

Why Teach Election?

A sermon by Robert Clifford

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At the beginning of this evening's Bible reading, the apostle Paul shows the warmth he has for his fellow Jews, those he is about to explain will be rejected because of their unbelief in God's plan of election. But far from being callous about their rejection, he expresses love and mercy in his willingness to suffer on their behalf if it would help their cause.

And in looking at the following verses about election - not a universally accepted and popular doctrine of course - divisive even, according to those who might say "doctrine divides." – the intention is to show God's love and mercy. Not to enter into combat, wave a stick or point a finger. The reality is that a good understanding of central doctrines of the Christian faith is liberating. "You're brave" said someone when I told them what I was planning on preaching about. Well, I don't think I'm brave and I certainly don't profess to having all the answers to what in many respects is indeed a great mystery. So why do it? That's the title of for this evening then – "Why teach election?"

1. And my first heading is simply - **What is this doctrine that causes so much fuss?**

According to one definition, it is that "God unconditionally elects individuals to be saved. By 'unconditionally' we mean that God, in eternity past, freely chooses specific individuals whom he will save and that his choice is not based on their foreseen faith or effort. God does not simply foresee that certain people will put their faith in him, for apart from his work of grace to overcome their resistance to him no one would or could desire to come. Rather, He foreordains and determines that those who have been chosen will exercise faith."

Well, although most Bible believing Christians DO accept some form of election or predestination, there is a key difference between those who accept this definition – that God’s people are chosen because God willed it (often referred to in short-hand as Calvinists) and those who don’t accept it and believe that we are chosen based upon God’s His knowing in advance – His foreknowledge - of man’s *choosing* the right path or response. Referred to as Arminians, this latter group do not – or cannot - accept the Calvinist view which they believe portrays God as one who chooses some arbitrarily. They see man as having a role alongside God in salvation.

Just to clean up as we go along and pre-empt any prejudice based upon references to John Calvin, as someone has rightly said, ‘Calvinism has an unlimited number of points: it is as broad as the Bible’, so we have to be careful about the label. But on this point I follow the Calvinist view, but not because Calvin taught it. I know full well that he, along with all other men, had ‘feet of clay’. But it should be pointed out that he drew his conclusions – certainly his doctrine of election – from the Bible. (And of course, he wasn’t the first to teach it anyway, the Lord Jesus Christ beating him to it; and the apostle Paul; And Augustine, but I digress).

The Bible says - “**God chose us in Him before the foundation of the world**” (Ephesians 1:4).

And in the next verse, we are told it was “**According to the good pleasure of His will**”. In other words, the cause was God’s sovereign will and *not* any merit in man. Any virtue is the effect, not the cause. Paul tells us clearly in this verse that nothing outside of God Himself was taken into account when he chose.

Elsewhere, (John 15:16) the Lord Jesus Himself says “**You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit.**” Arminians sometime suggest this passage is referring to just the 12 apostles, but the context clearly indicates that the Lord is talking to all disciples.

But if we accept that there are passages which people interpret in more than one way – supporting either understanding of election – then we must immediately go to the key principle of interpretation which is to compare scripture with scripture. How

does this passage stack up – or rather how does my understanding of it stack up - against the light of the overall message of the Bible and all other teaching on the particular subject in God's word?

So in this case, texts appearing to teach 'free will' must be interpreted in light of the fact that election is stated clearly in so many places in the Bible. For example, some texts say that if we turn to God sincerely and repentantly, He will receive us. But other texts explain the *cause*, that it is God who changes the heart in regeneration. The *effect* is the sinner choosing, perfectly consistent with the doctrine of election.

In our passage, verses 11 to 13, Paul says that before Jacob and Esau had done anything good or evil, one was chosen, the other rejected. He is stressing here the point that salvation does not occur on the basis of anything man does, but purely because it's the plan and purpose of God. Verses 16 and 18 reiterate that salvation does not depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. And not only that He has mercy on some, but that he explicitly hardens the hearts of others, like He did with the Pharaoh in times past. Pharaoh didn't harden his own heart, God did it.

But isn't this unfair? How can we be held responsible for something we have no choice over? Paul addresses these thorny issues head-on, right here in Romans 9, and so my second heading is:

2. Dealing with the difficulties

It might occur to us that because what appears on the surface as 'unfair' may be a stumbling block to faith, the solution is to avoid mention of it. That's the strategy of the 'seeker friendly' church: "preach only positive scriptures" they say. But Calvin is closer to the mark when he warns that to avoid teaching election in case it disturbs 'weaker souls' is to only criticise God "*as if he had unadvisedly let slip something hurtful to the church.*"

No, no, with Paul, we must tackle the difficulties head-on. We only have to follow him.

