The Doctrine of Election

Who Saves Whom?

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In this article I want to offer some brief scriptural responses to the common objections concerning the doctrine of election. If one does not believe in the doctrine of unconditional election, it is impossible to have a high doctrine of grace. As Luther told Erasmus, ignorance of this great truth is in a real sense ignorance of the Christian gospel. "For when the works and power of God are unknown in this way, I cannot worship, praise, thank, and serve God, since I do not know how much I ought to attribute to myself and how much to God." This distinction is essential, he added, "if we want to live a godly life." Further, "If we do not know these things, we shall know nothing at all of things Christian and shall be worse than any heathen."[1] As Luther pointed out in his debate with Erasmus, this issue of free will and election is essential in maintaining the doctrine of justification by eliminating any element of human decision or effort as a foothold for merit. Therefore, let's take a brief survey of the biblical support for this important doctrine by considering one of the principal passages: Romans chapter nine.

THE COVENANT

Running throughout the Old Testament and into the Gospels is the concept of covenant. Although God is the sovereign ruler of all creation and, therefore, quite capable of ruling merely as a dictator, he nevertheless condescends to enter into a covenant with fallen creatures, binding us to him, and himself to us.

This is the background of Paul's letter to the Romans in general, and chapter nine in particular. Paul has raised the issue of faithfulness. Because we are, individually and corporately, foreknown, predestined, called, justified, and anticipate glorification, nothing "shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Ro.8:39). But that raises an important question, especially for the Jewish believers reading this letter: If God has failed in his promise to save Israel, as many thought Paul

[1] Martin Luther (1975). *The Bondage of the Will*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 117.

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was implying in his ministry to the Gentiles, why should we have confidence in his determination to save us?

The apostle then launches into his discussion of the "true Israel." Even in the Old Testament, not every fleshly descendent was a child of God (Is.6:9-13, etc.). At one time, even Esau was a part of God's covenant people, as he grew up beside his brother Jacob. In fact, Esau, according to fleshly descent, was first in line to carry on the Abrahamic inheritance, but God chose to bless Jacob and curse Esau, "before the twins before, having done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose according to election might stand, not because of the one who works, but because of the one who calls" (v.11). This is the most obvious demonstration that God's gift of grace depends on his own generosity in election rather than on natural descent, racial privilege, or moral righteousness (see Dt. 9:4-6; 29:2-4). "As it is written, 'Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated'" (v.13).

OBJECTIONS ANSWERED

Paul realizes that he isn't going to get away with this so easily. It is a declaration from the mouth of God himself, but it is going to take some explaining: "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'" (vv.14-15). Salvation in general and election in particular are due to something in God, not in us. There is a pernicious idea floating around the evangelical world these days, owing more to pop-psychology than to religion, that if we want a basis for self-esteem we ought to remember that Jesus Christ thought we were worth his death. According to Scripture, however, Jesus Christ died for us because "God so loved…" (Jn.3:16). In other words, there was something in God–an inherent compassion, mercy, and love, which moved him to save us while there was absolutely nothing in us that attracted him. Even conservative evangelicals sometimes sound as though God is compelled to show mercy, as though love were his only attribute, but this passage reminds us that God is free to show mercy or withhold it according to his own good pleasure, since mercy, by definition, is not deserved.

After explaining how God is not dependent on his creatures in any sense, Paul concludes, "So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy" (v.16). There are few clearer declarations of monergism (i.e., the idea that God alone saves) than this. In one sentence the apostle excludes any human activity, either volitional or physical. There is absolutely nothing our decisions or actions contribute to our own salvation. So much for the popular Arminian maxim, "God casts his vote for your soul, Satan casts his, but you must cast the deciding ballot." Gone is the decisional regeneration that makes the new birth dependent on an exercise of the human will: "You did not

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choose Me; I chose you and appointed you to bear fruit that would last," Jesus told his disciples (Jn.15:16). We "were born not of the will of the flesh or the will of man, but of God" (Jn.1:13), "…having been predestined according to the plan of him who works all things after the counsel of his own will" (Eph.1:11).

Notice, too, that this exclusion of "willing and running" takes into its scope not only real, but foreseen decisions and actions on our part. Many will concede that God chose people, but based on his foreknowledge of their own choice. However, this is excluded in the sweep of Paul's statement in verse 13, as in verse 11: "for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand…." If God's election depended on our foreseen decision, this not only raises a question concerning God's grace (i.e., foreseen merit is merit nonetheless), but also concerning human sinfulness. After all, if God looked down the corridor of time what would he have seen in us besides sin and resistance? How could he foresee an exercise of the will that he himself did not grant, since "no one can come to the Father unless the one who sent me draws him" (Jn.6:44)?

