

Ephesians 1:13-14: Chosen, II

I thank you for your patience on this difficult topic of election. There is no reason why you have to make up your mind quickly about this issue. If it is as important as some of us think, and if good people have come down on both sides of it, then it is reasonable to take significant time to make up your mind. But I do teach to persuade so I leave you to your own conscience before God.

In the structure of Ephesians 1:3-14 there seems to be a Trinitarian structure revealed to us as we attend to the expression, “To the praise of His glorious grace.” It is in verse 6 and then what I take to be shorthand for that, in verses 12 and 14, “To the praise of His glory.” The Father is praised for His work of election, the Son for His work of redemption, and the Spirit for His ministry of sealing. What is the purpose of the passage? Is it to tell us what He was doing before creation? Perhaps in part it is, but there is a bigger purpose than that. The purpose is that we might praise the Trinity. The purpose of the doctrines of election, redemption, and sealing, are that we might praise the Trinity for our salvation. So if you are a person who works out all the right answers, but you are not filled with praise to God for His salvation and His grace, then I suggest you go back and work it out again. We want to think in the power of the Holy Spirit about the Word of God. If we do that, even if we disagree, if we give God all the glory for our salvation, then the purpose of the passage is fulfilled in our lives.

What is the timing of election according to this passage? The timing of election is given to us plainly in verse 4: “For he chose us in him [in Christ] before the creation of the world.” I will come back to the expression, “in Christ,” because it is one of the ways Arminians try to handle the passage and seek to fit it with their own theology. The timing of election is plainly before creation. Why does the Lord tell us that He chose us before creation? It is so that we would be careful to realize that we did not have anything to do with it. I do not rest my case for unconditional election on that reasoning, but He told us that He chose us before creation for a purpose. It is God’s way of taking our hands off of it. It points to a time when only the Trinity existed.

Someone from an Arminian background, which emphasizes the freedom of the will, might say that if it is all of God’s grace then that takes the pressure off to perform. It does not, however, take all responsibility away. We can rest, not in our easy chair, but we can rest in God’s grace even in the midst of vigorous activity. We repose in Him and His grace given to us. All Christians should do that.

Unlike the Old Testament presentation, which is a corporate election of Israel, this is an election unto salvation. We see it in verse 4 when it says, “He chose us in Christ to be holy and blameless in his sight.” This is what we call sanctification. It could be initial, progressive, or final sanctification. I understand it in context, especially in light of the parallel in Colossians 1, to be final sanctification. The meaning is He chose us before the creation of the world that we might ultimately be holy and blameless in His sight. In any case, it is plain that the election is unto salvation.

The same thing is shown in verse 5 with reference to the doctrine of adoption: “In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ.” Adoption is a wonderful and neglected teaching. Its background is that we are, by our sinful nature, children of the devil. We were enslaved, as Galatians 4 tells us, but God who is rich in mercy predestined us to be adopted as His sons and daughters through Jesus Christ. Galatians 4:4 presents Christ as a unique Son of God with a capital “S.” He is the Son of God by nature. We are sons and daughters of God by grace, because of His work on the cross, especially in this context presented as redemption. The same picture is used in verse 7. Redemption means buying back the slaves because of Christ’s work of redemption. We are no longer slaves. We are now the sons and daughters of the living God. Romans 8 and Galatians 4 are the great passages in the Bible on

adoption. There are many other passages that mention it. Those are the two big ones. Ephesians 1, Romans 8:14-17, and Galatians 4:4-7, or you can go back to Galatians 3:26, which says, "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus." Adoption is similar to justification in this way. It is by means of faith. But that faith is not the ultimate reason we are adopted. The ultimate reason is given in Ephesians 1: "In love he [God] predestined us to be adopted as his sons and daughters through Jesus Christ." The election is unto salvation. It is plain.

It is not the corporate election of Israel as is presented in the Old Testament. It is corporate in one sense. It is election of the church. I do not deny that. But it is an election of individuals who comprise the church. It is they alone who are redeemed, who have redemption through Christ's blood for forgiveness of sins, as it says in verse 7. Ephesians 1:13 is very plain, saying, "Having believed you were sealed in him with the seal, the promised Holy Spirit." The election here is corporate, but it is also individual onto the corporate election of the church. As a matter of fact, the election spoken of here includes Jewish and Gentile Christians. That is the meaning in verse 12, which refers to "we who were the first to hope in Christ." That means Jewish believers. Then it says, "You also were included in Christ." That means the Gentile recipients of this letter. It was probably a circular letter that went to different cities in Asia Minor. If that is so, different Gentile congregations were involved, though there were certainly some Jews in those congregations.

