

# Election

(Taken from Wayne Grudem's book *Systematic Theology*)

## *When and why did God choose us*

In the earlier chapters we talked about the fact that we all have sinned and deserve eternal punishment from God, and the fact that Christ died and *earned* salvation for us. But now in this unit (chapters 32–43) we will look at the way God *applies* that salvation to our lives. We begin in this chapter with God's work of election, that is, his decision to choose us to be saved before the foundation of the world. This act of election is, of course, not (strictly speaking) part of the *application* of salvation to us, since it came before Christ earned our salvation when he died on the cross. But we treat election at this point because it is chronologically the *beginning* of God's dealing with us in a gracious way. Therefore, it is rightly thought of as the first step in the process of God's bringing salvation to us individually.

Other steps in God's work of applying salvation to our lives include our hearing the gospel call, our being regenerated by the Holy Spirit, our responding in faith and repentance, and God forgiving us and giving us membership in his family, as well as granting us growth in the Christian life and keeping us faithful to himself throughout life. At the end of our life we die and go into his presence, then when Christ returns we receive resurrection bodies, and the process of acquiring salvation is complete.

Various theologians have given specific terms to a number of these events, and have often listed them in a specific order in which they believe that they occur in our lives. Such a list of the events in which God applies salvation to us is called the *order of salvation* and is sometimes referred to by a Latin phrase, *ordo salutis* which simply means "order of salvation." Before discussing any of these elements in the application of salvation to our lives, we can give a complete list here of the elements that will be treated in the following chapters:

### **"The Order of Salvation"**

1. Election (God's choice of people to be saved)
2. The gospel call (proclaiming the message of the gospel)
3. Regeneration (being born again)
4. Conversion (faith and repentance)
5. Justification (right legal standing)
6. Adoption (membership in God's family)
7. Sanctification (right conduct of life)
8. Perseverance (remaining a Christian)
9. Death (going to be with the Lord)
10. Glorification (receiving a resurrection body)

We should note here that items 2–6 and part of 7 are all involved in "becoming a Christian." Numbers 7 and 8 work themselves out in this life, number 9 occurs at the end of this life, and number 10 occurs when Christ returns.

We begin our discussion of the order of salvation with the first element, election. In connection with this we will also discuss at the end of this chapter the question of “reprobation,” the decision of God to pass over those who will not be saved, and to punish them for their sins. As will be explained below, election and reprobation are different in several important respects, and it is important to distinguish these so that we do not think wrongly about God or his activity.

The term *predestination* is also frequently used in this discussion. In this textbook, and in Reformed theology generally, *predestination* is a broader term and includes the two aspects of election (for believers) and reprobation (for unbelievers). However, the term *double predestination* is not a helpful term because it gives the impression that both election and reprobation are carried out in the same way by God and have no essential differences between them, which is certainly not true. Therefore, the term *double predestination* is not generally used by Reformed theologians, though it is sometimes used to refer to Reformed teaching by those who criticize it. The term *double predestination* will not be used in this book to refer to election and reprobation, since it blurs the distinctions between them and does not give an accurate indication of what is actually being taught.

## EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

We may define election as follows: *Election is an act of God before creation in which he chooses some people to be saved, not on account of any foreseen merit in them, but only because of his sovereign good pleasure.*

There has been much controversy in the church and much misunderstanding over this doctrine. Many of the controversial questions regarding man’s will and responsibility and regarding the justice of God with respect to human choices have been discussed at some length in connection with God’s providence (chapter 16). We will focus here only on those additional questions that apply specifically to the question of election.

Our approach in this chapter will be first simply to cite a number of passages from the New Testament that discuss election. Then we will attempt to understand the purpose of God that the New Testament authors see in the doctrine of election. Finally, we will attempt to clarify our understanding of this doctrine and answer some objections, and also to consider the doctrine of reprobation.

### A. Does the New Testament Teach Predestination?

Several passages in the New Testament seem to affirm quite clearly that God ordained beforehand those who would be saved. For example, when Paul and Barnabas began to preach to the Gentiles in Antioch in Pisidia, Luke writes, “And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of God; and *as many as were ordained to eternal life believed*” (Acts 13:48). It is significant that Luke mentions the fact of election almost in passing. It is as if this were the normal occurrence when the gospel was preached. How many believed? “As many as were ordained to eternal life believed.”

