

The Baptist Faith and Message: V. God's Purpose of Grace, part 1

Election is the gracious purpose of God, according to which He regenerates, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners. It is consistent with the free agency of man, and comprehends all the means in connection with the end. It is the glorious display of God's sovereign goodness, and is infinitely wise, holy, and unchangeable. It excludes boasting and promotes humility.

All true believers endure to the end. Those whom God has accepted in Christ, and sanctified by His Spirit, will never fall away from the state of grace, but shall persevere to the end. Believers may fall into sin through neglect and temptation, whereby they grieve the Spirit, impair their graces and comforts, and bring reproach on the cause of Christ and temporal judgments on themselves; yet they shall be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.

The *BF&M* 1963 combined two sections of the *BF&M* 1925 into one section that has been preserved almost verbatim in our *BF&M* 2000. The first section dealt with election and the other section addressed perseverance. As the section heading indicates, election and perseverance are purposed by God and are by His grace. This section will be handled in two parts. This installment addresses the doctrine of election, which is included in the broader doctrines of predestination and the sovereignty of God.

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By now, we understand that the sum of regeneration, justification, sanctification and glorification is salvation; no component can stand by itself. You possess all of them or none. *BF&M* defines election as God's gracious purpose to save sinners. Since we also understand that we have no ability to come to Christ because we are spiritually dead, the doctrine of election should be music to our ears. But, unfortunately, election has been and continues to be a controversial doctrine. Because of the potential for controversy extending even to the splitting of churches, preaching and teaching on election has been avoided in Southern Baptist circles for so long that many Southern Baptists would say that election is not a doctrine embraced by our denomination. In the mind of many Baptists, the doctrine of election would probably be associated with Presbyterians. Nevertheless, all historic Baptist confessions of faith have included statements on election because it is a biblical doctrine.

In defining election as "the gracious purpose of God," the *BF&M* states a truism but fails to accurately define election. This wording was adopted in the 1925 *BF&M* and retained in our recent version. A more specific definition of election is: before the foundation of the world, God chose whom he would save and ordained the means to bring their salvation to pass. (see Eph 1:3-4 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: 4 According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love.) Historically, election has been presented in two ways. One view holds that election is based in God's eternal decree and that He chose on the basis of His sovereign will. The other view holds that election is based in God's omniscience allowing Him to foresee who would repent and believe. In this view, persons who choose Him become the elect. Not surprisingly, the latter view is more popular because it seats salvation in man's will and protects God from the accusation of

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unfairness in not saving everyone or being a respecter of persons. However, the latter view conflicts with Scripture.

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One objection to the doctrine of election is that it appears to be inconsistent with our concept of free will. The fact is that, since the fall, we have not possessed free will because our will is tied to our fallen nature; thus, our will and choices are in opposition to God. This is why the *BF&M* uses the term “agency” rather than “will.” Free agency means that we make our choices without any coercion by God. God works at a subconscious level by changing our nature (i.e., the new birth or regeneration). When God changes our nature, our will is to love Him and serve Him. Whether a person is lost or saved, God never violates a person's conscience. At the point of decision, we always choose in accordance with our will. Election does not prevent anyone from being saved who truly desires to be saved. “All that the Father gives me shall come to me and whosoever comes to me I will in no wise cast out.” Non-elect persons will never be willing to believe or sincerely want to believe. The doctrine of election does not damn anyone, it only saves. People are damned by their sin for which they must be punished. Even though there are some Scripture verses that indisputably state that God prepared certain people for destruction or appointed them to wrath, God does not provoke them to evil or create them to be evil. God made man upright, but man sinned and brought the curse upon himself. Those whom God has appointed to wrath, He simply does not give saving grace.

...and comprehends all the means in connection with the end.

The word “comprehend” is used in the sense of “comprehensive.” When God elected a person to be saved, He also ordered all of the circumstances (means) of the person's life, as well as all other circumstances, to bring salvation to pass for that person. One of the means is Gospel witness. Some that oppose the doctrine of election say that it hinders missions because God has already determined who is going to be saved. So why bother to go? However, God has commanded us to go to the nations. Rather than being a hindrance to missions, election actually empowers missions and witnessing because we know that God has elect people everywhere. As long as we are faithful to witness, elect people will infallibly come to Christ. We must always be obedient to God's commands. God's sovereignty does not relieve us of our responsibility.

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God was under no obligation to save anyone. He could have left everyone to perish in their sins. But God, being full of mercy and goodness, chose to save a great mass of humanity at a great price. We must avoid the temptation to question God. He is the potter; we are the clay. God's election is part of His overarching eternal decree in which God has foreordained all things before the creation of the world. His decree is infinitely

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wise, holy and unchangeable. God's choosing of some for salvation and His passing by others is done in perfect wisdom, in perfect holiness and is unquestionably right. While from our finite perspective, God may appear to choose persons at random, He is never arbitrary. Randomness is not an attribute of God.

It excludes boasting and promotes humility.

Eph 2:8 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: 9 Not of works, lest any man should boast. Salvation is of the Lord from beginning to end. He determines who will be saved. If we contributed anything to our salvation, we would have grounds for boasting. We contribute nothing to it, except our sin and need for a Savior. He chooses us, He draws us to Himself, He regenerates, He gives righteousness, He pays the penalty, He works in us both to will and do according to His good pleasure, He keeps and preserves us, He gives eternal life. Where is boasting? To God be the glory! How humbling is it when we consider that we could have been passed by? How sweet it is to have been written in the Lamb's book of life from the foundation of the world!