

Sovereign Grace, Chapter 2

Chosen by God: The Doctrine of Unconditional Election

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One of the fundamental doctrines that underlie the biblical teaching that men are saved by the grace of God alone is the doctrine of election. The doctrine of election refers to God's choice of a certain number of people out of fallen humanity, who in history would receive all the merits of Christ's redemptive work and thus be truly, actually and eternally saved. God's choice takes place *before* creation; has absolutely nothing to do with any foreseen merit in man including a foreseen faith or repentance; and, is based solely upon God's own sovereign good pleasure.¹ An excellent definition of this doctrine is set forth in the Canons of Dort:

Now election is the immutable purpose of God, whereby, before the foundations of the world were laid, he has, according to the most free good pleasure of his own will, of mere grace, chosen out of the whole human race, fallen by its own fault from its primeval integrity into sin and destruction, a certain number of persons, neither better nor more deserving than others but with them involved in a common misery, unto salvation in Christ; whom even from eternity he had appointed Mediator and Head of all the elect and the foundation of salvation; and therefore he has decreed to give them unto him to be saved....²

¹ This study of election is limited to the doctrine of *individual* election. The Word of God also speaks of a corporate national election as was the case of Old Testament Israel (e.g., see Deut. 10:14-15). The reason that corporate election will not be considered is that national election involves the whole visible church which is composed of both wheat and tares, true believers and hypocrites, faithful saints and wicked apostates (e.g., read Mt. 3:12; 13:24, 25, 47; 7:21-23; 1 Jn. 2:19-20; 2:27; 5:4; etc). Individual election deals solely with those elected to salvation (true Israel, the invisible church, the remnant, real believers). Within the elect nation of Israel, Paul says, there is "a remnant according to the election of grace" (Rom. 11:5). In other words, in the visible church—the elect nation—there were many who were not elect individually. The reason that we must note this biblical distinction between national and individual election is that some Arminian apologists attempt to blur this distinction in order to justify universal atonement and the idea that real believers can fall away and go to hell.

² First Head of Doctrine, Article 7. William Hendriksen, translator, as quoted in Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953) 2:353. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (the pinnacle of Reformed confessional thought) treats the doctrine of election under the topic of God's eternal decree. Some helpful sections of this chapter reads as follows: "V. Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of his free grace and love alone, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto; and all to the praise of his glorious grace. VI. As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath he, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, foreordained all the means thereunto. Wherefore they who are elected being fallen in Adam are redeemed by Christ, are effectually called unto faith in Christ by his Spirit working in due season; are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power through faith unto salvation. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only. VII. The rest of mankind, God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice."

In order to emphasize the fact that God's election or choice of certain sinners to be saved is not based upon anything that the sinner himself does, Reformed theologians refer to election to eternal life as unconditional election. Because the doctrine of election has been redefined and essentially turned upside down by professing Christians since the days of the Reformation, our study will interact with and refute the popular Arminian interpretation of this doctrine. First, however, we will briefly examine the clearest, most succinct and detailed passage on election in the Bible—Ephesians 1:3ff.

The Apostle's Definition of Election

The teaching that God from eternity, before the world was even created, chose a definite number of people to be saved comes from the pen of the Apostle Paul. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will" (Eph. 1:3-5). This statement is amazing and merits a careful analysis. We are told that God the Father has blessed us, that is, Christians or believers, with every spiritual blessing. These blessings are designated spiritual because they are derived from the Holy Spirit who applies Christ's perfect work of redemption to our souls. When Paul says "*every* spiritual blessing...in Christ" he means that every aspect of redemption that Jesus accomplished for His people (justification, sanctification, adoption, glorification) is ours (i.e. true believers).

In verse four we come to the section of Paul's statement that is controversial. Paul says that all the blessings of salvation that believers have, have their source in the electing love of God the Father. Divine election is the source or origin of every Christian's salvation. The word chose (Greek, *exelaxato*) means to elect. God elected us in Christ. This word is frequently avoided or redefined in evangelical churches because if God elected some (i.e. everyone in Christ) then by logical implication others are not elected. That is, they are left by God to perish in their sins. Because many professing Christians don't think such a view is democratic or fair, they turn this passage upside down and teach that God only chooses men who first choose Him. This view will be considered in a moment.

Note that election is in Christ. The elect are chosen to be in Jesus. Everyone chosen by God will be united to the Savior (their federal head and representative) and thus will receive everything merited for them by the Mediator (regeneration, the gift of the Holy Spirit, justification, definitive sanctification, perseverance, glorification). Thus, we see that the ultimate ground of our federal union with Christ is not our faith in Jesus; but, rather, our faith in the Savior is ultimately rooted in our federal union with Christ. Although we are not actually justified until we lay hold of Christ by faith in space and time, the gifts of regeneration (Jn. 3:8; Ac. 11:18) and faith (Eph. 2:8) would not be bestowed by Christ without first the divine election of particular sinners.

Paul then gives us the time when election took place. "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world" (v. 4). Before time began, before the universe even existed, in eternity God chose those who He wanted to save in Christ. This statement tells some very important things regarding God's plan of salvation. We see that everything relating to the salvation of sinners is worked out in exhaustive detail in God's mind before the world even exists. There are no areas or pockets of chance in God's universe. He works everything according to the counsel

of His own will. Nothing that happens can or will take God by surprise. What this all means is that in the salvation of particular sinners, the elect ones, there cannot be failure. Their salvation is certain. Thus, salvation is from the Lord (Jonah 2:9). Christians are not saved by anything they have done. They are not ultimately saved because they made a choice; but, because God chose them. In other words, according to His great love and mercy He saved us. What a blessed gospel! God reaches out and saves those who cannot save themselves.

This teaching is supported by verse 5, which says that God “predestined us to adoption as sons [i.e. to be part of His own family] by Jesus Christ...according to the good pleasure of His will.” The word predestined (Greek, *proorisas*) means to predetermine or to determine beforehand. In context the word beforehand can only mean before the foundation of the world. The word predestined repeats the same idea as contained in verse four: “He chose us...before the foundation of the world.” God decided before creation began exactly who would be a part of His saved people. Therefore, the number of the elect was set in granite before any humans even existed. To argue otherwise is to say that either God is not sovereign or that Paul, writing by divine inspiration, made a mistake. Such ideas are obviously unchristian and demonic.

God’s choosing, election or predestination of those people who are to be saved is said to be “according to the good pleasure of His will” (v. 5). This means that God’s choice of the elect has absolutely nothing to do with anything outside Himself. It is not based on the foreseen faith of those who would choose Christ as Wesley proclaimed. Indeed, it cannot be based on what man does because: man is dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1), spiritually blind (1 Cor. 2:14), hostile to God (Rom. 8:6-8) and completely unable to choose spiritual good (Rom. 8:6-8; Jn. 15:5; Ps. 14:3). Therefore, God must take the initiative in saving a people for Himself and that is exactly what He does when He chooses a people in Christ. Because election has everything to do with what God does and is not at all based on man’s initiative, theologians refer to it as *unconditional election*. The ground of election is God’s sovereign will, not the will or choice of men who are spiritually dead and unable to believe in Christ.