In Romans 8:28–30, we read:

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. *For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son* in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. *And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

In the following chapter, when talking about God's choosing Jacob and not Esau, Paul says it was not because of anything that Jacob or Esau had done, but simply in order that God's purpose of election might continue.

Though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, *in order that God's purpose of election might continue* not because of works but because of his call, she was told, "The elder will serve the younger." As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." (Rom. 9:11–13)

Regarding the fact that some of the people of Israel were saved, but others were not, Paul says: "Israel failed to obtain what it sought. *The elect* obtained it, but the rest were hardened" (Rom. 11:7). Here again Paul indicates two distinct groups within the people of Israel. Those who were "the elect" obtained the salvation that they sought, while those who were not the elect simply "were hardened."

Paul talks explicitly about God's choice of believers before the foundation of the world in the beginning of Ephesians.

*"He chose us in him before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace."* (Eph. 1:4–6)

Here Paul is writing to believers and he specifically says that God "chose us" in Christ, referring to believers generally. In a similar way, several verses later he says, "We who first hoped in Christ have been *destined and appointed* to live for the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1:12).

He writes to the Thessalonians, "For we know, brethren beloved by God, that *he has chosen you*; for our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thess. 1:4–5).

Paul says that the fact that the Thessalonians *believed* the gospel when he preached it ("for our gospel came to you ... in power ... and with full conviction") *is the reason he knows that God chose them*. As soon as they came to faith Paul concluded that long ago God had chosen them, and therefore they had believed when he preached. He later writes to the same church, "We are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, *because God chose you from the beginning to be saved* through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth" (2 Thess. 2:13).

Although the next text does not specifically mention the election of human beings, it is interesting at this point also to notice what Paul says about angels. When he gives a solemn command to Timothy, he writes, "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of *the elect angels* I charge you to keep these rules without favor" (1 Tim. 5:21). Paul is aware that there are good angels witnessing his command and witnessing Timothy's response to it, and he is so sure that it is God's act of election that has affected every one of those good angels that he can call them "*elect angels*."

When Paul talks about the reason why God saved us and called us to himself, he explicitly denies that it was because of our works, but points rather to God's own purpose and his unmerited grace in eternity past. He says God is the one "who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of *his own purpose* and the *grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago*" (2 Tim. 1:9).

When Peter writes an epistle to hundreds of Christians in many churches in Asia Minor, he writes, “To *God’s elect* ... scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia” (1 Peter 1:1 NIV). He later calls them “a *chosen race*” (1 Peter 2:9).

In John’s vision in Revelation, those who do not give in to persecution and begin to worship the beast are persons whose names have been written in the book of life before the foundation of the world: “And authority was given it over every tribe and people and tongue and nation, and all who dwell on earth will worship it, *every one whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life* of the Lamb that was slain” (Rev. 13:7–8) In a similar way, we read of the beast from the bottomless pit in Revelation 17: “The dwellers on earth *whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world* will marvel to behold the beast, because it was and is not and is to come” (Rev. 17:8).

## **B. How Does the New Testament Present the Teaching of Election?**

After reading this list of verses on election, it is important to view this doctrine in the way the New Testament itself views it.

**1. As a Comfort.** The New Testament authors often present the doctrine of election as a comfort to believers. When Paul assures the Romans that “in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28), he gives God’s work of predestination as a reason why we can be assured of this truth. He explains in the next verse, “*For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son ... And those whom he predestined he also called ... justified ... glorified*” (Rom. 8:29–30). Paul’s point is to say that God has *always* acted for the good of those whom he called to himself. If Paul looks into the distant past before the creation of the world, he sees that God foreknew and predestined his people to be conformed to the image of Christ. If he looks at the recent past he finds that God called and justified his people whom he had predestined. And if he then looks toward the future when Christ returns, he sees that God has determined to give perfect, glorified bodies to those who believe in Christ. From eternity to eternity God has acted with the good of his people in mind. But if God has *always* acted for our good and will in the future act for our good, Paul reasons, then *will he not also in our present circumstances* work every circumstance together for our good as well? In this way predestination is seen as a comfort for believers in the everyday events of life.

