

Trusting God: What is our Prime Objective?

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In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will: That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ. In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory. (Eph 1:11-14)

We frequently hear Christians speak of seeking God's will in "my life." On the surface this focus is admirable, even commendable. However, I increasingly fear that many who use this or similar terms put far more emphasis on the personal pronoun "my" than they place on God's will. They still view their life as their own private possession with life's primary pursuit to be gratification and fulfillment of self, not an unselfish—even self-denying—pursuit of something outside of self and far greater than self. Paul's exemplary attitude profoundly instructs us regarding the proper emphasis of the Christian life and God's will for our life. "*For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake.*" (2Co 4:5) Notice the emphasis on Christ Jesus as Lord and Paul's attitude toward himself. The theme of the message, and necessarily the theme of the life behind the message, is not self or "my life," but Christ Jesus the Lord, the Ruler and Master of life. Only to the extent that we invest our deepest commitment to the truth that Jesus is Lord will we ever be willing, much less able, to regard ourselves as servants to the people whom we serve as ministers of the gospel. Many strong-willed ministers will gladly profess to be servants to Christ, but they often with equal stubbornness boast that they are servants to no man. Such a self-centered attitude directly violates Paul's truth and example. Only to the extent that we truly serve Christ are we willing to *serve* His people. During the Incarnation, did Jesus assert such independence from His people? No, He repeatedly affirmed, "I am among you as he that serveth." (Lu 22:27) To serve, truly serve, God's people simply follows Jesus' example. Service in this model does not mean doing everything that others require you to do. Sometimes they may demand the impossible or the unreasonable. Occasionally they may insist on your going against Scripture. However, even in these instances, the devoted and Biblical servant will use the occasion to instruct with grace and humility, not rebel with arrogant pride.

According to Paul in Eph 1, not to mention many other similar passages, our position in Christ as children of God did not occur by our own doing, but by the will of God that initiated the process in eternity past. God predestinated both our inheritance and us to it before He created the material universe. All the steps and requirements that God considered necessary to accomplish our ultimate salvation He provided to us—and for us—in Christ. Our salvation is not a synergistic Jesus and us, but Jesus alone. First to last, in its entirety our salvation is according to God's will and working.

What is God's ultimate objective in His gracious design to save sinful creatures? "*That we should be to the praise of his glory....*" Notice the emphasis is not on us but on Him and His glory. I believe that the term "who first trusted in Christ" refers to the "us" of the verse, a likely reference to the apostles, among whom I include Paul. Prior to the crucifixion the disciples engaged in a private argument over who should replace Jesus as their chief, their ruler, when He left them. (Mr 9:46-48) After the ascension we see a different attitude dominating their lives and ministries. A cursory reading of Acts leaves us with a clear understanding that Jesus continued to "rule" as chief among them through the ministry of the Holy Spirit (Ac 13:2-3 as only one example). They didn't chase their personal dreams of ministry. Nor did one apostle assume the role of absolute ruler. They united in their godly submission to the leadership, indeed the ruling of the Holy Spirit. We should note that the Holy Spirit

did not privately direct Paul and Barnabas to go to their work, but rather He directed the church to send them. Even the office of apostle is set “in the church.” (1Co 12:28) No minister will ever succeed in ministry apart from the intimate involvement and support of a local church. When a man follows the leadership of the Holy Spirit, he should expect that leadership to appear in the form of direction and support from his church. As a culture, we admire the rugged individualism of the “Rambo” spirit, but in Biblical Christianity that independent “loner” spirit consistently and predictably spells disastrous failure. Both passages referenced above (Ac 13:2-3 and 1Co 12:28) affirm the New Testament model for church growth and ministry.

In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation....” The faithful Ephesian church followed the apostles’ example, trusting in Christ and living for His glory, not their own. Such profound trust in Christ does not grow spontaneously. It grows slowly and only in the heart of one who lives (both ears and the whole life) under the instruction of the gospel.

We must not forget the primary objective of the apostles and their trust in Christ, for Scripture does not permit us to follow a different goal. The Baptist heritage historically has been the adage that “Scripture is our *only* rule of faith and practice.” Regardless the issue, be it in faith or practice, the moment that we begin to justify any idea or practice that we do not find affirmed in Scripture we deny our Biblical heritage, as well as endanger our blessings, present and future. No church will ever reach perfection in its pursuit of holiness in faith and practice, but Scripture does not permit a lesser objective as our goal. We should never elevate our church in the present, or in past generations, to become the absolute in terms of faith or practice. Christianity, to be sure, is historical, but we reject the Roman Catholic concept that the church and its decisions regarding faith and practice are equal with Scripture in authority. Rather than seeking to rationalize or justify beliefs or practices that are not affirmed clearly in Scripture, our goal should be an ever-increasing pursuit of the New Testament model for the church’s activities and beliefs. To the extent that we urge ideas or practices not set forth in the New Testament we also compromise the primary objective that our study passage sets before us, the glory of God in Christ. To the extent that we urge any idea or practice not affirmed in Scripture we imply that our Lord failed to provide the full authority and example for a healthy, spiritually thriving church. Glory slowly seeps away from Him and rests on the inventors and defenders of the alternate idea or practice.

Because of the Biblical promise that God would preserve His truth and church in all generations (Mt 28:20; Eph 3:21), we must study our own history carefully. However, when our own history becomes the “rule” of our faith, we demonstrate the same error that we criticize in the Church of Rome. Scripture never permits church decisions to supersede, equal, or compete with it as our exclusive source of authority in all things. Any belief or practice that cannot claim Biblical origins inherently lacks the controlling norm of Scriptural authority. Typically such ideas and practices first of all self-justify themselves by human rationalization. More troubling to vibrant Biblical authority, they slowly evolve over time. Without the fixed authority of Scripture to govern them, human reasoning takes over and justifies, not only the practice, but also the constant evolution of the practice into something different than its beginning.

With every gathering of the church we should examine our beliefs and practices against the only reliable and acceptable governing authority, Scripture alone. If we discover something that cannot claim Scriptural authority and example, we should joyfully release it to allow for the clear and refreshing spring of Biblical truth to govern our lives in all things spiritual.

The glory of God will not occur in a reluctant, tentative, or resentful decision. We might make the right choice, do the right thing, but do so with reluctance and resentment. God will not bless resentful obedience! Only a willing and joyful obedience tugs at His heart and brings blessings. We often see this

truth demonstrated in the Old Testament. Divine judgments and prophetic warnings temporarily drove Israel to reluctant abandonment of Baal worship or other sins, but reluctant obedience consistently predicts a return to the favored sins. God's blessings flowed freely only when His people "from the heart" responded to His Word with joyful willingness.

No other than the willing heart is empowered to do all things for the glory of God. The source of such glory lies in the "word of truth, the gospel of your salvation." May we live in all things to the worthy glory of our Lord.

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