

SOVEREIGN GRACE

# PERSPECTIVES

Reflections on Doctrine and Practice in the Local Church

## Sovereign Grace and the Glorious Mystery of Election

C.J. Mahaney



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# Sovereign Grace and the Glorious Mystery of Election

*He chose us in him before the foundation of the world* — Ephesians 1:4

**C.J. Mahaney**

## ***First Impressions***

Author James Cantelon presents this moving and insightful remembrance of his conversion experience:

“First impressions are lasting impressions.” So goes the old saying, and I suspect in most cases it is true. My first impression of God is with me to this day. It happened at a musty old church camp in Central Saskatchewan, Canada. I was five years old.

Back in those days we were into tabernacles. Not only were most of our churches called tabernacles, but our camp meeting buildings were also given this Old Testament name for tent. On one especially hot day my parents were in the adult tabernacle and I, with my fellow junior campers, was in the children’s tabernacle. The teacher was taking us through Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. As she taught, something sparked within me.

After the lesson the children exploded into the sunshine to play. I lingered. Miss Brown seemed to know why.

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“Can I help you, Jimmy?” she asked gently. I nodded dumbly, biting my suddenly trembling lower lip, tears welling in my eyes.

“Let’s go into the back room and pray,” she said. I can’t explain what happened....But I will say this: at age five I suddenly felt as though I were the worst sinner who had ever lived. My sense of sin nearly crushed my little heart. The prayer, however, had not ended. It began with remorse, it grew into joy. I felt this newly discovered burden lift from my fragile soul. The presence of God overwhelmed me. Without my looking for him, or asking for him—indeed, without any knowledge of my need of him—God came looking for me, asking for me...a five-year-old kid.<sup>1</sup>

First impressions are indeed lasting impressions. Mr. Cantelon’s description of his conversion experience is revealing: “God came looking for me.” What is your understanding of your conversion experience? Who pursued whom? Did God come looking for you? Or does it seem that, in essence, you were pursuing God? What stands out the most to you: God’s initiative and intervention, or your repentance and faith?

*When I was coming to Christ, I thought I was doing it all myself, and though I sought the Lord earnestly, I had no idea the Lord was seeking me. I do not think the young convert is at first aware of this. I can recall the very day and hour when first I received those truths [of the doctrine of election] in my own soul—when they were as John Bunyan said, burnt into my heart as with a hot iron, and I can recollect how I felt that I had grown on a sudden from a babe into a man—that I had made progress in scriptural knowledge, through having found, once for all, the clue to the truth of God.*

*One week-night, when I was sitting in the house of God, I was not thinking much about the preacher’s sermon, for I did not believe it. The*

These are not academic questions. The Christian who misunderstands or misinterprets the underlying cause of his or her conversion can be vulnerable to legalism, pride, self-reliance, ingratitude, condemnation, and lack of assurance. But when we rightly understand the nature of our conversion—that is, when we clearly grasp the role of God’s sovereign grace in election—we position ourselves to enjoy, in an ongoing way, the wonderfully life-transforming benefits that are available only through the gospel.

## **Out of Our Depth**

Election, of course, is a doctrine issuing from the deep end of the theological pool. As soon as we encounter it, we must all acknowledge

that we are in way over our heads. This is a place of mystery, a place that spawns a hundred questions, all of them variations on a single question: “How do I reconcile divine sovereignty with human responsibility?”

On the topic of theological mystery, I find this quote from J. Rodman Williams most helpful: “Because all Christian doctrines relate to God who is ultimately beyond our comprehension, there will inevitably be some element of mystery, or transcendence, that cannot be reduced to human understanding. Nonetheless, within these limits the theological effort must be carried on.”<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, God has announced the following non-negotiable arrangement: “The secret things belong to the Lord and the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever” (Det 29:29).

As one who loves secrets, my pride does not respond well to such a declaration. So, partly as an aid to my humility, God has allowed me to live near Washington, DC. Here, among the members of the church I am privileged to serve, are a number of people who must be rather secretive about the details of their government-related jobs. Sometimes, when talking with one or another of them, my pride and self-importance rises up, and I begin to crave a little insider access. Why don’t they share some cool stuff with me? Can’t they trust me? Can’t they make an exception for their pastor? To their credit, they never satisfy my prideful craving. Usually they don’t even admit they know any secrets.

