

EVANGELISM AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

"I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people."—Acts 18:10
ESV

J. I. Packer, in his book *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, cogently argues for the proper relationship between evangelism and the sovereignty of God. There often exists a widespread suspicion that belief in the sovereignty of God—particularly election—undermines or even inhibits zeal for missions and evangelism. Dr. Packer persuasively demonstrates that such a misunderstanding is, in his words, “nonsense.”¹ He writes,

I shall try to show further that, so far from inhibiting evangelism, faith in the sovereignty of God’s government and grace is the only thing that can sustain it, for it is the only thing that can give us the resilience that we need if we are to evangelize boldly and persistently, and not be daunted by temporary setbacks. So far from being weakened by this faith, therefore, evangelism will inevitably be weak and lack staying power without it.²

Election, in fact, does not inhibit the goal of seeing people come to faith in Christ. On the contrary, God’s election guarantees the success of evangelism. The doctrine of election ensures that God will not allow any opposition to interrupt His saving mission to redeem and adopt sinners.

Far from a mere academic exploration of this often-heated subject, Packer provides a great deal of pastoral theology and counsel that is quite helpful. Confidence and discouragement are two issues that pastors regularly face in their ministry. Pastoral ministry can be very confidence-dislodging and

1. J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1961), 10.

2. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, 10.

encouragement-squashing! However, when understood rightly, the doctrine of election is actually confidence-instilling and discouragement-killing.

Packer shows how Paul ministered sustained by the knowledge that God's gospel would not in the long run prove fruitless.³ Packer writes, "He [Paul] knew that wherever the word of the gospel went, God would raise the dead. He knew that the word of God would prove a savour of life to some of those who heard it. This knowledge made him confident, tireless, and expectant in his evangelism."⁴

Since Paul knew, for example, that Titus faced enormous obstacles and challenges to fulfilling his assignment of properly ordering the churches in Crete, from the opening paragraph of the epistle, Paul seeks to reassure, comfort and encourage Titus by mentioning "the faith of God's elect." A large Jewish population lived on the island of Crete, including false teachers (i.e., "the circumcision party" 1:10) who actively opposed Paul's and Titus's gospel work.

The gospel was an affront to Judaism, the problem of Law, circumcision and a crucified Messiah raising enormous barriers to evangelism among Jews, the most difficult of all people to convince that Jesus was the Messiah. In addition to the strong Jewish opposition in Crete was the island's notoriously ungodly indigenous culture, which also presented an enormous obstacle to the proclamation of the gospel and genuine conversion. Seeking to properly order a church around the gospel and its fruit (godliness) in such a hostile environment was a herculean assignment. Therefore from the outset, Paul seeks to reassure, comfort and encourage Titus by mentioning "God's elect." If election inhibited

3. Ibid., 115.

4. Ibid., 115-16.

Paul's goal of seeing people come to faith in Christ, he certainly would have excluded this doctrine in his opening greeting to Titus!

Paul had learned a vital lesson in Corinth during his second missionary journey. While proclaiming the gospel in Corinth, Paul encountered from Jews strong opposition (cf. Acts 18:6-7), which often forced him to leave one city and go to another (cf. Acts 13:50-51; 18:5-8). But in Corinth the Lord appears to Paul in a vision and assures him of successful ministry because of His electing grace. Luke writes, ⁹"And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, ¹⁰for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, *for I have many in this city who are my people.*' ¹¹*And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them*" (emphasis mine).

It is instructive to note that Paul did not wrongly conclude, "Well, the Lord has His elect so I will move on. I don't need to teach the word of God. God has His people here." No! A thousand times no! Those whom God the Father has chosen, He also calls by His Spirit *through the proclamation of the gospel* (cf. Eph. 1:4-13; 2 Thess. 2:13-15; emphasis mine). Packer writes, "His [Paul's] confidence was that where Christ sends the gospel there Christ has His people—fast bound at present in the chains of sin, but due for release at the appointed moment through a mighty renewing of their hearts as the light of the gospel shines into their darkness, and the Saviour draws them to Himself."⁵

The Lord had determined to use Paul to gather His church in Corinth. God would not allow the opposition to interfere or stop the work of the gospel. Therefore, Paul was not to fear the opposition but rather to keep on teaching the

5. Ibid, 117.

word of God because God had chosen many in Corinth though they were not yet saved. Far from producing apathy or indifference in Paul and inhibiting his evangelistic, church-planting mission, God's election instilled confidence in Paul. It motivated him to remain in Corinth eighteen months! Election, in fact, guaranteed his ministry's fruitfulness.

Packer shows that election not only instills confidence in the gospel's success but also guards against discouragement. Many pastors experience discouragement, for week after week of faithful gospel preaching in the context of apathy with little to no fruit can become very discouraging. To be sure, a gospel-driven ministry will encounter opposition and such opposition can lead to debilitating discouragement (cf. 2 Tim. 3:12). However, when understood rightly, the doctrine of election guards against discouragement as a pastor encounters difficulties, opposition and little fruit. Packer writes,

It [the sovereignty of God's grace in evangelism] should keep us from being daunted when we find, as we often do, that people's first reaction to the gospel is to shrug it off in apathy or even contempt. Such a reaction should not surprise us; it is only to be expected from the bondslaves of sin and satan. Nor should it discourage us; for no heart is too hard for the grace of God.⁶

Thus election, faith, the gospel and evangelism go hand in hand. It is of immeasurable benefit to know that God has chosen a people for Himself. Election instills confidence and guards against discouragement because God's sovereign government prepares the way for and ensures the success of the proclamation of the gospel (i.e., bringing God's elect to saving faith in Christ). The goal of gospel ministry is to faithfully proclaim the gospel in order to bring those whom God has chosen to saving faith in Christ. If we were left to

6. Ibid, 118.

ourselves, no one would receive and rest in Christ as He is freely offered in the gospel. But God's election guarantees that all whom the Father has given to the Son will come to trust in Christ. This Jesus promised when He said, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and whoever comes to Me I will never cast out" (Jn. 6:37).

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