

To The Praise Of His Glorious Grace--

What Election Means For Me, My Member,
And My Non-Member

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We are God’s children by grace, by God’s grace alone. What a blessing for us to cherish as we recognize our sins and weaknesses. We are saved *sola gratia*.

Likewise, God’s desire for all lost souls is that they be rescued from eternal misery by his grace. That grace provided a Savior for the world. What a distinctive proclamation we can take to souls burdened with guilt and searching for human solutions. As long as we live, it will be our joy to declare it.

Grace, the unmerited favor that flows from the heart of God is at the center of all he has done and continues to do for our welfare. And certainly it is at the heart of the doctrine of election. God’s electing of those who will be with him eternally is an election of grace. The teaching of predestination or election has been often misunderstood. That misunderstanding has created controversy in the history of the church. It brings quizzical looks from people learning about it for the first time. As a result, some feel nervous speaking of it. Yet we know that all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching us to know and serve our God. So the Formula of Concord states: “If we abide by this teaching and cling to it, it is a very useful, saving, consoling teaching” (SD, XI, 43).¹ The scriptural doctrine of election wonderfully proclaims the grace of our God. How clear this was to St. Paul as he wrote to the Ephesians, “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves” (Ephesians 1:4–6).² So, we also want to praise God for his grace as we consider what election means for ourselves, our members, and our non-members.

What Election Means For Me

We have studied one of the key biblical texts (*sedes doctrinae*) on election as well as the confession of the Formula of Concord at this conference. As we apply this teaching to ourselves and our ministry let’s consider a basic definition. Election is the Bible’s teaching that our Lord, before this world’s creation, chose, in Christ, and by his grace alone, those individuals who will be called to faith, justified, and finally glorified with eternal life in heaven. Consider these words from Paul to the Romans:

²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. ³¹ What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ... ³⁷ we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Rom. 8:28–32, 37).

Just imagine what sublime comfort this gave the former Pharisee, the one who called himself “the worst of sinners” (1 Tim. 1:16). Paul had the blood of Stephen and others on his hands. He had been

¹ Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions. 2005 (P. T. McCain, Ed.) (608). St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.

² All Scripture references are from The Holy Bible, New International Version, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984

persecuting Jesus himself. How Satan must have sought to crush Paul under his record of wrongs. How Paul must have hated to remember his past. But, how he loved to look to his future! He rejoiced to know that because of Christ all his sin was forgiven and forgotten. And Paul thrilled to be able to confess to fellow sinners what he knew because of God's election: "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39).

And who of us in the public ministry doesn't rejoice to find his peace and comfort in those truths of God's grace? Perhaps you have heard someone comment how wonderful her pastor is. And perhaps the speaker went on to suggest that the pastor must even be a bit closer to God because of his position. "Certainly he isn't likely to fall into the sins that others commit." And hearing such a comment, we found a place to remind that person that pastors too need God's grace. When we remember our many sins we too run for refuge to the cross. And when we prepare to present God's law and gospel in a sermon, Bible class or counseling session, we first let the word of God cut us, so that it can also heal us. And it does heal us.

Of course, the devil is not happy when that happens. And as the accursed accuser, he wants me to despair over my past. How he delights to remind me of my unworthiness for my calling, of the laziness or lack of love, or foolish mistakes that have marred my ministry. How he delights in torturing my conscience with the knowledge of my failures, the impurity of my own heart and the death I most certainly deserve. How he desires to frighten me with doubt about my future. Holy Scripture tells me that terrible days are coming before the Lord returns. The hearts of many will grow cold as they abandon their first love and lose the light of the gospel. And I, even I who preach it weekly, am so weak, and so susceptible to the world's seductions. So, what will happen to me?

Well, God himself tells me through the apostle John and in words that will not be broken. St. John says: "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 Jn. 5:13). And what are these things? "God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life" (1 Jn. 5:11-12). And our Shepherd Savior tells me, "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (Jn. 15:16). And he assures me, "My sheep listen to my voice...I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand" (Jn. 10:27-28). And this is true, and not because of anything in me. My future is secure in his flock, as one of his elect, by grace and grace alone.

But sooner or later, as I consider the doctrine of election, the inevitable question comes, "How do I know that God chose *me*? How can I be certain that *I* am among the elect?"

God wants me to be confident of my eternal future with him. He wants this purest gospel to be my comfort. But I cannot discover my place among the elect by researching the eternal past, or by prying into the very mind of God. I cannot deduce it by the power of human reasoning, for to my clouded thinking too much about God's ways seems unreasonable. I don't look for proof in some inner feeling, or in some immediate, special revelation from God.

