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EPHESIANS 1:4 DOES NOT TEACH UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION

I. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to address whether Ephesians 1:4 is support for TULIP unconditional election. The verse reads: “According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love.” Before addressing a proper interpretation of this verse, it is important to be precise about what Calvinists mean by the phrase unconditional election. Wayne Grudem provides a concise statement of the traditional Calvinist view of election: “Election is an act of God before creation in which he chooses some people to be saved, not on account of any foreseen merit in them, but only because of his sovereign good pleasure.”¹ Along the same lines, a recent book written to explain and defend Calvinism states: “The doctrine of election declares that God, before the foundation of the world, chose certain individuals from among the fallen members of Adam’s race to be the objections of His undeserved favor. These, and these only, He purposed to save.”² Notably, many Calvinists also include angels within their doctrine of election: “By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His own glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death.”³ The verse under consideration is particularly

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 685, Inter-Varsity Press (1994).

² David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, and S. Lance Quinn, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, p. 17, P&R Publishing Company (2d ed. 2004).

³ R.L. Dabney, *Syllabus And Notes Of The Course Of Systematic And Polemic Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust, p. 224 (2002).

important to Calvinists as something of a silver bullet for unconditional election because it mentions God choosing people before the foundation of the world. My position is that the traditional Calvinists' use of this text is incorrect because it does not give meaning to the phrase "in him" and because it is logically irreconcilable with other passages, including other passages in Ephesians. The better view is that Ephesians 1:4 is one of the dozens of Pauline verses that confirm various positional blessings and truths given to believers when they place faith in Christ.

II. Key Passages and Concepts

Critical to a proper interpretation of Ephesians 1:4 is understanding the Pauline usage of the phrase "in him" and its equivalents. Its relevance to a proper interpretation of Ephesians 1:4 cannot be reasonably denied since Paul uses the phrase or its equivalent some 20 times in the first two chapters of Ephesians, beginning with Paul's salutation to the members of the church at Ephesus as "the faithful in Christ Jesus." (Ephesians 1:1). Jesus remarked in reference to the redemptive work of God: "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work." (John 5:17). For Paul, "in Christ" is the sphere in which God is working to reconcile the world to Himself: "To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them..." (2 Corinthians 5:19). The Father's goal is "that in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him." (Ephesians 1:10). This reconciliation includes, of course, people.

Paul confirmed that "salvation ... is in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 2:10), for it is in this sphere that we find "grace" (2 Timothy 2:1) and the "love of God" (Romans

8:39). Indeed, those of us who were “baptized into Jesus Christ” were baptized into his death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6:3-5), are “sanctified in Christ Jesus” (1 Corinthians 1:2), are promised “everlasting life” (Romans 6:22), and have ascended in him, God having “raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:6). As Paul writes: “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.” (1 Corinthians 15:22).

For those that have been placed into Jesus Christ, we have “all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.” (Ephesians 1:3). These manifold blessings include the following: “redemption...in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:24), “no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1), God “hath made us accepted in the beloved” (Ephesians 1:6), for we are “the righteousness of God in him” (2 Corinthians 5:21), we are “in Christ... a new creature” (2 Corinthians 5:17), we were “created in Christ Jesus unto good works” (Ephesians 2:10), we have “liberty... in Christ” (Galatians 2:4), we are “all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28), and for good reason we “triumph in Christ” (2 Corinthians 2:14). For it is “in him” that Paul says we “walk,” are “rooted and built up,” and are made “complete.” (Colossians 2:6-10).

In Ephesians 1 and 2, Paul particularly emphasizes the spiritual benefits to those “in Christ.” Ephesians 1:4 begins with the phrase “According as...” and is a continuation of the thought Paul started in 1:3. Paul says there that the Father “blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.” Paul recognizes that Christ is presently before the Father in heaven: “Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly

places.” (Ephesians 1:20). And from Paul’s perspective, we are before the Father and have all spiritual blessings at this moment if we are in Christ: “And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” (Ephesians 2:6). As David Anderson explains, these blessings and truths are positional:

[In reference to 1 Corinthians 1:2] The apostle says they are completely sanctified, even though we know from later in the letter that many of them are far from holy in their walk. Yet, Paul also gives the key to this understanding when he says in v. 2 that their completed sanctification is “in Christ Jesus.” This is a statement of their position (see Eph 1:3f and Rom 6:1-10). They have been baptized into Christ and His crucifixion on the cross. That is their new position after believing in Him. Just that. They are **in Him**. And since they are “in Him,” everywhere He went from the cross forward, they went also. That is why the apostle can say we believers are seated with Him in heavenly places at the right hand of the Father (Col 3:1).⁴

Two critical questions are how do we get “in Christ” and when do we get “in Christ.” Christians could not have been in Christ prior to creation by some decree of God, or even prior to being born, because Paul says other people were “in Christ before me.” (Romans 16:7). Paul even speaks of himself as a spiritual father begetting people in Christ with reference to his evangelizing people. He wrote to the Christians in Corinth: “For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for *in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.*” (1 Corinthians 4:15). Similarly, Paul called Timothy his son (1 Corinthians 4:17, 2 Timothy 2:1) as well as the runaway slave Onesimus: “I beseech the for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds.” (Philemon 10). So what we have is

⁴ David R. Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology*, pp. 90-91, Xulon Press (2010).

that people are not placed in Christ before the foundation of the world, but instead, during their lifetime and “through the gospel.” As we will see below, the positional nature of these truths, as well as the timing and means of being placed in Christ, are critical to a proper understanding of Ephesians 1:4.

III. Interaction With Other Literature

In his book explaining and defending TULIP Calvinism, Duane Spencer writes in reference to Ephesians 1:4: “In fact, according to Paul, that *choice* [of who God would save] was made by God before He ever made so much as one single thing!”⁵

Gordon Clark likewise offers a typical Calvinist view of the verse:

Verse four clearly teaches that before the foundation of the world God chose Paul and certain citizens of Ephesus, and by implication all the saints, for adoption. Before Cain and Abel were born, God had chosen Abel and not Cain. Before their birth God had chosen Jacob and had rejected Esau. It was certain from all eternity that Abel and Jacob would be saved and that Cain and Esau would be lost.⁶

Most Calvinist writers express similar sentiments, but fail to give adequate consideration to Paul’s use of “in him.” Clark provides only cursory attention to the phrase:

The means of salvation were chosen along with the persons. These persons were chosen in Christ. They were not to be saved in some other name. There is no other name by which one can be saved; and thus their relationship to Christ was fixed and predetermined before God created the world....⁷

⁵ Duane Edward Spencer, *TULIP, The Five Points Of Calvinism in the Light of Scripture*, p. 42, Baker Books (2007).

⁶ Gordon H. Clark, *Predestination*, p. 70, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company (1987).

⁷ *Ibid.*

Clark's comments fail to address Paul's prolific use of "in him" and equivalents, especially in Ephesians 1 and 2, or to relate Paul's use of the phrase in verse 4 to his other uses of the phrase. While it is certainly true that there is no other name by which people can be saved, to say that this is the only significance of the phrase "in him" in Ephesians 1:4 is to ignore Paul's well developed usage of this phraseology. The failure to adequately deal with the phrase "in him" in verse 4 is the Achilles heel of most Calvinist writings that rely upon Ephesians 1:4 for unconditional election.

In his commentary on Ephesians 1:4, Peter O'Brien comments very briefly on "in him":

God's choice of his people 'in Christ' is the new element in election. He is the Chosen One par excellence (Luke 9:35; 23:35). The statement, however, does not mean that because Christians are *conscious* of being 'in Christ' they know themselves to be elect (even though this may be true on other grounds). Rather, it is objective, signifying that *in him* the people of God are chosen. If all things were created 'in him' (Col. 1:16), then it is no less true to say that earlier still it was *in him* that our election took place. 'He is [the] foundation, origin, and executor: all that is involved in election and its fruits depends on him'. Election is always and only in Christ.⁸

But these comments neither explain nor defend his Calvinist view of the text. All he is doing is restating that the choosing occurred in Christ without explaining what that means or doing any serious analysis of Paul's similar language elsewhere. Ultimately, his conclusion that this verse teaches election is not derived exegetically.