I can behave the same way with God. I implore him to explain some theological mystery, arrogantly assuming that my brain would not be microwaved by exposure to such divine illumination. But in his goodness, wisdom, and mercy, he doesn’t tell me any secrets, either.

How comfortable are you with the secret things of God?...with the difficult to understand?...the paradox?...the apparent contradiction? Are you at peace in the deep end of the pool? In

*thought struck me, How did you come to be a Christian? I sought the Lord. But how did you come to seek the Lord? The truth flashed across my mind in a moment—I should not have sought him unless there had been some previous influence in my mind to make me seek him. I prayed, thought I, but then I asked myself, How came I to pray? I was induced to pray by reading the Scriptures. How came I to read the Scriptures? I did read them, but what led me to do so? Then, in a moment, I saw that God was at the bottom of it all, and that he was the Author of my faith, and so the doctrine of grace opened up to me, and from that doctrine I have not departed to this day, and I desire to make this my constant confession, “I ascribe my change wholly to God.”*

— Charles Spurgeon<sup>2</sup>

### ***Sovereign Grace and the Glorious Mystery of Election***

***The decisive factor in determining who is to be saved from sin is not the decisions of the human beings concerned, but the sovereign grace of God—though human decision does play a significant role in the process.... We must therefore affirm both God's sovereignty and man's responsibility; both God's sovereign grace and our active participation in the process of salvation. We can only do justice to biblical teaching if we firmly hold on to both sides of the paradox. But since God is the Creator and we are his creatures, God must have the priority. Hence we must maintain that the ultimately decisive factor in the process of our salvation is the sovereign grace of God.***

— Anthony Hoekema<sup>4</sup>

ple that to desire any other knowledge of predestination than that which is expounded by the Word of God, is no less infatuated than to walk where there is no path, or to seek light in darkness.... The best rule of sobriety is, not only in learning to follow wherever God leads, but also when he makes an end of teaching to cease wishing to be wise.<sup>5</sup>

I believe that Christian maturity includes an increasing comfort with divine mystery and a growing trust in God, so that we can say with David, “O Lord, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great or too marvelous for me” (Ps 131:1).

As one grows in Christ, there won't be less mystery. But there ought to be more humility, that we may be more at rest in the presence of divine mystery. May it be great enough and marvelous enough for us to know that the doctrine of election is sound and reliable, representing the clear teaching of Scripture.

So let no one entertain vain hopes. This paper will answer no heretofore unanswered questions. It will not neatly align concepts that, to our limited minds, can seem out of alignment. And it certainly will not eliminate from the doctrine of election that rich

Scripture, God has asserted both divine sovereignty and human responsibility, without seeking to harmonize them completely. But they are certainly harmonized in his infinite wisdom, and that should be enough for us.

John Calvin offers wise counsel on this matter:

The subject of predestination, which in itself is attended by considerable difficulty, is rendered very perplexed, and hence perilous, by human curiosity, which cannot be restrained from wandering into forbidden paths... Those secrets of his will which he has seen fit to manifest, are revealed in his Word—revealed in so far as he knew to be conducive to our interest and welfare.... Let it, therefore, be our first principle

## Preliminary Clarifications

Before exploring the marvelous doctrine of election, the following points must be made in an effort to minimize any potential misunderstanding.

1) Because we find both divine sovereignty and human responsibility in Scripture, we must teach both, all the while emphasizing that the accent in Scripture is on election: the sovereignty of God in salvation.

2) The doctrine of election, although vitally important, does not define Sovereign Grace Ministries. The gospel defines us.

Election plays a critical role in relation to the gospel of grace. It protects and preserves the gospel, but it is not fully synonymous with the gospel. The gospel is the person and work of Jesus Christ. We are saved by trusting in him and his perfect work. "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1Co 15:3-4). We are not more passionate about election than we are about the gospel. Election is a vital doctrine, but only the gospel is of first importance.

3) A person does not have to believe in, understand, or agree with the doctrine of election in order to be saved. A saving relationship with God requires repentance from sin and trust in Christ alone, to save by grace alone, through faith alone. While the doctrine of election is an important one, and mistaken beliefs about it can have negative consequences, an embrace of the doctrine of election is clearly not necessary to salvation.

