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The Doctrine of Election and Mission Work

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The Doctrine of Election and Mission Work

The doctrine of election as presented in the Holy Scriptures is simple and clear, yet many people find the doctrine to be rather difficult to understand. Problems arise because their reason gets in the way and they begin to ask too many questions: Why are some saved and not others? Is God fair if he condemns to hell those who have never had the opportunity to hear the gospel? If those whom God has predestined will come to faith and be saved, why do we need to spend so much time, money, and energy in doing mission work? What's the value of evangelism if those who are predestined will ultimately be saved? If God has predetermined who will be saved, what good is anything that I do? If a person's salvation is in God's hands from first to last, won't that make Christians lazy?

In this study we plan to address these questions and many others that arise in regard to this precious and comforting doctrine. However, before we discuss the doctrine of election we must first consider the problem of human reason and examine our approach to theology.

I. In studying theology we must always submit human reason to the Word of God.

Since the fall into sin human reason is totally corrupt and is opposed to God's will and his plan of salvation. As St. Paul writes, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Co 2:14). Because Christians still have a sinful nature, they, too, must take their reason captive to the Word of God. God's Word is true whether we can fully understand what it is saying or bring it into harmony with human logic. Paul explains, "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Co 10:5).

Luther recognized human reason as a gift of God.¹ However, he was suspicious of human reason because reason is corrupted by sin. Reason is always to serve (ministerial use) rather than be exalted above Scripture (magisterial use) and stand in judgment over God's Word. We are "to be content with the words of God and believe quite simply what they say."² We are to pay attention to the grammar³ and the original languages.⁴ We are to take the words of Scripture in their ordinary grammatical sense.⁵ We are to give attention to "the text itself and what precedes and follows it, from which the meaning should sought"⁶ and to the subject matter and intention of the speaker.⁷ These are all proper uses of reason.

The magisterial use of reason is to be condemned because reason is clouded by sin making the teachings of God's Word appear to be foolish.

For faith speaks as follows: "I believe thee, God, when Thou dost speak." What does God say? Things that are impossible, untrue, foolish, weak, absurd, abominable, heretical, diabolical—if you consult reason. For what is more ridiculous, foolish, and impossible than when God says to Abraham that he is to get a son from the body of Sarah, which is barren and already dead?⁸

Luther taught that human reason after the fall is totally corrupt. "The blindness of human reason is so incomprehensible and infinite that it cannot form sound judgments even about life and works, much less about

¹ SC, Explanation to the 1st Article of the Creed; LC, 1st Article, 2.

² LW, 33:175.

³ LW, 33:167.

⁴ LW, 33:216.

⁵ LW, 33:217, 236.

⁶ LW, 33:234.

⁷ LW, 33:239.

⁸ LW, 26:227.

the doctrine of faith.”⁹ Even in believers the sinful flesh and human reason resist the Spirit.¹⁰ That is why the Christian must not allow reason to stand in judgment over Scripture, but must take his reason captive to God’s Word.

But what is more preposterous than that we undertake to sit in judgment on God and his Word, we who ought to be judged by God? Therefore we must simply maintain that when we hear God saying something, we are to believe it and not to debate about it but rather take our intellect captive in the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5).¹¹

Luther loved the apparent paradoxes in Scripture and had the marvelous ability to hold seemingly contradictory statements or teachings of God’s Word in their God-given tension without trying to harmonize them in a way that is satisfactory to human reason. He recognized that if two apparently contradictory things are clearly taught in Scripture, both must stand. Unless God has revealed how we are to harmonize them, we must teach them both as God’s Word without attempting any harmonization. We can deal only with God’s revealed will in Scripture. We must not try to peer into the mysteries of God that he has not revealed to us. They are unknowable and are none of our concern. Indeed, God has forbidden such investigation.¹² Luther also notes that because of original sin even the revealed wisdom of God “is hidden under the appearance of stupidity, and truth under the form of lying—for so the Word of God, as it often comes, comes in a form contrary to our own thinking.”¹³

When we look at the doctrine of election we will see an apparent contradiction which God in his infinite wisdom does not resolve for us in the Holy Scriptures. We see the universal grace of God and his sincere desire to save all, but we also see that the Bible teaches a *particular* election. Both are God’s truth.