First, is it unjust?

After mentioning the case of Jacob and Esau, Paul acknowledges in verse 14 that there may be a charge that God is unjust, and immediately denies that this is even possible. He says that distinguishing between the two is not unrighteous ***“For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion. So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.”*** Discriminating between men regardless of their own willingness or lack of it is not unrighteous. The fact is that NONE of us deserve mercy, so it cannot be unjust if a man doesn't receive it. We could say it was unfair when the Lord Jesus was subject to a sham trial and then died for us, the just for the unjust, but that's what happened. That was God's plan.

And election is God's plan too. And as the creator, as Sovereign God, far above all, He is uniquely entitled to do as He pleases. It cannot be unrighteous because God is righteous. It must follow, as righteousness is part of this nature, one of His divine attributes. Saving some to be His people is a beautiful demonstration of His character, with all the glory rightly His.

Okay, but is it fair, then, that man is personally responsible?

The shout is that to condemn men to everlasting punishment before they have even committed any offence is unfair. It cannot be their fault. They cannot be held 'personally responsible'. But we need to get right back to our key principle of comparing scripture with scripture. The Bible teaches us that until we are saved, God sees us all as sinners, fallen along with Adam. The doctrine of original sin demonstrates that God is just in imputing – accounting - Adam's sin to the rest of the human race, his posterity. If you accept the doctrine of original sin – which you surely must if you really are a Bible-believer - then there is not the slightest inconsistency in asserting that man is personally responsible.

Paul knows this objection is coming and again tackles it directly here. He pre-empted it when he says 'You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?" He knows that limited, finite man – beginning as he naturally is wont to do from his own perspective – will say that he cannot personally be

responsible if the elect are already chosen. But Paul swats away this questioning as irreverent; as insubordinate: “**O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, “Why have you made me like this?”** He doesn’t duck the issue, but then says very clearly – it could not be clearer – “**Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honour and another for dishonour?”**”

Still see this as unfair? As a humble preacher here today I am not suggesting for one moment that this is easy, but Paul leads the way. He tackles these key questions and leaves us with little room for manoeuvre – either we have to accept the plain teaching of Scripture or we have to engage in some sort of mental gymnastics and somehow dismiss it because it doesn’t fit with our own thinking. That’s the crux of it. That’s what happening when folks mangle Romans 8: 29 into their own theological models.

It comes down to this: do we start with God or do we start with man? That’s a pretty fundamental question. Humanists start with man. Even in the professing church – the Purpose Driven movement for example – we see a focus on finding yourself, knowing yourself, and discovering your true destiny. Your SHAPE is the way they describe it. That’s the reason for its success, it puts man first, seeing the church as a way of meeting man’s needs rather than for glorifying God and then as means of meeting man’s DEEPEST need, that of redemption.

Scripture is then interpreted from this man-centred-perspective. But that’s not right. We’re not to stand above it, analysing what we think about what God has said. We must say with John “I fell at his feet as dead.” Paul teaches in Romans 1 that because God has revealed Himself to us, far from needing his existence proven, we’re without an excuse because we know deep down that He’s there. And we mustn’t *think* independently of Him. For Christians “**the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge**”.

Those assuming they are using their neutral reasoning insist that evidence be provided before they will accept scriptural authority. But in Acts 17, we are told that a number of people believed in Christ after hearing Paul’s preaching. Not because

they had found evidence. Similarly Peter, Stephen, Philip and Paul implore men to repent and believe – not investigate claims - basing their arguments on Scripture. The assumption is always on the legitimacy of scripture and the historical fact of Christ's death and resurrection. They weren't philosophers, but preachers urging men to repent and believe in Jesus Christ, the way we all should respond.

Teach a High View of Scripture:

So we start with God – creator, sovereign – he is on the throne not us – righteous, good and faithful. Perfect in every way. And so is His Word. Inerrant – that is without error. It is authoritative, which means that it is not 'just another source'. Rather, other sources of information are to be interpreted in light of Scripture, not the other way around. Losing this high view of Scripture is what leads to most errors.

This was CH Spurgeon's great battle in the downgrade controversy. He believed that it wasn't doubting individual doctrines – election for example – that was the first wrong step on the path to error, but doubt in the divine inspiration of the Bible, that it was written by holy men as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

This is right, for as long as we acknowledge and accept the authority of Scripture, we cannot go far wrong. Pastor Chris Hand has well said that "controversy about the Bible's inspiration leads to controversy about its interpretation."

