

Reaching Today's World Through Differing Views of Election

**Opening Comments by Dr. R. Albert Mohler Jr.
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Well, good morning. I have to come to you rather awkwardly this morning with the words resonant in my mind of the Apostle Paul that I come in weakness and in trembling, and yet I believe it's important to be here. And I'm honored to be here with you. I'm honored to be with Dr. Wright, and I'm honored to be here with my dear friend, and dear brother Dr. Paige Patterson. The genius of this, or the genus, the beginning of all of this is in a friendship that is stronger than mere personal affection, although there is deep personal affection. There is a friendship in the Gospel. And I hope that's what characterizes us as Southern Baptists. I hope that is why we are all here. It is because of our friendship in the Gospel, a friendship that thus transcends any other concern and any other friendship that would be known to us.

What in the world is the doctrine of election that would draw so many persons on a Monday morning at an SBC Pastors' Conference? It is God's gracious purpose to save sinners through the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ. So as we are here in the name of a doctrine, at least as a point of our discussion, let us be clear that the doctrine of election is about God saving sinners. "God's purpose to save" as our Baptist Faith and Message puts it so beautifully. I'm thankful this morning that we are here to talk theology. This is good and healthy. It's a sign of a mature denomination that is not afraid to talk theology. When we are a part of a people who become allergic to the discussion of doctrine, we are a part of a people that is soon to taste the dust of theological death. We may be the last people alive that can have an honest disagreement. Because we believe that doctrine is important. We also believe in the law of non-contradiction. Two contradictory things cannot simultaneously be true. We believe in the integrity of language. And we believe in the Gospel imperative: that means we must know what the Gospel is. I am so thankful we are talking theology, recognizing that this is because of a significant and sovereign work of God to give this denomination a second chance. Were it not for the conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention, the debate to draw this large number of persons at a meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention might well be over just how to find a way to ordain homosexual persons to the ministry. By God's grace, we are not there. And it is by God's grace.

I'm also very thankful to be here with Dr. Paige Patterson, because not only is he a dear friend, but because he is a theologian. I mean only to speak of him with respect in pointing out the difference in our age, a difference which, by the way, is not changing, but as I get older appears to be less important. But as a young seminary student trying to understand the issues of debate in the Southern Baptist Controversy, one of the seminal events in my own understanding came in hearing a debate in which Dr. Patterson defended the substitutionary atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ. In his words, in his defense, in his explication, in his exposition I heard the heart and mind of a true theologian, and not only that, but I heard the heart and mind of a theologian that was

centered in the glory of God and the Gospel of Christ, and in the central and non-negotiable understanding that on the cross, Jesus Christ was the substitute for sinners, that indeed something took place upon the cross that was both necessary and salvific. Tied to the fact that it is because of the blood sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ that sinners, by grace through faith, may be acquitted because of the grace and mercy of God in that atonement of Christ.

We're talking theology because we're a Gospel people, and if we're going to talk about being a Gospel people, then we actually have to discipline ourselves to talk about what the Gospel is, and if we're going to talk about what the Gospel is, then we must simultaneously make clear what the Gospel is not, because all around us are false gospels about which the Apostle Paul warned us centuries ago. Now my purpose today is to define and defend and to disseminate the Gospel. Am I a Calvinist? Well, yes - though that is not my animating purpose or agenda. If one must, in the history of theology and in the multi-diverse world of theology, identify who fits where, then let me be clear in my conviction. I believe in what are classically defined as the Doctrines of Grace. I believe in what is classically defined as Calvinist soteriology. If you are counting points, there are 5 of them, and I affirm all five. Dr. Patterson said he is not a Dortian Calvinist, and in one sense, neither am I. Because at the Synod of Dort, the Calvinists were actually responding to what they perceived to be false teachings, and so you have a defensive mechanism there. The language is very cumbersome. For instance, in talking about irresistible grace, let me just dispense once and for all with the notion that there could be any person who is drawn against his will to Christ. I do not believe that such a person exists. Rather I believe in the doctrine of effectual calling that as the Scripture says once that work is begun, and that person is drawn unto Christ, then that person will come to faith in Christ, and will be authentically saved. I do not believe in the fictitious person who is drawn to Jesus Christ against his will. I do not believe that that is possible. And the question is not whether such a person could resist the Gospel. The Bible is very clear that human beings do resist the Gospel, in fact do resist the law of God, and do resist the call of God. The issue is, once that work of salvation begins in a sinner, by the grace and mercy of God is it completed to the end? I believe that yes, it is. In terms of limited atonement, well we all believe in limited atonement because I'm certain there are no Universalists here. The question is: how is the atonement limited? And by whom? And how do we rightly construe and understand this? I would prefer to speak of particular redemption. I do believe that before the creation of the world, God determined to save sinners, and not just in a general sense but in an actual sense, persons who would come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ because of the electing purpose of God. Reading the Scripture, we have to face squarely the fact that God is a choosing God in the exercise of His sovereignty. He chose Israel, He chose Jacob, and as the Apostle Paul makes clear, He chooses sinners. The "You" language-"You whom He has chosen"- the chosen language fits in a canonical shape of Scripture in understanding God's electing purpose with Israel, and God's electing purpose of the Church as well.

