

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Pastoral Thoughts on the Doctrine of Election

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So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace. What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened.

Romans 11:5-7

As I pondered the pastoral implications of preaching through such a heavily doctrinal passage as Romans 11, it seemed good to me that perhaps every few weeks we should pause in the flow of the exposition, and step back, and talk about some of the practical implications of what we've been seeing. What we have been seeing again in recent weeks from [Romans 11:1-10](#) (as we did in [Romans 8:29-33](#) and [Romans 9:10-24](#)) is the biblical doctrine of unconditional election.



This is the teaching that God chose, before the foundation of the world ([Ephesians 1:4](#)), who would believe and so be undeservingly saved in spite of their sin, and who would persist in rebellion and so deservingly perish because of their sin. In other words, the wisdom and justice and grace of God's will is always the ultimate explanation of what happens in the world—all of it. Humans are not God. We cannot originate causes out of nothing. We, the leaders of Bethlehem, hold fast to the biblical paradox (not contradiction) that, on the one hand, God is sovereign, and on the other hand, we are all accountable and guilty for our sin and deserving of wrath. If God chose us to come to faith and to be saved from this guilty condition, it is owing to nothing in us. That's what we have seen in Romans 8 and 9, and now again in 11:1-10. That's what I mean by unconditional election.

So we turn today to some pastoral thoughts on this doctrine of election.

1. Not all things are good for us to know, and so God has not revealed them to us; and there are some things that are good for us to know, even when we can't explain them fully.

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I base this partly on [Deuteronomy 29:29](#) where Moses said, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever." There are things God does not intend for us to know. They would not be good for us. For example in [Acts 1:7](#), Jesus says, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority." Knowing too much of the future would not be good for us. In fact we know almost nothing about what will happen tomorrow. [James 4:14](#) says, "You do not know what tomorrow will bring." Another example would be Psalm 131 where David says, "My heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me." There are some things out of our reach.

Other things we do know, because God has revealed them to us, but we know them only in part. So they are good for us to know. But we must be content to know only in part, as Paul says in [1 Corinthians 13:12](#), "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known." This is especially true of the doctrine of election. We are prone to ask more questions than God chooses to answer. There is a great danger that our questions will pass over into accusations.

One of the implications of this point is that we will not always know *how* some particular doctrine in the Bible is good for us. We Americans are especially pragmatic and demanding. If we don't see the payoff of a doctrine immediately, we tend to ignore it. We are like foolish children when we do that. Every parent knows that children must be made to learn things without knowing how they will someday be useful. We teach them the particulars of table manners when they are small, for example, so that later they will be able to navigate every social situation with grace. And they don't have a clue why you are telling them to hold the spoon a certain way and keep their elbows off the table. They have to take your word for it that the sun is standing still, the earth is a ball, the green vegetables will make you healthy, and the little bag of rat poison will kill you. If children must know these things before they know why or how, imagine the distance between us and God and how much we may have to know without knowing how it will help us.

The effects on our lives of what we know are always more than we know or can explain. Sometimes we must simply learn something because God says it's true. Then later we may see how the knowledge protected us, or strengthened us, or humbled us, or purified us, or guided us, or enabled us to see other things as true. The issue boils down to trust. *Do we trust that God has revealed what is good for us to know?*

With the doctrine of election we don't know all the ways it is good for us, but we do know some of them. Which leads to a second pastoral thought about the effect of knowing the doctrine of election.

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2. The doctrine of election has a strong tendency to make a church rigorous about the truth and about the Scriptures, and so keep it from drifting into doctrinal indifference and conformity to culture.

The doctrine of election tends to give firmness and fiber to flabby minds. It tends to produce robust, thoughtful Christians who are not swept away by trendy, man-centered ideas. It has an amazing preservative power that works to keep other doctrines from being diluted and lost. In general it tends to press onto our minds a God-centered worldview built out of real objective truth.

Here is one illustration of why that matters. In the most recent issue of *Christianity Today* Chuck Colson discusses “postmodernism” —“the philosophy that claims there is no transcendent truth.” He gives four or five signs from the culture that postmodernism is losing strength and may be soon passé. But then listen to the call he makes to the churches.

