

Why Evangelize If God Has Already Chosen Who Will Be Saved?

This engaging question has prompted many discussions and debates over God's sovereignty and man's free will. In answering the question, I am aware of the stricter judgment that awaits me if I mishandle the word of God (Jas. 3:1). My passion is to always honor and glorify God and never misrepresent His character. Scripture reveals that our sovereign Lord not only chose to save certain sinners, but He also ordained the means by which He will convert them. God established His eternal decree to save His people when they hear and believe His Word (Rom. 10:13-17). It is for this reason the Lord of the Harvest commissioned His church to proclaim His Gospel. Every Christian has been given the awesome responsibility and highest privilege to call people to repent and trust Jesus Christ alone for salvation.

God Promises Success in Evangelism

As an evangelist, I have come to love the doctrine of election. There is a sense of relief knowing, that when I evangelize, the eternal destinies of souls are not dependent upon my persuasive ability to convert them. God guarantees success whenever His elect hear His Gospel. Jesus promised, "All that the Father gives me shall come to me" (John 6:37, 65). Not some, not most, but all. This sovereign act of God will eventually result in the conversion of those He has given to the Son. This occurred when Paul proclaimed the Gospel to the Gentiles in Antioch - "as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48). The elect will come to Jesus as Christians proclaim the voice of the Good Shepherd. He promised that when His sheep hear His voice, they will follow Him (John 10:27). Whenever Christians sow the imperishable seed of God's living Word, He promises to bring forth life when the seeds fall on fertile soil (1 Cor. 3:7; 1 Pet. 1:23). Success in evangelism is therefore guaranteed by God's sovereign decree. What an encouragement it is to know that God causes those whom He has chosen to come to Him (Psalm 65:4). Man can never thwart God's predetermined plan and purpose.

Doctrine of Election

Election, as defined in Scripture, tells us that God, in eternity past, before all things were created, chose specific individuals to be saved by His unmerited grace. He chose them according to the sovereign good pleasure of His own will. Paul wrote, "God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth" (2 Thes. 2:13). In another epistle Paul said, "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). The Father chose His elect to be justified and totally glorified (Rom. 8:29-30). In a general sense God desires all men to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4). However, He decreed to save only some, and then He wrote their names in the Lamb's Book of Life (Rev. 17:8).

If the choice were left up to man, no one would choose God. Paul makes this clear without exception, "There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God" (Rom. 3:11; Ps. 14:2-3). Clearly, rebellious sinners could never choose Christ on their own free will; they choose Christ because He first chose them (John 15:16). Why does God choose some and pass over others? His purpose is hidden in the secret counsel of His will (Eph. 1:11). God's purpose has been established, and He will accomplish it all for His good pleasure (Isa. 46:10).

Man's Inability to Choose God

Scripture presents a clear contrast between God who is able to save and man who is unable. Man's inability is due to the corruption of his nature and his rebellion and hatred of God (Heb. 7:25; Rom. 8:7; Eph. 2:1-7). God includes everyone in His invitations, but sinners exclude themselves because of their enslavement to sin. Their bondage to sin keeps them from coming to God. The Bible teaches that we are all born spiritually dead with a sin nature that corrupts our senses and limits our "free will." Opponents of divine election deny this and teach that man has the free will to choose God and come to Him for salvation. However, Scripture proves this is humanly impossible. We cannot know God (Mat. 11:27); we cannot please God (Rom. 8:8); we cannot see the light of the Gospel (2 Cor. 4:4); we cannot understand spiritual truths (1 Cor. 2:14); we cannot hear the Words of Christ (John 8:43); and we cannot come to Jesus (John 6:44).