The basis of election in this passage is twofold. It is based upon God's love and His will. We see His love spoken of here in a number of places. One is explicit. In verses 4 and 5 there is a minor debate about the location of the phrase, "in love." Most translations usually include the words "in love" at the beginning of verse 5. But it is possible those words belong at the end of verse 4 and we would read, "He chose us in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight in love." It is a little awkward that way. It certainly speaks of us being holy and blameless in His sight. "In love" would mean we will be perfectly and finally in love with Him. It is a little awkward that way, however, so I read the phrase as belonging to the following sentence: "In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons."

The basis of election is love. We found that in Deuteronomy as well. Although it was election of a nation, God's loving and choosing of Israel went hand in hand. So it is here, we have His love. The idea of love of a gracious election is also implied in the notion of adoption because adoption involves God setting His great love upon us. Think of 1 John 3:1, which says, "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God." And that is what we are. So the very word "adoption" speaks of God's love for us, His children. But we also have God's love explicitly stated.

God's will is what is emphatic in the passage. Yet I would not really separate His love and His will. Both are involved. They answer why we are ultimately saved. It is due to God's sovereignty and His love, His grace and His will. I have heard people say this passage teaches election but it does not tell us why God chose. I disagree. Verse 5 again says, "In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ in accordance with his pleasure and his will." There is God's will spoken of. It is the same in verse 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." That is a hard statement to ignore. Likewise verse 9 speaks of the "mystery of his will." It is mysterious and God has not told us everything about it. I believe that which is implied in the Gospel of John and the book of Acts is made explicit in Paul. Why did God save us? He saved us because He chose to do it and because He loved us. Why did He love you? I cannot answer that. I can tell you it is not because of anything in you, though you may be a wonderful person. It is rather because of a couple of things in Him. It is because He is a gracious God who chose of His own will to make us His people.

There is a piece of information in the text that is customarily appealed to by Arminian theologians as a way around the strong emphasis on God's sovereignty. The passage says repeatedly that God chose us "in Him" or "in Christ." When it says "in Him" the pronoun certainly refers to Christ. How do they construe this? They construe "in Christ" to mean that God chose us in the prospect of our believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. God chose us taking into account our response to the Gospel. It is a way of fitting the passage into a free-will theology. Is that what "in Christ" means? My answer is no. It is not what that phrase means. As a matter of fact, we have that language throughout the passage. If you read through Ephesians 1:3-14, you will see that almost every verse includes either "in Christ" or "in Him."

What does this language mean in Paul's writings? It means a number of things. The usage that is found here is a reference to what we call union with Christ. Christian theology is an organic whole. The only problem is that we divide it up to teach one part at a time so we can understand it. But we are constantly appealing to other parts because they intersect. And here I must talk about union with Christ. Its background is our separation from God. Paul says later in Ephesians 2:12 that we "were separate from Christ without hope and without God in the world." He was especially speaking of Gentile Christians. Union with Christ is the work of God whereby He brings us, who formerly were separated from God, and He joins us to His Son spiritually, so that the benefits of Christ become ours. Paul's writings describe this in two major ways. One way is to take verbs that speak of what Jesus did for us—dying, being buried, rising again, ascending, sitting down at God's right hand, and even coming again—and he puts the preposition "with" in front of those verbs. We translate it by saying we died with Christ, were buried with Him, were raised with Him, ascended with Him, and sat down at God's right hand with Him. In Romans 8 and Colossians 3 it even uses the language of the second coming with reference to us. The meaning is that our life is so wrapped up with Christ that Paul could say our life is hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ returns our true existence, in a sense, will be revealed. Paul says in Colossians 3:4 that "when Christ who is your life appears then you also will appear with him in glory." It is not saying we are literally going to have a second coming. But we are so joined to the Son of God and we do not yet see what we will be. It is only when He comes again that the true revelation of the sons and daughters of God will be revealed in our true identity.

In each use of "in Christ" in Ephesians 1 it means union with Christ. The only difference is that this is a prospective union with Christ. We could not be joined to the Son of God until we were created. Thus my understanding of Ephesians 1:4 is that God planned to make us His sons and daughters and chose us, but He chose us in Christ. The meaning is that God elected us as His people before we even existed yet, but in His own mind He chose to make us His people, then He also chose the means of making us His people. Remember God uses means. It was not an afterthought to send His Son. It was planned from the beginning or even before the beginning, in a manner of speaking. God chose us in Christ. Thus it would turn the whole passage around to say that God chose us because He knew we would choose Him. Rather, it is the same meaning as every place else in the passage, which is union with Christ. It speaks of God's plan to send His Son and to join us spiritually to His Son. The Arminian interpretation does not appear to be a very good one.

