

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Answering the Key Questions About the Doctrine of Election

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: GTY106

PHIL: John, several years ago we offered everyone on the Grace To You mailing list a free copy of a message you taught on the doctrine of election. And the response to that was huge. It was one of the biggest offers we've ever had. And the topic generated a lot of conversation and response and some questions. So we wanted to kind of follow up on it. The fact is, election is one of those doctrines a lot of people have a strong response to, some people hate it, some people love it. And that's why we want to talk about it.

Do you get a lot of questions about the doctrine of election?

JOHN: I don't think I ever do question and answer session anywhere in the country or in other parts of the world that somebody doesn't ask about the doctrine of election. It's a very, very common question.

PHIL: It's usually one of the first questions...

JOHN: Yeah, if not the very first, it's near the front and it's always basically the question of how can the doctrine of election relate to human choice, or free will, as it's often called by people? So it's not just the doctrine of election itself, but how it connects with human responsibility.

PHIL: Good, well we'll talk about some of the hard questions about election. Questions...some of these questions will make us feel uncomfortable. Some questions that stretch our ability to think and to understand, but this is a subject about which the Bible has a lot to say and we want to be like the Bereans.

JOHN: Yeah, and I think at that point, if I can jump in and say, I understand all those hard questions. They're equally hard for me. And they're equally hard for you. To say I believe in the doctrine of election does not solve all the problems, it simply admits to what the Bible teaches. I cannot resolve all the problems, I have all the same questions that everybody else has. I don't think you're going to in this life get perhaps the final answer to all of those dilemmas but becoming content and committed to and faithful to what the Scripture says about the doctrine of election is the issue.

PHIL: Let's start just by talking about the term election for people who have heard that word and aren't sure what it means. Let's start with the basics. What is the doctrine of election?

JOHN: Well, it simply means to be chosen. We would use the word election in our own culture to refer to someone being chosen. When someone is elected, they are chosen for a specific purpose. And that's exactly what it means. It comes from a Greek verb, *eklego*, which means to pick out, to choose out. And it is the doctrine that says God chooses those who will be saved. And He does so sovereignly, according to His own will and His own purpose, uninfluenced by any other person, or by anything anyone does. That is to say the choice is apart from any action on the sinner's part, which might render that sinner worthy or deserving of that choice.

PHIL: John, is the debate about election a matter of differing traditions, or is this a debate that flows out of Scripture?

JOHN: It is a debate that has to be resolved in the Bible. But certainly there are differing traditions. There is the classical tradition that is often called Calvinism, although that's a little bit too narrow a definition because this kind of teaching was not exclusively John Calvin's teaching. So there is a tradition of teaching firmly and strongly on the doctrine of election that comes long before John Calvin and continues today even outside of classic Calvinism. There are believers all over the world who view the Bible as teaching the doctrine of election. There is also historically the idea that man has a free will and that he is free to choose and God only chooses man when man first chooses Him. The worst form of that has been called in the past Pelagian, a little less severe view of that is called semi-Pelagian and then it sort of migrates up the ladder a little to Arminianism. But all of it comes down to the idea that God does not in the end determine who is saved, the sinner himself determines that by an act of his own will with which God cooperates. So those are traditions that have been around a long time.

I think you can make a case classically, however, for the doctrine of sovereign election right straight back to the Apostles, as being the truest and purest reflection of what Christians have always believed.

PHIL: And as a matter of fact, it goes even further back than that because it permeates the Old Testament.

JOHN: It does. "Israel, Mine elect," says God in referring to Israel.

PHIL: Well I mentioned earlier that this doctrine of election is one of the most hated and by some people one of the most beloved doctrines in all the Bible. I teach sometimes, too, and I've noticed that people tend to bristle when you bring up this subject. Some people do, some people love it. Why is it that some people despise this doctrine if it is in Scripture?

JOHN: You know, I think in some ways it's sort of an American thing, sort of a cultural American thing to be free and have free will. I don't even think societies in the past in Europe that were monarchies that knew what it was to be under a sovereign had as big a problem in dealing with the fact that there was such a thing as a sovereign person who did things based upon his own will and his own purpose and made determinations without the consent of the people who were under him. But I think in our culture in America, most of the reaction has come here. The greatest reaction to the doctrine of sovereign election that I can see historically has sort of been Americanized. We're in to freedom, we're in to making our choices, personal autonomy is a big deal to us. And so I think it's just part of the way American people think, that we ought to have the right to choose our own destiny. That's the way it should be because that's the way it is in America.

But I do think also beyond that, and that may be a small element of it, beyond that, fallen human nature bristles, to use the word that you used, bristles at the idea that it isn't in charge of its own destiny. It's the old invictus(?) thing, I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul, I will determine my own destiny. This is all part of fallen human pride, that you're in charge of everything and you have the right to make every call and every decision. You hear that reflected in the silly stupid talk on the man on the street interviews today, this is my life and this is how I live it and you can take it or leave it, it's my life and blah, blah, blah. That...that's the...that's the basic idea of human freedom gone amok that wants no restraints. Well that's coming right out of the fallen human heart that reacts against any infringement upon its own personal freedoms and rights to choose its own destinies. So I think the combination of the kind of culture we have lived in and the reality of the fallen human heart with its flawed reason and its rebellious independence makes it hard for the average sinner to acknowledge the truth of this great doctrine.

