

THE GOD WHO SAVES: THE SHARED VALUE OF REFORMED THEOLOGY

RICK GAMACHE

We believe that God sovereignly chooses men and women to be saved in order to display His immeasurable grace and glory.

The first of our seven shared values is Reformed Theology, which sees in Scripture God's glorious sovereignty and centrality in all things. This includes the salvation of his image-bearers, which is at the center of his purposes. This article will focus on God's sovereignty in salvation, particularly the doctrine of election.

Let's toss our anchor into Ephesians chapter 1 so that the fluke can catch hold on verse 4. Here's what it says (beginning with verse 3): "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he (God the Father) chose us in him (Jesus Christ) before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him" (Eph. 4:3-4). The string of salvation gems that Paul unpacks in this chapter are ours because God chose us. And it's the doctrine of election that's at the center of "Reformed soteriology." Election is the choice of God before creation to save some people, not because of any foreseen good or merit in them, but based only on his sovereign will.

The term "election" can stir up thoughts and emotions among Christians

that aren't always positive, leading to disagreement and debate. So why is it one of our main values? Why is it one of our core doctrines? Why is it in our name? I hope to provide answers and, in so doing, to help us see that not only ought it be a core value of our denomination but also a core doctrine in our lives. It's a truth to be embraced and cherished, and delighted in. Why? There are definitely more, but we'll focus on four reasons.

1. Election Is the Foundation of the Gospel

The doctrine of election is the very foundation of the gospel. Let me explain. Here's what I know was true about me apart from Christ. (This was true about you too, whether you were saved years ago or yesterday.) I know that I was cut off from God, hostile toward him, and doing evil deeds (Col.

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1:21). I was enslaved to my sin (Rom. 6:17). I was condemned as God's enemy (Rom. 5:10). I was caught in the snare of the devil (2 Tim. 2:26). I had Satan as my father (John. 8:44) and did his will (Eph. 2:2). I was dead in my sin, a son of disobedience, a child of wrath, living in the lust of my flesh (Eph. 2:1-3). My understanding was darkened, my heart was incurably sick, and I was excluded from life with God

(Ephesians 4:18-19). I was destined for the fiery agony of eternal hell (Mark 9:47-48) to experience conscious torment (Luke 16:24) and drink the wine of God's wrath poured full strength into the cup of his anger (Rev. 14:10). Any knowledge of God I had was only sufficient to damn me (Rom. 1:20). I was free to choose according to my sinful nature, and I freely chose to run headlong away from God to hell. I had the free will to go to hell, but none to go to heaven. And hell is what I deserved.

There I was, totally unable to choose God. Yet I was completely unaware. What Jesus said in John 6:44 was true of me: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws (or drags) him." It wasn't gentle wooing that I required. I needed God to drag me off the wide road of destruction to reach down and pull me away from my suicidal fascination with sin. I needed God to haul me away from the devil and invade my soul. And, praise him, that's what he did! God broke in and raised me from my spiritual deadness,

making me alive to Christ so that he appeared to me to be irresistibly beautiful. By his gift of faith, he placed me firmly and forever in Christ and put the Spirit of Christ in me.

Ephesians 1 is true of everyone who banks their hope on Jesus. We are blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing (v. 3). We are adopted as God's sons and daughters through Jesus (v. 5). We are blessed in the Beloved (v. 6). In Christ, we have redemption and the forgiveness of our sins (v. 7). In him, God's grace is lavished on us (v. 8). God is making known to us the mystery of his will in Christ (v. 9). With Jesus, we have an inheritance (v. 11). In him, we are sealed with the Holy Spirit (v. 13) so that the inheritance is guaranteed (v. 14).

For all of that, God paid a very high cost. "In him we have redemption *through his blood*, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace" (Eph. 1:7, emphasis mine). Jesus came to rescue us from the devastation of sin and purchase for us all these blessings and ten thousand beside, but at what cost? He was despised and rejected and stricken and wounded and smitten and chastised and marred and oppressed and beaten and crushed and torn and whipped and tortured and killed: for us.

An honest reading of Ephesians 1 leads us to ask questions. How is it that I'm saved? How is it that I'm in Christ? How is it that the blessings of the Father are mine? How is it that I'm God's adopted child? How is it that my sins are forgiven? How can it be that I'm an heir of God and co-heir with Jesus? How can it be that I am now indwelt and secured by the Holy Spirit? I see nothing here (or anywhere in the Bible) that gives any indication that it had anything to do with me or you. We didn't make a decision for Jesus. We didn't invite him into our hearts. We sinned and rebelled. So how is it that you and I are saved?

An equally honest reading of Ephesians 1 provides the answers. Ephesians 1:4 says he chose us "before the foundation of the world . . ." This is the ultimate explanation for everything. The gloriously unshakeable foundation of our being in Christ is that God chose us to be in Christ. God is sovereign in the salvation of sinners. Feel the weight and wonder of that. Feel the love in that. Before the sun was formed, before any star was hung in the sky, before the earth existed, before the oceans were poured, God Almighty set his electing love on you. Ephesians 1:5: "In love he predestined us for adoption as sons

... " Knowing that it would cost him the excruciating death of his Son, God chose us. And Jesus, knowing the agony that awaited him, came to save us.