**2. As a Reason to Praise God.** Paul says, “He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, *to the praise of his glorious grace*” (Eph. 1:5–6). Similarly, he says, “We who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live *for the praise of his glory*” (Eph. 1:12).

Paul tells the Christians at Thessalonica, “*We give thanks to God* always for you all ... *For we know* brethren beloved by God, *that he has chosen you*” (1 Thess. 1:2, 4). The reason Paul can give thanks to God for the Thessalonian Christians is that he knows God is ultimately responsible for their salvation and has in fact chosen them to be saved. This is made even clearer in 2 Thessalonians 2:13: “*But we are bound to give thanks to God* always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, *because God chose you* from the beginning to be saved.” Paul was obligated to give thanks to God for the Christians at Thessalonica because he knew that their salvation was ultimately due to God’s choice of them. Therefore it is appropriate for Paul to thank God for them rather than praising them for their own saving faith.

Understood in this way, the doctrine of election does increase praise given to God for our salvation and seriously diminishes any pride that we might feel if we thought that our salvation was due to something good in us or something for which we should receive credit.

**3. As an Encouragement to Evangelism.** Paul says, “I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain salvation in Christ Jesus with its eternal glory” (2 Tim. 2:10). He knows that God has chosen some people to be saved, and he sees this as an encouragement to preach the gospel, even if it means enduring great suffering. Election is Paul’s guarantee that there will be some success for his evangelism, for he knows that some of the people he speaks to will be the elect, and they will believe the gospel and be saved. It is as if someone invited us to come fishing and said, “I guarantee that you will catch some fish—they are hungry and waiting.”

### C. Misunderstandings of the Doctrine of Election

**1. Election Is Not Fatalistic or Mechanistic.** Sometimes those who object to the doctrine of election say that it is “fatalism” or that it presents a “mechanistic system” for the universe. Two somewhat different objections are involved here. By “fatalism” is meant a system in which human choices and human decisions really do not make any difference. In fatalism, no matter what we do, things are going to turn out as they have been previously ordained. Therefore, it is futile to attempt to influence the outcome of events or the outcome of our lives by putting forth any effort or making any significant choices, because these will not make any difference any way. In a true fatalistic system, of course, our humanity is destroyed for our choices really mean nothing, and the motivation for moral accountability is removed.

In a mechanistic system the picture is one of an impersonal universe in which all things that happen have been inflexibly determined by an impersonal force long ago, and the universe functions in a mechanical way so that human beings are more like machines or robots than genuine persons. Here also genuine human personality would be reduced to the level of a machine that simply functions in accordance with predetermined plans and in response to predetermined causes and influences.

By contrast to the mechanistic picture, the New Testament presents the entire outworking of our salvation as something brought about by a *personal* God in relationship with *personal* creatures. God “destined us *in love* to be his sons through Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:5). God’s act of election was neither impersonal nor mechanistic, but was permeated with personal love for those whom he chose. Moreover, the personal care of God for his creatures, even those who rebel against him, is seen clearly in God’s plea through Ezekiel, “As I live, says the Lord GOD, *I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?*” (Ezek. 33:11).

When talking about our response to the gospel offer, Scripture continually views us not as mechanistic creatures or robots, but as *genuine persons* personal creatures who make willing choices to accept or reject the gospel. Jesus invites everyone, “*Come to me* all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). And we read the invitation at the end of Revelation: “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let him who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let him who is thirsty come, let *him who desires* take the water of life without price” (Rev. 22:17). This invitation and many others like it are addressed to genuine persons who are capable of hearing the invitation and responding to it by a decision of their wills. Regarding those who will not accept him, Jesus clearly emphasizes their hardness of heart and their stubborn refusal to

come to him: “Yet you *refuse* to come to me that you may have life” (John 5:40). And Jesus cries out in sorrow to the city that had rejected him, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, *and you would not!*” (Matt. 23:37).

In contrast to the charge of fatalism, we also see a much different picture in the New Testament. Not only do we make willing choices as real persons, but these choices are also *real choices* because they do affect the course of events in the world. They affect our own lives and they affect the lives and destinies of others. So, “*He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God*” (John 3:18). Our personal decisions to believe or not believe in Christ have eternal consequences in our lives, and Scripture is quite willing to talk about our decision to believe or not believe as the factor that decides our eternal destiny.

