

CHOSEN BY GOD: TEACHING THE DOCTRINE OF ELECTION TO ENCOURAGE OUR
PEOPLE IN OUTREACH

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ABSTRACT

While it is considered by many as a difficult and tricky doctrine, Scripture shows us that election is nothing to be afraid of. It is the purpose of this thesis to explore the application of this doctrine to our gospel outreach. The thesis starts with the basics from Scripture that support the doctrine of election. After that, it takes a closer examination of the importance of teaching election from an early age, then offers other instances where a pastor may have the opportunity to teach election and connect it to evangelism. Following this, the paper closes with some of the challenges one might face as they connect election to outreach.

INTRODUCTION

If you had to guess at which doctrine in the Bible is the most difficult to comprehend, what might you say? The Trinity? The power of the sacraments? The eternity of God? While it may not be possible to answer this question with a definitive answer, there is one teaching from the Bible that has caused confusion in the minds of many: the doctrine of election, or, as some might call it, predestination.

If you think hard about it, it's true. To our sin-darkened intellect, the Bible's teaching of election does not make logical sense. How in the world could a loving, caring God decide to save only a certain portion of people on earth? What criteria does he use to do so? Why are some chosen to be saved, while others are not? Sadly, these kinds of questions, which use logic to explain something that can be understood through faith alone, lead a person further away from the truth. Logic will never lead anyone to a saving knowledge about God. This can come only by the Holy Spirit working faith in a person's heart through the power of his almighty Word. Scripture makes this incredibly clear. "The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit" (1 Cor. 2:14).¹

What then, should be done with this difficult doctrine? Should it be hidden away in a closet, dusted off only when a member of our congregation or student in our confirmation class asks a question about it? Certainly not. "Since most Holy Scripture touches the doctrine of this article ... not only once, and that lightly or in passing, but teaches, emphasizes and explains [it]

¹ All quotations of Scripture in this paper will be from the NIV11 unless indicated otherwise.

thoroughly [and] often in many places, it is truly by no means to be passed by in silence and indifference.”² The doctrine of election is a key teaching of Scripture. The Old Testament is full of election language, and shows the variety of goals for which the LORD chose his people.³ The New Testament is also rich with references to election.⁴ God has said much to reveal his love to the crown of his creation in the doctrine of election. The comfort and assurance of his love is made certain in the knowledge that we were chosen by God to believe in his Son, and to glorify him in our words and actions.

But the comfort given to believers in Jesus through election is not ours alone to hold. This is something that needs to be shared with all who live on the earth. After all, in his final command to his disciples on the mountaintop, Jesus did not say, “Go, and rejoice in this comfort of salvation secluded away in the safety of your homes.” He said, “Go and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19–20). It is our charge as Christians to share the saving faith in Christ that God has given to us.

It is the purpose of this paper to apply the doctrine of election to our efforts in evangelism, and specifically in our instruction of lay members. “Evangelism” is a very broad term and can refer to anything from our preaching and teaching in a worship setting to speaking face-to-face with someone we meet on the street. There are certainly applications of the doctrine of election that can be made to our publications and outreach tools. However, it is the focus of

² Martin Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word and Sacraments: An Enchiridion*, trans. Luther Poellet (St. Louis: Concordia, 1981), 85.

³ In Nehemiah 9:7 many sing praises to God for his calling of Abram to faith. In Deuteronomy 7:7, the LORD speaks of his calling Israel. He also speaks of calling the Levites to serve as priests (Deut. 18:5, 21:5). In the account of King David, his election by God to serve as their ruler is especially emphasized (1 Sam. 10:24, 16:8-10, 2 Sam. 6:21, 1 Kgs. 8:16).

⁴ St. Paul has perhaps the longest discussion on election in the New Testament in chapters eight through ten of his letter to the Romans. In Ephesians 1:5 Paul emphasizes that this election brings a person into God’s family. A few verses after that, in 1:11 the emphasis is similar, with Paul focusing on the inheritance of heaven that comes by God’s election and foreknowledge.

this paper to address its application to our own personal ministries as called workers in the public ministry of the gospel. While it is a difficult doctrine to fully comprehend and apply, we do not want to shy away from an education from an early age that emphasizes the truths of election. This early education can lessen the “scare factor” that may sometimes be connected to election and gives the young Christian an excellent foundation built on Scripture that motivates them to share the message of the gospel.

PART 1: THE “BUILDING BLOCKS” OF ELECTION

First the Milk, then the Solids

It is the dead of night. 3 o'clock in the morning, and the baby has just been delivered. In the subdued quiet following the delivery, your brother and his wife share a quiet moment of relief and excitement as the baby is examined and weighed. Nurses and doctors mill about, carrying out the various duties that follow the birth of a child that they have done for so long. And then a nurse walks in. It is time to eat, and she is carrying quite the spread. A perfectly cooked steak, medium rare, with a side of mashed potatoes and grilled asparagus. As soon as the door swings open, the rich aromas waft through the room. The physical sensation of hunger hits you like a fully loaded semi going 80 miles per hour on the interstate. Your stomach starts to growl as you realize you haven't eaten in hours. You reach forward to take the tray from them, but the nurse awkwardly shakes her head. “It's not for you,” she says. “It's for the baby.”

You probably do not need to be a parent to understand what's wrong with that mental picture. Babies, especially newborn infants, are only able to consume only one thing: milk. Until the stomach has developed, the teeth begin to cut through the gums and he understands how to

chew food, a baby simply cannot be fed any sort of solid food. Not only would it be foolish to do so, it is also very likely that doing so could kill the child.

The writer to the Hebrews uses this exact picture of feeding a child to explain how a Christian should be taught.

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. (Heb. 5:11–14)

I do not think it is a stretch to say that election falls into the “solid food” category of biblical teachings. After all, in order to correctly understand the reasoning and motivation of God in our election as his faithful, we first need understand God himself, as well as who we are as sinful human beings. In the introduction to his book on predestination, Moldstad explains it well. “This review [of nine basic scriptural truths about God's plan for salvation] will help us better understand the place God wants this Bible teaching to have in our Christian faith and lives.”⁵ For the sake of expediency, we will not review all nine of these principles, but it is important to highlight several of them in this discussion on election.

The Depravity of Man

Every person born after Adam and Eve is, by nature, a sinner. “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Ps. 51:5). By nature, we hate God and want nothing to do with him. “The sinful mind is hostile to God” (Rom 8:7). No one is exempt from this, nor can he ever hope by his actions to change that. “Everyone has turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one” (Ps. 53:5).

⁵ John A. Moldstad, *Predestination: Chosen in Christ* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1997), 9.

It is imperative that this is the basic understanding of every Christian. If someone does not believe that man is sinful from the moment he or she is conceived, then they will err in more than just the doctrine of election. However, when we realize just how desperate our situation is as humans, the depths and riches of God's love and grace in election are clearly put on display.

God Desires that All Be Saved

Mankind's situation may seem hopeless, but God still desires that all people on earth would come to believe in Jesus as their perfect substitute and Savior from sin. "[God] wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1Tim 2:4). He dearly loves his creation, as flawed as it is by sin. This love is the reason he continues to preserve the world instead of destroying it and starting over. There is always someone else who needs to hear the gospel message. "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9).

