

Called Holy and to Holiness

Trinity CRC, February 11, 2018 PM
Canons of Dort

Ephesians 1:1-14
Rev. Richard J. deLange

People of God,

We are pragmatic people today. We like to see the payoff right away. When it comes to doctrine, we are no different. So if we don't see immediate payoff, we tend to ignore doctrine.

But what if we lived our whole life that way? There are many things which don't give you the payoff immediately. Parents know, as one man explains, that "children must be made to learn things without knowing how they will someday be useful. We teach them the particulars of table manners when they are small, for example, so that later they will be able to navigate every social situation with grace. And they don't have a clue why you are telling them to hold the spoon a certain way and keep their elbows off the table. They have to take your word for it that the sun is standing still, the earth is a ball, the green vegetables will make you healthy, and the little bag of rat poison will kill you." So if the distance between what parents know and what children understand is big, "imagine the distance between us and God..." There are many things that appear to be unimportant to us because we don't know how it will help us. But we must patiently seek to understand what God tells us and then we will also increasingly understand why it is important for our lives, and even practical. "Sometimes we must simply learn something because God says it's true. Then later we may see how this knowledge protected us, or strengthened us, humbled us, purified us, guided us, or enabled us to see other things as true. The issue boils down to trust. *Do we trust that God has revealed what is good for us to know?*" (John Piper, Desiring God.org)

The doctrine of election is something that we might not be able to fully understand. But we believe it because God says it's so. We confess it because the Bible teaches it as truth. And as we grow older and grow closer to God and as we grow in our understanding of God's grace and His ways, then we begin to see the practical payoff as well.

Election by God

Ephesians 1 is a great place to start in trying to know what we can know about the doctrine of divine election. God hasn't told us everything but He's told us what is important for us. You cannot read Ephesians 1 without being confronted by this doctrine many times over. Let me try to go through some of the verses quickly. Please follow along in your Bible.

In v.3 Paul says God *has blessed us...with every spiritual blessing in Christ.*

v.4 ^{EPH 1:4} ***For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.***

v.5 ^{EPH 1:5} ***In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—***

v.7 talks about ***the riches of God's grace*** ⁸ *that he lavished on us*

v.9 speaks about ***the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure***

v.11 says ^{EPH 1:11} *In him we were also **chosen**, having been **predestined** according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with **the purpose of his will**,*
and v.14 calls the Holy Spirit a deposit **guaranteeing our inheritance**

Ephesians 1 is a package spelling out God's electing love for His people. And all of this comes from a man who would have understood God's power more than most of us. The Apostle Paul, as you recall, goes out to persecute Christians. He is filled with righteous hatred for people who he considers God mockers. He's determined to stop this movement. But suddenly on the road to Damascus Paul is confronted by a bright light and the voice of Jesus. Paul is chosen by God and irresistibly drawn into the family of God. And when an earlier convert, Ananias, objects to God's call for him to go to Paul, we read in Acts 9,

*Acts 9:15 But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my **chosen** instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.*

Clearly, Paul is chosen by God. And clearly it is not because he is worthy. He's not better than other people. He's probably worse than most. In fact, Paul later calls himself the worst of sinners (1 Tim 1:15).

All this tells us that election is God's doing. It must be because salvation is by grace. Salvation is the complete and unmerited gift of God. That's what grace is. And election means, as John MacArthur put it, "We didn't decide for Christ. He decided for us." You see, when we confess that mankind is fallen into sin and that that sin means we are spiritually dead and have no desire to follow Christ, then He is the one who must come to us. And that's the clear testimony of the Bible as well.

We can't argue, for example, with a clear passage like Acts 13. In that chapter, Paul and Barnabas are preaching to Jews and Gentiles in Pisidian Antioch. Some of the Jews react to Paul and reject the gospel but we read in v.48:
Acts 13:48 When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; [and now listen to this] and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

All who were chosen by God, all the adopted, all those elected by God... and only those... believed! Those are the only ones that can believe.

That drives home once again the fact that salvation is a free gift of God alone. It's all grace. And if you remember nothing else about election remember that. Salvation is by grace alone. If you and I have anything to do with it, then it's not salvation by grace alone. If God saves me because I chose Him first of all, then I get some of the credit. But as it is, God gets all the glory. That's what the Bible teaches. That's what we must believe. It's important to get it straight, otherwise we don't have true comfort. If salvation depends in the least on me and you then it can be lost. But if it is God's sovereign choice and He accomplishes it by His almighty power alone then I'm saved securely. Then I have true comfort. Certain comfort.

