

We Believe: Election
Ephesians 1:3-14; 2:1-10
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
June 17, 2007
Pastor Dave Carver

I know that I have told a few of you about the time when I was doing campus ministry and I invited a young woman to come to our Bible Study. Her response was priceless: “Oh, geez, you’re a Christian, aren’t you? I thought you were so nice, too.” I said that well, I hoped to be nice, and yes, I am a Christian. She looked me up and down and said, “Well, are you one of *those* Christians?” I must have looked a little confused, because she continued: “You know, one of those narrow-minded people who is convinced that only the people from your little group is going to get into heaven?”

I thought about it for a moment, and then I said, “Well, I’m afraid that it’s even worse than you think. You see, I’m not even sure about all the people in my little group...”

In recent weeks, we’ve been looking at some of the core beliefs of Presbyterians. We’ve spoken about how with the church of every age, the Presbyterian Church confesses that there is one God, and that we can encounter or understand that God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Last week, we looked at how this doctrine of the Trinity can lead us to a concept of the church that is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Now within this larger church, we are connected with a family of believers known as Presbyterians. That is to say, that all Presbyterians would say that they are affiliated with the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church; however, not all in the church around the world would say that they are Presbyterian. We are a particular part of the body of Christ that sprang up in the 16th century, and we trace our heritage to that part of history that is called the Reformation. The church had been the church, essentially unified, for 1500 years, and there were some problems that had developed. Some courageous leaders like Martin Luther and John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli sought to correct these abuses, and were promptly tossed out of the church. These men went on to found churches in protest of the situation, and those protesting churches became what we know as the Protestant churches today.

One of the hallmarks of Presbyterian tradition is the emphasis on God’s election of believers. A word that is often used in this regard is predestination. To be honest, it’s a word with a lot of baggage. Many people, like my friend who wouldn’t come to my Bible study, see that doctrine as a description of God who is vicious and arbitrary – selecting a few certain individuals who will be saved and then sending the rest of them to eternal torment, no matter what they say or do.

But let me ask you this. Suppose you were a poor, illiterate farmer living in Spain in the 1500’s. You have heard something about the Lord, of course. But the worship services at your local church are conducted in a language that you do not speak. Actually, you’re pretty sure that the Pastor doesn’t speak that language either, but that he has memorized key words and phrases. In your

town, anyone who is a Jew or a Muslim is forced to be baptized and “convert” to faith, otherwise, they face the wrath of the Spanish Inquisition. The church has set itself up as the means of salvation, and you live in fear of doing something wrong and thus somehow messing up your chance at eternal life. You don’t trust your pastor, but he doesn’t seem to care at all. You don’t have anyone with whom you can ask these questions. Faith is, for you, and adventure in fear and uncertainty.

And then you hear, for the first time in your own language, the letter of Paul to the Ephesians. You hear about the fact that salvation is dependent on God alone – it’s not up to human effort, it does not rely on how holy your pastor is or on how much you give to the church. It’s all about God and God’s intentions.

The early Presbyterians and their colleagues who made a big deal about the doctrine of election were doing so because they thought that this was good news. They were reminding the church that our faith begins with God. God calls us, and we respond. God chooses us, and we interact with God. In this light, we see a reaffirmation of God’s freedom and God’s power that cannot be limited by a church that is flawed with human sin.

The reading from Ephesians, for instance, that you heard. Chapter 1, verses 3-14 all form one sentence in the Greek language. Paul is tripping over himself as he rushes to describe the basis of our faith in Jesus. In fact, take a look at that passage. You’ll see that in those eleven verses, the words “in Christ” or “through Christ” or “on Christ” show up an incredible 10 times – in a single sentence. Listen to the way that Eugene Peterson translates a part of that passage for us in *The Message*: “It’s in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone.”

Do you see the good news there? If your relationship with God, your salvation, is based on what God is doing, then there’s no way that a crummy pastor or a fractured church can get in the way. It’s God’s business in God’s way in God’s time.

In fact, in 1561, some members of the church in Germany charged one of their leaders, Frederick the Elector, with heresy – they thought that he didn’t think highly enough of the church and its power. He turned to a Swiss Theologian, Heinrich Bullinger, who wrote what we have in our Church’s Constitution as the *Second Helvetic Confession* for Frederick’s defense. In that document, he says, “God has elected us out of grace. From eternity, God has freely, and of his mere grace, without any respect to men, predestinated or elected the saints whom he wills to save in Christ...not on account of any merit of ours, God has elected us...in Christ and on account of Christ...” (Chapter 10)

Predestination and election are first and best understood as doctrines that remind us of God’s grace and God’s freedom to be God.