However, God's desire for all to be saved does not mean that he has elected all to be saved. These two truths are taught to us in Scripture. While they may not make logical sense, we cannot rely on our reason and logic to explain how this is possible, as the Calvinists do. This quickly leads to the false doctrine of double predestination, which teaches that God chose in eternity those who would not believe in him in addition to those who would believe. Not only does this teaching lack support from Scripture, it also implies that God has lied about himself. He could not say he wants all to be saved when he has already decided who would be condemned to hell. The blame for unbelief and its consequences lies solely on the one who has rejected God.

“What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God’s faithfulness? Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar” (Rom. 3:3–4).

As we teach this doctrine, we must let these truths stand as Scripture presents them. God desires all to be saved. He has chosen his believers in eternity, before creation. Man alone is responsible for his rejection of God. The role of reason in understanding these two truths will be addressed later on in this paper.

Universal Justification

Christ died, once for all, as the perfect and innocent sacrifice needed to atone for the sin of everyone, past, present and future. “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting man’s sins against them” (2 Cor. 5:19). That sacrifice won forgiveness not just for those who believe in him, but also for those who do not. “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). Those who believe in his sacrifice receive the blessings of forgiveness, new life and salvation. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). God eagerly desires all to be saved and has extended his free grace to all. Some have come to faith and enjoyed those benefits, while others have not.

There are some, like John Calvin, who rejected this doctrine of Scripture and taught “limited atonement” instead. In his paper “The Doctrine of Election and Mission Work,” John Brenner identifies Calvin’s reason for doing this. “Those who deny the doctrine of objective or universal justification either fail to understand that justification is the forgiveness of sins, fail to recognize the parallelism between the number who have sinned and the number who are justified, or are fearful that the doctrine of universal justification must ultimately lead to

universalism.”⁶ However, the teaching of universal justification does not lead to universalism, because the benefits of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross are only received and enjoyed through faith in Christ.

Credit for Conversion Belongs to God Alone

God alone can claim responsibility for when a person turns from a life of sin and spiritual death, to a life of faith in Jesus, who gives eternal life. “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3). Saving faith in Christ is not earned, but instead a free gift of God’s grace. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8–9).

So often in our lives of faith, we use the pronoun “I.” In the Apostles’ Creed, we begin each article with “I believe...” “Behind the words, behind the confessor, behind the faith in the heart, God himself is at work. No other explanation will do. Either the act of faith is all God’s doing, God’s miracle, or else it is a sham. The Holy Spirit, aided by no one or nothing else, moves us to acclaim Christ as our Savior.”⁷ Our election is not excluded from this. God, and God alone, brings each of his elect to faith with a call, in time, through the means of grace, worked by the power of the Holy Spirit in a person’s heart.

God Chose Solely by Grace

In eternity, God chose those who would be saved. He was not coerced or convinced to do so. Our Savior himself reminds us of this. “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so

⁶ John Brenner, “The Doctrine of Election and Mission Work” (essay presented to the Institute of Worship and Outreach, 2011), 3.

⁷ Moldstad, *Predestination: Chosen in Christ*. 13.

that you might go and bear fruit” (John 15:16). “Scripture teaches two causes of election; God’s grace and Christ’s merits.”⁸ St. Paul emphasizes this in 2 Timothy 1:9. God “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.” God’s choosing was entirely by grace. “For he chose us in [Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will” (Eph. 1:4–5).

There is no other source of election outside of Christ and his grace and merits. To insist otherwise is to flirt dangerously close to completely rejecting Jesus as the perfect Savior from sin.

To qualify election as occurring ‘in him’ also introduces embarrassing particularism. All elect ones will be found in Christ, and, without him, none are elect. Simply stated: *There is no election outside of or apart from Christ.* Any statement without the mysterious purposes of God – past, present or future – made without reference to the exclusive way in which God redeems humanity through the Jesus of history is philosophically reckless (at best) and soteriologically perilous (at worst).⁹

In God’s choosing *by grace*, we begin to see the incredible comfort that is offered to us in the doctrine of election. God did not choose us because of the faith that he would eventually see in us, or because of the good deeds we would do for him. If this were the case, we would be robbed of all comfort in the countless times that we fall into sin. It is in that moment of error and wrongdoing that God’s grace is put on display even more clearly. He chose me, a lost and condemned sinner, to be his own. This does not make sense to our human reason, but it does not need to.

⁸ Brenner, 3.

⁹ Carey C. Newman. “Election and Predestination in Ephesians 1:4-6a: An Exegetical-Theological Study of the Historical, Christological Realization of God’s Purpose” (*Review & Expositor*, 1996), 238.

The Dangers of Human Reason

Until this point, we have simply presented the facts of salvation and election, but now we must speak at length about human reason and its relationship to faith and election. How is it possible for us to resist God? Are we simply robots, making the choices and decisions that God already knew and established for us? Is it possible to explain election in a rational way? Are reason and logic valid tools to use in teaching this doctrine? It is beneficial for us to examine these questions and see the answers that Scripture has provided for us.

A heavy reliance on one's reason is always dangerous when connected to biblical interpretation, and the doctrine of election is certainly included in that. Ever since the fall into sin, man's knowledge and ability to reason have been flawed and darkened. Because of this, human beings are no longer able to understand God and his Word on their own. The Holy Spirit must first work in their heart this understanding. "The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit" (1 Cor. 2:14). Even in Christians, justified and redeemed by the blood of Christ, the sinful nature is still present. Therefore, we must still make our reason a captive to the Word of God. His Word is always true, whether we understand it or not.¹⁰ "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5).

In his explanation of the Third Article of the Apostle's Creed, Luther emphasizes that faith is a gift of God. "I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus

¹⁰ Brenner, 1.

Christ, my Lord, or come to him.”¹¹ When explaining the First Article, Luther also lists reason as a gift from God.¹² We do not want to set any gift from God aside or treat it lightly. However, because of our sinful tendency to misuse reason in our interpretation of Scripture, Luther was suspicious of it. “Reason is always to serve (ministerial use) rather than be exalted above Scripture (magisterial use) and stand in judgment over God’s Word.”¹³ This is where the difficulty lies in our understanding of Scripture, and especially the doctrine of election. We want “to be content with the words of God and believe quite simply what they say.”¹⁴ In our translating of the original languages, we pay attention to the grammar that is used¹⁵ and the intent of the original vocabulary.¹⁶ We should pay attention to context, understanding the words in the context of what is written¹⁷ and in what would be brought to mind in the context of its original audience.¹⁸ These are all proper uses of our God-given gift of reason.

We can thank God for the work of Martin Luther, for he clearly understood the proper application of logic to the Scriptures.

Luther loved the apparent paradoxes in Scripture and had the marvelous ability to hold seemingly contradictory statements or teachings of God’s Word in their God-given tension without trying to harmonize them in a way that is satisfactory to human reason. He recognized that if two apparently contradictory things are clearly taught in Scripture, both must stand. Unless God has revealed how we are to harmonize them, we must teach

¹¹ Explanation of the 3rd Article of the Apostles Creed in Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism* (Milwaukee; Northwestern, 2017), 183.

¹² Explanation of the 1st Article of the Apostles Creed in Luther, *The Small Catechism*, 130.

¹³ Brenner, 1.

¹⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works: Career of the Reformer III*, ed. Philip S. Watson, trans. E. Gordon Rupp, Vol. 33 (Fortress Press, 1972), 175.

