

The Canons of Dort: Unconditional Election

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Ephesians 1:1-14

Today we will talk about the Doctrine of Election. Let's be honest, for many of you who grew up the CRC, those words raise all sorts questions. For those of you who didn't grow up in our tradition, and don't know what I'm talking about, the doctrine of Election is neatly summarized in the words we read from the Canons of Dort a minute ago: "*Election is God's unchangeable purpose by which he did the following: Before the foundation of the world, by sheer grace, according to the free good pleasure of his will, he chose in Christ to salvation a definite number of particular people out of the entire human race.*"

In other words, the doctrine of election says, that before the creation of the world, before the world existed, before humans existed, there was a great choosing of teams; to use a sports metaphor, there was a great pre-creation draft. God looked out over all the people who would exist and out of that group he chose, he elected some to be part of his team.

Only this draft wasn't like drafts as we're used to seeing them: These draft choices were not based on advance scouting reports. These draft choices were not made because God could see what a fine person you were going to be, God didn't sit down before creation and watch the video of your life and say, "She's very impressive: a good mind, strong moral fiber, very fine church attendance and some solid committee work! *I want her!*" No, election says the choice was made completely apart from your behavior. God's choosing you has nothing whatsoever to do with the quality of your life or the excellence of your person. The choice is entirely God's good pleasure. It is pure generosity on God's part. It is pure grace.

Now, this is a remarkable claim, and as people have reflected on this doctrine, all sorts of anxious questions have popped up in their mind. So much so, that if you mention the doctrine of election to people, especially people with a little theological knowledge, their mind goes immediately to the problems and the questions. Questions like: God chose me before the beginning of the world completely apart from anything I do? Then where is my freewill? If my eternal destiny has been decided before I do anything and apart from anything I do, then what difference does my behavior make? It's all been decided already. You're either in or your out, so why not party hard and enjoy yourself?

And what about evangelism? My pastors will, on occasion, urge me to tell others about Jesus so that they can become Christians too. Actually it's not just my pastors; the Bible seems to tell me to do the same thing. But why bother!? God decided whether or not they would believe millions of years ago.

And what about my own status!! How do I really know that I'm one of the chosen? How do I know God drafted me? I mean, I come to church on Sunday, and I pray every day and I try to do what's right and I'm always asking for God's help. But if this choice was made before the beginning of time, apart from anything I do, maybe I wasn't chosen and now all this prayer and church stuff is just an exercise in self-deception? How do I know I'm on the team?

And maybe most significantly at all, is this whole draft system even fair!?!? God graciously chooses some people to be on his team, but he leaves some people off, even though they are no more or less deserving than the elect! And then, the Bible seems to teach, these people who were left off the team, who never really had a chance to be on the team, end up being sent to hell where they are punished eternally!!! How is that fair? This is the hardest question surrounding election, and I'm going to kick that can down the road. I will address this problem more directly next week.

Rich Mouw in his book *Calvinism at the Las Vegas Airport* talks about running into a Jewish couple after a talk he gave on Old Testament law. They came up to him after the talk and were appreciative of his remarks, but were puzzled by his calling himself a Calvinist. "*You seem like a nice person!*" the woman said, "*That's not the image we have of Calvinists! Don't Calvinists believe that God elects certain people, but not others? That seems to be a horrible belief.*" There are hard questions associated with this doctrine, and these questions are strong enough that sometimes, when Calvinists talk about election in mixed theological company, they are sheepish and a defensive.

Paul is not defensive or sheepish about election Ephesians 1 is one of the root texts for this doctrine, and in Ephesians 1 Paul is not sheepish, he's excited. Paul thinks election is great!!! Election is clearly the subject of this passage. Verse 4: "He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world." Verse 5: He predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ. "And he did all this not because we were such excellent people, but in accordance to his pleasure and will to the praise of his glorious grace." So Paul is talking about election, but when Paul talks about election to the Ephesian church he is not a man defending a problematic doctrine, he is a man proclaiming good news. "I want to tell you something great! Something wonderful!" He wants to tell them that they loved by God are part of a great big plan that has been going on since the beginning of time. He wants to tell the Ephesians that they are completely secure in Christ.

Because they would not have been people who would've felt particularly steady. They would've felt the furthest thing from secure. They would have felt frail and uncertain. They were brand new Christians; their Christian understanding was just forming. The Ephesian church had no social or financial power. They were a tiny little church in a big pagan city. That city was full of temptation and that city was full of opposition. They wouldn't feel secure; They would've felt like a hut in the path of a hurricane.

But Paul says to them, "You may feel like a hut in a hurricane, and there may be a storm brewing, but your roots aren't shallow!!! Your roots are so deep and so strong; you have no idea! *You are rooted in the past*, says Paul. God chose you in Christ before the creation of the world! Before you had ever heard Jesus' name, he knew yours. Your roots go down to before creation. *You are rooted in the future too*, says Paul. The Holy Spirit is a deposit guaranteeing your inheritance! When gathers up all things into Christ at the fullness of time, you will be part of that. Your roots go all the way forward in time to the new creation. *And you are rooted in the eternal present!* God knows you right now. The eternal God includes you as part of his eternal plan. You belong to Jesus and Jesus is sitting at the right hand of the Father. He's interceding for you right now. You have deep roots!