The *purpose* or goal of divine election is “that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love” (v. 4). Commentators are divided over whether or not the word holiness in verse 4 is subjective and designates sanctification or is objective and refers to justification (i.e. Christ’s perfect righteousness imputed to believers). If one believes it refers to sanctification the word “blameless” would refer to a person’s sinless perfection at the final resurrection. Whatever interpretation one follows, one thing is crystal clear. Election does not open the *possibility* of salvation, but *guarantees* its actual accomplishment. Election does not make salvation possible nor does it take men part of the way to heaven; rather, it takes sinners all the way to paradise to behold the face of God. “It does not merely bring him to conversion; it brings him to perfection. It purposes to make him *holy*—that is cleansed from all sin and separated entirely to God and to his service—and faultless—that is, without any blemish whatever (Phil. 2:15), like a perfect sacrifice.”³ Election is a God glorifying doctrine that ought to be precious to every Bible-believing Christian.

The Common “Evangelical” Redefinition of Election

The doctrine of election discussed above where God sovereignly chooses who will be saved, an election *not* conditional upon anything in man, is rejected and hated by many professing Christians in our day. Thus, they argue that election is not based upon God’s choice

³ John L. Girardeau, *Calvinism and Evangelical Arminianism* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle [1890] 1984), 78.

which is founded upon His own good pleasure (as we have just seen); but, upon God's foreknowledge of man's exercise of faith. In other words, before the world was created God looked down the corridors of history and took note of every single human being who believed in Jesus and then chose them. This popular, yet strange view, essentially teaches that God does not completely control His creation; that God's "good pleasure" has no role whatsoever in choosing the elect; that God is not really sovereign over His rational creatures; that God does not really save sinners but that sinners save themselves (with some help from God) and then God simply acknowledges what man has done. The reason that "evangelicals" have turned the doctrine of election upside down to where God does not elect men, but men elect God is their doctrine of "free will." The idea that man is sovereign over his own salvation must be protected at almost any cost.

How do "evangelicals" justify their upside down version of election? They do so with a peculiar interpretation of Romans 8:29: "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren." The word "foreknew" in this passage is said to simply mean that God knew something in advance. He knew before the foundation of the world which people would believe and repent and, on the basis of their actions, God chose them. There are a number of reasons why the common "evangelical" (i.e. Arminian) understanding of Romans 8:29 is unscriptural and impossible.

(1) The first reason is that the word "foreknow" (*pregno*, aorist active indicative of *proginosko*) does not simply mean to have an intellectual knowledge of something before it happens. Note the following considerations:

a) In Romans 8:29 foreknowledge is placed *before* predestination, while in Acts 2:23, God's predetermined plan ("predetermined," from *horizo*; "plan," *boulomai*—will, design or purpose) is placed *before* foreknowledge. "Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death." This fact of course does not mean that Scripture contradicts Scripture, but that God's omniscience and omnipotence are not separated, disjointed attributes. In other words, God's decree of what comes to pass and His foreknowledge of what will occur in the future are intimately connected. Because God is all powerful, determines and controls all things, His foreknowledge is a consequence (i.e. logically, for God's foreknowledge and decree occur simultaneously) of His eternal, fixed, counsel. God knows what will occur because He planned and ordained it.

The Ariminian idea that God looked down through time to see who would choose Him and then elected such persons implicitly denies the omnipotence and providence of God. If a human (a finite mortal) could look down the corridors of time, he would have the ability to choose people on the basis of their faith or something they did. But God who controls and sustains every aspect of creation (even subatomic particles, bacteria, viruses and insects) is not an impartial observer. He both knows *and controls*. If He sees a man believe, He gave that man the gift of faith and preordained his salvation. Calvin writes, "Peter doth teach that God did not only foresee that which befell Christ, but it was decreed by him. And hence must be gathered a general doctrine; because God doth no less show his providence in governing the whole world, than in appointing the death of Christ. Therefore, it belongeth to God not only to know before things to come, but of his own will to determine what he will have done."⁴

b) Further, the word "foreknow" when used of God's elect does not refer to a simple intellectual foresight or a knowing something cognitively before it happens, but rather refers to a selective knowledge which regards a person with favor and makes that person an object of love.

⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 1:97.

In other words, in Romans 8:29 Paul uses “foreknow” in the Old Testament/Hebraistic sense of *to love* beforehand.⁵ John Murray writes,

Although the term “foreknow” is used seldom in the New Testament, it is altogether indefensible to ignore the meaning so frequently given to the word “know” in the usage of Scripture; “foreknow” merely adds the thought of “beforehand” to the word “know.” Many times in Scripture “know” has a pregnant meaning which goes beyond that of mere cognition. It is used in a sense practically synonymous with “love,” to set regard upon, to know with particular interest, delight, affection, and action (cf. Gen. 18:19; Exod. 2:25; Psalm 1:6; 144:3; Jer. 1:5; Amos 3:2; Hosea 13:5; Matt. 7:23; 1 Cor. 8:3; Gal. 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:19; 1 John 3:1)...It means “whom he set regard upon” or “whom he knew from eternity with distinguishing affection and delight” and is virtually equivalent to “whom he foreloved.”⁶

God’s electing love originates from Himself, not out of foreseen faith or repentance. Therefore, when the Bible discusses individual election, it always grounds it in God and not sinful, depraved humanity. Election is “according to His good pleasure” (Eph. 1:9). It is “after the counsel of His own will” (Eph. 1:11).

This interpretation of “foreknow” in Romans 8:29 is supported by the simple fact that if we accept the Arminian interpretation that God predestinated men whose future history He foreknew, then the term would prove something totally unbiblical. Why? Because God foreknows the history of every man, woman and child who ever did or will ever live. Thus, the text would teach universalism. No Arminian believes that everyone including Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin will go to heaven. It is obvious that Pol Pot, Al Capone and Heinrich Himmler have not been predestinated to be conformed to the image of Christ.

The Arminian will object to the observation above by stating, “You are misrepresenting my position. I believe that only those people that God foreknew would choose Jesus are the ones He predestinated to life.” To this objection we ask one simple question. Where in the text of Scripture does it say this? One can read the Bible very carefully, cover to cover, and this statement or any like it cannot be found. “Where are the words you have added, ‘Whom he did foreknow to repent, to believe, and to persevere in grace’? I do not find them either in the

⁵ The Bible abounds with examples of the word “know” being used to describe an intimate relationship, personal relation or love. “Now Adam knew Eve his wife and she conceived and bore Cain” (Gen. 4:1; cf. 4:17, 25; 38:26; Jdg. 11:39; 1 Sam. 1:19; etc). “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you” (Jer. 1:5). “Those who handle the law did not know Me; the rulers also transgressed against Me” (Jer. 2:8). “You only have I known of all the families of the earth” (Amos 3:2). “And then I will declare to them, I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!” (Mt. 7:23). “I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep” (Jn. 10:14-15). “Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal; The Lord knows those who are His” (2 Tim. 2:19). Lenski writes, “It is plain that in his omniscience God knew, knows, and foreknew all men. When Jesus says regarding the wicked on judgment day that he never knew them, and when in contrast it is so repeatedly said regarding the Lord and regarding Jesus that they know the godly, we at once see that in all these statements ‘to know,’...is used in a pregnant sense, which usage our dogmatists well define as *noscere (nosse) cum affectu et effectu*, ‘to know with affection and with a resultant effect.’ The dictionaries would do well to adopt this definition, because nothing that is more exact and to the point has been produced. Now [*epiginoskein*] dates this affectionate and effective knowing back into eternity. This is the whole story” (*The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* [Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg (1936, 45) 1961], 557).

