

# God's Eternal Election: A Sermon Study on Ephesians 1:4–6

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[This is the tenth in a series of sermon studies on the 12 articles of the Formula of Concord. The Synod's Formula of Concord Anniversary Committee proposed the series to the homiletics department of the Seminary as a part of its planned observance of the anniversaries of the Formula of Concord and of the Book of Concord.]

The historical background for this article is supplied on pages 195ff. of the *Concordia Triglotta*. The article itself concedes that “no public dissension has occurred among the theologians of the Augsburg Confession.” It adds, however, that the article is included in the Formula “lest offensive disputations concerning the same be instituted in the future.” It also remarks that it is “a consolatory article, if treated properly.”

This latter remark shows in what direction a sermon on this doctrine ought to move. We consider it ill-advised in a sermonic treatment of the doctrine of election to refer to all of the questions which have been raised about it and all of the heresies which have arisen in connection with it. To mention these things could raise questions in the minds of the hearers which had never entered their minds before, set them to trying to master this doctrine with their logic, and deprive them of the comfort which this doctrine is intended to supply. We want to aim for assurance and comfort on the part of our hearers. The discussion of questions and heresies is best reserved for a teaching situation where it is possible to ask questions and to call for further explanation.

Ephesians 1:4–6, the text which we are suggesting for a presentation involving Article XI, and Romans 8:28–30 are the two instances in which our Lord goes into some detail concerning the doctrine of election. Otherwise, believers are simply referred to as the “elect” or their security is simply taken for granted (Mt 24:22, 24).

The mood of the apostle as he wrote the words of our text was one of high exultation. In the previous verse, filled with the spirit of worship and joy, he had given vent to his holy enthusiasm with a mighty Hallelujah, “Blessed be God.” The reason for this mood is that through Christ God has showered upon us all of the spiritual blessings which heaven can bestow. Beginning with verse 4 Paul counts up some of these blessings: election, forgiveness, understanding of God's purpose in history, faith in Jesus.

Concerning our election he says that it took place “before the foundation of the world.” Hence we speak of God's eternal election. The very fact that it did take place before time began means that nothing that happened in time influenced Him. In drawing a parallel between election and the choice of Jacob as bearer of the promise the apostle comments: “The children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth” (Ro 9:11). That God acted independently, apart from any influence emanating in time, is stressed with the words in our text: “according to the good pleasure of his will.” When the apostle further speaks of “the glory of his grace,” he impresses upon us the fact that there was nothing cold or ruthless about the exercise of God's will in the process of election.

Since the objects of election were part of the sinful and condemned human race which would inhabit the world after it had been founded and man had fallen into sin, something had to be done about the problem of guilt and condemnation. In His grace God planned the rescue from guilt and condemnation through Christ, “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Re 13:8). “In him” the election took place.

For us, who are living in time, the gift of the Savior is the evidence that God loves us. “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son” (Jn 3:16). “God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Ro 5:18). Furthermore, when the apostle speaks of the effecting of the eternal purpose involved in election, he points to God's love as the motivating force behind his action: “God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us” (2:4). It would be a strange omission if he had failed to mention God's love as that which moved Him to elect us. It is for that reason among others that we prefer the punctuation which puts a comma after the “without blame” in verse 4 and connects the words “in love” with the following “having predestinated.”

Looking at this verb “predestinated,” we are made to realize that election involved not only people but also a purpose. The root in the term is ὄριον, boundary. The picture which the word calls to mind is that God in His election charted a path or course which the elect were to follow, a course on which they would be bounded, hemmed in, if you please, so that they would move to neither the right nor the left but head straight for a goal. All of this, the election in Christ involving the setting of a goal, the entire process motivated by grace and love, took place before the foundation of the world.

Incidentally one might want to point out that the word “foundation” is not “evolution,” that it points to a founder, a creator. We might want to do that to show that the notion that creation by fiat is taught only in Genesis 1 and 2 is false, that the doctrine of creation is interwoven into all parts of the Bible. To grant the theory of evolution equal status with the doctrine of creation is to undermine the reliability of the entire Bible and with it the certainty of salvation. If this point is to be made in a sermon on this text, it must be kept incidental lest the chief thrust of the text is obscured.