4) The doctrine of election is for Christians, not non-Christians. It should not be taught or referred to in any evangelistic context. Theologian Bruce Milne has stated wisely that the doctrine of election "is not an explicit part of the gospel which the Christian presents to the unbeliever. It ought not to inhibit the universal appeal of Christian evangelism."<sup>6</sup> The English reformer John Bradford said, "Let a man go to the grammar school of faith and repentance before he goes to the university of election and predestination."

5) Our unity with Christians from outside this ministry does not require full agreement on the doctrine of election. We affirm these words of Charles Spurgeon:

"We give our hand to every man that loves the Lord Jesus Christ, be he what he may or who he may. The doctrine of election, like the great act of election itself, is not intended to divide between Israel and Israel but between Israel and the Egyptians. Not between saint and saint, but between saints and the children of the world. A man may be evidently of God's chosen family and yet, though elected, may not believe in the doctrine of election. I hold that there are many savingly called who do not believe in effectual calling and that there are a great many who persevere to the end who do not believe the doctrine of final perseverance. We do hope the hearts of many are a great deal better than their heads. We do not set their fallacies down to any willful opposition to the truth as it is in Jesus, but simply to an error in their judgment which we pray God to correct. We hope that if they think us mistaken, too, they will reciprocate the same Christian courtesy. And when we meet around the cross, we hope that we shall ever feel that we are one in Christ Jesus."<sup>7</sup>

element of mystery. Remember—the most gifted, best-equipped minds in church history, no matter how far they dive into the theological pool, have failed to plumb the depths of election. Meanwhile, far above them, my skinny legs can only occasionally be glimpsed, just beneath the surface, desperately treading water.

## ***The Glorious Mystery***

Ephesians 1:4 is a definitive text for gaining a biblical understanding of one's conversion experience. And while it is far from the only text on the subject of divine election, it is clear, authoritative, succinct, and sufficient for our present purposes. Here, despite the lingering presence of mystery, is clarity that the human mind can grasp firmly. This verse explains what was really taking place at that moment of conversion: the outworking of a divine choice made in eternity past.

The verse tells us that our transition from death to life, from sinner to saint, from object of wrath to object of mercy, was exclusively and entirely the result of sovereign grace. Does your first impression of your conversion suggest otherwise? If so, let that impression be adjusted by truth:

*He chose us  
in him  
before the foundation of the world*

In this verse, Paul takes us behind the scenes. He turns our attention away from our limited, personal experience, and toward the Sovereign One, reigning in eternity past. Inspired by the Spirit, Paul wants there to be absolute clarity on this point: salvation flows from divine election. Every conversion, in every era, in every land, has come about solely by sovereign grace.

With Ephesians 1:4 as our guide, let us now concentrate on that which is clear and certain regarding this doctrine. Let us explore the glories of election, that we might derive from it the full benefits God intends.



He chose us in him...

As we begin to unpack this phrase, we should do so in the context of verses 3-14, which in the Greek appear as a single sentence. That sentence begins with Paul celebrating spiritual blessings: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing.” Paul then spins out a dizzying array of blessings, beginning with the fact that “He chose us.” The effect of that initial blessing is later echoed several more times in the passage—in words such as “predestined,” “adoption,” “redemption,” and “forgiveness”—as Paul explores the wonders of our unmerited salvation.

We learn from this passage of Scripture that divine choice precedes human response. In light of my sinfulness, pervasive depravity, and wicked hostility to God, I must concur with Charles Spurgeon that this is precisely what happened in my case.

I believe the doctrine of election, because I am quite certain that, if God had not chosen me, I should never have chosen him; and I am sure he chose me before I was born, or else he never would have chosen me afterwards; and he must have elected me for reasons unknown to me, for I never could find any reason in myself why he should have looked upon me with special love.<sup>8</sup>

As you read this quote, does your spirit rise up in affirmation? Are you quick to agree? Do you see that he chose you, and not vice versa? And do you see that he chose you—not because of who you were, or are, or will yet become—but simply out of his own mercy? If not, perhaps you hold a common misunderstanding regarding

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.*

— Ephesians 1:3–14

### ***Sovereign Grace and the Glorious Mystery of Election***

*The verb elect means “to select, or choose out.” The biblical doctrine of election is that before Creation God selected out of the human race, foreseen as fallen, those whom he would redeem, bring to faith, justify, and glorify in and through Jesus Christ... This divine choice is an expression of free and sovereign grace, for it is unconstrained and unconditional, not merited by anything in those who are its subjects. God owes sinners no mercy of any kind, only condemnation; so it is a wonder, and matter for endless praise, that he should choose to save any of us; and doubly so when his choice involved the giving of his own Son to suffer as sin-bearer for the elect.*

— J.I. Packer<sup>9</sup>

the nature of election, one brilliantly addressed in this anecdote from Mark Webb. It begins with him teaching a class.