⁶ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 317.

English version or in the Greek original.”⁷ Sadly, Arminian theologians and interpreters are guilty of reading their own prejudices, presuppositions and humanistic traditions into the text of Scripture. While the Arminian interpretation is very popular and appeals to our fleshly egos and our human autonomy, we must reject it because it has no exegetical basis in Scripture. We must “bow to holy Scripture...not to glosses which theologians may choose to put upon it.”⁸ Since the Arminian interpretation contradicts Scripture, is not found in the text at all and is absurd we will choose the biblical and logical alternative: that the word “know” in this passage refers to God’s saving love and favor.

c) The Arminian interpretation that the word “know” is purely intellectual is decisively refuted by the immediate context of Romans 8:29. The context of Romans 8:29 does not teach that God chooses on the basis of what man will do in the future. Paul does not say that man is ultimately sovereign in salvation. He says the exact opposite. In Romans 8:30ff the apostle teaches that God’s love is not a passive, helpless love that sits by and waits to see what sinful, lost, hopeless men will do; but, rather, the passage sets forth a sovereign active love, a love that nothing can impede, stop or override. Paul writes,

Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: “For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.” Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:30-39).

The interpretation that foreknowledge is merely the recognition that certain people will exercise faith sometime in the future—a faith that is solely dependent on man and that can fail at any time—simply contradicts Paul’s emphasis on God’s determinative action in salvation. Paul presents a chain of events, all of which are dependent solely upon God. The apostle is teaching a monergistic doctrine of salvation. That salvation depends solely upon divine choice and action. He emphasizes that God is the one who predestinates, calls, justifies, and then glorifies. Furthermore, it is Christ who achieved an objective, perfect redemption and who intercedes at the right hand of God for His people (v. 34). The three actions (called, justified, and glorified) which inevitably flow from God’s eternal counsel cannot be separated. “The future glorification of the believer is designated by the aorist, as his justification, calling, predestination, and election

⁷ Charles H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon’s Expository Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 7:22.

⁸ Ibid. Girardeau writes, “The testimony in Eph. i. 4 is indisputable. Arminians are compelled to evade it. For example, Wesley says upon the text: “As he hath chosen us”—both Jews and Gentiles, whom he foreknew as believing in Christ.’ That is, he chose us because he foreknew that we would be holy. But Paul says just the opposite: he chose us that we should be holy. So clear is the affirmation that holiness is the effect of election, that even Meyer and Ellicott both acknowledge that the Greek infinitive rendered ‘that we should be’ is one of intention—in order that we should be holy” (*Calvinism and Evangelical Arimianism*, 69).

have been; because all these divine acts are eternal, and therefore simultaneous for the divine mind. All are equally certain.”⁹ Paul emphasizes that salvation is certain for the elect because “God is for us” (v. 31).

Salvation is guaranteed by God’s electing love and predestinating power. Such a doctrine is totally incompatible with the idea that everything boils down to the “free” choice of people who are “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1), who could lose their faith and salvation at any moment. Since it is God alone who saves, Paul can affirm that nothing created can separate the elect from God’s love (v. 39). Nothing created—not even man’s will—has veto power over the elect’s final salvation. “He has shown how the present pilgrimage of the people of God falls into its place in that determinate and undefeatable plan of God that is bounded by two foci, the sovereign love of God in his eternal counsel and glorification with Christ in the age to come.”¹⁰ Girardeau writes, “Whatsoever, then, may be, according to the Arminian view, the love of God towards his saints, it is a love which does not secure their salvation: it is not a saving love. It is not equal to the love which a mother cherishes for her child. She would save him if she could. This reputed divine love may be called a special love, but it is not the love for his saints which the Scriptures assign to God. The idea of it was not born of inspiration: God never claimed such love as his own.”¹¹ “What God is assuring his children in Romans 8:29 is not that He has foreseen our favourable response to his call when the time comes and has therefore decided that we shall duly be conformed to the image of his Son. It is rather that he loved us in anticipation and determined, for reasons entirely hidden from us, that we should be conformed to the image of his Son by an act of his sovereign grace.”¹² Therefore, Christians can be “confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6).

(2) The Arminian interpretation of Romans 8:29 contradicts the biblical teaching that salvation is by the pure grace of God. If (as modern evangelicals assert) God’s predestination of the elect is based on something that men do such as faith and repentance, then ultimately conversion is not entirely a work of God’s grace. Faith and repentance are no longer gifts of God’s grace¹³ but are autonomous, self-generated acts of the human will. Men are no longer saved by or through faith (Rom. 3:22, 25, 28, 30; 5:1; Eph. 2:8), but rather *because* of faith. According to the Arminian interpretation “it is not God and God alone who works salvation...the

⁹ William G. T. Shedd, *Romans*, 266.

¹⁰ John Murray, *Romans*, 321.

¹¹ John L. Girardeau, 69.

¹² Arthur C. Custance, *The Sovereignty of Grace* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1981), 139-140.

¹³ The Bible explicitly teaches that faith and repentance are not self-generated, but are gifts from God. Note the following passages. *Ephesians 2:8*, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.” Paul teaches that not only are we saved by faith in opposition to works, but even our faith does not originate in ourselves. It is also a gift of God. *Philippians 1:29* says, “For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake. 2 Peter 1:2-3 reads, “Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and Godliness.” Jesus said, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me” (Jn. 6:44-45). *Acts 11:18* reads, “When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, ‘Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.’” *Acts 16:14* says, “Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul.”

actual enjoyment of salvation hangs at a decisive point upon something in man, or something done by man.”¹⁴

Martin Luther repudiates the idea that God cannot save man unless man allows Him to dispense His grace. In his exposition of 1 Peter 1:2 he writes,

V. 2a. *According to the foreknowledge of God the Father.* Peter says they are elected. How? Not by themselves, but according to the order or purpose of God. For we will not be able to raise ourselves to heaven nor create faith in ourselves. God will not permit all persons to enter heaven; he will very definitely identify his own. Here the human doctrine of free will and or our own ability avails nothing any longer. It does not depend upon our will but upon the will and election of God.

This means that you are chosen, you have not obtained it through your own strength, work or merit, for the treasure is too great, and all the holiness and righteousness of mankind far too worthless to obtain it; moreover you were heathen, knew nothing of God, had no hope and served dumb idols. Therefore, without any assistance on your part, out of pure grace you have come to such inexpressible glory, namely, only in the way that God the Father appointed you to it from eternity. Thus he presents the foreknowledge of God in a very beautiful and comfortable light, as it he should have said: You are chosen and you will indeed remain so, for God who foreknew you is sufficiently strong and certain that his foreknowledge cannot fail him, nevertheless so far as you believe his promise and esteem him as the true God.

