

## **The Gospel Begins with God**

By Pastor Andy Aikens

*You did not choose me, but I chose you  
and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.*  
- John 15:16

We walked out of the Baptist Student Union meeting in the school chapel together on the night we were introduced, and I was already certain that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. I had spotted this beauty in the school gym weeks earlier. Through the help of a mutual friend, I orchestrated this meeting. I seized the initiative. I pursued this person that had sparked my delight. We made arrangements to have a late snack at a local restaurant, but we never made it there. Instead, we spent quality time talking to each other. We have been talking ever since.

I won't say Hope was reluctant, but she was pretty laid back about the whole dating idea. I was certainly more convinced than she was. Our marriage has probably been characterized by that same dynamic. However, in those days my persistence paid off. I won her heart, and for this I have been glad.

In a very similar way, God seizes the initiative with us. His plan for bringing us into a relationship with himself is called the gospel. As we saw in the first chapter, the gospel belongs to God, flows from God and is all about God. God is central to the gospel. He holds the place of supremacy as the source and content of the gospel. In the gospel God pursues a people. This is what makes salvation a gift of grace. Man did not have to go looking for God. God came looking for man. Genesis 3:6-9 records the event,

"When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. <sup>7</sup> Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

<sup>8</sup> Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. <sup>9</sup> But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"

The fact that God came looking for man should never lead us to make much of man, but rather it should always lead us to make much of God. For, God does not pursue us because we are so special or because he cannot live without us. God pursues us because he is so gracious, good, and righteous.

God's unconditional love for us causes my analogy concerning my pursuit of my wife to break down. There is a fundamental difference between my pursuit of Hope and God's pursuit of us. I pursued my wife because she was so beautiful, inside and out. God pursues us because he is so beautiful.

Understanding this dynamic provides what I have called a God-centered view of the gospel. We need this God-centered view of the gospel because scripture

teaches it. But we also need a God-centered view of the gospel because it honors God and helps people.

God's initiative in the gospel flows out of the larger truth of God's sovereignty. The sovereignty of God is one of the core tenets of Christianity, and it can be defined as God's right to rule over his creation as he pleases. This truth is rooted in the reality of who God is. God is the creator of all things, the sustainer of all things, and the redeemer of sinful men and women.

As creator, sustainer, and redeemer God seizes the initiative in everything. But for our focus we want to see how he exercises his sovereignty in the pursuit of his plan of redemption. This plan involves two actions of God that demonstrate his initiative like no other. The first is God's sovereign display of grace through predestination and election. God's choice to save sinners is specific and purposeful. He knows exactly what he is doing. The second action is his sovereign display of grace through granting faith and repentance to those he has chosen. Scripture repeatedly speaks of faith and repentance as gifts from God. God chooses who will be saved and grants them all that they need to be saved so that no one will ever have grounds to boast that they did anything to earn God's favor. These two foundational truths put God at the very center of the gospel as its source and its content.

*It Begins with God: A Look at Predestination and Election*

When it comes to God taking the initiative in salvation through predestination and election, I find it interesting that no one ever objects to the common idea of Israel being God's chosen people. I guess no one considers that it is only logical that if Israel is chosen then others are rejected. Likewise, I commonly hear people comforting the grieving by saying, "this strife is not an accident. Things do not happen by chance. Certainly God has a purpose for your suffering." To say that God has a purpose necessarily implies that he is behind what has happened. He has ordained it for his purposes.

Learning to understand the gospel, as God's gospel, is very important to grasping the truth that salvation depends on God. This constitutes a marked shift from thinking that salvation depends on man. God takes the initiative in saving sinners. That is why God is supreme in the gospel. There is no one like him and no one that he answers to. Therefore, I think it is wonderfully refreshing to see that he exercises that supremacy by taking the initiative in the gospel.

Every Christian denomination believes in election and predestination. Christians believe in election and predestination because it is in the Bible (Acts 13:48; Romans 8:28-29; 9:11-13; 11:7; Ephesians 1:4-12; 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; Revelation 17:8). To deny election and predestination is to step outside the bounds of the Christian faith. However, all Christian denominations do not agree on what election and predestination mean.