I was reading about the Mackinac Bridge this week – the bridge that spans the straits between Lake Michigan and Lake Huron. The conditions in the straits of Mackinac are brutal! It's windy through there. Cars have been blown off the bridge. The wind can whip up huge storms through the straits raising up waves that pound with enormous force. Worst of all there is the ice. Ice flows have enormous power. Ice flows in the Ice Age carved the earth and smashed rocks to pieces. In the Straits, ice can generate forces of up to 21,000 pounds per linear foot. Driven by the winds and the waves Ice can destroy everything in its path. In order to withstand those force, the pilings of the Mackinac Bridge go down 230 feet into the lake bed. They contain three quarter of a million tons of concrete, poured 20 stories down into the ground. For 65 years the wind has been buffeting the bridge, and the waves have been pounding the bridge, and the ice has been crashing into the bridge, but the bridge is still standing because it has deep roots.

When Paul talks about election he talks to little people like us, people who will feel the pounding of life's heavy weather. People who will feel inadequate, people who will be filled with doubt, people who know that they are weak in the face of temptation, but wants to comfort us with our election! "Don't be afraid! Don't worry! You have eternal roots!!!"

That shows us: Paul's main concern in Ephesians one is pastoral Paul's main concern in Ephesians 1 is not, "Who gets to go to heaven when they die?" Paul is not trying to write speculative theology, he is trying to empower frightened, tired people. *Think about it, what kind of a passage is Ephesians 1?* What mode is Paul writing in here? As you read it does it sound like technical theology? Does it sound like a philosophical essay? Does it sound like a technical manual for salvation? Or is this more of a hymn of praise to God? Is this more of a doxology, a gush of praise to God?

I think it's pretty clearly the latter. It's a hymn of praise! It's a love letter! It's got the spirit of a wife calling her husband to tell him the cancer is in remission. It's a daughter calling her mom to tell her she got the scholarship. It's our heavenly father calling to us and telling us that we are secure. Of course, we are welcome to take this hymn and think about the technical workings of salvation that it implies. We are welcome to speculate about what Paul's hymn might mean about the inner workings of God's heavenly decrees, but we probably shouldn't go too far here because Paul's first intent is to sing about God's deep love for us.

Paul's words here probably come out of his own experience of being saved. Think about Paul's own story. He was an arrogant, violent enemy of God, but in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, God turned him into

a humble servant. For Paul, salvation wasn't his idea. He wasn't saved because of his choice or decision. For Paul, salvation was something that came completely from God. That's what he knew. Election wasn't a dry doctrine for Paul; Paul lived election before he thought it. Paul sang election before he tried to understand it. Election is Paul's story.

My experience of coming to faith could not be more different from Paul's. I was baptized in the church. I was raised by loving Christian parents. I have never rebelled. I have always stayed within the orbit of God's family. There is nothing like a Paul conversion experience in my life, and yet election is my story too. During my ordinary days I feel like I'm the one doing the choosing. During my ordinary days as I try to be good and faithful, as I try to grow in my faith I have the sense that this is a story of me climbing the mountain, this is the story of me working out my salvation. But when I take a big step back for the work of the day and look over where I've been and how I've got here. When I look at all the times when I was on the edge of doing something foolish and something pulled me back, when I think of all the times when a "random" decision worked out, when I think of all the people who have been sent into my life at just the right time, when I look back on the whole of it, I see this isn't about me, this wasn't me, this was God. My life has not been some heroic performance performed under a spotlight, my life has been a song sung from the shelter of His wings. Election is my story too. And I'll bet it's yours.

Which brings me to my final point. This eternal foundation that Paul celebrates here is meant to be built on. We are not just chosen by God so that we can go to heaven when we die. We are elect to serve. Election isn't the spiritual equivalent of Willy Wonka's golden ticket, something for us to protect and cherish until that day when we enter the pearly gates. We are elect to serve. We are chosen for a task. We are chosen because God wants to give us a job on this earth. We have an eternal foundation so that we can build on that foundation. We have eternal roots so that we can bear fruit that can bless the world around us. In that sense being elect in Christ is like being elected to public office. As Richard Mouw points out in his book, it would be a very strange thing if, after winning an election to the school board, your local representative spent her entire term celebrating the fact of her election. It would be really odd if she chose to recognize her election by throwing a weekly party celebrating the outcome. No, after the election it's time to go to work. It's now your job to improve the schools for our children. The people elected you to work. And that is how it is with our election in Jesus.

You see that sense of election as you read further in Ephesians. In chapter one, Paul lays the foundation of their election, their security. But as you read through the rest of the letter you hear Paul calling them to build on that foundation. In chapter 2 he imagines a community where the ancient walls of suspicion and hatred between people are broken down in Jesus Christ. In chapter 4 he imagines a community of people who will work at fellowship and unity with one another, who will love each other in the Spirit. In chapter 4 and 5 he imagines a community of people who will work at moral transformation, they will fight anger and laziness and lies and sexual immorality, and they will be children of light in the world. In chapter 6 he imagines a community who will work at overcoming the evil one, who will put on the armor of God and send evil packing! Paul imagines election as the foundation for a community of joyful, transformative work! Election is not meant to raise an army of problems; it's meant to raise an army of servants!

So, Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.

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