world's pleasure rather than religion; then why should you grumble that God has not chosen you to religion? . . . According to your own confession, . . . you do not want religion, do not want a new heart and a right spirit, do not want forgiveness of sins, do not want sanctification, you do not want to be elected to these things; then why should you grumble? . . . Who are you that you should find fault with God, when it is your own desperate will that keeps you from loving these things—your own simple self makes you hate them. . . . You do not like holiness, you do not like righteousness; if God has elected me to these things, has He hurt you by it?¹

In other words, election does not mean that God chooses some to heaven and some to hell. The reason men go to hell is their own enslaved and rebellious will. God simply passes them by and leaves them to their own preference, which is sin.



In other words, election does not mean that God chooses some to heaven and some to hell. The reason men go to hell is their own enslaved and rebellious will. God simply passes them by and leaves them to their own prefer-

ence, which is sin. This is the testimony of Scripture and experience. Therefore, why should men reproach God for giving to others that which they detest and despise? Why should God be railed for showing kindness on some when none deserve it or want it? Men are often commended for what God is railed and reproached for. If a wealthy heiress were to take some orphans out of an orphanage, no one would rail her for not taking them all. Yet, God is reproached for choosing to save some out of a race of rebels. These are rebels, none of whom love His Son, but on the contrary despise Him. We will look more at the perceived difficulty with God's justice later.

A DESIGNATION OF GOD'S PEOPLE

We now consider the reality of election as it is taught in Scripture. First, election is taught indirectly by the fact that the term "elect" is a common designation of God's people. Jesus calls believers elect (Mark 13:20,22). To be called elect is a term of endearment. When Christ wants to assure us that God hears our prayers and we should not lose heart in prayer, He reminds us that we are His elect (Luke 18:7). The apostles also refer to believers as elect. Paul reminds us we are "beloved, chosen of God" (Col. 3:12). When he assures Christians that God's love for them knows no bounds, that Christ intercedes for them (Rom. 8:34) and that God guarantees their final salvation, He refers to them as God's elect. Paul asks: "Who will bring a charge against God's elect?" (Rom. 8:33). Once again we see it as a special term of endearment. It indicates that Christians are precious in His sight. He has set His love on them by His own choice. The apostles were not hesitant to use the word. Obviously, in their thinking if there are elect then there was an election! They believed it and they taught it. Must we not also do the same?

THE DECLARATION OF ELECTION IN SCRIPTURE

The second way election is taught is by the references that make a direct declaration that God has chosen those who were to be saved. The following are a few references among the many that could be selected. Believers are said to have been chosen in eternity past "just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him" (Eph. 1:4). These words can't be taken to mean that God saw persons in Christ and therefore chose them. On the contrary, election determined that they would be in Christ. Here are Paul's own words, "By His doing we are in Christ Jesus". (1 Cor. 1:30). God chose us and as a result, we are in Christ. Believers are also said to have been appointed to eternal life. Luke wrote, "As many as had been appointed to eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48). Belief is the result of a prior appointment to eternal life. It would be impossible to state it any clearer. The apostles were told they did not choose Christ but Christ chose them (John 15:16). The apostles had chosen to follow Jesus but prior to that it was Christ's choice to make them His disciples. Paul tells us that "God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation" (2 Thess. 2:13). He also tells us that "God saved us and called us . . . according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity" (2 Tim.1:9). God's grace was granted to us in eternity past; this grace was according to His own purpose. Moreover, according to Christ, believers were previously given by the Father to the Son (John 17:6; 6:37). Christ states clearly that believers first belonged to the Father before they came to the Son. He says, "I manifested Thy name to the men whom Thou gavest Me out of the world; Thine they were, and Thou gavest them to Me" (John 17:6). He also says, "All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out" (John 6:37). The teaching is clear: those who

come to the Son were previously given to Him by the Father! To put it in terms of our present discussion, those who come to Jesus were already the Father's by election and were then given to the Son.

Finally, believers were Christ's sheep before they believed (John 10:26-28). Jesus told the Pharisees, "But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep" (John 10:26). Notice carefully Jesus' words. He did not say, "You aren't My sheep because you don't believe!" He said, "You don't believe because you are not of My sheep." In other words, believers were already Jesus' sheep prior to salvation. Belonging to the sheep isn't dependent on believing; rather, believing in Jesus is dependent on whether you were already His sheep. Jesus has sheep; these sheep will believe. The only way He could already have sheep is if they were chosen to be His sheep beforehand.