The most popular objection to predestination says that such a view removes all responsibility from people. The argument goes like this, "If God has already chosen who will be saved and who will be lost, then nothing we do

matters.” Answering this objection exhaustively is not my purpose in this chapter. Let it suffice to say that no Biblical definition of predestination will ever remove our responsibility before God. Since predestination is a scriptural term, I am willing to begin with an agreement that election and predestination are about God’s initiative in salvation. For this very reason, Arminian theologians came up with a category of grace called prevenient grace. Recognizing the deficiencies of their own position they were forced to create a doctrine that gave emphasis to God’s initiative in salvation. Therefore, if the words election and predestination are to mean anything at all, they must mean that salvation begins with no one else but God. It is an indisputable Scriptural fact that God takes the first step in saving a people to himself.

If this definition is not satisfying to you then ponder your own definition of predestination or even God’s foreknowledge. Unless you redefine these terms in such a way that is inconsistent with their common usage no one can avoid the conclusion that predestination means we must give God all the credit for our salvation. In light of this I would like to offer some advice on what to do with Biblical ideas that are hard to understand.

*Some guidance on how to proceed*

Doctrinal teachings based on the Bible work much like a fence in the backyard. My wife and I put up a fence because we wanted our children to be

able to play safely within the boundaries of that fence. Doctrine works the same way. Once we know where the scriptural boundaries are, we can play safely.

The day they came to put up our fence my wife and I breathed a sigh of relief. Ever since I was nineteen, I wanted my own fishpond. In 1999 I got it. In 1999 I also became a father. I never realized the two events would be in conflict. Hope and I would keep the dead bolts locked all day in a foolproof attempt to insure that our son never got in that pond. Sometimes it felt like we were prisoners in our own home. As Caleb grew our fears grew. So I called the fence company. I did not want to fill in my pond.

When it comes to hard truths, people live with fear and anxiety over not understanding or not being able to control. When people encounter tough questions from scripture, they usually respond in one of two ways. They either respond in frustration, lamenting that they do not understand anything, or they respond by pridefully boasting that they have it all figured out. Neither of these extremes is helpful. Instead, when facing imponderables like the Trinity, or the two natures of Christ, or in this case the sovereignty of God and responsibility of man, we should look for the boundaries. Those boundaries for the subject at hand exist in the affirmation of both God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. Even though these two truths seem to contradict one another, they are both affirmed in the Bible. It is clear that we are standing face to face with a great mystery.

God's sovereignty has to do with two things. The first is God's rights, and the second is God's power. As creator, God has the right to do with his creation

as he pleases. As creator and sustainer of all things, he has the power to direct the affairs of creation. These truths about God often make people cringe. They make people cringe because of what it implies about human beings. What it implies to some people is this: if God is absolutely in control of all things then man cannot be held responsible for his actions because he is only a puppet. Paul anticipates this argument in Romans 9:19, "One of you will say to me: 'Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?'" He answers such an objection by pointing to God's rights as the creator, "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?' Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?" The bottom line is that people are held responsible for their choices. This is only possible if those choices truly belong to the individual. Therefore, we are standing in the presence of a great mystery. Peace about this matter comes from knowing the boundaries, and they are: God is sovereign and man is responsible.

Many people do not understand how both of these realities are true. They seem to contradict each other. The important thing to remember is that this is an appearance. Even though our finite minds have trouble making sense of how God can be in control without making man into a puppet, God has no difficulty whatsoever.

I have learned to summarize this truth this way: we make choices every day, but behind those choices God superintends all things for his own glory. How God superintends these choices is a mystery that theologians call

providence.<sup>1</sup> The best example of this mystery is found in Acts 2:22-23, “Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. *This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.*”

In this retelling of the cross event Peter puts two ideas together. Those two ideas are: God ordained the death of Christ, and wicked men perpetrated the death of Christ. God was superintending the real choices these men made in order to bring about his own holy purposes. In Ephesians 1:11-12 Paul explains the mystery this way, “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.*” The sovereignty of God in the gospel is demonstrated by the initiative he seizes in election and predestination.