At this juncture a closer look at the word “elected” is in place. There have been those who tried to make of election only the decision or will of God that those people who would believe in Jesus should be saved. But that is not what the word “elect” means. It means that out of a larger number certain individuals are selected. Dogmatians call the large number the *massa perditā*, the lost mass. That election refers to persons is evident from the fact that the first person plural occurs no less than four times in the text. What has been developed above makes it clear that there was nothing about the individuals whom God elected that motivated Him to elect them. It was all a matter of His will, His love, His grace.

What purpose did God have in mind when He elected these individuals? The first purpose mentioned is “that we should be holy and without blame before him.” If we follow the punctuation of the KJV, we shall have to add the words “in love” to this revelation of God’s purpose. We have already said why we believe that these words belong with what follows. If we read them with the statement of God’s purpose, then it means that He had in mind a holy conduct on our part. The FC seems to favor this interpretation. As one of the reasons why Scripture teaches the doctrine of election it mentions to “urge to godliness, Eph 1,4” (1:14 here is evidently a typographical error, FC, S.D., XI,12). And again: “God in His purpose and counsel ordained...5. That He will also sanctify in love those who are thus justified, as St. Paul says, Eph 1,4” (FC, S.D., XI,19). But we may disagree with this particular exegesis without thereby denying the doctrinal truth which is set forth here and supported by other passages of Scripture, e.g., Titus 2:14; Ephesians 2:10.

In favor of understanding “holy and without blame before him” as referring to our justification, our change of status before God from that of condemned sinners to that of those who stand before Him as having no sin which might be charged against them, is the consideration that immediately after speaking of our election the apostle tells what God did to render us “holy and without blame before him.” Verse 7 reminds us that in connection with His beloved Son “we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins.” When we examine our thoughts, words, and deeds in the light of God’s holy law, we cannot do otherwise than to confess that we are poor miserable sinners who have justly deserved God’s temporal and eternal punishment. Our omniscient God sees even more than we can see. “Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance” (Ps 90:8). Yet in what He determined concerning us when He elected us He planned a way in which “we should be holy and without blame before him.” Truly, our election had to be “in him,” in Christ.

We find the same combination “holy and without blemish” (the original uses the same term which in 1:4 is translated “blame”) in 5:27. Here it is the result of sanctifying and cleansing the church “with the washing of water by the word” (5:26). Here, too, commentators go apart, some applying the words to our sanctification in the narrower sense, others to our justification. We have good warrant for applying it to our justification when we compare these words with the invitation of Ananias to Paul: “Be baptized, and wash away thy sins” (Ac 22:16), for here it is plainly stated that the washing of water by the word (baptism) bestows forgiveness, thus making us “holy and without blemish.”

A third consideration which leads us to regard the term “holy and without blame before him” as referring to our justification is the comparison of our text with Romans 8:29–30. There, after revealing our

eternal election and predestination, the apostle continues: “Whom he did predestinate, them he also called; and whom he called, them he also justified.” “Justified” and “holy and without blame before him” are synonymous.

The distinction between “holy” and “without blame” is that the first is positive, the second negative. Holy means fit to stand in the presence of God as pure, perfectly righteous. “Without blame” reminds us of the constant requirements in the ceremonial law that a beast offered as a sacrifice must be without blemish. This suggests that the worshiper carefully inspected the beast before using it to make sure that nowhere did it have a blemish. So “without blame before him” suggests that even upon closest inspection God would not discover a single taint of sin to charge against His elect.

We might think of what has been discussed above as being the intermediate goal of election with the ultimate goal being “the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself.” The apostle will shortly demonstrate that we are not born as children of God, all talk about the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man to the contrary notwithstanding. We “were by nature the children of wrath” (2:3). The reason for that is the sinfulness of our nature and the resulting sinfulness of our conduct. But when our guilt is removed and we stand before Him holy and without blame, we are fit to be adopted into the family of the holy God. For this present life this insures “boldness and access with confidence” (3:12) to our heavenly Father. It insures comprehensive concern and care through the Son whom the Father gave “to be head over all things to the church” (1:23). For the future it guarantees a share in “the riches of the glory of his inheritance” (1:18), the “inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation” (1 Pe 1:4–5).

