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Corporate Election

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A good friend who is also a pastor wrote to me recently about the nature of election. He wondered if it were possible for Christians to be chosen *in Christ*—that is, for Christians not to be elected individually, but only as a corporate entity. The idea was that Christ is the chosen one and if a person is “in Christ,” then he’s chosen too. This is known as corporate election.

Here are some thoughts on the issue of corporate election.

Dear Pastor _____,

Preliminarily, I should address an antecedent issue. Although I will express my opinion, you of course have to come to your own conclusions. Having a good conscience about the text doesn’t require agreement with others; it requires being faithful to pursue truth at all costs to the best of your abilities. To be sure, you want to seek the counsel and input of various experts. But when the day is done, you have to stand before God and tell him how you see your views as in harmony with Holy Writ. In other words, I *never* want you to feel any kind of intimidation or pressure from me or anyone else about your handling of the text. I do of course want you to feel a great duty (as you always have) to the Lord in the handling of his word. At bottom, all of us have to give an account of ourselves to the Lord, and any human loyalties will have no standing before him.

Now, on to the issue!

First, allow me to clarify the issue: By corporate election I suppose you mean that only those who will be in Christ are chosen *and* that God does not specifically choose individuals but only chooses the sphere (“in Christ”) in which the elective purposes of God can take place. Thus, if one embraces Christ he is chosen.

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If that is what you mean by corporate election, then I would reject it. Here are the reasons why:

First, the authors you cited seemed to make a conceptual-lexical equation (i.e., if the word “elect” was used, only groups were in view; *ergo*, election is only corporate). That view has been regarded by linguists and biblical scholars as linguistically naïve. James Barr in his *Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford, 1961) makes a lengthy and devastating critique of Kittel’s ten-volume *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* for its numerous linguistic fallacies. Among them is this conceptual-lexical equation. Allow me to unpack this a bit more: conceptual-lexical equation means that one does not find the concept unless he sees the words. That seems to be an underlying assumption in the authors you cited. However, where else do we argue this? Would we not say that the *concept* of fellowship occurs everywhere in the New Testament? Yet the word *κοινωνία* is found only twenty times. Or consider the deity of Christ: If we could only speak of Christ’s deity in passages where he is explicitly called “God,” then we are shut up to no more than about half a dozen texts. Yet the New Testament wreaks of the deity of Christ—via his actions, attributes that are ascribed to him, Old Testament quotations made of him, implicit and explicit statements made about him. Hence, our first question needs to be: Do we see the concept of election as a corporate notion or an individual one?

Second, I think that there may be a false antithesis between corporate and individual election. Proof that God elects corporately is not proof that he does not elect individually (any more than proof that *all* are called sinners in Rom 3:23 is a denial that individuals are sinners). I embrace corporate election as well as individual election. As Douglas Moo argues in his commentary on Romans (pp. 551-52),

... to call Rom. 9-11 the climax or center of the letter is going too far. Such an evaluation often arises from a desire to minimize the importance of the individual’s relationship to God in chaps. 1-8. But the individual’s standing before God is the center of Paul’s gospel.... Individual and corporate perspectives are intertwined in Paul.

Evidence for this can be seen in Romans 9 itself: the examples that Paul uses to show the meaning of election are individuals: Pharaoh, Jacob and Esau, etc. Yet, these very examples—these very *individuals*—also represent corporate groups. If

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only corporate election were true, Paul could not have written Romans 9 the way he did.

Third, going back to the conceptual-lexical equation for a moment: let's look at the evidence.

Mark 13:20—“but for the sake of the elect whom he chose he has cut short those days.” If we take only a corporate view of election, this would mean “but for the sake of all humanity he has cut short those days.” That hardly makes any sense in the passage; further, election is doubly emphasized: the **elect** whom he **chose**. It would be hard to make any clearer the idea that election is of individuals.

Luke 6:13; John 6:70—Jesus chose twelve of his disciples out of a larger pool. True, he chose more than one; but this also was of particular individuals. Jesus *named* them individually, indicating that his choice of them was individual. This election was not toward salvation, as we see in John 6:70.¹ But this election was *entirely initiated by Jesus* (“you did not choose me, but I chose you”). Initiation and selection are the prerogatives of the Lord. Corporate election makes absolutely no sense in this context; and further, the elective purposes and methods of God incarnate are the same, whether it is of his apostles for service or of sinners for salvation.

Luke 9:35—“This is my Son, my Chosen One.” Certainly election of Christ is both individual and corporate: Christ as the elect of God (see also at John 1:34 the textual variant that is most likely original, and is the text reading of the NET Bible) is the vehicle through whom God effects his elective purposes today. That is, God chooses those who would be saved, but he also chooses the means of that salvation: it is in Christ (see also Eph 1:4).

