Election and Reprobation

What is election?

The Baptist Faith & Message states: "Election is the gracious purpose of God, according to which He regenerates, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners. It is consistent with the free agency of man, and comprehends all the means in connection with the end. It is the glorious display of God's sovereign goodness, and is infinitely wise, holy, and unchangeable. It excludes boasting and promotes humility."

This definition accommodates Calvinists and Arminians, but it doesn't say whether election is *unconditional*, as Calvinists assert, or *conditional* as Arminians insist. Calvinists say God chose certain, specific sinners for Himself before creation based solely on His sovereign will and good pleasure. Arminians counter that God chose the elect because He foresaw their faith in Him. Is it possible to bridge this doctrinal divide?

The word "election" in Scripture is derived from the Greek word *eklegomai*, which means "to choose something for oneself." The Bible also uses words such as "choose," "predestine," "foreordain," and "call" to indicate that God has entered into a special relationship with certain individuals and groups through whom He has decided to fulfill His purpose.

The Bible speaks of election in three ways: 1) the election of individuals to office or to honor and privilege, for example, Abraham, David, and the apostles; 2) the election of nations to special privileges, particularly the Jews (Deut. 7:6; Rom. 9:4-5); and 3) the election of individuals to eternal life (Eph. 1:4; 2 Thess. 2:13; 1 Peter 1:1-2). It is the third usage of election with which we are concerned. The Bible teaches that certain people are elected, or chosen, "for salvation" (2 Thess. 2:13), to receive the "adoption as sons" (Gal. 4:5); and "to be holy and blameless in His sight" (Eph. 1:4). The ultimate end of election is the "praise of His glorious grace" (Eph. 1:6).

What does Scripture say?

Let's look at several passages on election:

John 6:37, 39 – Everyone the Father *gives* Me will *come* to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will never cast out…. This is the will of Him who sent Me: that I should lose none of those He has given Me but should raise them up on the last day.

- Jesus declares that God the Father has given certain *individuals* to Him. This passage, as well as others, refutes the idea of "corporate" election (see notes under Eph. 1:4-6).
- Jesus will keep those given to Him and complete His work of salvation by resurrecting and glorifying them.

John 10:16 - But I have *other sheep* that are not of this fold; I must *bring* them also, and they will *listen* to My voice. Then there will be one flock, one shepherd.

- While some already believed in Jesus, He knew there were others who *would* believe, and He considered them as belonging to Him already.

Acts 13:48 - When the Gentiles heard this, they rejoiced and glorified the message of the Lord, and all who had been *appointed* to eternal life believed.

- There are 15 different Greek word forms translated "appointed" in the New Testament. The word *tasso* is used here and means to place in order, arrange, ordain, or assign. The word often is used in a military sense.
- John MacArthur says this verse is "[o]ne of Scripture's clearest statements on the sovereignty of God in salvation. God chooses man for salvation, not the opposite" (*MacArthur Bible Commentary*).
- However, the construction of the Greek allows the passage to read, "… as many as had set themselves unto eternal life [believed]" (Ralph Earle, *Word Meanings in the New Testament*).

Acts 18:9-10 – Then the Lord said to Paul in a night vision, "Don't be afraid, but keep on speaking and don't be silent. For I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to hurt you, because *I have many people in this city*."

- Paul stayed in Corinth a year and a half as a result of God's encouragement (v. 11).
- God had appointed to salvation many Corinthians who had not yet heard the gospel message. Just as God elects people to salvation, He ordains the *means* of their salvation – hearing the gospel, believing, repentance, etc.

Rom. 8:28-30 - We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God: those who are *called* according to His purpose. For those He *foreknew* He also *predestined* to be conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brothers. And those He *predestined*, He also *called*; and those He called, He also *justified*; and those He justified, He also *glorified*.