From this we can in brief draw the teaching that this foreknowledge does not rest upon our worthiness and merit, as the sophists hold, for then Satan could every moment make it doubtful and overthrow it; but it rests in the hand of God, and is founded upon his mercy, which is unchangeable and eternal; consequently it is called the foreknowledge of God, and therefore it is certain and cannot fail.¹⁵

Further, Romans 9:11-18 makes it abundantly clear that election has nothing to do with what we do and everything to do with God’s calling. As Paul concludes, “So then it is not of him who wills [i.e. election is not a result of men exercising their free will or choosing God], nor of him who runs [i.e. it has nothing to do with human exertion or works], but of God who shows mercy” (Rom. 9:16). As Augustine so beautifully states in his Confessions: “By your gift I had come totally not to will what I had willed but to will what you willed” (9:1).¹⁶ Interestingly, one of Paul’s proofs that the gospel is the power of God is that “the world through wisdom did not know God” (1 Cor. 1:21). “[T]he weakness of God is stronger than men. For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called...God has chosen, the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence...as it is written, ‘He who glories, let him glory in the LORD’” (1 Cor. 1:25, 28, 29, 31).

Reformer Martin Luther understood that attributing our salvation to a human choice (i.e. “free will”) ultimately destroys the grace of God:

Granted that your friends assign to “free will as little as possible”, nonetheless they teach us that by that little we can attain righteousness and grace; and they solve the problem as

¹⁴ Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 70.

¹⁵ Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1982), 10-11.

¹⁶ Augustine as quoted in Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 468.

to why God justifies one and abandons another simply by presupposing “free-will”, and saying: “the one endeavoured and the other did not; and God regards the one for his endeavour and despises the other; and He would be unjust were He to do anything else!” ...They [the guardians of “free will”] do not believe that He intercedes before God and obtains grace for them by His blood, and “grace” (as is here said) “for grace.” And as they believe, so it is unto them. Christ is in truth an inexorable judge to them, and deservedly so; for they abandon Him in His office as a Mediator and kindest Saviour, and account His blood and grace as of less worth than the efforts and endeavors of “free-will”!¹⁷

The apostle Paul says that the biblical doctrine of salvation completely excludes human boasting (Rom. 3:27). Yet, if Arminianism is true and some people have the wisdom and moral perception to choose Christ while others do not, then do they not have a reason to boast? If some men on the basis of their own intrinsic power and faith have caused God to choose them over others (who were unwilling), then do they not have a reason to brag? Of course they do! Therefore, Arminianism cannot be true for it repeatedly contradicts Paul’s teaching. But, if men are dead in trespasses and sins and totally unable by their own will or power to respond to Christ until He raises them from the dead through regeneration, then there is no reason to boast. The biblical gospel preserves the doctrines of grace of which divine election is so integral a part.

(3) The Arminian interpretation of Romans 8:29 explicitly contradicts the doctrine of original sin or man’s state after the fall (e.g., total depravity and spiritual inability). If God’s choice is contingent on fallen man’s prior choice, then no one would be elect for Paul says, “There is none who understands...who seeks God...who does good, no not one” (Rom. 3:11, 12). The Bible teaches that unsaved, unregenerate men hate both Christ and the truth (Jn. 3:19-21). Unregenerate fallen man: dwells in darkness (Jn. 1:4-5); is dead spiritually (Eph. 2:1-5); has a heart of stone which is unable to respond to divine truth (Ezek. 11:19); is helpless (Ezek. 16:4-6); is unable to repent (Jer. 13:23); is enslaved to Satan (Ac. 26:17-18); and is unable to see or comprehend divine truth (1 Cor. 2:14). Unconditional election is the logical corollary to total depravity. Thus Jesus Christ taught: “*No one* can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him.... *No one* can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father” (Jn. 6:44, 65). An unregenerate man can no more choose Christ as Savior than can a rotting corpse raise itself.

Since the Bible teaches that the fall has rendered man incapable of believing in Christ and repenting, the idea that God looked through time and chose those who first chose him is absurd and impossible. That is why the Bible teaches that faith and repentance are gifts from God (cf. Jn. 3:3-8; 6:44-45, 65; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29; 2 Pet. 1:2, 3). “For unless God by sovereign, operative grace had turned our enmity to love and our disbelief to faith we would never yield the response of faith and love.”¹⁸ Furthermore, the biblical passages which teach unconditional election are clear and abundant.

(4) The Arminian doctrine of a conditional election is an implicit denial of the sovereignty of God. “Evangelicals” who emphatically reject the doctrine of unconditional election, foreknowledge (biblically defined) and predestination do so because they believe that God’s prior sovereign choice and predestination infringes on human freedom. Consequently, the Arminian’s concept of free will or human freedom becomes the presuppositional axis of their

¹⁷ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, Translated by J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnson (Cambridge: Jones Clark, 1957), 292, 305.

¹⁸ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 100.

whole theological system. It completely alters their concept of God and their doctrine of salvation.

For example, the Arminian is well aware that the Bible teaches that God is sovereign (read 1 Chron, 29:11-14; 2 Chron. 20:6; Job 12:10-23; 36:32; 42:2; Gen. 45:7; 50:20; Ex. 2:1-10; 4:11, 21; 7:3, 13; 8:15; 9:12, 35; Deut. 2:30; Prov. 21:1, 30; 19:21; 20:24; Isa. 40:15-23; 14:24, 27; 46:10, 11; 45:7; Am. 3:6; Dan. 4:31-32; Jn. 6:44, 45, 67; 17:2, 6, 9, 12; 12:37-40; 15:16; Ac. 2:23; 4:28; 13:48; 16:14; 18:27; Rom. 9; Eph. 1:1ff, Ja. 1:17-18; etc).¹⁹ But in order to preserve his philosophical concept of human freedom he proposes the idea of a self-limiting God. In other words, God voluntarily limited His absolute sovereign power so that He would not intrude upon man's free will. This humanistic presupposition is foundational to the idea that man *allows* God to elect him. (In other words, in the sphere of salvation man is sovereign over God). But this self-limiting concept raises a few pertinent questions. Is it possible for God to suppress, negate or alter one of His essential attributes? Can God somehow voluntarily cease to be absolutely sovereign over certain aspects of His creation? The biblical answer to this question is absolutely not. God, the Bible tells us, cannot deny Himself (2 Tim. 2:13). He can no more cease to be sovereign than could He lie, for to do so would be to deny Himself. The idea that God can create an area of pure contingency outside of His control is just as unbiblical and absurd as teaching that God could create some part of creation that could exist without God's sustaining power. It is simply impossible. In his zeal to protect his humanistic concept of human freedom, the Arminian must posit a God who can cease to be God.