Of course, this raises three principal objections. The first and most obvious one is the issue of fairness.

It is a measure of our sinfulness and pride that we would use God's gracious initiative in election as an occasion for placing his righteousness and justice in question. If we are, as a race, in as serious shape as Paul has been telling us, especially in the first three chapters, there should not be one reader who would seek God's justice in his or her own case. God's justice–giving us what we deserve–demands our execution. God's mercy, therefore, is owed to none. Paul refers God's mercy to his freedom. Since all deserve judgment, the mere fact that many will be spared is cause for astonishment rather than for wondering why God did not elect everyone.

To illustrate this freedom, Paul recalls Pharaoh to the witness stand: "For this very purpose," God declares, "I raised you [Pharaoh] up, that I might show my power in you and that my name might be declared in all the earth" (v.17). No Jewish reader needed to be reminded how negatively Pharaoh figured in Israelite history. While it might be excessive to compare him to Hitler, there is no doubt that the Egyptian ruler who had held Israel captive for slave labor was the last person first-century Jewish Christians would have wanted Paul to use as an example of God's freedom. Nevertheless, the apostle reminds them of the words of Exodus 9:16, that God had raised him up. Later, he will also recall to their attention the fact that "There is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God" (13:1).

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Amos called upon a forgetful and apathetic generation to realize God's sovereignty over history: "If there is a calamity in a city, will not the Lord have done it?…A lion has roared! Who will not fear?" (Am.3:6). In Daniel four we have Nebuchadnezzar's dream, interpreted by Daniel. The proud king was humiliated by God until, in the ruler's own words, "I lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me." He realizes for the first time that "All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; he does according to his will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain his hand or say to him, 'What have you done?'" His conclusion? "His ways are just and those who walk in pride he is able to humble" (Dan.4:34-37). Isaiah 45:1-7 points up God's use of yet another pagan ruler, Cyrus, "that they may know from the rising to the setting of the sun that there is none besides me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the Lord, do all these things." In short, the *telos* or design of history is the glory of God. Each of us exists because it happens to serve God's design for glorifying himself. He saves us because the exercise of his love and mercy brings him honor, not because there is anything in us that moves him to respond.

Another reason Paul brings up the example of Pharaoh is the circumstances surrounding God's instructions to Moses in the first place. In Exodus 4:18-23, we read that God commanded Moses to return to Egypt. "And the Lord said to Moses, 'When you go back to Egypt, see that you do all those wonders before Pharaoh which I have put in your hand. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.'" In other words, God is going to hold Pharaoh accountable for his hardness of heart even in the face of Moses's signs and wonders, and yet God intended to harden Pharaoh's heart all along. It's a tough passage, but there it is.

The second objection picks up where the first leaves off: How can God blame us for what he determined? After all, "Who can resist his will?" (v.19). How could God blame Esau, Pharaoh, or my unbelieving neighbor if they were only fulfilling his plan? This is the essence of the objection Paul anticipates. The belief that God's will "cannot be thwarted" (Dan.4) is not a peculiarity of Reformation thought, nor indeed of Christian thought. It is a basic declaration of theism! If one believes that God is dependent on human beings in any sense (either their willing or running), they are not merely Christians of a different color; they are following an essentially non-Christian and non-theistic interpretation of God's nature. Contemporary evangelical scholars such as Clark Pinnock and Richard Rice realize this and call for a rejection of classical theism for just that reason.

But this idea that God's ultimate intentions and designs cannot be frustrated or overturned creates tension. Paul does not resolve it, as God does not care to reveal it even to an apostle. Calvin warned, "The curiosity of man is such that the more dangerous the

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subject, the more willing he is to rush boldly into it…Let this, therefore, be our sacred rule, not to seek to know anything about predestination except what the Scripture teaches us. Where the Lord closes his holy mouth, let us also stop our minds from going on further."[2] Paul does not reply with a sophisticated line of metaphysical reasoning. He simply says, "Who are you, a mere human, to answer back to God?" In other words, to demand that God defend himself in our presence on this matter is the height of arrogance. Is there any reverence for God anymore? Is the Sovereign God allowed no secrets, no privacy in his heavenly chambers? Must every corner of his rooms be ravaged by our naive and fallen speculations? No, here, to switch metaphors, we come to the end of the precipice and to take a single step farther is to fall hopelessly into despair and confusion.

