

Election- Exegesis of Ephesians 1

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Integration Question: *What is "election" and how do we understand Ephesians 1:3ff in relation to 1 Peter 1:1ff?*

Theological Statement

For millennia, the opening to Paul's letter has caused much debate. In it, he writes that "[God] chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself" (Eph. 1:4-5). One group of people interpret this as depicting God deciding who would, and consequently, who would not, believe in Him and have salvation before the foundation of the world. They derive this understanding by adding that God chose those "to be" in Him. On the contrary, another group, more included, believe Paul is actually conveying that Jesus was God's plan from the beginning, and God has chosen those who are "in Christ" (have put their allegiance and faith in Jesus) to be holy, righteous, and blameless and fulfill the task of blessing all the nations. We know from the opening verse, Paul is writing to a group identified as those who are living "in Christ" (Eph. 1:1, 3). After a formal, yet powerful, salutation, Paul then expresses that being "in Christ" was the plan from the beginning, not an afterthought (Eph. 1:4). It is important to keep in mind, that Paul is writing to gentiles, people who have not been part of Abraham's seed, the original group who was to bless the entire world. But now, these people (all humanity) have been grafted in to be His representatives, holy ones, because being "in Christ" was always God's plan. Paul does not use election to describe individuals who are predetermined for salvation, but rather, Paul is saying that all who put their faith in Jesus are "in Christ", and all who are in Christ are the chosen people to fulfill His promise to be a blessing and light to all the nations (Gen. 12:1-3) that was once tasked to Israel.

Paul's literature is saturated with themes, concepts, and ideas from the Hebrew Bible, which serves as the key to unlocking what Paul really means when he writes about God choosing and electing. The overwhelmingly common theme of election in the Hebrew Bible is God choosing a people for the task and purpose of being a blessing and light to all the other nations. Abraham was selected for this purpose, and all the people who identified within this group were known as Abraham's seed, descendants (Gen. 12:3). They were then traced through Isaac (Gen. 21:12) and then Jacob, whose name was changed to Isreal (Gen. 32:28). This is why the rest of the biblical authors refer to God's election as corporate, not individual. For example, Moses writes that Isreal is "a holy people to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth" (Deut. 14:2). Likewise, the Psalter writes, "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, his people whom he chose for an inheritance for himself" (Ps. 33:12). God did not choose Israel to give them faith or to predetermine them to be saved. Being an Israelite did not automatically mean one was in good standing with God. In fact, to participate in the Abaraham Covenant, one had to actually give their allegiance to God, which is what the New Testament Greek word for faith (*pistis*) conveys. The Bible shows us that God had changed who that group- those given the task- was, from all of Isreal, to just the southern tribes, namely Judah. It then became smaller in Pauls' day to just those Jews who believed in Christ, and then all gentiles who put their faith in Christ.

Paul's concept of election is not the predetermined faith of individuals, but that God chose Jesus, and all who put their faith in Him (His Church) as the plan from the beginning to fulfill the original mandate and purpose, "to be holy and blameless before Him in love" and bring all the world back under God's rule and reign. This is exactly why Paul tells Timothy that God saved those who put their faith in Jesus which was His purpose "given to us in Christ Jesus

before time began” (2 Tim. 1:9). Similarly, Peter begins his letter exclaiming to his audience that they were chosen through the foreknowledge of God to be covered by the blood of Jesus. He then explains in the conclusion of this section that what he means is “Jesus was ordained before the foundation of the world, but was revealed in these last times, that in Him you believe in God” (1 Pet. 1:1-2; 20-21). Just like Paul’s words to the church in Ephesus, Peter states that God new the plan was always going to be through Jesus, and He foreknew that those who believed in Jesus, His Church, were the ones that would be “in Christ” and radiate to the world His redemption.

Ministry Application

A first important application of the theology of election is that every person can be certain that God perfectly and wholly loves all humanity. He created all humans out of love and for the purpose of living in oneness with all humanity. God wants every person to be saved, that is, experience unending life and relationship with Him. In fact, through Jesus’ sacrificial life and death, God made a way for every person to be saved if they would only place their faith and allegiance in Jesus. People can also be confident that God takes no pleasure or delight in the destruction of His created beings, even those who reject Him. God pleads with those people to make a “new heart and new spirit...for [He] has no please in the death of anyone who dies” (Ezek. 18:32; 2 Pet. 3:9; 1 Tim. 2:4). This confidence builds people’s trust that God is not out to smite people or punish them to hell. On the contrary, the theology of election can reassure people that if there are ten people drowning, God has already thrown each person a lifeline, not withholding any from anyone. While God throws a lifeline to every human being, it is up to each person if they choose to utilize their lifeline or not.

Another important application with the theology of election is that His Church does not have to wait for other groups of people to come along and advance God's kingdom; we are those people. While some find the Calvinist's interpretation of election comforting (typically only the elect), all people must take solace that whoever desires to put their faith and allegiance in Jesus is grafted into the special task of radiating His presence and blessing to all the earth. In an everyday context, this means that because of Jesus, and consequently, those who put their faith in Jesus, we have always been the plan from the beginning. The time is at hand to walk in our purpose. In other words, the coffee shop you stop at every day, your kids sporting event you go to twice a week, the workplace you spend a majority of your waking hours at, or your neighbors you wave to every evening pulling into the driveway, are the exact people you are supposed to reach. Paul once wrote, "How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent" (Rom. 10:14-15)? Because of God's election of those "in Christ," He has already commissioned and sent us out.