

Election

Aaron Smith, Ph.D.

Experience: Associate Professor
of Theology at Colorado Christian
University

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Our Main Path: *The Word of God is the self-determining life and action of God.*

Having explored the trail of unaided reason and experience, and having tracked the corresponding relationship between theology and philosophy, we must now return to our main path. The Word of God is the self-determining life and action of God. It is His revelation, which defines who He is and defines who and what we, and all creation, are and will be. His reality, once more, is not a predicate of our reality, but the primal and basic cause of our existence in its every variety and potential.

We cannot lose sight of this order of things, and of its twofold determination. In and as His Word, God is eternally Lord over Himself and over all that He is not. He executes a decision regarding His being, which decision is of cosmological significance: He wills to be Immanuel, God-with-us, and so coordinately wills to create, reconcile, and redeem humankind. He wills to have His being in this determinative life and act, as light addressing itself to darkness and life to death, bringing light and life from emptiness and nonbeing.

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First Point: *God is as He wills to be, not as we would will Him to be.*

If God is primary and basic and we are secondary and derived, then we must say that God is as He wills to be, not as we would will Him to be, and that God is as He wills to be, not as we would will Him to be. Let me explain those emphases. First, God is in charge of His own life. Our lives make no necessary claim upon Him. He does what is consistent with His character. Secondly, His character is consistent with His doing. He defines the good and right and true by His choosing and acting. There is no fixed standard according to which He must act, for then that standard would be god, and He would be subject to it. He makes the standard of His being according to His willing and the consistency of its execution. God has His being as He decides to have it, and that just is good and right and true. He exists with reference to His deciding, not with reference to categories of existence that we think appropriate to Deity, the supernatural, or what have you.

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*Our true being is having **our** will brought into **conformity** with **God's will**.*

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Thinking and speaking of God in terms of God's Word.
 - Jesus Christ
 - Prophetic and apostolic testimony to Christ
 - Proclamation of the testimony to Christ

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Biblical Basis for the Doctrine of Election

In turn, we are as He wills us to be. Our being is subject to His will more basically than it is to our own. We think that we determine our existence by our choices and actions, but, in truth, God has elected us to “live and move and have our being” in Him (Acts 17:28). We plan, but in fact the Lord directs our steps, Proverbs 16:9 teaches.

Our true being is in having our will brought into conformity with God's will, such that the self-willing that codetermines our being takes place as gift, that is, as faith, as thinking and speaking in correspondence to the prior, decisive will of God.

These are loaded, complex claims. It will take us the better part of our next four lectures to work them out. To begin, we must get our minds around this core matter: If we are to think and speak of God, then we must do so according to His own thought and speech given to us.

We must think and speak in terms of God's Word. To think and speak in terms of God's Word is to think and speak in terms of God's self-determining will, that is, in terms of Jesus Christ, the prophetic and apostolic testimony to Christ, and the proclamation of that testimony. By this threefold form of His Word, God reiterates the decision that He executed from all eternity. He wills here and now to address Himself again to what He is not and to live in that address, to reveal Himself self-determinatively, to be God-with-us.

God's election, then, is not the mere outcome of a series of prior doctrinal commitments. It is not a secondary teaching of Christian faith, materially important for a few confessions but immaterial to most of us. On the contrary, it is at the heart of everything that we would think and say of God and of humankind.

I sometimes hear Christians say, “I don't believe in election. I don't think that the loving God I know would predestine people.” Besides the logical problem concerning the centrality of the doctrine of election to Christian thought and speech of God, there is a biblical problem with this claim. Actually, there are two biblical problems.

In the first place, the doctrine of election is scripturally non-negotiable. It is not possible to read the Bible and argue that this doctrine is simply the unfortunate creation of overeager theologians, or the like, which the more spiritually sensitive

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God wills and acts in covenant history

- Psalm 135:6
- Isaiah 46:11
- Isaiah 48:3

God constrains Himself by self definition.

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Election connotes a dynamic choice on God's part

- eklego: "spoke out"
- ekklerow: "called out"
- proorizo: "previously set apart"

among us can disregard. In fact, the teaching underlies some of the most basic concepts in all of Scripture: the pervasiveness of sin, the totality of our need for grace, and the decisiveness of God's action.

God wills and acts as He wills in covenant history. "The Lord does whatever pleases him," says the psalmist, "in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths" (Ps. 135:6). "What I have said, that will I bring about," the Lord declares in Isaiah 46:11, "what I have planned, that will I do." He continues in Isaiah 48:3: "I foretold the former things long ago, my mouth announced them and I made them known; then suddenly I acted, and they came to pass." God lives and acts as He decides, and it is this self-governing freedom that constitutes His God-ness. He is beholden only to Himself, accountable only to His power, wisdom, and goodness, which attributes He defines simply by His acting. No alien power, wisdom, or morality defies or defines Him. He is constrained by His self-definition and no other.