Next, Paul appeals to another Old Testament allusion: the potter and the clay. In Isaiah 29:15-16, the prophet declares, "Surely you have things turned around! Shall the potter be esteemed as the clay; for shall the thing made say of him who made it, 'He did not make me'?" But Paul changes the last question to read, "Why did you make me thus?" Out of the same lump (i.e., the same mass of fallen humanity), God chooses to make vessels of wrath and vessels of mercy, one to bring him glory by demonstrating his justice, the other to glorify him for his compassion and mercy. There is no distinction, as all are taken from the same group. Therefore, the elect cannot be proud.

Notice that this will of God is not capricious or arbitrary, a view that many Arminians suppose and hyper-Calvinists encourage. This, it must be said, is a view of God that has more in common with Greek philosophy than with Christianity. It is fatalistic and hopelessly at odds with the biblical picture. Rather, God's will is connected to his nature and attributes. In this sense, as Jonathan Edwards pointed out, no being (including God) has a free will. The will serves the nature and God is moved to elect, redeem, justify, and save not because of an arbitrary decision or whimsical display of power, but in order to show mercy and compassion. Remember, these are "vessels of mercy." He "will have mercy on whomever he will have mercy." In other words, God is presented in this passage as electing men, women, and children out of an already condemned and ruined race. Their condemnation is just, so God is not responsible for the resistance, disobedience, and hatred of those who are rejected, but only for the salvation of those who do embrace the forgiving grace of God.

Finally, it is essential that we point out what Paul labors to make clear elsewhere, especially in Ephesians chapter one: All of this is "in Christ." We are chosen, predestined, redeemed, justified, called, sealed, and so on, "in him." One of the great New Testament emphases, recovered so clearly by the Reformers, was that election should only be taught

[2] John Calvin, *NT Commentary on Romans Nine*.

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and understood in the context of one's relation to Christ. In other words, we cannot search for our election in an abstract philosophical manner. To be chosen is to be "in Christ" and to be in Christ is to be united to him through faith. We find our election not in our performance, race, success, or outward signs–for this was Israel's folly, but in Christ's cross and resurrection.

If these answers are not good enough for the reader, Paul concludes, the alternative to election is immediate judgment for all human beings (vv. 22-23).

The final question that is likely to be asked is this: Aren't we really talking about the nation Israel? Many of us were raised with the explanation that Romans nine was dealing with Israel's election, and not ours. This meant that Romans nine could be ruled inadmissible for use in the debate. But as Paul made clear here as elsewhere, the true Israel is created by grace, not by human descent, decision, or duties. Thus, there is no true Israel apart from faith in Christ. Only those who cling to him in faith are chosen; the rest are judged along with the Gentiles (Ro.11:5-10). "Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham," Paul instructed the Galatians (Gal.3:7). There are no Jews who ever have been saved, are now saved, or who ever will be saved who were not chosen members of the church in both testaments–the ancient (Old Testament) church looking forward to Christ and the modern church looking back to Christ and forward to his return.

Nevertheless, to emphasize that he is not speaking merely of the nation of Israel, Paul adds, "even us whom he called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles," (v.24) drawing on Old Testament prophecies pointing to the ingathering of the elect Gentiles together with the Jewish remnant in the formation of one body.

THE BASIS OF REPROBATION

Much could be said about the other side of the coin. As there are vessels of mercy that are chosen, so there are the vessels of wrath that are rejected. All Paul the apostle wishes to say about this matter is this: No one is reprobated by God without just cause. "What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why?" Does Paul answer, "Because they weren't chosen"? No, the blame is squarely on their shoulders: "Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law" (vv.30-33).

One of the surest ways to be confident that you are not one of the elect is to pursue a righteousness that you have created by your willpower and effort. The elect are simply

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those who have put down their swords of war, their shovels for digging out their own righteousness, and have placed themselves at the mercy of this God who has promised to have compassion on all who seek him. They are to be comforted by the fact that if they are seeking him it is because he himself has first loved and drawn them to himself. However, unbelievers are not to look to their election, but to Christ, whose offer of forgiveness extends to all people everywhere: "Come unto me, all you who work and are loaded down and I will give you rest."

Thus, this doctrine is calculated to drive home the idea that God saves us by grace alone because of Christ alone. Many are willing to accept that they were justified freely, but their resistance to this doctrine reveals an unwillingness to fully accept the idea that their salvation is not conditioned on anything in them. May we all, regardless of our traditional perspective, take this passage from Paul's Magna Charta seriously and employ this doctrine of election not merely in the service of theological debate, but in grateful appreciation and thanksgiving.

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