The implication of this is that we certainly must preach the gospel, and people’s eternal destiny hinges on whether we proclaim the gospel or not. Therefore when the Lord one night told Paul, “Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man shall attack you to harm you; for *I have many people in this city*” (Acts 18:9–10), Paul did not simply conclude that the “many people” who belong to God would be saved whether he stayed there preaching the gospel or not. Rather, “*he stayed a year and six months teaching the word of God among them*” (Acts 18:11)—this was longer than Paul stayed in any other city except Ephesus during his three missionary journeys. When Paul was told that God had many elect people in Corinth, he stayed a long time and preached, in order that those elect people might be saved! Paul is quite clear about the fact that unless people preach the gospel others will not be saved:

But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? *And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?* ... So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ. (Rom. 10:14, 17)

Did Paul know before he went to a city who was elected by God for salvation and who was not? No, he did not. That is something that God does not show to us ahead of time. But once people come to faith in Christ then we can be confident that God had earlier chosen them for salvation. This is exactly Paul’s conclusion regarding the Thessalonians; he says that he knows that God chose them because when he preached to them, the gospel came in power and with full conviction: “For we know, brethren beloved by God, that he has chosen you; *for our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction*” (1 Thess. 1:4–5). Far from saying that whatever he did made no difference, and that God’s elect would be saved whether he preached or not, Paul endured a life of incredible hardship in order to bring the gospel to those whom God had chosen. At the end of a life filled with suffering he said, “Therefore *I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain salvation in Christ Jesus with its eternal glory*” (2 Tim. 2:10).

**2. Election Is Not Based on God’s Foreknowledge of Our Faith.** Quite commonly people will agree that God predestines some to be saved, but they will say that he does this by looking into the future and seeing who will believe in Christ and who will not. If he sees that a person is going to come to saving faith, then he will predestine that person to be saved, *based on foreknowledge of that person’s faith*. If he sees that a person will not come to saving faith, then he does not predestine that person to be saved. In this way, it is thought, the ultimate reason why

some are saved and some are not lies *within the people themselves* not within God. All that God does in his predestining work is to give confirmation to the decision he knows people will make on their own. The verse commonly used to support this view is Romans 8:29: “For those *whom he foreknew* he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.”

**a. Foreknowledge of Persons, Not Facts:** But this verse can hardly be used to demonstrate that God based his predestination on foreknowledge of *the fact that a person would believe*. The passage speaks rather of the fact that God knew *persons* (“*those whom he foreknew*”), not that he knew some *fact about them* such as the fact that they would believe. It is a personal, relational knowledge that is spoken of here: God, looking into the future, thought of certain people in saving relationship to him, and in that sense he “knew them” long ago. This is the sense in which Paul can talk about God’s “knowing” someone, for example, in 1 Corinthians 8:3: “But if one loves God, one is *known by him*.” Similarly, he says, “but now that you have come to know God, or rather *to be known by God ...*” (Gal. 4:9). When people *know* God in Scripture, or when God *knows* them, it is personal knowledge that involves a saving relationship. Therefore in Romans 8:29, “those whom he *foreknew*” is best understood to mean, “those whom he long ago *thought of in a saving relationship to himself*.” The text actually says nothing about God foreknowing or foreseeing that certain people would believe, nor is that idea mentioned in any other text of Scripture.

Sometimes people say that God elected *groups* of people, but not individuals to salvation. In some Arminian views, God just elected the church as a group, while the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) said that God elected Christ, and all people in Christ. But Romans 8:29 talks about certain people whom God foreknew (“*those whom he foreknew*”), not just undefined or unfilled groups. And in Ephesians Paul talks about certain people whom God chose, including himself: “He *chose us* in him before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). To talk about God choosing a group with no people in it is not biblical election at all. But to talk about God choosing a group of people means that he chose specific individuals who constituted that group.

