

Divine Election: The Ultimate Pride Killer

By Pastor David C. Forsyth

Since the beginning of time God has been about the process of choosing who, what, when where, why, and how His creation operates. The opening chapters of Genesis describe the forming and filling of the physical universe, all according to the divine plan, without even a hint of either outside activity or third party interference. The picture that is clearly given in those early chapters of Genesis is that God sovereignly chooses what He will do and how He will do it. This sovereign choosing does not end with the physical universe, but according to the Scriptures, God determines the rise and fall of nations, leaders, and even the eternal salvation of individuals. The theological term commonly used to refer to God's sovereign choice is election.

God's choice of nations:

The most obvious example of the sovereign choice of God with regard to nations is His choice of Israel to be the nation that would receive His divine promises and mercy. When God delivered the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt, He stripped away any basis for ethnic or religious pride by telling the people that His choice of them did not depend on either their status as a nation, nor on their righteous and obedient behavior, but rested instead upon God's uncoerced love for them (Deut. 4:37-38, 7:6-7, 9:4-6, 31:27).

God's choice of leaders:

God demonstrates His sovereign choice in the rise and fall of world leaders (Dan. 2:21). In addition the Scriptures declare that David, the great king of Israel, came to his position and prominence via the direct choice of a sovereign God (1 Sam. 16:7-12, 2 Sam. 7:8-16, 12:7-9). Finally, Christ demonstrated His sovereign choice in the selection of a very unlikely group of men to become His apostles (Lk. 6:13, Jn. 6:70, 15:16, Acts 9:15).

God's choice of individuals to salvation:

The fact that God chooses individuals to salvation is plain to the most casual reader of Scripture, being clearly taught in such passages as Acts 13:48, Romans 8:28-30, Ephesians 1:4-6. Disagreement over the how and why God chooses, has been, and still is, a source of friction throughout the history of Christendom.

Some questions that have caused consternation to the human mind are:

What is the purpose or reason for God's choosing?

The clearest Scriptural statement as to the reason or purpose behind election is that Christians would give God praise for the wonders of His grace (Eph. 1:5-6). According to the Scriptures, humanity is spiritually

dead; unwilling and unable to do anything that would commend them to God (Is. 64:6, Rom. 3:10-18, Eph. 2:1-4). Yet God in His mercy has remedied mankind's hopeless situation by providing a Savior who bore our guilt and reconciled us to God (2 Cor. 5:17-21). This reconciliation becomes effective in space and time when a person gives up on any hope of obtaining merit with God based upon their own righteousness, and by faith trusts in the sacrificial work of Christ on their behalf. Thus the consistent witness of the Scriptures is that God's actions on mankind's behalf are not because of their intrinsic merit, but because of His grace, or unmerited favor (Eph. 2:2:8-9). Therefore God's choice to rescue lost sinners is for His glory alone.

On what basis does God choose or elect people to salvation?

This question really drives to the heart of the topic of election and has been historically answered in one of two ways. Those who believe that God foresees an individual's future faith in the sacrifice of Christ, and bases His election on that foreseen faith, are commonly identified as Arminian in their theology and hold to a "conditional election." Those who believe that God's choice of individuals for salvation resides totally within the secret councils of God, and that a person's future faith is a result, not a cause of God's election are commonly identified as Calvinistic in their theology, and hold to an "unconditional election."

In evaluating the "conditional" view of election it is important first of all to point out that the Scriptures that speak of God's foreknowledge regarding salvation, refer to His foreknowledge of people, not facts (Rom. 8:29, Gal. 4:9, 1 Cor. 8:3, 1 Pet. 1:2). The idea that God foresees certain actions of individuals, and bases His choice of them upon those foreseen actions is foreign to the context of the passages that are most frequently cited in support of the concept (note the use of the personal pronouns "whom," "you," and "he"). Secondly, a number of Scripture passages that clearly address the doctrine of election specifically exclude the possibility that any individual actions play a part in God's choice of them to salvation (Rom. 9:11-13, 11:5-6, Eph. 1:5-6, 2 Tim. 1:9). Finally, if God foresees who will believe and who won't, and bases His election on that, then the following questions must be given serious consideration and answered without violating the clear teaching of Scripture:

1. If the foreseen faith really is the basis by which God chooses individuals for salvation, then what differentiates this action from all other meritorious actions that are clearly excluded by Scripture?
2. Why do some people believe and some do not?