How do we become children of God? Our apostle answers: “Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus” (Ga 3:26). Thus it becomes evident that election is unto faith, God’s eternal purpose is attained by bringing us to faith. Election is not because of faith, *intuitu fidei*. That election is unto faith is evident from 11 and 12. No matter whether one takes the “first trusted in Christ” to mean that the Jews believed in the Messiah even before His appearing or that they believed in Him before the Gentiles did, our point is that their believing (or hoping in Christ, as the original reads) came about because they were predestinated. That election is unto faith is clearly stated in Romans 8:30: “Whom he did predestinate, them he also called.”

We have already mentioned that what moved God to elect us was His grace on the one hand and “in Christ” on the other. Our text brings that double emphasis. There seems to be little linguistic justification for the translation “he hath made us acceptable in the beloved.” A better translation would be: “which he graciously bestowed upon us in the beloved.” This designation of the Savior reminds us that both at the inauguration of His ministry and as He approached its climax, His Father voiced His approval of what His Son was doing by saying: “This is my, beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased (Mt 3:17; 17:5).

In Christ, in His grace God elected us “to the praise of the glory of his grace.” Some take this phrase to mean that it was His intention that the elect should praise Him. Others, however, take these words to mean that what God does for the elect shows how wonderful His grace is. This is our view too. Certainly the elect will praise Him. But even without their saying a word, the fact that those who were born entirely corrupt and deserving damnation a thousand times over, through the carrying out of God’s election decree become such who are perfectly righteous, who are dear children of God, who are heirs of heaven and will be in heaven eternally—the very fact that they are such shows how marvelous God’s grace is, how much it can do. They are “to the praise of the glory of his grace.” We have these words as a refrain in verses 12 and 14, and parallel thoughts in 2:7 and 3:10, cf. also 2 Thessalonians 1:10.

One more thought needs to be developed: how can I know whether I am one of the elect? It is not given to us to look behind the scenes to see what God was planning for us back in eternity. Only from what is taking place here in time can we judge what His eternal counsel was. Do we match the description which He in His Word gives of the elect? Are we “holy and without blame before him” (v. 4)? Are we called, are we justified (Ro 8:30)? Are we His children by adoption (v. 5)? For certainty concerning these questions we look not at ourselves but rather at Jesus. Did He live and die for me? Seeing ourselves mentioned in passages such as John 1:29 and 1 Timothy 1:15, because we too are part of the world, we too are sinners, we become sure that we share in the salvation which belongs to the elect. Thus Christ becomes to us what Article XI calls Him, “the

Book of Life” (FC, Epit.,XI,12; S.D.,XI,13, 66). The Article also says, “This eternal election of God is to be considered in Christ, and not outside of or without Christ. For in Christ, the Apostle Paul testifies, Eph. 1:4f., *He hath chosen us before the foundation of the world*” (FC, S.D.,XI,65).

When we are sure that we are among the elect because we know and believe that Jesus saved us, we shall experience the full consolatory power of the doctrine of God’s eternal election. We shall be sure that our lives will be shaped in such a manner that God’s eternal and loving purpose concerning us will be accomplished (Ro 8:28). We shall be sure that at the end of our pilgrimage on earth Jesus will give us eternal life (Jn 10:28). That covers everything.

### **Homiletical Suggestions**

We shall now present a suggested sermon outline which incorporates for preaching purposes the material presented above. We suggest this basic outline:

#### **God’s Eternal Election**

- I. It took place in eternity.
- II. It decreed our salvation.
- III. It brings solid comfort.