II. God loves every human being and sincerely desires the salvation of all.

Even a cursory reading of Scripture reveals the universal love and grace of our Lord toward sinful human beings. Our Savior revealed that love to Nicodemus, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:16). Peter explains, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Pt 2:9). Paul writes, “God our Savior . . . wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Tm 2:4). That same truth was proclaimed in the Old Testament as well. “As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?” (Ez 33:11)

III. Christ has redeemed all people. In addition, God has also reconciled and justified or forgiven the entire world.

The Bible teaches universal atonement. Calvin’s doctrine of limited atonement is a rationalization. John assures us, “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). A reconciliation between the righteous God and sinful human beings has taken place. The reconciliation has taken place not because sinful human beings changed or paid their debt to God, but because

⁹ LW, 27:57.

¹⁰ LW, 27:54.

¹¹ LW, 1:157.

¹² LW, 5:44.

¹³ LW, 25:438-439.

God no longer counts their sins against them. That is the clear teaching of Scripture. “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them” (2 Co 5:19).

If God does not count the sins of the world against the world, then God has justified or forgiven the world. John the Baptist pointed at Jesus and declared, “Look the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). If Jesus has taken away the sin of the world, then God no longer counts sin against the world. The world is forgiven or justified. Paul writes, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Ro 3:23-24). Note the parallelism between those who have sinned and those who have been justified. The same parallelism can be seen in the fifth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans. “Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life (literally, the justification of life) for all men” (Ro 5:18).

Those who deny the doctrine of objective or universal justification either fail to understand that justification is the forgiveness of sins, fail to recognize the parallelism between the number who have sinned and the number who are justified, or are fearful that the doctrine of universal justification must ultimately lead to universalism.

Objective justification does not lead to universalism because the benefits of God’s declaration can be received only by faith. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son” (John 3:16-18). Luther explains,

Even he who does not believe that he is free and his sins forgiven shall also learn, in due time, how assuredly his sins were forgiven, even though he did not believe it. ... He who does not accept what the keys gives receives, of course, nothing. But this is not the key’s fault. Many do not believe the gospel, but this does not mean that the gospel is not true or effective. A king gives us a castle. If you do not accept it, then it is not the king’s fault, nor is he guilty of a lie. But you have deceived yourself and the fault is yours. The king certainly gave it.¹⁴

Universalism is ruled out also because the Bible teaches a *particular* election. As our Savior tells us, “For many are invited, but few are chosen” (Mt 22:14).

IV. In eternity God chose and predestined those who will be saved. He chose us not because of anything in us but purely by his grace in Christ. Election pertains only to those who are saved. God did not predestine anyone to damnation.

In eternity God chose those who would be saved. Our Savior reminds us that the choice was his, not ours. “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (John 15:16). Scripture teaches two causes of election, God’s grace and Christ’s merits. He “has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time” (1 Tm 1:9). Election in the Scriptures is truly an election of grace. “For he chose us in *him* (Christ) before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In *love* he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will” (Eph 1:4-5). To be chosen in Christ means to be chosen for the sake of Christ or on the basis of his redemptive work and merit.

Paul writes, “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Ro 8:29). Some have used this passage to claim a reason why God elected certain human beings. They believe that the basis for God’s choice was the foreseen faith of those

¹⁴ LW, 40:366-367.

individuals. A closer examination of the passage, however, reveals that it says nothing about foreseen faith or any other cause in a human being for his being chosen. The object of *foreknew* is not faith but *those*, i.e., individuals. Furthermore the verb *foreknew* in Greek means not only to know beforehand, but also to take, make one's own or in broader sense: resolve something beforehand.¹⁵ In this passage it is virtually synonymous with *chose*. The usage is similar to Jesus' expression in Matthew's Gospel, "Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never *knew* you. Away from me you evildoers'" (Mt 7:23).

