

NOTES ON THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF ELECTION

\* \* \* WHO ARE GOD'S CHOSEN PEOPLE? \* \* \*

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Soli Deo Gloria!

"The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor **choose** you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people. But because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers..." (Deuteronomy 7:7-8a)

"As concerning the gospel, they are enemies for your sakes; but as touching the **election**, they are beloved for the fathers' sakes." (Romans 11:28)

**INTRODUCTION: THE REFORMED DOCTRINE OF ELECTION**

Reformed theology (a.k.a. Calvinism) has taken Biblical words, "elect" and "election", and built around them a doctrine of salvation in which God chooses whether individuals will be saved (i.e., the elect) or damned (i.e., the reprobate) before they are even born, and His choice is unconditional, being made independent of any necessary faith-response on their part.

Consider the following assertions from the *Westminster Confession of Faith*<sup>1</sup>:

By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestined unto everlasting life; and others foreordained to everlasting death. (III.III)

Those of mankind that are predestined unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen, in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of his mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith, or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto; and all to the praise of his glorious grace. (III.V)

God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the **elect**, and Christ did, in the fullness of time, die for their sins, and rise again for their justification. (XI.IV)

Consider also these comments by Steele and Thomas<sup>2</sup> under the topic of "Unconditional Election":

The doctrine of **election** declares that God, before the foundation of the world, chose certain individuals from among the fallen

<sup>1</sup> *The Westminster Standards* (Great Commission Publications, Suwanee, GA; 1997).

<sup>2</sup> David N. Steele and Curtis C. Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, Documented* (Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., Phillipsburg, NJ; 1963) p. 30.

members of Adam's race to be the objects of His undeserved favor. These, and these only, He purposed to save. God could have chosen to save all men (for He had the power and authority to do so) or He could have chosen to save none (for He was under no obligation to show mercy to any)—but He did neither. Instead He chose to save some and to exclude others. His eternal choice of particular sinners unto salvation was not based upon any foreseen act or response on the part of those selected, but was based solely on His own good pleasure and sovereign will. Thus **election** was not determined by, or conditioned upon, anything that men would do, but resulted entirely from God's self-determined purpose.

Thus, in Reformed theology (a.k.a. Calvinism): 1) the objects of God's election are individuals, and 2) the purpose of God's election is their personal salvation. The Calvinist answers the question, "Who are God's chosen people?" as the Church, which in his understanding is comprised of "the elect" of every age and all time (including saved persons in the O.T., such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, and David<sup>3</sup>). However, these theological conclusions are rife with errors, and the errors result from an incorrect understanding of elect/election imputed to these biblical terms by a theological system, rather than the understanding of them derived from an exegetical analysis of their use in the Bible.

#### THE BIBLICAL USE OF ELECT/ELECTION

The words "elect" or "election" occur 27 times in the English Bible (KJV). When used in the Bible, these words are transliterations (rather than translations) of the Greek word **ἐκλεκτος**, which means *chosen* (and is translated as such in Matt20:16; 22:14; Luk23:35; Rom16:13; 1Pet2:4; 2:9; Rev17:14). Though theological dictionaries often define these words to mean *chosen for salvation*, the purpose of the choice is not intrinsic to **ἐκλεκτος** and must be inferred from its usage in any particular context.

Each verse that contains the words "elect" or "election" is shown in the CHART: ELECT/ELECTION IN THE BIBLE (KJV). Also shown in the chart is the identification of the elect person or group as inferred from the context of the verse or surrounding passage. Finally, some comments are also provided to support or explain either the identification or the context.

