

Revisiting John 3:16

Sometimes you just have to go ahead and say it. Skirting the issue can be useful at times, as well as the making of gentle hints, but there comes a time when it just has to be said - God has a chosen people.

And no, they are not people who have chosen God (although they always do), but they are the people whom God has chosen, as Jesus said, "You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you" (John 15:16).

So God chooses His people. Now, if we ignore or even deny the truth of God's sovereign choices in scripture - as many folks do - that's bad enough, but there is more to the theological problems of our day than that. Reading man's choices into scripture where they do not belong is just as bad or worse. And that is what is often done with that most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16, which reads thusly,

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Notice that there is no exercise of human choice stated here. A state of condition yes, but not an exercise of choice. The statement is only that believers have eternal life. Actually, you may have never thought about this, but we human beings do not just choose to believe the things that we believe. Rather we do believe them because of convincing evidence that confronts us. For example, one can't believe that he has a billion dollars in the bank without some evidence to that effect. Our minds just don't work that way.

Why does anyone at all believe?

In the Bible, Paul's scathing description of mankind's unregenerate state is quite clear to us. He said this in Romans:

Romans 3:11 - There is none that understands, there is none that seek after God.

If we understand that truth, then we have to assume that no human being would ever believe on the Lord Jesus Christ of his own volition. He needs help, and Christians generally agree on that. Where we often disagree is what that help might be and what it is that causes the human volition to change. We do know that many people do believe the gospel, so God obviously has done something first to change the volition factor and enable a human to believe a gospel he otherwise would not.

So that fact changes the question a bit. Instead of asking how anyone of himself could believe on Jesus Christ, we ask instead why do some people believe when they hear the gospel while others do not? There are scriptures that explain this for us, and one of them is Acts.

Acts 13:48 - And when the Gentiles heard this they were glad, and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.

Notice the words "as many." This indicates a specific number of people. That is God's election, which is very specific. This passage also shows us that people who believe the gospel are preordained to believe

it. That's God predestination at work. So this change of volition in the heart of man is a work of God Himself. And it has to be effective and irresistible; otherwise the phrase "as many" would not work. Redemption in Christ would have to be left to chance and the blind "law of averages."

In addition, those folks who gladly believed Paul's preaching on that occasion (although there were some there who did not believe) did so because they had evidence that the gospel is true. What kind of evidence was that? Well first of all, they were ordained by God to eternal life, but there was more to it than that. They were also already born again. And how do we know that? Because of something Jesus said to the believing Pharisee, Nicodemus.

John 3:3 - Verily, verily I say unto you (listen up!), except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

So then, unless one is born again he cannot even see, much less believe in, the kingdom of God.

Those people who believed Paul's preaching on that occasion (Acts 13:48) saw something that the others did not see. They spiritually saw the King, and they saw the kingdom - and when they saw this they believed it. They already had their hearts opened by spiritual rebirth, and it was by God's choice and direct action. That is why they believed.

Now, if these folks had already been born again before they believed Paul's preaching, when had it happened? Well who knows when it happened? Jesus told Nicodemus (John 3) that new birth is like the wind blowing where it chooses. One can't know where it originates or ends. The popular idea that one is born again "the moment he believes" has no scriptural basis. That's like trying to catch the wind.

In Revelation the phrase frequently appears, "Whosoever has ears to hear let him hear." This has to do with spiritual hearing, of course, something that the world in general does not have and which comes with being born again. Spiritual eyes and ears belong to spiritual people. And that is a simple fact to understand.

So Christ's statement in John 3:16 tells us simply that believers have eternal life. That is not an offer of anything, it is a statement. Yes, there are definite offers made in the Bible:

Revelation 22:17 - Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.

But that is an offer of the Holy Spirit. Look for the definition of the water of life in John 7:37-39 and you will see. God never offers eternal life. He either gives it freely or He doesn't. God's sovereignty extends to redemption and regeneration as well as to creation and other matters of great spiritual importance.

Jesus went on to say...

In the gospel of John our Lord stated far more on this subject than just verse 3:16. In Chapter 17 he prayed to his Father:

John 17: 2-3 - Father, the hour is come, glorify your Son that your Son may also glorify You. As You have given Him power over all flesh that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him.

Now this is a significant statement that Christ spoke intimately to His Father. When He spoke those words He was about to make the supreme sacrifice of His very life for the sins of some people. But it was not going to be a potential sacrifice for just anybody who by pure chance might want to partake of it - no, it was a sacrifice that would be applied to all that the Father had chosen to receive it. These are the elect of God, chosen before the world began for that purpose and to that end.

Nor did He say it just once. Jesus repeated the phrase, "...as many as You have given Me" again and again, in verses 9, 11 and 24 in chapter 3 of John. That's reinforcement. And He waxed even plainer in chapter 6:

John 6:37 - All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and he that comes to Me I will in no wise cast out.

How can that be denied? The Father chose certain people for Jesus Christ to redeem from sin, and He has done it. All of them will come to Him.

And as we have already seen, God determined all this before He made the world.

Ephesians 1:4 - According as He has chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love.

The "Him" here is Jesus Christ, but the One who chose us is God the Father. We need to know that.

But not only did God make His choice of His people before He made the world, He also wrote their names in His Book of Life at the same time. This is shown in Revelation 17:8. God does not leave anything to chance. In fact, with God there is no such thing as chance. The Bible says that even the casting of a lot (shall we say dice?) is of God.

So we have the word "elect" that appears about thirteen times in the New Testament, such as in Matthew 23.

Matthew 23:31 - And He shall send His angels with the great sound of a trumpet, and shall gather together His elect from the four winds...

- Loren Wilson (This article may be copied freely.)