Consider again what Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome: "Those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified" (Rom. 8:30). God's election before time

is not to be separated from all God has done to save me in time. Because he elected me, he also called me to faith in Christ as my Savior. To the church at Thessalonica Paul wrote: “For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction” (1 Thess. 1:4-5). When Paul and Barnabas brought the word of God to the Gentiles in Pisidian Antioch, Luke comments that “all who were appointed for eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48). God saves those he has elected through faith in his Son. I have faith and that faith is evidence of God’s election.

But here a caution is in order. I am saved *through* faith, but not *because of* faith. I am saved because of faith’s object. In short, I cannot put faith in my faith.

I can recall a brief period of time in my childhood when I occasionally wondered, “Do I truly believe as I should? I say that I believe. I confess my faith when I speak the creed in church. But is my faith real, or it is something I confess simply because I’ve grown up in a Christian home. Do I really, sincerely, properly believe? If I don’t, I won’t fool God and I’ll be in trouble.” Satan was sowing seeds of doubt.

Years later, I was taught an important truth about faith. Faith can be like a little mouse that runs and hides when you go looking for it, when you try to find it, measure it, and examine it. Therefore we must find confidence not in our faith itself, in its strength, its power, its sincerity, but in Christ who is the only sure foundation and object of our faith. If someone had asked me, while I was wondering about my faith, “What will carry you to heaven?” I’m sure I would have immediately responded, “Its Jesus. He will get me there.” In a sermon on “God’s Eternal Election” Dr. Siegbert Becker talked about Luther’s early doubts: “When Luther was a monk in the monastery, he was greatly troubled by the doctrine of election and he worried about it day and night. One day he told Dr. Staupitz, who was the vicar general of the Augustinian order of monks to which Luther belonged, about his fears. Dr. Staupitz told him, ‘Brother Martin, first find yourself in the wounds of Christ, and then you can be sure of your election.’”³

In order to find my comfort in the wounds of Christ, I need to go back to the sure promises of God’s word that proclaim them to me. As Paul explained to the believers in Thessalonica, “We ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief *in the truth*” (2 Thess. 2:13). And the Formula of Concord says wisely, “There is no doubt that God foresaw before the time of the world, and still knows, exactly, which people who are called will believe and which will not believe. He also knows which of the converted will persevere and which will not persevere... However, God has reserved this mystery for His wisdom... Therefore, we should not reason in our thoughts, draw conclusions, or inquire curiously into these matters, but we should cling to His revealed Word, to which He points us” (SD, XI, 54-55).⁴

My personal faith is founded on and will always be fed by the objective statements of God’s universal grace found in the infallible Holy Scriptures: God loves all; Jesus died for all; Christ atoned for every sinner; all have been justified freely by his grace; God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ. If

³ Siegbert Becker, “God’s Eternal Election”, The Word Goes On, (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992) p. 70

⁴ Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions. 2005 (P. T. McCain, Ed.) (610). St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.

he loves, died for, atoned for, justified, and reconciled every sinner, then he did this for me. And all of this is not an accident as the doctrine of election reveals. By his grace, and because of the merits of Christ he has elected me to be his own, all “to the praise of his glorious grace” (Eph. 1:6).

Finally, if I am to derive the comfort and certainty God wants me to have from the doctrine of election, I need to be diligent in listening to the voice of my Shepherd in his word. The Formula of Concord states: “Therefore, there is no question that lack of repentance or despair should not in any way be caused or strengthened by the sound sense or right use of this teaching about God’s eternal foreknowledge. The Scriptures teach this doctrine only to direct us to the Word, to encourage repentance and godliness, and to strengthen faith and assure us of our salvation.” (SD, XI, 12).⁵ Should my human reason suggest that since I’m elected, an indifference to the word or a lifestyle unfaithful to my Lord are of no consequence, then I have abused and mistreated this precious teaching. Because I am elected, God has called me to faith. That faith is worked and sustained through his Word. Has my busy schedule, yes even my busy pastor’s life, become an excuse to neglect the “one thing needed” for my own soul? Is my devotional life all but missing? Then my sinful nature needs the admonition that without his Word my faith can dry up like the plant in my office that I neglected to water. Or, has the lifestyle I lived when I’m not in the public eye, or in the parish eye, failed to reflect that I am one of Christ’s redeemed who now lives under him and delights to serve him? Have I forgotten my first love? Then I need the warning that a fruitless faith is really no faith. “We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?” Paul says (Rom. 6:2).

And when the warnings of God’s law strike my heart and crush my pride, then God works his work of repentance. Then my loving heavenly Father points me back to the cross where he nailed my sins to his dear Son so that they are as far from me as east is from west. Then he directs my attention back still farther. He assures me that I am his for eternity, since before creation he elected me to be his own. And all this is to the praise of his glorious grace.