This truth matters. The doctrine of election when taken to heart will awaken Christians who believe things that don't logically connect. For example, you can't believe that we are dead in our sin but then still able to choose God. That's not possible. Dead people don't do anything. So the doctrine of election helps us see the greatness of God's saving grace. When God's sovereign election confronts us, we should be "jarred by the radical God-centeredness of the Bible," writes John Piper, and by "the frightening man-centeredness of [our] own hearts."

Lots of churches and Christians today downplay doctrinal correctness in the name of reaching out to the lost or being effective in our secular culture. They act like we can save people through our programs and all of the right words. You might hear things like, "If you don't share the gospel people will go to hell because of you!" But that's simply not true. We can't change hearts. We can only do as Paul and Barnabas did: preach the gospel. Then we trust that all those appointed to eternal life will believe! God will open their hearts and minds to the gospel of His grace.

That was a beautiful truth reaffirmed for me this past week at the *More and Better Conference* Pastor Michael and I attended. The church who hosted us is really strong on this teaching. And the pastor reminded us that election is exciting for us when we head into the world because we know that some people we rub shoulders with are appointed to eternal life. And this is where it gets practical. Our calling, then, is to be available for God by speaking His Gospel to these people. We are God's holy people, which means people set apart by God. And we are set apart—chosen, elected, adopted by God—to be His instruments of holiness in this world. As He gives us opportunities, we speak His word. And those whom He is already at work in will come to faith in time.

Now, so far I feel like I've only scratched the surface of God's unconditional election. But let's move on now to thinking about the very practical matter of how to know we are elected.

Making Your Election Sure

The Apostle Peter writes,

2Pet 1:10 Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure...

So how do you know that you're one of the elect? I face this question from time to time in my pastoral work. It comes from the elderly. Sometimes as they look back on their life, they realize how they have failed the Lord and wonder if they could really be saved. It also comes from catechism students who want to be sure that they are one of God's chosen children.

Article 12 in the sections we read from The Canons of Dort says, "Assurance of this their eternal and unchangeable election to salvation is given to the chosen in due time, though by various stages and in differing measure." This reminds us that we do need to grow in the grace and knowledge of God and grow toward making our election certain. Some people seem strong in their certainty from early on.

Others have doubts. “Do you believe you are sinner?” I say to the doubting elderly person and to the young people. And they don’t usually have a doubt about that. They have what the Canons describe as part of the fruit of election: “a godly sorrow for their sins.” But sometimes they just get stuck on the sin part. So I ask them if they believe Jesus died for sins and for sinners? “Yes,” they say. “So do you want to be certain of your salvation?” I ask. And they say, “Yes!”

In the booklet *FAITH Unfolded* we read, “A man once said, ‘There are two ways to know for certain that you are one of God’s elect. One is to go to the firehouse and get the world’s largest hook-and-ladder truck, extend the ladder up as far as it will go, lean it against the clouds of heaven, climb to the top, peek over the edge, and look into the Book of Life to see if your name is written there. Or you can believe in Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord.’” (pg. 53) The point is that there is really only one way to know that you’re chosen. Just believe! We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus. If you know you are sinner and believe in Jesus who died for your sin then you will be saved. Isn’t that what Paul and Silas also told the Philippian Jailer when he asked, “*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*”

Acts 16:31 They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved-- you and your household.”

Paul and Silas remind us that salvation is easy to receive. Believe in the Lord Jesus. Don’t make it more complicated than it is. Simply recognize that your desire and willingness to believe is a gift of God. It is His grace. Remember the one hymn which says, *None who to Jesus came were ever sent away*. Or in the words of the song we sang a few minutes ago, “This knowing, if I love Thee, Thou must have loved me first.”

Furthermore, our confession reminds us that faith produces fruit. The Canons say, “Such assurance comes not by inquisitive searching into the hidden and deep things of God”—not with firetruck ladders—“but by noticing within themselves, with spiritual joy and holy delight, the unmistakable fruits of election pointed out in God’s Word—such as a true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for their sins, a hunger and thirst for righteousness, and so on.” I believe it is right to even say that if you have the desire to know that you are saved, that is a sign in itself that you are elect. People who don’t care about their salvation don’t care about election. They don’t care about being right with God or serving Him in any way. But those who are genuinely sorry for their sin and sincerely want to be reconciled to God have the desire to know that they are elect. Understanding this doctrine of election is very practical in that regard.

It starts with faith—do you believe in Jesus? From there our election is confirmed in the things we desire and the things we do. Are there fruits of faith in our lives? Ask your friends what they see. Do you want to grow closer to Christ? Do you want to serve Him better? Those are signs that you are a genuine believer. Rest in God’s grace to you. Enjoy the journey of growing in faith and deepening your joy and peace in Him.

