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Q&A#96 Election in Ephesians 1

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Today's question: "Trying to understand Eph. 1 and was wondering if you could help. Paul seems to be addressing the visible/historical church in Ephesus. If my assumption is right then he is saying that the people in the visible church of Ephesus are predestined to adoption as sons, have redemption through Christ's blood, have been gifted with every spiritual blessing, etc. My trouble is that as a Calvinist I don't know how to make sense of the fact that he calls all of that visible church elect? Could you help me work through this important passage?"

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, trying to understand Ephesians 1 and was wondering if you could help. Paul seems to be addressing the visible, historical church in Ephesus.

If my assumption is right, then he is saying that the people in the visible church at Ephesus are predestined to adopt from the sons, have redemption through Christ's blood, have been gifted with every spiritual blessing, etc. My trouble is that as a Calvinist, I don't know how to make sense of the fact that he calls all of that visible church elect. Could you help me work through this important passage? I think it helps

when reading this to compare it to the situation of Israel.

When we have these great statements of Israel's election in places like Deuteronomy, it's a statement not about each and every individual as a detached individual. It's about the nation and those who are members of that nation participate in that status. But yet, it's not something that can be detached from that belonging to the people.

So it's more than just a selection of individuals who each as individuals have this particular quality. Rather, it's about a body of people and the quality and the blessing that is received by that body of people. That Abraham and his seed were chosen as a body of people, not just as a selection of individuals.

And the individuals that compose that body of people are a different question, a different issue, from the actual status of that body of people itself. When you get to a passage like Ephesians 1 or if you're reading Romans 9, I think what we're dealing with is God's formation of a people in history. And the significance of Ephesians 1 is the fulfilment of God's purpose in Christ from before the world began at this moment in history.

Election within Paul's teaching is not this abstract doctrine about how God saves people in every time, place and situation. It's about what God is doing in the first century AD at that particular moment in time through the work of Christ. What has been made possible through Christ's work that was not the case beforehand.

And that, I think, helps us to understand a lot of the ways in which this passage fits in with what goes later in Ephesians, which emphasizes this family that's being named and that's being formed about the overcoming of the division between Jews and Gentiles, about the status of peoples and the way that God has created a new people, a temple of the Holy Spirit, etc. When you look through Ephesians 1, what you're seeing then is a historical entity of the church. It's a visible entity and yet this visible entity is the one church.

The church, visible or invisible, those are two different aspects of the single church. Now, in the visible church, there are people who will fall away, there are people who are unfaithful, and yet that is not some sort of detached church from the invisible church, the church of the people who are connected to Christ in a living union who will persevere to the end. These are not two different churches.

Rather, it's the same church viewed from two different aspects. If we're looking at this passage then, I think it helps to consider the centrality of Christ. It's about the centrality of what God is doing in Christ, that all things are being summed up in him, that Christ is the head of the church and that as the head of the church, Christ is ruler over all things for the sake of the church.

And the church is the site where God is fulfilling this great purpose that he has had since

before the world began. This purpose is about Christ. Now, as we read later on in that passage, we'll see the significance of putting things under Christ's feet, making Christ the head for the church, and this helps us to understand a bit of what is going on.

God the Father was always, from the very outset, from before the foundation of the world, he was going to create a people for his son, a glorious humanity that would be joined to his son in a living union, and he was going to do this in the fullness of time. And this is what is taking place in churches like that of Ephesus, that God is forming his people, that God is forming this promised and long anticipated people. And in the process, the mystery that was secret since before the world began is being disclosed, a mystery that is seen in Christ and in the church that is being formed in Christ.

So this is not about a detached group of individuals. This is about a body of people that is chosen in Christ. Now, that language of chosen in Christ is maybe helpfully understood by reference to the language that we'll find elsewhere in Scripture of Israel being chosen in the fathers, that their chosen status is not as detached individuals and chosen in a detached way, but rather it's out of their union with the fathers.

It's out of their union with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that their elect status is found. And in the same way, our elect status is found in Christ, in union with him. And so it's not something that should be attached primarily to the individual Christian.

This is not to say, as some people would say, in opposition to a Calvinist understanding, that God is not sovereign in the election of individuals. I don't think that's the case. Rather, what we're seeing is the centrality of the picture is not upon the election of individuals, but upon the centrality of Christ and the church and what God is doing here and now within this great disclosed historical purpose.

So all this mystery that has been the case before, that God has not made known in times past, is now disclosed. And the mystery is that all things are being gathered together in Christ. And the church is at the heart of this.

This is at the ground zero in many respects of what's taking place. And we are there. The Ephesian church is there, that they have been chosen in Christ to receive all these spiritual blessings, all these spiritual blessings in the heavenly realm, the adoption by sons, etc.

This is a privilege that belongs to the church and to those who are faithful members of it. So if we're talking about this in terms of other biblical language, it's talking about the elect vine. Now, there are branches within that vine that would be broken off.

There are branches that are not faithful, that do not participate in the true life of that vine. And yet it's a truth about the vine and everyone who is attached to that vine is implicated in that. It is not primarily a truth about detached branches.

And if the branches are cut off, they lose the life, they lose the status. And so addressing this to the visible church is important because the visible church is where this event is happening, this gathering together, this formation of God's purpose, this fulfilling of God's purpose in the middle of history. And there is a situation where we do not know who is fully participating in the life of the vine, who might be cut off in the future.

