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Doing Theology through the Gates of Heaven

A Bible Study on Ephesians 1:3-14

John Lewis

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THEOLOGY today seeks to exist within the framework of new world views and understandings of reality. The temptation is to abandon the finer details of theology. What seems to be preferred is any concept of church that can satisfy the many demands of our new post-modern world. However, in recent times culture based solutions armed with all their research, statistics and testimonials have not always proved themselves to be the 'heroes of the hour' they were once crowned. We have become servants to their demands, rather than *they* servants of the Word. It is evident that as we advance deeper into Post-modernism, the dictums that were once taken as certainties will increasingly become unknown and unheard amid the voices of subjectivity and abstraction.

What is required in these days of change is for the church to re-emphasize a theology of the Word of God that

asserts a biblical and confessional faith, addresses our current human condition, and speaks with depth to our emotional and spiritual needs. It is the Word that holds the key to a contemporary theology that is alive and resonant to minds and hearts of today. It is in the Word that one finds theology uttered with passion as it speaks of God, existence, spirituality, the demands and needs of community, and the hope of Jesus Christ. In Ephesians 1:3-14 one encounters a dynamic passage that expresses theology in the context of worship. In an outpouring of praise, important aspects of soteriology are discussed with poignancy and relevance.

1. A Theology in Worship

The passage begins with an outpouring of praise 'to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ'. This is praise in response to the gracious work of God and his loving decree that has bought about the possibility of 'every spiritual

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blessing' for those who are found in Jesus Christ. This is a benediction, an 'exclamation of praise and prayer', and 'resounds with the praise of God's glory'.¹ It is a statement of thanksgiving that the Father has chosen to elect a people in the Son he loves. Because the Father loves the Son he loves those who are in the Son. In this praise there is a description of a new relational existence that has been bought about by God's love, 'that he has lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding'. In the context of this outpouring of praise the ensuing theology unfolds. This is theology in the context of worship; the doing of the theology as one enters through the gates of heaven and into the presence of God.

2. The Meaning of Election

In verse 4 Christians are drawn to consider what it means to be chosen in Jesus Christ. Here is the reason for praise and thanksgiving. The powerful Christological orientation of this existence is immediately apparent. The one who has just been praised is the instrument of election. The Christians are in praise because it has been made known to them that they are loved by God, united with him, and constitute a fellowship defined by its corporate existence in Jesus Christ. Indeed, Markus Barth has pointed out that this passage is to be noted for its frequent use of the preposition 'in'. Eleven times 'in Christ', or its equivalent, is used.² As

Andrew Lincoln has stated, God's design for his people 'has been effected in and through Jesus Christ'.³ There are two aspects to this. The first is the election of Jesus Christ and the second is the election of God's people through Christ.

In the Old Testament Israel is said to be God's elect. They were his chosen people. What the New Testament affirms, and on which Ephesians 1 rests, is that Jesus Christ is now the elect of God and that the Christian's election can be spoken of only as being election *in him*. Robert Shank, in his *Elect in the Son*, follows this theme when he states that the 'first step toward a correct understanding of the Biblical doctrine of election is the recognition that the election of men is comprehended only in Christ'.⁴ He finds historical support for his argument by turning to the Canons of Dort, which affirms 'that election is in Christ, "whom [God] from eternity appointed the Mediator and Head of the elect and the foundation to salvation."' ⁵ Shank further states that 'election is first of *Christ* and then of men *in Him*'.

In declaring this Shank finds support from Clement, first-century bishop at Rome, who wrote in his First Epistle

¹ Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1-3: The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), pp. 97-98.

² Markus Barth, *Ephesians*, p. 100.

³ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ephesians* (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), p. 23. According to Lincoln this verse explicitly links the notion of election to being 'in Christ'. Lincoln further observes that in Galatians 3 Paul treats Christ as the one who has fulfilled Israel's election.

⁴ Robert T. Shank, *Elect in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Election* (Springfield, Missouri: Westcott, 1971), p. 27.

⁵ Shank, *Elect in the Son*, p. 28.

to the Corinthians: 'God... chose out the Lord Jesus Christ, and us through him for "a peculiar people" (64:1)'⁶ Here Christians come to the realization that they are part of God's grand design to call a people his very own. However, this is not a statement of straight determinism, but an outpouring of praise that one may be found in a loving relationship with the Father *in* and *through* Christ. Here God does not choose to elect individuals, but has chosen to elect Christ and those who are found in him. For this reason this passage presents a theology of election in the context of *corporate* worship, and with a clear pastoral note that affirms Christians as loved and chosen by God.