This is a conversation among close friends. This has happened, of course, before in the history of the church. George Whitefield and John Wesley were good friends, their friendship sometimes tested in the context of theological controversy, but they were

friends together in calling sinners to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ - presenting the Gospel. And they were simultaneously in common known for their affirmation of the New Birth. Similarly, Charles Spurgeon and D.L. Moody were good friends even though they would have differed on some of these doctrinal issues. They cooperated together in evangelism and welcomed each other to their pulpits, when D.L. Moody was welcomed to Spurgeon's pulpit in London. But we are even closer friends than that. Because my warning - if it be a warning, or reminder - if it be a blessing, is that all of us in this room are almost certainly one form of Calvinist or another. That is because of four affirmations we would get from the very beginning.

Number one: our affirmation of the inerrancy of Scripture. It is not by accident that there are not great Armenian testimonies to the inerrancy of Scripture. It is because of our understanding of verbal inspiration. We really do believe that God can work in such a way that the human will, wills to do what God wills that will to do. And that is exactly why we believe in the inerrancy of the Scripture. We do not believe that the apostle Paul was irresistibly against his will drawn to write the book of Romans. But we also believe that every single word of the book of Romans is inspired of God and perfectly consummate with the Father's will. We also do believe in substitutionary atonement, and the logic of a substitutionary atonement fits only within what would have to be described as the umbrella of a Calvinists scheme. That does not mean that anyone has to tie any particular set of points, but that the entire worldview in which substitution makes sense is a worldview in which the sovereignty of God and the righteousness of God and the saving purpose of God are vindicated in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ as demonstrated there. We are also very close friends, standing on very close theological terrain in affirming the unconditional omniscience of God. At the very least, as our Baptist Faith and Message requires belief in the total omniscience of God, that means no limited theism, that means that all of us in this room in so far as we agree with the Baptist Faith and Message, and I believe more importantly with the message of Scripture. Believe that before the foundation of the world, at the very least, depending on how you want to define foreknowledge, at the very least, God created this world knowing exactly who would come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Some of us believe more than that, but certainly none of us believe less than that. If that be so, then the sum total, not only the total, but the precise identity of all the persons who have come to faith in Christ was known to the Father before the world was created. A very important point of common affirmation there are some of us who believe more than that but certainly none who believe less than that. And when I say more than that, that is the mind and character of God between His own omniscience and His will, well that is known only to God, but it is also testified in Scripture and we are given an understanding of how that works.

We are also standing on common ground because of our belief that once this work of salvation is accomplished in the life of the sinner and whether that sinner is transformed by the grace and mercy of God, he can never fall away. Whether you want to define that as the perseverance of the saints or the security of the believer, the fact is that we do not believe that the human will operates so that one can will oneself to be saved and then no longer will oneself to be saved and potentially will again oneself to be saved and potentially no longer will oneself to be saved. We are not Nazarenes.

