

## "MY UNDERSTANDING OF THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF ELECTION"

(Romans 8:28-34)

Dan Wallace

*"I'm so glad that God chose me before the foundation of the world,  
because he never would have chosen me after I was born!"*

Charles Haddon Spurgeon

The following is a brief discussion of what I understand the biblical doctrine of election to mean.

1) Election does not mean that God merely knew who would believe and on that basis elected them. D. L. Moody thought that election meant this: "God chose me for himself, but the devil chose me for himself. My choice is the tie-breaker."

This really would not be election or "choice." God would not be choosing us; rather, we would be choosing him and he would simply know about it. (Further, the devil, a creature, would be put on a plane equal to God.) The consistent testimony of scripture is that God is the one doing the choosing, not us. Cf. Romans 9:6-21; Ephesians 1:4; 1 Thessalonians 1:4.

2) Election does not obliterate human responsibility. Each person is held responsible before Almighty God as to what they will do with his Son. "There are unsaved people alive today, who, though elect, are now lost and will not be saved until they believe." Cf. Ephesians 2:3.

3) Election is necessary because we are totally depraved sinners. In other words, we would not choose God unless he first chose us.

Non-believers are portrayed as unable to do or think anything which would move them one step closer to God. There is nothing they can do or say which would please God. Cf. Romans 3:10-23; Ephesians 4:17-19. In fact, non-believers are spiritually dead until the Spirit of God calls them: that is, they are unresponsive to anything outside the realm of sin (Ephesians 2:1-3). Just as Lazarus was dead until Jesus called his name, so unbelievers are dead until the Spirit of God calls them. And just as Lazarus could not boast, "Jesus couldn't have done it without me!", neither can we. Dead men don't have much to bargain with. It is important to note that Ephesians 2:8-9 is in the context of God raising us from the dead spiritually.

4) The process of election, as worked out in our own lives, does not violate our will. That is, the doctrine of "irresistible grace" does not mean "divine coercion," as if God bullies you into submission to do his will. Rather, it is compelling persuasion. The devil has blinded the eyes of the world (2 Cor. 4:4) and once our eyes have been enlightened by the Spirit of God, we see clearly what God has done for us. Further, if grace were resistible, this would mean that the person who can resist God's will is a strong and powerful individual and those who can't (and thus those who get saved) are weaklings. That is not the biblical picture.

5) The means of election is always through human agency. That is, God uses other believers to communicate the gospel to the lost. Cf. Romans 10:14-17. Therefore, we cannot excuse ourselves from sharing the gospel by saying, "If he's elect, God's going to save him anyway. He doesn't need me to do the job." It's true that God doesn't need any of us to do his will, but it is equally true that God uses those who are willing to obey him. Consequently, the doctrine of election should motivate us to share the gospel—not out of fear but because we want to be used by God to do his will.

6) Election does not contradict any of God's attributes and, in fact, is a direct outgrowth of his love (Eph. 1:4-5). (See point 10 for further elaboration.)

7) Election is not just to salvation, but to sanctification and glorification. Cf. Eph. 1:4-5; Rom. 8:28-30. In other words, those whom



God has chosen are chosen not just to be saved, but also to be sanctified.

8) The question of whether God is fair or not in choosing some but not others diminishes how great our salvation is—and how much our sin permeates us. If God were fair, we would all go to hell. If he saves one person, he is infinitely merciful.

9) Actually, three basic questions arise when discussing election: Is God fair? Doesn't this make us robots? Why should I evangelize?

All three questions are answered in Romans 9-11, the great passage in the Bible which deals with this doctrine. Romans 9 answers the question of our choice, Romans 10 answers the question of the need for evangelism, and Romans 11 answers the question of God's fairness. It should be noted as well that Paul's theology here is not in a vacuum; he begins (vv 1-3) by almost wishing that he could go to hell if it would mean that just one of his Jewish brothers would get saved!

10) Many folks want to seek a balance between God's sovereignty and human free will. A balance needs to be sought, but this is not the place. Nowhere do we read in the Bible that God is not sovereign over our wills. Further, we have the explicit testimony of Romans 9 to the opposite effect. As well, there is an inherent imbalance between a creature's will and the Creator's will. What right do we have to claim that these two are equal?

The real balance comes between the two broad categories of God's attributes. God has moral attributes (goodness, love, mercy, justice, etc.) and amoral attributes (he is infinite, eternal, omniscient, omnipresent, etc.). In short, the balance is between his sovereignty and his goodness. If God only had amoral attributes, he may well be a tyrant. If he only had moral attributes, he would be incapable of effecting change in the world; he would be impotent.

Putting all this together we see the majesty and mystery of God. God's attributes cannot be compartmentalized. That is, he is good in his sovereignty, infinite in his mercy, loving in his omnipotence. However, we as mere finite creatures cannot comprehend the grandeur of his plan. Isaiah 55:8-9 says: "My ways are not your ways, and my thoughts are not your thoughts; but just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." There is no contradiction in God, but there is finite understanding in us.

11) The doctrine of election is analogous to that of inspiration. God has inspired the very words of scripture (2 Tim 3:16), yet his modus operandi was not verbal dictation. Isaiah was the Shakespeare of his day; Amos was the Mark Twain. Both had widely divergent vocabularies and styles of writing, yet what each wrote was inspired by God. Luke's style of writing and Greek syntax is quite different from John's, yet both penned the Word of God. We read in 2 Peter 1:20-21 that no prophet originated his own prophecies, but was borne along by the Holy Spirit: "Above all, you do well if you recognize this: no prophecy of Scripture ever comes about by the prophet's own imagination, for no prophecy was ever borne of human impulse; rather, men carried along by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (NET Bible).

Thus, we are presented with a mystery: Each biblical writer wrote the very words of God, yet each exercised his own personality and will in the process. The message originated with God, yet the process involved human volition. The miracle of inspiration, as Lewis Sperry Chafer long ago noted, is that God did not violate anyone's personality, yet what was written was exactly what he wanted to say.

This finds parallels with election. The mystery of election is that God can choose unconditionally, yet our wills are not coerced. We are persuaded by the Holy Spirit to believe. Further, we have the sense of free will in the process, just as the biblical authors did. That is, the biblical authors did not always know that they were even writing scripture, even though God was directing their thoughts.

12) Summary: the biblical doctrine of election is that it is unconditional, irresistible, and irrevocable. All this to the glory of God—without in any way diminishing the dignity or responsibility of man. To put this another way: A large part of maturing in the faith is this: we each need to make the progressively Copernican discovery encapsulated in the words, "I am not the center of the universe." Or, as John the Baptist put it, "That he might increase and I might decrease."