PHIL: In a way, that pride you described is...is rooted in sin itself. I mean, Satan's fall stems from his desire to usurp God. Eve fell when Satan promised her she would be like God. There's a sense in which that pride is the very essence of sin.

JOHN: Exactly, exactly what it is, it is the essence of sin and as you put it, Satan wanted to be sovereign and he wanted to replace God and he wanted to be sovereign. God said, "Don't do that." She said, "I will do that. I'll usurp sovereignty over my own life and make my own choices." And that's the fabric of human fallenness. So when you come along and say God is absolutely sovereign, you know, that's like putting your fingers down a blackboard, your fingernails down a blackboard to the sinner because he believes so strongly in his own right to choose.

PHIL: If that's the case and resistance to the sovereignty of God is rooted in sin, that means as a theological issue goes, this is a very important one and if you resist the sovereignty of God, that's about as serious a theological error as you can make.

JOHN: It is absolutely right because you're striking a blow at the very heart and soul of everything in Christian theology and that is the character and attributes of God Himself. That's why you see in the Garden the great fall of humanity came in a usurping of God's sovereignty, a denial that God had any right to tell Eve what to do or not to do. That was essentially what brought the whole race down and that is still the battleground. I guess the irony of that is, however, among Christian people that they hold on to that, that Christian people who have crushed in their own sinfulness, broken, humbled...to borrow the language of James 4, humble yourselves, you know, because God gives grace to the humble. They have come humbled and broken and crushed at the foot of the cross to be redeemed, to be saved, they have fled for God to forgive them and give them grace and redeem them and now that they are saved, they want to hold on by virtue of that remaining fallenness, they have this irrational, spiritually irrational idea, they want to hold on to their own autonomy as if this decision belonged to them and not to God. And yet if you talk to a Christian, they're going to tell you that God did the work in their lives. When you tell someone that someone is lost, what do they do? First thing they do is pray for that person. What is that? That is an acknowledgment of the sovereignty of God over that person's soul. They plead with God to save that individual. So we're caught in a trap where we understand spiritually, we have to understand that God is doing this miracle, that He's in charge of it. That's the way we come to the foot of the cross, pleading for His mercy and His salvation. That's the way we pray. And yet we still can't let go of this idea that we're in control of our own destiny.

PHIL: I think most Christians feel that tension all the time and you can't study Scripture very far without running into it. The doctrine of election has to do with God's choosing people for salvation in particular. Where would you go in Scripture to establish that doctrine? What are the key passages?

JOHN: Well there are many, many passages. You can go back in to the Old Testament, the book of Deuteronomy, where God talks about choosing Israel. In the prophets He calls Israel "Mine elect." Perhaps a good starting point and it's found in the words of the Apostle Peter who in the most, I guess, obvious sort of simple normal way introduces an epistle and doesn't make a defense of this doctrine but in just a very, very simple straightforward way says this, "Peter an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen." There's no defense. There's no, "Well, ah, here's what I really meant by that. Oops, sorry, I hope I didn't offend anybody." "And they are chosen according to God's predetermination by the sanctifying work of the Spirit to obey Jesus Christ." And then he goes into the benediction, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again." Not only do you have the choosing, but you have the effecting of that choice. He not only chose us, He caused us to be born again. That's...that's an analogy that is a very important analogy. Nobody causes his own birth. The Lord picked that analogy because it's so air tight. You can't cause your own birth. You show up because of choices and decisions made by someone other than you. I was born into this world with no contribution to that fact. And that is the very reality that our Lord uses to refer to the new birth, it is a being born again. We have no power to do that. And Jesus said that, I love that in John 3, this is another key passage.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus and he says, "What do I do to...what do I do to enter the Kingdom? What do I do to receive eternal life?" This is the question of his heart, not what's on his lips. Jesus reads his heart and He said, "You must be born again." And he said, "Well, what do I...how do I get in to my mother's womb and get born all over again?" I don't think he was being silly or superficial, I think he was picking up the analogy and saying, "How do I do that? You're telling me I need to be born again, facetiously he says, Well how do I get into my mother's womb? How do I do that?"

And Jesus' answer is not this, He doesn't say, "Well here are the three steps to being born again. Pray this prayer, say these words, bow your head." He didn't say that. You know what He says, it's astonishing what He says. He says, "Well, the Holy Spirit is like the wind, He blows where He will. And you hear the sound of it but you don't know where it comes from and where it's going." And His answer is, "Nicodemus, that 's the work of the Holy Spirit. And He comes when He will and does what He will when He wills."

That's not an answer that would satisfy an Arminian. That's not an answer that would satisfy a contemporary evangelist. You say, "How do I...how do I become born again?" And the answer is, "It's a work of the Holy Spirit, and it's a sovereign work and He'll do it when and where and with whom He chooses to do it." But it involves believing on the Lord Jesus Christ. And, of course, we add the gospel because it doesn't occur apart from the gospel.

Another important passage along this line would be Ephesians chapter 1 which is an inescapable statement concerning the doctrine of election...which says to us, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ just as He chose us in Him, that is in Christ, before the foundation of the world." That's pretty clear.