3. The Decision of Faith

Because this passage states that there is a particular group of people who are elect in Christ, it implies that there are certain restrictions. It clearly points to a condition that must be met. Verse 13 stipulates that those who are included in Christ are those who have heard and believed. The decision and will of God to act in grace stands clearly as the means by which any might come to faith. The faithful preaching of the gospel is the vehicle by which people hear and on hearing the gospel the individual is enabled, by God's grace, to freely make a decision as to whether or not they will embrace Christ as Lord and Saviour.

The initiative of God and the responsibility of the individual are clearly spelled out here. Dale Moody spoke of the two sides of salvation, 'God's grace

and man's faith'.⁷ But it is not election that is to be thought of in individualistic terms. God wills that all come to faith, but has also decreed that only those who do will be counted among the elect. As Shank has stated, the 'saving purpose of God in election has been fixed from eternity and cannot be altered. But the election is corporate rather than particular'.⁸

Therefore, the need for the individual to make a response to God's grace is still evident. This is possible because God in his grace calls out and enables the individual to decide. As F.L. Forlines has stated, there 'must be a move toward man on God's part before there will be any response on man's part...The Holy Spirit must take the Word of God and work in the human heart and mind to prepare the heart and mind before there can be the response of faith from a sinner'.⁹ Forlines is helpful when he writes that the 'Holy Spirit creates a framework of possibilities in which a person can respond in faith to Jesus Christ. The response of faith is not guaranteed, but it is made possible. The person can say either yes or no'.¹⁰ The fact that such a situation is possible is further reason to enter into praise, prayer and thanksgiving. However, this grace is not irresistible.

7 Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth: A Summary of Christian Doctrine Based on Biblical Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 309.

8 Shank, *Elect in the Son*, p. 131.

9 F.L. Forlines, *Biblical Systematics: A Study of the Christian System of Life and Thought* (Nashville, Tennessee: Randall House, 1975), p. 204.

10 Forlines, *Biblical Systematics*, p. 204.

6 Shank, *Elect in the Son*, p. 31.

The Ephesians were described as those 'having believed' (1:13). There is no suggestion in this passage that they were chosen to believe. As we have already argued, the text refers to a corporate election in Christ, the elect Son of God. The Christians of Ephesus believed because they were free to believe and did. This is the condition of election with which they had successfully complied. This means that God's grace is resistible but also available to all. Shank refers to passages that point to the resistibility of grace. 'To the Galatians (2:21), Paul wrote, "I do not frustrate the grace of God" (by seeking righteousness through the works of the law rather than through faith in Christ). To the Corinthians he wrote (2 Cor. 6:1), "We then, as workers together with God, beseech you also that you receive not the grace of God in vain" (by failing to go on with God in the unfolding of His redemptive purpose for them).'¹¹

However, the point of praise in this passage is that God's grace is available to all. In his earlier *Life in the Son* Shank asserts that God's sovereign will is to save them that believe since he is pleased with the faith of those who seek him. Indeed, God 'wills to have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4), not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9).'¹² The task of the Christian community also comes to light here. The elect church is clearly called to

mission as well as worship. The ministry of the elect is to proclaim the message of Jesus and see others come to share in the Father's rich blessings in Christ. This passage calls upon the church to focus its attention on its true calling as it considers its vision, mission, purpose and goals.

One of the issues related to conditional salvation is that it demands that a person is competent enough to fulfil this condition. This is a significant pastoral note that reflects again on the grace and love of God that leads to praise. The conditional election alluded to in this passage rules out the need for infants to be baptized in order to be saved. It also means that when an infant (or other person not capable of making a decision of faith) dies they are not condemned in their sin, but stand in God's grace. Shank has proposed that on the basis of the words of Jesus (Mt. 18:10; 19:14) it is evident that children are always in a state of grace.¹³ Forlines has further argued that since Christ died for our personal sins one becomes guilty of sin only when one has the capacity to decide to commit one.¹⁴ Consequently people must be able to repent and profess faith to be held accountable for their sins. This is further reason for thanksgiving. The elect community is a corporate

¹¹ Shank, *Elect in the Son*, p. 101.

¹¹ Shank, *Elect in the Son*, pp 131-32.

¹² Robert Shank *Life in the Son: A Study in the Doctrine of Perseverance* (Springfield, Missouri: Westcott, 1961), p. 344.