I can't think of a more critical time for pastors, scholars, and lay people to be grounded in a biblical worldview and to defend it clearly to those hungering for truth.

But are we prepared for such a challenge? George Barna recently completed a tour of American churches and came back with a dismaying report that most church and lay leaders—90 percent, according to one survey— have no understanding worldview. How are we going to contend with competing philosophies if we're not even rooted in our own truth system?

Ironically just as there seem to be encouraging signs in the culture, there are also signs that the church is dumbing down, moving from a Word-driven message to an image- and emotion-driven message (note how many Christian radio stations have recently converted from talk and preaching to all music).

It would be the supreme irony—and a terrible tragedy—if we found ourselves slipping into postmodernity just when the broader culture has figured out it's a dead end. (“[The Postmodern Crackup](#),” in *Christianity Today*, December, 2003, Vol. 47, No. 12, p. 72).

The doctrine of election has an amazing effect to awaken people who are drifting in the river of inherited assumptions with no engagement of the mind. Suddenly they are jarred by the radical God-centeredness of the Bible and the frightening man-centeredness of their own hearts. They are put on a quest to build a way of thinking Biblically about the God and the world that may avoid the tragedy Colson warns about: namely, the world

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discovering, at last, that truth really matters, just when the church has decided in the name of cultural relevance that doctrine doesn't matter. The doctrine of election is good for us and for our grandchildren in ways we can't even yet imagine.

3. A third pastoral thought about the doctrine of election is that *it is one of the best ways to test whether we have reversed roles with God.*

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This is a timeless problem, but especially in the modern world that assumes human autonomy and questions all authority and takes the judgment seat to decide if God even exists.

Paul addressed this issue most forcefully in [Romans 9:6-23](#). As he did, he heard the ancient and modern objection, "Why does [God] still find fault? For who can resist his will?" his answer to that was, "But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?'" ([Romans 9:19-20](#)). In other words, it's not fitting for you to reverse roles with God. He's the potter. Few doctrines test more clearly whether we are judging God or God is judging us.

When the book of Job is finished and all Job's defenses are spent, and all the misleading counsel of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar has faded away, the sum of the matter is this: "Then Job answered the LORD and said: 2 'I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. . . . I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.'" God responds, "Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you make it known to me." In other words, Take your proper place, Job, and listen to me. Learn from me; don't teach me. Trust me; don't accuse me. To which Job says finally, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" ([Job 42:1-6](#)). The doctrine of election puts us to the test as few others to see if we are in the shoes of the Job who accuses, or the broken and contrite Job who trusts.

It is hard for a fish to know that it is wet. Wet is all there is for a fish. A fish doesn't even think of it. So it's hard for a modern person — a person living in the last two hundred years — to know that he is arrogant toward God. Arrogance toward God is all there is in the modern world. It's the ocean we swim in—the air we breathe. It's woven into the fabric of our minds. We don't even know it's there. We can't see it, because we look through it to see everything else.

Here's the way C. S. Lewis put it:

The ancient man approached God . . . as the accused person approaches his judge.
For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He

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is quite a kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defence for being the god who permits war, poverty and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that man is on the Bench and God in the Dock. ("God in the Dock," in Lesley Walmsley, ed., *C.S. Lewis: Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces* [London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000], p. 36)

That's virtually what it means to be modern: the imperceptible feeling - the assumption we don't even know we have—that it is fitting for us to question and even judge God. The doctrine of election is one very effective test of whether you are being delivered from the indigenous ocean of arrogance in the modern world, or are still drenched to the bone. It is good for us to be tested in the crucible of God's sovereignty, so that we may say with Job: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" ([Job 42:6](#)).