We are also here because of a common history. This very convention was established by men who, at least in the vast majority, understood themselves to affirm the doctrines of grace. They were themselves representative of a great Baptist movement that was itself part of a great evangelical movement and the recovery of the Gospel of the missionary mandate. It is no accident that William Cary held these very beliefs and thus he went to India and began the modern missionary movement. It is no accident that those who established this denomination likewise held those beliefs and those very beliefs compelled them into world vision and cooperation for world mission endeavor together. This is a more recent history than many might know, but it is also the part of the stream that has brought us to this place. What binds us together in terms of these affirmations is what is best described as the well-meant offer of the Gospel. That is to say when Dr. Patterson shares the Gospel and when I share the Gospel, we do so honestly and urgently believing that if the person to whom we share the Gospel of Christ responds in faith, he or she will be saved. That is the well-meant offer of the Gospel. In so far as there be anyone of whatever stripe denies that well meant offer of the Gospel, let him be anathema.

Now we hear all kinds of language thrown around in the midst of some discussions and debates, we hear some persons referred to as hyper-Calvinists and there is always the danger of hyper-Calvinists. There is first of all the danger of Calvinists who are hyperactive. But secondly, there is the real theological danger of those who do not believe in the well-meant offer of the Gospel. These are not persons who are merely five point Calvinists. Five point Calvinism is not hyper-Calvinism, it's just Calvinism. However, if one takes an additional logical jump from that point and says, therefore, we should not present the Gospel to all persons, they're in direct conflict with the Scripture and direct disobedience to the call of God and in direct contradiction to the model of the apostles.

Every one of the dangers Dr. Patterson mentioned about Calvinists of certain stripes, I want to affirm in the most emphatic terms, whether it be the heresy of hyper-Calvinism which is rare. But we must admit, dotted along the landscape of America, you can find churches of different labels who would affirm that. You will notice that they are all small. Many of them are shuttered. If you ever find a vital hyper-Calvinist movement you will have found a living oxymoron. It does not exist. Antinomianism, yes, let us always worry about that, but that is true of anyone who believes that salvation isn't grace. That's a danger that comes to any who believe in grace. It must not be cheap grace; it must not be grace that becomes a license to sin.

I also want to add another problem that Dr. Patterson was kind not to mention, and that is there is a tendency towards a debating personality for a confrontation on debating these different points of doctrine. It is healthy when we talk theology, it is healthy when we go to God's Word and submit ourselves to study God's word in order to find out what the Gospel is. It is not healthy to have persons who will drive across the state to debate Calvinism, when they would not drive across the street to share the Gospel. In so far as that is found it is a heresy.

I also want to say that I believe, I think, in so far as I was able to hear Dr. Patterson correctly. Everything he said about the alls and the whosoever, in terms of this. I do not believe that there is any person who would respond to the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and be denied the grace and mercy and unmerited favor of God. I preach without hesitation, the whosoever and the alls. “Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” I believe that emphatically. In fact I go beyond that to say not only do I believe that is a potentiality – whosoever will – it is also an actuality. The elect do.

There is an awkwardness in discussing all of this, especially in the short amount of time we have this morning. We will of necessity raise more issues than we can answer. The “all” in Scripture. For whom did Christ die? Well, in some sense of course, Christ did die for all. That does not accomplish the salvation of all. That does not even, in one sense, explain how the “all” is to be understood in that context. Because, when we talk about God’s sovereignty we have to remember that we are not only talking about God’s sovereign purpose to elect and God’s sovereign purpose recognized and actualized in the cross. We are also talking about God’s sovereignty in the fact that all these things take place in a space – time continuum. There were persons who lived and died before the incarnation of Jesus Christ. When persons say, “I believe that all persons will have an opportunity or should have an opportunity to respond to the Gospel” – well, of course, that is the missionary mandate now, but it is not retroactive. In other words, we will never be able to come up with something that will meet a secular or liberal notion of a fairness doctrine when it comes to God. We are not responsible for the fact that most of us were born into Christian homes with Christian parents. That is not true for all of us, but it is true for many. There are many apparently arbitrary, just by a secular evaluation of our lives, factors that have a lot to do with our proximity to the Gospel. All the rest is simply due to the sovereignty of God. It is not something for which we can take credit. None of us can take credit for when or where or to whom we were born, nor our proximity of the Gospel. But we have to turn that around and say, on the other hand, it is now our responsibility to take the Gospel to others as eagerly, as expansively, as generously, and as universally as possible.