Human logic suggests that if God chose some and not others, there must be a reason in human beings for his choice. Could some by nature resist the Holy Spirit's work less than others? The Bible declares that all human beings by nature are alike. They are dead in their transgressions and sins (Eph 2:1, 5; Col 2:13). By nature every human being is hostile to God. "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God" (Ro 8:7-8). Indeed the message of salvation seems like nothing but foolishness to the minds of sinful human beings. "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, and he cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Co 2:14).

On the other hand, if the reason for God's choice does not lie in the person himself, logic dictates that God's choice is arbitrary. If he chose some to be saved, he must have also chosen the rest to be damned. If there is no cause in the elect why they were chosen, then God must be responsible for the lost. Scripture, however, never speaks of an election to damnation. Instead the Scriptures speak of God's universal will to save (1 Tm 2:4, 2 Pt 2:9). God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Eze 33:11). Those who are lost can blame only themselves. God would be fair and just if he punished everyone eternally because that is what sinners earn and deserve. For "the wages of sin is death" (Ro 6:23). Sinful human beings by nature resist God's grace. Jesus laments, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing" (Mt 23:37).

If one asks why some are saved and not others, Scripture offers only two answers. If we are saved, it is all to God's credit. If we are lost, it is all our own fault. Here we must take our reason captive and allow this seeming paradox in Scripture to stand. How can you reconcile the universal grace of God with a particular election? How can God be sincere in his desire to save all, when he has only chosen some to be saved? According to human reason we cannot reconcile these teachings without falling into false doctrine. We believe both doctrines because God's Word clearly teaches them. The apparent paradox must stand. We must hold our reason captive to God's Word and let God be God.

V. Those whom God has chosen, he also has predestined and in time calls, justifies and glorifies them. The fact that we believe is evidence that we are elect. No one will be saved apart from the means of grace.

Our salvation is in God's hands from first to last. Those he chose in eternity by his grace in Christ he also predestined or foreordained to eternal life. He saw to it that they had everything they needed for salvation. Scripture is very clear when it lays out the order of salvation. "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will" (Eph 1:4-5). God's election had a purpose—to make us his own. He foreordained that those he chose would be called by the gospel, come to faith in Jesus and be justified, and that they would die in faith and be glorified. "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified (Ro 8:29-30). The Scriptures also

¹⁵ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Trans by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 710. See also *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Gerhard Kittel, ed., Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964)1, 715.

declare, “In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory” (Eph 1:11-14). Again the Bible declares, “But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth” (2 Th 2:13).

There is no salvation apart from faith in Jesus and no one comes to faith apart from the means of grace. The meaning of Paul’s words is inescapable. “For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe” (1 Co 1:21). Though the gospel seems foolish to human beings by nature, it is the very message that has the power to convince them of its truthfulness and save them. That’s why every Christian declares, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the Salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile” (Ro 1:16).

The elect must hear the gospel. “For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’ But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our message?’ Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Ro 10:12-17).

Although we cannot peer into the hidden will of God, the fact that we believe is evidence that God has chosen us. Sinful human beings cannot come to faith on their own. The Holy Spirit is responsible for our conversion. If I believe in Jesus, then the Holy Spirit has worked that faith in my heart. The Bible teaches the connection between election and faith in this way: “When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed” (Ac 13:48). If I am a believer, I can assume that God has chosen me because I cannot come to faith on my own. We cannot have absolute knowledge of our election because that belongs to the hidden will of God. But if I believe that I will go to heaven when I die, then I believe that I am one of the elect. We have the certainty of faith based on the objective promises of God in the gospel.

Those who teach absolute and double predestination also teach perseverance of the saints (once in faith, always in faith). They hear Jesus’ promise, “My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hands” (Jn 10:27-28), and conclude that believers cannot fall from faith. Yet the Bible clearly warns, “So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall” (1 Co 10:12). In explaining the parable of the sower our Savior says the seed that falls on the rock are those who “believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away” (Lk 8:13). Paul tells Timothy that some “have shipwrecked their faith” (1 Ti 1:19).

While it is true that the elect will die in faith, even they can fall from faith for a time. That is why Jesus tells us to carry out Christian discipline in the attempt to win our brother back (Mt 18:15-17). Paul tells us to restore the sinner gently (Gal 6:1).