4. The fourth pastoral thought about the doctrine of election is this: *The humble embrace—not the discussion of, not even the intellectual belief in, but the humble embrace—of the precious truth of election and sovereign grace, produces radical, loving, risk-taking ministry and missions.*

One example (and there could be so many more from William Carey and Adoniram Judson and David Livingstone and John Patton and George Mueller and Charles Spurgeon and Jonathan Edwards and on and on): Kristin Carlson has been in Zambia for almost a year working with street kids with [Action International](#) (Get to know them; I could have listed the director, Doug Nichols, among those radical Christians who went to Rwanda with colon cancer because he humbly embraces the truth of election). Here's what Kristin emailed to us on Thanksgiving morning:

First of all, I am thankful for God's unfathomable grace in choosing me. I have done nothing to deserve this, and I continually marvel at my Father's goodness to me. The reason I am thankful to be chosen is because I know what I have been chosen for. Chosen to proclaim the excellencies of God; chosen to be eternally satisfied in God through Jesus; chosen to live in light and not darkness; chosen to taste and see that He is good.

Don't miss this. Some of you have no idea of what Kristin is talking about because you have been taught that the doctrine of election is either untrue or unhelpful. You have always stood on the outside looking in and being suspicious or criticizing. You are now hearing in this email a story from inside—from someone who knows what is like to embrace and be embraced in the doctrine of unconditional election. The effect is not what you may have been taught. Listen to its effects. She continues:

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I am thankful that God chose Vasco, a hard, ignorant, rebellious street kid, out of darkness into His marvelous light. And the fruit I already see in Vasco's life is testimony to his abiding in Jesus, the Vine.

I am thankful for God's overflowing goodness in the past year. . . . What an amazing work to be a part of—becoming friends with street kids and sharing the only lasting hope with them. And as an insert here, I'm thankful for the heart God has given me for these kids. Objectively speaking, I know it's not "normal" to LOVE treading through garbage piles and sitting on a plush couch (a small metal object with a piece of cardboard on top for a seat) with dirty, smelly kids, but, so it is, I love it.

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Embracing and being embraced by the doctrine of sovereign grace—beginning with unconditional election—first produces that kind of radical, risk-taking sacrificial love; and then it humbles us to rejoice in the truth that we did not produce this beauty in ourselves, God did. Then we give him the glory.

If you ask: Is this a Biblical way of thinking? Does the Bible actually teach that the truth of election is intended by God to have these effects? the answer is yes. First consider the wording of [Colossians 3:12-13](#), "Put on then, as *God's chosen ones* [God's elect], holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive." There's the connection. It's explicit and plain in Paul's mind. To know that you are chosen by grace, that you are set apart for God, that you are loved, should make you one of the meekest people in the world ready to endure mistreatment and ready to forgive. Loving the unlovely—in Zambia and everywhere else.

Here's another clue how this works. In [Romans 8:33](#) Paul says, "Who shall bring any charge against *God's elect*? It is God who justifies." The answer is: Nobody can make a charge stick against you if you are chosen by God. He is for you forever. It's crystal clear that Paul says this because he expects it to have a practical effect on us. He expects us to feel assurance and joy and then be courageous and fearless. As you stand before a decision today that seems right and loving, but risky, do you feel the effect of the question: "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?" Do you feel the assurance-producing gospel force in the word "elect"?

This is not mainly a doctrine to be argued about, but a doctrine to be enjoyed. It's not designed for disputes; it's designed for missions. It's not meant to divide people (though it will); it's meant to make them compassionate, kind, humble, meek, and forgiving.

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5. I close with one last pastoral thought. *Don't think of election apart from Jesus Christ.*

[Ephesians 1:3](#) says, “[God] chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world.” In other words, when God planned in eternity to pluck us out of our bondage to sin, he had Christ in mind as the way he would do it. God planned before the foundation of the world to save us through the death and resurrection of Christ.

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Therefore, what God has done to save us and call us to himself is not to tell us ahead of time if we are elect. God never reveals this except through a relationship with Jesus Christ, so that Christ is central to our election. Instead of telling us if we are elect, what God did was to send his Son and say, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life” ([John 3:36](#)). “Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself” ([1 John 5:10](#)). He knows that he is elect.

So in the name of Christ I call you: Come, take him as your Savior and your Lord and the Treasure of your life. He never casts out any who comes in faith. He forgives sin. He clothes with righteousness. He gives the Holy Spirit. He will keep you. “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand” ([John 10:27](#)). Hear the voice of the good Shepherd and come.

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