¹⁵ Luther, LW:33, 167.

¹⁶ Luther, LW:33, 216.

¹⁷ Luther, LW:33, 217, 236.

¹⁸ Luther LW:33, 234.

them both as God's Word without attempting any harmonization. We can deal only with God's revealed will in Scripture. We must not try to peer into the mysteries of God that he has not revealed to us. They are unknowable and are none of our concern.¹⁹

This holds true in the doctrine of election. There are two facts that Scripture clearly presents as truths, but these facts would seem to our human reason to contradict each other. God alone can bring a person to believe in Christ as his Savior,²⁰ but human beings are able to reject his grace and are held accountable for doing so.²¹ Human reason would argue that these cannot stand in apparent contradiction to each other, and therefore must be explained in a logical manner. If God is the only one who can cause someone to believe, then he *must* be responsible for those who do not believe also. On the other hand, if humans can reject God, then his grace must not be as powerful as he claims, or that he simply withholds grace from those who would reject him. One can quickly go astray when speaking of election if he relies too heavily on his reason. We must let Scripture stand as God has revealed it, even if our logical brains cannot fully explain how this is possible.

What Happens When the Foundation is not Biblical?

As I mentioned before, it is incredibly important for a person to believe and teach these fundamental "building blocks" of doctrine that form the basis for the doctrine of election as Scripture presents them. If a leader in the church has a wrong understanding of any of these fundamentals, these errors will quickly show themselves when they attempt to explain election.

¹⁹ Brenner, 2.

²⁰ 1 Cor. 12:3, Rom. 9:14.

²¹ Ezek. 18:20, Rom. 6:23.

One example that many have struggled over is attempting to answer a very difficult question about election. Why would God decide to save some people and not others?

As he stood before Jerusalem, Jesus lamented about those who had rejected him as the promised Savior. “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, and you were not willing” (Matt. 23:37). Jesus clearly shows the love that he has for those who did not believe him. Only days away from his death on the cross, he still yearned for their reconciliation. However, it is important to notice where Jesus places the blame for this rejection. It is not aimed at the Father. He does not cry out to his Father, questioning why those people do not believe. Instead, Jesus says “You [Jerusalem] were not willing.” Jesus states it clearly, but problems arise when one insists that only logic and reason can understand Scripture.

Herman Bavinck, a Dutch Reformed theologian and Calvinist, writes at great length to answer why some were chosen by God to believe while others were not.

Why does one person have so many advantages over another in character, talent, disposition and upbringing? Why does the one child die in infant and as a child of the covenant is taken into heaven, while another dies outside of the covenant and without grace? Why does the one become a believer and another not? All of these are questions that no mortal can answer.²²

That final statement is a good one. We cannot answer why God allows these things, other than answering with the comfort that he works “all things for the good of those who love him” (Rom. 8:28). However, Bavinck seemingly ignores his own thought just a few sentences later. “Election as such is not always an act of mercy or explicable as such. In the election of Christ and of the good angels, there was no sin and hence no mercy either. And the election of humans, though an act of mercy, is not explicable in terms of mercy alone. For then God would have had to be

²² Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*. ed, John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 200), 400.

merciful to all, since all [had sinned and] were wretched.”²³ Bavinck’s problem lies in his understanding of universal justification. In the Calvinist TULIP²⁴, it’s taught that Christ’s death did not pay for the sins of the entire world, but instead only for those who would believe in him. Loraine Boettner, a Calvinist theologian who popularized the TULIP acronym, explains this teaching.

Calvinists hold that in the intention and secret plan of God Christ died for the elect only, and that His death had only an incidental reference to others in so far as they are partakers of common grace. The meaning might be brought out more clearly if we use the phrase ‘Limited Redemption’ rather than ‘Limited Atonement.’ The Atonement is, of course, strictly an infinite transaction; the limitation comes in, theologically, in the application of the benefits of the atonement, that is in redemption.²⁵

Both Bavinck and Boettner would claim that Christ’s atoning work was only on behalf of those whom God would eventually save, because they had already been chosen by God to believe. However, this clearly goes against what Scripture so clearly teaches. God desires that all be saved. Jesus died for the sins *of the whole world*. By limiting the effectiveness of Christ’s sacrifice, they are trying to do something that no man should attempt: to limit the God of all things.

Sadly, this is just one example of the many mistakes made by man in an attempt to fully explain and understand what they cannot.²⁶ If one has a flawed understanding of any of the

²³ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 400.

²⁴ This acronym is often used to summarize the five basic teachings of classical Calvinism: Total depravity of man, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace and Perseverance of the saints. This phrase seems to be popularized by Loraine Boettner in the early 1930s, but these five teachings had been used for many years prior to this, going back as early as the late 1870s. “TULIP.” Theopedia. Accessed December 2, 2019. <https://www.theopedia.com/tulip>.

²⁵ Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Grand Rapids: The Reformed Press, 1932), 150.

²⁶ Our own church body was not exempt from the struggle that arose among Lutheran church bodies in the early 1900’s. However, through the efforts of several of our own theologians, along with the help of the Missouri Synod, we were able to speak clearly as a synod about election. It is not the focus of this paper to highlight all of the controversies surrounding the doctrine of election, but for an excellent breakdown of the events surrounding the

“building blocks” we have mentioned up to this point, then the chances are very likely that he will also err in his teaching and understanding of the doctrine of election. Errors in doctrine, no matter how small, always have the potential to cause great damage to a person’s faith. It is for this reason that Paul says to his readers, “I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. *Keep away from them.*” (Rom. 16:17, emphasis added) Paul warns us to stay far away from those who teach untruths about the Bible. However, in order to do this, our pastors and lay people alike need a solid education in Scripture in order to first identify errors. Careful instruction from an early age in the Scriptures is invaluable. Because of this, we want to make every effort to establish the truth about election.

So, What is Election?

Only with these principles in mind can we begin to discuss and teach the doctrine of election. When we do so, it’s important to distinguish between God’s foreknowledge and the predestination of his believers. Our Lutheran forefathers confessed as much in the Formula of Concord.

God’s foreknowledge is nothing else than that God knows all things before they happen... This foreknowledge extends equally over godly people and evil people, but it is not a cause of evil. It is not the cause of sins, when people act wrongly (sin proceeds originally from the devil and the wicked, perverted human will), nor of human corruption, for which people are responsible themselves. Instead God’s foreknowledge provides order in the midst of evil and sets limits to it... God’s eternal election extends only to the righteous, God-pleasing children of God. It is a cause of their salvation, which God brings about. He has arranged everything that belongs to it. Our salvation is so

Election Controversy that began as early as 1870, see Prof. John Brenner’s book *The Election Controversy Among Lutherans in the Twentieth Century*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House. 2017.

firmly grounded on it [cf. John 10:26–29] that ‘the gates of hell will not prevail against it’ [Matt. 16:18].”²⁷

This predestination occurred before the creation of the world, outside of time and entirely apart from our own eventual actions as Christians.