But God beheld my wretched state
Before the world's foundation,
And, mindful of his mercies great,
He planned my soul's salvation.
A Father's heart he turned to me,
Sought my redemption fervently;
He gave His dearest treasure.
(*Christian Worship*, 377:4)

What Election Means For My Member

Since it is our privilege not only to know this peace for ourselves but also to bring it to the sheep we are called to serve, we can now consider what the doctrine of election, the election of grace means for our members.

⁵ Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions. 2005 (P. T. McCain, Ed.) (604). St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.

Our teachers state that the doctrine of election is not a foundational or fundamental doctrine (“one that is essential for salvation.”⁶). A Christian who has not learned about the matter of his election can still be elect and saved. Yet, God has a purpose in telling us about our election. And we can teach it for the same purpose. Consider some of the prominent places election is presented in Holy Scripture and the purpose for which it is presented. The doctrine of election is given to believers as a wonderful comfort, an assurance that our salvation is not an accident, nor does it depend on us, because it is by grace.

Romans 8:28-30 - ²⁸ *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.* ²⁹ *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.* ³⁰ *And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.*

Paul’s letter is addressed to the Christians in Rome, those “called to be saints” (Romans 1:7). In the beginning chapters of the letter Paul addresses man’s sin and God’s solution: justification through faith on the basis of Christ’s atoning sacrifice. From there he speaks of the new life of the believer, the struggle against sin and the sufferings a believer endures while he awaits the glory that is to be revealed. In light of that suffering and struggle Paul informs his dear Christian friends that nothing will be able to keep God’s saving plans from coming to pass for them. God predestined them to be called, justified and glorified. He reveals this truth for their comfort, to assure them that nothing will separate them from the love of God.

Ephesians 1:4-6,11 - ⁴ *For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love* ⁵ *he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—* ⁶ *to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.* ¹¹ *In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.*

In this letter, addressed to “the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:1), the apostle gives thanks to God for their faith, reminds them they have been made alive in Christ and prays that they will better know his love. Before he does that, at the start of the letter, he praises God that he and they were chosen by God, elected. He thus assures them of their place in Christ, that they might celebrate God’s grace and stand firm in the face of all spiritual enemies.

2 Thessalonians 2:13-14 - ¹³ *But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.* ¹⁴ *He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Paul wrote two letters to “the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thess. 1:1). It was a small body of believers who felt the flames of persecution even while the apostle was still with them. They were a “model” congregation. Yet they continued to face severe suffering for the Gospel. In the second letter he foretells trouble for the church in the coming of the “man of lawlessness” “in accordance with the work of Satan” (2 Thess. 2:9), and marked by evil that deceives. In order that these believers do not despair over their future, Paul tells them they were chosen by God to be saved and enjoy his glory. In that assurance they were to hold firm to the apostolic teaching.

⁶ Lyle W. Lange, God So Loved the World, (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2005) p. 430

1 Peter 1:1-2; 2:9 - ¹ *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia,* ² *who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance. ...* ⁹ *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*

Peter addressed his letter to God's "elect," his "chosen" ones. These believers too had to "suffer grief in all kinds of trials" (1 Pt. 1:6). Yet God had an imperishable inheritance in store for them. They were to find security in the grace of God that chose them. They were to zealously declare that grace of God to others.

2 Timothy 1:9-10 - ⁹ *[God,] who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time,* ¹⁰ *but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*

Paul wrote these words "to Timothy, my dear son" (2 Tim. 1:2) as he faced martyrdom for proclaiming the faith. He gives all credit to God for their salvation. The knowledge of that grace, given before the beginning of time, will encourage Timothy so that he too will not be ashamed to testify about Christ.

John 10:27-29 - ²⁷ *My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.* ²⁸ *I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.* ²⁹ *My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand."*

It is true that Jesus' words were spoken to those who did not listen to his voice and because of that were cutting themselves off from their Shepherd. But to all the sheep who are listening and trusting (it's possible Jesus' disciples were present but not referred to), there is the wonderful comfort that they will never be stolen from the Shepherd. Certainly God wants those sheep we serve to rejoice in the knowledge that they are safe in him for eternity.

The sheep I serve faces great spiritual enemies. The devil is constantly on the attack with the goal of filling him with fear and doubt and robbing him of his faith. He has his own weaknesses: a tendency to become confused and doubtful, to forget the good purposes God has for him, and to focus on himself as the solution to his problems. Is my member tempted to think God has forgotten him? Is he fearful because he sees many turn away from the Lord and worries about his own fragile faith? God wants me to tell him that he is so concerned about his conversion, justification, preservation, and glorification in heaven that he planned it and ordained it even before creation. Do not be afraid. God's plan cannot fail! (These are the points made by the Formula of Concord, SD XI, in paragraphs 45-47.)