You have it also, and I love to go to this particular text because I think its escaped a lot of people, but it's at the beginning of Titus as Paul writes his letter to Titus. He says, "Paul, a bondservant of God and an Apostle of Jesus Christ, for the faith of those chosen of God." In other words, he says I preach the gospel so that those who are chosen can hear it and believe. That's just as simple as it can be. And this is a divine work of God which He grants to those for whom He has purposed to grant it, that's what it means to be chosen.

The Apostle Paul again doesn't make some kind of explanation when he says this. Second Timothy 1:8, "Do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me," Paul writes Timothy, "his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose." And again, you're right back, this is God's purpose upon which He based His own election, predestination, calling conversion.

PHIL: That's an interesting array of answers you've given me. And our listeners would be interested to know you did that without notes. Nobody prompted you on what these questions would be, it's the first time you heard the question. You went through and you gave examples from Peter, from Jesus, from Paul, really you could cite almost any New Testament author all teaching the same truth.

JOHN: Then there's...and the thing that is about it, so important about it is it's without pretension, it's without explanation, it's without the um, ahh, I know this is hard to swallow. It was assumed. It was, and you mentioned that earlier, I think it was so crystal clear in the Old Testament that God had chosen Israel and that God did His work through His people and that as it says in Isaiah 46, God does exactly what He purposes to do. They knew that. That wasn't some strange new doctrine injected into their lives, the doctrine of election didn't come sort of in a vacuum, this was something they could readily understand because of what they knew about God from the Old Testament. God does exactly what He wills. Listen to this, "I am God, there is no other...Isaiah 46...I am God, there's no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times thing which have not been done saying My purpose will be established, I will accomplish all My good pleasure." And Psalm 135 says, "God does whatever He pleases."

Now how could God determine the end of human history, the end of His creation from the beginning of it if He wasn't in control of it? And so this, I think, is part and parcel of the very nature of God which was clearly revealed in the Old Testament so that this was no surprise to anybody who had a Jewish background and an understanding of the Old Testament that God was in charge of everything. Listen to Psalm 33:11, "The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation." His plan, His purpose working its way through human history, He chooses. He chooses in the Old Testament, Israel Mine elect, He even calls Christ My elect. And He chooses Christ as His chosen one, He chooses believers today and through all of redemptive history as His own.

PHIL: And, you know, as I study the gospel, no body stressed this more than Jesus and He made it very personal with the disciples in John 15 when He said, "You didn't choose Me, I chose you."

JOHN: Absolutely right. He walked up to them in the midst of their life, that's one of the wonders of it, when I wrote the book Twelve Ordinary Men, it was so startling to think that Jesus would have chosen the ones that He did, the no-name, anonymous, unimportant typical working type people and He picked them out all the way along the line. He just selected them, selected them, collected them, collected them, collected them, trained them and sent them out into the world. And, of course, it's all summed up in what He said, "You didn't choose Me, I chose you."

PHIL: All right, in a sense though they might have said, "But we did choose you," because there was a choice they made, right?

JOHN: Yes, but before they could make the right choice, God already had made the choice of them. Then the second thing that had to happen was God had to transform their lives to make them respond to Him.

PHIL: So they chose Him because He chose them.

JOHN: That's what John said. We love Him because He first loved us.

PHIL: That's exactly right. So you could add John to the list of New Testament writers who affirmed this truth.

JOHN: Absolutely.

PHIL: Well we hear a lot about the idea of free will. You mentioned it earlier. Is that a biblical concept at all?

JOHN: Yes, I think it is, but I think there's a way to understand free will that is very important. Man's will is free to choose the form of sin that most appeals to him, but that's the limit of his freedom.

PHIL: Because we're in bondage to sin.

JOHN: Well yeah, I mean, we're going to...we're sinful. We're depraved. We are...our nature is fallen, it is dead, we are blind, we are alienated from God. We do not possess the life of God. We are...we are dead in trespasses and sins, to borrow the language of Ephesians chapter 2. But within the framework of our sinfulness we could pick our poison. When you talk about free will, we're talking about the freedom that the sinner has to choose his iniquity. That's what his freedom is, that's the sum and substance of his freedom. The one thing he's not free to do is to choose salvation, or to choose righteousness, or to choose holiness, or to choose God, or to choose Christ unaided and on his own. The natural man understandeth not the things of God, they are foolishness to him, the preaching of the cross is foolishness to those that are perishing. The Jews are looking at it and it's a stumbling block and it's folly and foolishness to the Gentiles. All that the Bible says about the fallen man is that this man has no capacity to make the righteous choice. So free will as I see it and I think this is what Jonathan Edwards is talking about in *The Bondage of the Will*, the will is bound by sin so that mingling around in the reality of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, you can pick your sin. But the one thing you can't do is extricate yourself from that condition of sin and death.

PHIL: Yeah, actually I rarely get to correct you but Jonathan Edwards book was titled *The Freedom of the Will*, Luther wrote *The Bondage of the Will*...

JOHN: Yeah, it was Luther who wrote The Bondage of the Will.

PHIL: And it's interesting...

JOHN: And they were saying the same thing.

PHIL: Opposite titles but they said the same thing. And Edwards said the will is free but fetter because of our bondage to sin. And so we're free to choose according to our nature, but our nature is bent toward sin. And yet, John, I know you teach that the gospel offers salvation freely to all, you preach it that way. Why is that?