The goal of election is given in verse 4, in terms of holiness and blamelessness. God chose us in His Son before creation in order that we might be holy and blameless in His sight. There is the goal. Remember in Romans 8 that the goal there was conformity to Christ's image and final glorification. Conformity to Christ's image is final sanctification. It is conformity to His image in holiness. Here in Ephesians it explicitly says that we will be holy and blameless in His sight.

Colossians 1:21 is the passage that convinces me that Paul is speaking of final sanctification rather than progressive. It says, "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation." Is that initial sanctification, which the Bible teaches in some places? Is it progressive sanctification, which the Bible certainly teaches? Or is it final sanctification, which the Bible also teaches. It is final. The following verse, Colossians 1:23, says, "if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel." That is a way of saying they will be presented holy if they persevere as the saints must do. Perseverance of the saints is sometimes presented as a requirement for final salvation.

The goal of election is presented in verse 10 in cosmic terms, not just corporate. The corporate terms are seen in Ephesians 5 where we read that Christ died for the church "to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless." It is not just corporate, however, it is cosmic. It seems to include the new heavens, the new earth, and perhaps even the good angels. Ephesians 1:9-10 says, "And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ." Here the goal is the final restitution of all things under Christ. Of course it is not absolute. Not everybody is going to be saved in the end. The devil is not going to be saved. Matthew 25:41 says that when Jesus comes again He will say to some, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." So the devil is not going to be saved in the end. The demons are not going to be saved and neither will unsaved human beings.

At this point some people may be wondering about some passages in Scripture that they think indicate that God either wants to, or will indeed save, everyone. Second Peter 3:9 is one such verse that people sometimes appeal to. Yet prior to that in 2 Peter 2 we find one of the strongest passages of God's condemnation of people anywhere in the Bible. The false teachers are condemned. It uses very strong language. Then 2 Peter 3:9 says, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." I agree with Richard Bauckham in his commentary on 2 Peter that the use of "you" must be understood in context. Peter is not saying that the Lord does not want those heretics from chapter 2 that he just condemned to hell to perish. It just does not follow. He is saying He does not want this group of professed believers to be influenced by those false teachers and to turn out to be false professors and not true believers in Christ.

Is there any expression in God's Word of His universal salvific will? Is it not the will of God, for example, for the Gospel to go to all people? Yes, it definitely is. The disciples are commanded in the Great Commission in Matthew 28 to take the Gospel to everyone. An even clearer verse is in Acts 17:30, which says, "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed." He is talking about the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is unavoidable for Christians to distinguish between different wills of God. God's will in creation is different than His will in commandment. We also talk about God's will by decree—His decretive will. His preceptive will is His will by precept or commandment. His desirative will is His will by desire. I do not see how you can avoid the first two. There is God's will when He says, "Let there be light," and there was light. That must be different from God's will when He says, "Thou shall not steal," and every day at least thousands of people steal around the world. We have to make a distinction. God's will by

decree is that which He decides to do and it unfailingly comes to pass. Making the distinctions does not decide for us which type of will it is in any particular passage. God's will by precept, His preceptive will, is where He makes a command. Thou shall not steal is one. Yet every day people steal. There is a difference there from His will by decree, in which things most assuredly come to pass. There was no possibility of God not creating when He said, "Let there be." His will by precept is different.

In the 2 Peter passage, He addresses His preceptive will. He holds the people accountable. He commands them not to transgress His will. Positively, He commands them to do His will. Every day people break those commandments. God takes no delight in the condemnation of the wicked. He commands people everywhere to repent. He tells the disciples to take the Gospel to make disciples of all the nations and we make no distinctions. And God gives a well-intentioned free offer of the Gospel to whosoever will hear it.

Studying the doctrine of election is one-sided by the very nature of it. It speaks of God out of His own good pleasure and grace choosing multitudes for salvation. It does not give us the full picture of everything in the Bible. It just shows us that particular slice. And it is a very one-sided picture from the Bible. But the Bible does give a broader picture. For example, if you study the judgment passages, there is a different one-sidedness there. People are judged according to what they have done. In the judgment passages it is human responsibility which comes to the fore. It makes sense. God is a just judge of all the earth.

Let us pray together. *Father, we confess that there are many things in Your Word that we do not understand. And we certainly do not understand all of Your eternal counsels before the creation of the world, Lord, and we do not pretend that we do. Help us to be faithful students of Your Word. Help us submit our minds, our lives, our emotions, and our wills to what You plainly teach. Give us progress as we search Your Word. Help us to be fair to the different viewpoints, Lord, and not misrepresent anyone. Lead us in Your truth we pray, for Your glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*