Is my member worn out from her struggle with cancer, fearful of the pain, losing patience waiting for the day she will be free of it? Is my member suffering every day under a boss at work who scorns her faith, or is she continually pressured by an unbelieving spouse to abandon the practice of her faith? God wants this sheep to know that he has elected her and determined that no trials and tribulations will separate her from his love. God determined that all things will work for her good. God will carry on to completion the good work he began in her. (This is the point made by in the Formula of Concord, SD XI, in paragraphs 48-49.)

Still the devil (often using sinful human reasoning as his ally) does not cease his endeavors to dilute and destroy the comfort my member might have in knowing God's grace that elected him to salvation in Christ. So the questions continue: "How could God ever forgive me for the affair and abortion? I know I have trouble forgiving myself." "Alzheimer's runs in my family. I'm afraid of what God will think of me if I forget about him." "I keep trying to follow God and break my abuse of alcohol. I ask God to forgive me, but I fall again. How can I really be a Christian on my way to heaven when I have such a destructive habit?"

How do I answer such fears and dangerous introspections? I tell my member that Jesus did not die for her because she has lived a fine, moral life. God doesn't remember him with love because he never forgot God. He won't be safe with God because he possesses the strength to overcome his sinful habits, or because his faith has no flaw. Jesus died for him and will keep him safe because he loves him and only because of his love. Believe it! Furthermore, the Lord foresaw this sheep as his own, and chose him as his own even before the creation of the world and clearly before he could do anything to earn or deserve it! Believe it! My member's election and his final salvation are certain, not because he is less sinful or more godly than another, but because of God's grace in Christ. Professor Deutschlander describes what this truth does to the heart of the troubled believer:

It is simply impossible to exhaust the comfort for each penitent sinner that comes from this truth. Am I good enough for God to choose me? Is my faith strong enough for God to elect me? Away with all such questions! They have nothing to do with God's choice. Your faith is neither your own work, nor the result of your own merit nor the consequence of a coincidental birth in a Christian family or near a Christian church. No, it is all God's arrangement. It is all the result of his will in eternity worked out in time, reaching its blessed fruition in you in the here and now. Have you been baptized? God arranged all of history so that you would be baptized. Do you at least in your mind's eye fall down before the altar of God in church on Sunday to confess that you deserve nothing but wrath and punishment? It is God effective ruling over history that you hear in the voice of the pastor, Jesus' own voice: "Be of good cheer! Your sins are forgiven! The one who comes to me, I will never cast out!"⁷

As we can see, in bringing God's comfort to my troubled member, I point him to his election, but not to election "all by itself." "It is not as though election included nothing further, or nothing more belonged to it, or nothing more were to be considered in it, than that God foresaw who and how many were to be saved and who and how many were to be damned" (SD, XI, 9)⁸ Imagine a member is sitting in your office and says to you, "Pastor, I want to know for sure that I am going to heaven." It would not be helpful for you to respond, "Okay, let's take a look and see if you are elected." We cannot pry into the mind of God to find that information. We cannot go back and visit that moment when God's election occurred. We are careful not to separate God's election by grace in eternity from what he continues to do by grace in time. If we do, the human mind can easily run astray, in a couple different directions. One direction leads to a kind of fatalism: "If God only elected certain people, and if I am not one of them, then there is no hope for me, no matter what Jesus did, or how strongly I believe, or how fervently I follow." Such a statement is misguided first because it comes close to saying that God passed by me, or

⁷ Daniel Deutschlander, *The Narrow Lutheran Middle*, (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2011) p. 106

⁸ Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions. 2005 (P. T. McCain, Ed.) (604). St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.

even chose not to save me. But God's election concerns only those who are saved. No one is lost because God chose or elected to pass him by. Furthermore this statement does not consider what God in his grace did in time and revealed in his sacred word. Point that questioning soul to the cross. Let him see again that Jesus died for all, therefore Jesus died for him. Lead him to find comfort in the sacrifice that reconciled him to his heavenly Father, and to marvel at the grace of God which will carry him through this life and home to heaven. Then remind him that all of this was God's purpose for him. It is what God planned for him and elected him to receive, even before the world's foundation.