JOHN: Because that's what the Bible says.

PHIL: What do we do with the whosoever passages in the Bible?

JOHN: I think we preach them. I think we preach whosoever will may come. I think we preach Isaiah 55, everyone that thirsts, come, come. Jesus says, "Why will you die? Why won't you come?" Jesus weeps, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I would have gathered you, you that kill the prophets and stone those that are sent to you, how often I would have gathered you as a hen gathers her brood, but you would not and now your house is left to you desolate." Jesus pleading, Jesus weeping. Jeremiah 13, God weeps in Jeremiah 13, shedding tears over Israel's apostasy and unbelief and disobedience and defection from the truth. And the heart of God is broken and the prophet says God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. So I...I see clearly that the Bible holds the sinner responsible. The Bible calls the sinner to repent and believe the truth.

PHIL: Second Corinthians 5 gives us the duties ambassadors to plead with people to be reconciled with God.

JOHN: Yep, we are to beg them, be reconciled to God, as it says, though God were begging through you. That's exactly the language there. As though God were begging through you, be reconciled to God, go into all the world, preach the gospel to every creature, make disciples of all the nations. We have the responsibility to take the gospel to the ends of the earth to every creature.

PHIL: Well Scripture says the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. Does that then mean that those invitations and pleas and beseechings are the instruments that God uses to call those to whom...

JOHN: That's exactly what it means. It means people are saved, 1 Peter 1, they're begotten again by the word of truth, or Romans 1:16, they are begotten again by the power of the gospel to save Jew and Gentile. So the power of salvation comes to the sinner in two ways. It comes directly from God

when God by sovereign power gives life to the dead, when God by sovereign power awakens the sleeping sinner, when God by sovereign power gives spiritual sight to the one who was blind and simultaneously the sinner is empowered to understand and believe the gospel. So it comes apart from the Scripture in one sense, it comes from God into the life of the sinner to give him life and at the same time through the Scripture because salvation comes by hearing the truth concerning Christ, Romans 10. And so it is that conflux of God giving life to the sinner and awakening the sinner so that through the sinner's understanding now of the word of the gospel, salvation can occur. And it can never happen, salvation can never happen apart from the regenerating work of God which is the sovereign work of God and at the same time the believing of the sinner who embraces the truth of the gospel.

PHIL: So the gospel offers salvation freely to all. It pleads with people to be reconciled with God. It beseeches the sinner to repent. As you say, begs us to be right with God. Is that an expression of the true heart of God toward the sinners?

JOHN: It is absolutely the true heart of God otherwise God would be some kind of an actor, God would be some kind of a hypocrite.

PHIL: Then does the Bible give us any insight as to why God chooses some and passes over others?

JOHN: First of all, He's God and He has a right to do whatever He wishes to do. The question of why God does anything is the ultimate question that is generally not answered except to say this. Since right is whatever God does because God is the definer of what is right, shall not the judge of all the earth do right? I mean, we can't call that into question. So God only does what is right and what God does is what right is. And so, God does what He does because it's right to do it. If you're going to ask well why would God want to send anyone to hell? Why would God not choose everyone? The answer would be because it glorifies Him, cause that has to be the answer to everything, it glorifies Him. That's why Romans 9 says, "What if God desires vessels of wrath? What if...do you have a right to question God? Shall the clay tell the potter how the potter is to behave and what he is to do? Whom he is to shape?" If God is glorified in His wrath, as well as in His grace, then He has a right to that. So the ultimate answer to that question is, God does what He does because it's right and He does what He does because it brings Him glory.

PHIL: That stretches my brain, John. These are important issues, obviously.

JOHN: Well and I think, Phil, just to help because it stretches mine. I'm in the same boat anybody is. I can understand somebody's listening and saying, "This is really difficult." I just want you to know, that's exactly how I feel, but I'm not the resolution. I'm not the guy to say, "Hey, here's the little two-step way to resolve all this." I...I have the same problem that a baby Christian who doesn't know much who is listening to this discussion is immediately having. I have the same problem the guy in

the Q & A on a college campus has when he asks me this same question. I have all those problems. But I'm content to say that's not a problem for God. If it's in the Scripture, I take it at face value. I cannot harmonize it all. I cannot resolve it all anymore than you can. I have a finite pea brain just like everybody else, just like all the rest of us humans. God is infinite. It's not a dilemma to Him. There are no apparent paradoxes to God, He has no dilemmas. There is no confusion. There are no unresolved issues. I...I think it's a great testimony to the fact that God wrote the Bible because if a committee had written the Bible, they wouldn't have allowed for such impossible tensions to exist. They would have fixed them. You know, you're an editor, you fix everything. So...but the fact that it's there means the book is transcendent. These things are not resolved. And I rest in the perfections of God, in the perfect wisdom of God, the perfect justice of God, the perfect righteousness of God and I give Him all the glory for the salvation for all who are redeemed, and I give Him all the glory to be displayed in His wrath because He is a God who will receive all glory and only glory for all that He does is glorious.

