

## A Matter of Choice

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John 15:12-17; Romans 8:28-34

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Perhaps the hottest spot on planet earth today is the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Conflicting claims by radical groups within Judaism, Islam, and Christianity have led to predictions that this small piece of real estate will become the catalyst for World War III. The Temple Mount was the location of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem reconstructed twice in biblical history, finally by Herod the Great at the time of Christ. The Temple was finally destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE.

For Sunni Muslims, this is the third holiest site in Islam, believed to be the place where Muhammad ascended to heaven. It is also the location for the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the Dome of the Rock, completed in 692 CE, making it one of the oldest Islamic structures in the world. Although the State of Israel moved into Jerusalem in the 1967 war, the Mosque was left under Islamic control, much to the chagrin of Jewish extremists, who persistently claim biblical rights of possession. Today, Jews are generally excluded from entering the Mosque; and many Jews will not walk through the Temple area surrounding the Mosque for fear of treading on the Holy of Holies where God's presence is believed to continue to reside.

A section of the outer western wall of the Temple is still standing. With the rise of Zionism in the early twentieth century, it became known as the "Wailing Wall," a place where Jewish pilgrims "wailed" in prayers of lamentation for the lost Temple. Muslims are threatened by the Jewish prayers, viewing the practice as more of a claim for Jewish nationalism than for the worship of God. For half of a century, the Wall has thus been the location of numerous incidents of violence between the two religions.

Add to this volatile picture Christian extremists, who believe that the return to Jewish dominance and the restoration of the Jewish Temple must precede the coming of Christ. Dispensationalism represented in the *Left Behind* novels of the last decade have popularized the notion that Jewish dominance in the Holy Land is a key to the return of Christ. John Hagee, pastor of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas, has been a key advocate for Jewish Zionism, centering his TV ministry on promoting Jewish dominance. Although Hagee has been controversial for his derogatory comments about both Catholics and Jews, the pastor has received numerous awards including an honorary doctorate from Israeli sources for his support of Israel. Of course, any casual observer realizes that his support for Israel is not an end, but a means to the Christian possession of the land.

**Do we have a choice?** The common denominator among the three religious contestants for the Temple Mount is the claim of divine favor. Each group believes that God has chosen them for property rights and privilege. On the down side, each group follows the common logic that if they are chosen by God, then all others are excluded. Election, then, becomes a belief in the prejudicial, perhaps even capricious, acts of God, preferring one people over all others. At the extreme, Reformed Calvinist theology taught a limited atonement, that Christ came to save only God's chosen ones. Since sin is universal, all except the elect are damned before the judgment of God. Thus, the concept of election becomes a theological justification for ethnic exclusion and bigotry.

John Calvin, like his predecessor Augustine, taught that God is in absolute control of the world. Later Calvinists concluded that nothing happens outside the direct involvement and intentional will of God, that we live under an order of divine predestination. Often without any direct knowledge of Calvinism, I still hear folks struggling to find a rational explanation for personal and global events with certainty that everything happens by divine initiative. So, we hear pious words of surrender to the will of God in the struggle with cancer; the death of a spouse or a child; or, at the very worst, the Nazi Jewish *Shoah*, the concentration camps and gas chambers. An elaborate exercise of theological gymnastics is required to find the worst evils of human history somehow within the will and elective purpose of a loving God. Actually, the Jews have struggled with this question as much or more than Christians, and some have charged God with breaking Covenant with the Chosen People.

I was a ministerial student at Baylor taking my first theology class. David Mueller had just returned from a year of study with Karl Barth whose Reformed theology was anchored in the concept of divine election. Dr. Mueller challenged me in class to offer my view of Barth's doctrine of Election. Because nothing about this concept was familiar ground for my twenty-year-old Baptist background, I simply

rejected Barth on the grounds that Election is unbiblical. Mueller groaned and suggested that I revisit the Bible. My mentor was right about a large segment of the Bible, but one must note that early Christians were pressed to rationalize God's exclusive election of the Jews in the face of including Gentiles in the church.