How do we resolve the paradox of Jesus’ promise that no one can pluck his sheep from his hand with the warning to be careful that we do not fall? As Christians we sometimes need to hear the warnings of the law and sometimes the comfort of the gospel. We cannot neglect the means of grace which God appointed in eternity as the way that salvation must come to people. We dare not play with sin as if sin has no consequences. But when the law has crushed us, revealing our sin and its consequences, then we need to hear the comfort of the gospel and God’s sure promises of salvation.

VI. The doctrine of election gives us comfort because it guarantees that our salvation is in God's hands from first to last. God has made us his own and cares for us. His eternal decree is immutable and cannot fail.

In his decree of election and predestination God provided everything we need for salvation. In fact, everything that happens to us must serve his eternal purpose and result in our eternal good. “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us” (Ro 8:28-34).

False prophets and false Christs might prove exceedingly deceptive, but they cannot ultimately prevent the elect from being saved. Jesus tells us, “For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible” (Mt 24:24). Our Savior assures us that no one can take our salvation from us. “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall *never* perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one” (Jn 10:27-30).

All those whom God has chosen in eternity will be saved. “When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48). This truth was taught already in the Old Testament. “But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt” (Da 12:1-2).

Hoenecke explains, “The immutability of election has clear proof in Matthew 25:24; 24:24; John 10:28; Daniel 12:2; and Romans 8:29,30. Our confession expresses the Scripture doctrine very clearly and plainly. And when our confession says that God “ordained it [salvation] in his eternal purpose, which cannot fail or be overthrown,” (FC SD XI:45, *Triglot*, p. 1079) then it is asserted very definitely and clearly that no elect person finally remains in impenitence and unbelief and thus is lost.”¹⁶

Some claim that if everyone who is elect will be saved, then it follows that God's grace must be irresistible. But Scripture does not support the teaching of irresistible grace. Our Savior lamented that he wanted to gather the inhabitants of Jerusalem as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but they were not willing (Mt 23:37). Stephan told the members of the Sanhedrin that they were just like their fathers. They always resisted the Holy Spirit (Ac 7:51). Once again we must hold these two clear teachings without trying to resolve them. The elect will ultimately be saved, but human beings can resist God's grace. In fact, that is all they can do. We cannot resolve the fact that some come to faith and others do not in a way that will accord with human reason and logic. We must hold our reason captive to God's Word when it teaches that it is all to God's credit if a person is saved and it is all a person's own fault if he is lost.

VII. The doctrine of election gives us comfort, but it does not make us lazy. Rather this expression of God's pure grace spurs us on to apply ourselves to the means of grace and to do good works.

¹⁶ Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*. trans by James Langebartels (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2003) vol III, p. 52.

Luther's opponents accused him of not promoting good works. They claimed that if you taught that a person's salvation is in God's hands from first to last, people would become complacent. If good works are not necessary for salvation, no one will be moved to do them. Luther's opponents could only think in terms of *old* obedience, slave-like obedience, that obeys only because of threat of punishment or hope for reward. They understood neither the law nor the gospel nor the purpose or affect of either.

The doctrine of election is pure gospel. It proclaims God's unconditional mercy. God's love in eternity planned our salvation. In time God demonstrated that love by sacrificing his Son for our sins. Those who recognize that amazing love want to live for the One who has done everything for them. As St. Paul puts it so well, "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Co 5:14-15).

In fact, Christians who know that God has done everything for their salvation will work as if everything depended on them. They will fight against the desires of their sinful nature and they will apply themselves to the means of grace. As Paul urged the Philippians, "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Php 2:12-13).

The great Apostle Paul who wrote so clearly on the election of grace and salvation by grace alone, devoted himself to spiritual training, lest he fall from faith. "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to receive the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after having preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (1 Co 9:24-27).

Salvation is by grace alone without any merit or works on our part. Therefore we will work as if it all depended on us because that is what faith leads us to do. Our new man wants to do God's will and loves those means through which the Holy Spirit works in our hearts and helps us in our struggles with the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh. This may seem like a paradox, but it is an expression of scriptural truth.

VIII. Since we cannot identify who the elect are, God calls us to preach the gospel to all. For no one will be saved apart from the means of grace.

