

# Doctrine of Election

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Before beginning a discussion on election, we want our intentions to be clear: since this doctrine has created so much controversy and has been frequently misunderstood, we do not want our understanding of it to be a means of division, but rather a means of unifying believers as we grapple with God's sovereign purposes and plan. Since we are called to unashamedly preach the Word of God, we want to speak frankly about a doctrine that should elicit both humility and worship among believers. May those who differ with us not judge our intentions or our passion for reaching the lost for Christ.

First of all, we must affirm that all Christians believe in election; if you believe the Bible, you believe in election since it is taught both directly and indirectly in so many passages. So the question is not whether we believe in election, but rather how we understand the meaning of the word.

Many people believe that election is based on foreknowledge; that is, we as individuals actually cast the final vote in our salvation; we decide that we will receive Christ as Savior, and God knowing this "elects us" unto eternal life. These people point to Scriptures that say we are "elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father" as evidence that election is based on foreseen faith (1 Peter 1:1-2).

However, the word *foreknowledge*, when used in the Bible in relationship to God, does not simply mean to know ahead of time, but it also means to "fore love" or "to have a relationship with." For example, Christ was "foreknown" before the foundation of the world (1 Peter 1:20). Israel was spoken of as having been "foreknown" (Amos 3:2). Clearly, it cannot simply refer to "knowing ahead of time," since it also refers to God's eternal relationship with Christ and special relationship with Israel.

Ephesians 1:4 reads, "even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him." Such verses—and there are many others—teach that (1) God made the choice as to who will be saved, and that (2) it was made before the creation of the world. Attempts to soften such verses by saying that the choice was not related to salvation and only refers to God's decision for us to be "in Christ," or to say that the choice was that we be "holy and blameless," but not the choice of salvation—such attempted interpretations ignore the plain implications of the verse and the other passages that teach that God does the choosing unto salvation.

Does this mean that we are simply robots without free will? No, because God works in the hearts of those He has chosen to bring them to salvation; thus, they believe in Christ because they *want* to. God does not bypass their wills but overcomes their blindness and grants the faith that they might believe. In answer to the question: did God choose me or did I choose God, the answer is that God chose you, and in response to His grace, you, in turn, chose Him. Without His choosing

and calling, no one would come to Him (John 6:44). Despite the obvious tension between the two truths, the Bible teaches both God's sovereignty over our wills, and also teaches human responsibility.

Does a belief in election undercut all missionary effort and evangelism itself? After all, the argument goes, if the elect will be saved, they will be saved regardless, so why witness? However, the greatest missionary of all time, the Apostle Paul, who taught on election, did not use the doctrine to hinder his missionary zeal; he used it to fuel it! Because he believed that God was using him to save the elect, Paul wrote, "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained. *Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory*" (2 Timothy 2:8-10, italics added).

And finally, the objection is often raised: does not the Bible teach "whosoever will may come" to Christ? The answer is, yes. Of course this is what the Bible teaches, and this invitation should be proclaimed to all who are willing to listen. We should plead with sinners to come to Christ to be saved, even as we humbly acknowledge that although the invitation is to all, only those who hear the voice of God—only the elect—will respond to His call. Historically, it may be true that election has sometimes been misinterpreted as an invitation to passivity in evangelism, believing that the elect will be saved regardless of our efforts. But thankfully, most often it has been the fuel for great missionary and evangelistic activity, as in the case of William Cary, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitfield, Charles Spurgeon, and a host of others.