

Comments on Various Disputed Passages - 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14

Written by Michael Gowens

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2 Thessalonians 2:13-14 *But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth: Whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

The popular interpretation of this verse is that God's election, the Spirit's sanctification, and the individual's belief of the truth are equal links in the chain of salvation. The Calvinist argues from this verse that election precedes the act of believing, and that an evangelical faith is the predetermined outcome of election as the instrument of "salvation". Though the principle that election is precedent to belief is Biblically valid, yet I reject the inference that all the elect are predestinated to hear the gospel as the means of salvation. Two interesting facts lead to my conviction that the tendency to explain 2Th 2:13 in terms of eternal election is hermeneutically inaccurate.

(1) The word "chosen" is not eklego, the usual word for election, but haireo, meaning "to take to oneself". If 2Th 2:13 is an eternal election verse, then it is the only reference in the NT where haireo is used for election.. Every other "election" verse in the NT employs eklego.

(2) Likewise, the phrase "from the beginning" is not Paul's normal word to describe the timelessness of eternity past. In eternal election passages like 1Co 2:7; Eph 1:4; 3:9; 2Ti 1:9, & Tit 1:2, Paul employs the word aionios ("before time was"). This phrase is arche (meaning "commencement" or "origin"- cf. Re 3:14) not aionios. Zodhiates defines arche to mean "from the first", not "before the world began". If this is an "eternal election" verse, then this choice took place at some point after the inception of time—not "before the foundation of the world" but "from the commencement"...

How, then, should the passage be interpreted? Interestingly, Ac 15:14ff includes similar language: "...God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name [haireo meaning "to take to Himself"]...Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world". James is describing God's sovereign intention since the earliest days to number Gentiles among the company of His true servants. The language is identical to 2Th 2:13 explains 2Th 2:13?

When one adds to the portrait the fact that the church at Thessalonica was one of the first churches on European or Western soil and that it was comprised largely (if not exclusively) of

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Gentiles, one wonders if Paul is not employing a wise pastoral tactic, i.e. encouraging them to "stand fast and hold the traditions they had been taught" (2Th 2:15) by validating their identity as the true people of God. "You belong to the Lord as His special people," he affirms. "You are who you are and where you are today because of His plan to take out from the Gentiles a people for His name; therefore, brethren, stand fast against deception." The reminder and reaffirmation of their identity is the incentive for faithful perseverance, as well as the encouragement they needed in lieu of the news that some would be deceived by the antichrist.

The reputable commentator Leon Morris says that it is immaterial that Paul employs different language in 2Th 2:13 than every other election verse in the NT. My reply to that statement is, "In all due respect, who says it is immaterial?" If this is an eternal election verse, then why is it the only exception to the consistent usage of the election terms *eklego* and *aionios*? I suggest that the different terminology is not immaterial, but vital to an understanding of Paul's intent. If the proliferation of "election" verses in the NT employ identical language, but one, lone verse uses, not one but, two completely different terms, could that not be a compelling argument for the potential that 2Th 2:13 is not talking about eternal election at all, but God's purpose to take a people to Himself from the Gentiles?

The Thessalonian believers were living proof of God's intent "from the beginning"—even as far back as the Abrahamic Covenant (i.e. "in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed"); yea, even previous to that, when Noah predicted that "Japheth would come into Shem's tent"—to include Gentiles in the company of his those who would serve Him through special revelation. Throughout the Old Testament, references to this Divine program surface again and again. In fact, James quotes Am 9:11-12 as an example. "What we are witnessing with the influx of Gentile converts," James tells the Jerusalem council, "is the fulfillment of God's plan of the ages." Paul now emphasizes the same point from a pastoral perspective to encourage the believers at Thessalonica that they were indeed true servants of God.