Further, if man is to be truly free from all outside influences and forces as Arminian theology requires, then man would have to be a self-created, truly autonomous, self-sustaining being. But, that is obviously not the case. Robert L. Reymond writes,

There simply is no such thing as a will which is detached from and totally independent of the person making the choice—suspended, so to speak, in midair and enjoying some “extra-personal vantage point” from which to determine itself. The will is the “mind choosing” (Edwards). Men choose the things they do because of the complex, finite persons that they are. They cannot will to walk on water or to flap their arms and fly. Their choices in such matters are restricted by their physical capabilities. Similarly, their moral choices are also determined by the total complexion of who they are. And the Bible informs us that men are not only finite but are *now* also sinners, who by nature *cannot* bring forth good fruit (Matt. 7:18), by nature *cannot* hear Christ's word that they might have life (John 8:43), by nature *cannot* be subject to the law of God (Rom. 8:7), by nature *cannot* discern truths of the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:14), by nature *cannot* confess from the heart Jesus as Lord (1 Cor. 12:3), by nature *cannot* control the tongue (James 3:8), and by nature *cannot* come to Christ (John 6:44, 65). In order to do any of these things,

¹⁹ The Bible unequivocally teaches that God, according to His own good pleasure, determines the destiny of every single human being. *Psalm 75:7* says that God “puts down one, and exalts another.” *1 Samuel 2:7* says, “The Lord makes poor and makes rich; He brings low and lifts up.” *Deuteronomy 8:18* reads, “Remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth.” *Daniel 4:17* declares, “The Most High rules in the kingdom of men, [and] gives it to whomever He will.” *Daniel 2:21*, “He removes kings and raises up kings; He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding.” When Pilate attempted to intimidate Christ by speaking of his great authority Jesus said in *John 19:11*, “You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above.” The God of the Bible has providential control over all the affairs of men. If we deny this fact in order to assert human freedom, then we do not believe in the true living God with whom we have to deal. Although God is totally sovereign, man is a valid secondary agent who is responsible for all his actions. (This point is discussed below.)

they must receive powerful aid coming to them *ab extra*. So there simply is no such thing as a free will which can always choose the right.²⁰

Additional Biblical Evidence for Unconditional Election

Although the evidence for unconditional election presented thus far is strong and irrefutable, there are other passages that clearly affirm this doctrine.²¹

(1) In Acts 13:48 Luke says that only those men who were appointed by God to eternal life believed. “Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.” The Greek word *tetagmenoi*, which is translated as ordained (KJV, ASV, RSV), appointed (NKJV, NASB, Berkeley, Young’s Literal Translation of the Bible) and destined (JB) is the passive form of the verb *tasso* which (as might be expected) means to ordain, or to appoint. The fact that the verb is passive indicates that these people did not ordain themselves but were chosen by an outside agent—God the Father. “In the Greek, the form *were ordained* is a passive participle in the perfect tense. The perfect denotes action that took place in the past but is relevant for the present.”²² God predestined the salvation of particular persons even among the Gentiles. Thus, Luke, writing under divine inspiration, explicitly endorses the doctrine of unconditional election. These people believed in Christ because God first appointed them to eternal life. Therefore, this passage explicitly contradicts the idea that election is God’s response to man’s faith. God’s choice of a person to be saved is the cause, not the effect, of that person’s faith in Christ. Therefore, God receives all the glory for our salvation and we have no reason to boast.

Why then, do some people believe and others disbelieve? According to Luke, the difference is not that some people are smarter, wiser or more holy than others, but that God has chosen or ordained some to life and passed by the rest. If you believe in Christ it is because God chose you and gave you the ability to believe by the mighty power of the Holy Spirit. God drew you to Christ and turned your stony heart into a heart of flesh. He turned your enmity toward the Savior into love and delight. God makes the unwilling, willing. Calvin writes,

²⁰ Robert Reymond, 353-354.

²¹ There are so many passages that teach or at least imply the doctrine of unconditional election that we do not have the time or space to treat each passage. For further study examine the following passages. *1 Kings 19:18*, “I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal.” *Rom. 11:5-6*, “Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer of works.” *Rom. 8:30*, “Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified and whom He justified, these He also glorified.” *Gal. 1:15-16*, “But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me...” *Eph. 1:11*, “In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will.” *1 Thess. 1:4*, “knowing beloved brethren your election by God.” *2 Tim. 1:8-9*, “...God who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began.” *1 Peter 1:2*, “...elect according to the foreknowledge of God in the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.” *Revelation 7:4*, “And I heard the number of those who were sealed. One hundred and forty-four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel were sealed. *James 1:18*, “Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.” The Bible also teaches a foreordination to condemnation. *Rom. 9:13, 22*, “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated...God...endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction.” *1 Peter 2:8*, “They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they were appointed.” *Jude 4*, “For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation...”

²² Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 496.

[T]his ordaining must be understood of the eternal counsel of God alone....And this place teacheth that faith dependeth upon God's election. And assuredly, seeing that the whole race of mankind is blind and stubborn, those diseases stick fast in our nature until they are redressed by the grace of the Spirit, and that redressing floweth from the fountain of election alone. For in that of two which hear the same doctrine together, the one showeth himself apt to be taught, the other continueth in his obstinancy. It is not, therefore, because God doth lighten [illumine] the former, and doth not vouchsafe the other the like grace....though our heavenly Father invited all men into the faith by the external voice of man, yet doth he not call effectually by his Spirit any save those whom He hath determined to save.²³

Those who reject predestination and unconditional election have attempted to circumvent the clear meaning of this passage in two different ways. First, there are people who simply ignore the meaning of the Greek and twist the passage so that it means what they would like it to mean. Thus, the Arminian translator of the Living Bible translates Acts 13:48b as follows: "...and as many as wanted eternal life believed." Not only does this translation completely pervert the meaning of the original Greek, but it also assumes something quite ridiculous. Apparently, those who did not believe did so because they did not want eternal life. In other words, they didn't believe because they preferred the eternal tortures hell over paradise. They must have been sadomasochists! Another arbitrary translation comes from the pen of the old heretic Socinius who invented his own Greek grammar to have the passage say, "...as many as believed, were ordained to eternal life." Socinius held to the view that, if the Bible doesn't say what one thinks it should, then one should switch the words around until it does.

Second, a more sophisticated method for avoiding the doctrine of foreordination is to argue that the verb is not passive but middle: "...as many as were disposed to eternal life believed." (In the Greek language passive and middle verbs have the same ending.) Such a translation must be rejected for the following reasons: a) Such a translation ignores the analogy of Scripture and the entire New Testament which teaches that God ordains or predestinates and not man (cf. Rom. 8:28-29; 9:11; Eph. 1:4; 1 Tim. 1:9; 1 Cor. 1:26-29; 1Pet. 1:2, etc). b) It ignores the context of the book of Acts which teaches that no man is able to put himself in God's debt by his own powers or works (Ac. 8:19ff; 13:39; 16:14). "[W]henver this verb occurs elsewhere, it invariably expresses the exertion of power or authority, divine or human, and being in the passive voice, cannot denote mere disposition, much less self-determination, any more than the form used in 2, 40 above..."²⁴ c) The concept of being disposed to eternal life as a cause of believing is odd and foreign to Scripture. If we define dispose as having a natural inclination towards something, then would not everyone believe? How many people are there who would say that they do not want to go to heaven, but instead have a preference for the flames of hell? The issue in Scripture is never a preference for heaven or hell, but rather one's attitude toward Jesus Christ. On this issue the Bible is crystal clear. No one has a natural disposition towards the Savior unless they were appointed to life by God and their hearts are changed by a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, one should not be surprised to discover that all the ancient translations (including the Latin Vulgate, Syriac, and Arabic as well as virtually all modern translations

²³ John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 1:555-6.

