

THE DOCTRINE OF ELECTION

Definition of Election

The doctrine of election is best understood in conjunction with the doctrines of God's calling and predestination. However, due to the intended brevity of this paper we will focus our remarks on election specifically and not delve into the broader topic of predestination.

The terms "elect" or "election" occur 21 times in the NT and are derived from a Greek word meaning to pick out, choose, or select (eklego), with most instances referring particularly to salvation. The concept of God choosing (electing) a people for Himself is also set forth in the OT. For example, Moses records, "For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth" (Dt 7:6, see also Ps 33:12). It should be kept in mind that the emphasis of the OT speaks of God's "ethnic election" of Israel as a nation (where not everyone in the nation was saved), whereas, the NT emphasis is on 'election to salvation'. Before citing some of the Biblical texts that teach God's choice of people for salvation, let us state a concise definition:

"Election is the eternal act of God with respect to all who are saved, by which, out of pure grace and for Christ's sake He purposed to endow them in time with the spiritual blessings of conversion, justification, sanctification, and preservation unto eternal life" (quoted in *Systematic Theology, Biblical and Historical*, by R. D. Culver).

The Necessity of the Doctrine

The doctrine of election becomes Biblically and logically necessary when considered against the backdrop of the human condition. Briefly stated, mankind's natural state is one of total depravity, i.e. a total inability by sinful human beings to do anything to gain or contribute to their own salvation. A few Biblical verses are sufficient to establish this fact. In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul declares that all men are under the death sentence of sin and that not only are all people separated from God but no one seeks God nor does anyone even do good in God's sight (Rom 3:9-12; 23; 5:12). In equally graphic language Paul states in Eph 2:1 that our pre-Christian status was one of being "dead in our trespasses and sins" and goes on to say that before Christ "we were by nature children of wrath" (Eph 2:3). If human beings are spiritually dead, enslaved to sin, and are totally unable to secure their own salvation, then, the solution must lie with God Himself. God does for us what we can not do for ourselves, i.e. "makes us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)..." (Eph 2:5). If God does not choose some to be saved, none will be saved. God's election of the saved is referred to as "*unconditional* election" in Calvinistic and Reformed theology (the "U" in the acrostic TULIP representing the five points of Calvinism). The term unconditional rests upon the idea "that since man is totally unable to contribute in the slightest degree toward his own salvation, it follows that salvation is wholly from the grace of God and not conditioned upon any virtue, foreseen or otherwise, in fallen humanity" (J. Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*).

The Biblical Affirmation of the Doctrine of Election

While I am gratefully a theological child of the Reformation and there is much about Calvinism that has helped me to glean many of the rich doctrines of Scripture, it is not these theological systems that compel me to embrace the doctrine of election, but first and foremost it is the clear testimony of the Bible itself. Following are a sampling of such verses. The teachings of Jesus contain numerous references to the choice of the Father and/or the Son in calling people to the Lord. Jesus said, "*No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him* (Mt 11:27), and, "*For many are called but few are chosen*" (Mt 22:14), and again, "*No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him...*" (Jn 6:44). Jesus told His disciples, "*You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit...*" (Jn 15:16). One of the boldest proclamations of God's sovereign choosing of people is Jesus' parable of the laborers in the vineyard in Mt 20:1-16. In response to the complaints of full day workers who resented being paid the same as partial day workers, Jesus quotes the landowner (obviously representing God), "*Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own?*" In relationship to Israel's history, the Apostle Paul says that prior to their actual birth the younger Jacob was the twin who would be the son of promise due to nothing either child had done...it was solely God's

sovereign **choice** (Rom 9:11-13). Speaking of the remnant of true believers, Paul states, *“In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God’s gracious **choice**... What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained, but those who were **chosen** obtained it, and the rest were hardened”* (Rom 11:5,7). Paul frequently acknowledges that the recipients of his letters have been chosen by God: *“So, as those who have been **chosen** of God, holy and beloved...”* (Col 3:12, see also: I Thess 1:4; II Thess 2:13; Titus 1:1). One of Paul’s strongest declarations concerning God’s election of people to salvation is in Ephesians 1:4-6, *“just as He **chose** us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He **predestined** us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of **His will**, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which **He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved**”*.

The Apostle Peter echoes this same truth as he employs the language of the OT promise to Israel and applies it to the Church, *“But you are a **chosen** race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession...”* (I Pt 2:9). Luke records that during Paul’s first missionary journey Gentiles responded to the gospel in Pisidian Antioch and that the ones who believed, *“had been appointed to eternal life”* (Acts 13:48). These verses along with a host of other passages give irrefutable evidence that God chooses those to be His people.

Some Objections to the Doctrine

It is suggested that the doctrine of election negates human responsibility in believing the gospel, i.e. “if God chooses, then what I do or don’t do doesn’t matter”. This is not so. The reader of John’s gospel is repeatedly called upon to respond and believe the gospel. The Apostle Paul forcefully taught election and yet, he spent his life urging his listeners to repent and believe in the risen Christ and warned that people are culpable for their acceptance or rejection of the message.

It is also suggested that if God’s sovereign electing purposes will not be thwarted then it is not necessary for believers to evangelize. This too, is incorrect. We need look no further than the practice of the early Church that obeyed Jesus’ mission mandate (Mt 28:18-20) and zealously proclaimed the gospel. Paul says that people can not believe if there is not someone to preach the message (Rom 10:14-15). While it is difficult to understand the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, we should not forfeit one in favor of the other because Scripture affirms both.

A common objection to the doctrine of election is that it portrays God as unfair or even arbitrary. We should recall that all mankind is lost, under divine wrath and bound for hell unless God intervenes (Jn 3:36; Eph 2:3). It is gracious of God to save any undeserving person and He is not obligated to save anyone. In His wisdom He chooses in mercy and love for reasons that we are not privy to as finite beings. R. D. Culver observes, “Some objectors appear to conceive of themselves as more gracious than the God of the Bible. They suppose their own hearts to be more compassionate than the heart of the Father who sent His only Son to die for us while we were yet sinners.” Such questioning of God is met by the Apostle Paul with an abrupt response, *“...who are you O man who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘why did you make me like this, will it?’”* (Rom 9: 19-21). R.D. Culver further comments, “a sovereign ruler is not obliged to treat condemned rebels alike. God is not an egalitarian and never heard of ‘the declaration of human rights’ when forming His counsels”.

Blessings Derived from the Doctrine

- + It exalts God and *“is to the praise of His glory”* (Eph 1:12)
- + It comforts and encourages believers. We have been chosen to proclaim His excellencies (I Pt 2:9) be holy and blameless before Him (Eph 1:4) and to bear fruit (Jn 15:16). Also we have the assurance that He has called us to be conformed to the image of Jesus and that He will bring to fruition His purposes for us in this life and unto eternity (Rom 8:28-39).
- + It compels humility in us because we realize that there is absolutely nothing in us that commends us to God and we can do nothing to merit His gracious salvation.
- + It is a motivation to remain steadfast in evangelism, ministry (II Tim 2:10) and godly living (II Pt 1:10).

The doctrine of election is a great source of blessing as well as perplexity. Despite the struggles we may have in understanding the doctrine, J. I. Packer is on target when he says, “The thought of election should drive ransomed sinners to incessant doxologies and thanksgivings as it does Paul”.