But failing to look at election properly by separating it from the saving work of God that follows, could also result in my member going down a different but equally wrong road to a false security. I cannot recall a member ever saying to me in just these words, "*Because I am one of the elect*, I can live in whatever sinful way I wish. And I don't have to come to worship or read the Bible because I'll be saved no matter what." But such a statement isn't much different from saying, "Don't worry that I haven't been in church in six months, pastor. I still have my faith. Don't worry about that little sin in my life. God understands me. I still talk to him. I'll be just fine." Election comfort is for the new man. The sinful nature speaking in those examples needs the warnings of the law.

Election brings comfort and assurance to the soul who is clinging to Christ. God has elected souls to be called to faith and though that faith, constantly fed by the means of grace, to find peace in the justification God declares to us because of Christ. Election doesn't give comfort to the person who is neglecting those means of grace so that his faith starves and dies. Similarly election doesn't give comfort to the person who is living in unrepentant sin and therefore is not yearning for and clinging to the good news of God's forgiveness. In short, a person cannot take comfort in election while he is despising the gospel. Such a person is not praising God for the glory of his grace, which is what election teaches us to do. Election teaches us to look to Christ and to find our peace in what he's done for us. Pieper comments, "The recognition of one's election and faith in the Gospel are identical."⁹

What about a plan for teaching the doctrine of election in our parishes? This doctrine is "solid food." While Christians of any age are comforted by the simple statement that God planned their salvation before creation, a fuller treatment of this doctrine best serves those who are ready to go beyond elementary Scripture truths. Our WELS Christ-Light curriculum for Lutheran Elementary Schools and Sunday Schools has no presentation of election that I can recall. The Gausewitz and Kuske catechism texts include some of the verses where election is referred to but not in reference to election specifically. I don't believe the terms "election" or "predestination" are found in either book. Obviously the individual pastor will need to determine to what extent this doctrine is addressed in youth or adult confirmation classes. The teacher will want to stress that we look in faith to Christ and all he has done for us to be sure that we are among the elect.

When it comes to teaching those who are "young" in the faith, let's keep in mind that election is not to be separated from what follows in God's order of salvation, his calling, justification and glorification, all by grace in Christ. We could say that the teaching of election really begins with the proper teaching of other Second and Third Article doctrines: Christ's atonement, justification, and conversion by the work of the Holy Spirit. When Christians have a grasp of what God says to us about these doctrines, they have a firm foundation for going on to the deeper teaching about election.

⁹ Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, Vol. 3, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), p. 483

For more mature members, Bible classes will be welcome opportunities for believers to dig deeply into what God's word says and doesn't say about election. What better opportunity for your members to raise their questions or for the pastor to discover erroneous ideas that can be corrected by God's word. A Bible study on the book of Romans or Ephesians could naturally discuss this doctrine in the context of the apostolic instruction given to first century congregations. A doctrinal study of our justification could take up the related subject of election. An NPH Bible study kit has been produced as a companion to the People's Bible Teachings volume on election itself ("Predestination"). Why not take advantage of the work of the reformers and study through Article XI of the Formula of Concord? And, if you are a pastor who loves church history, a look at some of the controversies that have troubled Lutheranism would almost certainly have to include those involving the doctrine of election.

Whether it is in a classroom, at the sick bed, or from the pulpit, directing God's people to his grace in Christ will teach them the basis for their election, and finding their confidence in all he has done for them, they will learn to count themselves among the elect. When carefully presented, the doctrine of election will bring assurance to the saints that they are safe in Jesus' hands, for God himself has planned and determined it, all to the praise of his glorious grace.

Alleluia! Let praises ring!
Unto the Lamb of God we sing,
In whom we are elected.
He bought the Church with his own blood;
He cleansed her in that blessed flood
And as his bride selected.
Holy, Holy Is our union
And communion. His befriending
Gives us joy and peace unending.
(Christian Worship, 241:2)

What Election Means For My Non-Member

The apostle Paul arrived in the city of Corinth in the year 50 or 51 A.D. on his 2nd missionary journey. What an exciting journey that must have been. First, Paul and Silas took opportunity to encourage the believers in Syria and Cilicia (Acts 15:41). Then at Lystra Paul added another missionary worker to the team, young Timothy, his son in the faith. While at Troas Paul saw the vision of the man of Macedonia, calling, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9). The Lord was directing Paul to carry the gospel to Europe, and he and his companions did. They experienced the thrill of sharing the word in new places but at the same time faced hardships and attacks for the Lord. At Philippi the apostle was beaten and jailed. At Thessalonica he narrowly missed the mob that meant him harm and fled the city. We are not surprised that Paul would need the Lord's encouragement when he met opposition again in the city of Corinth (Acts 18:6). It was there that the Lord spoke to him in a vision and said, "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city" (Acts 18:9-10). Paul's mission work was to continue in Corinth. The Lord knew all those who would be brought to faith in him and he wanted them to be gathered. His words parallel those in John 10:16: "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I

must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.” Later, when Paul was in prison in Rome, he wrote to his companion Timothy, “Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory” (2 Tim.2:10). From the words of this missionary we see that God’s eternal election of grace does have application to our mission work. Here, as well as in our ministry to Jesus’ gathered sheep, a correct understanding of election and related doctrines is needed if our labors for the Lord will indeed be for the praise of his glorious grace.