- This passage is packed with key salvation terms. Those of the Reformed tradition refer to these verses as the "golden chain of redemption" – illustrating the beautiful and unbreakable work of God in choosing certain sinners to salvation before creation and then ensuring that His work of salvation is carried out into eternity future (see *Quick Reference Guide* for definitions of these key terms).
- Arminians use this passage to argue that God's election and predestination are based on His *foreknowledge* of future faith in certain sinners. However, while God is omniscient and certainly knows everything that will come to pass – including people's choices – the use of "foreknew" here clearly is a reference to God's knowing certain people and entering into a relationship with them before creation. As a result, He "predestined" the elect to be "conformed to the image of His Son," a reference to believers' future resurrection and glorification.
- A proper understanding of this passage does not necessarily rule out the Arminian position, but it does nothing to advance it.

Eph. 1:4-6 - For He *chose* us *in Him*, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He *predestined* us to be *adopted* through Jesus Christ for Himself, according to His favor and will, to the praise of His glorious grace that He favored us with in the Beloved.

- Some use this passage – specifically the words "He chose us in Him (Christ)" – to argue that our election is "in Christ." That is, Jesus is the "elect One" and the church is an "empty set" to be filled by people who freely choose to receive Christ. This is sometimes referred to as "corporate election." But it seems better, in light of other passages, to understand this as God's eternal plan for His Son to be the One through Whom elect sinners would be saved.
- Paul makes it clear that the Father chose believers for the purpose of making them holy and blameless in His sight – a work accomplished through His Son. In addition, the Father determined that the elect would be adopted into His family, which includes resurrection and glorification. Further reading makes the work of God even more complete: We have *redemption* through Christ's blood (v. 7); were made His *inheritance* (v. 11); and were *sealed* with the Holy Spirit, Who is our down payment on glorification (vv. 13-14).
- What was the Father's motivation in choosing us? Paul says it was "His favor and will" (v. 5); "to the praise of His glorious grace" (v. 6); "according to the riches of His grace" (v. 7); "according to His good pleasure that He planned in Him [Christ]" (v. 9); "to bring everything together in the Messiah" (v. 10); "according to the purpose of the One who works out everything in agreement with the decision of His will" (v. 11); "so that we … might bring praise to His glory" (v. 12); and "to the praise of His glory" (v. 13).
- There is nothing in these verses that suggests God was motivated by foreseen faith in certain sinners.

1 Thess. 1:4-5 - Knowing your *election*, brothers loved by God. For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, in the Holy Spirit, and with much assurance. You know what kind of men we were among you for your benefit.

- How do Paul, Silvanus and Timothy *know* these believers are elect? Because of the evident work of the Holy Spirit in changing their lives; they "became imitators of us and of the Lord" (v. 6), endured "severe persecution" (v. 6) and "became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia" (v. 7).
- These verses say nothing about whether the election of the Thessalonians was unconditional or conditional, but they do make it clear that God enables the elect to persevere.

2 Thess. 2:13 - But we must always thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God has *chosen* you for salvation through *sanctification* by the Spirit and through belief in the truth.

- Paul contrasts the elect with the non-elect, who "will be condemned – those who did not believe the truth but enjoyed unrighteousness" (v. 12).
- The means by which God saves the elect include "sanctification by the Spirit" and "belief in the truth" (v. 13). In addition, He "called you to this through our gospel, so that you might obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 14).
- While this passage clearly states that God has chosen some sinners "for salvation," it does not tell us whether that election is conditional or unconditional.

1 Peter 1:1-2 - Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ: To the temporary residents of the Dispersion in the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, *chosen* according to the *foreknowledge* of God the Father and *set apart* by the Spirit for obedience and [for the] sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ. May grace and peace be multiplied to you.

- Albert Barnes comments: "The simple fact here affirmed, which no one can deny, is, that there was *foreknowledge* in the case on the part of God. It was not the result of ignorance or of blind chance that they were selected. But if *foreknown*, must it not be *certain*? How could a thing which is foreknown be contingent or doubtful? The essential idea here is, that the original *choice* was on the part of God, and not on *their* part, and that this choice was founded on what he before knew to be best. He undoubtedly saw good and sufficient *reasons* why the choice should fall on them. I do not know that the reasons why he did it are revealed, or that they could be fully comprehended by us if they were" (*Barnes' Notes on the New Testament*).

What is reprobation?