The alternative is to start with man. Dr Leslie Weatherhead, a leading liberal, for example, was convinced that what he sees depicted in Scripture as a very harsh view of God is what alienates people from the Christian faith. Sidestep it? Dismiss it? He went further, blaming what he saw as this faulty idea of God actually on the doctrine of the inerrancy of scripture. If we go down this route, we end up not with God's revealed will, but our own thinking. It becomes our word against His.

We'll come on to one big reason to teach election very shortly and several other supplementary ones too, but for now it is worth saying that we teach it because it is Scriptural, and we are to teach the whole counsel of God.

Mystery

Critics of the doctrine of election say it is unfair, undemocratic and harsh even. It is certainly something of a mystery, difficult for many to accept in the age of science. They want answers where there are none. We need to trust Sovereign God. Meditate upon his attributes, His goodness; His justice; His mercy and His love; His faithfulness, and so on. This is not arbitrary or impulsive decision-making. Clearly God is not like that.

But just because we can't find reasons why He does things, it doesn't mean God doesn't have a reason. He says through the prophet Isaiah "***For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways, say the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.***"

Spurgeon said "neither you nor I have any right to want to know more about predestination than what God tells us... If it were worth while for us to know more, God would have revealed more. What God has told us, we are to believe". In other words, 'this is what the Lord says' and not 'I think...'

The doctrine is clear and the difficulties can be tackled, even if much remains a mystery, but moving now towards our particular question this evening 'Why teach election?' we need to understand the purpose of election. That's the title of my third heading.

3. The purpose of election

It's a theme tonight, isn't it, in this often despised terrain of election that objections are raised? Objections as we are seeing that often mask a low view of scripture, an inadequate conception of God, or a perspective that wrongly begins with man. Sometimes, the objections are sincere, but based upon ignorance or poor teaching. One of these is the belief that inevitably the doctrine of election removes the motivation to strive after holiness. This is one of the objections John Wesley made in his sermon 'Free Grace'.

But as Wesley's erstwhile friend, George Whitefield, made clear in his letter responding to the sermon, the complete opposite is the case. Whitefield started by saying that a 'true lover of the Lord Jesus Christ strives for holiness for the sake of being holy' and that the elect will engage in more good works because they know they'll gain a greater reward. But his most compelling argument – his main point, in fact THE main point – is that we are chosen for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth' (2 Thessalonians 2: 13). Holiness is evidence of our election. He argued that advocates of this so-called harsh doctrine of election are the very ones growing in grace, characterised by tender-heartedness and meekness BECAUSE they know full well that God has been so merciful to them and they played no part in it. They know this in their hearts and know that these Godly characteristics – these graces – are the result of their election. Fancy footwork, and just another human argument support a man-made theological standpoint? Not at all - Colossians 3: 12 says just this: "As the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering."

Calvin explained this point by saying that God would not have chosen us because he knew in advance we would be holy.. because he chose us TO BE holy! Election the cause, holiness the effect – refuting the charge that election leads people away from the path of holiness.

I read part of Ephesians 1: 4 earlier: "God chose us in Him before the foundation of the world". The next part of that verse "that we should be holy" summarises this point, making crystal clear that the reason for our election is to be holy, that it is God's purpose and the goal we are to aim for. When the Lord Jesus died it was to free us from the guilt of sin AND the POWER of sin. And when Jesus died he so with perfect effect because He only died for those the Father had given Him. It wasn't a case of Him dying and then waiting to see who would respond and take advantage. As if the divine Saviour's sacrifice wasn't perfect in every way.

Comfort of Religion

But going back to Whitefield's letter to Wesley if I may, he refutes another of Wesley's objections very thoroughly too. Wesley claimed that the doctrine of election tends to destroy 'the comfort of religion'. But as well as leading to holiness – far from

destroying it – Whitefield says that this doctrine is his ‘daily support’. He says “I should utterly sink under a dread of my impending trials, were I not firmly persuaded that God has chosen me in Christ from before the foundation of the world, and that now being effectually called, he will allow no-one to pluck me out of his almighty hand.”

This from one of the greatest evangelists of all time, who I’d encourage you to read about for yourselves.

Like Paul before him, he’s astute and honest enough to know that this doctrine throws up difficulties. But again, like Paul, he deals with them directly. Doesn’t it lead to doubts? Well, he says, this is a *good thing* if it leads to earnest seeking and striving to make our calling and election sure. It counters what we should really see as an eternal terror, presumption that we are saved, our children here now knowing that I’m talking about Mr False Security from our pastor’s children’s series based upon John Bunyan’s great book *The Holy War*. It SHOULD arouse concern and thought, and that is precisely why the natural or worldly man baulks against it.