Our God has told us that he has chosen in eternity who will be saved. However, he has not told us who he has chosen. "Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: 'The Lord knows those who are his'" (2 Ti 2:19). We cannot read God's mind nor inquire into his secret counsels. Rather we do what he has told us to do. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Mt 28:18-20). Our Savior has given his people work to do.

People do not and cannot know the way of salvation by nature. They need to be told. "As it is written, 'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him' – but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit" (1 Co 2:9-10). The purpose of the Scriptures is to lead people to believe in Jesus as their Savior. "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (Jn 20:31).

Those who are privileged to work in the public ministry of the gospel have an urgent task. Paul writes, "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience

and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry” (2 Ti 4:2-4).

The Lord takes the work of the ministry seriously. In fact, he threatens judgment on those who fail to warn someone who is heading to hell. “Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked man, you will surely die,’ and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his sin, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself” (Eze 33:7-9).

Although God has chosen in eternity those who will be saved, no one will be saved apart from the means of grace. God does not work on human hearts directly to bring people to faith, but he works through the gospel which he has willed to be proclaimed by sinful human beings like you and me. “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How then can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.’ But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our message?’” Consequently faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Ro 10:13-15, 17). Salvation comes only through faith in Jesus. Faith comes only through the means of grace. People need to hear the gospel.

IX. As we proclaim his Word, the Holy Spirit will accomplish what he pleases.

We can have confidence when we proclaim God’s Word because it is *God’s* Word. It has his power. “‘Is not my word like fire,’ declares the LORD, ‘and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?’” (Jer 23:29). The gospel is the power of God for salvation (Ro 1:16). “The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow” (Heb 4:12).

Whenever God’s Word is proclaimed, the Holy Spirit will accomplish his purpose. “As the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isa 55:10-11). Every Lutheran pastor confesses that the Holy Spirit works faith only through the means of grace and through those means works according to his timetable and his plan and purpose. “For through the Word and sacraments as through instruments the Holy Spirit is given, who effects faith *where and when it pleases God.*”¹⁷

X. Although the means of grace work *supernaturally*, they don’t work *magically*.

Since the God’s plan of salvation is foolishness to people by nature, it is a miracle when people come to faith in Jesus as their Savior. Since every human being is dead in transgressions and sins, it is a miracle when they are born again. A miracle is a supernatural occurrence, one that goes beyond the laws of nature. The means of grace, therefore, work supernaturally. That is the clear message of Scripture. “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.’ Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and

¹⁷ AC, V, 2.

Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength" (1 Co 1:18-24).

Nevertheless, the means of grace do not work magically. We do not proclaim God's Word as if we were chanting a magical incantation. God has condescended to reveal his plan of salvation in human language. God's Word has meaning. His words are not empty syllables that we mumble as if they were some hocus pocus. Rather God has directed his Word toward the human mind in language that can be understood. God's Word is not the outer shell of the syllables or sounds that are made but the meaning that is in those words. We do not preach in Greek or Hebrew, the languages of the Bible, but we translate those words into languages that the people we are trying to reach can understand. We convey the meaning to them. That is God's Word.

As St. Paul explains, "Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction? Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is not without meaning. If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me" (1 Corinthians 14:6-11).

God's Word is not a magic talisman or charm that we hang on our walls or around our necks to ward off evil or bring us good luck. God's Word addresses our minds in language we can understand to bring us God's blessings.

When we read the Bible or come to worship or hear a sermon or receive the Lord's Supper we are not simply to go through the motions as if simply going through the right motions guarantees God's blessings. Concerning God's Word St. Peter tells us that we "will do well to pay attention to it" (2 Peter 1:19). Jesus warns, "You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' Jesus called the crowd to him and said, 'Listen and understand'" (Matthew 15:7-10). The Bible tells us, "Guard your steps when you go into the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong" (Ecclesiastes 5:1). We cannot expect our worship to be a blessing if we daydream through the reading of Scripture, the proclamation of the sermon, or the singing of the hymns.