PHIL: Now at the same time these are practical and not just theoretical issues, and that's one of the things we want to talk about in the second half of this interview. If you're interested in hearing the entire interview covering today and tomorrow's Grace To You broadcasts, we're going to be making it available to you free of charge. Just send your name and your address and mention the election interview and our e-mail is letters@gty.org or call us at 1-800-55GRACE, or outside the U.S., contact your local Grace To You office.

PHIL: John, we're almost out of time and we have another full page of questions for you. And I'm going to work hard to get through all of them tomorrow. But before we go today, let me ask one last question. This is a difficult doctrine. Was there ever a time...well, let me rephrase that because he's already said that. Just going to start over with the question.

This is a difficult doctrine, and you've already said it was difficult for you. Describe for us briefly your own struggle with the doctrine of election and how it is that you finally came to grips with this.

JOHN: Well my own struggle with that doctrine comes from my emotion. It comes from the influences of my fallen heart. It comes from my expectation that everybody ought to have a right to make a choice. And it also comes from the early years of my Christian experience when I didn't understand what it meant to be depraved. As a young Christian, I didn't understand how really dead the sinner is. That is the bottom line issue here. Salvation has to be all of God if you understand the doctrine of human depravity. If you understand what it means to be utterly unable to do right, unable to know God, dead in trespasses and sin in the most profound kind of unalterable death about which you can do nothing, and if you understand there is no human merit, there is no human effort, there is nothing we can do to alter that situation or to please God. Out of the doctrine of what I call utter human inability comes the doctrine of election. It was when I understood the sinfulness of man and the total inability of the sinner to do anything about his condition that I was left with nothing but the doctrine of election to solve that problem. That doesn't, of course, as we said today, solve all of the

tensions...we'll have to wait for heaven to come to a full understanding of that.

PHIL: Thanks, John. And I want to remind our listeners not to forget to ask for your free copy of this interview. Just send your name and address and ask for the Q & A on election. Our e-mail address again is letters@gty.org, or outside the United States contact your local Grace To You office. And with that in mind, Carl's here for more details about the free offer and how to contact us. Carl?

PHIL: John, for people who might not have been with us yesterday, would you give us a definition again? What is the doctrine of election?

JOHN: It is the doctrine taught by Scripture throughout Scripture that God sovereignly, independently, uninfluenced by any other person chooses who will be saved and that that choice was made by God before time began, before the world was created in eternity past and that He is in response to that choice redeeming His chosen people through human history until finally they are all together redeemed and gathered into His presence forever.

PHIL: Now I want to ask you today some questions about the practical ramifications of this doctrine. Some would argue that the doctrine of election encourages fatalism and discourages people from being evangelistic. What do they mean by that? Where are they coming from and how would you respond to that?

JOHN: Well I think that's a straw man. How could the doctrine of election lead to fatalism and indifference to evangelism when you understand that the elect are gathered together only one way and that is through the preaching of the gospel? I'm not ashamed of the gospel of Christ for it is the power of God unto salvation. Faith comes by hearing the message concerning Jesus Christ. Nobody is ever going to be saved apart from the gospel, apart from the truth of Christ. That's why we're told to go unto all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.

Furthermore, the decree of God and just who the elect are is unknown to us. Somebody criticized Spurgeon one time and said, "Oh, if you believe that, why don't you just preach to the elect?" And he said, "Well, if you'll pull up their shirttails so I can see if they have an E stamped on their backs, maybe I will." Facetious, of course. Since we don't know who they are but we do know that no one will be saved apart from the preaching of the gospel, we understand then that we in the faithful proclamation of the gospel are the means by which God sovereignly saves those whom He has sovereignly chosen.

PHIL: Based on what you're saying there, and what you said yesterday, I would...I would think that you might say your convictions about the biblical doctrine of election actually make you a more determined evangelist rather than being negligent about it.

JOHN: Yeah, and you know what they do, Phil? They make me determined to preach the clear gospel. If I believe that I could get people saved and that people basically produce their own salvation by their own will, then I would be on Charles Finney's side of the fence and I'd be saying anything that manipulates the will, any way we can manipulate the will, we've got to manipulate the will. So we come up with an anxious bench, we come up with a mourner's bench. We hammer people's emotions. We sing 54 verses of the invitation hymn. We play the mood music. We do whatever we need to do to get them to move their will.

What happens then is truth becomes minimized and manipulation becomes maximized. And now we're looking at style, we're looking at technique. It's still with us. I mean, that's defining evangelicalism today. It's creating...I've heard people say in the big crusades, well I've been in sessions where people have said, "Now if you really want to get people saved, you've got to prime the pump." Well how do you prime the pump? Well you put all the counselors up in the audience. You put all the counselors' wives in the audience, in the mass of humanity, and you put the people who are ushers and whoever else and soon as the invitation is given, all you people on cue, you start coming to the front. You start pouring down and the evangelist says, "Look at them, they're all coming and they're all coming." And people will get caught up in the flow because the pump is primed. That is a staple, has been a staple in mass evangelism for years. What does that have to do with the work of God? It has absolutely nothing to do with it. But if you think you can manipulate the will of people, then that's what you do. I think the doctrine of election forces the evangelists to say the message is clear, the message is the issue. The truth must be proclaimed. So I'm much more concerned with the clarity of the gospel and with a passionate appeal based upon that gospel short of any manipulation whatsoever that might give somebody a sort of an emotional pressure that would make them do something that was not really the work of God.