**b. Scripture Never Speaks of Our Faith As the Reason God Chose Us:** In addition, when we look beyond these specific passages that speak of foreknowledge and look at verses that talk about the *reason* God chose us, we find that Scripture never speaks of our faith or the fact that we would come to believe in Christ as the reason God chose us. In fact, Paul seems explicitly to exclude the consideration of what people would do in life from his understanding of God’s choice of Jacob rather than Esau: he says, “Though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, *in order that God’s purpose of election might continue* not because of works but because of his call, she was told, “The elder will serve the younger.’ As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated” ’ (Rom. 9:11–13). Nothing that Jacob or Esau would do in life influenced God’s decision; it was simply in order that his purpose of election might continue.

When discussing the Jewish people who have come to faith in Christ, Paul says, “So too at the present time there is a remnant, *chosen by grace*. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works” (Rom. 11:5–6). Here again Paul emphasizes God’s grace and the complete absence of human merit in the process of election. Someone might object that faith is not viewed as a “work” in Scripture and therefore faith should be excluded from the quotation above (“It is no longer on the basis of *works*”). Based on this objection, Paul could actually mean, “But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, but rather on the basis of whether someone would believe.” However, this is unlikely in this context: Paul is not contrasting human faith and human

works; he is contrasting God's sovereign choosing of people with *any* human activity, and he points to God's sovereign will as the ultimate basis for God's choice of the Jews who have come to Christ.

Similarly, when Paul talks about election in Ephesians, there is no mention of any foreknowledge of the fact that we would believe, or any idea that there was anything worthy or meritorious in us (such as a tendency to believe) that was the basis for God's choosing us. Rather, Paul says, "He destined us *in love* to be his sons through Jesus Christ, *according to the purpose of his will* to the praise of his glorious grace *which he freely bestowed on us* in the Beloved" (Eph. 1:5–6). Now if God's grace is to be praised for election, and not human ability to believe or decision to believe, then once again it is consistent for Paul to mention nothing of human faith but only to mention God's predestining activity, his purpose and will, and his freely given grace.

Again in 2 Timothy, Paul says that God "saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but *in virtue of his own purpose* and the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago" (2 Tim. 1:9). Once again God's sovereign purpose is seen as the ultimate reason for our salvation, and Paul connects this with the fact that God gave us grace in Christ Jesus ages ago—another way of speaking of the truth that God freely gave favor to us when he chose us without reference to any foreseen merit or worthiness on our part.

### **c. Election Based on Something Good in Us (Our Faith) Would Be the Beginning of**

**Salvation by Merit:** Yet another kind of objection can be brought against the idea that God chose us because he foreknew that we would come to faith. If the *ultimate* determining factor in whether we will be saved or not is our own decision to accept Christ, then we shall be more inclined to think that we deserve some credit for the fact that we were saved: in distinction from other people who continue to reject Christ, we were wise enough in our judgment or good enough in our moral tendencies or perceptive enough in our spiritual capacities to decide to believe in Christ. But once we begin to think this way then we seriously diminish the glory that is to be given to God for our salvation. We become uncomfortable speaking like Paul who says that God "destined us ... *according to the purpose of his will* to the praise of his glorious *grace*" (Eph. 1:5–6), and we begin to think that God "destined us ... according to the fact that he knew that we would have enough tendencies toward goodness and faith within us that we would believe." When we think like this we begin to sound very much unlike the New Testament when it talks about election or predestination. By contrast, if election is solely based on God's own good pleasure and his sovereign decision to love us in spite of our lack of goodness or merit, then certainly we have a profound sense of appreciation to him for a salvation that is totally undeserved, and we will forever be willing to praise his "glorious grace" (Eph. 1:6).

In the final analysis, the difference between two views of election can be seen in the way they answer a very simple question. Given the fact that in the final analysis some people will choose to accept Christ and some people will not, the question is, "What makes people differ?" That is, what *ultimately* makes the difference between those who believe and those who do not? If our answer is that it is ultimately based on something God does (namely, his sovereign election of those who would be saved), then we see that salvation at its most foundational level is based on *grace alone*. On the other hand, if we answer that the ultimate difference between those who are saved and those who are not is because of *something in man* (that is, a tendency or disposition to believe or not believe), then salvation ultimately depends on a combination of grace plus human ability.