After giving a brief survey of these doctrines of sovereign grace, I asked for questions from the class. One lady, in particular, was quite troubled. She said, “This is the most awful thing I’ve ever heard! You make it sound as if God is intentionally turning away men who would be saved, receiving only the elect.” I answered her in this vein. “You misunderstand the situation. You’re visualizing that God is standing at the door of heaven, and men are thronging to get in the door, and God is saying to various ones, ‘Yes, you may come, but not you, or you, or you...’ The situation is hardly this. Rather, God stands at the door of

heaven with his arms outstretched, inviting all to come. Yet all men without exception are running in the opposite direction towards hell as hard as they can go. So God, in election, graciously reaches out and stops this one, and that one, and this one over here, and that one over there, and effectually draws them to himself by changing their hearts, making them willing to come. Election keeps no one out of heaven who would otherwise have been there, but it keeps a whole multitude of sinners out of hell who otherwise would have been there. Were it not for election, heaven would be an empty place, and hell would be bursting at the seams.” That kind of response, grounded as I believe that it is in scriptural truth, does put a different complexion on things, doesn’t it?

If you perish in hell, blame yourself, as it is entirely your fault. But if you should make it to heaven, credit God, for that is entirely his work! To him alone belong all praise and glory, for salvation is *all of grace* from start to finish!<sup>10</sup>

Do you realize that he stopped you in your willful, headlong rush toward the gates of hell? Scripture speaks of us, in our unregenerate condition, as enemies of God, denoting an active

hatred and hostility (Col 1:21, Ro 5:10, Php 3:18-19). Yet prior to Genesis 1:1, this God whom you hated determined to save you. And in time, through the proclamation of the gospel, he called you by name, stopping you in your eager flight. Why did he do that? Certainly not because there was anything lovable in you. This is the mystery of his mercy. Because he had chosen you in his Son, he stopped you *because* of his Son. Do you not find that astonishing? The more you are aware of God's divine initiative and your own depravity, the more you will be amazed by grace.

Let's remember: You and I were dead in our sins (Eph 2:1, Col 2:13). God placed that phrase in the Bible intentionally. We were not weakened. We were not injured. We were not sickly or languishing. In relation to God and salvation we were dead. Flatlined. Gone. A bunch of corpses.

At the same time, we were very much alive with respect to sin and self. We loved darkness, and that love made us enemies of God, and hostile to him. We hated him. Please, don't flatter yourself by thinking otherwise. Let the plain teaching of Scripture enlighten your understanding. You were not seeking God. You did not discover God. You did not find God. (He was not hiding.) Nor were you neutral toward God. You were actively and arrogantly hostile and opposed—you hated God as your enemy. You may well have been drawn to some caricature of God. You may have been pursuing a counterfeit religious experience involving a man-pleasing deity crafted out of vain hopes and sinful imagination. But the true and living God—the sovereign, self-sustaining, pre-existent one—him, you despised. It was directly away from him, away from the uncompromising standard of his perfect holiness, that you were running, and running hard.

How could a holy God choose sinners such as us? Scripture provides the answer to this all-important question. He chose us “in him.” That is, in the Savior, who in the first 14 verses of Ephesians is referenced no less than 15 times. He is the means by which God's choice to save is achieved. Sovereign grace is in him. I am chosen in Christ, and solely because of Christ. I am not chosen apart from Christ, or because of anything within me. Election, redemption, adoption, and forgiveness of sins are in him, and none of these can exist apart from him. He was the Lamb slain before time. God chose us in him...

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...before the foundation of the world.

Here is a rare biblical reference to something that God was doing before creation. He was choosing sinners like you and me. Prior to Genesis 1:1, we were singled out, selected for salvation. For me, this is brain-overload territory. I'm undone by the sovereign grace displayed in this phrase. The God whom I hated determined to save me and, in time, through the proclamation of the gospel, called me by name, declaring, "Stop. You will not go to hell. Instead, forgiveness of sins and infinite joy is yours in my Son." And it was all decided before the foundation of the world.

