

ELECTION, CALVINISM, AND THE BIBLE

by Jack Cottrell

QUESTION: The New Testament speaks of God as “choosing” or “electing” us, and Christians are called “the chosen ones” or “the elect.” This sounds like determinism, or Calvinism. How can such language be reconciled with free will?

ANSWER: The main verb for “choose” is *eklegomai*; the adjective (as in “chosen ones”) is *eklektos*; the noun (“the chosen”) is *eklogē*. The words “elect,” “chosen,” and “predestined” carry similar connotations. A main point is that this language is used in different contexts with different applications. It does not always have to do with salvation, i.e., “chosen for salvation.” I will explain these different applications.

First of all, Jesus as the incarnate Son of God is called “My Son, My Chosen One” by the Father (Luke 9:35; see Isa. 42:1; Matt. 12:18; 1 Peter 2:4,6). His redemptive work was both predestined and foreknown (Acts 2:23; 4:28; 1 Peter 1:20). Obviously the second person of the Trinity was chosen not for salvation but for service, nor was he chosen against his own will.

Second, as with Jesus, when used of human beings sometimes the language of election refers to being chosen for service, not for salvation. God decides to use certain individuals to play specific roles in his program of redemption. To create the nation of Israel God chose Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Neh. 9:7; Rom. 9:7-13). He chose Moses (Ps. 106:23) and David (Ps. 78:70; 139:16) among others. He even chose certain Gentile rulers to help carry out his purpose for Israel, e.g., Pharaoh (Rom. 9:17) and Cyrus (Isa. 45:1).

Calvinists and determinists in general usually have completely misunderstood Paul’s point about election in Romans 9. They see God’s election of the individuals named here, and of the nation of Israel as such (see below) as referring to unconditional election to salvation. This is totally wrong. The point is election to service, as I show in my commentary on Romans.

Calvinists make a similar mistake regarding election language when used of the Apostles. E.g., Jesus says of the Apostles, “You did not choose Me, but I

chose you” (John 15:16). Calvinists continually cite this as proof for their doctrine of unconditional election to salvation, when Jesus is actually referring to his choice of these men, even Judas the betrayer, for key roles of service, not for salvation. See Luke 6:13; John 6:70; 13:18; 15:19; Gal. 1:15-16.

Third, the language of election is sometimes used in the Bible not for individuals as such but for groups, usually the nation of Israel. In this case, again, the election in view is to service and not to salvation. See Deut. 7:6; 14:2; 1 Chron. 16:13; Acts 13:17. This nation was chosen specifically to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. This corporate election for service had no necessary connection with the salvation of any particular Israelite. This is Paul’s main point in Romans 9—a point which is usually missed completely by Calvinists. In this section of Romans Paul is defending God’s sovereign right to unconditionally choose either individuals (such as Pharaoh) or groups (such as Israel) for roles of service without being bound to guarantee their salvation.

In a similar way the language of election is also used of God’s new elect body, the new Israel, the church. While not strictly parallel to OT Israel, in this age the church as a body is now God’s chosen people (1 Peter 2:9); and this election is in part an election to service. When Peter here describes the church as a “chosen race,” he adds this purpose for the choosing: “that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” Thus in terms of service, whereas Israel was elected for preparation, the church is elected for proclamation.

Fourth, the language of election is sometimes applied to groups in the sense of election to salvation, but in a very special way. Here the Bible speaks of a group as being chosen or predestined for salvation, not in the sense that every individual in the group will be saved, but in the sense that the group is chosen as the category of individuals to whom God is pleased to offer his gift of salvation. This is the key to understanding Paul’s treatment of predestination in Ephesians 1:1-14. His main point is not the predestination of individuals to salvation, but the predestination of all the Jews as a nation, and then the

predestination of all the Gentiles also, to be a part of his chosen people. However, he is not here speaking of every individual Jew nor of every individual Gentile as the object of predestination to salvation, but of God's choice to make salvation available to both groups and to unite both groups into one body, the church (see Eph. 2:11-16; 3:1-10).

A key to this understanding is how Paul's use of "we" and "you" in Ephesians 1 refers to "we Jews" and "you Gentiles." In this passage Paul identifies himself with the Jews, whom he calls "the first to hope in Christ" (v. 12). In the first part of the chapter he dwells on God's purpose for the Jews as a nation: how God chose them ("us") before the foundation of the world, how he predestined them to adoption as sons, how he offered them the gospel of grace first (see Rom. 1:16). It should be noted that the references to predestination in Ephesians 1 are strictly speaking of the predestination of the nation of Israel, not of individual believers. Paul's main emphasis up through v. 12 is on God's purpose for the Jews ("us"). But then in the next verses he begins speaking in the second person, "you," i.e., you Gentiles. In v. 12 he says that "we who were the first to hope in Christ" were used to the praise of his glory, but now "you also" have been brought into the sphere of salvation "to the praise of His glory." This is the theme he continues to develop, then, in chapters two and three especially.

The use of election language in this sense is also seen in some passages allegedly referring to repentance and faith as "gifts of God." E.g., Acts 5:31 speaks of Christ as the one who grants repentance to Israel, while Acts 11:18 says God has granted repentance to the Gentiles. The point is not that God grants actual faith and repentance to every member of the nation of Israel nor to every Gentile. The point is simply that God has made the opportunity to believe and repent available to both groups. This is the way in which God is said to have chosen both groups for salvation, i.e., he has made salvation available to individuals within the groups.