Since the purpose of teaching election is to comfort Christians, the doctrine of election won’t usually be part of our outreach conversations with those who are not yet believers. What will election mean *to* unbelieving non-members? It probably won’t mean anything but confusion because they don’t yet grasp God’s grace. In a tract on election by C.F.W. Walther, published in 1881 it is stated: “Should this pamphlet fall into the hands of such a reader also who is not yet a living and believing Christian, we advise him either not to read it at all, or, at least, not before he also has become a living and believing Christian. For before this is done, what this pamphlet contains is not food for him.”¹⁰ There may of course be people on our prospect list who have confessed their Christian faith to us. In those cases, as with members, there may be occasions when election could be discussed to help them better understand God’s grace. But with those who are not yet able to confess faith in Christ as Savior the presentation of election will wait.

Nevertheless, we can talk about what the doctrine of election means *for* unbelieving non-members. This doctrine will help prepare us and inform us for our work with those not yet in Jesus’ flock. A proper understanding of election and related doctrines is important if we are to understand who they are, what our role is in reaching them, and if God’s grace is to stay front and center in our outreach work.

Picture in your mind that person who called you looking for help because he found your church’s website while surfing the internet. His life is a mess. He is searching for the truth, but doesn’t yet know it is to be found in Jesus Christ. Or, picture the unbelieving friend you met in your neighborhood or at that place where you volunteer in your community, the person you are now including in your nightly prayers. What follows are some of the things you and I will want to remember about our lost neighbor, things that we know because of election and related doctrines.

- 1. My friend has no ability whatsoever, in himself, to accept or believe the message of the gospel. He is utterly dead in sin. Scripture says, “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient” (Ephesians 2:1–2).***

This position is opposed by the Arminian idea that there is some spark of goodness in every individual which could contribute to his turning to the Lord, being convinced of the truth of God’s word, and “making his decision.” We know however, that all are dead in sin and that “the sinful mind is hostile to God” (Rom. 8:7). I can expect to see evidence of this in my friend’s unfavorable (even if polite) remarks about religion, the Bible, and those who follow it. The elect are chosen by God’s grace alone. They are called and gathered because of his grace alone. If my friend’s heart is to be changed, that change will be

¹⁰ C.F.W. Walther, “The Doctrine Of Election Presented In Questions And Answers, ” (St. Louis, Mo, 1881) <<http://www.projectwittenberg.org/etext/walther/Tracts/WaltherDoctrineofElection1.txt>>

the work of someone outside of himself. Changing hearts is the work of the Holy Spirit through the powerful, life-giving word of the gospel.

- 2. At the same time, I also know that my unbelieving friend has not been predestined by God to be passed over, or even damned to hell (nor has any other soul).***

If that were the case, what an awful desperation would pour into my heart concerning the lost friend about whom I care. Even while love will lead me to warn that hell lies ahead for all who finally reject Christ, it is not because of an irrevocable predestination by God. In fact, Holy Scripture teaches me that...

- 3. My lost friend is loved by God. And God so loved him that before the world's creation he planned to send his Son as Savior to die for him and for everyone. In his grace God has provided full atonement for the sins of his soul and of every soul. "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2).***

This position is opposed by the Calvinist, who cannot conceive of God shedding the blood of his Son for those who will spend eternity as his enemies (the doctrine of limited atonement). But even if my friend is the "hard-core" atheist who ridicules my faith, he is still loved by God. Jesus paid for all of his sins at the cross as well as all of mine. Consider what an amazing message of grace I have to tell!¹¹

- 4. Though I don't possess an inspired list of his elect, God does tell me that he desires my lost friend to be saved and therefore, I will treat him as one whom the Lord wants to gather into his eternal kingdom.***

Consistent with the teaching of limited atonement, Calvin taught that God wasn't serious about saving all people. "There is a universal call, by which God through the eternal peaching of the word, invites all men alike even those for whom he designs the call to be a savour of death, and the ground of a severer condemnation. Besides this there is a special call which, for the most part, God bestows on the believers only..."¹² Scripture is clear in telling us "God...wants all men to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:3-4) and takes "no pleasure in the death of the wicked" (Ezek. 33:11). The Formula of Concord states: "We should not think of this call of God, which is made through the preaching of the Word, as a juggler's act...The Holy Spirit wants to be effective through the Word, and to strengthen and give power and ability. It is

