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Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

T.U.L.I.P.

Sermons on the Five Points of Calvinism
U. = Unearned and Unconditional Election
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Ephesians 1:3-6

God has done some choosing. Often he chose some very unlikely persons, but God selected them from among their peers to be his own. In the history of humankind and in the story of biblical salvation, God did some choosing.

God chose Abraham. In the year 2000 B.C. there were many men in the land of Ur (modern Iraq), but God selected only Abraham. God said to Abraham, so Genesis tells us: "I am going to bless you, and make your name great; I will be a God unto you, and to your descendants after you; and in you shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 12:2-3). God did some choosing.

God chose Jacob. A more unlikely character hardly could be found. Abraham had two sons, and God chose Isaac over Ishmael. Isaac had two sons: Esau and Jacob. God did not choose Esau, although he was the oldest; but God selected Jacob, the younger, to be progenitor of God's people. Henceforth, the children of Israel (Israel was another name for Jacob) knew themselves to **be** God's chosen people, which is exactly what they were.

God did not choose the Egyptians, whose culture was far more advanced than that of the Hebrews. As the poet says: *How odd, Of God, To choose, The Jews*—yet he did. To the Hebrew people God said

through the prophet Amos, “Of all the peoples of the earth, I chose you only” (Amos 3:2). The psalmist says, “The Lord has chosen Jacob for himself, and Israel for his possession” (Ps. 135:4). God did some choosing.

In the New Testament we find that God did some choosing as well. God chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus. God chose the apostle Paul. Saul of Tarsus (that’s what Paul was called at first) was a most unlikely choice. He was a persecutor of the church. Certainly, there were a score of devout Jews that day on the road between Jerusalem and Damascus, but Christ appeared only to Saul of Tarsus. God did some choosing.

“Wait!” you say, “those were special cases: Abraham, Jacob, Mary, Paul. God doesn’t choose ordinary persons like me.” Oh, contraire. All these were ordinary people before God chose them.

Look again at our text for the day. Paul is writing to the Christians in Ephesus. They were ordinary believers like you and me—a very unlikely lot; yet the apostle says, “God chose you.” The Christians in Thessalonica too were the everyday garden variety of believers, yet Paul speaks of their election by God. “God,” he says, “has chosen you to salvation” (2 Thess. 2:13). All through the New Testament believers are referred to as “the elect”—those whom God has chosen as his own.

Many of Calvin’s 21st Century followers seem embarrassed by his doctrine of election. While the doctrine of election poses difficulties, it would be a mistake to give up on it altogether. Belief in election is in many ways a logical extension of the Reformation belief in grace alone. Election teaches that each of our lives is rooted in the gracious will and intentionality of God. In other words, election is meant to be a practical doctrine that gives us encouragement and hope. It is not meant to become a matter of speculative debate.

Calvin lived a life of exile away from his home, city and state. The doctrine of election gave him the comfort that no matter what befell him, his life was secure in the grace of God. Election includes the affirmation that, prior to any action or merit on our part, God knows us, God saves us, and God empowers us for service.

The doctrine of election seeks to give an answer to some of life’s most important questions: Why was I born as this particular person with these particular gifts? What is my purpose in life? What am I supposed to be and do on this planet?

One way to approach these questions (very popular today) is that everything, including our own birth and death, is random and arbitrary, with no underlying meaning or purpose. Our lives are a biological accident. Once we pass on our DNA, our deaths make little difference to the species, the ecosphere, or the cosmos.

Calvin offered a different answer. He was convinced that our individuality, who we are—our gifts and our calling—reside deep within the intentionality of God. Election teaches that before we were, God was; that God thought of us and called us into being; that God knows us by name; and that God has chosen to give us a future and a hope.

Some believe that this doctrine presents God as distant and aloof. In Scripture, however, the language of election is one of intimacy. To be elected by God means that God has taken special notice of us. Thus the Bible says that God sets God’s heart upon Israel (Hos. 11:8). The people of God are God’s treasured possession (Exod. 19:5-6). Sometimes Scripture even uses verbs to speak of God’s election

that are synonymous with physical attraction (e.g., Hos. 2:16-20).

One of the hallmarks of Calvin's theology is that knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves is closely linked. On the one hand, election tells us something quite profound about the character of God. It tells us that God has determined to be for us. It tells us that God does not merely create us and leave us to our own devices; rather God has a special place for each of us in God's very own heart. On the other hand, this teaching tells us something equally important about ourselves: we are loved and accepted by our heavenly parent. It communicates that we are called to be God's people and to live in relationship to God all our days. It reminds us that we were made to live out God's purposes in the world. Since God's purpose is to love us, it suggests that our purpose is not only to love God but to love one another.

The doctrine of election brings genuine humility. It removes pride, because we know that we do not deserve God's election. We know that there was nothing in us that caused God to choose us. Our parents in the faith called it "unconditional election" because it was not conditioned on any merit or goodness in us. It was only out of God's mercy and grace that he chose to save us. We are adopted orphans. So, the doctrine of election destroys pride and arrogance and removes all reliance on ourselves for salvation.

Now, folks, that's the good news. There is another benefit of this doctrine that is not so attractive.

Do you remember the play *Fiddler on the Roof*? It is the story of a Jewish family in Russia in the early decades of the twentieth century. There are happy and humorous times for the family, but there is always a subtle galling persecution of them because they are Jews. In spite of their difficulties, however, the family remains faithful to their religion and to their God. But, the father, who is a delightful, sensitive, devout personality, after a particularly irritating experience of discrimination by a gentile official, looks up to heaven and says, "Lord, I know we Jews are your chosen people; but next time—choose somebody else, please." For him at that moment, there was little benefit to being one of God's chosen people.

The catch for us in the election doctrine is this: we have been chosen to service, not to privilege; we have been chosen for work, not for rest. God has chosen us to be his instruments, his witnesses, his agents. God has chosen us, if need be, to suffer for Christ's sake. We are chosen to do good works. Paul says, "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10).

Yes, it is by our witness, by our service to those in need; it is by being God's instruments; it is by our suffering for Christ's sake—that we confirm his choice of us and make our calling and election sure.

Sometimes it seems like a lot of people are playing at religion, dawdling with it as a child dawdles with food it doesn't want to eat. They worship, they pray, they even sometimes read their Bibles, yet they work in the church and serve others in mission only when it is convenient—which is not very often. Such halfhearted activity only raises grave doubts about their calling and election.

Peter says, "Be diligent (that is, be energetic and bold) to make your calling and election" (2 Peter 2:10). And Paul says, "I beseech you, therefore, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies as a living sacrifice ... Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed . . . that you may prove what is the will of God" (Rom. 2:1-2)—that you may demonstrate that God is at work in you.

Our morning's scripture from Ephesians is a joyous shout out by Paul. It is written in the first person

plural. I'd like to end this sermon by reading it again, but this time changing the words "we" and "us" to "me" and "I." I'd like you to imagine the text was written just for you, as a prayer. Let us pray...

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed **me** with every spiritual blessing, even as he chose **me**, before the foundation of the world, that **I** should be holy and blameless before him in love, having predestined **me** in love to be his own child. Amen.*