

Salvation: God's Pursuit of Us
Part Two

The Biblical Doctrine of Election

The issue before us is *why and on what grounds some are elected to salvation and eternal life and others are not*. The question, then, is this: *Does God elect people because they believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, or does God elect people in order that they shall believe in Christ?*

- **The Calvinist says that God elects unbelievers and predestines them to become believers.**
- **The Arminian says that God elects believers and predestines them to become his children.**

The issue is not whether there is a cause or basis of God's choice of people, but whether that cause is some condition (faith) fulfilled by an individual acting from free will, or the sovereign good pleasure of God. We are not disputing whether faith and repentance are necessary for salvation. The question, rather, is this: *Are faith and repentance produced by free will and thus the cause of election, or are they produced by the Holy Spirit and thus the effect of election?*

According to Arminianism, election is that act of God whereby he foreordains to eternal life those whom he foresees will respond in faith to the gospel. According to Calvinism, election is that act of God whereby he foreordains to eternal life those who, because of sin, cannot and will not respond in faith to the gospel. Which of these two views is the one the Bible teaches? Or is there a third, mediating option?

The Biblical Terminology of Election

Here I focus exclusively on the New Testament terminology for election and predestination.

(1) The verb to "choose" or to "elect" (*eklegomai*) is found twenty-two times in the New Testament. It is used eight times of Christ's choosing or electing his disciples (Luke 6:13; John 6:70; 13:18; 15:16 (twice), 19; Acts 1:2; 2:4). On one occasion Jesus is himself the person chosen (Luke 9:35). Six times it is used in a context that does not pertain to salvation (Luke 10:42; 14:7; Acts 6:5; 15:7, 22, 25). The remaining seven occurrences refer to men and women as the objects of election to eternal life (Mark 13:20; Acts 13:17; 1 Cor. 1:27 (twice), 28; Eph. 1:4; James 2:5).

(2) The noun "elect" (*eklektos*) is also used twenty-two times in the New Testament. On three occasions Jesus is the "elect" one (Luke 23:35; 1 Peter 2:4, 6), and in one text the word refers to angels (1 Tim. 5:21). There is also one passage in which the word has no bearing on salvation (Rom. 16:13). In the seventeen remaining cases the word is used of men and women as God's "elect," those chosen to eternal life (Matt. 22:14; 24:22, 24, 31; Mark 13:20, 22, 27; Luke 18:7; Rom. 8:33; Col. 3:12; 2 Tim. 2:10; Titus 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1; 2:9; 2 John 1, 13; Rev. 17:14).

(3) The word which means "election" (*eklogē*) is used seven times, all of which refer to salvation (Acts 9:15; Rom. 9:11; 11:5, 7, 28; 1 Thess. 1:4; 2 Peter 1:10).

(4) The word frequently translated "to predestine" or "to predestinate" (*proorizō*) is found six times in the New Testament. It is used once with reference to Christ's sufferings (Acts 4:28), once of the predestination of God's redemptive plan (1 Cor. 2:7), and four times of the predestination of people to salvation (Rom. 8:29, 30; Eph. 1:5, 11).

(5) Another word which means "to choose" (*haireomai*) is used three times, only one of which refers to God's "choosing" people to salvation (2 Thess. 2:13).

(6) The word that means "to place, appoint, ordain" (*tassō*) is used eight times in the New Testament. Only one of these usages (Acts 13:48) is applicable to our study.

Clearly the terms used in the New Testament do not of themselves tell us anything definitive about the *basis* of divine election. That issue must be determined by the way in which each term is used, as well as other relevant statements in each context.

A. *The Arminian Concept of Divine Election*

There are two primary ways in which Arminians conceive of divine election.