I mentioned there are two impossible persons. First is the person that does not desire Christ who is irresistibly drawn to Him. And the second person that does not exist is the person who wishes to respond to faith in Christ but is denied his faith - in other words, those who would call upon the name of the Lord and be denied. My model is the apostle Paul and I am so thankful that in, for instance, just one book in the New Testament – in the book of Romans, we have chapters eight, and nine and ten – and by the way – in that order. And Paul in Romans eight sets out the order of salvation, in the electing purpose of God. And then in chapter nine – perhaps, the most resisted chapter . . . I do believe that there is resistible preaching because a lot of preachers manage to resist Romans chapter nine. But in Romans chapter nine, you do have a clear affirmation that God has the right to create vessels for blessing and salvation and vessels of wrath. But then you have Romans chapter ten, where the beautiful, majestic logic of the Gospel is set out. “For whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” But how shall they call? And then you have the logic of the Great Commission, which is, I think, most

symphonically declared in Romans chapter ten. They cannot call upon the name of the Lord if they do not hear. They will not hear if no one will go, if no one is sent. So faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of Christ.

I want to follow the model of the apostle Paul in urging persons to come to faith in Christ – even persuading insofar as there is among some Calvinists a reluctance to persuade – that is, a reluctance to seek to manipulate. But that can be taken far too far. We must be as eager as the apostle Paul to persuade persons to come to Christ because the means of salvation in the Scripture is the preaching of the Gospel, and the preaching of the Gospel comes with the task also of calling persons. Martin Luther perhaps put this better than anyone else when he said, look, it is our responsibility to address to all persons that outward call of the Gospel, but we do so knowing that only God Himself can effectually bring about that internal calling. And we really do know this; otherwise we would not pray when we go out to share the Gospel. When we send out evangelistic teams, we don't say, "Good luck – happy fishing." No, we pray. How do we pray? That God will open eyes, open hearts, and make ears receptive to hear the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Everyone is a Calvinist in praying before surgery. Trust me. No one wants a God of mere potentials when we need the sovereign God who acts. And when we need the sovereign God who acts, we never have that need more than at the point of our greatest need – which is our need as sinners for a Savior.

How does the doctrine of election compel us forward in evangelism? It is because, I believe, an affirmation of the doctrine of election explains why we go with confidence to share the Gospel. It is because God does call sinners to Himself, through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ by the means of the instrumentality of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. And thus, we are not going out just hoping that there might be some response somewhere if we could only perhaps reach those persons where they are, as opposed to where they are not, presumably. We do not have that ability; we do not have that strength. The parable of the sower and the soils makes clear; we cannot read the human heart. We do not know who is the fertile heart and who is the resistant heart. Who is the shallow heart and who is the complicated heart? We just know that they are sinners who need to hear the Gospel. And thus we preach the Gospel to all persons, *knowing* that God does save.

We also, undergirded by the doctrine of election, share the Gospel because we know that God's glory and goodness of the nations in coming to know the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and thus let the nations rejoice, freely, eagerly, generously, universally preach the Gospel. It is a matter not only of effectiveness or ineffectiveness. It is a matter of obedience or disobedience to the call of God. And thus we preach the Gospel to all persons, knowing that God does save.

We also, undergirded by the doctrine of election, share the Gospel because we know that God's glory is in the gladness of the nations in coming to know the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. And thus let the nations rejoice. Freely, eagerly, generously, universally preach the Gospel. It is a matter not only of effectiveness or ineffectiveness; it is a matter

of obedience or disobedience to the call of God. And do so knowing that God does save sinners. Let the nations be glad. Thank you so very much.