**d. Predestination Based on Foreknowledge Still Does Not Give People Free Choice:** The idea that God's predestination of some to believe is based on foreknowledge of their faith encounters still another problem: upon reflection, this system turns out to give no real freedom to man either. For if God can look into the future and see that person A *will* come to faith in Christ, and that person B *will not* come to faith in Christ, then those facts are already *fixed* they are already *determined*. If we assume that God's knowledge of the future is *true* (which it must be), then it is absolutely certain that person A will believe and person B will not. There is no way that their lives could turn out any differently than this. Therefore it is fair to say that their destinies are still *determined* for they could not be otherwise. But *by what* are these destinies determined? If they are determined by God himself, then we no longer have election based ultimately on foreknowledge of faith, but rather on God's sovereign will. But if these destinies are not determined by God, then who or what determines them? Certainly no Christian would say that there is some powerful being other than God controlling people's destinies. Therefore it seems that the only other possible solution is to say they are determined by some impersonal force, some kind of fate, operative in the universe, making things turn out as they do. But what kind of benefit is this? We have then sacrificed election in love by a personal God for a kind of determinism by an impersonal force and God is no longer to be given the ultimate credit for our salvation.

**e. Conclusion: Election Is Unconditional:** It seems best, for the previous four reasons, to reject the idea that election is based on God's foreknowledge of our faith. We conclude instead that the reason for election is simply God's sovereign choice—he “destined us in love to be his sons” (Eph. 1:5). God chose us simply because he decided to bestow his love upon us. It was not because of any foreseen faith or foreseen merit in us.

This understanding of election has traditionally been called “unconditional election.” It is “unconditional” because it is not *conditioned upon* anything that God sees in us that makes us worthy of his choosing us.

## **D. Objections to the Doctrine of Election**

It must be said that the doctrine of election as presented here is by no means universally accepted in the Christian church, either in Catholicism or Protestantism. There is a long history of acceptance of the doctrine as here presented, but many others have objected to it as well. Among current evangelicals, those in more Reformed or Calvinistic circles (conservative Presbyterian denominations, for example) will accept this view, as will many Lutherans and Anglicans (Episcopalians) and a large number of Baptists and people in independent churches. On the other hand, it will be rejected quite decisively by nearly all Methodists, as well as by many others in Baptist, Anglican, and independent churches. While a number of the objections to election are more specific forms of objection to the doctrine of providence presented in chapter 16, and have been answered in more detail there, a few particular objections should be mentioned here.

### **1. Election Means That We Do Not Have a Choice in Whether We Accept Christ or Not.**

According to this objection, the doctrine of election denies all the gospel invitations that appeal to the will of man and ask people to make a choice in whether to respond to Christ's invitation or not. In response to this, we must affirm that the doctrine of election is fully able to accommodate

the idea that we have a voluntary choice and we make willing decisions in accepting or rejecting Christ. Our choices are voluntary because they are what we want to do and what we decide to do. This does not mean that our choices are absolutely free, because (as explained in chapter 16, on providence), God can work sovereignly through our desires so that he guarantees that our choices come about as he has ordained, but this can still be understood as a real choice because God has created us and he ordains that such a choice is real. In short, we can say that God causes us to choose Christ voluntarily. The mistaken assumption underlying this objection is that a choice must be absolutely free (that is, not in any way caused by God) in order for it to be a genuine human choice.

**2. On This Definition of Election, Our Choices Are Not Real Choices.** Continuing the discussion in the previous paragraph, someone might object that if a choice is caused by God, it may appear to us to be voluntary and willed by us, but it is nonetheless not a genuine or real choice, because it is not absolutely free. Once again we must respond by challenging the assumption that a choice must be absolutely free in order to be genuine or valid. If God makes us in a certain way and then tells us that our voluntary choices are real and genuine choices, then we must agree that they are. God is the definition of what is real and genuine in the universe. By contrast, we might ask where Scripture ever says that our choices have to be free from God's influence or control in order to be real or genuine choices. It does not seem that Scripture ever speaks in this way.

