

James Boice



Who's Choosing
Whom?



ALLIANCE OF CONFESSING EVANGELICALS

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From the Lord

Jonah 2:9

But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, "Salvation comes from the Lord."

This sentence from Jonah is simple, but profound. It tells us that salvation begins with God's choice of us rather than our choice of Him. Our salvation continues to a successful conclusion because God perseveres with us to see that it does. Jonah's case is a perfect example. His story is of being chosen by God to a work that he did not want to do: the evangelization of Nineveh. But God persevered with him in spite of the rebellious prophet's attempts to run away. To be sure, Jonah's call was to a particular work and not to salvation, but the principle is the same.

Nothing can take place spiritually in a person's life until God decides to call that person to Him. It would be foolish for a preacher to enter a funeral home to encourage the corpses to lead a holy life. The corpses are dead. If the words are to have any purpose, the corpses must first be made alive. After that they can respond.

In the same way, the call to discipleship must begin with the act of God in making a spiritually dead person alive. The choice to do that is not with the one who is spiritually dead but with God, who alone is able to give life.

This is what new birth means. Before conversion God says a man is dead in trespasses and sins. The man is alive physically and intellectually, but he is not alive spiritually. Hence, he cannot

respond to spiritual stimuli. While he is in this state, the Word of God is a hidden book to him, the Gospel is nonsense.

But then God touches his life. God's touch brings life out of death, and the man then believes in Jesus Christ and begins to understand the Bible. This is what it means to be chosen by God, and this must happen before there can be any true discipleship. As Jesus said, "You did not choose me, but I chose you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last" (John 15:16).

Predestined

Romans 8:29

For those God foreknew he also predestined...

In Romans 8:28-30, the choice and calling of God are put in a carefully expressed sequence of God's acts, beginning with God's eternal purpose and ending in the ultimate glorification of the individual. These verses say,

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called, those he called, he also justified, those he justified, he also glorified.

This passage provides us with an orderly list in the sense that it gives a proper sequence to God's actions. A prior determination of God precedes everything. This is expressed in the words: "his purpose," "foreknew" and "predestined."

Use of the word "foreknow" has led some to argue that God's choice is based upon foreknowledge in the sense that God foresaw that certain people would be more responsive to the Gospel than others and would therefore yield to the strivings of the Holy Spirit where others would not, as a consequence of which He predestined those who would yield to salvation. These thoughts are wrong—if for no other reason—simply because the passage does not start with the idea of "foreknowledge" but rather with a statement of God's "purpose" to save, as we have seen.

The idea of God merely foresaw our responsive to the Gospel distorts many of the central doctrines of Christianity. As A.W. Pink writes, this...

"...repudiates the truth of total depravity, for it argues that there is something good in some men. It takes away the independency of God, for it makes his decrees rest upon what he discovered in the creature. It completely turns things upside down, for in saying that God foresaw certain sinners would believe in Christ, and that because of this, he predestined them unto salvation, it is the very reverse of the truth. The Bible affirms that God, in his high sovereignty, singled out certain ones to be recipients of his distinguishing favors (Acts 13:48), and therefore he determined to bestow upon them the gift of faith".¹

The real issue in this discussion is what the word "foreknowledge" means in the Bible. If the word should be used in reference to us, it would mean advance knowledge of something on the basis of which we could take some action. But God is not a creature of time as we are. Therefore, we should expect that the word would have a very different meaning in reference to him than it does in our experience.

The word foreknowledge is never used in reference to events or actions—that is, as advance knowledge of what one would or might do—but always of persons, whose lives are affected by the foreknowledge rather than the other way around.

Called

Romans 8:30

And those he predestined, he also called...

The next term in the sequence, "called," is the point at which this eternal determination over into the experience of the individual. The overall term is "purpose," in this case an eternal purpose out of which the other steps flow. More specifically, this eternal purpose expresses itself first in foreknowledge and predestination and then, as a follow-up to that, in calling, justification and glorification. The remainder of the passage shows that this work of God is certain of completion. For nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (verse 39).