And so there is a mystery to election, but there is also a deep revelation there. We know the reality at the heart of election. The reality at the heart of the election is Christ.

And those who are being formed together as a people in Christ are the people who participate in this, chosen in Christ before the world began. We are the people who are being formed into the bride that God has always intended, the new humanity that God has always intended in his son. And that is the heart of election.

And so election is not fundamentally a hidden doctrine. Do you want to know that you are elect? Calvin talked about Christ as the mirror of election. Now I think the approach I'm taking here goes further than Calvin in certain respects.

But the same truth holds that if you want to know if you are elect, you look to Christ because he is the one in whom the purpose of election is being worked out. Now what does this do? I think it does a number of things. First of all, it removes the anxiety of a deep, hidden doctrine of election, a doctrine of a God that hides behind a mask and we may never know how he stands in reference to us.

That is a very difficult doctrine. But when we think about election as fundamentally revealed in Christ and taking a very specific form in the life and reality of the church, the visible church, then we know how we stand in reference to it in a way that we do not know if we're thinking in terms of this hidden decree. There is a hiddenness, but it is not as hidden as some people would think.

Another thing to notice is that it throws forward the significance of history. Election is not something that we hear about a lot in the Old Testament, save in reference to the election of Israel, where we do hear about it a bit. What we hear about in the New Testament when we're hearing about election is something that has happened in the fullness of time, the formation of a new people in Christ, Jews and Gentiles being brought together, participating in the life of Christ.

And that gives us a very different way of thinking about this. It's not primarily an ahistorical doctrine, a timeless doctrine of soteriology. It's part of the *Historia Salutis*, the history of salvation and what God is doing in history.

And so when we think about salvation, we often think about a series of ahistorical doctrines. We think about adoption. We think about regeneration.

We think about faith. We think about repentance. We think about all these events in a

chain, sanctification and justification, and maybe their definitive and progressive and final forms.

And we have a whole list of different things that are associated with a very personal soteriology and eschatology. But that's not what we see in the New Testament. In the New Testament, what is focused upon is the history of salvation, what God is doing in history and how individuals are plugged into that.

And so what happens in events like Pentecost or the death and resurrection of Christ, these are events in history. They're not just events that underpin a personal soteriology, that make it possible for God to save individuals. Rather, it's about God doing something new in history towards the final end of history.

And it's one of the reasons why when we celebrate things like the church calendar, we are foregrounding history at the heart of salvation, not a detached salvation system, but what God is doing in history, how God is gathering all things together in his son and the cosmic significance of all of this. When you read the doctrine of election as it's situated within Ephesians 1, it is situated within a cosmic picture. That God is gaining power.

God is winning his victory over all the principalities and powers. He is subjugating all things under his son. And Christ is the head of all things to the church.

And the church in this fullness of time is the place where the people of God are being gathered together, being formed as a new people in Christ, Jew and Gentile together. Now, that's a very grand picture. It's a picture that encompasses the whole of the creation.

And humanity finds its place within that as part of a much bigger picture. And this, I think, helps us to understand how things like election fit in with the larger picture of creation that we find in Genesis 1 and 2 and elsewhere, where humanity is created in part for the purpose of the creation, to serve and to guard and to glorify the creation that mankind has created in order to till the earth, to continue and to perfect God's work of creation and his management of his creation. The other thing that it does is it removes the central gravity from the individual and their salvation to the picture of Christ and the church and all that's taking place in Christ.

And that removal of the central gravity from the individual is a very significant one. Partly it's related to the historical issues that I mentioned already, but partly it's also just a matter of getting rid of the self-focused attitude that we often have when we're thinking about salvation. When we think about salvation in the New Testament terms, we should be thinking about what God is doing in this grand scale of history, in the big field, this big realm of the whole cosmos, and about the centrality of Christ, how Christ is at the very heart of that picture.

So at the heart of that picture is not me and my personal salvation, with Christ being the means to achieve that end, and election being God's purpose before all the world began to elect me, to save me, to make me at the very heart of his purpose. It's not about me, it's about Christ, and I am part of that much bigger picture. And that I find is something that's far more in keeping with the tenor of the New Testament, and the scripture more generally.

It's also something that maintains all the points that I think have been at the very heart of a Calvinist understanding, an emphasis upon the sovereignty of God, an emphasis upon the centrality of Christ, an emphasis that we see within Book 3, for instance, of the Institute's on union with Christ at the heart of salvation. And then things like Christ is the mirror of our election, the truth that God is a good God, a God who can be seen in Christ, and we can behold God in Christ, that he has revealed himself in his Son. All these truths, I think, are at the heart here, and it helps us to understand these things in a way that we would not if we think about this primarily in terms of salvation of detached individuals before the world began, with Christ as the means to fulfilling that, and then my salvation being the centre of the picture.

I think this presents us with a far more biblical view, and a view that I think resolves a number of the problems that certain understandings of election have caused within the broader systems of biblical and systematic theology. I hope this is of some help. If you have any further questions, and I'm sure people do on this particular issue, please leave them on my Curious Cat account, and if you'd like to support this and future videos, please do so using my Patreon account and my PayPal account.

If you would like to be involved in transcribing these videos, I'm looking at the moment for people who would be able to volunteer a couple of hours of their time every month, or something like that, and with a group of people to be able to transcribe all of these videos, so that they will be accessible to a broad audience. Thank you so much for everyone who supported these videos, for the time that you give to watching them, and to listening to the podcasts. Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow.

God bless.