Yet He does constrain Himself by His self-definition! God is not arbitrary in electing; His freedom is not capricious fatalism as in the mythical tradition of ancient Near Eastern deities. His freedom is His right and power to be God, as we have seen, in and with what is not God. He is the free Lord precisely as the suffering Servant. His self-election determines that He should be God-with-us, not God-apart-from-us. In the second place, then, the elective will of God and the love of God cannot be biblically separated and played off against each other.

Ephesians 1 makes this clear. No less than six times in the opening 14 verses of this chapter, Paul stresses that God has "chosen," "elected," or "predestined" us, giving us His "glorious grace" and "redemption" in Christ and in love (twice in v. 4, once each in vv. 6, 7, 11, 13). Election is not factory output by an unimpassioned, preprogrammed Deity. It is the living act of a loving God.

Election connotes a dynamic choice on God's part, a living decision as opposed to once-for-all, mechanistic determinism. "For he selected us in [Christ] before the creation of the world," Paul writes in 1:4a. The word translated as "selected" here is eklego, which if we were to be quite stiff about it could just as well be rendered "spoke out" or "spoke forth." It connotes a purposive, thoughtful activity on God's part, not merely an indiscriminate, robotic assembling. Again, in verse 11, "In [Christ] we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him

Election is merely the manifestation of God's being God in and as Jesus Christ: God loves and therefore humans are elected.

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Karl Barth
- Church's Teaching
- Doctrine of Christ



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Karl Barth
Biblical need to
connect election to
the love of God in
Christ



who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will." The word for "chosen" is *ekklerow*, "called out." It suggests a relational kind of being in which the master directs himself toward a servant and summons him or her to his bidding. And the word for "predestination" (*proorizo*) means something like "previously set apart or delineated" and not "predetermined," or "pre-fated." It means marked out by a certain identity, not impassively fated to wooden performance of discrete activities collectively called "life."

Unmistakably, God elects and determines "according to the purpose of his will." Paul stresses that whatever God does with regards to us He does in and with His self-determination to be this God and not another. Election is merely the manifestation of God's being God in and as Jesus Christ. He, and not an unnamed deity living and acting prior to Him or externally from Him, is the eternally electing God. In and as Christ Jesus, God loves, and therefore humans are elected. In flesh and mortality, God exercises His power, His sovereign lordship over darkness and death and brings about light and life.

You may not have encountered election treated in exactly this way. If not, you are in good company: Most theologians agree that prior to Karl Barth's work on the doctrine in the 1930s, we do not see explicit connection between the church's teaching on election and the doctrine of Christ. In spite of Paul's language, when it came to predestination, the tradition largely thought and spoke in terms of a "God beyond God," God in pre-temporal eternity acting in differentiation from His love in Christ Jesus. Election was known as God's *decretum absolutum*, His "absolute decree," an abstract, preset dictate deriving from the depths of an unfathomable will. As if we do not know God's eternal will! As if Christ is not also God in pre-temporal eternity! As if our thinking and speaking are not bound to Him then and there as they are now and here!

We cannot walk through the full range of implications stemming from Barth's corrective treatment of election in this context. I hope that if nothing else you are beginning to see the biblical need to connect election to the love of God in Christ as he did, and that if you were someone who, prior to this lecture, was skeptical about the doctrine, you are beginning to appreciate its importance and promise. Of its essence, election is simply manifestation of the livingness of God;

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Election is part and parcel of God's self-defining life and action in His Word.

it is part and parcel of His self-defining life and action in and as His Word. We will, as indicated, work through some of the significance of God's self-determinative act in subsequent lectures as we consider the Trinity, the church, and human being. For the bulk of this lecture, we must discuss how election has been understood historically.

Historical Treatment of Election: Supralapsarianism, Infralapsarianism, and the Free-Will Tradition. We can identify three primary positions that various elements of the church have taken on the doctrine of election. These are Supralapsarianism, Infralapsarianism, and what is often referred to as Arminianism and Wesleyanism, but is perhaps best collectively called the free-will tradition.

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Supralapsarianism: *Above or prior to the fall of humankind*

The first position is Supralapsarianism. "Supra-lapse" means above or prior to the fall of humankind. Advocates of this perspective claim that God's decree took place logically and chronologically before the creation of the world. God's decision is not even logically dependent upon an eventual creation gone bad. It is not as if God looked out from a perch before creation, thought through different world scenarios, picked the one with Adam and Eve but, foreknowing in this scenario the occurrence of sin and death, He decided to save some people, maybe on the basis of their ultimate, positive response to Him.