In Romans 8:28-30 persons are foreknown, and the result is their predestination to an effectual calling, justification and glorification. Pink asks,

"...what scriptural ground is there for anyone saying God 'foreknew' the acts of certain ones, viz., their 'repenting and believing' and that because of those acts he elected them unto salvation? The answer is none whatever... Truly, he did know from all eternity that certain ones would repent and believe, yet this is not what Scripture refers to as the object of God's 'foreknowledge'...God foreknows what will be because he has decreed what shall be. It is therefore a reversing of the order of Scripture, a putting of the cart before the horse, to affirm that God elects because he foreknows people. The truth is, he 'foreknows' because he has elected."²

Justified

Romans 8:30

... those he called, he also justified...

In theology, the call of God is usually termed an "effectual call" to distinguish it from a human call, which might or might not be effective. The situation here is quite parallel to that involving the word "foreknow." On the human level and in human experience, "foreknow" means advance knowledge, while in God's case, where time references do not enter in, it means elective favor or choice. Similarly, "to call" on the human level may make something possible, but it does not actually bring it about. By contrast, in God's case, it does.

We may take as an example a summons to appear in court. A summons is a form of call, a serious one at that. It has the authority of the law and the power of the state behind it. Yet even this extremely serious call does not actually have the power to bring the summoned one to court. She or he may hide from law, jump bail, skip the country or otherwise thwart the court's intention. Not so with God. In God's case the call actually brings about the response of the one summoned.

We find an illustration in the call of Lazarus. Before Christ called him from the tomb, Lazarus was dead and therefore impervious to any call. If you or I were present, we could have called loudly, persuasively and eloquently, but Lazarus would not have responded.

When Jesus called it was different. His call had power to bring the dead to life. In the same way His call revives those who have been chosen by God to be His people. And none can resist the revival! As Jesus said, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27). God is not frustrated, because He effectively calls all whom He has chosen.

Some have taught that election is a useless teaching—or perhaps even destructive. "Because," so they say, "it encourages irresponsibility or even sin." Actually it does nothing of the sort. People are responsible before God for what they do, regardless of whether God elects them to salvation or not, so there are no disadvantages. Moreover, on the positive side there are great benefits for Christian people.

None May Boast

Ephesians 2:9

...not by works, so that no one can boast.

The first practical benefit of election is that it eliminates boasting within Christian ranks. Non-Christians or those who do not understand election often suppose the opposite, and we must admit that those who believe in election sometimes do appear smug, self-righteous and superior. But this is a travesty. In fact, God tells us explicitly that He has chosen to save a people to Himself by grace entirely apart from any merit or receptivity in them, precisely so that pride will be eliminated:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and that is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

If we were saved on the basis of anything in us, no matter how small or, by contrast, how large the proportion of the grace of God, we would be able to boast. For even though God was the source of the greater part of our salvation, we would nevertheless in the ultimate analysis be in heaven because of that small part in us, and others would not be in heaven because that small part (whatever it is or however large or small) would be lacking.

But there is nothing in us. Not even faith, for that is a gift of God. Salvation is totally of grace so that the glory might be God's.

The second practical benefit of this doctrine is that encourages love for God. If we have a part in salvation, then our love for God

is diminished by just that amount. If it is all from God, then our love for Him must be boundless. We did not seek Him; He sought us. When He sought us we ran from Him. When He came to us in the person of His Son we killed Him.

Yet still He came; still He elected a great number of stubborn rebels to salvation. What great love His is! The Bible says, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

Finally, the doctrine of election encourages us in evangelism. It is thought to do the opposite. It is thought to make evangelism unnecessary. "For," the argument goes, "if God is going to save certain individuals, then He will save them and there is not point in my having anything to do with it."

But it does not work that way. The fact that God elects to salvation does not exclude the use of means through which He calls them, and the Bible explicitly tells us that the proclamation of the Gospel by believers is that means (1 Corinthians 1:21; cf. Romans 1:17).

Moreover, it is only this that gives hope of success as we proclaim the Gospel. If the heart is as hard and as opposed to God and His ways as the Bible declares it to be and if God does not both elect the individual and then effectually call him or her to faith, what hope could we possibly have of calling Him? If God cannot call effectively, then certainly we cannot.

But on the other hand, if He is doing such a work in the world and if the proclamation of the Gospel is the means through which He does it, then we can go boldly knowing that all whom God has determined to save will come to Him. We do not know who they are. The only way we know the elect is through their response to the Gospel, and the living of the Christian life, which necessarily follows that call. But we can call them boldly, knowing that those who are called by God will surely come.

Notes:

1. A.W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, n.d.) 20.

2. Ibid., 24.



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