Harold Hoehner's commentary provides only slightly more analysis:

This prepositional phrase refers back to "in Christ" in verse 2 and means that God chose "us" in connection with Christ. It does not mean

⁸ Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter To The Ephesians*, pp. 99-100, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company (1999).

that God chose us through faith in Christ [] as suggested by Chrysostom because this would destroy God's freedom of choice. If this were the case, believers by their faith would have a legal claim whereby God must choose them. Nor is it as the Barths, Bengel, and possibly even Calvin propose that Christ is the elect and we are in him because the object of the verb "chose" is "us" and not "Christ." Nor is it because God, by means of his foresight or omniscience, knew who would have faith in him, which then became the basis of his election of them. This suggests more than the passage claims and, furthermore, verse 5 states that God's selection was done on the basis of the good pleasure of his will. Rather it could be one of two views. One view is that it could be regarded as a dative of sphere, which connotes the idea that we are chosen in Christ as the head and representative of the spiritual community. The other view is that it could be relational or instrumental in the sense that God chose believers in connection with or through Christ's work of redemption. This latter interpretation is preferable because it expresses that God chose the believer for his glory and that it had to be done in connection with the redemption accomplished in Christ. God cannot bring sinful humans into his presence forever without Christ having paid for sin.⁹

While I tend to agree with much of what Hoehner writes here, especially his dismissal of some spurious views of the text, he basically takes the same view as Clark, already quoted above. The problem once again is that he fails to provide adequate evidence from other Pauline usage of "in him" and its equivalents for his view that here, Paul uses "in him" only to mean "in connection with or through Christ's work of redemption."

When Paul teaches positional truths about believers, they are truths that do not apply to the person unless and until they place faith in Christ and are at that moment placed "in him." Even though Christ was crucified nearly 2,000 years ago, a believer is not identified with that past crucifixion until being placed in Christ when

⁹ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians, An Exegetical Commentary*, pp. 176-77, Baker Academic (2002) (citations omitted).

that person trusts Christ for eternal life. And further, as a positional truth, that past crucifixion is not actually realized or experienced by the person placed in Christ, nor could it be since it is a past historical event that occurred almost 20 centuries ago. Likewise, we did not actually ascend to heaven in the first century, but if we are a believer, then at the moment we first trusted Christ, positionally we ascended and were seated before the Father, holy and blameless. As quoted from David Anderson earlier in this paper about the believers' position: "They are **in Him**. And since they are 'in Him,' everywhere He went from the cross forward, they went also. That is why the apostle can say we believers are seated with Him in heavenly places at the right hand of the Father."

When you cut through it all, what those expressing a Calvinist view of Ephesians 1:4 do is read the text to say "chose us *to be* in him" and that is why they fail to give adequate attention to Paul's intentional and prolific use of "in him" and equivalents in the first two chapters of Ephesians.¹⁰ They need the alternate reading to support their theological commitment, but the fact is that Paul could easily have said it that way but did not do so. The reason Paul did not say "chose us to be in him" is because that would not reconcile with the rest of his letter to the Ephesians or any other express Pauline teaching. For instance, Paul later states in relation to the Christian Gentiles in the church: "Wherefore remember, that ye

¹⁰ Some Calvinists assert that believers were placed "in him" before creation. In this view, believers are apparently in Christ before creation, then later in Adam at the fall, then later in Christ again. But as we have already seen in Section II, we are placed "in him" in time, as we respond to the gospel in faith. For this reason, the phrase "chosen us in him" cannot possibly mean that all believers were placed "in him" before creation.

being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; that at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.” (Ephesians 2:11-13). If God had already decreed their salvation before creation, then how could Paul say that “in time past” they were “without Christ...having no hope, and without God in the world”?