¹¹ Do the Reformed, because of Calvin's doctrines of double predestination and limited atonement, have no desire or heart for mission work? We should be careful before asserting that. They seem hold to Calvin's doctrines in different degrees. Not all cheer for the supralapsarian, double predestination position. A quick search of internet blogs and papers will find some who argue for evangelism. But one can find a problem in the content of the "gospel." For example, what comfort and grace is left for the hearer in the message which says that Jesus atoned only for some, but not for all? How do I know if I'm part of the "some"? One Calvinist author proclaims a passion for evangelism, but also states:

The elect are the Father's gift to Christ. Jesus himself vows that of all the Father gives to him, he will not lose any (John 6:39). Since the elect are sinners both by nature and by choice, and since God is a holy God who will not tolerate sin, but must judge it, a substitutionary atonement needed to be made in order to reconcile God to his elect. *And so, the Calvinist does not believe that Jesus Christ died for all men indiscriminately*, but that he laid down his life for the elect, his sheep, his church (John 10:11; 14-16; Eph. 5:25) [Emphasis mine.] Bill Welzien, "Calvinism and Evangelism" The author is the pastor of Keys Chapel OPC in Key West, Fla. Reprinted from [New Horizons](http://www.opc.org/new_horizons/NH01/07b.html), July 2001.
<http://www.opc.org/new_horizons/NH01/07b.html>

¹² Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 2:247, Quoted in Hoenecke, [Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics](#), vol. 3, (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2003) p. 33

God's will that we should receive the Word, believe it, and obey it" (SD, XI, 29).¹³ Therefore, since God is sincere in his gospel call, I also earnestly preach the good news to all. I won't approach my friend with the gospel of life, all the while wondering if God really had death in mind for him. I sincerely proclaim, "Jesus died for all. He is your salvation. Believe it!"

5. *Since those who are elected, are elected "in Christ," because of God's grace and the merits of Christ, there can be no salvation for my friend apart from Christ.*

"Progressive Christianity" asserts that "the teachings of Jesus provide but one of many ways to experience the Sacredness and Oneness of life." It appeals to those who are "repelled by claims that Christianity is the 'only way.'"¹⁴ But election teaches me that those who are saved are those who are elected in Christ, called to faith in him, and justified and glorified because of him. God's election of grace reminds me that I will face opposition to the cross when I lift it high. But no apologies will be offered to the universalist for telling my friend the one and only way to life, Jesus Christ!

6. *God's plan is to bring the elect to saving faith through the means of grace, the gospel in word and sacrament. The gospel must therefore occupy the central place in my efforts and the church's efforts to reach my friend and all the lost. "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17).*

Any evangelism plan that seeks to gather God's elect must rely on the *gospel* to bring lost souls to Christ. (A self-evident statement). Simply assuming the gospel is already understood is not enough. Pushing the word and sacraments to the side in order to cater to people's "felt needs" has shown itself capable of adding numbers to the church roster, but not to the Body of Christ. Some don't seem to agree. David Valleskey quotes W. Charles Arn: "People today who respond to the Christian faith... are those who respond to the love and caring of Christ's people, not to a set of ideas or theological statements. People are not talked into the kingdom. They are loved in. Reflecting God's unconditional love is the essence of the Christian Gospel."¹⁵ But Valleskey correctly states: "The truth is, people are 'talked into the kingdom.' The Holy Spirit does the work. He carries it out, however, through the words Christians speak..."¹⁶ While I will reflect Christ's love in my actions to my friend, he needs, above all, to hear the loving talk of the kingdom. And when my unbelieving friend (or any prospective member) visits my church, what he sees and hears should be the best vehicles possible for conveying the gospel of the kingdom in our hymns, our preaching, our liturgy, and the administration of and teaching about the sacraments. *Christus pro nobis* should be "center stage".

7. *The doctrine of election reminds me that all the credit in conversion and salvation goes to God.*

My role is to be the planter of the "seed" of the Word, not the one who makes it grow. My task is not to "convince" my seeking friend that Christ is the one he is looking for. Rather it is to connect him to the Word of God through which the Holy Spirit does the "convincing."

¹³ Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions. 2005 (P. T. McCain, Ed.) (606). St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.

¹⁴ <<http://progressivechristianity.org/>>

¹⁵ W. Charles Arn, *Church Growth: State of the Art*, (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1986) pp. 66-67, quoted by David Valleskey in *We Believe Therefore We Speak* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1995) pp. 113-114

¹⁶ Valleskey, *ibid.*, p. 114.

