



Studies in 1 Peter

EXCURSE – Election

Asking Hard Questions

When we read that Christians are “elect” or “chosen” it can prompt us to ask some really tough and searching questions. Why does God choose some people but not others? Does God choose who goes to heaven and who goes to hell? If it is up to God to choose, then does it matter what I want? Do I have the free choice to accept or reject Christ? Do some people believe only because God makes them believe?

The Popular Answers

Different schools of thought have given answers to these questions. If you spend any time looking for Christian content on the internet you will quickly come across a couple of buzz words: Calvinism and Arminianism. I am not convinced that either of these options gives a fair assessment of what the Bible says, but it is worth understanding their claims.

Calvinism

Named after John Calvin (1509-1564), this system is mostly associated with “reformed” Christians such as Presbyterians. They believe that God has sovereignly chosen a fixed number of individuals to have eternal life, and has chosen all others to face everlasting destruction. They believe this choice has nothing to do with the individual involved—not their works, not their perseverance, not even their faith. The reason for the choice is entirely with God. From our perspective, we may as well say this choice is random. Those who are chosen, God moves to faith. They believe because God makes them believe and the decision is out of their hands. While many faithful, bible-believing Christians hold to these ideas, it is my opinion that this view greatly diminishes the love of God, the abundant grace seen in the gospel, and the accountability of man which are the focus of so much emphasis in the Bible.

Arminianism

Named after Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609), this view is famously associated with the preacher John Wesley and the movement which followed him, Methodism. Arminians believe that God’s “choice” is entirely based on his “foreknowledge” of what people would decide to do in response to the gospel. Those who God knew would accept his Son, were chosen. Effectively “God does not choose anyone, but instead foresees that some will choose him”. This view, also held by many respected and godly people, has issues. The Bible clearly teaches that God has “chosen”, but the Arminian interpretation robs these words of their force and feels like an unsatisfactory explanation. So what does the Bible actually say about election? And is there a better explanation?

What does the Bible say?

The Bible does not give as clear an answer as we may like. We must be careful in going beyond scripture and discern what questions we have been given answers to and which we are left to speculate about. Some key passages on the doctrine of Christian election include Ephesians 1:3-14, Romans 8:28-30 and Romans 9, among others. But we should also consider some important background from the old testament.

Abraham and Israel

Abraham was chosen to be the father of God's special people (Genesis 12:1-3). This choice of Israel (the descendants of Abraham) is the focus of Romans 9. It is not the choice of individuals, but of a nation by virtue of their connection to Abraham. Nor does this choice have to do with Israel obtaining eternal life while everyone else perishes. Instead the whole world is blessed through Abraham. Israel was chosen to have a special status and service in God's plan, so that he would be praised throughout the whole world (Isaiah 44:23).

Christ and the Church

Not unlike Abraham, Christ was "chosen" as the servant of God (Matthew 12:18). He is chosen because he is the "beloved with whom [God] is well pleased". Furthermore this choice is not to eternal life, but to service. God's chooses Christ to fulfil his mission for the world.

In the passages that speak of Christian election, individuals are not in view. Instead it is the collective body of all who put their faith in Christ. They are chosen because of their association with him. That is, "chosen in him" (Ephesians 1:4). People who are still in their sins are never spoken of as being "elect", but only those who have already put faith in Christ. Furthermore, the thing for which they are chosen is not "to have faith" but to have a special status and service from God. It is those who put their faith in Christ who are chosen to "be conformed to the image of his Son" (Romans 8:29), to be God's people in this age (1 Peter 2:9-10).

What about Acts 13:48? ...as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.

This verse is often presented as the strongest support for Calvinism. It clearly shows that certain individuals, before they believed, had been "appointed" to have eternal life, and this is the reason for them believing.

But wait! One reason for hesitating on this interpretation is the context. The verse seems very out of place in the narrative. Why does Luke choose this moment to drop such a theological bombshell on us? It seems more than a little odd.

It is possible that an alternative translation would make better sense in the context. The word "appointed" might have the sense of "appointed themselves to". This is the sense in 1 Corinthians 16:15 and probably Acts 15:2. We might paraphrase this in Acts 13:48 as "as many as prepared themselves to receive eternal life"

If this sense is true, then it fits in the context in a much more satisfactory way. It is a further description of the enthusiasm of those who heard the gospel (see verse 44), in contrast to the apathy and contempt of the Jews (verses 45-46)

We might then paraphrase verse 48 further: "as many as wanted to get saved, got saved"