John 15:16—“You did not choose me, but I chose you.” Again, we see that election is done by the initiative of God. Further, *those who are chosen become what they are chosen for* (in this case, apostles). A view of corporate election that allows a large pool of applicants to be “chosen” then permits a self-selection to

¹ What is significant here is that the choice of Judas actually illustrates that election is entirely unconditional. Judas certainly did not possess the kind of character that made him suitable to be an apostle. Yet Jesus chose him anyway—knowing his character and what he would do.

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narrow the candidates seems to ignore both God's initiative and the efficacy of God's choice: **all** those who are chosen become what they are chosen for.

John 15:19—"I chose you out of the world." The same theme is repeated: election may have many individuals in view, but the initiative and efficacy belong to the Lord.

Acts 1:2—same idea as above.

Acts 1:24—This text reveals a choice of *one* individual as opposed to another. The apostles vote on which of two candidates they had put in the pool would fill Judas' spot. But even their choice is dictated by the mandate of heaven: "Show us which *one* you have chosen."

Acts 15:7—Peter notes that God had selected him to bring the good news to the Gentiles. Again, though this is not election to salvation, it is election that is initiated by God and effected by God (for, as you recall, Peter was quite resistant to the idea).

Thus, election is seen to be initiated by God and effected by God. Those who are chosen—whether individuals or groups—become what they are chosen for. Corporate election simply ignores this consistent biblical emphasis.

Fourth, when we look at the broader issue and involve words other than from the ἐκλεγ— word-group, we see that the concept of God's initiation and efficacy is very clear. For example, in Acts 13:48 we read that "as many as had been appointed for eternal life believed." This is a group *within* the group that heard the message. The passive pluperfect periphrastic ἦσαν τεταγμένοι indicates both that the initiative belonged to someone else and that it had already been accomplished before they believed.

Fifth, this leads to the issue of election in relation to depravity. I would encourage you to again look at the essay I have posted on the bsf website called "My Understanding of the Biblical Doctrine of Election." The basic point is that if we cannot take one step toward God (Rom 3:10-13), if we are unable to respond to anything outside the realm of sin (Eph 2:1), then if *anyone* is ever to get saved, God *must* take the initiative. This initiative cannot be simply corporate; he must initiate in the case of each individual. Eph 2:1-10 is explicitly about God's initiation in the case of individual believers; this sets the stage for 2:11-22 in which corporate election is seen. But there can be no corporate election unless there is first

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individual election. Corporate election, at bottom, is a denial of total depravity. Or, to put it another way, if corporate election is true and if total depravity is true, then no one will ever get saved because no one will ever freely choose to be in Christ. Only by the gracious initiative of God does anyone ever choose Christ.

Sixth, corporate election offers no assurance of anything to the individual. If election is corporate only, then the promises given to the elect are only given to them corporately. This would mean that we cannot claim individual promises about our salvation. This would include the promise of eternal security. Paul writes, “who will bring any charge against God’s elect?” (Rom 8:33)—an allusion to the election of the Son (Isa 50:8). This allusion suggests that God looks on us as he looks on his own Son. But if we read this as saying that only groups are chosen, then the charge that is brought against the elect must be a corporate charge. *How does that offer any comfort to the individual?* To be consistent with a corporate-only view, when Paul says, “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” (Rom 8:35), we would have to read that corporately. It would not be a promise to individuals (and it is interesting that Paul says “us” not “me” in vv. 35-39; his lone reference to himself is in the line “I am convinced” [v 38]). If election is only corporate, then eternal security is only offered on a corporate plane. No personal assurance can take place. The irony is that those who hold to corporate election often also hold to eternal security. They don’t realize the extreme inconsistency in their views. You can’t have it both ways: either we are individually chosen by a free act of God’s will and are eternally secure, or we are neither.

Seventh, Rom 8:29-30 seems to be decisive on this issue: “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (30) And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.” The relative pronoun throughout refers to the same group each time: no one is lost—from foreknowing,² through predestination, through calling, through justification, and to glorification. At any point if we wish to broaden the group beyond those who are actually saved, we violate the grammar of the text and the point of the apostle. Thus, unless we want to hold to universal salvation, we must surely view this text

² As I’m sure you’re aware, God’s foreknowledge in the NT does not refer simply to knowing beforehand, but to God’s *loving selection* beforehand. Otherwise, the significance of the death of Christ has to be reinterpreted (Acts 2:23)!

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as being restrictive. God's initiative and efficacy in our salvation are clearly indicated here.

Well, that's a quick treatment on corporate election. For a more detailed look at it, I would recommend James White's book, *The Potter's Freedom*, a book which takes on one of evangelicalism's greatest Arminian apologists, Norm Geisler.

God bless you in your pursuit of truth for his glory. It's quite an adventure isn't it?