1. **Corporate or class election.** Roger T. Forster and V. Paul Marston argue that “there is no such thing in the New Testament as personal (individual) election of believers. Christ is *the* chosen One, and believers are elect because they are *in him*” (*God’s Strategy in Human History* [Wheaton: Tyndale, 1973], p. 145). Forster and Marston explain:

“The prime point is that the election of the church is a corporate rather than an individual thing. It is not that individuals are in the church because they are elect, it is rather that they are elect because they are in the church, which is the body of the elect One [i.e., Jesus Christ]. . . . A Christian is not chosen to become part of Christ’s body, but in becoming part of that body [by free will, exercising faith] he partakes of Christ’s election. Although God, in his foreknowledge, doubtless knew which individuals would repent and so be joined by him to Christ’s body, this is not at all the same thing as picking them out to make them repent. God’s choice is not an individual one of who should repent; it is a corporate choice of the church in Christ” (p. 136).

William Klein contends that “God has chosen the church as a body rather than the specific individuals who populate that body” (*The New People of God: A Corporate View of Election* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990], p. 259). The concern of the New Testament regarding predestination, says Klein, “is not *how* people become Christians nor *who* become Christians” but “*what* God has foreordained on behalf of those who *are* (or *will be*) Christians” (185).

CORPORATE ELECTION

GOD → ELECTS → “CHURCH/CHRIST” ← FREE WILL ← INDIVIDUALS

INDIVIDUAL ELECTION

GOD → ELECTS → INDIVIDUALS → “CHURCH/CHRIST”

2. **Individual or personal election.** While not denying corporate or class election, other Arminians affirm that God also chooses *individuals* to eternal life.

The Arminian view of individual election is that God predestines to salvation those individuals who meet the gracious conditions which he has set forth: namely, faith and repentance. God foreknows from the beginning who will and who will not repent and believe in Christ, and these he predestines to be saved. The crucial point in this Arminian concept of election is this: If and when a person fulfills the condition of faith and repentance, it is he or she alone who does so. It is not God but the individual himself who is the ultimate cause of the decision.

B. *The Arminian Doctrine of Prevenient Grace*

Whereas some Arminians deny the doctrine of total depravity, most affirm it and account for human free will by appealing to the concept of *prevenient grace*. According to this doctrine, God graciously and mercifully restores to all human beings the freedom of will lost in the fall of Adam. Prevenient grace provides people with the ability to choose or reject God. This grace, however, is not irresistible. Whereas all are recipients of prevenient grace, many resist it to their eternal demise. Those who utilize this grace to respond in faith to the gospel are saved. In summary, “Arminians maintain that ‘prevenient grace,’ a benefit that flows from Christ’s death on the cross, neutralizes human depravity and restores to pre-Christians everywhere the ability to heed God’s general call to salvation” (Bruce Demarest, 208).

C. *The Calvinistic Concept of Divine Election*

God's election of individuals to eternal life antedates creation. It is a *pre-temporal* act which the biblical authors describe as having transpired "before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4; Rev. 13:8; 17:8) or "from the beginning" (2 Thess. 2:13). Election is a result of God's gracious purpose to save sinners, according to which we have been "predestined" to obtain an inheritance (Eph. 1:11). All of which, Paul tells us, "was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity" (2 Tim. 1:9).

The Calvinist insists that election is not grounded or based upon any act of man, for good or ill. Election "does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy" (Rom. 9:16). That God should set his electing love upon any individual is not in any way dependent upon that person's will (Rom. 9:16), works (2 Tim. 1:9; Rom. 9:11), holiness (Eph. 1:4), or obedience (1 Peter 1:1-2). Rather, election finds its sole and all-sufficient cause in the sovereign good pleasure and grace of God (Eph. 1:9; Rom. 9:11; 11:5; Matt. 11:25-26; 2 Tim. 1:9). Were election to be based upon what God foreknows that each individual will do with the gospel it would be an empty and altogether futile act. For what does God foresee in us, apart from his grace? He sees only corruption, ill will, and a pervasive depravity of heart and soul that serves only to evoke his displeasure and wrath.

What this means is that Calvinism is *monergistic* (made up two words that mean "one/sole" and "energy/power") when it comes to the doctrine of salvation. This simply means that when a person is saved it is due wholly to the working of one source of power: God. Arminianism is by necessity *synergistic*, in that it conceives of salvation as the joint or mutual effort of both God and man.