God’s decision of who would believe is not something that we can hope to grasp or understand by attempting to reason out the innermost thoughts of God. “Rather, it is to be sought in the Word, where it has also been revealed.”²⁸ The Word leads us to see Christ, our Savior, and our desperate need for his saving work. It is in him, especially in his love, that we see our calling in Christ. “For he chose us in [Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight” (Eph. 1:4). Therefore, what we understand about election, and the decisions and teachings that we base off this chief teaching of Scripture, must always be focused solely on the gospel. “We are to make judgments regarding our election to eternal life neither on the basis of reason nor on the basis of God’s law. Such a course of action would lead us either into a wild, irresponsible, Epicurean life, or into despair.... Instead, the true meaning of election must be learned from the holy gospel of Christ.”²⁹ Chemnitz echoes these thoughts in his *Enchiridion*. What he emphasizes here will guide the following discussion on how we want to approach teaching election to our people.

For if someone approaches the article of predestination *a priori*, that is, from the hidden and inscrutable will of God and believes that nothing else or more is to be considered in it besides these bare fancies, that God, in the hidden counsel of his predestination, preordained and decreed only who and how many are to be saved, likewise who and how many are to be damned, or that He determined thus by some selection as of a military nature, ‘This one I want to be saved, that one is to be damned,’ various absurd as well as dangerous and pernicious thoughts will surely arise thence... Christ in the parable Mt 22:1–14 and Paul Ro 8:29–39 [and] Eph 1:4–11 teach that one must begin *a posteriori*,

²⁷ Formula of Concord, Epitome: XI; 4-5 in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 517.

²⁸ Formula of Concord, Epitome: XI; 6 in Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 517.

²⁹ Formula of Concord, Epitome: XI; 9-10 in Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 518.

that is, from the divinely revealed Word. For when the article is considered, they set it before us not simply in the arcane and hidden counsel of the Trinity, but as that mystery has been revealed to us in Christ, who is the true book of life, through the Word, in such a way, that in the doctrine of this article are embraced the whole counsel and decree of the Trinity regarding the redemption of mankind through Christ.³⁰

PART II: TRAINING GOD'S ELECT

Adapting to Unique Situations

When these doctrinal “building blocks” are in place, one is well-equipped to teach many things about Scripture, but this is especially true about the doctrine of election. There is so much comfort and reassurance that God extends to us in election. We would be remiss to withhold that comfort from our people because of our own hesitancy, or because we are lacking the knowledge we need to feel comfortable enough to teach it. However, teaching our lay people about election is much more complicated than simply “knowing the basics.” There are many factors to consider and adapt to as we teach the doctrine of election.³¹ Once again, we turn to the words in our Lutheran Confessions to guide our approach to teaching election.

If a person wishes to speak or think about the election and *praedestinatio* (or predestination) of God's children to eternal life correctly and profitably, one should as a matter of course refrain from speculation over the naked, secret, hidden, inscrutable foreknowledge of God. On the contrary, one should focus on how God's counsel, intention, and preordination in Jesus Christ... is revealed to us through the Word. This

³⁰ Chemnitz, *Enchiridion*, 87.

³¹ While I cannot cover all of the things you can factor into your approach to teaching this subject, there is one thing to keep at the forefront of your mind in teaching this doctrine (and really any time we teach). There are always many ways of saying the same thing. Depending on what you emphasize and who your target audience is, you can craft your words to affect the different “domains” that we learn in. These three domains, as identified by Benjamin Bloom in *The Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals* (London: Longman Group, 1956) are the cognitive, affective and sensory domains. If the goal of your lesson is for the student to retain certain facts about the subject, you would focus on the cognitive domain. If you want your students to attach what they learn to a specific emotion, then your target is the affective domain. Finally, if you want to encourage your students towards a certain action, you are dealing with the sensory domain. In order to focus on each of these (and one certainly could have a lesson that uses two or even all three domains) then you would craft your lesson and the wording that you use to reflect that.

means that the entire teaching of God's intention, counsel, will, and preordination concerning our redemption, calling, justification, and salvation must be taken as a unity.³²

How Old are My Students?

You may think, "Why should I pay attention to how old my students are? Shouldn't we simply rely on the power of God to work through the Word?" While this statement is true, we also want to avoid placing obstacles before our students and set them up to fail or misunderstand. After all, if you would try to teach someone about the intricacies of computer programming, you might first want to make sure they know how to turn the computer on before diving in to teaching them complex coding. It is important to take into consideration the age of our students, especially earlier in their lives. If we do not, we risk teaching in a way that goes over their heads or leads to further confusion.

From the moment we are born, our brains begin to progress from simple thoughts to complex functions. Mental development is a lifelong process, but several stages have been identified early in a person's life. Each of these stages signifies a significant shift in the way a child learns. Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist, was one of the leaders in studying this development of the brain in children, and his Theory of Cognitive Development is still widely accepted to this day.³³ According to his theory, there are 4 stages of cognitive development. Those stages are the sensorimotor stage (ages zero–two), the preoperational stage (ages two–seven), the stage of concrete operation (ages seven–eleven) and the formal operational stage (ages twelve and up).³⁴ In each of these stages, the child understands things in different ways. It

³² Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration: XI; 13 in Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 643.

³³ Leroy T. Howe, "Jean Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development: An Overview and Appraisal," *Perkins Journal* 31 (1977): 27.

³⁴ Kendra Cherry, "What Are Piaget's Four Stages of Development?" *Verywell Mind*, www.verywellmind.com/piagets-stages-of-cognitive-development-2795457.

is our desire as ministers of the gospel to teach clearly and effectively, adapting the *materia* of Scripture to best communicate the *forma* to our audience. Remember, however, that each child develops at a different pace. Because of this, the ages assigned to each of these stages are somewhat fluid. Creating and maintaining relationships with each child will help you gauge how your students are growing in in their cognitive development. In each of these developmental stages, we can see that, while they may understand it in different ways, a child is still able to grasp the basics of election from an early age. Knowing this and using this in our approach to teaching this doctrine can aid us as we teach our people to see election as a blessing, and not something to be feared or avoided.

The Sensorimotor Stage

In this stage, a child is still very early in his development. Understandably, there is very little in the form of cognition and understanding at this age.³⁵ Towards the end of this two-year period, the child begins to understand more complex matters. He is able to communicate and understand his surroundings at a very basic level, though most of this is through non-verbal and physical stimuli.³⁶ Obviously, at this stage in a child's life, any sort of instruction needs to be very basic, with the parents bearing the greatest responsibility for the child's spiritual upbringing. While he cannot verbalize and express his thoughts or feelings, we do not want to use that to dismiss instruction for a child at this age. Scripture clearly shows us that even from infancy faith can

³⁵ Howe, 36.

³⁶ Howe, 40.

grow in a person's heart,³⁷ so we do not want to dismiss any sort of education in Scripture as worthless at this age.

As pastors and teachers, we can encourage our lay people to immerse their child in God's Word as early as they can. Perhaps they can pray with their child before each meal or hold a short devotion after they have finished eating. There are Bibles that are written and illustrated in a way that is meant for infants and toddlers. The parents could spend a few minutes each day reading a story or two from one of these Bibles to their children. There are many resources and ideas available to parents to use to introduce their young children to God's Word. We cannot force the parents of our congregation to use these things, but we can certainly encourage them to make use of these resources as they raise their children. Not only are they putting their trust into God's almighty hands to work faith in the child, but it also sets a solid foundation for the parents to build on as their child continues to grow and mature.