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Supralapsarianism: *God created this world purely with reference to an ultimately unknown, eternal volition including in it creatures who are elect and other who are reprobate.*

No, God created this world purely with reference to an ultimately unknown, eternal volition, including in it creatures who are elect and others who are reprobate. Let God be God! We do not call God unjust for making such a world as we have and for differentiating between the creatures with which He populates it. Who are we to tell God what justice entails, and that it cannot mean carrying forward a plan in which some people will be condemned?

Supralapsarianism is the position typically ascribed to John Calvin. In truth, his stance is harder to pin down than most people realize; and how to interpret his many writings on the interplay of grace and human nature vis-à-vis salvation is much debated. My own reading of Calvin locates him in the supralapsarian camp, albeit incipiently and, to a degree, provisionally. The reason I place Calvin in this position is that it is the only one that can support the "double decree," which he clearly articulated.

"Double decree" refers to the notion that God elects both to salvation and condemnation. We will contrast this in a moment

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John Calvin
(1509 - 1564)



"All are not created in equal condition."

- John Calvin

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Infralapsarianism: Below or after the fall of humankind

with a "single decree," in which God elects only to salvation. Damnation in that case is simply the outcome of human choice. We will also contrast the notion of a double decree with the idea that God's single election to salvation really is just His foreknowledge of those who will respond favorably to Him.

For Calvin, it would compromise God's sovereignty to contend that His election was dependent upon foreknowledge of the human condition or of human decision. God is God in His freedom to live as He chooses, without necessary concern for us. Besides, what is really gained by placing damnation at the doorstep of human choice? Why not prevent the damned from making the choices that will subject them to hell, or, given the high stakes of eternal punishment, why not avoid creating those who will condemn themselves altogether? Since God could presumably conduct either sort of intervention, God is finally responsible for everyone's eternal condition anyway. Knowing what will come and not doing anything about it is equivalent in God to simply decreeing the final state of both elect and damned.

Thus, "all are not created in equal condition," Calvin writes in Book III of the Institutes. "But eternal life is foreordained for some, and eternal damnation for others." Again, God does not only elect some to be saved. He elects others to be damned as well. This is a hard but necessary conclusion demanded by God's sovereignty and consistent reasoning from the biblical data.

The apparent harshness of the supralapsarian position has caused offence to a number of Christians. It is usually this specific position that people have in mind when they say that they don't "believe" in election. Even before Calvin gave quintessential expression to the double decree, many theologians found a softer means of explaining God's election.

The middle of our continuum is occupied by the sub- or infralapsarians. Infra-lapse means below or after the fall. Here again, we are dealing with a logical and not merely chronological statement. "After" the fall still refers to the perspective that God enjoys from eternity: He elects on the basis of how He sees creation under the curse of Adam's sin, even though His vantage point is before that sin occurs. He elects on the basis of this foreknowledge of the fallen state of things, not with reference to the righteous choices that some will make in such a state, but strictly with reference to His sovereign grace.

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Infralapsarianism: Seeing humanity in a state of unrighteousness and helpless to lift itself out of it, God elects some.

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Infralapsarianism
 - Sin and damnation are brought about by humanity.
 - Salvation is brought about by God.

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Freewill: Exercising will to love and accept Him

Seeing humanity in a state of unrighteousness and helpless to lift itself out of it, God elects some. It is important to make note of this because in the infralapsarian position as in supralapsarianism, God's saving work in Christ does not amount to a "Plan B." It is still "Plan A." It is still the case that God wills the means of salvation for a select group from all eternity. This position too stands within the Calvinist/Reformed tradition because of the weight that it places on God's sovereignty. Yet as indicated, it is not the best reading of Calvin himself in that, in order to exonerate God from the charge of human sin and condemnation, it articulates only a single decree.

Sin and damnation are brought about by humanity. Salvation is brought about by God. The fourth/fifth-century theologian Augustine of Hippo is thus perhaps a fitter referent for Infralapsarianism.

Augustine taught that all of humanity is implicated in Adam's "original sin." God sees the human race from the start as a "mass of perdition." Out of this mass, God saves who He wills. All of humankind inclines by its inherited nature to sin and damnation, but God overcomes that nature for some and elects them to salvation. Humanity thus remains responsible for its failings, and God remains responsible for redemption.

Still other Christians do not think that the infralapsarian position goes far enough in accounting for the role of human choice in determining our eternal condition. The free-will tradition contends that God's election really amounts to His knowledge of those who, in receipt of His "prevenient grace," exercise their will to love and accept Him. "Prevenient grace" refers mainly to the universal work of the Holy Spirit on the human heart and mind, restoring to them an ability to perceive the love of God in Christ Jesus and respond favorably to it. It is the counterpart to "saving grace," or the atoning work of Christ on the cross.