However weak you feel today, whatever struggle you're enduring, no matter the state of your marriage or family, whatever conflict you're facing, never forget this. God chose you in Christ before the foundation of the world. It didn't rest on whether we would accept. He loved us and took us for himself as his treasured possession. And he will keep us forever.

Our salvation is grounded in the rock of God's sovereign choice, not in our own fickle decision. That means we are eternally safe in His omnipotent hands. Salvation does not rest in you or in me. It rests in God alone. That's a reason to delight in this core value.

2. Election Humbles Us

The doctrine of election humbles us. The truth of this doctrine is precious beyond words, but it gets personal as we think about unsaved loved ones. I have sleepless nights, pleading for God to save those close to me. Yet, I know that I must let God be God. And I must let the Bible reveal to me who he is.

I cannot surrender to my philosophical assumptions just because the deeper answers to the most profound questions belong to another. Who am I to say that God cannot choose some individuals to be saved unconditionally and still have compassion for all men and desire that they are saved? It's not up to me to declare that God's absolute sovereignty in the salvation of sinners renders men guiltless for rejecting God. Those are philosophical assumptions, not biblical statements. I don't deny that God feels genuine compassion for perishing people. I don't deny that God desires all men to be saved. I don't deny that God loves the world. I don't deny that God sovereignly chooses those he saves, yet all people are responsible for responding to the gospel with faith and repentance. I believe it because the Bible teaches it, not because I completely understand it.

To cut the mysteries out of the Bible is to have a puny theology of a puny God. And God is not puny. You know who's puny? I am. You are. It takes humility to see and admit that truth even as our pride rages against it. God is infinitely wise and gloriously complex, and wonderfully complete beyond our comprehension. That's what makes him God. And if we will allow it, that's what humbles us. It's the height of arrogance to assume we have the

capacity to grasp the details of God's eternal counsel. It takes a humble person to be okay with mystery. Pride demands answers to every question. But we say, "O LORD, 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" (Ps. 131:1).

God keeps secrets. Deuteronomy 29:29 says so. "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law." God keeps secrets. Do you know why? To keep us humble. Listen to what John Calvin says on this point:

The subject of predestination, which in itself is attended by considerable difficulty, is rendered very perplexed, and hence perilous, by human curiosity, which cannot be restrained from wandering into forbidden paths. . . to desire any other knowledge of predestination than that which is expounded by the word of God, is no less infatuated than to walk where there is no path, or to seek light in darkness.¹

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Humility accepts not knowing when God has not offered wisdom. And God promises more grace to the humble (James 4:6). That's a reason to delight in this difficult doctrine. That's a reason to make it a key value in our churches.

3. Election Guarantees Effective Evangelism

The doctrine of election also guarantees effective evangelism. Jesus himself says in John 10:16, "And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." That statement is the banner over all our evangelism. Jesus has other sheep. All over the world. There are sinners out there on whom God has set the sights of his electing love who have not yet been shot through with the gospel's saving power. They might live next door to us; they might

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1966), 404.

be at the office tomorrow morning. They might be at the next desk in class, or they may be the barista who takes our coffee order. Jesus says that he *must* bring them and that they *will* listen to his voice.

Where does Jesus get the authority to call people "sheep" who are not even in the fold yet? Answer: he gets the authority from the Father. In John 10:29, he says, "My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all." In other words, God has chosen a people to be his sheep. They are his elect sheep whom he chose before the foundation of the world. He gives the chosen sheep to his Son, Jesus, so that they can be saved by faith in him. And because they are elect sheep given to Jesus, he must bring them into the fold. So when he calls, they will come. They are Christ's own sheep by the choice of the Father.

Election does not undermine evangelism and mission, as some contend. On the contrary, election makes evangelism hopeful and guarantees missional success. Evangelism is God using us to call his sheep. Isn't that remarkable? Jesus still summons his sheep through the gospel by the Spirit's power, but he uses our mouths to deliver the message. We are his ambassadors. When we call on behalf of Jesus, the elect sheep will come. They will hear and respond. May that fill us with hope and encouragement and courage to speak words of light and life to those we encounter every single day. They just may be sheep that the Father chose in Christ before the foundation of the world.

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4. Election Leads to a Deeper Experience of God-Centered Worship

Finally, the doctrine of election leads us into a deeper experience of God-centered worship. And that makes sense since this doctrine is the foundation of our very salvation since it humbles us before God, since it guarantees the success of our mission.

Drawing us into a deeper experience of God-centered worship is exactly what God intends for election to do. Ephesians 1 is one long outburst of worship. The first words of the text are: "Blessed be the God and Father of

our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 3). It goes on. Verse 6: "to the praise of his glorious grace." Verse 12: "to the praise of his glory." And verse 14: "to the praise of his glory." Paul is lost in a deep experience of worship as he pens these words. The doctrine of election is not a call to theological debate; it's a call to worship! The only appropriate response to the good news of election is passionate praise and wonder-filled worship. It is more than worthy of being a key value in our churches and in our lives.

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