²⁴ J. A. Alexander, *Acts of the Apostles* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1857] 1991), 43.

(Living Bible excepted) translate *tetamenoi* as the passive: “were ordained, or appointed.” Given the biblical evidence we must heed the wisdom of C. H. Spurgeon on this passage:

Attempts have been made to prove that these words do not teach predestination, but these attempts so clearly do violence to language that I shall not waste time in answering them. I read, “As many as were ordained to eternal life believed” and I shall not twist the text but shall glorify the grace of God by ascribing to that grace the faith of every man. Is it not God who gives the disposition to believe? If men are disposed to have eternal life, does not He—in every case—dispose them? Is it wrong for God to give grace? If it be right for Him to give it—is it wrong for Him to purpose to give it? Would you have Him give it by accident? If it is right for Him to purpose to give grace today, it was right for Him to purpose it before today—and, since He changes not—from eternity.²⁵

(2) In Romans chapter 9 Paul gives a very detailed explanation of divine election: “[F]or the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls.... As it is written, ‘Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.’ What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.’ So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy” (vs. 11, 13-16). If one has ever wondered why some people become Christians and others continue in darkness, he need only read Romans 9:6-24. Paul argues that the reason some are saved and others are damned is that God so willed it. Paul says that God ultimately decides who receives mercy. Election reflects God’s will and purpose: “it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy” (Rom. 9:16).

In order to emphasize God’s sovereignty over salvation (out of the whole Old Testament), Paul chooses the twin brothers Jacob and Esau as a case study in divine election. Paul sets out to prove that election to salvation flows solely from God’s will and purpose; that one’s blood line, parentage, upbringing, actions, or human choice have *nothing* to do with election. Note that Jacob and Esau were twins. They were conceived at the same moment and born only minutes apart. Unlike the case of Isaac and Ishmael who had different mothers, one being an Egyptian slave (Hagar), Jacob and Esau had the same mother, Rebekah. Both were covenant children born of the patriarch Isaac. Their conception was a miraculous answer to prayer (Gen. 25:21). From a human standpoint, if anyone had the advantage it was Esau who was the first born (Gen. 25:25) and favored by Isaac his father (Gen. 25:28). Furthermore, in order to make it absolutely clear that election has nothing to do with human merit or choice, Paul says that God chose one to salvation (Jacob) and one to reprobation (Esau) before they were even born; before either had done good or evil. Why is it that some people believe in Christ and others do not? Because God has mercy on some and others He hardens (Rom. 9:18). Ultimately God makes the difference. Paul reasons as “plainly as language can express the idea, the ground of the choice is not in those chosen, but in God who chooses.”²⁶

There are a number of objections that have been raised against the doctrine of unconditional election as taught by Paul in Romans 9. First, it is said that when the passage says God hated Esau, it really means that God loved him less than He loved Jacob. Although the word hate can sometimes be used in Scripture to mean to love less (e.g., Lk. 14:26), the context of the

²⁵ C. H. Spurgeon, quoted in George Sayles Bishop, *The Doctrines of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954), 171.

²⁶ Charles Hodge, *Romans* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1835] 1989), 309.

passage quoted by Paul (Mal. 1:2-3) and Romans 9 itself indicate that in this instance hate does *not* mean to love less. “The context of Mal. 1:2-3 is one of judgment, punishment, indignation: ‘...Esau have I hated, and made his mountains a desolation.... They will build, but I will throw down.’”²⁷ If Paul meant to love less, then why compare Esau to Pharaoh, whom God destroyed? God killed Pharaoh’s firstborn son and then drowned Pharaoh in the Red Sea. If a person slit the throat of your firstborn son and then drowned you in the backyard swimming pool, would you regard that person as loving you less? Also, why would Paul explain what he meant by saying that those hated beforehand are “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction” (v. 22). They are lumps formed by God for dishonor (v. 21). It is obvious that hate in Rom. 9:13 does not mean and cannot mean to love less.

Another objection is that Paul is not really referring to individual election, but the election of nations. Were not Jacob and Esau both the father of nations? Indeed they were. But the context of the passage indicates that here Paul is not at all concerned with collective or national election, but is explaining why “they are not all Israel, who are of Israel” (Rom. 9:6). Paul is explaining the distinction between Israel and *true* Israel. He wants his reader to understand why so many within the elect nation do not believe. This brings Paul to a lengthy discussion of individual election so that all may understand: they are not all elect (individually), who are of elect Israel (nationally). Furthermore, according to the Arminian conception of justice and fairness “is it not equally unjust of God to choose one nation and leave another? The argument which they imagine overthrows us overthrows them also. There never was a more foolish subterfuge than that of trying to bring out national election. What is the election of a nation, but the election of so many units, of so many people?—and it is tantamount to the same thing as the particular election of individuals. In thinking, men cannot see clearly that if—which we do not for a moment believe—there be any injustice in God choosing one man and not another, how much more must there be injustice in choosing one nation and not another. No! The difficulty cannot be got rid of thus, but is greatly increased by this foolish wresting of God’s Word.”²⁸

The most common objection is: “That’s not fair!” Paul himself anticipates such a response in verse 14: “What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God?” Many people think that the doctrine of predestination, where God foreordains some to salvation and others to destruction before they are even born, is unjust. Although such a response may be natural for the unregenerate and those ignorant of theology, it should never be the response of a Christian. Paul, after posing the question, says, “Certainly not!” (v.14) Furthermore, “It is not for their being passed by that they are punished, but for their sins. Their being passed by is a sovereign act: their condemnation is a judicial act of God in His capacity as a Judge. ‘*Salvation is all of grace; damnation all of sin.* Salvation [is] of God from first to last—the Alpha and the Omega; but damnation [is] of men not of God: and if you perish at your own hands must your blood be required’ (C. H. Spurgeon).”²⁹

²⁷ William Hendriksen, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 323. “What we find in Malachi 1:1-5 is illustrated by instances in the Old Testament where God’s hatred is mentioned and where either persons or things are the objects (cf. Psalms 5:5; 11:5; Prov. 6:16; 8:13; Is. 1:14; 61:8; Jer. 44:4; Hos. 9:15; Amos 5:21; Zech. 8:17; Mal. 2:16). The divine reaction could scarcely be reduced to that of not loving or loving less. Thus the evidence would require, to say the least, the thought of disfavor, disapprobation, displeasure” (Murray, *Romans*, 2:22).

²⁸ C. H. Spurgeon, sermon on Jacob and Esau, in William MacLean, *Arminianism: Another Gospel* (Gisborne, New Zealand: Westminster Standard, 1965), 16-17.

²⁹ MacLean, *Arminianism: Another Gospel*, 15.