ELECTION IS ROOTED IN GOD'S FREE GRACE, NOT MAN'S FORESEEN WORKS

Lest there be any misunderstanding, more must be said about whether God foresaw something in believers that may have moved Him to choose them. As we shall see, contrary to this, the Scriptures clearly teach that election is apart from anything foreseen in man. In other words it is unconditional. The choice came entirely from within God. There was nothing foreseen in men that moved God to choose them. To start with, Paul says we were chosen to be holy: "just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him" (Eph. 1:4). Therefore holiness is the effect of being chosen, not the cause. God didn't see any work that we would perform, and therefore chose us. Any works we do are the result of our being chosen, not the cause. Not only that, Paul says it is God's grace and the kind intention of His will that alone is to be praised. He says "to the praise of

the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved" (Eph. 1:6). There is nothing in us of which we can be praised, not even believing; for faith itself is a gift (Eph. 2:8-9).

To remove any concern that he taught unconditional election, Paul could simply have said something like this, "You misunderstood my argument. God saw Jacob's faith, works, etc.; that is why He chose him." However, Paul didn't do that. On the contrary, he asserted it even more directly. He declared God's prerogative to show mercy on whomever He wished since none have any claim on Him and He can justly cast off forever whomever He wills.



In Romans 9:10-11, when referring to God's choice of Jacob over Esau, Paul says that it was prior to their doing either good or bad. He writes, "Though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose according to His choice might stand" (Rom. 9:11). Election isn't based on what God foresees

people will do, whether good or bad. It is based on His purpose.

Along these lines Paul says, "It does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who shows mercy" (Rom. 9:16). Even Paul's answer to the anticipated accusation about God's injustice indicates He taught unconditional election. The accusation states: "What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there?" To which Paul answers, "May it never be! For He says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion'" (Rom. 9:14-15). To remove any concern that he taught unconditional election, Paul could simply have said something like this, "You misunderstood my argument. God saw Jacob's faith, works, etc.; that is why He chose him." However, Paul didn't do that. On the contrary, he asserted it even more directly. He declared God's prerogative to show mercy on whomever He wished since none have any claim on Him and He can justly cast off forever whomever He wills.

Finally, there is the question of election being according to God's foreknowledge of faith. That is, did God choose those whom He knew beforehand would believe? It is enough to say that foreknowledge with God isn't simply knowledge of what He anticipates will happen. Foreknowledge is God's prior knowledge because He fixed something beforehand to happen. That is, something is known beforehand because He determined that it would take place! For example, God foreknew Israel (Rom. 11:2). This wasn't His prior awareness of His relation to Israel because He saw that Israel would choose Him! It was His prior relation and knowledge of Israel because He determined that Israel would be His people. Calvin, speaking on this, wrote:

They are foreknown, not as our opponents imagine that he foreknows, from an idle watchtower, what he does not him-

self carry out, but in a sense in which we often find the word used. For surely when Peter says, through Luke, that Christ was "delivered up" to death "according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23), the God he brings forward is not a watcher but the Author of our salvation.²

The same is true of His foreknowledge of believers and their election. He determined their salvation. Therefore it was certain, and because it was certain, He knew them beforehand as His own. In fact, this is why Paul refers to believers as those "whom He foreknew" (Rom. 8:30). The issue of God foreseeing faith is simple. There was no faith to foresee! Men don't seek God, they don't come to the light. This is why faith is described as a gift (Eph. 2:9; Phil. 1:29). He produces it in the elect, He draws them and enables them to believe. It is what Paul calls "the faith of those chosen of God" (Titus 1:1).

THE RECOGNITION OF THE PRACTICAL IMPORTANCE OF PREACHING AND TEACHING ELECTION

Now we must look in more detail at what the Scriptures say is the practical importance of teaching and preaching election. Election is often taught in the context of theological controversy. In Scripture, however, it is primarily presented as a central evidence of God's love (e.g., Rom. 8:29-39; Eph. 1:4-5). Election exhibits God's grace and mercy toward His people. What could persuade Christians of God's love for them more than that He chose them? A full understanding of God's grace and love toward His people simply can't be understood apart from unconditional election. Calvin, recognizing this, wrote:

We shall never be clearly persuaded as we ought to be that our salvation flows from the wellspring of God's mercy until we come to know His eternal election. How much the igno-

rance of this principle detracts from God's glory; how much it takes away from true humility is well known. Yet Paul denies that this which needs so much to be known can be known unless God, utterly disregarding works, chooses those whom He has decreed within Himself.³

Paul clearly states that the grace of God is understood and appreciated fully only when seen in light of election. Stating the reality of election, he says, "In the same way then, there has come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice" (Rom. 11:5). He then goes on to give his famous definition of grace. He says, "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace" (Rom. 11:6). To Paul grace is truly magnified and comprehended against the backdrop of God's election. Anything else leaves man with a basis for boasting. If election is not true, then men could boast that they made use of God's grace. They could boast that they are different, for unlike others, they, on their own, responded to Christ. However the reality is not even our faith, and coming to Christ is in a final sense our doing. It is God's election that makes believers to differ. It is nothing we have done, for as Paul says, "By His doing we are in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor. 1:30).

