

ELECTION AND ITS EFFECTS

1 Thessalonians 1:4-5

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For we know, brothers, loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction (1 Thess. 1:4-5).

According to author James R. White, the Trinity is the forgotten doctrine of Christianity. He argues:

Most Christian people have forgotten the central place the doctrine is to hold in the Christian life. It is rarely the topic of sermons and Bible studies, rarely the object of adoration and worship... The doctrine is misunderstood as well as ignored... it does not hold the place it should in the proclamation of the Gospel message, nor in the life of the individual believer in prayer, worship, and service.”¹

This could not be said about the apostle Paul, who structured his whole teaching of salvation around the Trinity. Paul’s opening section of thanksgiving in 1 Thessalonians makes mention of each Person of the Trinity and their respective contributions to our salvation.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

The Trinity is Christianity’s highest and greatest mystery. The Bible presents the one God in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As the Westminster Larger Catechism explains, they are “the same in substance, equal in power and glory; although distinguished by their personal properties” (Q. 9). This statement emphasizes that each member of the Trinity is equally God in every respect, yet in their personhood they are distinct and individual. To be a Christian is to relate to all three Persons of the Trinity; according to Jesus, the full Christian name for God is “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (Mt. 28:19).

¹ James R. White, *The Forgotten Trinity* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1998), 16.

In his teaching of salvation, Paul emphasized the role that each of the three Persons play and the distinctive work that each provides. God the Father chiefly *ordains* and *plans* our salvation. Speaking of the Father, Paul writes in Ephesians 1:11 that we have been “predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.” The ultimate cause of our salvation is the sovereign plan and will of the Father.

Meanwhile, God the Son *accomplishes* the work of our salvation. Paul says in Ephesians 1:7, “In him [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses.” Christ’s saving achievement includes his perfect life as our representative, his sin-atoning death and glorious resurrection, his present reign on the throne of heaven, and his soon return to bring his people to glory. These are all things that Christ does for us, accomplishing a definite work for our salvation. How can sin condemn us when Christ has paid its penalty? How will the flesh, the world, or the devil destroy us while Christ now reigns in power, interceding for us in heaven?

There is still need for the work of God the Spirit, who plays the role of *applying* salvation to individual believers. How can I be included in God’s salvation? How can I know these things are not merely true in the abstract but true for *me*? The answer is in the work of God the Spirit, who gives us faith and unites us to Christ.

Seeing how all three members of the Trinity conspire to provide a sure and certain salvation, we understand why James White began his book by writing, “I love the Trinity.”² Paul loved the Trinity, too, and this is why his exclamation of thanksgiving for the Thessalonians points to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit working together for and in us. The God displayed in Trinity is a God of unfathomable glory, who meets our every need. Our salvation rests on the *sovereign authority* of God the Father, on the *finished work* of God the Son, and on the *personal application* performed by God the Holy Spirit.

THE DOCTRINE OF ELECTION

² Ibid., 13.

In the beginning of Paul's thanks for the Thessalonians, he prayed to "our God and Father" because of their faith in "our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 1:3). Paul then thanks the Father because faith in Christ indicates that the believers were chosen by God for salvation: "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you" (1 Thess. 1:4). Here, Paul makes clear reference, as he so often does in his letters, to the doctrine of election.

The doctrine of election gets its name from the Greek word *eklektos*, which means *chosen*. When America holds an election, its citizens choose their leaders. The Bible's doctrine of election says that God chooses his people for salvation. All the blessings we enjoy as Christians are grounded in the sovereign election and predestination of God, which took place in eternity past. Paul asserts in Ephesians 1:4 that God "chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world." God's eternal purpose is the strongest, firmest ground possible for salvation, and it is upon this that Paul rests our hope for salvation. John Calvin explains:

God having chosen us before the world had its course, we must attribute the cause of our salvation to His free goodness; we must confess that He did not take us to be His children, for any deserts of our own; for we had nothing to recommend ourselves into His favor. Therefore, we must put the cause and fountain of our salvation in Him only, and ground ourselves upon it.³

We ask the question, "Why is someone a Christian?" One might answer, "Because he believed the gospel." This is true. But we go on and ask, "Why did he believe while others did not?" The issue then is this: "Was it because of something in the Christian that is better in some way, enabling him to believe while others hear the same message and do not?" The Bible says, No! Salvation is not caused by anything in the Christian, but because of God's sovereign election of individuals to be saved through faith in Christ. This is good news to all who believe, for election assures us that our salvation does not ultimately rest on anything in ourselves, we who are so weak and changing, so mixed in our affections, so inconstant in our faith, but our salvation rests on God's sovereign choice from eternity past.

³ John Calvin, *The Mystery of Godliness* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1999), 11.

Paul's firmest and ultimate cause for the Thessalonians' salvation is "that he has chosen you" (1 Thess. 1:4).

Notice that Paul joins election to both the love of God and the brotherhood of believers: it is "brothers loved by God" who are chosen by God. The Bible consistently sees God's love as the operative principle in election. The Lord told Israel, "It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers" (Dt. 7:7-8). Paul wrote in Ephesians 1:4-5, "In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ." Being bound together in sovereign grace, believers are joined into the brotherhood of God's family. Paul wanted the Thessalonians to think of themselves together as "members of one family and the objects of God's special love,"⁴ mentioning their brotherhood nineteen times in this letter.