The Preoperational Stage

Beginning at age two, the mental capacity of a child increases dramatically. Earlier in life, the child will learn primarily from physically stimuli like touch and sight. Once they reach the preoperational stage, "adaptation to environment shifts from systems of direct bodily action and reaction to mental activity ... which exerts direction upon bodily activity."³⁸ However,

Because this is a period of transformation and massive reconstruction [of mental activity], it is extremely difficult to characterize; every aspect of development seems to exhibit the fluidity of transition. The most significant behavior, therefore, will be of a mixed type, including frequent regressions... Thus, characterizations of both worldview

³⁷ 2 Tim. 3:15

³⁸ Howe, 42.

and the cognitive structures of the pre-operational child of necessity must over-simplify, almost to the point of distortion.³⁹

Teaching children at this age can be frustrating. They can go from speaking clearly about Jesus as their Savior one day to seemingly knowing nothing about him the next. This is not our fault as teachers, nor is it intentional on the part of the child. It is simply how their brain functions at this age, and so we want to adjust our expectations accordingly. Repetition is important, for it helps the child to retain what they are taught.

At this stage in life, a child still struggles to understand complex thoughts. Morals and ideals are not thought of as internal motivators, but instead are found in the child's surroundings.⁴⁰ However, this does not mean that it is impossible to teach that child about the basic truths of sin, grace and forgiveness. Holy explains,

More developed moral judgment clearly requires an increasingly acute self-world differentiation. Until such is forthcoming, and until the young child has accumulated an abundance of experience of relating genuinely to peers, Piaget believes, that child will continue to hypostatize his/her own desires for vengeance into a universal order based upon vengeance from unknown sources, as well as from parents who always remain the known sources of constraint and punishment.⁴¹

This age is an opportune time for parents to teach their children about "constraint and punishment," and Scripture provides us with the perfect picture of this; the law that God has revealed to us in his almighty Word.

Because of the mental capacity at this age, the child probably is not yet able to fully grasp the meaning of God's choosing them to believe, but that does not mean that we cannot begin teaching it to them. Start with the basics. Forgiveness means that God doesn't remember the

³⁹ Howe, 42.

⁴⁰ Howe, 44-45.

⁴¹ Howe, 45.

wrongs they've done. Jesus' died to win that forgiveness for them on the cross. He did this because he loved us so much. God chose *you* to believe in that promise. It may be tempting to emphasize how *special* they are, that out of the billions of people who have lived throughout all time, God chose *them* to believe. While this could be understood in a proper way, it may be wise to refrain from this emphasis. This could easily lead that child to believe that it was something God saw in them that swayed his decision.

A child at this stage in his mental development learns almost exclusively through the physical interaction they have with the world around them. While his reactions to things may be shifting from a simple physical response to thinking things through, he is still heavily reliant on physical stimuli.⁴² Because of this, object lessons are incredibly important to include in the spiritual training of children. Using something that they can see or hold in their hands to connect them to the main point of your lesson will help them to learn and remember that point at a higher rate than simply talking to them about it. For example; when teaching a kindergarten class about universal justification, you can show them a check written out for \$100 with their name on it. You might ask them what they would do with the check. Once they give you some answers, lead them to understand that they need to go to the bank and give it to the bankers, and they will give you a bunch of money. After doing so, you can then make the connection to universal justification. Jesus "wrote a hundred-dollar check" for everyone who has ever lived on earth when he died on the cross to forgive sins. Some people, through faith, have cashed the check and now enjoy the blessings that Jesus won for them. Other people have discarded the check or hidden it away. They don't enjoy the blessings that Jesus wants to give to them. This is just one example, but there are many ways to use object lessons as we teach the fundamental doctrines

⁴² Howe, 42.

that support the doctrine of election. It is up to the pastor or teacher to identify opportunities to use this method in their own curriculum.

The Concrete Stage of Operation

At this point in a child's life, typically around age seven, his capability to think rationally begins to develop at a rapid pace. "Conceptualization begins to occur at the level of classifying, that is, at the level of constructing inclusions of parts into a larger whole."⁴³ Simply put, children at this age begin to take concepts they have learned before, like forgiveness and grace, and begin to make the logical connections on their own. These connections are not perfect. Sometimes they may not make sense to an adult. Piaget refers to this as "syncretism," and gives an example of this. "The sun does not fall down because it is hot. It stops there because it is yellow. The moon is the same as the sun because it is lying down in the sky"⁴⁴. We cannot become frustrated because of this, but instead continue to review with the child.

One of the best things a teacher can do for his students at this age is to emphasize the basic "building blocks" of election. These fundamentals, covered at the beginning of this paper, are vital in raising a young child in his faith in Christ. Once you see your students begin to have a solid grasp on these fundamentals, it can be tempting to quickly move on to the more difficult topics of Scripture, including election. While this may be a good thing, it is also important to continue to review with them these fundamentals. They may forget certain details. Days after a class where they seemed to have good understanding, they may struggle with the basic concepts of forgiveness, or the immense nature of God's grace. This is not a bad thing, nor does

⁴³ Howe, 47.

⁴⁴ Jean Piaget, *Judgement and Reasoning in the Child* (London: Routledge, 2014), 229.

it make you a poor teacher. It is simply how their brains are built to function at this stage in their life. Instead, work with them to review those teachings. Continue to integrate object lessons into your teaching methods or refer to those that you have used previously. Lead them to make the connections to election. They may not always see it, but with time and careful instruction, the Holy Spirit has promised to work understanding in their hearts and nurture their faith as they continue to mature in their faith in Jesus.

The Formal Operational Stage

This final stage of development occurs around the age of twelve, but just as in any of the other stages, the age that this occurs can vary. Sometimes, a child will not reach this stage until deep into his teens, while others seem to have made the jump already by the age of ten or eleven.⁴⁵ Once a child has reached this stage of mental development, he is able to think abstractly, formulate hypotheses and answer them without physical stimulation. This shift is best demonstrated in one of the experiments Piaget conducted. In this experiment, children of different ages were given a scale and set of weights that could hook on either side of the scale. Their task was simply to balance the scale. The young children, around age 4, were completely unable to do so, because they could not understand what “balance” meant. Seven-year-olds figured out how to balance the scale by hooking on weights but did not comprehend that where they placed the weights also played a part. At age 10, the children could correctly balance the scale. However, they did so only by trial-and-error until the desired outcome was achieved. Only

⁴⁵ Howe, 51.

around the age of thirteen could the children hypothesize where to place the weights to balance the scale and could do so without the trial-and-error of their younger counterparts.⁴⁶

How can we use this knowledge as we teach election to our teenagers? Because of where they are at in their development, a teacher is able at this stage to truly challenge their students to think on a deeper level about the doctrine of election. Until this point, it would be wise to avoid speaking about the false teachings that some have asserted concerning this doctrine. Before the formal operational stage, when trying to understand hypotheses that are contrary-to-fact, children are more likely to simply negate any theory simply because you say it isn't true, instead of attempting to think through the contrary thought and reason out why it is so.⁴⁷ Because of this, they may misunderstand what is meant when you bring up these false teachings, or simply disregard them because you tell them that it is something that is not true. While this may not necessarily be a bad thing, it makes teaching these falsehoods more difficult, because you are not able to explore with the students the reasons why those teachings are false. However, once a child is twelve or thirteen years old, his mental process has matured enough to begin to think through these issues in a logical way. He is finally able to think through the falsehoods that so many have taught in connection to election and answer why a person may come to that conclusion. It also gives the teacher an opportunity to explain to his students the use of reason and logic when interpreting the Scriptures.

