



## Elect – But to what?

God's people are elected — but to what? To glory would be the answer that most would give. All are predestinated — but to what? To heaven and hell would be a common answer. No doubt there is a lot of truth in that, but how exactly does the Bible describe the goal God has for his people?

The word "to elect" or "to choose" immediately makes us think of a process of selection. It is a calling out of something. It raises the natural question: what are we chosen from? But although the Bible has a lot to say about the sad condition of lostness from which we have been chosen and about the gracious basis of the selection process, the goal of election is never lost sight of. We are not only elected from, but elected to.

The great goal of election, of course, is the glory of God's own name — in particular, the glory of his grace. But what specifically has God designed to do for his people that will bring honour to his name? We can look at various passages of Scripture which describe election as it refers to the experience of God's people.

According to John, Jesus said: "*I chose you **to go and bear fruit** — fruit that will last*" (John 15:16). Again, with God's eternal purpose more obviously in mind, Peter describes the believers he addresses as "*chosen ... **for obedience to Christ and sprinkling by his blood***" (1 Peter 1:2). James' way of speaking of this goal of election is conveyed in his question:

*"Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world **to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom** he promised to those who love him?"*

(James 2:5)

In these examples, we can see quite plainly that, as regards the position of the elect themselves, what is emphasised is not the state in which election found us, but the condition in which election is designed to leave us. The focus is on the future, not simply on the past.

Though the use of the word "elect" or "chosen" has this interesting orientation towards the goal which was in view in making the choice, this is the locus more especially of the word commonly translated "predestinated".

### Predestinated

In regard to the use of the word in reference to the Lord's people, it is the goal which predestination envisages for the elect that is prominent. Thus Paul describes those whom God foreknew as being "*predestined **to be conformed to the likeness of his Son***" (Romans 8:29).

In a similar passage giving a lofty description of the divine purpose, he speaks in general terms saying that we were predestinated "*in order that we might be for the praise of his glory*" (Ephesians 1:11-12). More specifically he describes this purpose: "***to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ***" (Ephesians 1:5).

So much for the Biblical statements in regard to God's purpose of election for his own. The points that we wish to make on the basis of this brief mention of the Biblical witness are simple.

### Wide-ranging

The purpose of God for the elect is much richer and fuller than it is often represented to be. What belongs to us in Christ? Salvation, in the sense of forgiveness of sins and peace with God, is what

many might say in answer. What has God predestinated us to? To heaven, is the common idea. But these are shallow and imperfect ideas in the light of the teaching of the Scriptures which we have mentioned above.

The full range of blessings and endowments of grace are disposed to us in the purpose of election. Not just pardon, but adoption into his family circle; not only forgiveness but the rich enjoyment of the eternal kingdom; not just faith, but the full riches which faith can bring us; not merely justification but the fruitfulness which is characteristic of the mature Christian; not just heaven but holiness.

It is a whole parcel of blessings that come to us by the eternal purpose of God. It could not be otherwise. The apostolic testimony is that we are elected in Christ Jesus. That is a far reaching relationship with enormous consequences. If we are elected in Christ Jesus, then we are destined to enjoy the blessings which the Father bestows upon him, the legal representative of his people.

We must make more of this richness. Sometimes even Christian people see God's purpose in election as a cold, impersonal thing. Predestination suggests to us simply destiny, heaven. We forget that all that was necessary to get us to that destiny has similarly been decreed for his people. What we have done is pick here and there at the parcel of blessings without realising the variety and fulness of what comes to us as a bundle in Christ. We must stop seeing God's purpose of election in monochrome and begin seeing it in technicolour.

## **Holiness**

More specifically, we can say that the emphasis of the Scriptures is not that God's people are chosen for heaven but that they are chosen for holiness. This, also, is clear from the passages already quoted.

Our Lord speaks of choosing his disciples that they should bring forth fruit. The fruit which he has in mind does not consist of souls saved from sin through our instrumentality, as it is sometimes represented to be. The fruit which he has in mind consists of characteristics such as those mentioned in the immediate context — obedience to his commands (John 15:10) or loving the brethren (John 15:12, 17). In other words, he chose his disciples for an obedient and sanctified life in which the fruits of the Spirit would flourish.

If election involves being "*conformed to the likeness of his Son*", then there can be no escaping the fact that election is to holiness of life. Our Lord was "*holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners*" (Hebrews 7:26).

