

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

What are your thoughts about the doctrine of election?

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: QA181

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Phil Johnson:

What do you suppose, John, would be the most common doctrinal question we get?

John MacArthur:

The most common doctrinal question. Boy, I don't know what the most common doctrinal question would be.

Phil:

It's about election.

John:

Yeah, I was going to say it would probably be on the issue of the sovereignty of God, the doctrine of election--are we Calvinists, and how many points do we affirm of Calvin's theology? That would sort of been a guess of mine. But, it's interesting that you would say that is the most commonly asked question.

Phil:

Yeah. The doctrine of election. You know, people say, how do you explain this, that Jesus said to the disciples, "You've not chosen me. I've chosen you." But wasn't there a sense in which they did choose Him? What does all that mean?

John:

You know, just backing up from that. This last couple of weeks I have been, as I always do every week of my life, preparing sermons, and it struck me. I'm in 2 John, this little epistle of 2 John, which is not known as anything very doctrinal. It's a warning against showing hospitality to false teachers. But, it just struck me how it opens. Listen to this. This is from the [MacArthur Study Bible](#) text, the New King James. This is the beginning of 2 John: "The elder, to the elect lady." Isn't that a strange way to identify someone? This is a letter to a lady and her children. It's like 3 John, which is a letter to a man named Gaius. This lady is unnamed, but the letter is written, clearly, to a lady. We know it's a lady because it talks about her children, talks about her home, talks about hospitality, and ends up referring--get this, to the children of your elect sister.

Phil:

Wow! It does have a jarring sound, doesn't it? In this culture, you might think he was talking about Hillary Clinton or something, a politician.

John:

Yeah, the person who got elected. Would you stand up in a church service and say, "I want to introduce to you our elect brother?" I mean, people would go, "What?" You know, you say, we got to keep that doctrine under wraps, guys. We can't, we can call people Christians. We can call 'em children of God, sons of God, believers, but we don't go around saying, "My fellow elect." Why not? Why don't we do that? And, yet, that is so amazing.

I'm writing a commentary as we speak on 1 Peter. And, listen to this on how this begins: "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the pilgrims of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, elect..." I mean, that is jarring in the sense that you just pick up the letter. There's no explanation. There's no, "Well, I know that word. Sounds a little tough. I'll explain it later." There's no parenthetical statement. There's no caveat. There's no deference given to somebody who might be offended. It was as if you called somebody a Christian. It was as if you called them a believer, a brother, a sister, a child of God, a fellow worshipper of Christ. That was a term used freely among those in the early church.

Phil:

It's a prominent idea all through Scripture, if you think about it. Chosen people of God.

John:

Israel, mine elect. Christ, my elect. Right. So, I just think we have gotten so far away from the very high level of comfort that the early church and the writers of the New Testament had with the idea of election. We haven't introduced something foreign into Scripture. We have deviated so far from this and made this into such a tortuous conflict.

I heard yesterday, I was talking to a Pastor on the phone, and he said that the previous Sunday he was an associate Pastor, struggling in a church where he's a young guy, and the senior Pastor got up and was going to preach because he's preaching in Ephesians chapter one on predestination. So, his whole sermon was the history of the conflict between Calvin and Arminius. And, at the end of his sermon, he said, "You know, you're free to take your choice. Pick your side." And, this young man was rather appalled by that.

We have turned something that is an absolute fact, which the early church acknowledged and celebrated and rejoiced in and gloried in into some kind of issue that is seen as divisive and should never be introduced in polite company, should never be introduced to a nonbeliever, should never be introduced to a young Christian or somebody who's a novice in Scripture because it's liable to offend them when just the opposite is absolutely the case. So, I just need to say that at the beginning, when you are talking about the doctrine of election, you're talking about something that was so clearly assumed in the New Testament community that when you write a letter to somebody, you say, to the elect lady and her children. I mean, I don't know anybody that's ever written me a letter like that. To the elect, to my beloved elect, John.

Phil: My next memo to you, I'll address it...

John:

Please.

Phil:

'cause, you know, I love this doctrine, too. I love the doctrine of election.

John: Well, I love all the sound doctrines.

Phil:

But, let's be honest. This is a difficult doctrine. Right? I mean, was there ever a time when you struggled with it?

John:

You know, I guess, in one sense that's true. In another sense, all doctrines are difficult doctrines. It's just a question of how you view them. It's a question of at what point do you look at them. If you said to me, "God is eternal." Is that a difficult doctrine?

Phil:

Sure.

John:

It's an impossible doctrine. I cannot fathom a being that has always existed. This is not possible to be conceived.

Phil:

Right.

John:

Nor can I understand that I will exist forever. My eternity is beyond description. And, if I think about it very long, I get nauseated. I really do. I can't cope with it because everything I've ever known in my whole world has a start and an end. My Dad used to say, "If you think about it too long, you'll find yourself under the bed saying the Greek alphabet." You know, you will have lost your mind.

So, you asked me about election, and I'm just saying, there's nothing in the doctrine of election that's any more mysterious, any more incomprehensible to me than the concept of a being that is eternal. Beyond that, how am I to comprehend that God is infinite? That is to say that there is no limit on His being. There is no confining of His being. I live in a time-space environment. That's all I comprehend. Everything has time or space features. God has neither of those. That's an impossible doctrine for me to understand.

I believe, that the reason the doctrine of election is a bone in people's throat does not have to do with its incomprehensibility. It has to do with how it offends human will and ego and pride. I believe, that's the bottom line. It's not about its incomprehensibility, because I can't comprehend how Jesus can be fully God and fully man. I can't comprehend how God can make Jesus the sacrifice for my sin. I can't comprehend how God can create. The whole of creation, to me, is incomprehensible.

I was saying to the people Sunday morning in my sermon. I was talking about a bacteria. Talking about a bacteria in your body. And, I was talking to Joe Francis who's the immunology professor at the Master's College. A brilliant scientist. And, he told me that there are more bacteria in my intestines than people who've lived on the planet since creation.

Paul:

Wow! Are you sick?

John:

I'm well. And, he said, the strange reality is you can't even get to the bottom of life. The creative power of God, you can't get to the bottom of it. And, Einstein, of course, died terribly disillusioned because he got all the way down to the atom, all the way down to splitting the atom, and he still couldn't understand what held it all together because it was nothing that could be measured scientifically. I mean, the incomprehensibility of this is just absolutely staggering to me.

So, when I come to something like the doctrine of the incarnation, or when I come to something like the doctrine of salvation, when I come to something like predestination, election, it is no more incomprehensible to me than any other doctrine. And, I think, the problem lies in the fact that the pride of man and the self-will of man and the self-determination of man, which is a reflection, may I say, of his warped *amagio dea* [sp?] it's the warping of the image of God so that he gives to himself more credibility than he deserves. That's the bent that has been induced into man's nature by sin. He is offended by the fact that he can't make that choice. Ultimately, it's the offense of it, not the incomprehensibility of it.

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