IV. My Interpretation

With this background in mind, let’s return to the passage at hand: “According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love.” From what has been covered so far, we know that people are not placed in Christ until they believe and we know that Paul uses “in him” and its equivalents to express positional truths about believers. When a person is placed in Christ, they are identified with several historical events, including Jesus’ death, burial, resurrection and ascension. And according to Ephesians 1:4, they are also identified with God’s choosing. Gordon Olson writes:

It is not incidental that Paul wrote that we are chosen “in Him.” This idea is strongly reinforced by the *twenty times* in the first two chapters of Ephesians that Paul used the expressions, “in Him,” “in Christ,” “in Christ Jesus,” “in the Beloved One”.... Since He is the elect one, it follows that the only possible election is “in Him,” and there is no election apart from Him. He did not write that we are chosen *to be* in Him, but that we are “chosen in Him.” Our election or chosenness is in Christ. Thus, it is only those individuals who are connected to Him

by faith who are the elect.¹¹

It is not that believers were picked before creation to be in Christ, for otherwise Paul would have written the verse that way. The Father's choosing occurred "in him," and we must give the phrase meaning.

Suppose for argument sake that the Calvinists are correct that God did choose the only people He would save before the foundation of the world, passing over the rest of humanity. As already pointed out, Paul's characterization of some of these "elect" people in Ephesians 2 as being without God and without hope would make no sense. But we can say something more. If this interpretation is correct, then an elect person is elect their whole life. That person does not become elect when they place faith in Christ and therefore are placed "in him." They are elect from conception, and as far as election is concerned, their being placed in Christ through the gospel changes absolutely nothing. And so to accept unconditional election, we must accept that every spiritual blessing for the believer that Paul places in the realm of "in him" or "in Christ" is given to a person at the moment they are placed in Christ *except* the choosing of Ephesians 1:4, because that blessing, despite Paul's limiting language of "in him," was theirs while they were outside Christ, indeed before they were conceived. What it boils down to is that in the Calvinists' view, the words "in him" are superfluous.

The alternate view I am suggesting is that those who are placed in Christ through the gospel get in on the choosing just as they get in on the crucifixion,

¹¹ C. Gordon Olson, *Getting The Gospel Right*, p. 283, Global Gospel Publishers (2005).

resurrection, ascension and so many other spiritual blessings. What we can say from Ephesians 1:4 is that God made a decision as part of His reconciling all things to Himself in Christ that those who would identify with Christ by faith would receive numerous spiritual blessings, including being positionally holy and blameless before Him. Lawrence Vance captures the right idea regarding Ephesians 1:4:

The choosing had nothing to do with salvation but rather concerned our position in Christ.... As far as God is concerned, we are seated “before him,” holy, without blame, and blessed with all spiritual blessings. This is because we are part of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 6:17; Eph. 5:30). Once a man gets “in Christ” he gets in on the choosing. God chose that whoever was in his Son would be “blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places” and “holy and without blame before him in love.” The error of the Calvinists was in assuming the verse made mention of getting “in Christ.”¹²

The closest Pauline parallel to Ephesians 1:3 is 2 Timothy 1:9-10, which also supports this interpretation: “Who hath saved us, and called *us* with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began, but is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” As with the Ephesians passage, the sphere of blessing is once again “in Christ Jesus.” Vance’s insight is helpful here:

Now, grace was not *physically* given to any man “before the world began” for the simple reason that there were no men around to give it to. But grace was “given us in Christ Jesus.” God deposited grace in Christ before the world began, but it was only given to us when we got “in Christ.” This grace “is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 Tim. 1:10).¹³

¹² Laurence M. Vance, *The Other Side of Calvinism*, p. 359, Vance Publications (2007).

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 360.

Paul does not teach that believers were given something before they existed to receive it. Rather, God's redemptive plan, the grace of God toward sinners, was operative in Christ before creation, and later manifested when the God-man died on the cross and was resurrected, conquering death and making eternal life available "through the gospel" (not election). In like manner, Ephesians 1:4 is not teaching that God chose individuals for salvation before they existed, but that God determined blessings for those who would subsequently identify with Christ by faith upon hearing the gospel.¹⁴

The positional nature of the blessing in Ephesians 1:4 also accords perfectly with Paul's numerous references to Christians as "elect." Calvinists inject their theology into the Greek adjective *eklektos* when they define it along the lines of "marked out beforehand," but a basic word study in the Septuagint and other Greek literature demonstrates that the term is almost always used with the derived meaning of choice, excellent, or the very best of something (not just people). BDAG supports this definition as a secondary definition. In the New Testament the term is

¹⁴ Many Calvinists find further support in Ephesians 1:5 because it uses the term "predestinated." The verse states, "Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will." Obviously, this verse does not say appointed to salvation, but appointed "unto the adoption of children." This verse elaborates on further blessings God determined for those that would identify with Christ by faith.

used often of believers but without any explanation for how they become elect, but importantly, it is never used of a non-believer. These verses only state the fact of their election and not how or when they became elect.