In the same way, we will use our heads when we proclaim God's Word. Paul was careful not to let matters of adiaphoron become stumbling blocks that would keep people from hearing the gospel. "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel that I may share in its blessings" (1 Co 9:19-23). That means we will want to get to know people and their culture so that we can communicate to them clearly and not give them any reason to close their ears to our message.

In matters of adiaphoron, including how we worship, we will have to use sanctified Christian judgment to determine what we will do. Lutherans confess that rituals are not in themselves worship or a part of it.¹⁸ We choose those rites and music that allow us to proclaim the gospel in the best possible way in a given context. Those who believe that the only way to preserve the truth is through "traditional" Lutheran worship

¹⁸ FC, Ep, X, 8-9.

misunderstand the power of God's Word and confuse methods with the means of grace. Those who believe that the only way we can reach our generation is through "contemporary" worship misunderstand the power of the Word of God and confuse methods with the means of grace. We must argue on the basis of what is the best way to worship at a given time and in a given context.

XI. Although we cannot take credit for the success of our work, the public ministry demands our best efforts.

St. Paul refused to take credit for the success of the gospel. When people began taking pride in the messenger rather than the message, he declared, "What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants through whom you came to believe—as the Lord assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow" (1 Co 3:5-7). The great apostle was well aware of his limitations. He was nothing more than the vessel God used to accomplish his purposes. "For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. . . But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Co 4:5, 7). His success did not rest on his own natural abilities but on God's power. "When I came to you brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on man's wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Co 2:1-5).

But Paul also recognized the privilege that God had given him and carried out the work of the ministry to the very best of his abilities. He encouraged Timothy to do the same. "Do your best to present yourself to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Ti 2:15).

XII. In mission work we will always want to hold the apparent paradoxes of Scripture in their proper tension, not falling off to the right or to the left. We will always be careful not to let our reason or emotions be elevated above Scripture.

The proclamation of God's Word will always accomplish what God wants, not necessarily what we want. God's Word is powerful but it works imperceptibly. Jesus says, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). Sometimes we see apparent numerical success as in the case of the preaching of Jonah (Jnh 3:4-10) or the preaching of the apostles on Pentecost (Ac 2:41). Sometimes we don't. The great Prophet Elijah thought that he was a failure (1 Ki 19:9-18). After Jesus' Bread of Life Discourse many *disciples* turned away from the Savior himself (Jn 6:60-66). Scripture doesn't resolve the apparent paradox for us why the same message sometimes meets with visible success and sometimes does not. To judge the success of one's ministry on the basis of numerical success can be misleading and can cause improper consternation if we do not see the numbers we wanted. To disparage numerical success is not scriptural. To use the fact that God will accomplish what he wants as an excuse for our laziness is sin.

If the gospel is being proclaimed the church cannot die, even though an organized congregation may go out of existence. The church (believers) will simply find other gatherings of like-minded Christians. There may be many reasons for a congregation to go out of existence, but so long as the gospel is being proclaimed the church has not died nor can it. The church draws its life from the gospel. We live by faith not by sight. We must always be careful not to equate visible organizations with the church or the success of visible organizations with the success of the church.

American pragmatism teaches that if only we do things in the right way, success will follow. That attitude can lead people to substitute methods for the means of grace. The truth of the matter is that we can do nothing

to make the gospel appealing or palatable to the unregenerate. The gospel will always remain an offense to sinful minds. We cannot argue anyone into heaven. To try to substitute anything for the means of grace is sinful. On the other hand, to proclaim the gospel in language that people cannot understand or to ignore cultural differences which may prevent people from hearing our message is to treat the gospel as if it were a magical incantation.

The doctrine of election is intended to bring comfort to the believer. It also brings comfort to the pastor or missionary who thinks that all of his efforts are in vain. Those whom God has chosen will be saved. No one can bring any charge against them, because God is the one who justifies those he has chosen (Ro 8:33-34).

On the other hand, if someone uses this precious truth as an excuse for not preaching the gospel to the best of his ability, he is acting contrary to the Scriptures which tell us to preach the gospel (Mt 28:19-20), to do our best (2 Ti 2:15), and to “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have” (1 Pe 3:15). The certainty of election and the power of God’s Word must always be held in tension with the injunctions of Scripture to proclaim the gospel to the best of our ability.