In short, these are *good* doubts, to be considered and thought through. No, no, like the train operators proclaiming that there are the wrong types of leaves on the line or the wrong type of snow, the *wrong* doubts are those that come from a lack of belief in this doctrine. Election is so closely linked with eternal security that where it is dismissed or refuted doubts lead to a lack of assurance and the fear that at any time he can be snatched out of the Saviour’s hand by the enemy and cast into hell.

To pursue my rather feeble rail operator metaphor further than it really warrants, when these ‘wrong kind of’ doubts surface, we know we’ve gone down the wrong track. Just a few verses before Paul says these wonderful words, as directed by the Holy Spirit:

“Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?”

The purpose of election then is holiness with a side order of comfort and assurance thrown in. That's why we should teach it. But there are other plenty of other compelling reasons, some of which I'd like to outline in brief under my final head, rather unimaginatively called:

4. Other reasons to preach election

- Firstly, it brings great praise and glory to God, showing His amazing saving grace in bold relief. No great surprise that Ephesians 1 features so heavily in this evening's message. One well-known Bible handbook describes verses 3-14 under the heading 'God's Eternal Purpose' and says this: "A magnificent epitome of God's plans: the redemption, adoption, forgiveness, and sealing of a people for God's own possession, determined from eternity, now being brought to pass through the effective exercise of God's will'. Quite.

In particular, verse 9 says "having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure WHICH HE PURPOSED IN HIMSELF." The preacher who believes this doctrine cannot take any credit for himself when someone is saved, knowing full well that the work is entirely of the Lord. Instead he will praise God and wonder at the privilege of his instrumentality, that he is used as the means of proclaiming the good news.

- And because election help preaches, that's another reason to teach it:
 - i. It 'assures' him of 'success', because he knows that God's chosen ones will respond with repentance and faith
 - ii. Which in turn encourages the preacher to continue to boldly and faithfully proclaim God's Word, without looking to adapt it to his own way of thinking. He preaches justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone to the glory of God alone. He is responsible for doing just this – and for doing it clearly, directly and persuasively - but has the assurance that the outcome is in God's hands.

- iii. Election holds the preacher to account, knowing he is God's instrument, that every time he preaches there will be those who's eternal destiny is unknown to him. IF he is faithful, then he has no fear that he is any way responsible for that destiny, whatever the outcome.
 - iv. It guides the preacher's prayers. We pray, don't we, for the salvation of those we know? But preachers can pray that their words will be used to bring more of the elect - including those they don't know - to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. And we can all pray that by lip and by life we will have the same effect, playing a part in bringing sinners into the kingdom, those chosen in eternity past
 - v. In summary, the preacher has a precious promise in dry seasons and a caution against boasting during times of encouragement.
- There is one final reason I will give for teaching election, related really to my previous point:
 - i. That far from stifling and discouraging missions and evangelism as some critics contend, the doctrines of grace – and election cannot really be divorced from the whole – have been central principles in times of great awakening. During THE Great Awakening, an estimated 50,000 converts were added to churches in America, out of a population at the time of 2 million. In today's terms that would be 7 and a half million converts. However, because of the practice during Edwards's time of admitting all to the communion table, a huge number of church goers would have been converted but not counted in these estimates! The effect on the nation would have been astonishing. And during this time, Jonathan Edwards – often referred to as America's greatest ever theologian – continued to stress election AND an invitation to ALL men to receive Christ
 - ii. But surely – after all you've said – the doctrines of grace are incompatible with evangelism? Could Edwards be a one-off? Could this be coincidental in church history? Well, William

Carey, often referred to as the father of the modern missionary movement, battled on this very point. He knew that without God's love and mercy shown so clearly in election, no-one would be saved. He knew that the gospel starts with God and not with man. But he knew that preaching was God's chosen means and that He is crystal clear in His Word about our great commissions to go into all the world and preach the good news to everyone.

- iii. Professing Christians have said to me before that they came to the conclusion long ago that the whole 'Calvinism / Arminianism controversy' as they wearily described it was 500 years old because it was so intractable. "Leave it" they would say from the privileged position of having had the opportunity to discuss it as young men and women in university campuses, 2 or 3 decades before. But no, leave it we must not, because it is so foundational. Ducking away from the clear teaching of scripture for a quiet life leaves people with a vagueness about the way the Lord deals with / converts a soul, the obvious effect being a lack of confidence in personal witness. And public evangelistic methods become based upon faulty theology often leading to false converts.

If you worry that you are not part of the elect, the reassuring news is that that's actually a good sign. Seek the Lord with all your heart and all your soul and you will find Him. He will not turn you away, He has promised that.

Amen