Divine election, according to Calvinism, is that loving and merciful decision by God the Father to bestow eternal life upon some, but not all, hell-deserving sinners. This decision was made before the foundation of the world and was based not upon any act of will or works of men and women, but solely upon God's sovereign good pleasure. One does not enter the ranks of the elect by meeting a condition, be it faith or repentance. One enters the ranks of the elect by virtue of God's free and altogether gracious choice, as a result of which he enables us to repent and believe. Thus, election is both sovereign and unconditional.

In addition to the texts cited above, we must also consider these:

"All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out" (John 6:37).

"And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day" (John 6:39).

"I give them [my sheep] eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand" (John 10:28-29).

Jesus has been given authority over all flesh, that is, over all of the human race in every age, "to give eternal life to all whom you [the Father] have given him" (John 17:2).

"I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word" (John 17:6).

"I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours" (John 17:9).

"Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world" (John 17:24).

"[God] *chose* us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he *predestined* us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved" (Eph. 1:4-6).

“But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God **chose** you as the first fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14).

A 10-Point Summary of the Calvinistic/Reformed Doctrine of Unconditional Election

(1) Election is a **pre-temporal** decision by God, a choice he made before any of us ever existed. God chose us in Christ **“before the foundation of the world”** (Eph. 1:4). God “saved us,” said Paul, “and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus **before the ages began”** (2 Tim. 1:9).

(2) Many have an unbiblical view of the condition of sinful humanity. **All human beings deserve hell and eternal condemnation.** We are by nature and by choice rebellious, morally corrupt, spiritually blind, God-defying, Christ-rejecting sinners (Eph. 2:1-3). As such, God doesn’t owe us anything, other than judgment.

Many people tend to think of the human race as a collection of *innocent victims of divine wrath*, when in point of fact **we are all wicked perpetrators of cosmic treason against God and the Lord Jesus Christ.** The world is not comprised of good people who desperately desire to be saved, but of evil people who are enemies of God and willingly and freely despise him. See especially Romans 3:10-18.

Thus when God chose to elect unto eternal life certain individuals from among this mass of fallen humanity, no one was treated unjustly or unfairly. No one deserved to be chosen. No one was deprived of his or her rights. All deserved damnation, but God in glorious mercy chose to redeem from this mass of fallen humanity a people for his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is out from this collection of fallen, hell-deserving sinners that God the Father has “given” to Jesus Christ those whom he chooses to save. It is to these that Jesus gives what not one of them deserves: “eternal life” (John 17:2).

(3) No one deserves heaven. Everyone deserves hell. No one goes to hell except those who deserve to. No one goes to heaven because they deserve to. Many embrace the utterly misguided and unbiblical notion that no one deserves **either** heaven or hell. We are, in some sense, morally and spiritually neutral. If such were the case, it would certainly be unjust and unfair for God to choose some to inherit eternal life while passing over others. But such is most decidedly **not** the case. We were **all** conceived in sin and “brought forth in iniquity” (Ps. 51:5) and “were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Eph. 2:3).

(4) No one who desires to go to heaven will be denied entrance. Anyone who wants to come to Christ may come. No one who repents and trusts in Jesus Christ will ever be denied entrance into the kingdom of God. Election does not mean that people who want to be saved cannot be saved because they are not elect. If any individual wants to be saved it is precisely **because** they are elect.

Divine election does not mean that people who want to have their sins forgiven and enter into the kingdom of God when they die will instead go to hell. **Divine election does not mean that people who want to be saved will ultimately be lost.**

God does not respond to people who repent and desire to trust Christ by saying: “Sorry. The quota of the elect is already full.” Jesus makes it clear that “whoever comes” to him shall be saved and “whoever comes” to him he “will never cast out” (John 6:35). Thus “everyone who looks upon the Son and believes in him” will have eternal life (John 6:40).

(5) Divine election is not based on God’s foreknowledge of our faith. Faith isn’t the ground or the cause of election, but its fruit. Faith isn’t the reason why God chose you. It isn’t the cause of election, but its effect. **We don’t get chosen by God because he foresees that we choose him. Rather we choose him because in eternity past he graciously chose us.**

Thus, God's choice of some hell-deserving sinners was not dependent on any will other than his own. Election "depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy" (Rom. 9:16). Thus, election is the fruit or effect of one will, God's will.