*"He committed no sin; and no deceit was found in his mouth ... he did not retaliate ... he made no threats".*

(1 Peter 2:22-23)

That is the likeness into which we are being changed. Election must therefore have in view the production of such qualities in our lives.

Similarly, election is for the praise of the glory of his grace. We must therefore ask what in us will lead to his glorious grace being praised. The answer must be: a style of living that is God honouring. Every stain of sin brings dishonour to his name. Therefore if we are elected for his glory we must have been elected to holiness.

For all these reasons, we can say with the surest confidence: that holiness, not heaven, was central to the purpose of election. We will get to holiness because we are elect; but we will get to heaven because we are holy.

## **Caricatures**

This emphasis on holiness of life in the purpose of election has its practical importance. For example, it deals a death blow to the all too common caricature of the doctrine of election which

makes God out to be an arbitrary tyrant who coldly appoints people to their eternal destiny without any regard to moral standards.

This caricature is portrayed in the well known words of Robert Burns in the opening stanza of *Holy Willie's Prayer*:

*"O Thou that in the Heavens does dwell,  
Who, as it pleases best Thyself,  
Sends ane to Heaven and ten to Hell,  
A' for Thy glory  
And no for onie guid or ill  
They've done before Thee!"*

This is a gravely distorted and seriously unbalanced presentation of the Scriptural doctrine of the divine decree. Its chief misrepresentation is that it drives a wedge between election and morality. The rest of the poem is an illustration of that: it describes Holy Willie's immorality, hypocrisy and pride. But neither the Scriptures themselves nor Reformed teaching know such a divorce between morality and the purpose of election.

On the one hand, there is a plain connection between hell and man's sinfulness. As the *Westminster Confession of Faith* puts it, the rest of mankind — the non-elect — God was pleased to "pass by and to ordain

On the other hand, while it is true that God did not choose his people for himself on the basis of any good that they had done or would do before him, that is not the complete picture. The central thrust of election is that he chose them for holiness. The result of God's purpose then is that there are no holy people in hell and there are no unholy people in heaven.

This means that there is a complete concordance between holiness and heaven, between sin and hell — the very thing which Robert Burns in the person of Holy Willie so emphatically misrepresented.

But it is by no means only the Robert Burns of this world that misunderstand and misrepresent this. It is disturbing to see at times the fatalism that there is among those brought up within the Reformed Faith. It is the purpose of election that is causing their downfall — not their own sins! In their minds there is no connection between their moral state and the destiny that awaits them. They too have made a complete divorce between morality and their final destination.

And this works the other way round as well — that is, there can be the sad tendency to think that there is no real connection between holiness and heaven. I've had some experience of grace: my future destiny is secure — whether I'm holy or not.

### **False assurance**

The link between election and holiness must never be forgotten. Election is not *on the basis of* holy living; but election is *with a view to* holy living.

This emphasis not only undermines the caricature which alleges that there is no connection between election and holiness, it undermines the false confidence that can easily creep in to the believer's life, not least in the day and age in which we live.

This false confidence expresses itself thus. (Here I'm using the gist of a conversation I had with a professing Christian lady — outside the Free Church, I may add — who didn't enjoy the best of reputations in her local community.) "I was converted when I was a child, when I gave my life to Christ at my mother's knee. That's all that matters." No amount of persuasion that faith shows itself in a transformed life would avail to make her look further than that distant experience.

In the Free Church we have a slightly different emphasis, but we may not succeed in escaping from the same distorted viewpoint. Some have as the great goal of spiritual experience that they

should have sufficient assurance as to allow them to sit at the Lord's Table. To achieve that goal is to arrive. All is then well. Nothing more matters. They are children of God and that's it.

But God did not choose us for salvation at that basic level. That conversion, that coming to assurance of faith, that sitting at the Lord's Table — these are only steps on a longer road towards the goal for which we were chosen: to glorify his name through being conformed to the image of his Son. The pursuit of holiness is absolutely essential. If it was the practical goal which God had in mind for us in choosing us, then it must be the practical goal of all those who are seeking to make their calling and election sure. There can be no divorce in our thinking between salvation and holiness, or between heaven and holiness.

We were created afresh in Christ Jesus *for good works* which God prepared from beforehand for us to do (Ephesians 2:10). There can be no easy assurance that we are God's children without the practice of holiness. To have the goal of election in mind, as far as the objects of election are concerned, will give us both an enriching awareness of the great things planned for God's people and a stimulating consciousness of the need for holiness in the life of the Christian.

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