So the first thing that happens when you believe in the doctrine of election is it forces you in your evangelism to focus on the truth because the power is in the truth. God converts through a true presentation of the gospel. The second thing is, you don't bear the full burden of response. People say to me, "Are you disappointed when you preach and a lot of people aren't saved?" And my answer is, "I'm disappointed when I preach and I don't get it right. I'm disappointed when I preach and I haven't studied well enough. I'm disappointed when I preach and I don't make it clear. I'm disappointed when I preach and I haven't given my whole heart to the preaching to exhaust that passage to plead with sinners." But I can't control the response. That's not my job.

If I thought actually, if I thought that people went to heaven based upon my ability to convince them, I couldn't live with it. I couldn't live with the fact that hell was being populated by my inabilities. I can't carry that load. And yet you see some...this is an amazing thing to me, some of the most slap-happy evangelists, some of the most slapstick carnival kind of evangelism which is really popular today, by these guys up there who think, you know, they're wowing the crowd and getting people in the

Kingdom and isn't it great, do they really believe that it's their style that is converting people? Because if they do, then it's also their lack of connection that's damning other people. That's just way too much responsibility.

I don't know, if I were an evangelist and I felt that people's salvation depended upon my ability to manipulate or move them, if I believed that, I couldn't live with it. I mean, that would...that would be such an overwhelming burden that I think I'd go mad with that. But I...and I couldn't be a comedian, I'll tell you that, that would suck out of the comedy out of my preaching for sure. But I think even people who don't stop and think about the implications of it, even guys who employ manipulation and all this stuff, down in their hearts they know that God is the converter of sinners. You have to know that.

PHIL: Now you just prompted a bunch of questions in my mind and I want to get to them. But I want to say to our listeners first that...and as you can all tell from what John is saying, these issues I'm talking about are very important, very practical. It's a difficult doctrinal issue, the doctrine of election, but filled with practical ramifications and that's why we're making yesterday and today's interview available to you free of charge on one CD. Send us your name and address and mention election interview. Our e-mail address is gty.org, or call us at...actually our e-mail address is letters@gty...is that right? Letters? Okay. Our e-mail address is letters@gty.org or call us at 1-800-55GRACE.

John, for what you just said, and I've known you for 30 years now, and I would say the outstanding thing about your character is your passion for the truth. You...I mean, when we did a tribute to you in book form a couple of years ago, it's called Truth Matters, and your next book is The Truth War. Truth is always at the heart of what you're doing. What you're just saying is, it seems to me, your passion for the truth is directly related to your convictions about the sovereignty of God.

JOHN: Absolutely right. And that is a tremendous connection to make. I know God does His work through His truth. I know that. There is no ministry apart from the truth. That's why this whole post-modern emergent church thing is so ludicrous. You've got people running around saying, "Well we can't know what the truth is, let's not get carried away with the truth, let's just love Jesus, let's not divide over doctrine. You know, let's not get caught up in interpreting passages...as our once mutual friend said, you know, you can't...you can't get God's message from interpreting a verse in the Bible. You know let's not get caught up in this battle for the truth, it really doesn't matter that much, let's just love Jesus and love God and work it out any way we can." That's absolutely ludicrous. God does His work through His truth. He saves through the truth, He sanctifies through the truth. John 17:17, Jesus says, "Father, sanctify them by Thy truth, Thy Word is truth." It comforts through the truth, it gives hope through the truth, He instructs through the truth, He edifies through the truth. All the work of God is predicated upon the truth. All the sovereign work of God He has accomplished through His truth. That's why it is so critical that we proclaim the truth.

PHIL: And as you point out, that is becoming more and more a minority position. People today really don't care what the truth is. And unfortunately that's true even in many churches. Would you say then that the...the approach to evangelism that you described, just attempting to manipulate people and all of that rather than relying on the truth itself has contributed to a susceptibility among evangelicals to fall for that lax attitude towards truth?

JOHN: It has not only contributed to a susceptibility, it has produced a far-reaching one, but worse than that, it has convinced people that the truth doesn't even matter, that it's not important. The truth that people are after is how are you going to tweak my life? How you going to make me feel better about my wife? How you going to make me feel better about my job? How you...how you going to make me feel better about my career? Is God going to give me a new BMW? Is God going to give me a new house? You've got the prosperity gospel in its myriad forms, the health, wealth, name it and claim it on one hand, now kind of merging with the psycho, psychological approach to things. And the gospel is all about finding your purpose and your well-being in life and becoming everything you can be. It's like an Army commercial, you know, be all you can be. Sure. And what it is is a complete disregard for the truth. That 's why I wrote the book which just finished on the Truth War. We've lost sight of the fact that we have to fight for the truth. We have to go to battle for the truth to contend earnestly for it, or we lose it. And that's...that's a generational disaster.

PHIL: Now I've been in evangelistic meetings like you described where the all sorts of gimmicks are used to prime the pump or manipulate people into coming forward in responses like that. Would you think a lot of those conversions are not real?