Why does Paul have such an emphatic, negative reaction to the objection that divine election is unfair and unjust? Perhaps the apostle is outraged at the thought of finite sinful beings assuming they are competent to sit in judgment over the secret, eternal determinations of the triune God. “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and our children forever” (Dt. 29:29). Perhaps Paul thinks that sinners who are selfish, narrow-minded, subjective, have an ax to grind against God and understand so little about God’s justice and plan ought to keep quiet. Such people “assume that we are competent to sit in judgment on God’s government of the universe; that we can ascertain the end He has in view, and estimate aright the wisdom and justice of the means adopted for its accomplishment. This is clearly a preposterous assumption, not only because of our utter incapacity to comprehend the ways of God, but also because we must of necessity judge before the consummation of his plan, and must also from appearances.”³⁰

Further, a fatal problem with the objection that predestination or unconditional election makes God unjust is the simple fact that all human beings, because of the sin of Adam and their own sins, *deserve* eternal damnation. “There is none righteous, no, not one; There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. They have all gone out of the way; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10-13). God could justly send every human being to hell. He is not obligated to save anyone. If God had not (because of His love) elected some to life and sent His only begotten Son to die, *no one* would go to heaven. “Shall we not fix it once for all in our minds that salvation is the right of no man; that a ‘chance’ to save himself is no ‘chance’ of salvation for any; and that, if any of the sinful race of man is saved, it must be by a miracle of almighty grace, on which he has no claim, and, contemplating which as a fact, he can only be filled with wondering adoration of the marvels of the inexplicable love of God? To demand that all criminals shall be given a ‘chance’ of escaping their penalties, and that all shall be given an ‘equal chance,’ is simply to mock at the very idea of justice, and no less, at the very idea of love.”³¹ This explains why election is always presented in Scripture as according to God’s will and purpose and *not* man’s merit. Paul goes on to quote Exodus 33:19 in response. The key to understanding election for Paul is God’s mercy. “For He says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion’” (Rom. 9:15). What is mercy? Mercy is the unmerited or undeserved favor of God. “Compassion has to do with recognizing the poor or helpless state of a person and stooping to help that person. Mercy does the same, but its unique quality is that it is shown to people not only who do not deserve it, but who in fact deserve the opposite. In this case, mercy describes the giving of salvation to people who actually deserve to perish.”³²

The Arminian thinks he is avoiding the common objection of unfairness by making the ultimate cause of election man’s choice of Christ. However, this supposed solution to the question of fairness does not really address the “problem.” The Bible clearly teaches that no one can be saved apart from Christ (Acts 4:12; Jn. 14:6; 15:5; 1 Jn. 5:12; Rom. 10:13). Yet throughout the history of mankind, very few people have had the opportunity to hear the gospel. If God was trying to meet this human, unscriptural standard of justice that under girds Arminianism, would He not give every person in history an opportunity to hear the gospel? Yet, the biblical account shows that God in the Old Covenant era focused His attention on a tiny nation in Palestine while the rest of the world was left in complete ignorance and darkness. And

³⁰ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 2:350.

³¹ B. B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 80-81.

³² James Montgomery Boice, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 3:1070.

even in the New Covenant era, when God is gathering His elect from every nation, the vast majority of people have not heard the gospel. Paul was forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the Gospel in Asia, but rather was directed in a vision to go to Europe (Macedonia; cf. Ac. 16:6). God excluded some and focused on others. “It was the sovereign choice of God which brought the Gospel to the people of Europe and later to America, while the people of the east, and north, and south were left in darkness.”³³

Also consider that God is in total control of when and where each person is born, yet some individuals are born into households where they are taught false religions and philosophies while others are born into Christian households where they hear the gospel throughout childhood. One child is born in poverty to wicked parents who worship idols, and another is born into a middle-class Christian family where Christ is taught, honored, and worshipped daily. The Bible teaches that God has the power to open and close the womb (cf. Gen. 30:2-3). God could (if He wanted to meet the Arminian standard of fairness) only allow children to be born into godly Christian households. Furthermore, some are born more intelligent, trusting, kind, etc, than others. If God’s elective choice is dependent upon the foreseen faith of man, as the Arminian asserts, then election is *unjust*, because all men are not born into equal circumstances and all are not born with equal intellectual capabilities.

The doctrine of *unconditional* election is the only view of election which is just. The whole human race is dead in trespasses and sins, and under the just sentence of eternal damnation. But God, who is merciful, chooses “according to the good pleasure of His will” (Eph. 1:5) to save some. None are deserving. None are spiritually able. None have a spiritual advantage. They all are at the same point. Then, apart from anything in them, God saves some and passes by others. This is exactly what Paul is saying when sinful, guilty humanity is compared to the “same lump.” “Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?” (Rom. 9:21) “This scripture evidences that there is ‘no difference,’ in themselves, between the elect and the non-elect: they are all clay of ‘the same lump,’ which agrees with Eph. 2:3, where we are told, that all are *by nature* children of wrath.”³⁴ “The main idea Paul is putting across is this: if even a potter has the right out of the same lump or mass of clay to make one vessel for honor, and another for dishonor, then certainly God, our Maker, has the right, out of the same mass of human beings who by their own guilt have plunged themselves into the pit of misery, to elect some to everlasting life, and to allow others to remain in the abyss of wretchedness.”³⁵

Another fatal problem for the Arminian view of election as taught in Romans 9 is that if Paul is teaching that election is based not on God’s will, but human choice, the hypothetical objections that Paul raises to the doctrine don’t make any sense. If Esau was not elected because he did not exercise faith, why would anyone accuse God of injustice? The Arminian teaches that ultimately God had nothing to do with it. The objection raised in verse 19 (“You say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?’”) is obviously made against predestination. If (as Arminians erroneously assert) God cannot violate man’s free will, and salvation is merely a possibility which man sovereignly appropriates, why an objection against

³³Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 89. “If the Arminian theory were true, namely, that Christ died for all men and that the benefits of His death are actually applied to all men, we would expect to find that God had made some provision for the Gospel to be communicated to all men. The problem of the heathens, who live and die without the Gospel, has always been a thorny one for the Arminians who insist that all men have sufficient grace if they will but make use of it” (Boettner, 118).

³⁴ Arthur W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976 [1930]), 51.

³⁵ Hendriksen, *Romans*, 327.

God's absolute control of salvation and reprobation? Furthermore, the illustration developed above regarding the potter fashioning the clay solely as he pleases is also totally out of place. Unconditional election is a hated doctrine by most professing Christians today. Yet, the apostle Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, championed the doctrine and taught it with such clarity that one can only wonder how those who profess belief in the Bible can deny it.

It is truly sad that so many who profess the name of Christ hate the doctrine of unconditional election, for it is the heart of biblical religion and God-glorifying doctrine. What is more fundamental to biblical truth than the fact that salvation is a gift from God? "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, *which God prepared beforehand* that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:8-10). Those who hate the doctrine in reality hate God's sovereign grace. They would ignore the doctrine if they could, but since it is taught so clearly and often in the New Testament, they have no choice but to attempt to explain it away. Their main attempt—the idea that election is based on a foreseen faith—turns election into its very opposite: God does not elect man, but rather man elects God. Furthermore, *predestination* in such a scheme is really a *postdestination*. The Arminian viewpoint is unbiblical and illogical, for it makes the eternal counsel and choice of God contingent upon the choice of men who are spiritually dead and unable to choose Christ (apart from regeneration) and who do not even exist yet! The Arminian scheme has temporal events controlling and conditioning the eternal, unchanging will of God. In other words, the clay has control over the potter. The Arminian, by taking election out of God's hands and placing it in the hands of depraved man, has destroyed salvation by grace alone and replaced it with a humanistic synergism. Christ testified against such Scripture twisting when He said to His disciples: "You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you" (Jn. 15:16). Arminianism is unscriptural, irrational, and takes the glory due to God alone and bestows it upon sinful man.