Paul, self-acclaimed as the Apostle to the Gentiles, is perhaps the most adamant about the inclusion of Gentiles in the saving work of Christ. But Paul the Pharisee also had to reconcile his new-found faith with his roots in the identity of the Jews as the chosen people of God. In Romans he makes his most eloquent stand for the sovereign judgment of God in the world: "those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." Paul argued for the continued place of Israel in the purpose of God, but he also adjusted his definition of Israel to go beyond parentage, nationality, and birth. For Paul, the true Israelites are the remnant, the faithful.

In the John's final discourse of Jesus with his disciples, he uses the language of election: "You did not choose me but I chose you." But you need to keep on reading: "I appointed you to go and bear fruit. . . . I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another." The call to bear fruit and to love one another is not the overpowering authority of God forcing disciples to do as they are called. Rather, Jesus is suggesting an appropriate response to being "chosen."

In my last year of high school and first summer after my freshman year at Baylor, I was the head lifeguard and pool manager of the hometown swimming pool. I recall a four-year-old boy who with his adoptive parents was a regular visitor to the pool. One day the father told me about his adoption. After years of waiting and wanting a child, they had an opportunity to adopt this boy born of an unwed teenage mother in another city. He said that from day one, the infant took to water like a duck. He loved the bath, and in infancy his parents brought him to the public pool to play in the water. They readily paid for private swimming lessons from the lifeguards, and at age four the child could swim like a fish. I recall one day his father's chuckle that the boy had learned to rationalize his adoption with his friends. He would say, "Your parents did not have a choice when you were born. They had to take you. But my parents picked me."

I have often thought about this story in light of the biblical statements about God's chosen people. Having a sense of being chosen is not evil; it is an expression of love. It should not imply that natural children are not chosen or unloved, and it should offer no justification for exclusion or a sense of superiority, although the latter was suggested by the adoptive parents. I suspect that something like this was at work in Jewish claims of chosenness in the Old Testament, and it seems that Paul is suggesting another dimension in the "chosen" response of people to the love of God.

Election goes two ways. Wives and husbands get married out of an exclusive choice of one another as companions for life. In our idealized view of marriage, we may see this as an indelible sacrament that can never be broken. However, on the real level, we have to keep on choosing every day and every year.

***We have a choice of biblical metaphors.*** Not only does the biblical picture of humanity envision a people who make decisions and choices about their own destiny, a free will, the Bible suggests a variety of scenarios for the ways of God in the world. Jeremy Cott wrote an interesting article "The Biblical Problem of Election" (*Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Spring, 1984, p 199ff) in which the author claimed that the biblical idea came out of scarcity. The sense that there is not enough land, food, or love to go around caused people to make claims of being special or select to justify taking from others or waging a holy war. He acknowledged the enormous presence of election throughout the Bible and its powerful influence on early Americans, Pilgrims under the influence of Calvinism. The same kind of destiny that the Jews attributed to God in the Old Testament became the rationale for taking the land away from Native Americans or holding the African slaves as property. Cott was convinced that far more evil than good had come from this doctrine, and he observed the reluctance to face the problems. For example, OT scholar G. Ernest Wright justified the conquest of Canaan on the basis that Canaanite civilization was in decline anyway, that the Jewish conquest was a rescue operation. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel called the Jewish slaughter of Canaanites not a conquest but a liberation, since it was ordained by God from creation that the land of Israel should belong to the Jews.

Cott notes that the Bible offers choice in theology. The Jews also developed a strong theology of the stranger based on their history that Jews were once strangers in the land of Egypt. At harvest time, Jews were called by God to remember the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow among them (Deut. 16:11); and the Golden Rule, "love your neighbor as yourself," became the law of the land.

Cott also noted a "transcendent nationalism" in the Jewish scriptures that exceeds the vision of Jewish domination of the world. Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3 looked beyond the borders of Israel to a day when "He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

The language of election resides in our hymns and creeds and continually threatens to corrupt our view of God's world. Let us agree, that God's love is universal, that God's salvation reaches out to every child made in the divine image, that all justifications for destroying one another are baseless in the sight of a loving God.