Other verses describe angels as elect (1 Timothy 5:21), churches as elect (see 2 John 1), part of national Israel as elect (Matthew 24:24), and Jesus as elect (Luke 23:35; 1 Peter 2:4, 6). The use of “elect” to describe Jesus is interesting. Peter juxtaposes the term with “precious” and quotes from Isaiah where the idea is a “tried” stone. What we can conclude is that the term indicates excellence or purity, and not unlike Paul’s reference to Christians as saints or holy ones, Paul’s description of Christians as elect is always a positional description. Further, if it meant picked for salvation it could not apply to Jesus or churches. And just as the term saint only applies to believers—those in Christ—so also elect applies only to believers. That is why Paul said in Titus 1:1: “Paul, a servant of God, and an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of God’s elect...” If people were elect before being placed in him, Paul could not refer to “the faith of God’s elect.” But there, just as in Ephesians 1:4, Paul understands people to become elect only after they place faith in Christ.

V. Application

I find that TULIP unconditional election is a profound and far reaching truth claim that rests, in terms of Biblical support, on the head of a needle. Ephesians 1:4 is the primary proof text that has the necessary time marker for the supposed

decree preceding creation.¹⁵ Because I see Paul's teaching in Ephesians 1:4 to be a positional truth and not a statement that God picked those He would save, there are a number of very practical results that follow. If anyone can get in Christ through faith and then enjoy the choosing and all of the other blessings, then the swan song of God's love in John 3:16 is legitimate, humbling and encouraging all at the same time. Since I reject TULIP unconditional election, I necessarily reject TULIP total depravity. And since I then understand the Scriptures to teach that anyone can receive eternal life through faith in Christ, I do not have to question my integrity in presenting the good news without regard to any concern about their being elect or not. Further, I see God glorified when people come to Christ, not in a Calvinist sense because people made a choice for Christ that was decreed for them, but in a fuller sense because they truly had a free choice to make. Finally, I do not have to wrestle with things the Bible says that are logically irreconcilable with TULIP unconditional election in order to salvage a theological commitment.¹⁶ What a blessing it is to be

¹⁵ A few others verses are typically cited as proof texts, including 2 Timothy 1:9, 2 Thessalonians 2:13, Revelation 13:8 and 17:8. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address these passages here, but I do find that most Calvinist writers place primary reliance upon Ephesians 1:4, and from that interpretation they find unconditional election painted all over the canvas.

¹⁶ As I see it, the Scriptures are full of statements that just do not make good sense through a TULIP colored lens. Why does Luke record that Paul was "persuading" people of the gospel? Surely God determined their moment of salvation and Paul did not need to be persuasive, but only to share the message. For that matter, why does Paul even both trying to be culturally relevant in his preaching? (compare Acts 13 and 17). Surely 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 make no sense at all. Why did Jesus tell people that if they did not believe his words, they should believe because of the works? And why does Paul write that Satan blinds people from the gospel? Surely non-elect people do not need blinding and elect people cannot be blinded when it is their moment to be made to believe. Why does Paul say of the Jews that after they

part of God's elect and to know that anyone I preach the gospel to can choose to become part of God's elect—God's excellent ones.

VI. Works Cited

I reviewed and cited the following works in this paper:

1. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press (1994).
2. David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, and S. Lance Quinn, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, P&R Publishing Company (2d ed. 2004).
3. R.L. Dabney, *Syllabus And Notes Of The Course Of Systematic And Polemic Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust (2002).
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8. Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians, An Exegetical Commentary*, Baker Academic (2002) (citations omitted).
9. C. Gordon Olson, *Getting The Gospel Right*, Global Gospel Publishers (2005).
10. Laurence M. Vance, *The Other Side of Calvinism*, Vance Publications (2007).

turn to Christ the veil is lifted? And why does Paul say that Jewish persecutors thwarted the salvation of Gentiles in 1 Thessalonians 2:16?