### *Scripture Texts Concerning Predestination and Election*

Ephesians 1:4-5 is foundational. “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.” Two phrases in this text deserve attention as regards our topic. He chose us to be his children *before the creation of the world*. Before we

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<sup>1</sup> For a more in depth discussion of providence please see Wayne Grudem’s [Systematic Theology](#). Pages

were created and before we had the opportunity to do good or evil (Romans 9:11), the Lord made his plan to redeem a people to himself. God seized the initiative and this initiative is *in accordance with his pleasure and will*. The basis of God's choice is rooted in God's heart and God's mind. He has his reasons and whatever they are, they please him. Knowing that God is holy and perfect gives us the comfort of knowing that if God's reasons please him, then those reasons are also perfectly holy.

In addition to this we also see God's initiative expressed in John 15:16. "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last." Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, evangelical Christianity in America has been plagued by an overemphasis on choice in the matter of conversion. Itinerant evangelism reduced the gospel call to a contractual choice between man and God with man having the decisive word in the matter. Correcting this error begins by grasping the truth that God seizes the initiative in salvation. We need to stop making much of man and start making much of God. According to John 15:16 Jesus disciples do not choose him, but he chooses them. The initiative belongs with God.

Another text that shows God's initiative in salvation is Romans 8:28-29. It says, "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." Again there are two phrases that deserve attention in regard to my purposes in this section. *In all things God works*, is a

powerful antidote to man-centered thinking about the gospel. It is God that works in all things. This includes salvation. And, that includes predestination, for it is in the text. Some teachers have used Romans 8:28-29 to say that predestination is based on God's foreknowledge. These teachers like to say that God looked ahead into the future and foresaw who would choose him and then based his choice on their choice. 1 Peter 1:1-2 has been used to corroborate this position. Peter begins his letter, "To God's elect...who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father." If a person came with the presupposition that man's free will determined whom God chose, these texts could mean that. But I have found that upon deeper investigation Paul and Peter have something else in view.

First, those who insist that predestination is based on God's foreknowledge of man's future faith are trying to preserve the absolute freedom of the human will. However, they do not succeed in preserving this kind of freedom. Once you commit yourself to the idea that God's foreknowledge is perfect, then, anything he knows about the future is fixed. Isaiah 46:9-10 explains it like this, "Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please." In order for God's foreknowledge to be as extensive as this passage says that it is, then the things he knows must be determined. The only way to preserve an absolute freedom in man is to deny that God has a perfect foreknowledge of the future, which would be to deny

Isaiah 46:9-10. In order for man to be free without constraints God must cease to be omniscient.

Secondly, Paul and Peter do not intend to say that God looks down the corridors of time in order to foresee human faith so that he can then elect those who choose him. Instead, Paul and Peter are shattering the last vestiges of man-centered thinking about the gospel. Romans 8:29 says that God foreknew persons. The text says, “whom he foreknew,” which indicates persons and not decisions of persons. He certainly knows our decisions, but the text is emphasizing his foreknowledge of people. Wayne Grudem correctly points out that verse 29 would be better understood as talking about people that God foreknew in a saving way.<sup>2</sup>

God’s foreknowledge is his ability to know the future and this ability is based on his initiative in predestination. God knows all things because he has ordained them to be so. Objectors consistently ask, “Doesn’t that make God the author of evil?” Or other objectors may ask, “Doesn’t this make humans out to be robots or puppets?” The answer is located in the fence analogy. We must confess that scripture affirms two truths. God is sovereign in the manner I have described, and man is still responsible before God. God is not the author of evil, but he has ordained it. God does not make decisions for us, but he does superintend all human activities. In order for God to be God he must always remain sovereign over his creation. There is nothing in the universe that is outside of his control.

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<sup>2</sup> Wayne Grudem. Systematic Theology. P. 676-678

If we are to hold together the two truths that God is sovereign and man is responsible, then we cannot venture outside that fence. As soon as we venture outside the fence we are no longer safe. So I ask, is it more dangerous to question man's freedom, which is different than his responsibility, or to question God's character, nature, power and ability? Many folks agree that God is sovereign but when they are pressed about predestination they want to metaphorically tie the hands of God. There is a common belief that God's sovereignty ends where my free will begins. But if sovereignty is to mean anything at all this cannot be possible. God cannot be partially sovereign. It just does not wash. Romans 8:29 and 1 Peter 1:2 will not allow for this. God seizes the initiative in the gospel.