This can be expanded as follows:

Introduction: Article XI calls the doctrine of God’s eternal election “consolatory.” We pray that we may experience the comfort which it brings as we consider: **God’s Eternal Election.**

#### I. It took place in eternity.

##### A. The time

1. Text: “before the foundation of the world.” “Foundation” implies a Founder. Evolution says that energy and matter always existed. Unreasonable. Common sense tells us that for every effect there must be a cause. So when the text speaks as it does, it reveals that God is the cause for the existence of the universe and the world. He always existed, He is eternal. So the apostle points us back to Genesis 1 and 2 as history.
2. Before what is told us in Genesis, God did what is told us in our text: chose (elected), predestinated. Since no human being had as yet come into existence, nothing that man did influenced God’s election. He was moved to do what He did only by “the good pleasure of his will.”

##### B. The motive

1. God is triune. As the Father existed from eternity, so did the Son: John 1:1. Even in eternity the Father had already decided that the Son should die for the sins of the world, Revelation 13:8b. Because of what He would do for sinners God’s eternal election took place “in him.”
2. This shows what kind of thoughts God had when His eternal election took place. It was not a case of saying, “I’m God, I can do as I please.” Nor was He moved to elect anyone on the basis of what he would do or believe. Human beings did not deserve a Savior. It was God’s undeserved love, His grace, which moved Him to give a Savior, John 3:16. The same love was involved in His eternal election. So the election which took place in Christ was prompted by “the glory of his grace which He graciously gave us in the beloved” (v. 6). Hence: “in love having predestinated us.” This was the nature of “the good pleasure of his will.”

Transition: But what does “elect” mean?

## II. It decreed our salvation.

### A. Election involved people.

1. Negative. It is more than a term for the general intention of God when He gave a Savior “that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (Jn 3:16).
2. Positive
  - a) Election happened to people. “We” and “us” occur four times in the text.
  - b) God’s all-seeing eye surveyed in eternity the entire future population of the world. Out of this multitude He chose, elected some.
  - c) Then He predestinated, determining the goal which they were to reach after their life on earth and the course which they were to follow in reaching it.

### B. Election involved a plan for people.

1. “Holy and without blame”
  - a) Holy—pure, righteous. Without blame, blemish, before Him like Old Testament sacrifices. Nothing would be detected in them which deserved punishment. Such a condition was possible only in Christ, who would take away sin.
  - b) Scripture reveals that only believers have forgiveness (Ro 3:28; 8:1). So election involved God’s purpose to bring the elect to faith. Paul says: “Whom he did predestinate, them he also called” (Ro 8:30).
2. “The adoption of children”
  - a) This implies that the human beings whom God elected would not be born as His dear children, (2:3c). Before they could be adopted as His children, Christ would have to be slain for them to remove the guilt of sinfulness and sinning which called forth God’s wrath.
  - b) The Word reveals that only believers are children of God: John 1:12; Galatians 3:26. Hence election means that God determined to bring the elect to faith.
  - c) “In him” God planned to make them His children. A wonderfully changed situation would result: Psalms 103:13; Ephesians 3:12; Romans 8:17a; Ephesians 1:18c.

Transition: What is said about election is wonderful. But are we among the elect?

## III. It brings solid comfort.

### A. Am I one of the elect?

1. Negative. God has not given us a list of the names of the elect. We cannot look behind the scenes to see whether God in eternity was thinking of me.
2. Positive. But He has given us a description of the elect.
  - a) Does it fit us?
    - 1) Are we holy and without blame before Him? 1 John 1:7c; Romans 8:33–34.
    - 2) Are we His children? Galatians 4:6.
  - b) If ever we are tempted to be unsure whether we are one of the elect, forget all questions and look to Christ. Article XI calls Him the Book of Life in which we read of our election. Did Jesus die for you? 1 Timothy 1:15. The Word works and strengthens faith. Since we know Jesus and believe in Him, we are one of the elect.

### B. Then I have firm comfort.

1. For this life, Romans 8:28.
2. For eternity, John 10:28.

Conclusion: This is the comfort of election. May the Lord keep it strong in our hearts until He brings us to the goal which He set for us even before the foundation of the world, our eternal home in heaven. Amen. Or TLH 528:1.