In his *Systematic Theology,* Wayne Grudem defines reprobation as "the sovereign decision of God before creation to pass over some persons, in sorrow deciding not to save them, and to punish them for their sins, thereby to manifest his justice." Critics of this doctrine refer to it as "double predestination" and charge Calvinists with worshiping a God who is capricious, arbitrary, and lacking in redeeming love for all mankind. In any case, Scripture speaks of those whose eternal separation from God was known, even fixed, before creation, for example:

Rom. 9:21-22 – Or has the potter no right over His clay, to make from the same lump one piece of pottery for honor and another for dishonor? And what if God, desiring to display His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience objects of wrath *ready [prepared] for destruction*?

Rom. 11:7 – What then? Israel did not find what it was looking for, but the elect did find it. The rest were *hardened*.

1 Peter 2:8 – A stone that causes men to stumble, and a rock that trips them up. They stumble by disobeying the message; they were *destined* for this.

Jude 4 – For certain men, who were *designated* for this judgment long ago, have come in by stealth; they are ungodly, turning the grace of our God into promiscuity and denying our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Rev. 13:7-8 – And he was permitted to wage war against the saints and to conquer them. He was also given authority over every tribe, people, language, and nation. All those who live on the earth will worship him, *everyone whose name was not written from the foundation of the world in the book of life* of the Lamb who was slaughtered.

Rev. 17:8 – The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to come up from the abyss and go to destruction. Those who live on the earth *whose names were not written in the book of life from the foundation of the world* will be astounded when they see the beast that was, and is not, and will be present [again].

But do these verses mean that God, before creation, chose certain individuals for damnation, and therefore they can do nothing about it? The Arminian would shout, "No! People must choose and experience the consequences!" Most Calvinists agree, but view the issue from a different perspective. They would argue that, of all possible worlds, God decided to create a world in which free human beings would rebel against Him and fall into depravity. To manifest His glory, God would save some of these sinners, thus showing His grace, and bypass the rest, declaring His justice. No one goes to hell unjustly.

But doesn't God want everyone to be saved?

Consider the following passages of Scripture:

1 Tim. 2:3-4 – God our Savior … wants *everyone* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

2 Peter 3:9 – The Lord does not delay His promise, as some understand delay, but is patient with you, not wanting *any* to perish, but *all* to come to repentance.

These are strong statements that seem to tell us God desires eternal life for all people. Calvinists tend to address these passages in one of two ways:

- Some say these passages have certain people or certain kinds of people – not all people – in mind. For example, Paul's admonition to pray for "everyone, for kings and all those who are in authority" (1 Tim. 2:1-2) is a prelude to his statement that God "wants everyone" – namely kings and those in authority – to be saved (v.4). But if God wants all rulers to be saved, why not all other people? As for Peter's statement, some say the context (Peter is writing to believers) and his direct reference to his readers ("you") show that God desires the salvation of all the *elect*, not of all people. This, too, seems to stretch the text.

- Other Calvinists, like John Piper, do not dispute that these passages refer to all people. Rather, they contend that God has two wills – a will for all people to be saved, and a will to elect unconditionally those who will actually be saved. These two wills are complementary, not contradictory. Through the just punishment of the wicked and the gracious salvation of the elect, God demonstrates His sovereignty, justice and grace to all mankind.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, there are many passages of Scripture that speak of God's election of certain, specified sinners to salvation; the Bible verses in this document are but a few examples. God is the One who elects, according to His divine will and good pleasure, without any foreseen merit in those who trust in Him. There appears to be no clear Biblical support for the belief that God's election is conditional; the passages that speak of foreknowledge speak of *people* and not of their decisions. Yet to say that God's election was made in a vacuum – without considering all possible outcomes in the world He was about to create – reduces God to a capricious deity and distorts the Reformed view of unconditional election.

Therefore, it probably is best to reject the Arminian view of conditional election without embracing the fatalism of some extreme Calvinists; a moderate Reformed position on this issue matches well with Scripture. Perhaps it's best to state our case this way: God's purpose in election is beyond our full understanding (Isa. 55:8-9), yet we can rest in the knowledge that God is sovereign, just, gracious, and merciful. Our responsibility is to "confirm" our "calling and election" (2 Peter 1:10) through faith in Christ, trusting Him to complete the good work He began in us (Phil. 1:6), for even the staunchest Calvinist agrees that "everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Next week: Regeneration

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