**3. The Doctrine of Election Makes Us Puppets or Robots, Not Real Persons.** According to this objection, if God really causes everything that we choose with regard to salvation, then we are no longer real persons. Once again it must be answered that God has created us and we must allow him to define what genuine personhood is. The analogy of a "puppet" or a "robot" reduces us to a sub-human category of things that have been created by man. But genuine human beings are far greater than puppets or robots, because we do have a genuine will and we do make voluntary decisions based on our own preferences and wants. In fact, it is this ability to make willing choices that is one thing that distinguishes us from much of the lower creation. We are real people created in God's image, and God has allowed us to make genuine choices that have real effects on our lives.

**4. The Doctrine of Election Means That Unbelievers Never Had a Chance to Believe.** This objection to election says that if God had decreed from eternity that some people would not believe, then there was no genuine chance for them to believe, and the entire system functions unfairly. Two responses can be made to this objection. First, we must note that the Bible does not allow us to say that unbelievers had no chance to believe. When people rejected Jesus he always put the blame on their willful choice to reject him, not on anything decreed by God the Father. "Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your *will* is to do your father's desires" (John 8:43–44). He says to Jerusalem, "How often would I have gathered your children together ... *and you would not!*" (Matt. 23:37). He said to the Jews who rejected him, "You *refuse to come to me* that you may have life" (John 5:40). Romans 1 makes it plain that all people are confronted with a revelation from God of such clarity that they are "without excuse" (Rom. 1:20). This is the consistent pattern in Scripture: people who remain in unbelief do so because they are unwilling to come to

God, and the blame for such unbelief always lies with the unbelievers themselves, never with God.

At a second level, the answer to this question must simply be Paul's answer to a similar objection: "But who are you, a man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me thus?" ' (Rom. 9:20).

**5. Election Is Unfair.** Sometimes people regard the doctrine of election as unfair, since it teaches that God chooses some to be saved and passes over others, deciding not to save them. How can this be fair?

Two responses may be given at this point. First, we must remember that *it would be perfectly fair for God not to save anyone* just as he did with the angels: "God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of nether gloom to be kept until the judgment" (2 Peter 2:4). What would be perfectly fair for God would be to do with human beings as he did with angels, that is, to save none of those who sinned and rebelled against him. But if he does save *some at all* then this is a demonstration of grace that goes far beyond the requirements of fairness and justice.

But at a deeper level this objection would say that it is not fair for God to create some people who he knew would sin and be eternally condemned, and whom he would not redeem. Paul raises this objection in Romans 9. After saying that God "has mercy upon whomever he wills, and he hardens the heart of whomever he wills" (Rom. 9:18), Paul then raises this precise objection: "You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" ' (Rom. 9:19). Here is the heart of the "unfairness" objection against the doctrine of election. If each person's ultimate destiny is determined by God, not by the person himself or herself (that is, even when people make willing choices that determine whether they will be saved or not, if God is actually behind those choices somehow causing them to occur), then how can this be fair?

Paul's response is not one that appeals to our pride, nor does he attempt to give a philosophical explanation of why this is just. He simply calls on God's rights as the omnipotent Creator:

But who are you, a man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me thus?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for the vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? (Rom. 9:20–24)

Paul simply says that there is a point beyond which we cannot answer back to God or question his justice. He has done what he has done according to his sovereign will. He is the Creator; we are the creatures, and we ultimately have no basis from which to accuse him of unfairness or injustice. When we read these words of Paul we are confronted with a decision whether or not to accept what God says here, and what he does, simply because he is God and we are not. It is a question that reaches deep into our understanding of ourselves as creatures and of our relationship to God as our Creator.

This objection of unfairness takes a slightly different form when people say that it is *unfair of God to save some people and not to save all*. This objection is based on an idea of justice among human beings that we sense intuitively. We recognize in human affairs that it is right to treat equal people in an equal way. Therefore it seems intuitively appropriate to us to say that if God

is going to save *some* sinners he ought to save *all* sinners. But in answer to this objection it must be said that we really have no right to impose on God our intuitive sense of what is appropriate among human beings. Whenever Scripture begins to treat this area it goes back to God's sovereignty as Creator and says he has a right to do with his creation as he wills (see Rom. 9:19–20, quoted above). If God ultimately decided to create some creatures to be saved and others not to be saved, then that was his sovereign choice, and we have no moral or scriptural basis on which we can insist that it was not fair.