Concluding Thoughts on Mental Development.

⁴⁶ Kathleen Stassen Berger. *The Developing Person Through Childhood and Adolescence*. (Worth Publishers; 2008) 447-448.

⁴⁷ Howe, 51.

Knowing and understanding the mental progression of a child is incredibly beneficial to a person's preparation for teaching in general, but this is especially true when teaching election. Just as there is a natural progression in a baby from milk to more and more solid foods, there is also a progression in the mental capacities of children. We do not want to suffocate them with big, meaty doctrines that they are too young to handle, but that does not mean that we are not already able to set the foundation for an easier understanding of election.

However, it is important to remember that these stages that Piaget identifies are only guidelines. You cannot point to every child at age seven and expect to find them all at the same stage in their mental progression. This development is different for each child, and because of this the ages that are attached to each stage of development are fluid.⁴⁸ It was mentioned previously in this paper, and I will mention it again here because of its significance. Attempting to establish relationships with one's students is important in every aspect of a called worker's ministry, but it is even more important in the understanding of a child's ability to learn and understand. Each stage of life requires different methods of teaching. The only way to know where a child is at, and what method may have the most impact, is to know and understand him well. This takes time and a great deal of understanding on the part of the pastor or teacher.

⁴⁸ Howe, 51. Echoing the thoughts of Piaget, Holy emphasizes that the development of the brain is a constant work in progress. Our brains never stop growing or developing, but at later stages in life it is much less drastic than the first 20-25 years of a person's life. Around the age of 12, a child has reached this last stage in the development of his mental capabilities. At that point, he is able to take concepts they have previously learned and apply those things through his mental process, instead of through physical activities as he does previously. He may still struggle to reason out contrary-to-fact statements and hypotheses, but the ability to do so comes quickly later in life when "adult" intelligence and its defining structures are in place. At an early age, rules and morals are seen to the child to be a part of a "universal order," even if they only come from the parent's preferences. However, once the stage of concrete operations is reached, the child gradually realizes that these rules are more subjective, and that the punishment attached to breaking those rules is dependent on his own actions. All of this applies to the method a teacher uses in the child's spiritual upbringing. Once the child has reached this stage, his education can begin to shift from concrete, tangible lessons to more abstract. The breadth of the child's understanding will vary from person to person, and so the teacher must keep this in mind as he continues to educate his students.

Bible Information Class

But what about the adults? And more specifically, what about those who have expressed a desire to learn more about what Scripture teaches? What place does election have in a Bible Information Class? This is a difficult question to answer, but I think that in answering it, we see some important thoughts to consider.

The focus and goal of a Bible Information Class is to teach new members about the “basics” of the Bible. As a synod, it has long been our practice to thoroughly instruct people wishing to join us in membership on all important points of doctrine, so that they can publicly declare fellowship with us. However, before teaching Bible Information Class students about election, there are a several things to consider.

The doctrine of election is found often throughout all of Scripture, and often in connection to other key teachings of Scripture. For example, Peter writes in 1 Peter 2:9, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” In a Bible Information Class, this passage would most likely be used in connection with a life of sanctification, but at the very beginning of the verse Peter mentions our election as God’s “chosen people.” Because of examples like this, it would be difficult to ignore election entirely. This close connection to Christ’s grace and mercy is something that we want every Christian to know.

However, as was mentioned before, we would not describe this doctrine as spiritual “milk.” It is a difficult doctrine to understand. If you introduce it too soon without a proper understanding of the other doctrines that support it, there is potential to cause harm to that person’s faith. Because of this, if you would desire to teach election in a Bible Information Class,

I think it would be best to teach it after introducing the “building blocks” (universal justification, chosen by grace, conversion, etc...). These lead us to a clearer understanding of what it means to be chosen by God in Christ to believe. A Bible Information Class will often shift the focus from the basics of justification to what Scripture says about sanctification about halfway through the course. This could be a good place to take a closer look at what Scripture tells us about election. However, because of the difficulty that this doctrine poses, I would not argue too strongly with the pastor who desires to wait to talk more in depth about election after the class’s completion. There certainly is value in saving the topic of election for a later date when you can focus specifically on this doctrine and give them ample time to explore the more difficult questions that may arise.

Spiritual Background

As called workers, we do not only teach children and teenagers. We are also responsible for the continued education of the adults as well. Each congregation is unique because its people are unique. Because of this, it would be wise for a called worker to closely examine the spiritual background of the church they serve at, especially when they first arrive. Is the church a newer mission start, or has it practiced ministry for a long period of time? Are the members mostly recent converts, or life-long Lutherans? Young families? Baby boomers? These are just a small portion of the many questions one could ask when they newly arrive at a church, but the answers to them will help to determine how one would broach the topic of election. If the church is a long-standing establishment, with the majority of its members being life-long Lutherans, then it is highly likely that they have a solid grasp of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. You would not need to do more than review these things before an in-depth study of election.

However, if the opposite is true, and most of your members are less certain in their doctrine, then it may be wise to spend more time determining where they stand on the clearer, simpler doctrines of Scripture.

This understanding of a congregation's spiritual maturity is not easy. It is important to remember that it can take some time. We want to be wary of approaching our preparation for a Bible Study or worship service with a personal agenda. "I know all about (*insert doctrine here*), and I am going to teach these people about it, even if it doesn't fit what we're talking about here. They need to hear what I have to say." This mindset is troublesome. Not only could it lead to confusion or misunderstanding in the minds of your members, but you could also be in danger of placing too much emphasis on your own personal presence in the growth of a Christian's faith. The credit for that maturation can only be given to God himself. "I [Paul] planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow" (1 Cor. 3:6).

PART III: CHALLENGES IN APPLYING ELECTION TO OUTREACH

Making the Connection to Outreach

If there is one question a person could ask that would sum up the ministry of a called worker, it could be this one; how can we do our best to encourage and equip our people our people to spread the gospel? This is a wide-reaching question, and the answers one could come up with are almost endless. Since the focus of this thesis is on election, I would modify that question to read in this way; how can we use the doctrine of election to encourage our people to spread the gospel?

This past summer, I had the opportunity to teach a Bible class of teenagers at a summer camp. Over the course of our studies, another pastor who taught the class with me made a rather

sarcastic statement about the connection between election and outreach. It went something like this: “I really hate the doctrine of election. It’s the lazy man’s doctrine. If I know that God has decided who will believe, why should I go out and talk to people about Jesus? If he’s going to convert them anyways, then I have better ways to use that time.”⁴⁹ While this statement was meant simply to draw out the temptations one might face in the context of that discussion, it still opens our eyes to the fact that this could be the mindset of our own lay members. This highlights even more how important it is as their spiritual shepherds to see the wonderful comfort this doctrine gives to us as we share the good news about Jesus.

Personal Application

In order to teach the doctrine of election to others, it may be wise to begin by first applying it to ourselves as called workers. Ministry can be incredibly difficult and take a heavy toll on those who go out to spread the gospel. We want to make sure we apply that gospel message to ourselves as we attempt to share the message about Christ with others. “Sometimes we see apparent numerical success as in the case of the preaching of Jonah (John 3:4–10) or the preaching of the apostles on Pentecost (Acts 2:41). Sometimes we don’t. The great Prophet Elijah thought that he was a failure (1 Kgs. 19:9–18). After [Jesus’] Bread of Life Discourse many disciples turned away from the Savior himself (John 6:60–66).”⁵⁰ This apparent failure to reach the hearts of many can be discouraging. You might even be tempted to blame yourself for

⁴⁹ Perhaps this quote sounds a little harsher here than it came across in context. As the discussion went on, he made it clear that he did not actually despise a teaching that was so critical to Scripture. Instead, he was voicing the temptation that many may feel when then talk about election in connection to outreach.