Saved for a Purpose

Now this is all just nice talk if it doesn't help us live a life of loving service for God and our neighbour. That's what doctrine should do. The certainty of your election changes your life! You will live a new life if you know you're truly an adopted child of God. You'll live differently because you know who you are. I'm a child of God. I'm an adopted brother or sister of King Jesus. I'm secure in God's hands for every day of my life. And I want my life to show Him how thankful I am for what He's freely and graciously given me. And I want others to know the joy and peace that I've been given by faith in Jesus.

If we believe that election is God's work and if we make our election sure by believing in Jesus alone, then we might still ask what is the point? Why are we adopted by God? Why elected? And the answer is that God chose us in Christ for a purpose. This is where election becomes very practical. God chose you and me for a reason. We might not understand all the "big picture" stuff but we know that it is a great privilege and honour to be God's adopted children. And as His children we know that He has things in mind for us. In Ephesians 1 we read,

Eph 1:4 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.

And then in v.12

Eph 1:12 in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.

That really summarizes the whole purpose of election. God chose us to bring glory to Him. Or as our sermon title suggests, we are called holy so that we may be examples of holiness in the world. Those who are children of God, adopted, elected, can know because of our membership in the family of God that God called us to Himself for a purpose. And in doing so He also gives us all the resources we need through the Holy Spirit.

We don't have to think about how we were chosen in Christ every day. But we do need to live out of the comfort of our salvation every day. We should be aware that we are special agents of God. He has a job for you and me to do here. Every day I should be thinking about doing whatever He gives me to do in a way that brings glory to Him. As a school-aged child, I'll do my school work for the glory of God. I don't just want good marks so I can get noticed by the teacher or my classmates. I just want to use my talents to show God that I'm thankful for what He's given me. I want to learn more so that I can serve Him better as I grow older.

As a mom or dad, I've been chosen by God to make my household a place where God gets the glory. I'll show my children what a great Father God is. I help them see that Jesus is my wonderful Saviour and I live my life in gratitude to Him for this wonderful salvation I am enjoying! I'm here to make sure that my home is a place where God is exalted in all things from food and clothing to TV and computer use. I'm not a slave to my housework so that people will be impressed by my clean home. I'm here to impress God alone. People will see that we live for God, not to impress others. We are set apart—holy—to let the world see God's grace at work in us.

We do that at the office, in the lab, in the family, on the road, and everywhere else. Sometimes Christians talk about going to work or playing sports as less significant than doing the so-called “Lord’s work.” But because we believe God is sovereign over all of life, not just over the church and maybe the Christian school, we look to serve Him in every part of our life. That’s why He’s saved us. We can glorify God in the office and on the ice as much as in the church. He is Lord of all. So we seek to glorify Him in all things because we are called to holiness, living a set-apart life. People will see the difference Christ has made in our lives, including our motivation for living.

Christ saved us by His grace to do everything for God’s glory. And we can do it with all of our heart and strength because Christ has saved us so securely.

In conclusion, then, don’t let the doctrine of election get you all confused. Understand that we are saved by grace, we can know that by faith. Then let us live out of that comfort and security by giving God all the praise and glory in our lives each day.

Before Sermon:

Canons I, Article 7: Election

Election is God's unchangeable purpose by which he did the following:

Before the foundation of the world, by sheer grace, according to the free good pleasure of his will, God chose in Christ to salvation a definite number of particular people out of the entire human race, which had fallen by its own fault from its original innocence into sin and ruin. Those chosen were neither better nor more deserving than the others, but lay with them in the common misery. God did this in Christ, whom he also appointed from eternity to be the mediator, the head of all those chosen, and the foundation of their salvation.

And so God decreed to give to Christ those chosen for salvation, and to call and draw them effectively into Christ's fellowship through the Word and Spirit. In other words, God decreed to grant them true faith in Christ, to justify them, to sanctify them, and finally, after powerfully preserving them in the fellowship of the Son, to glorify them.

God did all this in order to demonstrate his mercy, to the praise of the riches of God's glorious grace.

Article 12: The Assurance of Election

Assurance of their eternal and unchangeable election to salvation is given to the chosen in due time, though by various stages and in differing measure. Such assurance comes not by inquisitive searching into the hidden and deep things of God, but by noticing within themselves, with spiritual joy and holy delight, the unmistakable fruits of election pointed out in God's Word—such as a true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for their sins, a hunger and thirst for righteousness, and so on.

Rejection of Errors #1

Having set forth the orthodox teaching concerning election and reprobation, the Synod rejects the errors of those

I. Who teach that the will of God to save those who would believe and persevere in faith and in the obedience of faith is the whole and entire decision of election to salvation, and that nothing else concerning this decision has been revealed in God's Word.

....As Scripture says, "I have revealed your name to those whom you gave me" (John 17:6). Likewise, "All who were appointed for eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48), and "He chose us before the foundation of the world so that we should be holy . . ." (Eph. 1:4).