

Election and Evangelism

One of the hallmark doctrines of the Reformed faith is the sovereignty of God. We take great comfort in God's providential control over whatsoever comes to pass (Eph 1.11; Dan 4.35; Mat 10.29; Acts 17.26; Psa 139.16; Rom 8.28 et al). The pinnacle of God's sovereignty is found in our election—God's sovereign decision to save those whom He desires from sin and death. The most familiar passage of Scripture that communicates this doctrine is, of course, the ninth chapter of Romans.

Under divine inspiration, Paul sets forth his case for God's sovereignty in salvation. In Romans 9.15, he quotes Exodus 33.19: "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion." Paul then writes that "*it is* not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy" (Rom 9.16). This highlights the fact that it is God who decides who is saved and who is rejected. This emphasis upon the sovereignty of God is not something that is new to the pages of the Bible but instead makes up its warp and woof. There is, however, a doctrine that runs alongside of election that many do not always see, namely evangelism.

No one in Reformed circles doubts the Apostle Paul's robust belief in the sovereignty of God, especially when it comes to the doctrine of election. What might be ignored, however, is Paul's equal emphasis upon the need for evangelism. We see Paul's heart for evangelism in several places throughout the book of Acts as well as in his epistles. We see, for example, that when Paul went to Athens with his companions "his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols" (Acts 17.16). Paul did not simply sit idly by but went to the synagogue and marketplace and reasoned with the Gentile worshippers and the intelligentsia of his day—he evangelized them. Paul not only demonstrated by his actions that evangelism and election go hand-in-hand, but he also directly addresses this truth in the verses that follow Romans 9.

On the heels of Paul's declaration of the sovereignty of God over salvation, he explains the necessity of evangelism in the very next chapter. Paul once again quotes the Old Testament to explain that God saves both Jew and Gentile alike: "For 'whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved'" (Joel 2.32; Rom 10.13). In the very next two verses Paul explains: "How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, Who bring glad tidings of good things'" (Rom 10.14-15)! Notice that in Romans 9 Paul can say that it is God who saves, yet in Romans 10 he also says that there is a need to preach the Gospel in order for people to be saved. Again, we see election and evangelism, hand-in-hand. Why do these two doctrines go together?

Election and evangelism is the way that God has seen fit to bring about His sovereign will. Yes, God ordains certain people to salvation—the end goal of His electing decree. God, however, also ordains the means by which His end goal is brought about. In this case, the means by which God saves the elect, is evangelism. Why should this be a great source of comfort to the Church?

That the sovereignty of God undergirds our evangelism, because He has decreed that people will be saved, gives us hope and tells us that we do not labor in vain. Yes, there will be those who reject the Gospel, but there also will be those who accept it. We should not labor in angst or carry guilt if people reject our message—our job is to carry the message not to convert people. Only God can convert a person. We should, however, intensely desire to obey our Master’s command to take the Gospel into the nations (Mat 28.18-20). Like Paul, we should desire to see God’s name glorified and have compassion for the lost.

While many in the church are not pastors or missionaries, this does not mean that there are not opportunities for evangelism. The first mission field that a person encounters is his own family—his own children. Yes, our covenant children are privileged in that they have been born into Christian homes to Christian parents. Physical descent, however, does not guarantee a child’s salvation (John 1.12-13). Whether it is in reading your child a Bible story before bedtime, requiring him to memorize Scripture, or singing hymns to him about our Lord, those are precious opportunities to share the Gospel with him. Children’s Sunday School teachers also have a unique opportunity to evangelize the children they teach and to reinforce what parents are teaching at home. Those who work in the marketplace, like Paul, have plenty of opportunities to evangelize co-workers through chats at the water-cooler, an invitation to church, or an invitation to your home for a meal. Let’s pray that the Lord would open our eyes to the evangelism opportunities in our day-to-day lives and also remember that election and evangelism always go hand-in-hand.

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