As mentioned, the Scriptures often connect God's special love for His people with His election of them. For example, Paul says, "knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you" (1 Thess. 1:4). Perhaps the most significant passage that connects election and God's love is Romans 8:29-39. Paul taught on the great interconnected plan of salvation: God's purpose, predestination, calling, justification and glorification (Rom. 8:28-30). Then he posed the question, "Who shall bring a charge against God's elect?" (Rom. 8:33). His final answer is that "nothing shall be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ

Jesus" (Rom. 8:35,39). In other words, God's elect are His beloved. His beloved are His elect. He chose them; therefore, He loves them. It is that simple! Why do people struggle with this? God wants His people to find joy in it. If a young lady is asked for her hand in marriage by a very desirable man, does she get angry that others were not chosen? Doesn't she joy in it? Likewise, God intends us to revel in His choice of us. For it assures us of His great love toward us from all eternity.

Election also requires that man must acknowledge and submit to the sovereignty of God and His righteous character. It produces a posture of humility and teachableness, so needed in God's people. It teaches us not to expect to completely resolve every difficulty but to rest in the fact that God is righteous, that there is no injustice with Him.



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needed in God's people. It teaches us not to expect to completely resolve every difficulty but to rest in the fact that God is righteous, that there is no injustice with Him. We must acknowledge God's insistence of His righteousness in all He does (Ps. 9:7-8). Rather than accuse God we must recognize man's sinfulness and God's righteousness. We must humbly agree with Paul when he says to those questioning God's justice: "On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God?" (Rom. 9:20).

Furthermore, we must remember that it is God who has chosen to reveal election. If we don't preach and teach election, we would be indirectly passing judgment on God. We would be questioning His wisdom in revealing it in Scripture where it is so openly and frequently taught. Luther, responding to those who refused to teach election, said:

So your Creator must learn from you, His creature, what may usefully be preached and what not? God was so stupid and thoughtless, was He, that He did not know what should be taught till you came along to tell Him how to be wise, and what to command?—as if without your pointing it out He would not have realized that this paradox involves the consequence you draw? No; if God has willed that these things should be openly proclaimed and published, who are you to forbid it?⁴

Not only this; to refuse to teach election is to defraud believers. It is God who wants them to know His choice of them. It is God who wants them to know that it was His seeking of them, and His subduing of them, that they are saved. Calvin's words are to the point. He says:

For Scripture is the school of the Holy Spirit, in which, as nothing is omitted that is both necessary and useful to know, so nothing is taught but what is expedient to know.

Therefore we must guard against depriving believers of anything disclosed about predestination in Scripture, lest we seem either wickedly to defraud them of the blessing of their God or to accuse and scoff at the Holy Spirit for having published what it is in any way profitable to suppress.⁵

The fact is, God revealed election. Therefore, it must be beneficial. He wants Christians to know that His love of them was sovereign and free, and that it was from before time and in spite of anything they've done in time. To withhold this is to deprive God's people of the full understanding of His great love.

Conclusion

Heartfelt preaching of election is greatly needed in the church. Election exalts God and abases man. It displays God's purposeful, prevailing love and affection for His people. Moreover, it puts man in his rightful place. It develops in Christians a God-centered, man-abasing mindset. It strips any basis of boasting. Most important, it helps create an environment where Christ is rightly exalted as the beginning and end of everything, where He is truly magnified as "the author and perfecter of faith." George Whitefield, perhaps the most effective evangelist since Paul, wrote:

Nothing could possibly support my soul under the many agonies which oppressed me . . . but a consideration of the freeness, eternity and unchangeableness of God's love to me. May He enlighten me more and more to know and feel the mystery of His electing, soul-transforming love. Nothing like that to support us under present and various future trials But the Lord has apprehended us and will not let us go. Men and devils may do their worst; our Jesus will suffer nothing to pluck us out of His Almighty hands.⁶

That which is perhaps the greatest source of assurance that the child of God is loved with an eternal and unchanging love must be freely proclaimed. God honored such preaching in the past. He will honor it again.

Author

Steven Fernandez is senior pastor of Community Bible Church, Vallejo, California, and a professor of theology at the Grace School of Theology and Ministry, Pleasant Hill, California. He has contributed to previous issues of *Reformation & Revival Journal*.

Notes

1. *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 1:316.
2. John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:939.
3. *Ibid.*, 2:921.
4. Martin Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 97-98.
5. John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:924.
6. Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:407.