⁵⁰ Brenner, 10.

this failure. It is in that moment that I would encourage you to turn to this doctrine for comfort and encouragement.

If the gospel is being proclaimed, then the Holy Spirit is at work. You may not see this success at your own, visible church, but God has promised that he calls his elect to faith, in time, wherever the gospel is preached. “The church (believers) will simply find other gatherings of like-minded Christians. There may be many reasons for a congregation to go out of existence, but so long as the gospel is being proclaimed the church has not died nor can it. The church draws its life from the gospel.”⁵¹ This doctrine brings comfort to the pastor who beats himself up after a conversation where he felt he could have presented the gospel in a clearer way. It offers hope to the missionary who has worked tirelessly for months on end, without any visible results to show for that effort. Those whom God has chosen will be saved, and he does so as we spread the gospel message. We are not the ones who work faith in a person’s heart. We cannot argue them into believing. We simply trust in the almighty power of God’s word that works faith (Rom 1:16) as we strive to use our God-given talents to the best of our ability (2 Tim. 2:15).

Encouraging Our People With the Doctrine of Election

As called workers, we have the blessing of spending years, perhaps even decades, studying God’s Word, and so the application of election to outreach may not be a difficult one to make. The struggle is in helping our lay people to make that connection. How are we to go about this? Should we craft our sermons to show the close connection of election and outreach? Is this done in Bible class, or does it come to our people as we lead by example? There are several different

⁵¹ Brenner, 10.

ways to approach this, and it would be my suggestion to use multiple approaches, so that our message may have an impact in a variety of ways.

WELS pastors may be labeled by some as lacking creativity. After all, we do not pick and choose the text to focus on each week, but instead follow a set order of lessons determined by others. While some may see this as a negative, the lectionary really is a great blessing, and especially so with election. Our own sinful pride is taken almost completely out of the equation. We are robbed of the soapbox that, at times, we so desperately want to preach from. Instead of preaching what is most important or pressing in our minds, a pastor's task is simple. Preach to the people what the portion from Scripture emphasizes. And what if the focus of the text is on election? Then you as a preacher have been given a wonderful opportunity to share with your members the incredible truths that God has revealed in election. Emphasize to them the security they have, knowing that God chose to bring them to faith and has done so through the gospel. Assure them that their sins are forgiven through the blood shed by the one in whom we were chosen, Christ Jesus. Motivate them through his love, that they might go and share this amazing news with others. Point them to the trust they have that God will bring his elect to faith in him, and that he "works all things for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

However, preaching is not the only way to instruct our people about election and the comfort it offers. Paul's epistle to the Romans is one of the greatest resources we have available to us for continued education through Bible Study. Throughout the letter, Paul lays out a "roadmap" for us to follow as we instruct our lay people. If time allows, a pastor could spend several weeks, or even months, working chapter by chapter through the entire book. Using Paul's epistle in this way sets the stage wonderfully for an in-depth discussion on the doctrine of

election. If time is a factor, one could simply narrow the focus onto chapters eight, nine and ten, where Paul spends a great deal of time discussing the finer points of election. Whatever one's approach is, a Bible study like this is the perfect opportunity to make the connection to outreach. Here, you will have the opportunity to answer the questions or doubts that your members may have.

In this context, you can fix your people's eyes on the urgent nature of gospel ministry. There are many who have not yet heard the gospel. God has given us this saving, powerful message so that we may share it with others. He wants all to be saved. He has chosen those who would believe before eternity, when time did not even exist, but he doesn't magically call people to faith. He works through the means of grace, in time, to call a person to faith. We can be the tool God uses to spread that gospel message "To accomplish his eternal purpose God sees to it that each of the elect comes into contact with other people whom God uses to bring them the gospel."⁵² Because of this, we want to view everyone equally; equally damned by sin and equally deserving of the gospel. Our task is straightforward. We are simply tasked to share the gospel message about Jesus. God has promised to do the much more difficult work of creating faith and bringing people to saving faith in Jesus as their Savior.

In teaching election from Romans 8, it is important to emphasize to your people the significance of 8:28. This passage is often quoted to those in great distress or trouble and is meant to comfort them with God's omnipotence and omniscience. While that is certainly a valid use of this passage, in context we see that this verse is central to the points Paul will make in the following chapters.

On this text depends the entire passage which follows to the end of the chapter. For He wills that to the elect who are loved by God and who love God the Spirit works all things

⁵² Brenner, 11.

for good, even things which in themselves are evil. He approaches, yes, from this point on begins to discuss the matter of predestination and election, which is not as deep a subject as is commonly thought, but rather is a wonderfully sweet thing for those who have the Spirit, but a bitter thing and harsh thing above all things for the prudence of the flesh. For there is no other reason or cause why numerous adversities and evils do not separate the saints from the love of God except the fact that they have not only been called but ‘called according to His purpose,’ and therefore to them alone and to no others ‘He works all things for good.’⁵³

As Luther so aptly puts it, election is not so deep and unsearchable of a topic that we can never hope to understand it. When viewed in the light of Romans 8:28, it becomes quite simple. God’s choosing was out of love. He did so to work all things for his believers. When we teach election in this way, we show our people that election is not too difficult of a topic to speak about. We do not have to feel that we need to sweep this doctrine under the rug, hoping that no one will ask us about it. Instead, we want to instill confidence in our people to gladly share what Scripture teaches us about election. This comes through thorough and careful instruction in our preaching and teaching.

Preparing our People to Always Give an Answer

As called workers, Scripture encourages us to “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Pet. 3:15). This is also the goal for that our lay people be properly instructed, both for their own personal growth and so they are able to give an answer to others if they ever need to. However, we do not want to forget how this verse ends. “But do this with gentleness and respect.” In order to respect those who may disagree with us on theological matters, we must first understand the basis for their opposition.

⁵³ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works: Lectures on Romans*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, trans. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, vol. 25 (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1972), 371.

Teaching “Truth” in a Postmodern World

While the term “postmodern” may only be commonly used in philosophical circles, the thinking that it defines is widely found across America. A simple definition of postmodernism might be this: there is no such thing as objective, universal truth. Question everything. “Postmodern philosophers applied the theories of the literary deconstructionists to the world as a whole. Just as a text will be read differently by each reader, they said, so reality will be ‘read’ differently by each knowing self that encounters it. This means that there is no one meaning of the world, no transcendent center to reality as a whole.”⁵⁴ As a Christian who believes in and teaches a God who governs all, the “transcendent center to reality,” you can see why this thinking might be troubling. If we were to try to share the message from Scripture about sin and grace with someone who thinks this way, we might simply be told, “Yeah, well, you know, that’s just like, your opinion, man.”⁵⁵ More than this, how would we convince someone of the truth of election? One could argue that this is the least subjective truth of Scripture. God chooses his believers, not because of their own decisions or opinions, but because of the greatest objective truth of all; his love and grace revealed in Christ Jesus.