Of the 27 occurrences of elect/election, 2 are references to Messiah/Christ (Isa42:1; 1Pet2:6), 1 is a reference to the holy angels (1Tim5:21), 3 are references to individual persons (Paul in Tit1:1 and an unnamed "lady" in 2Jn1:1,13), and in 2 of the uses the object of election is somewhat ambiguous (Col3:12; 1Thess1:4). At least **19** of the 27 occurrences of "elect" or "election", however, are clear references to **the nation of Israel**. Furthermore, in the instances where individuals are referred to as "elect", the Apostle Paul is Jewish and the "elect lady" of 2 John is likely, or conceivably, Jewish

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<sup>3</sup> This despite the fact that the Lord Jesus indicated that the building of His Church would not begin during His earthly ministry (Matt16:18), and that incorporation of individuals into the Body of Christ (which is the Church; Eph1:22-23) is by means of Spirit baptism (Matt3:11; 1Cor12:12-13), which did not begin until Acts 2 (cf. Act2:1-4; 11:15-16).

as well, and the ambiguous use of "elect" in Colossians 3:12 could be understood as an exhortation for the believers at Colossae to imitate the "elect" nation of Israel. That leaves only one ambiguous use of "elect" in 1 Thessalonians 1:4 in which the term could have the meaning imputed to it in Reformed Theology, but could also be simply a non-technical use implying God's choice of the Thessalonian church for a divine purpose not related to the personal salvation of individuals.

Thus, in the great majority of uses of "elect" or "election" in the Bible, the object of election is the nation of Israel and is non-soteriological in nature; this is explicitly asserted in Isaiah 45:4. This comports perfectly with classic Dispensationalism's understanding that the Jews are God's chosen people.

#### **WHO ARE THE "CHOSEN" IN THE BOOK OF EPHESIANS?**

Ephesians 1:4-5 is inevitably used to support the Reformed doctrine that individuals are unconditionally "chosen" by "God" for salvation "before the foundation of the world". Superficially, taken out of context, it does appear consistent with such a notion. That changes radically, however, when the broader context of the Epistle to the Ephesians is properly recognized. Specifically, two sets of pronouns are used in the opening chapters of Ephesians, which discriminate between two very different groups. The pronouns "we" and "us" (e.g., Eph1:3-12) are used relative to one group, which includes the Apostle Paul as the author of the epistle. This group is characterized as having been the unique recipients of "the mystery of [God's] will" (Eph1:9; Cp., Rom3:1-2) and as having "first trusted in Christ" (Eph1:12; Cp., Act2:5-41); this group must be Jewish believers.

In contrast, the pronouns "you" and "ye" (e.g., Eph1:13-2:17) are used relative to another group, characterized as the "uncircumcision" (Eph2:11) and "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise" (Eph2:12); clearly, this group must be Gentile believers. While Paul concludes that the work of the Lord Jesus Christ "might reconcile both [Jews and Gentiles] unto God in one body by the cross" (Eph2:16), it is only the Jewish group that he characterizes as "chosen" and "predestinated" (Eph1:4-5).

Thus, understood in the broader context, "chosen" (i.e., elected) as used in the Epistle to the Ephesians is a reference to Israel.

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

The term "elect" simply means *chosen*, and "election" means *to be chosen*. In the Bible, these terms are used of: 1) Messiah/Christ, 2) the holy angels, and 3) the nation of Israel. The Lord Jesus Christ is perfect and without sin, so His election by God cannot have anything to do with personal salvation. The holy angels are unfallen, such that they do not require salvation (and the fallen angels are not eligible for salvation). However, by far the most common use of elect/election relates to the nation of Israel. The nation of Israel has always been comprised of both believing and unbelieving Jews<sup>4</sup> (cf. Rom3:3; 9:6), so

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<sup>4</sup> Note Romans 11:28, which uses "election" in reference to the *unbelieving* nation of Israel during the Church Age.

the election of Israel cannot pertain to the salvation of individual Jewish persons.

Biblical "election" is God's choice of a person or persons for a particular purpose in His divine plan. Christ was chosen by God to be the redeemer of believing humanity (Jn3:16). The angels were chosen by God to be His governing and ministering spirits within the creation (Heb1:14). And the nation of Israel was chosen by God for a myriad of reasons, but primarily to be His principal channel of revelation to fallen humanity, through which God brought forth both the Person of Messiah (Rom9:3-5) and the Holy Scriptures (Rom3:1-2). These purposes have nothing to do with the personal salvation of the objects of God's election.

Reformed theology's notion that "election" is God's choice of who He will save and who he will not, made before His work of creation and having nothing to do with faith on the part of its objects, finds no support in the Bible.