**6. The Bible Says That God Will to Save Everyone.** Another objection to the doctrine of election is that it contradicts certain passages of Scripture that say that God wills for all to be saved. Paul writes of God our Savior, “*who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*” (1 Tim. 2:4). And Peter says, “The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, *not wishing that any should perish* but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). Do not these passages contradict the idea that God has only chosen certain people to be saved?

One common solution to this question (from the Reformed perspective advocated in this book) is to say that these verses speak of God's *revealed will* (telling us what we should do), not his *hidden will* (his eternal plans for what will happen). The verses simply tell us that God invites and commands every person to repent and come to Christ for salvation, but they do not tell us anything about God's secret decrees regarding who will be saved.

The Arminian theologian Clark Pinnock objects to the idea that God has a secret and a revealed will—he calls it “the exceedingly paradoxical notion of two divine wills regarding salvation.” But Pinnock never really answers the question of why all are not saved (from an Arminian perspective). Ultimately Arminians *also* must say that God *wills* something more strongly than he wills the salvation of all people, *for in fact all are not saved*. Arminians claim that the reason why all are not saved is that God wills to preserve the free will of man *more than* he wills to save everyone. But is this not also making a distinction in two aspects of the will of God? On the one hand God wills that all be saved (1 Tim. 2:5–6; 2 Peter 3:9). But on the other hand he wills to preserve man's absolutely free choice. In fact, he wills the second thing *more than* the first. But this means that Arminians also must say that 1 Timothy 2:5–6 and 2 Peter 3:9 do not say that God wills the salvation of everyone in an absolute or unqualified way—they too must say that the verses only refer to one kind or one aspect of God's will.

Here the difference between the Reformed and the Arminian conception of God's will is clearly seen. Both Calvinists and Arminians agree that God's commands in Scripture reveal to us what he wants us to do, and both agree that the commands in Scripture invite us to repent and trust in Christ for salvation. Therefore, in one sense both agree that God wills that we be saved—it is the will that he reveals to us explicitly in the gospel invitation.

But both sides must also say that there is something else that God deems more important than saving everyone. Reformed theologians say that God deems *his own glory* more important than saving everyone, and that (according to Rom. 9) God's glory is also furthered by the fact that some are not saved. Arminian theologians also say that something else is more important to God than the salvation of all people, namely, the preservation of *man's free will*. So in a Reformed system God's highest value is his own glory, and in an Arminian system God's highest value is the free will of man. These are two distinctly different conceptions of the nature of God, and it seems that the Reformed position has much more explicit biblical support than the Arminian position does on this question.

## **E. Practical Application of the Doctrine of Election**

In terms of our own relationship with God, the doctrine of election does have significant practical application. When we think of the biblical teaching on both election and reprobation, it is appropriate to apply it to our own lives individually. It is right for each Christian to ask of himself or herself, “Why am I a Christian? What is the final reason why God decided to save me?”

The doctrine of election tells us that I am a Christian simply because God in eternity past decided to set his love on me. But why did he decide to set his love on me? Not for anything good in me, but simply because he decided to love me. There is no more ultimate reason than that.

It humbles us before God to think in this way. It makes us realize that we have no claim on God’s grace whatsoever. Our salvation is totally due to grace alone. Our only appropriate response is to give God eternal praise.

### **QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION**

1. Do you think that God chose you individually to be saved before he created the world? Do you think he did it on the basis of the fact that he knew you would believe in Christ, or was it “unconditional election,” not based on anything that he foresaw in you that made you worthy of his love? No matter how you answered the previous question, explain how your answer makes you feel when you think about yourself in relationship to God.
2. Does the doctrine of election give you any comfort or assurance about your future?
3. After reading this chapter, do you honestly feel that you would like to give thanks or praise to God for choosing you to be saved? Do you sense any unfairness in the fact that God did not decide to save everyone?
4. If you agree with the doctrine of election as presented in this chapter, does it diminish your sense of individual personhood or make you feel somewhat like a robot or a puppet in God’s hands? Do you think it should make you feel this way?
5. What effect do you think this chapter will have on your motivation for evangelism? Is this a positive or negative effect? Can you think of ways in which the doctrine of election can be used as a positive encouragement to evangelism (see 1 Thess. 1:4–5; 2 Tim. 2:10)?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology : An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 1994), 669-87.