OBJECTIONS TO ELECTION ANSWERED

Despite the overwhelming biblical evidence for election, many Christians raise objections to the doctrine. Some argue that believing in election leads to pride, since if we believe we have been chosen by God we will think that we are somehow special and superior. In fact, however, the biblical doctrine of election promotes humility and not pride.

Election promotes humility by ascribing salvation not to any merit in the Christian but only to the sovereign grace of God. Election is joined to the doctrine of total depravity, which says that sinners are not able to contribute anything positive to their own salvation, which must be wholly of God. Where is the ground for human boasting when we realize that our salvation is in spite of our utter unworthiness and thorough corruption, and only because of God's sovereign and amazing grace? Paul states the humbling truth in Titus 3:3-5: "For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving

⁴ Andrew W. Young, *Let's Study 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth, 2001), 12.

kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy.”

A second objection to election complains that it leads to laziness and loose living. After all, it is argued, if my salvation is caused not by my effort but by God’s mercy, then what motive have I to press on with the difficult work of sanctification? In answer, the Bible emphasizes that election promotes holiness and not license.

The objection that election promotes license fails to realize that holiness is the goal for which we are saved. It is God’s purpose in our salvation that we should be holy. Paul wrote that God “chose us... that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Eph. 1:4). Martyn Lloyd-Jones therefore writes that according to Paul “we are not chosen with the possibility of holiness, but to the realization of holiness... Being ‘chosen’ and being ‘holy’ are inseparable... God will make you holy because He has chosen you unto holiness.”⁵

This teaching warrants the categorical statement that if you are not bearing evidence of holiness and if you do not even desire to be holy, then you have no reason to think you are elect. God elected sinners to holiness, which is the particular mark of the elect. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, “This is the will of God, your sanctification” (1 Thess. 4:3). Once we realize that holiness is our destiny in Jesus Christ, we no longer look upon sanctification as an unrealizable ideal but we pursue it with vigor and anticipation. In this way, election promotes and greatly stimulates the pursuit of holiness, as we rely on God’s grace and not on our works.

ELECTION’S GOSPEL EFFECTS

A further objection to election argues that believing the doctrine discourages zeal in evangelism. Critics say, “If God predestines people to salvation, then why bother to preach the gospel?” The answer is that God ordains not merely the ends but also the means. God predestines some to be saved and commands us to preach the gospel to that end. If we do not witness the gospel then none will be saved. But God has ordained that they will be; so he has

5 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God’s Ultimate Purpose: An Exposition of Ephesians 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), 103-4.

also ordained that we would preach the gospel so that his chosen people will come to faith. John Stott thus argues that “the doctrine of election, far from making evangelism unnecessary, makes it indispensable. For it is only through the preaching and receiving of the gospel that God’s secret purpose comes to be revealed and known.”⁶ James Boice adds:

Besides it is only election that gives us any hope of success as we evangelize. If God cannot call people to faith effectively, how can we? We cannot persuade them. But if God is working, then he can work in us even if we are inept witnesses. We do not know who God's elect are, but we can find out who some of them are by telling them about Jesus... We can speak to them boldly because we know that God has promised to bless his Word.⁷

The relationship between God’s sovereign election and the preaching of the gospel is seen in Paul’s continuing thanks for the Thessalonians. In verse 3, Paul saw the evidence of their faith, love, and hope as proof of their election. Now, Paul expresses confidence in their election because of the way the gospel came to them: “For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thess. 1:4-5). F. F. Bruce comments: “While the act of election took place in God’s eternal counsel, its effects are seen in the lives of the elect, as they were seen now in the lives of the Thessalonian Christians.”⁸

Paul sees God’s sovereign grace at work because of three ways the gospel came to the Thessalonians. First, Paul says that the gospel came to them “not only in word” (1 Thess. 1:5). This tells us that the witness of the gospel must first come “in word,” that is, in the form of clear, biblical teaching. When we consider Paul’s ministry in the book of Acts to widely different people, it was always that case that he

⁶ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994), 31-2.

⁷ James Montgomery Boice: *Amazing Grace* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1993), 56.

⁸ F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 13.

ministered “in word.” Typically, he went to the synagogue, where the Jews met for worship, and Paul “reasoned with them from the Scriptures” (Acts 17:2). This means that he expounded the text, “explaining and proving . . . , ‘This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ’” (Acts 17:3). On the occasions when Paul ministered to Gentiles who did not know the Scriptures, Paul still reasoned with them so as to explain the biblical message about Jesus (see Acts 17:30-31). As Paul put it to the Romans “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?... So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:14, 17). Gospel ministry is always a ministry “in word.”

Theologians refer to preaching as the “general call” of the gospel. When the pastor opens the Bible in the pulpit and proclaims Jesus Christ, or when a Christian witnesses the gospel to a neighbor,” this is the general call that invites everyone to come to Jesus in faith for salvation. Without the general call, no one can be saved. Yet, by the general call alone, no one still can be saved, because of the blinding effects of sin. So complete is the sinner’s corruption that he “does not accept the things of the Spirit of God . . . , and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). Because of man’s total depravity in sin, no one is able to respond to a gospel ministry that is “only in word” (1 Thess. 1:5).