JOHN: Sure. A lot of them are not real. Maybe most of them are not real. I mean, statistics will even tell you that. Statistics done by evangelistic organizations would say things like one out of four people that come forward in a meeting show up in a church, or less, within a year. And then within five years the number goes down, goes down, goes down, goes down. There was a survey done some years ago, the number was pretty startling to me, it was somewhere in the 90 percent of people who are truly converted, long-term people who are converted were converted by personal contact, personal contact and it was something under ten percent that came to Christ through some mass event kind of thing. It's still a personal testimony, personal witness, credibility of a life, time to build a relationship, not just for the relationship's sake but enough time in the development of a relationship to clearly explain the gospel so that the person understands exactly what they're responding to. If you go to a church that says Jesus wants you successful, Jesus wants you to have a great goal and objective in life, so take Jesus. And the guy says, "Yeah, where do I sign? I'll take Jesus, I'll sign my little deal and take Jesus." What is that? So you have the kind of passing approach to manipulation which was the long verses of the invitation, the organ plays, etc., etc., emotional tear-jerking stories, that kind of thing. Now being replaced by the psychological kind of cool approach that Jesus wants to make your life successful. It's just a different form of manipulation. It's just a different style, but in the end you get the same superficiality because there's not enough understanding of what's going on for people to do

the hard, hard, heart-crushing work of true repentance and the clear understanding of the glory of the gospel to truly put their trust in the Christ who is the Christ of the gospel.

PHIL: Yeah. Earlier you mentioned Charles Finney and I wanted to follow up on that. He didn't believe in the doctrine of election, did he?

JOHN: No, he hated the doctrine of election. He believed in the sovereignty of the sinner.

PHIL: Explain how his views and his practices affected what it is that you're talking about.

JOHN: It defined American evangelism. It got in the fabric of American evangelism and it went right through all the most well-known evangelists in American history, and it's still out there. And Finney's deal was that we manipulate the sinner. He even said, "Whatever it takes to move the sinner's will, that's what I have to do because the sinner is fully responsible for his own situation." And it's still around. It's the way traditional evangelism is done today. And the new non-traditional, seeker-friendly emerging church kind of evangelism is just another form of this which instead of majoring on the full orb'd glory of the gospel, instead of being heavy with biblical content and rich with the truth of Scripture, moves that out, gets rid of it and in its place cool stories, neat insights, psychological self-help stuff...

PHIL: Rap videos.

JOHN: Rap videos, really blasphemous kind of stuff, and at best superficial dishonoring treatments of Christ manipulate people. It's a new kind of manipulation but the same old theology...or lack of theology.

PHIL: All right, so we live in a evangelical culture that is conditioned by a lot of shallow teaching and you're talking now about a doctrine, the doctrine of election, that is very difficult anyway. Should this doctrine be taught to a young believer? Is this something that should be saved for more mature believers?

JOHN: Probably ought to be the first thing you teach a young believer. Now that you've come to Christ, this is what I want you to know, you were saved by the sovereign grace of God who stepped into your life in the midst of your death and blindness and gave you life and sight and picked you up and brought you into His Kingdom. Sheer grace has done this for you. That, I think, is the first thing you should say to a new convert. This is, if in fact, you are faithful to the confession you have made, if in fact your love for Christ and desire to honor, to worship and to obey Him continues to grow, this will be an ongoing evidence that God has wrought a miracle in your life. And because of that, you need to know, this is really important, that you should live a life of gratitude for a work has been done in you which you did not deserve and did not earn.

Secondly, if you have in your salvation tasted the kindness of the Lord, that is to say if you have experienced in your salvation the power of the Word of God, combined with the sovereign grace of God, if you've experienced that in your salvation, then go on in the Word to experience it your sanctification. Isn't that what Peter is saying?

PHIL: It is. And, in fact, one of the basic truths of the gospel is that we are not responsible for our own salvation, "For by grace you are saved through faith and that not of yourselves." And I think every true Christian understands that on some level. But think about this, John, and I think this is the difficulty a lot of people have. If I am not responsible for my own salvation, does that mean that my unsaved neighbor is not responsible for his own sin?

JOHN: No. We are all responsible for our own sin. We are all held accountable before God, not only for our own sin but for our rejection of God and of the gospel. When Paul writes the Thessalonians, he says God is going to send His angels to bring out judgment and retribution on those who do not obey the gospel. And they'll be punished everlastingly for not obeying the gospel. The sinner is fully culpable, fully accountable, fully guilty, fully to blame for his own or her own sin and will bear the full weight of divine justice upon that sin. That is the responsibility clearly indicated in Scripture. And, of course, that produces the question, first of all, why didn't God choose everybody for salvation. And the answer to that is God does what God does because it in the end gives Him glory. And God has every right to glorify Himself in His wrath as well as in His righteous grace. Beyond that you cannot go except to say that the sinner will bear the full guilt of his own sin forever.

And I think one of the ways to describe hell that helps us to understand it is that hell will be a permanent condition of a fully functioning conscience that forever will justly accuse the sinner for the life that that sinner lives...lived and continues to live throughout eternity in rebellion against God.

PHIL: That is a frightening thought. Our tendency, I think, is to...is to try to say if God is sovereign then how is He righteous to judge me for my sin? And that's the related question. Why does God pass over some? You've said we can't know the answer to that. How does God then hold them responsible if He didn't choose them for salvation?