So how then can we speak of election in this postmodern world? While it may not be the first thing that comes up as we go door-to-door or in passing conversation in the airport or on the commute to work, there still may be opportunities to do so. It may be with a co-worker who has become interested in the Bible and has been reading through Romans 8. It could be a friend who read a comment online that talked about God choosing people to believe. Whatever way this conversation may come up, we want both ourselves and our people to be equipped “to give an

⁵⁴ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 6.

⁵⁵ *The Big Lebowski*, DVD, directed by Joel Coen (USA: Polygram Video, 1998).

answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Pet. 3:15).

The answer to this question is rather simple. We let the Word of God stand as it is, without ever compromising its inerrancy or absolute truth. We boldly proclaim election as truth. We never back down from this belief. To do so would be to say that all of Scripture is false. However, we can present our beliefs in a way that causes the postmodernist to question his own view of the world.

In his book *A Primer on Postmodernism*, Stanley Grenz identifies several ways that Christians can shape their proclamation of the gospel to have a greater appeal in the postmodern world, and several of his points are quite valuable for us to think on. First, he writes,

In contrast to postmodern thought, we believe that there is a unifying center to reality. More specifically, we acknowledge that this center has appeared in Jesus of Nazareth, who is the eternal Word present among us.... Ultimately the metanarrative we proclaim lies beyond the pale of reason either to discover or to evaluate. Therefore we agree [with the postmodernist] that in this world we will witness the struggle among conflicting narratives and interpretations of reality. But we add that although all interpretations are in some sense invalid, they cannot all be *equally* invalid.⁵⁶

While we may hesitate to completely agree with Grenz on this (we certainly would hesitate to say that our view of Scripture is invalid), he makes a good point. As a postmodernist, you would have to admit there is truth *somewhere*. Everything cannot possibly be invalid. While this may not convince all postmodernists with whom you interact, or even get an answer from them, this accomplishes two things. First of all, we are confident that we have shared the message about Christ in a way that reflects the inerrancy of Scripture. Second, we have placed a “rock in their shoe,” causing them to question their own set of beliefs. However, in this we must always remember that we cannot argue a person into believing in Jesus. The temptation with such an

⁵⁶ Grenz, 165.

approach is to continue to argue with them over what is “truth” and what is not, in an attempt to do what we cannot; bring a person to faith.

The next point that Grenz makes deals with what we might want to emphasize as we talk about Christianity. Grenz urges his readers to portray the gospel in a manner that is *post-individualistic*. Simply put, postmodernism is a reaction to the modernist, who emphasized the importance of self and the individual. According to post-modernism, truth is not only objective and “within each of us.” Instead, it is something searched for and found through the rest of the world.⁵⁷ While much of what Grenz states in this section is perhaps a bit too philosophical, his point here is one to keep in mind. Point them to the natural knowledge of God. Talk to them about the beauty and majesty and complexity of all things, and then question how this could all have come about on its own. Use their conscience to draw out the natural understanding that all people have about the law that God has recorded in his Word. Again, this approach may not seem to have much of an impact at the time. You may be left feeling as if your conversation accomplished little or nothing. However, you have pointed them to where God has revealed himself in nature, praying that they would look for God in his Word. “God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.” (Acts 17:27)

What is the doctrine of election’s place in all of this? First and foremost, God gives us personal comfort as we try to evangelize the postmodern thinker. Although we may come away from conversations like this feeling only failure and rejection, we still have cause to hope. God has promised that he will call his elect to faith and in time. We don’t know who God has called,. However, we can pray that each person we speak to is one of those elect and trust that God will

⁵⁷ Grenz, 168.

do as he has promised. Whether it is through our own sharing of the gospel, or through someone else, God's Word will "achieve the purpose for which [he] set it" (Isa. 55:11).

What value is there in a life of constant skepticism and lack of truth? How can a postmodernist ever be completely convinced that he has discovered truth? We can be grateful that, in election, God never makes it depend on our thinking or understanding. His love and plan for the salvation of all are an objective truth. We hold fast to this with absolute confidence.

Calvinistic Double Predestination and Preservation of the Saints

As I mentioned previously on pages eleven to fourteen, one of the most troubling false teachings about election is taught by many Calvinists. Because of their belief in a limited atonement by Christ, they must attempt to explain election in light of this. The logical conclusion is the teaching of double predestination — God has chosen some people to be believers and chosen the rest to go to hell. Closely connected to this teaching is the "P" from the Calvinist TULIP; the Perseverance of the Saints. Boettner explains,

We believe that those who once become true Christians cannot totally fall away and be lost, - that while they may fall into sin temporarily, they will eventually return and be saved.... If God has chosen men absolutely and unconditionally to eternal life, and if His Spirit effectively applies to them the benefits of redemption, the inescapable conclusion is that these persons shall be saved.⁵⁸

The natural question to ask a Calvinist who believes this would be, "What about those who do believe, only to fall away later in life. Boettner answers this question as being a matter of God demonstrating his love for that person.

God does not take them out of the world while they are in the saved state. Surely no one will have the perversity to say that it was because He could not, or because He did not foresee their future apostasy. Why, then, does He leave these objects of His affection here to fall back into sin and to perish? His gift of continued life to those Christians amounts

⁵⁸ Boettner, 182.

to an infinite curse placed upon them. Who can really believe that the heavenly Father takes no better care of His children than that? This stupid heresy of the Arminians teaches that a person may be a son of God today and a son of the Devil tomorrow... Certainly this is desperate doctrine. There is scarcely an error more absurd than that which supposes that a sovereign God would permit His children to defeat His love and fall away.⁵⁹

For once, we would agree with the Arminians here. Scripture makes it clear that a person *can* reject God's grace, and that it is possible for a person to fall away.

This teaching of "once saved, always saved" can be incredibly dangerous to a person's faith. He could fall under the false assumption that, since he clearly believes and was therefore elected by God in eternity, nothing he does can make him fall away. He is free to live his life as he pleases. On the other hand, if a person would happen to fall away, he is left without hope of ever returning, because according to the Calvinist he was never chosen in the first place. There are two reasons we want to inform our people about the false teachings they may face. First, so that they may understand what is being talked about if the subjects of double predestination and perseverance come up in a conversation. Second, so that they are not overcome by their own sinful pride, but instead focus on the reassurance of love and forgiveness that God offers to them in election.

CONCLUSION

"Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Eph. 4:11–12).

While it is true that not all of God's people have been given the gifts to serve in the public ministry, this does not restrict outreach to something only a pastor or teacher can do. God says to all who believe in him, "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood ... that you may declare the

⁵⁹ Boettner, 182.

praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pet. 2:9). As Christians, we are all given the responsibility and privilege of sharing the wonderful news about Jesus as Savior of the world. The doctrine of election is so closely tied to Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, that we can hardly mention one without the other. While there certainly are challenges in applying election to our outreach methods, through careful examination of and instruction in the Word, we see the incredible comfort that our Lord gives to us in this doctrine. We must be careful not to let our reason take the driver’s seat, but instead rely solely on the power of God’s Word to call his elect to faith through our spreading of the gospel message.

We have a special title, given to us by God through the saving work of Christ – *chosen*. We rejoice in this title, not because of anything within us that deserved this, but because of the Lamb of God who shed his blood on the cross. We are motivated through this great love to proudly proclaim about Christ until he returns, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!” (Rev. 5:12)

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