

October 27, 2019

“Sovereign Election”
Ephesians 1:4-6

FCF: Unwillingness to have our thinking stretched

PROPOSITION: (anchor) The doctrine of election is a strange and beautiful thing.
(magnet) And we need to understand it.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Life is full of mystery. Is water a liquid, solid, or gas? It depends, doesn't it? Pushing further into the realm of physics - does light travel as particles or as waves? Or, moving into the realm of theology, is God one or three? Is Jesus human or divine? Life is full of mystery.

Which brings us to our topic this morning - sovereign election. That is, God's choosing us before the beginning of time such that we would choose Him. There's been a bit of debate over that. We shouldn't be surprised if it's hard to grasp. But it's well worth thinking through.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Ephesians 1:3-14](#) (vv.4-6)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

This year marks the 400th anniversary of the Synod of Dort which makes it our theme for this Reformation Sunday. Why is this worth our attention? We talked a bit about this the last hour. From this meeting of church leaders, pastors, and civil authorities came the Canons of Dort from which came the “Five Points of Calvinism” - Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, Perseverance of the Saints - TULIP. For time's sake, we're going to look at just one of the five, Unconditional (or Sovereign) Election. This was the focal point of the disagreement and debate that led to the Synod of Dort. So it's where we'll go.

What does it mean? We know what an “election” involves - a selecting and choosing of someone or something. This is how the Synod of Dort defined sovereign election ([READ I:7a](#)):

Election is the unchangeable purpose of God, whereby, before the foundation of the world, He hath out of mere grace, according to the sovereign good pleasure of His own will, chosen, from the whole human race, which had fallen through their own fault from their primitive state of rectitude into sin and destruction, a certain number of persons to redemption in Christ, whom He from eternity appointed the Mediator and Head of the elect, and the foundation of salvation.

That's a pretty comprehensive definition. And you can hear the attention to precision in it.

Which brings us to our text. Ephesians 1:3-14 is one long sentence in the original Greek. We are going to be drilling down into just vv.4-6, one clause within this much longer sentence. In these verses, it becomes clear that the doctrine of election is a strange and beautiful thing. “Strange” in the sense of being foreign. “Beautiful” in its effects. And we need to understand it.

The understanding these verses bring can be summarized in three ways. First, this is a revelation from heaven. Second, it is an incentive to holiness. Third, it is a stimulus to humility.

I. A REVELATION FROM HEAVEN

First, the doctrine of election is truly a revelation from heaven ([READ vv.3-4a](#)).

A) Not of Man

The doctrine of election is not a human invention or the result of vain speculation.

1. Much taught through the years

It has been much taught through the years - Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Polycarp, Ireneus, Cyprian, Ambrose, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Edwards, Whitefield, and Spurgeon.

2. Much abused today

It has been much taught through the years. And, sadly, much abused as well. Even in our day.

B) But of God

But the doctrine of sovereign election is most certainly not of man but of God.

1. As explained in the Canons of Dort

You can hear it explained in the Canons of Dort, again set forth so carefully ([READ I:6](#)):

That some receive the gift of faith from God and others do not receive it proceeds from God's eternal decree, for "known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world" (Acts 15:18). "Who worketh all things after the counsel of His own will" (Eph. 1:11). According to which decree, He graciously softens the hearts of the elect, however obstinate, and inclines them to believe, while He leaves the non-elect in His just judgment to their own wickedness and obduracy. And herein is especially displayed the profound, the merciful, and at the same time the righteous discrimination between men, equally involved in ruin; or that decree of election and reprobation revealed in the Word of God, which though men of perverse, impure and unstable minds wrest to their own destruction, yet to holy and pious souls affords unspeakable consolation.

2. As set for the in the Scriptures

But more important than that thorough explanation, we see sovereign election set forth in the Scriptures. We read from Deuteronomy 4 and John 15 earlier. Here is a sampling of just a few more texts ([READ Acts 13:48; 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5a; 2 Timothy 1:8-9; Romans 8:29-30](#)).

Clearly, the doctrine of election is a revelation from heaven, not an invention of man.

Illustration:

What do we do with this? This story seems appropriate ([READ "Chicken Lady"](#)):

When Christian Herter was governor of Massachusetts, he was running hard for a second term in office. One day, after a busy morning chasing votes (and no lunch) he arrived at a church barbecue. It was late afternoon and Herter was famished. As Herter moved down the serving line, he held out his plate to the woman serving chicken. She put a piece on his plate and turned to the next person in line. "Excuse me," Governor Herter said, "do you mind if I have another piece of chicken?" "Sorry," the woman told him. "I'm supposed to give one piece of chicken to each person." "But I'm starved," the governor said. "Sorry," the woman said again. "Only one to a customer." Governor Herter was a modest and unassuming man, but he decided that this time he would throw a little weight around. "Do you know who I am?" he said. "I am the governor of this state." "Do you know who I am?" the woman said. "I'm the lady in charge of the chicken. Move along, mister."

Application:

We have to recognize and submit to authority. That's what we have with this teaching from God's Word. If you're wrestling with the doctrine of election, your first questions should not be, "Do I understand it? Do I like it?" but "Is it taught in the Bible?" If it is, then obedience to Christ requires you to receive it. That's what it means to be His disciple. And, as you receive it, as His disciple, you can expect Him to lead you in greater appreciation of it. And rejoicing.

The doctrine of election is a strange and beautiful thing. And we need to understand it.