In evaluating the "unconditional" view of election, appeal is made to the numerous passages of Scripture which indicate that salvation is a work of God, and in no way dependent upon the efforts of man (i.e. Jn. 6:37, 44, 65, Acts 13:48, 16:14, Rom. 9:10-16 Titus 3:5). These clear statements, coupled with the weaknesses in the conditional election view, drive us to

the conclusion that election is unconditional, and resides within the secret councils of God (Deut. 29:29, Eph. 1:11).

Is it fair for God to choose some and not all people?

The question of fairness, at its heart presupposes that unequal treatment is inherently unfair. Before we examine that issue it is important to remind ourselves that God does not owe salvation to anyone, and in fact would be perfectly fair if He allowed all people to perish for their sin (Ezek. 18:4, Rom. 3:23, 6:23a). Since God clearly does not owe salvation to anyone, is it unjust for Him to give it to some and not to others? The answer to this question is to briefly examine the concept of justice. When God gives sinners what they deserve (eternal damnation) He is giving them justice. Conversely, when God withholds punishment from a person who deserves it He gives mercy, or non-justice. In neither case is God guilty of injustice, which is punishing somebody who doesn't deserve to be punished (Rom. 9:14).

Isn't election really just another name for fatalism?

No. Fatalism is belief that an impersonal force controls your life. God is both personal and loving, and cares for His creation (Matt. 5:45).

What about peoples free will?

The Scriptures nowhere describe people's will as free, but rather as in bondage to sin (Rom. 8:6-8, Eph. 2:3, 4:17-18). The idea of two sovereignly existing free wills (God's and man's) is contradictory by definition. This does not however mean that men are robots unable to make moral, intellectually "free," and satisfying choices. Somehow, under the umbrella of God's sovereign choice, men are called upon to repent and believe the gospel, and are judged by God for their moral failure to do so (Jn. 3:18-19). The Scriptures unashamedly proclaim the divine truth that God desires all men to come to repentance (Ezek. 33:11, 2 Pet. 3:9), yet unless God Himself acts on their behalf, they will never come (Jn. 6:44). These truths are seen side-by-side in Matthew 11:27-30 where Christ's invitation for all to come to Him (v. 28) is preceded by His statement that no one knows the Father except those to whom the Son wills to reveal Him (v.27).

Why are some people chosen and some are not?

The short answer to this question is that we do not know. In Romans 9:15-16 Paul says that God's mercy is based upon His choice alone.

Isn't election a hindrance to evangelism?

No. On the contrary, the Apostle Paul found the doctrine of election to be the basis upon which he was able to keep evangelizing, knowing that God had assured that his preaching would indeed bear fruit (Acts 18:9-12, 1 Thess. 1:2-4, 1 Cor. 3:6-9, Rom. 10:13).

Since the topic of election causes so many problems, wouldn't the church be better off if the doctrine of election were just ignored?

The answer to this question is twofold. First, the doctrine of election is so clearly and pervasively woven throughout the Scriptures that to ignore it would require ignoring large portions of the Word of God in clear violation of Paul's statement in 2 Tim 3:16-17. Secondly, properly understood and taught, the doctrine of election is a great comfort for the believer since the same God who has worked (past tense), and will work (future tense), can certainly be relied upon in the present to work for our good (Rom. 8:29-30).

The doctrine of election, at its core, recognizes God as sovereign over all His creation and forces sinful humanity to depend entirely upon His mercy and grace. Thus this doctrine attacks the point at which people are most vulnerable, that is their pride. How should a Christian respond to the doctrine of election? "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His ways!... to Him be the glory forever. Amen" (Rom. 11:33-36).

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