

Ephesians 1:3-14
January 3, 2010

South Plains

created after the resurrection because God had to have a place to put the followers of the risen Jesus. John Calvin taught that the fruit of salvation is the church (Geneva Catechism #94). Only in the church are we born again.

Chosen Before Creation

When Harry Potter begins his schooling at Hogwarts, we meet the sorting hat. Each new student sits on a stool and places the sorting hat on his or her head. The hat magically announces which of the four houses at Hogwarts the student will join for all their years at school. It's a clever literary device because everyone knows that the sorting is important, but no one knows how or why it will be important.

Our New Testament reading assures the Ephesians that they have already been "sorted" or chosen by God as the people of God. They can count on that choice. Indeed, they will build eternally on that choice because the fact that God chose them is the most critical event in their life as a church.

Presbyterian government, from a human point of view, revolves around the choices of Presbyterians. Our congregation has elected a new class of elders for the governing body, the session, of our church. Far more important, however, is God's choice of us to be the children of God.

God "chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world," says the fourth verse. This means that the church was not an afterthought or an organization

The life and ministry of Jesus aimed to instruct us, his disciples, about being the church. The death of Jesus ransomed and redeemed the church from bondage to sin and guilt and death. The resurrection of Jesus promises the church new life, new life beginning right now and lasting forever.

When we look at the church the way, this letter to the Ephesians invites us to see ourselves and we gain fresh insight into our purpose, our mission. We can better understand ourselves, and we catch a vision of how God sees us. Elders and pastors need to keep this vision in mind as we make decisions and guide the programs of South Plains. Every member has the privilege of choosing how we can be a part of God's work through the church.

The ordination and installation of new elders is a good time to remind ourselves not only of the mission of the church, but also of the glory of the people of God. I think this moment in the life of a congregation is a little window into the heart of Presbyterianism. We practice representative government with elders elected by the people. But far more important is the election of every Christian into the family of God, an election before creation.

benefits we have in Christ. It's a doxology in roughly chronological order: past, present, and future.

The past blessing happened before the beginning of time. Our glory is that God chose us in Christ to be the church. It's no accident that we are surrounded by incredible natural beauty, mountains and rolling hills. Our history, for which we can take no credit, unfolded as faithful believers worked and planned and struggled to maintain a witness to Christ in this particular place. Not by chance do we sit near the intersection of Interstate 64, the Richmond Road, the Louisa Road and Black Cat Road leading toward Lake Monticello. We are here today as the result of a chain of decisions that stretch back to the foundation of the world. That may seem grandiose to people who pay little attention to the nature of God's work in the world. For us it's an affirmation of faith.

Our present blessings are summarized in these hefty theological words sprinkled through this passage. We are adopted as children of God. In him we are redeemed through Christ and have received forgiveness in him. Verses eight and nine say that God has shown us the mystery of God's will.

The nature of that mystery becomes clear in the rest of the letter. Against all the expectations of the people of God, God has brought together Jews and Gentiles. Gentiles, who are called later in chapter two "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenant of promise (2:12)," those Gentiles are now

Just a word here about predestination: I know that whenever Presbyterians hear words like election and God's choice of us, we get nervous about predestination. Please note that in the whole letter to the Ephesians there is not a word about God choosing anyone for anything except salvation. Predestination to damnation is a dead end that we followed for a while when we tried to force the Bible into the categories of scientific rationalism. There are some difficult passages of scripture that bear on damnation, but they are a tiny minority in the whole Bible.

Far more numerous in scripture and in the experience of Christians is the conviction that we are here because of events we do not fully understand and certainly do not fully control. Forces were at work in our lives before our birth that have influenced our decision to be in church this morning. People we scarcely know helped us get to this place in our lives. We are not counted as Christians simply because we made a heroic decision to act like followers of Jesus Christ. We are here because our small choice fit into a larger scheme of personal blessings and influences. By the grace of God, we enjoy the benefits of Jesus Christ.

Some commentators call the first fourteen verses of Ephesians a hymn of blessing and praise. The language is extravagant, poetic and rich. It follows the same pattern seen in Jewish blessings. We bless the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ by extolling the

members of the body of Christ. The mystery is that God chose us Gentiles before creation. And, somehow, the people of God failed to see and understand that was God's goal all along. That's why the promise to Abraham was that he would be a blessing to many nations. All of those blessings: adoption, redemption, forgiveness and membership in God's family are ours in the present.

The future blessings that are ours have already begun. We can enjoy our inheritance right now. I like the way Presbyterians put it into words in the seventeenth century. I'll paraphrase slightly for the sake of clarity: The chief end (or purpose) of humanity is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. We are destined, according to Ephesians, for the praise of his glory.

That does not mean we will be singing praise hymns in heaven. We glorify God in every moment we are enjoying God's blessings. The single qualification on our pleasure is that we tie our happiness firmly and publicly to God's blessings in Christ. We don't just satisfy selfish enjoyment. We seek true and lasting pleasure for ourselves and for neighbors far and wide. That means we seek justice and love for all. It means we witness to the righteousness and joy that God seeks from the beginning of time.

It's hard to imagine a higher calling for the church, a more challenging task for our officers and a greater sense of satisfaction for every one of us. We are part of

a plan so much larger than ourselves. We are a people chosen from creation.