The unregenerate man lives in the lusts of his flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and are by nature children of wrath (Eph. 2:3). Only when God causes the spiritually dead to come alive in Christ can they see, hear, know and understand the Gospel, and thus, come to Jesus in faith (Col. 2:13). No one can become a child of God by their own will or by the will of their flesh (John 1:13). There is nothing man can do on his own to be adopted into God's family. Only by God's will can anyone be brought forth through the word of truth (Jas 1:18). "So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy" (Rom. 9:16). Sovereign election underscores not only the inability of man but also the freedom of God to save sinners according to His own purpose and grace (Titus 3:5; 2 Tim. 1:9). Those who are not recipients of His grace will remain in bondage to sin, captive to their own fleshly desires and hostile towards God (Rom. 8:7).

A Doctrine Hotly Contested

Although divine election is clearly presented throughout Scripture, it remains one of the most hotly debated doctrines in church history. Christians who reject the biblical doctrine of election do so for one of the following reasons: 1) pride - they believe man has the free will to release himself from the bondage and power of sin, and then come to Jesus; 2) man-centered evangelism - they enjoy taking credit for persuading people to "accept" Jesus; 3) fear - they refuse to accept that their loved ones may not belong to the elect; and 4) a distorted view of God - they say God is unjust by choosing to save some while passing over others. Paul anticipated these objections when he wrote, "Who are you, O man, who answers back to God...Does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use?" (Rom. 9:19-23). Is man so prideful that, as a depraved sinner, he has a better plan than an infinitely holy and eternally righteous God? Scripture soundly rebukes this foolish idea! "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways," declares the Lord. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8-9). Those who deny election are usurping God of His absolute control over His creation and the right to choose His own family. They wittingly or unwittingly rob God of His glory, which is a dangerous position to take.

God does not treat everyone the same, but He does treat everyone justly. Some receive justice, which they deserve, and some receive mercy, which they don't deserve (Rom. 9:15). Election does not mean that God chose some for heaven and some for hell. Every passage of the Bible that reveals divine election deals with it in the context of salvation, not damnation. Nowhere is anyone elected for hell. The only support for such a view is human logic, not Scripture. Clearly, all of us deserve the eternal fires of hell as the just punishment for our sin. People end up in hell because they rebelled against their Holy God and Creator. It is not man's love for God that is the motivating factor behind anyone being saved but God's amazing, unfathomable love for fallen man (Rom. 5:8; 1 John 3:1). We must never forget that God is glorified both when His righteous justice is executed on sinners as well as when His mercy is graciously bestowed on the elect. "Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Thy name? For Thou alone art holy...for Thy righteous acts have been revealed" (Rev. 15:4).

Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

God is sovereign, but He made man responsible for his actions. To some, this appears to be a paradox. The two subjects are often set in opposition to each other rather than harmonized together. Both are true and both are found in the Word of God. We see that all men are held responsible for what they believe. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life...He who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:16, 18). Yet we also hear Jesus saying, "You do not believe because you are not my sheep" (John 10:26).

The harmony of these two subjects are hidden somewhere in the infinite mind of God. They stretch man's ability to comprehend the perfect purpose of God (Ecc. 11:5). This is good, since it gives us a greater desire to know Him and, in turn, it causes us to dig deeper into His Word. We must praise God for who He is and honor Him for His sovereign grace.

Motivations to Proclaim the Gospel

We must be diligent in proclaiming the Gospel because God is pleased to save those who believe it as His Spirit works in their hearts. The faithful Christian knows that God is in control and He moves us to do the work He has prepared for us. We evangelize because we are sent by God to reconcile the world to Himself through Christ. What a royal privilege it is to represent the King of kings as His ambassadors to a lost and dying world. Like Paul, we must "endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory" (2 Tim. 2:10). It is true we do not know who the chosen ones are, but we do know this: "Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom. 10:13). We also know that people will believe the Gospel as the Spirit of Truth reveals its glory and illuminates the Word to them.

The answer to "why evangelize?" is very simple - obedience! God has commissioned His saints to call the lost sheep to the Shepherd. No longer thundering from the mountain or from the burning bush, He uses Christians to accomplish His task of getting His Word to the elect. In closing, let us be motivated with this encouraging thought: Divine election is like a net cast into the sea - it does not drive the fish away, but draws them in. This should inspire us all to cast out the Gospel net more faithfully for God's glory!