II. AN INCENTIVE TO HOLINESS

Which lead us to the second point from the text. The doctrine of election is an incentive to holiness. Which is vital to see in the face of the spurious charge - "This will mean license, laxity, and spiritual laziness." Hardly. Not if it's rightly understood ([READ Ephesians 1:4a-b](#)).

A) Not Presumption

Rightly understood, the doctrine of sovereign election does not encourage presumption.

1. Ignores the relational element

That would be to ignore the relational element here. To be a Christian, to be Christ's disciple, is to have faced your enslavement to sin and guilt before God and cried out to Him for forgiveness and freedom. To then just go your way simply doesn't fit as the response of a true Christian.

2. Ignores the biblical teaching

Presumption ignores the relational element. And the biblical teaching. What do we see here? God chose us for holiness. Holiness is a mark of the elect. As the Canons said ([READ I:13](#)):

The sense and certainty of this election afford to the children of God additional matter for daily humiliation before Him, for adoring the depth of His mercies, for cleansing themselves, and rendering grateful returns of ardent love to Him, who first manifested so great (a) love towards them. The consideration of this doctrine of election is so far from encouraging remissness in the observance of the divine commands or from sinking men in carnal security, that these, in the just judgment of God, are the usual effects of rash presumption or of idle and wanton trifling with the grace of election in those who refuse to walk in the ways of the elect.

B) But Assurance

Rightly understood, election does not bring presumption. But it does bring assurance.

1. Not a "possibility" of holiness

Think of what Paul says here. He speaks not of the mere possibility of holiness. That is, holding out an enticing offer that can be yours if you work hard enough. That's hardly what he says.

2. But a realization of holiness

Paul speaks of the realization of holiness, with a certainty to it. God, who has chosen you to holiness, will then surely make you holy. Period. To be chosen and made holy are inseparable.

Do you see? The doctrine of election is an incentive to holiness, not presumption.

Illustration:

There is an inevitability to it. Granted, we have the daily war against the world, the flesh, and the devil. But from a larger perspective, pulling the view out, we are all the while swimming with the current. We can know we will get there. Which is an encouragement with each stroke.

Application:

If you're charting your sanctification, your growth as a Christian, with a line graph, it will often look like a roller coaster going up and down. But if you take the long view, that line that goes through those peaks and valleys is trending up. Now the tough thing is that, along the way, you become more aware of your sin and wretchedness. So even though you're getting better, you may feel worse. But you're getting better. By God's grace, you are becoming more holy.

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III.A STIMULUS TO HUMILITY

Which brings us to our last point. The doctrine of election is also a stimulus to humility. Which is vital to know in the face of the charge that "All this talk of being chosen will surely lead to feeling superior to others." Again, not if it's understood ([READ Ephesians 1:4c-6](#)).

A) Not Grounds for Pride

There are absolutely no grounds for pride here. Why has the Christian been chosen?

1. Nothing to do with merit

It has nothing to do with merit. Just read a little further in Ephesians ([READ Ephesians 2:8-9](#)).

2. But all to do with grace

Election has nothing to do with merit and all to do with grace. The emphasis throughout this passage is God's grace, love, purpose, and choice. The reasons are all in Him and nothing in us.

B) But Cause for Wonder

So there are no grounds at all for pride. None at all. But every cause for wonder.

1. Before creation

For we were chosen before creation - before we were, before anything at all had come to be.

2. For His glory

And all for God's glory. Which is His ultimate purpose in this and in everything He does.

The doctrine of election is a stimulus for humility, giving us no grounds for pride.

Illustration:

George Whitefield and John Wesley were preachers during the Great Awakening of the 18th century. Whitefield lined up with Dort but Wesley put more emphasis on man's role. There was a rivalry between the two. Their followers divided into camps. But, in the end, the gospel had its way. One day, one of Whitefield's followers asked, "Will we see Wesley in heaven?" To which Whitefield said ([READ quote](#)), "I fear not. He will be so near the throne, and we shall be at such a distance, that we shall hardly get a sight of him." That's election stimulating humility.

Application:

My friends, Christians should be the most humble people of all, especially those who are persuaded of God's sovereign election. We should be the most secure, steady, confident, and courageous. But we should also be the most humble, knowing that God's reasons for choosing us have nothing to do with us and are only and all in Him. That's election stimulating humility.

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CONCLUSION:

Back to the mystery. The famous Bible teacher Donald Grey Barnhouse often used an illustration to help people make sense of election ([READ "Two Views of the Same Door"](#)):

He asked them to imagine a cross like the one on which Jesus died, only so large that it had a door in it. Over the door were these words from Revelation: "Whosoever will may come." These words represent the free and universal offer of the gospel. By God's grace, the message of salvation is for everyone. Every man, woman, and child who will come to the cross is invited to believe in Jesus Christ and enter eternal life. On the other side of the door a happy surprise awaits the one who believes and enters. From the inside, anyone glancing back can see these words from Ephesians written above the door: "Chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world." Election is best understood in hindsight, for it is only after coming to Christ that one can know whether one has been chosen in Christ. Those who make a decision for Christ find that God made a decision for them in eternity past.

Why is anyone a Christian? More pointedly, if you are His disciple, why are you a Christian? A fundamental part of the answer is God chose you in Christ before the foundation of the world.

That said, it's vital to see all this in the context of the Father's care. Why is He telling us this? He wants us to know the security of His love. When doubts come, when failures mount, when dreams crash, when friends fail, He wants us to know and be assured, "You're mine. You always have been. And you always will be. You always have been. And you always will be."

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