- 8. *It is true that God has chosen, already before creation, those who will believe and be saved. And it is true that he will allow none of them to be lost. Still, the doctrine of election must never become an excuse for not sharing the gospel whenever and wherever I can, with whomever I can, praying that God’s “kingdom come” to them. Romans 10:13–14 tells us, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”¹⁴ How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?”***

A correct view of election will not lead to a fatalistic view of mission work, i.e., “If God has already elected those who will spend eternity in heaven and his plan cannot fail, why do mission work at all?” We are taught that God has elected people to be called to faith and justified. The Holy Spirit calls them through his Word. His great commission directs us as his messengers to go to all nations with that Word. We do so remembering that the gospel is the power of God for salvation. That gospel is meant for all people because it tells all people that Jesus died to save them. So we will not wait for the elect to come to us. But as the Lord sent Jonah out to the great, ungodly city of Nineveh, so he sends us out to “preach the good news to all creation” (Mark 16:15). “A single great commission Compels us from above To plan and work together That all may know Christ’s love.” (CW 566:1)

- 9. *If my unbelieving friend rejects the gospel, the fault belongs with him, not with God and not with the gospel.***

Scripture consistently credits God alone with our conversion and salvation, while assigning to man the responsibility for his separation from God. Recall our Lord’s words, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing” (Matthew 23:37). Sadly, my friend may continue to resist and reject the gospel invitation I bring (many will), and my sorrow over that is part of the cross I bear as a follower of Jesus. But his resistance is not because God has doomed him, or because the good news that Jesus died for sinners doesn’t really apply to him. I won’t let such ideas interfere with my witness to him or shake my confidence in the power of the gospel.

- 10. *Still, I bring the gospel joyfully to my friend and others, with the confident knowledge that while many are lost, God’s word will not return to him empty.***

I know the gospel is the power of God for salvation, though I do not know when and where the Spirit through that gospel will bring people into God’s kingdom. But as long as this world endures, or as long as God allows me to breathe this earth’s air, my energy will be joyfully spent to uncover and gather his elect through the preaching of Christ crucified.

- 11. *When my unbelieving friend repents and believes (has a change of mind and heart worked by God), and is no longer dead spiritually, I will remind myself and explain to him that this is all due to the grace of God. “⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9).***

- 12. *I readily acknowledge that what the Bible teaches about my friend’s salvation presents a paradox to my human reasoning. If he is lost, it is his fault. If he is saved, God gets the credit. How can both statements be true? I dare not try to solve that puzzle to the satisfaction of my human reason, or ever suggest that he can. If I do, I am no longer directing myself or him to God’s grace.***

Scripture teaches that God's grace is universal, he truly wants all to be saved and therefore he sent his Son Jesus to die for and atone for the sins of all. Simultaneously, it teaches that man is saved by God's grace alone. Salvation can only come by God's grace since all by nature are dead and can contribute nothing. But if salvation comes by God's grace alone and God truly wants all to be saved, why then are only some saved while others are lost? Some have suggested that the difference lies in God. "God, by an act of his sovereign will, elected some to salvation and some to damnation and sent a Savior to atone for only those in the former group." (Calvinist) But by such teaching they deny universal grace. Others have said the difference lies in man. "Some people exercise their will to choose salvation" (a good choice or good work) "while others do not." (Arminian) But by such teaching they deny salvation by grace alone. Both erroneous answers solve the puzzle (why some, not others) according to human reason, but in the process say something contrary to Scripture's teaching about grace. As Robert Koester writes, "Breaking the paradox places a person outside of grace."¹⁷ Therefore there is a place and time when we must tell our reason to close its questioning mouth and simply listen to the voice of God. Only there can sinners find true comfort. Only then can we truly praise God for his glorious grace, his grace that saves entirely apart from us, and his grace which wants entirely all to be saved. It is this grace which I will declare to my lost friend, disregarding all the probing and prying of human reason. It is this grace which can turn his heart and so fill him with the conviction of God's love that he need not seek any further than that love for his peace. What a joy then to be able to sing with him:

Amazing grace that chose us e'er the worlds were made;
Amazing grace that sent your Son to save;
Amazing race that robed us in your righteousness
And taught our lips to sing glory and praise.
Not unto us but to your name be glory, Lord,
For grace so rich, so wide, so high, so free.
Abide with us till trav'ling days are over and done,
And pilgrim feet lead us home, Lord, to you.
(*Christian Worship*, 392:2,4)

¹⁷ Robert Koester, Law & Gospel: Foundation of Lutheran Ministry, (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993) p. 94.

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