(6) Election does not undermine or eliminate the urgency and absolute necessity of faith and repentance. Election is what makes them possible! *Were it not for the Holy Spirit working secretly and silently in the human heart, causing us to be born again and overcoming our resistance to the gospel, no one would ever believe in Jesus.* Faith and repentance are absolutely necessary if one is to experience the forgiveness of sins and inherit eternal life. They are produced in the heart of an elect individual by the secret, sovereign, and mysterious work of the Holy Spirit by which he enables the previously hostile heart to see and relish and take supreme delight in the beauty of Jesus.

(7) Divine election does not undermine or negate the importance of evangelism and prayer. Election is what assures us that our evangelism will be successful (Acts 18:1-11). Divine election does not mean that we don't need to pray. God does not ordain a certain end (in this case, saving faith in the elect) apart from ordaining the necessary means (prayer and evangelism) by which that end is attained.

(8) Many are asking the wrong question: "Is my unbelieving friend (or family member) among the elect?" God does not permit us to ask that question and he refuses to give an answer. The only relevant question for your unbelieving friend or family member is this: "Do you *want* to be saved and forgiven of your sins? If so, trust and treasure Jesus Christ as your only hope." If you do not think you need to be saved and you find nothing appealing in Jesus Christ, you have only yourself to blame. But if you are convicted by your sin and sense a deep desire to know Jesus and to be reconciled to God, then repent and believe the gospel, and you will be saved!

(9) Divine election is not an arbitrary choice made by God, as if there were no reasons why he chose some for eternal life but passed over others. Election is "according to the purpose of his [God's] will" (Eph. 1:5). The basis of this choice is "the mystery of his will" (v. 9). It was according to his "purpose" (vv. 9, 11) and "the counsel of his will" (v. 11).

So, why did God choose this person and not that one? It was his good pleasure and will that he do so. But why was he "pleased" to choose this one and not another? We only know that it wasn't because of anything in one that was not in another. But whatever "reason" or "purpose" moved God to choose as he did, it was pleasing to him and in perfect harmony with both his justice and his love.

(10) Divine election has the glory of God as its primary purpose. In order to magnify his grace and make known the majesty of his mercy, God chose hell-deserving sinners to inherit eternal life and be joined in covenant union with his Son, Jesus Christ. He "predestined" them "for adoption as sons" (Eph. 1:5). Thus one purpose of election was to "save" hell-deserving sinners (2 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 1:8-10).

But in a more ultimate sense, their salvation was designed to honor and magnify the grace and glory of God (Eph. 1:6, 12). Thus, our salvation is not the sole purpose of election. We were chosen for worship! We were chosen to "proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

In conclusion, we had better hope that divine election is true. For if it is not, there is no possibility that *anyone* will be saved, neither you, me, nor your friends and family members. Unless God chooses and sovereignly enables a person to come to faith, no one will ever believe in Jesus. The only hope we have for the salvation of anyone is God's sovereign, gracious, merciful election unto eternal life.

Discussion Questions

(1) What is the primary difference between the Arminian and the Calvinist understanding of divine election? Are they entirely incompatible with one another, or are the two sides really saying the same thing but with different points of emphasis?

(2) Does the Bible teach the notion of “corporate” or “class” election? What is it? Do Calvinists affirm some form of corporate election? Is it compatible with the notion of individual election? What is the difference between the two?

(3) What is the Arminian doctrine of prevenient grace? Is this concept taught in Scripture? Why does the Arminian insist on the necessity of prevenient grace?

(4) Why do people so often reject the Calvinist doctrine of unconditional election? What are some of the misconceptions of it that contribute to this resistance? Be specific. Do you embrace unconditional election? Describe your own theological journey on this subject. What have been the greatest obstacles to your embracing of unconditional election?

(5) Read again this statement from the notes. Then analyze it. Is it true? How does understanding this overcome the objections we so often hear to unconditional election? Here it is.

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(6) Is election conditional upon God’s foreknowledge of our faith in Jesus? Is this biblical? If so, what texts support it? If it isn’t biblical, what role does divine foreknowledge play in our salvation?