### *The gift of Faith and Repentance in Scripture*

The initiative of God in the gospel is further demonstrated by the fact that faith and repentance are not merely the result of man's will but are also and first a gift from God. Early on in my life I thought that faith and repentance were merely an exercise of my own will. I shared the gospel with people in such a way that revealed this. I would work very hard to marshal forth the very best arguments in an attempt to intellectually persuade the person I was witnessing to. If they did not "make a decision for Christ" I felt that I had failed. I would rework those conversations in my mind to discover what I had said wrong so that

I would not make that mistake again. I left no room in my thinking for the necessity of the work of God upon the heart of the one to whom I was speaking.

Then I remember discovering the texts that follow. When I learned that faith and repentance were gifts from God my whole perspective on the gospel and God changed. I realized that a person's conversion did not hinge on another person's ability or inability to share the gospel message. Instead, I discovered that, when the gospel is preached, God must grant faith and repentance if anyone is to believe and be saved. Faith and repentance are acts of man's will, but they are not merely acts of man's will. God empowers true belief and repentance.

Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "for it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast." It is pretty clear in the English that faith is a gift from God, but what about in the Greek. In English, pronouns and nouns relate to each other by their proximity. Before you can use a pronoun you must establish the noun that the pronoun will refer to. This noun is called the antecedent.

The pronoun in question is *this* in verse 8, "and *this* is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God." The question we must answer is, does *this* refer to faith or does it refer to grace? In English grammar a pronoun's antecedent is usually the noun closest to it. When there is an exception, the context will determine which noun is being referred to. In Greek there is usually a less ambiguous system. Greek nouns and pronouns are classified by gender: masculine, feminine and

neuter. When the pronoun matches the noun in gender it is a pretty good clue that you have the antecedent and its pronoun.

The problem for the text in question is that *faith* is feminine and *this* is neuter. Normally this would exclude the one from referring to the other. But, in this passage there is no neuter noun to serve as the antecedent for the pronoun *this*. In Ephesians 2:8-9 all of the nouns are feminine. So why did Paul choose to write this way? Is it a case of bad grammar? I do not think so. Paul did not want to leave any room for doubt that all of salvation comes from God. The pronoun *this* is in the neuter so that it will be allowed to refer to grace and faith. Grace is a gift. Faith is a gift, and thereby all of salvation is a gift. No one can boast before God that he or she believed merely by his or her own will. God granted it, and therefore God gets the glory.

A second verse that teaches this same truth is Romans 12:3, “for by the grace given me, I say to everyone of you: do not think more highly of yourself than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.” Again Paul links the gift of grace and the gift of faith in one sentence. Grace must be given for it to be grace. As soon as God’s favor is earned it is no longer grace. This principle of grace undergirds the reality that faith is a gift. If faith is not a gift from God then it becomes a work that man does. Yet, Scripture is faithful to present faith as a gift, and it becomes clear that all of salvation is by grace. Faith is the means by which we apprehend Christ. If salvation is by grace, then faith must be a gift.

Why do so many Christians appear to be unaware that their faith is not completely from themselves? One reason comes from our experience. When we put our faith in Christ, it truly feels like we are doing it all. In fact, we are. Biblical faith must genuinely belong to the person, and that same person must genuinely exercise that same faith if it is to have any saving qualities. However, the reason this is so difficult to grasp is that Scripture says this same faith is also a gift from God. God spiritually gives saving faith to us. Faith always has these two sides. One side says that faith is an act of man's will. The other side of the picture says that faith is a gift from God. Faith is an act of my will, and heart and mind, and faith is a gift from God. God enables his children to believe, and the faith that he grants results in a changed life. God never drags a person kicking and screaming into heaven. Instead, he makes them willing. When our hearts are made new we see God afresh and treasure him with all that we are.

In addition to faith being a gift, repentance is also a gift. If there is anything that we are required to do by God, it is repent. Scripture commands repentance in Acts 17:30, "in the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent." Repentance also seems like a mere act of the will. Repentance is a turning away from sin and a turning towards God. This is something the person must do. However, it is still a gift. No one will ever repent if God does not grant it, and granting repentance is exactly the way scripture describes it.