As indicated, the key element at work in the free-will tradition is God's foreknowledge. Advocates of this perspective make relevant to God's eternal knowledge the eventual decisions of human beings. This extends beyond what infralapsarians consider relevant, which is again the simple awareness of human sin. Free-will proponents contend that God saves not only those who He recognizes to need His salvation, but also those who He knows to want His salvation. Anything less than awareness of this ardent desire makes God arbitrary and makes humanity irresponsible.

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God's saving work is broadly considered "Plan B" from the Freewill standpoint.

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Humanity is born in a state of sickness before

- Sickness itself is not damning. Only our choices condemn us.
- God conditionally elects those who respond to His Spirit and choose Him.

Why strive for salvation if God simply decreed it for an unknown group without reference to that group's will and decision?

Because it makes salvation contingent to a degree upon human choosing and acting, God's saving work is broadly considered "Plan B" from the free-will standpoint. God intended a sinless world, but confronted with the disobedience of His children, He crafted an alternative means of communion with them, namely, the cross of Christ. He offers the atoning grace of the cross to all people, but holds them accountable to accepting His offer.

Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609) is the principal exponent of the free-will perspective. Arminius was a student of Calvin's own disciples, but came to reject their views on election. To a large extent, he seems to have formed his own view in critical response to the core logic of the supra- and infralapsarian positions.

Arminius argued that humanity is born in a state of sickness before God. We are inundated in the consequences of Adam's sin, and as such we cannot be saved apart from divine aid. However, Arminius claimed that although we experience the illness of Adam's transgression, we do not inherit the guilt of that transgression. We only become guilty when we reach an age of self-consciousness and accountability and succumb to our sickness, willfully choosing to sin. Sickness itself, in other words, is not damning. Only our choices condemn us. We might thus say that the human is weak and in need of a doctor, but not totally depraved.

In the Arminian framework, then, election is conditional. God provisionally or conditionally elects those who respond to His Spirit and choose Him. That presupposes that everyone has the right to choose Him, that His saving grace is at least theoretically available to all of humanity and not only a preselected group. And it presupposes that some will not choose Him, that His grace can be resisted and even rejected unto eternal condemnation. Moreover, some who respond favorably today may change their minds tomorrow. They may not endure in their saved condition. In 1618, leaders of the Dutch Reformed Church in Holland convened a Synod in order to formally renounce Arminius' teachings.

In their place, the Synod of Dort outlined five points—colloquially and I'm afraid a bit misleadingly referred to as the "five points of Calvinism"—often listed by the mnemonic "TULIP." These

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Conclusion

- Return to Scripture
- Acknowledge the biblical tension regarding election
- Resituate the doctrine squarely on God

are Total Depravity (the guilt of original sin extends even to our preconscious, infant state); Unconditional Election (God's decree is not conditioned by or a function of our choice); Limited Atonement (God's saving work is, strictly speaking, for the elect alone); Irresistible Grace (when God gives His Spirit to us, He cannot be denied); and Perseverance of the Saints (once elected, we cannot then forfeit our salvation by a later choice; God's will trumps our will).

What can we make of these options? Our first step must of course be to return to Scripture. I'm afraid it will not be so simple, however, as just deciding which position enjoys biblical support or even the best biblical support. Each claims significant scriptural warrant. Supralapsarianism, for instance, looks to passages like Exodus 4, where God hardens Pharaoh's heart without explanation, to Job 14, Psalm 135, Romans 9, and Ephesians 1–2. Infralapsarianism cites texts like Jeremiah 29, where God foreknows His plans for Israel and will carry them out in spite of Israel's infidelity, Acts 2, and Romans 8. The free-will tradition anchors itself in passages like Exodus 8, where Pharaoh hardens his own heart, Deuteronomy 30, Joshua 24, and Hebrews 6.

We can, of course, take up a perspective and try to interpret the passages cited by alternative views in a way that does not undermine our chosen one. My sense, after looking back at centuries of just this effort yielding very few results, is that there must be a better way. Maybe God intends us to acknowledge the biblical tension regarding election, to allow it to stand and not ignore or resist it.

Maybe from the standpoint of human destiny, God wants us to live in this tension, for it returns our attention to Him. Maybe the Achilles' heel of each of the three traditional perspectives is that they rush to make election about the human being and not about God. To the extent that they refer to God at all, they do so in the abstract, once more, to an ultimately unknown factor. Maybe, then, the road forward on election is to resituate the doctrine squarely on God as He reveals Himself to be, to let His Word teach us about the electing God before all else, to allow it to ground our understanding of God entirely in the self-determining life and action of Jesus Christ.