## ***Our Worthy Response***

"When [Paul] introduces [election] into his teaching," writes J.I. Packer, "it is for one end only—to help Christians see how great is the grace that has saved them, and to move them to a worthy response in worship and life."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, to hold to a biblical understanding of election is to live a life of "worthy response." To learn that we were chosen before time enables us to live for him, in time, with joy, passion, and clarity of purpose that are rooted beyond time.

In my experience, a clear and thorough understanding of God's grace in election promotes, at a minimum, humility before God, assurance from God, gratefulness to God, and a pervasive sense of mission for the glory of God. By God's grace, these "worthy responses" in large measure have characterized the Sovereign Grace churches thus far. It is my goal to ensure that they continue to do so, and in increasing measure, that God may be increasingly glorified.

## **Humility before God**

In 1 Corinthians 1:26-29, Paul references election four times, and then ties the doctrine of election to humility, "so that no human being might boast" (v.29). "God intentionally designed salvation so that no man could boast of it," writes Mark Webb. "He didn't merely arrange it so that boasting would be discouraged or kept to a minimum—He planned it so that boasting would be absolutely excluded. Election does precisely that."<sup>12</sup>

Election leaves no room for self-congratulation, for it precludes

all human contribution. If your repentance had contributed to your eternal salvation, if it had helped in any way to bring about your resurrection from spiritual death into eternal life, if it had somehow persuaded God to change his mind about your eternal destiny, well that would be a pretty neat trick. I'd be very impressed, and you would have something to boast about before God and man. But, as Philip Ryken points out, "Repentance is not a special method for saving ourselves; it is a way of admitting that we cannot save ourselves at all. It is a way of throwing ourselves on the mercy of God and begging the Saviour to save us."<sup>13</sup>

One reason I am so thankful to God for allowing us to have the name Sovereign Grace Ministries is that I anticipate this name will help to restrain pride and promote humility. "Sovereign grace," of course, encompasses far more than election. It speaks of all God's gracious attributes and acts, as they relate to all of life, for all things are under the sovereign, gracious, attentive care of God. Nothing that man does for God is ever about human achievement. It is about God's mercy, kindness, and gracious enabling. "What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" (1Co 4:7). A right understanding of grace will always promote humility. So I view this name as a gift, a catalyst to humility, effective today, but also sent on ahead to some future generation I will not see.

## **Assurance from God**

I meet far too many people who seem unsure or unaware of God's love for them personally. They know God loves other Christians. They know God loves their pastor. They know God loves the members of their church. But they are far less certain that the Creator loves the specific individual bearing their name, their fingerprints, their unique DNA.

Recently, a Christian man recognized me on a plane. When we landed, he introduced himself and said, "I found great comfort when I saw you were on the flight. I knew we wouldn't crash." I

*For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.*

— 1 Corinthians 1:26-29

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felt a certain helplessness at that moment. There wasn't sufficient time to address all the faulty assumptions his comment revealed. I tried to assure him that if he was converted, God's love for him was perfect, specific, and sufficient. But as we spoke it only became more evident that he was not yet fully aware of that great truth.

Such believers often think of themselves as loved by God by virtue of their membership in a group. *God loves Christians. I am a Christian. Therefore, as God extends his love to Christians I can kind of get under the faucet and be touched by the generalized love God has for the saints.*

That's getting it backwards. You are only a Christian—you are only among the redeemed and adopted, you are only an heir to God's infinite riches—because God has chosen and loves you. Personally.

To have even a minimal understanding of election is to experience the love of God on a personal level. Note how Paul, when exploring the intricacies of the doctrine of justification beginning at Galatians 2:15, could not help but move very quickly into what this meant for him personally: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives **in me**. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who **loved me** and gave himself **for me**" (v.20, emphasis added).

Philip Ryken passes along to us an illustration that captures the wonder of finding oneself a recipient God's electing grace.

The famous American Bible teacher Donald Grey Barnhouse (1895–1960) often used an illustration to help people make sense of election. He asked them to imagine a cross like the one on which Jesus died, only so large that it had a door in it. Over the door were these words from Revelation: "Whosoever will may come." These words represent the free and universal offer of the gospel. By God's grace, the message of salvation is for everyone. Every man, woman, and child who will come to the cross is invited to believe in Jesus Christ and enter eternal life.