2 Timothy 2:25 says, "those who oppose (the Lord's servant) he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a

knowledge of the truth.” These scriptures help us see man’s inability to do anything that would merit salvation. We are totally dependent on God. Because we are spiritually bankrupt we must have a gospel where God is at the center giving us what we need to please him. In Acts we see the astonishment of Peter in regard to the salvation of Gentiles. In that moment he describes their coming to Christ as God having granted them repentance. Acts 11:18 tell us, “when they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “so then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.” This is an admission that no one can repent without God’s intervention. From the human perspective they did not see God do anything to these men and women. Regardless, the very fact that they repented was understood to be the work of God. The Gentiles could not have repented without God. Therefore God granted repentance. Repentance and faith are human acts, but they are not merely human acts. They are first and foremost gifts from God.

I have often wondered how this can be. How does God cause a sinner to come to him willingly? What turns a man’s heart toward God? Acts 16:14 gives us a clue in the life of Lydia. “One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.” When Luke says that the Lord opened her heart, I automatically think of Ezekiel 36. He took out her heart of stone and put in a heart of flesh. When she heard the message she responded in faith and repentance. It was her faith and her repentance, but God granted it to her. God opened her heart. Without the opening of her heart she

would have just been another listener, but by the opening of her heart she became a child of God.

### *A Life Example*

The coaches meeting started with nervous laughter. Tryouts were over. Strategies for selecting a good team had been devised. Basketball season was about to begin. A small box containing numbered slips of paper was passed around the table. These slips were picked out of the box one by one to determine who would pick first. It was draft night, and each coach had his list of the boys he hoped to be able to pick. My first two rounds went just as I planned. When other coaches took the boys that I wanted, I had a contingency plan. My options were before me, and I seized the initiative. The kids themselves really had no say in who would be on any team. Each coach put together the best team he could. Before the season ended my team would become the best team in the league, but it all began on draft night when the choices were made.

I have always been amazed at this process. From playground pick up games and recreational leagues to highly competitive school sports, the process of an appointed authority choosing players to participate on a team is never effectively argued against. This time-honored process continues unaltered.

People are subjected to selection processes their whole lives. We should learn from this analogy that if there is any being in the universe that has the prerogative of choice it should be God. And yet, we would deny the Supreme Being his right to make choices on the grounds of a faulty definition of fairness.

Instead of viewing God as the supreme coach who is actively involved in his universe, we have relegated him to the sidelines as a referee. Our definition of fairness says that everyone must be treated the same. However, fairness is really about being treated like we deserve.<sup>3</sup> For some reason, many people find it to be an imposition on themselves that their creator has a plan for his creation. This should not be. And, if we are wise we should never ask God for fairness. Instead, we should always ask him to be merciful.

A significant difference between coaches choosing players or bosses choosing employees and God choosing sinners to be saved is that of condition. Coaches and bosses make conditional choices. That is, they look at the qualifications of those they have to choose from and then make their decision based on those qualifications. Their choice is conditional.

However, God's choice is unconditional. That is, the basis for his choice is not rooted in anything that regards the person being chosen. If it is conditioned on anything, God's choice is conditioned by his mercy and his wisdom. Two texts support this. Romans 9:11 says, "Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose in election might stand." Romans 9:16 is the most staggering support, "It does not therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God mercy." The consistent witness of Scripture is that God seizes the initiative in salvation through predestination and election, and that this election is rooted in God's mercy.

Everything begins somewhere. The gospel begins with God. Like a lover pursuing his beloved, God pursues a relationship with men and women through

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<sup>3</sup> Lorraine Boettner. The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination

the gospel. He chose us, and he granted us faith and repentance so we could know him. God is the source of the gospel. It flows from his heart. Augustine was certainly correct when he said, "God gives all that he commands." This does not make us puppets. We are still responsible for our choices. We must set up these two propositions (God is sovereign, and man is responsible) like a fence around our yard. Outside that fence we will find trouble, but inside that fence the children of God can play and enjoy the pleasure of God our Father.

This truth causes me to treasure God above everything in the universe. I am so thankful that God pursued me. Left to myself I would never have pursued him (Romans 3:10). But, he seized the initiative and pursued me. Then, he provided me with all that I needed to come to him. He is gracious, kind, loving, holy, and just. He is powerful, wise and good. If these things are not true then there is no hope for hurting people. Only a God-centered gospel honors God and helps people. No person ever has the ability to save or help himself or herself. Praise God! For God has seized the initiative and done what we could not. He is central and supreme in the gospel as its source, its content, and its goal. He is sovereign over the entire universe.