(3) In John chapter 17 which contains Christ's solemn prayer to the Father after His farewell address, we find some very profound statements on the topic of election. After Jesus prays for Himself, He prays for those chosen by the Father. "You [the Father] have given eternal life to as many as You have given Him" (v. 2). "I pray for them, I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours" (v. 9). There are some important theological statements in our Lord's words.

a) Note that Jesus receives authority over the whole human race as a result of His redemptive obedience. "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Mt. 28:18). He is the "head of every man" (1 Cor. 11:3); the "head of all principality and power" (Col. 2:10). "Christ...is gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him" (1 Pet. 3:22). The reason the Mediator receives this authority is so that He can give eternal life to those given to Him by the Father. The ascended Savior sits at the right hand of God and gives the Holy Spirit to everyone who is to be saved. "'The first man Adam became a living being.' The last Adam became a life-giving spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45). Christ is sovereign over salvation and gives it only to the elect.

b) Jesus only gives eternal life to those persons given to Him by the Father. Why are the people who are to be saved described as a possession of the Father's that is given to the Son? Because, in the economy of salvation, it is the Father who chooses the elect. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as *He chose us in Him* before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:3-4). The Father takes what is His (the elect) and gives it as a love gift to the Son. "Beside the

power given unto Christ over all creatures, there are a certain number of men given by the Father unto Christ in the covenant of redemption, that he may redeem, take charge of, and be forthcoming for them....³⁶

All men without exception are commanded to repent and believe in Jesus. But, only those men chosen by God from all eternity who belong to the Father and are given to the Son will repent, believe and obtain eternal life. “This giving of men to the Son to be redeemed and saved is the same thing with election and predestination....All the elect are given from eternity to the Son, to be redeemed by His blood; and all the redeemed are in due time drawn by the Father to the Son [Jn. 6:44], to be kept to eternal life.”³⁷ Now we can understand the certainty of Christ’s glorious promise in John 10:27-29, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone 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 My Father’s hand.”

c) Note that Jesus does not pray for all men without exception, but only for the elect—those who are chosen and thus belong to the Father. The Savior prays and intercedes only for the elect and not for others because the elect are the possession of the Father. They have been given to the Son and are Christ’s also. Further, Jesus is glorified in them (v. 10). If (as Arminians assert) God is trying to save all men without exception, then why doesn’t the Savior pray for all men? The answer is simple. Christ only came to save His people, the elect, His sheep. Hendricksen writes,

It is with reference to (*peri*) the elect that Jesus is making request, in order that the full merits of his redemption may be applied to them, namely to *the given ones* (see on 6:37, 39, 44; 17:6). It is for these given ones that he lays down his life (see on 10:11, 14); hence, it is also *for them*—for them *alone*—that he makes (is constantly making) this request. See also Rom. 8:34 (“he makes intercession *for us*”); Heb. 7:25 (“he ever lives to make intercession *for those who draw near to God through him*”) 9:24 (“Christ entered into heaven itself, now to appear before the face of God *for us*”); and 1 John 2:1 (“We have a Helper with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous”).

All this is particular, not universal. Nevertheless, the prayer of the Highpriest looks beyond the men who were in the Upper Room that night, as is clear from verses 20 and 21. It is wrong, moreover, to say (as is sometimes done) that Jesus prayed only for *believers*. Rather, he prayed for *all* his people, also for those who as yet did not believe in him, but were going to accept him by true faith later on (again, see verses 20, 21), as the result of sovereign grace.³⁸

The topic of election is one that is hated and avoided by most professing Christians today. Yet our Lord’s most detailed and longest prayer for His saints is incomprehensible without it. The typical “evangelical” objections to this doctrine are irrational, weak and based on human concepts of fairness, not biblical exegesis.

(4) In 2 Thessalonians, Paul gives thanks to God for his brothers who have been loved by the Lord “because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth” (2:13). When Paul wants to comfort and reassure the Thessalonians

³⁶ George Hutcheson, *The Gospel of John* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1657] 1972), 353.

³⁷ Robert Trail as quoted in J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John* (Cambridge, England: James Clark, 1976), 3:197.

³⁸ William Hendricksen, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954), 2:354-355.

regarding their own participation in the coming deliverance on the day of the Lord he points them to divine election. They have been elected or chosen (*heilato*) by God from the beginning. “‘From the beginning’...dates this act of God’s, but not at the beginning when time began; *apo*, ‘from the beginning,’ dates from that extreme point of time (the Greek always thinks forward from the farthest point) because beyond that no point of time exists. The sense is thus the same as ‘before the foundation of the world’ (Eph. 1:4), in eternity.”³⁹ God chose His own unto salvation which is achieved in time through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. Only those who are elected by God have the Holy Spirit given to them by Christ. The Spirit of God sets them apart, regenerates their dead hearts and enables them to savingly embrace Jesus Christ. “Here, therefore, is the true port of safety, that God, who elected us from the beginning, will deliver us from all the evils that threaten us. For we are elected to salvation; we shall, therefore be safe from destruction. But as it is not for us to penetrate into God’s secret counsel, to seek *there* assurance of our salvation, he specifies signs or tokens of election, which should suffice us for the assurance of it.”⁴⁰ If (as the Arminians teach) men elect themselves by an act of the unencumbered will (i.e. the divine decree is not based on God’s good pleasure but sinful fallen man’s choice of Jesus in history), then Paul’s appeal to divine election as a reassuring doctrine falls to the ground. Such appeals would really amount to no more than pep talks on man’s own power. “Don’t worry about your severe persecution. Your free will, which allowed God to save you, will pull you through this trial also.” We must reject such humanistic nonsense and thank God for His election of us; for His sovereign decision to save us even though we deserved to go to hell for our sins and were completely unable to make any move toward God. Jesus said, “No one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father” (Jn. 6:65).

Conclusion

The doctrine of unconditional election is foundational to biblical Christianity, for it places the salvation of men squarely in the hands of God. “Salvation is of the LORD” (Jon. 2:9). Men are saved *solely* by God’s grace. Calvin writes, “We shall never be clearly persuaded, as we ought to be, that our salvation flows from the wellspring of God’s free mercy until we come to know his eternal election, which illumines God’s grace by this contrast; that he does not indiscriminately adopt all into the hope of salvation but gives to some what he denies to others. How much the ignorance of this principle detracts from God’s glory, how much it takes away from true humility, is well known.... If—to make it clear that our salvation comes about solely from God’s mere generosity—we must be called back to the course of election....”⁴¹

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³⁹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistle’s to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, [1937] 1964), 439.

⁴⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Second Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 439.

⁴¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* III:XXI:1 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2:921.