On the other side of the door a happy surprise awaits the one who believes and enters. From the inside, anyone glancing back can see these words from Ephesians written above the door: "Chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world." Election is best understood in hindsight, for it is only after coming to Christ that one can know

whether one has been chosen in Christ. Those who make a decision for Christ find that God made a decision for them in eternity past.<sup>14</sup>

Election is an after-the-experience explanation of your conversion. Happy surprise, indeed!

May the phrase by which this ministry is known promote a continual, deepening assurance of God's unfailing, timeless love. That divine love began in eternity past. It is immune to the effects of this present age. It stands outside of time and creation, and will continue forever.

What a happy surprise that is! Know the love of God for you—personally. Feel it. Experience it. Turn around and see over that door:

*Chosen in Him Before the Foundation of the World*

### **Gratefulness to God**

Ephesians 1:3-14 (see p. 7) is an uninterrupted outburst of praise. That's the effect of understanding the sovereign grace of election. Bruce Milne writes of this passage: "Paul is not standing at his desk engaged in dialectical argumentation; rather he is on his knees, lost in adoring worship."<sup>15</sup> The doctrine of election is not meant to be a point of theological disputation. It is a call to worship.

My prayer and exhortation is that the name of this ministry will serve as a continual reminder of God's gracious initiative toward his people, and thus as a call to worship. May our personal lives and churches be characterized by the distinct absence of complaining and the distinct presence of passionate, grateful praise and worship to God.

May it never be that these outward expressions to God become superficial or merely habitual. Before the foundation of the world, he chose me in Christ. The only appropriate response even to a basic understanding of the doctrine of election is passionate gratefulness—praise and worship all the days of my life, until my dying breath.

### **Mission for the Glory of God**

Prior to creation, God was doing some choosing. He's been busy in eternity past and he's got saving work to do in the present. And he

#### ***Sovereign Grace and the Glorious Mystery of Election***

does that work when his people proclaim the good news. As a family of churches, God is calling Sovereign Grace Ministries to evangelism locally and to church-planting globally.

In this world, we live amongst men, women, and children who have not experienced salvation. Because of the doctrine of election, we know that the eventual salvation of specific ones among them is absolutely certain. We do not—indeed, we cannot—know in advance who these individuals are. But we know they are there, in every tribe and tongue and nation. And we know that, for each one chosen before time, there will be that moment in time when a single presentation of the gospel is used by God to bring about salvation.

In his mercy, God has given us a biblical understanding of salvation, as he has countless believers before us. Knowing that our salvation was fundamentally accomplished by God rather than ourselves fuels our confidence and builds our faith to see others regenerated. This “first impression” of our salvation with which God has armed us is a lasting one, having glorious ramifications for daily life and ministry. Thus armed, we go out into the world full of faith, knowing that the gospel is the power of God, and that the triumph of the gospel was assured before time began.

With regard to church-planting, both domestically and internationally, we have not been ambitious. When we do move forward to seek to build and strengthen churches, we find that we have not arrived ahead of God, or at the same time as God, but we find that he has gone ahead of us. All glory for any fruitfulness or expansion we have experienced or may experience must go to him.

Far from undermining evangelism and church planting, a proper understanding of the doctrine of election invigorates both these activities and assures us of their ultimate success. How good it is to know that the gospel of the crucified and risen Savior does not return void. Our God has “a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:10). By grace, this plan of the Sovereign one will indeed be fulfilled. Whatever exceedingly small role this ministry may play in that fulfillment, sovereign grace has surely been our history. Sovereign grace will be our future.



## Endnotes

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3. J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988) p.16
4. Anthony Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989) pp.3,7
5. J.I. Packer, *God's Words* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1981) p.158
6. Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 1982) p.183
7. Iain Murray, *Spurgeon vs. Hyper-Calvinism* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1995) pp.111-112
8. Charles Spurgeon, quoted in *Table Talk*, September 8, 1994
9. J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1993) p.149
10. Mark Webb, "What Difference Does it Make?" *Reformation and Revival Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Winter 1994, pp.53-54
11. J.I. Packer, *God's Words*, p.157
12. Mark Webb, "What Difference Does it Make?" p.52
13. Philip Ryken, *The Message of Salvation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001) p.60
14. *Ibid*, p.68-69
15. Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth*, p.184