When Paul presents the doctrine of election in the eighth chapter of Romans he lays out the order of salvation. God chose and predestined people in eternity. He foreordained that they would believe. In time he sees to it that they are called, justified, and ultimately glorified. To accomplish his eternal purpose God sees to it that each of the elect comes into contact with other people whom God uses to bring them the gospel. God gives a variety of gifts to individual Christians and to those who serve in the public ministry. God sanctifies these gifts and abilities and uses them in the ways he sees fit. To some God has given a winning personality that makes people naturally like them and to be drawn to them. To others he gives the ability to think quickly on their feet. To some he gives a powerful voice and pulpit presence. Others have the ability to be an especially engaging teacher. Some have tremendous energy and capacity for work. Some have a unique ability to understand the problems of others and to apply appropriate Christian counsel. To others he gives the ability to survive and thrive in another culture. Some are particularly gifted to work with little children while others are very good with teenagers or the old and infirm. These gifts do not make the gospel more powerful but God uses them to accomplish his purpose with the elect.

We will do well to appreciate these gifts of God and play to their strengths in the work we ask God’s people to do (see Ro 12:4-8). We will also want to be careful that we do not unduly elevate certain gifts to the exclusion of others. God’s estimation of which gift is greater than another may be different from ours. For instance, Paul lists prophets (proclaimers) and teachers high on the list and gifts of administration farther down the line (1 Co 12:27-31). Each gift is necessary and God uses these gifts according to his eternal plan and purpose. There is no place for jealousy in the ministry nor is the room for us to think of ourselves more highly than we ought (Ro 12:3).

Sometimes God presents us with a special situation to gather in his elect. As Philip was traveling on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, the Holy Spirit presented him with an Ethiopian eunuch whom God had prepared for Philip’s witness (Ac 8:26-39). At other times God uses our plans and blesses them. It seemed reasonable to Paul when he came to Philippi to go down to the river on the Sabbath because he expected to find a place of prayer there (Ac 16:13-15). God used Paul’s plan to begin to gather in the elect in that city. At other times he changes our plans to suit his eternal plan and purpose as he did when he turned Paul’s attention from the province of Asia to Macedonia (Ac 16:6-10). Even in Athens where Paul met with little success the Holy Spirit used Paul’s address in the Areopagus to reach the handful of elect he had in that city (Ac 17:16-34).

God has his eternal plan and he will accomplish his will through our efforts. Paul could declare, “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. Whether, then, it was I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed” (1 Co 15:10-11). Paul was the greatest of the Apostles but he recognized the work of others and understood that God’s grace was responsible for everything he accomplished.

God has given us considerable freedom in carrying out the work he has given us to do. He will bring to faith through the means of grace those he has chosen in eternity. We sometimes speak of *pre-evangelism*, those things which might help us gain a hearing among people. Paul showed common sense when he began to speak at the Areopagus. He appealed to the curiosity of the Athenians gathered there. Like Paul we will want to use our heads to gain a hearing while we recognize that God's eternal purpose in election will ultimately be realized only through the means of grace.

On the other hand, we will want to be careful that we do not allow historical observations or pre-conceived notions to prevent us from reaching out to any group. Luther's rain shower analogy is an accurate historical observation. The gospel has passed from one location to another throughout history. But an historical observation, no matter how correct it might be, is no reason to predict where God's elect might be. Because the shower of the gospel has now seemed to have left Europe, we should not conclude that it will do us no good to preach the gospel there. The gospel will always remain the power of God for salvation and we cannot see who the elect are or know for certain where we will find them. In the same way, just because some groups seem harder to reach than others (e.g. Muslims, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.), that does not mean that we should not try to reach them. It is no greater miracle of the Holy Spirit to convert a member of these groups than it was for him to convert any of us. Perhaps God has his elect among them as well. His Word will not return empty.

The doctrine of election is a source of comfort for those who serve in the public ministry. As we do the work our Savior has given us to do we can be certain that he will always use us to accomplish his plan and purpose. As St. Paul encourages us, "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Co 15:58).

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