

# The Doctrine of Election

**H**oly Scripture describes all those who are ultimately saved as God's 'elect' or 'chosen ones' (Rom 8:33; Col 3:12; Titus 1:1; 1 Peter 1:2). The doctrine of election is a most wonderful and comforting doctrine if correctly understood. It can also be a most terrifying and disturbing doctrine if mis-understood. It is often one of those 'things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest... unto their own destruction' (2 Peter 3:16). There are two important keys to understanding this doctrine. First, we must be guided by the Scripture alone and not by our own reason. Most errors arise because of speculations or conclusions drawn from one's own mind and not from the Word of God. Secondly, we must understand election in its proper context. We must apprehend it only from within the context of salvation, and not from outside of it. In other words, the order of apprehension must be salvation and then election, not election and then salvation.

Now, what precisely is the doctrine of election? Simply put, election means that God from eternity past chose us to be saved, and in time effected that salvation in our behalf. This election did not take place in view of our faith, but rather embraced our faith. That is, we are not elected because we believe, but rather we believe because we are elected. Luther writes:

'[Election] rests in the hand of God and is founded upon His mercy, which is unwavering and eternal; for that reason it is called the foreknowledge of God and hence is certain and infallible.' (SL IX:1115).

The central teaching of Scripture is the Gospel, the comforting doctrine that Christ died for the sins of the whole world (2 Cor 5:19; 1 John 2:2). To this doctrine Scripture adds the truth of election, that what God bestows upon us in time, He decreed to bestow upon us from eternity. Election must be comprehended only in the Gospel. Outside of the Gospel, there is no election. As we enter the sphere of God's truth the Gospel is the 'first of all' (1 Cor 15:3); then comes election. He who has the Gospel has election. He who has not the Gospel has not election. It's that simple. In fact, he who has the Gospel, has not only election, but every spiritual blessing in Christ. The unchangeable rule is this: He who has the Gospel has Christ, and he who has Christ has all.

Luther writes:

'Why do you want to hear the Gospel, the Epicureans ask, since everything depends on being elected? – That is how Satan violently robs us of election, of which we are assured through the Son of God, and through the holy Sacraments... That is what would have happened to me, if Staupitz had not saved me when I was suffering this same temptation... Dr Staupitz used to comfort me by saying: "My dear friend, why do you plague yourself with these speculations and philosophical ideas? Fix your eyes on the wounds and blood of Christ, shed for you; then the election of God will become clear to you."... There are many who did not thus resist this temptation, and as a result were plunged into destruction and eternal damnation... This is how the saints or Christians who are still novices tend to think of God, outside of Christ... This is why pious people should guard themselves against this and be concerned only with clinging to the infant Son of God, Jesus, who is your God and became Man for you sake... If you have Him, you also have the hidden God along with the revealed God.' (*Luther's Works*, Vol 5, 47f.)

We might look at salvation as a house with a single door, a sort of Passover house awaiting the judgment of the first-born. The door of this house is the Gospel, how that 'Christ died for our sins'. None enter the house who enter not through this solitary door. There is no message of election outside the house, for this teaching applies only to those who are in the house. The message is not spoken to those in the world, but to those in the kingdom of God; not to those in Adam, but to those in Christ. The world has its message, '*God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life*' (John 3:16). This message resides on the outside of the house, above the door so to speak. When a person enters the house he sees another message written on the inside of the door. It reads, '*God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation*' (2 Thess 2:13). This now becomes a great comfort and encouragement to us, that we not only have arrived, but that we have arrived by God's own decree and doing. Thus, we are eternally safe, because God's decree cannot fail.

In Romans 8:29,30, we see a golden chain of salvation, so to speak, each link necessarily connected to the next. Paul writes, '*For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate... whom He did predestinate, them He also called: and whom He called, them He also justified: and whom He justified, them He also glorified.*' We may see this like the chain to a great anchor, descending into the depths of eternity past. Although the links of foreknowledge and predestination belong in the unknown eternal depths, we have once held the link of calling, and do now hold the link of justification. Thus, if I hold justification, I also hold calling; if I hold calling, I also hold predestination; and if I hold predestination, I also hold foreknowledge. He who holds a single link of the chain holds the whole chain.

Francis Pieper, summarising the *Formula of Concord*, correctly captures the order in which things must proceed for the Christian. He writes:

'We must consider (1) that God has truly reconciled the human race unto Himself through Christ; (2) that God offers and distributes to us the grace purchased by Christ through the means of grace; (3) that the Holy Ghost works faith through this offer of grace in the means; (4) that God through this faith justifies and (5) sanctifies those who are thus justified; (6) that He will not forsake them in their great weakness and in all manner of temptations; (7) but will strengthen, increase, and support the good work to the end; (8) until finally He will eternally save and glorify in life eternal those whom He has elected, called, and justified.' (F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol III, p. 477.)

The believer will never be certain of his election if he limits the universal scope of the Gospel. We must know that the promises of the Gospel pertain to all men (John 1:29; 3:16, etc). All who deny this truth have no foundation on which to rest their faith. If the Gospel is limited to the elect alone, how can anyone know whether or not he belongs to that

elect, and thus whether Christ died for his sins? Rather, the Scripture teaches that Christ died for the sins of the whole world, and thus the believer knows with certainty that Christ died for his own sins. And because he knows that Christ died for his sins, then he also knows that he is one of God's elect. Certainty of election is a *certainty of faith*, a most blessed assurance wrought by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel.

Though there are numerous warnings against apostasy, which Scripture addresses also to believers, these pertain to Christians only according to the flesh. Hence they belong to the preaching of the Law, which works the knowledge of sin in the believer (Rom 3:20). But they do not pertain to the believer according to the spirit. As a new man in Christ, a Christian must entirely forget the threatenings of the Law (1 Tim 1:9), and comfort himself with the promises of the Gospel (Rom 6:14; 10:4; Gal 2:19; 3:13). To get back to an earlier analogy, so long as the believer remains on the inside of the Gospel house, let him hear nothing but the sweet voice of comfort and security. However, if he ventures outside the house, let him then hear the earnest and severe warnings of eternal loss. These loving warnings will show him his danger, the Gospel then gently calling him back into the Gospel house, where he will again be safe and secure.

Now, we acknowledge that the Scriptural doctrines of 'election' and 'universal grace' leave a mystery for the natural mind. If God loves all men so as to suffer and die for their sins, why does He then elect only a few unto final salvation? We must not try to solve this mystery, but recognise that it belongs to God's unsearchable judgments and His ways which are past finding out (Rom 11:33-36). We must cling to the revealed teachings of Scripture, *'bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ'* (2 Cor 10:5). For now, let us leave the mystery to God, knowing that He will reveal it in His own good time. *'Now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known'* (1 Cor 13:12).

In conclusion, Luther writes:

'Of all the commandments of God this is the greatest, that we picture His dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, before us. He is to be our heart's daily and most important mirror, in which we see how God loves us and how lovingly He has cared for us, a faithful God who also gave His dear Son for us. Here, here, I say, you will learn to understand the doctrine of election, and nowhere else. There you will discover that you believe in Christ. If you believe, you are one of the called; and if you are called, then you are most assuredly also predestinated. Never let the eye of your heart be diverted from this mirror and throne of grace. When such thoughts come and bite you like poisonous snakes, don't pay attention to the thought or the snakes, but turn your eyes the other way and gaze upon the bronze snake, i.e., Christ, given for us.' (*Message of Comfort to One Ridden with Anxiety, etc*, 1532; X:2047f.)