In part one of this essay [above], I said that the Biblical language of election is used in several different senses or applied in several different ways. In that

part, I explained the first four such ways: (1) the election of Jesus as the incarnate God the Redeemer; (2) the election of individuals to service, e.g., the patriarchs and the apostles; (3) the election of groups (especially Israel) to service; and (4) the election of groups as categories of individuals to whom God offers his gift of salvation, specifically the Jews and the Gentiles.

Now, fifth and finally, the language of election (predestination) is sometimes used in the Bible to refer to the fact that God has indeed chosen or predestined some individuals to salvation. Both Calvinists and non-Calvinists recognize this, of course. The difference between these groups is not that the former believes in predestination while the latter does not. No, the key difference lies in the fact that the former (Calvinism) believes that such election is unconditional, while the latter (non-Calvinists) believes that it is conditional. In TULIP, the Calvinist acronym for its doctrines of sin and salvation, the “U” stands for “unconditional election.” The key word here is “unconditional.”

When Calvinists say that God chooses individuals unconditionally, they mean that in eternity past he surveyed in advance the entire future sinful human race and chose to save some while allowing the rest to remain unsaved and go to hell. They also mean that God does this without any regard whatsoever to any responses the chosen individuals have made to God’s announced conditions for salvation. Indeed, there ARE no such announced conditions for being thus chosen. From our perspective, the election is arbitrary; and we have no say in it at all.

The non-Calvinist approach is just the opposite of this. It has three main points. First, God does choose (predestinate) some individuals to be saved. The language of election or choosing is definitely applied to us as individuals (see Rom. 16:13). We are “the elect,” the ones chosen by God. See, e.g., Matt. 24:22, 24, 31; Mark 13:20, 22, 27; Rom. 8:33; Col. 3:12; 2 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 2:10; Titus 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1-2; Rev. 17:14.

The second point is that our election is conditional. I.e., God specifies in advance what conditions a sinner must meet in order to be chosen for

salvation. In this New Covenant age these conditions, as clearly taught in the NT, are faith, repentance, confession, and baptism. (See my book, *The Faith Once for All*, chs. 19, 20, for an explanation of these as conditions for salvation.) These actions are decisions we must make in order to be chosen by God for salvation. Faith and repentance are not gifts which God bestows arbitrarily upon some sinners while passing others by. Ephesians 2:8 does NOT say that faith is the gift of God; Greek grammar does not allow this interpretation (see *The Faith Once for All*, 200). Nor should Acts 13:48 be translated as saying that “as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed” (NASB). The verb here is *tasso*, and it should be taken in the middle (reflexive) voice, not passive. I.e., “as many as turned themselves toward eternal life believed.”

The bottom line is that some choose to meet these conditions, and some do not. The Bible says emphatically that God wants all people to be saved (1 Tim. 2:2-4; 2 Peter 3:9), a fact that is clearly inconsistent with the whole idea of the unconditional election of only some to salvation. The Bible also clearly says that not everyone is willing to meet the conditions God specifies in order to be among the chosen. Jesus said these words over Jerusalem: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.” But in spite of Jesus’ own earnest desire (“I wanted”), he sadly acknowledges—“and you were unwilling” (Matt. 23:37). Jesus wanted to choose them, but they did not want to be chosen.

This is how we must understand texts such as John 5:21, which says that “the Son also gives life to whom He wishes.” In general he wishes to give life to all sinners, but Scripture makes clear that he will actually give life or salvation only to those who do those things he has specified as conditions for receiving it. These conditions are part of the gospel, through which God draws all men unto himself (see John 6:44, 65; 12:32). The word of the gospel draws ALL who hear it, but some resist its drawing power. God calls and draws sinners unto himself, but this calling and drawing are universal and resistible, not selective and irresistible (contrary to Calvinist teaching).

The third point is that God from eternity past in his foreknowledge has already foreseen who will and who will not meet his gracious gospel conditions by obeying his gracious gospel commands. (On the concept of obeying the gospel, see Rom. 10:16; 2 Thess. 1:8.) Based on this foreknowledge, in eternity past those whom he foreknew would meet these conditions were predestined to be with him in glory for eternity future. See Rom. 8:29; 2 Thess. 1:9; 1 Peter 1:1-2. God did not predestine anyone to believe and repent. He foreknew that they would believe and repent along with obeying the other gospel commands, and as a result he predestined them to final salvation.

Those who want to see more detailed discussions of these points should consult my published works thereon: What the Bible Says About God the Ruler (originally College Press, 1984; now Wipf and Stock), especially chapters 4-5, 8-9; What the Bible Says About God the Redeemer (originally College Press, 1987; now Wipf and Stock), pp. 389-399, “Is Grace Conditional or Unconditional?”; The Faith Once for All (College Press, 2002), ch. 19, “Conditions of Salvation”; ch. 20, “Baptism”; and ch. 22, “Predestination”; my essay on “The Classical Arminian View of Election,” ch. 3 in Perspectives on Election: Five Views (Broadman & Holman, 2006); and my commentary on Romans (College Press, 2-vol. ed., 1996, 1998; 1-vol. condensed ed., 2005), especially the comments on Rom 8:28 and on ch. 9.

Notes [1 Peter 3:20](#), 1 Timothy 2:2-4, 2 Peter 3:9, apostles, Arminianism, Baptism of Desire, Calvinism, College Press, Conditional election, Ephesians 2:8, Faith Once for All, Grace, Irresistible grace, Israel, Jerusalem, Original Grace, Original sin, Predestination, Repentance, Romans 10:16, Romans 16:13, Romans 6:4, Salvation, T-U-L-I-P, Theology, Unconditional election

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