¹³ Shank, *Elect in the Son*, p. 101.
¹⁴ Forlines, *Biblical Systematics*, p. 172. John Smyth, in his 'Short Confession of Faith' stated: 'That there is no original sin, but all sin is actual and voluntary, viz., a word, a deed, or a design against the law of God; and therefore, infants are without sin (5).' William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969), p. 100.

entity and community that embraces all. The whole Christian community is included in this benediction of praise.

4. The Meaning of Atonement

As Markus Barth has observed, verse 7 marks a sudden change in direction from election to a specific event—that is, Christ's death on the cross.¹⁵ Shank believes in a theology of the atonement in which Christ 'voluntarily concurred in the elective purpose of God and gave to that purpose its eternal realization'.¹⁶ In this verse the redeemed are brought to the gates of God's presence through the blood of Jesus Christ.

This passage begins in a celebration of praise. In verse 7 one finds worship is made possible only through the shed blood of Christ. We are directed by this to the meaning and purpose of the atonement. Christ did not die in our place under the hand of a wrathful God who seeks to kill us all in our sin. Stanley Grenz has noted that the atonement is primarily directed to human sin, rather than God's wrath.

The sacrifice of Christ leads to the possibility of forgiveness of sins and results in a restored relationship.¹⁷ On God's part the motive is love, not the expression of wrath, and the result is reconciliation and worship.¹⁸ The sacrifice of Christ was a sacrificial offering

that was paid to satisfy God's justice, turn away his wrath, make atonement for the sins of the world, secure forgiveness, and open up, for the purified elect, the way into God's holy presence. There in the heavenly sanctuary, in a state of pure righteousness, the elect gather in Christ to give God his due.

The atonement's purpose is to ensure that there is a reconciled and forgiven people acceptable to enter into worship (Heb. 10:19-25). Vincent Taylor has argued well that the sacrifice of Christ is the means by which a person may 'approach God and find reconciliation with Him'.¹⁹ Taylor further contends that Christ can be said to be our representative in his sacrifice 'because in His self-offering He performs a work necessary to our approach to God'.²⁰ Christ having made oblation for our sins, humanity may now repent of sin, believe in Christ, and in Christ, our faithful high priest, enter into the heavenly places in praise and worship of our creator and Lord. Taylor declares that the atonement has accomplished for humanity the means for one to have sins atoned for and on that basis, to be qualified to approach God in worship and prayer.²¹

Consequently, the theology of atonement expressed in this passage leads to a theology of worship that encompasses the whole being. The burden of our day is that worship often becomes the church's primary tool of

15 Markus Barth, *Ephesians*, p. 83.

16 Shank, *Elect in the Son*, p. 98.

17 Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 347.

18 Walter Conner, *Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: Broadman, 1937), p. 174.

19 Vincent Taylor, *Jesus and His Sacrifice* (London: Macmillan, 1948), p. 304.

20 Vincent Taylor, *Jesus and His Sacrifice*, p. 306.

21 Vincent Taylor, *Jesus and His Sacrifice*, pp. 312-324.

appeasing the cultural sensitivities of our age. However, worship is not about appeasing the demands of our culture, less so wanting to be liked by it. This does not mean that we neglect our culture or ignore the church's need to engage missiologically with its environment. But we must do so fully aware that worship is not anyone's right. It is only by God's grace and in his love that through the costly shedding of Christ's blood a people may enter into the presence of God. It is only through our costly repentance and commitment of faith that this privilege is bestowed.

Conclusion

Theology in Worship

This passage in Ephesians is a theological statement composed in the context of a worshipping community. There is an outline of Christian truth that emerges out of the narrative of the Ephesian fellowship in worship. It is a proclamation in response to the work of God that has led to an outpouring of thanksgiving and praise. Here one finds theology being done in the con-

text of praise, a situation that gives meaning to the theology it seeks to express. One has access into the hearts and minds of Christians and the nature of their existence in Jesus Christ. It is part of the Christian story that must be told, heard and entered into. Consequently there is a challenge to consider theology in the context of lives touched by God and lead into praise.

A Theological Statement

The theology of this passage is a statement of the true nature of Christian worship, the message of Christian salvation, and the church's mission in the world. Christians are called to worship because they have been elected in the elect, Jesus Christ. There is worship because the call to election is extended to all. However, it is only those who respond to God's grace that enter into this new reconciled existence. Consequently, their songs of praise must be heard to the ends of the earth and through time. It is only through Christ and his atoning sacrifice for sins that a people gather in praise. God's motivation is his love and his means is the shed blood of his Son. The result is God's people doing theology through the gates of heaven.

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