The problem is, of course, that we can’t concentrate on God’s grace and

God's freedom very long. We'd rather be wrapped up in ourselves. And so just a couple of generations after the church "discovered" the idea of election as a great gift and as an encouragement, it started to use it as a weapon.

Do you know the old theory that the people who hate smoking the most are the reformed smokers? You know, smoke can be annoying, but someone carping about the smoke is really annoying? This was about the same thing. Church leaders who ought to have known better began to talk about the "elect" and the "reprobate" as if they themselves had a scorecard of who was in and who was out, and the doctrine of election, rather than being a gift to the church, became a big pain in the neck.

By the late 1700's, the Scottish Poet Robert Burns was so frustrated with the organized church and the ways that the leaders of that church were consumed with self-righteousness that he wrote a poem called "Holy Willie". In it, he mocks the self-assurance of religious leaders who are so sure that God is going to consult them on any matter before he acts:

O Thou, that in the heavens does dwell,
As it pleases best Thysel',
Sends aen to Heaven an' ten to Hell,
For Thy glory,
And no for onie gud or ill
They've done afore Thee!

Yet I am here a chosen sample,
To show thy grace is great and ample;
I'm here a pillar o' Thy temple,
Strong as a rock,
A guide, a buckler, and example,
To a' Thy flock.

The poem itself is seventeen stanzas long – but the point is simple: Burns is making fun of anyone who would set himself up as a leader who would claim to have some sort of power of the souls of men or the mind of God.

John Calvin himself, when writing of this doctrine, says, "...let them remember that when they inquire into predestination, they penetrate the inmost recesses of Divine Wisdom, where the careless and confident intruder will obtain no satisfaction to his curiosity, but will enter a labyrinth from which he will find no way to depart." (Book III, ch. xxi)

In all of its documents and confessions, the Presbyterian Church (USA) is unapologetic in maintaining an emphasis on election as God's free and sovereign choice and a graceful gift to humanity. God makes choices, God issues calls, and humans respond. But one of the hallmarks of the church is that we refuse to see election and salvation an end in itself. It's not as if God taps someone on the shoulder and says, "Hey, Carver, you've got it made. Just relax. You're "in", if you know what I mean..." Following Scripture, we maintain that there is a purpose, an end, a goal to salvation.

Look again at Ephesians, this time Chapter 2. Paul begins by reminding

his readers that we were dead – that is, that if it were up to us, nothing would happen, because we are powerless to save ourselves. Twice in five verses, he says, “we were dead because of our sinfulness”. But we are made alive. How? Remember chapter 1. We are made alive through or in Christ. He goes on to remind us that we were made alive because of the grace of Jesus and then he gets to his main point at the end of the reading: we are his workmanship, created for good works in Christ, which God had prepared beforehand for us to do.

In other words, God does not save anyone because he’s lonely and has a few more seats at the heavenly dinner table. God saves people because God intends for those who hear and accept his call to respond by serving others. What does that mean to us? As Presbyterian Christians we believe that

“...the church is founded and enlivened by the presence of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, [so] we can be confident that it is Christ who works through the imperfect and sinful fellowship of the church. Even in our brokenness we testify that we belong solely to Jesus Christ. In the power of the Holy Spirit, we proclaim Christ's love, in word and deed, to all the world.

The Christian Church is the congregation of the brethren in which Jesus Christ acts presently as the Lord in Word and sacrament through the Holy Spirit. As the Church of pardoned sinners, it has to testify in the midst of a sinful world, with its faith as with its obedience, with its message as with its order, that it is solely his property, and that it lives and wants to live solely from his comfort and from his direction in the expectation of his appearance. [The Theological Declaration of Barmen, 8.17*]¹

The implication is that if we think that we have heard the call of God; if we think that in his grace God might have spoken a word to us, then we are bound to look for ways to serve Christ in the world. That’s what election is all about. We dare not get caught up in a game of “who’s in?” or “who’s out?” Instead, we are called to focus our lives on being the Body of Christ in the world.

In Matthew 25, Jesus tells a story about some who are saved and some who are not. The ones who are saved don’t really have any idea that they are going to be saved – they are simply trying to do what Jesus expects them to do as they feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and care for the sick. Their salvation is not all about entering into heaven, it’s about following Jesus in caring for God’s children now, and then entering the fullness of joy in God’s own time.

On Thursday, a few of us gathered and sent Kristen Knouff to Malawi for a few weeks. We called her a missionary. This morning, we’ll commission the Cross-Trainers to do some ministry here. They are our missionaries here.

But if we think that these folks are doing something **for us**, or only on our behalf, we do so at our own peril. These servants are doing Christ’s work with us. They are doing it as us. It is our business. It is why we are here. Praise

¹ Taken from *Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ* (2002, PCUSA)

God for the opportunities to serve, to love, and to live as though we can hear his calling on our lives. Amen.