JOHN: Well they are responsible for their own sin because it is their sin. The sinner sins because the sinner chooses to sin. We sin because it is our nature to sin and we sin in the fashion that we choose to sin and we will not believe, we do not believe, we are culpable for that unbelief. You're pressing back to that same tension again, and the ultimate question would be this, this is the question at the end of the day: why didn't God choose everybody? Okay? That's the question, right? He didn't choose every body to go to heaven. God could have made a salvation plan where there's no hell, there's no judgment, there's no condemnation, there's just heaven. He didn't do that. We know He didn't do that, right? We know He didn't do that. The Bible is clear there is a hell and multitudes are

going there. In fact, it's pretty clear that more people are going to go to hell than are going to go to heaven. It's a narrow gate, few are going to find it. Hell is going to be more populated than heaven.

Now the question is, who determines who goes to heaven and who goes to hell? We know not everybody is going to heaven. If God wanted everybody into heaven, He's God, He could have done that. He chose not to do that. Then we ask the question, did God then choose that some would go to hell? Of course, of course. He's the only one who could make that choice because He created heaven, He created hell and He created man. You're back again to the same dilemma, why? Because it glorifies God to demonstrate both His grace, His righteous grace and His righteous wrath. And that's as far as we can go. But nothing...nothing is going to resolve that question, not the debate between free will and election because if you say, "No, the sinner is free to choose," then you have to ask the question, "Why would God let sinners make the choice if He didn't want them to be condemned?" You can't...you can't ever get to the end of that dilemma.

PHIL: Well, these are obviously difficult questions. You said to me before we began this hour-long interview, two half-hours, that there's no way in this amount of time we could cover all the questions. And that's true, we barely scratched the surface. And there are lots of pastors in churches out there who, you know, hold different positions.

Here's question we often get from listeners who are convinced that Scripture does teach the doctrine of election but perhaps go to a church where this is not taught. Is this an issue that's worthy leaving a church over, or even splitting a church over?

JOHN: No, you know, I want to say that you don't want to split a church over anything, really, unless you're talking about the deity of Christ, or the character of God, or the nature of salvation. I mean, if you need to put a fight up, put a fight up on the gospel front. But when you're talking about the secret decree of God and we're talking about those divine elements that are beyond our comprehension, you don't want to drive some big stake in the ground and put yourself on a great hill on the election of God and sit up there and condemn everybody else who doesn't understand that. I think if you truly understand the doctrine of election, you're going to be humbled by it, not made proud by it. I think if you've been made proud by this, then you've missed the whole point. I think it's a humbling thing and I think if you're in a church where this is not taught, or where there seems to be a resistance to it, you need to humble yourself and be meek and be gracious and celebrate the glory of God in His electing grace in your own life and do the best you can to live your Christian life in that environment. And when given the opportunity, speak to it, point people in the direction of the Word of God. But don't make this some issue that you're going to split a church or create conflict.

Understand this, that people are the product of their teaching and they're where they are for a reason. Somebody took them there and most people aren't in a position to move a whole congregation in another direction. If you're the pastor, it might be a different thing. You start...I came to a church that

was fully Arminian, founded by a Methodist who was fully a Fineite(?), couldn't have been more opposite than where I am. It took years of transition. They didn't even know they were being transitioned by the way. They woke up one day and realized they believed in the doctrine of divine election and they embraced it with a full heart. It can be done, but it needs to be done at a leadership level in a gracious, patient way.

PHIL: By teaching the Word of God.

JOHN: By teaching the Word of God from the verses in the text so that the Word does its work.

PHIL: Right, good advice. John, we're almost out of time. One last question before we go. Some might think of the doctrine of election as a cold concept of merely intellectual interest. But as you've been talking this half hour, there are practical ramifications for this doctrine, let's get really practical. Does this doctrine help a person who has just lost his job, or a mother whose child has died, or children who suffer because their parents are getting a divorce?

JOHN: Well of course it does because if you understand that God is sovereign in choosing His own, and that...and this is the thing to say...He has chosen not just their justification, not just their regeneration, their justification, He's chosen their sanctification and their glorification. Everything then that goes on in this life is part of His sanctifying work in those whom He has chosen. That's why we can count it all joy when we fall into various trials because we know those trials are God's tools by which He works His own divine ends for our good. Second Corinthians chapter 12, Paul says, "I rejoice in persecution, suffering distress because when I'm weak then I'm strong." God is sanctifying me through this. Peter says, "After you've suffered a while, the Lord make you perfect." So I think when you understand that God is unfolding His sovereign purpose in the fullness of salvation, all the way from regeneration, justification through sanctification to glorification, then you can rejoice in it all because it is all what Romans 8:28 says, "God working things together for that glorious end to those that love Him and are the called, according to His purpose."

PHIL: Anything you'd like to add, John?

JOHN: Just one comment. Some years ago I did a message called "Who chose whom?" that is right out of the text. It's the most definitive, it's the most clear presentation that I've ever done and it's titled "Who chose whom?" It might be a good thing to remind our listeners that if you're really grappling with this, this more than anything I've ever done will take you where you need to go in the text of Scripture to understand this great doctrine. And it is available through the ministry of Grace To You. You can order it at a very reasonable price, its title "Who Chose Whom?"

PHIL: Thanks, John. Our e-mail address is letters@gty.org or outside the United States, contact your local Grace To You office.

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