Paul thanks God and sees evidence of his readers’ election because the gospel did not come to them “only in word,” but also “in power and in the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 1:5). We remember that the gospel is “the power of God for the salvation of those who believe” (Rom. 1:16), but only as the Holy Spirit attends to the ministry of the Word to bring faith to life. When Paul speaks of power, he is not referring to the miracles that the apostles sometimes performed, for which the New Testament employs a plural form of the word for power.⁹ He refers here to the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit with and through the Word of God to bring the spiritually dead sinner to life. This is the

⁹ See Robert L. Thomas, “1, 2 Thessalonians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 11:244. The singular *dynamei* means “power,” whereas the plural *dynamis* means “miracles”.

“effectual call” of the gospel. The general call offered by the preacher through the Word is made effectual by the Spirit’s power in opening the heart so as to believe.

The classic example of the Spirit bringing power to the gospel Word is the conversion of the apostle Matthew, then known as Levi the tax collector. Living in Jesus’ headquarters town of Capernaum, he would have seen Jesus, known about Christ’s miracles, and heard the gospel message on a number of occasions. None of this availed for his salvation. But Matthew 9:9 tells that on one occasion Jesus came directly to him. “He said to him, ‘Follow me,’” and the tax collector “rose and followed him” (Mt. 9:9). If you are a Christian it is only because Christ came to you through the ministry of the Spirit and gave power to the gospel word in order to bring you to spiritual life and salvation.

Paul’s teaching that election is seen not merely in word but in the Spirit’s power reminds us of the necessity of a transformed life in Christian salvation. We do not transform our lives in order to be saved, but having been saved the power of God changes us, starting with the reborn hearts that believe the gospel. Those whose Christianity consists only in talk, in word only, unadorned with a growing holiness and spiritual fruit, are warned by Paul’s teaching that “the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power” (1 Cor. 4:20). Only where the Word is confirmed in the power of the Spirit may we be assured regarding our election. The Welsh evangelist Rowland Hill once met a drunken man in the street. “Mr. Hill, I am one of your converts,” the man stammered. “Yes, I dare say you are one of mine,” Hill answered; “but if you were one of God’s you would not be in the state in which you are now.”¹⁰ Why was Hill right to answer this way? Because, Paul wrote to Timothy, “God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control” (2 Tim. 1:7).

Those involved in Christian ministry are hereby reminded of our total reliance on the Spirit and his power for salvation. Paul was strongly persuaded of this in his own gospel outreach. He therefore did not preach in a way that relied upon his rhetorical skills or a dynamic

¹⁰ CHS, 51:54.

personality, but rather he preached “in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:4-5). 2 Corinthians 4:2 explains his simple approach to preaching, saying that “by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.” Our encouragement in preaching is to know that the Spirit does attend the true preaching of God’s Word with power even by his vastly flawed servants. As a result, all of God’s chosen and beloved people have known what it means to have the power of God’s Word impressed upon their hearts.

Paul concludes his statement in verse 5 by asserting that the faith given to Christians by the Holy Spirit is not bare faith but one that is fully persuaded regarding Jesus Christ. Paul thus completes his thought: “our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thess. 1:5). Paul is not saying that true faith requires believers always to have complete assurance of their salvation. A true believer may often doubt his or her election, and will have ups and downs in his spiritual lives. Paul is referring, instead, to the full persuasion of Christ and his gospel that endures under trials and temptations to turn away.

In Jesus’ important parable of the soils, Jesus said that the Kingdom of God is like a farmer going about sowing seeds, the seeds representing the Word of God. In one case, the seed fell on rocky soil where the seed would not grow strong roots. He explained that in this case, the person “hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately falls away” (Mt. 13:20-21). The Thessalonians had borne testimony to their election by enduring under hardships and persecution, so that they not only received the Word with an initial experience of the Spirit’s power but they continued persuaded in their faith and showed their salvation by refusing to give way under trials.

WITH POWER AND PERSUASION

Paul’s thanks God for the tangible signs of his readers’ election, provides us with a helpful framework for evaluating the spiritual authenticity and health of our churches and our lives. Is the Word of God going forth plainly from our pulpits and being

received earnestly by God's people? Is our evangelism and our spiritual growth based upon God's Word, instead of worldly methods and techniques? Paul presupposes that ministry must be centered on the Word. But then is there evidence of and an experience of the Spirit's power working in our lives through the Word? Are we finding that long-cherished errors are yielding place to Scriptural truth, however unpalatable they are to the spirit of our age? Is the Spirit of God bringing Scripture verses to our minds so as to restrain our sin or motivate our service? Are we embracing Christian duties in the home, church, and society more freely and with a more fervent commitment? True Christians revel in the excitement of hearing and reading God's Word, knowing the power with which the Holy Spirit attends the Word, a power which testifies to our eternal election and reveals itself through a persevering, conquering persuasion of faith.