

A Closer Look at the Biblical Doctrine of Election

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(For another study on *Election, Predestination, and Foreknowledge*, see, alexkurian.org, under Doctrine/Theology).

Many Christians label the doctrine of election as “Calvinistic” and ignore the fact that it is a Biblical doctrine. They openly deny the doctrine of election, to distance themselves from Calvinism. I have seen this trend in my own church circles. Some Christians claim to be “balanced” and “moderate” and they try to prove this by denying the doctrine of election. To many others, this is a divisive and controversial theological issue, and a very difficult doctrine to understand. Then, why bother about it?

Though election is not an easy doctrine to comprehend fully, we must affirm that it is a Biblical doctrine. If you believe the Bible, you believe in election. It is taught both directly and indirectly in so many passages. The question concerning election is not whether or not one understands it but whether or not the Bible teaches it. For many of us who believe election, the most important question is how we understand it. We should not neglect this truth because the Holy Spirit has put it in Scripture for our understanding. We must depend upon the Spirit of God to enlighten our minds to apprehend and appreciate this amazing doctrine. Let us see this as a “Biblical” doctrine and not as a “Calvinistic” doctrine. Too much of this “labeling” trend has hindered our open and honest pursuit of Scriptural truth.

What Is Election?

Election is God’s free and sovereign **choice of individuals** to salvation. Election is God’s gracious plan before creation to save those who believe, not because of any foreseen merit in them, but because of His sovereign will. I find four definitions very helpful in understanding this doctrine.

1. Louis Berkhof’s definition seems to reflect the Biblical doctrine of election fairly well. Election “*is that eternal act of God whereby He, in His sovereign good pleasure, and on account of no foreseen merit in them, chose a certain number of men to be the recipients of special grace and of eternal salvation*” (*Systematic Theology*, 114).

2. Wayne Grudem’s definition is very helpful: “*Election is an act of God before creation in which he chooses some people to be saved, not on account of any foreseen merit in them, but only because of his sovereign good pleasure* (*Systematic Theology*, 670).

3. The Baptist theologian A. H. Strong defined election as “*that eternal act of God, by which in his sovereign pleasure, and on account of no foreseen merit in them, he chooses certain out of the number of sinful men to be the recipients of the special grace of his Spirit, and so to be made voluntary partakers of Christ’s salvation*” (*Systematic Theology*, 779).

4. Dispensational theologian Charles Ryrie gives a simple definition: *Election is "God's pretomporal choice of those who would be saved"* (*Basic Theology*, 535).

The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, *A Faith To Confess* explains the Biblical doctrine of election in this manner: *"Before the world was made, God's eternal, immutable purpose which originated in the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, moved Him to choose (or to elect), in Christ, certain of mankind to everlasting glory. Out of His mere free grace and love He predestinated these chosen ones to life, although there was nothing in them to cause Him to choose them (Rom.8:30; 9:13,16; Eph.1:4, 9, 11; 1Thess 5:9; 2 Tim.1:9).*

Three Kinds of Election

The Bible speaks of three kinds of election.

1. Theocratic Election – The election of Israel to be God's chosen people (Deut.7:6-8; Amos 3:2; Rom.11:2). The holy status of Israel is a result of their election. God did not choose the Egyptians or the Canaanites to be His people. "The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth" (Deut.7:6). Neither Israel's size nor anything else about them motivated God, but by His love and sovereignty He chose them. But this has no bearing on their personal salvation (Rom.9:6-7).

2. Vocational Election – The Lord called out the tribe of Levi to be His priests; to stand and minister in the name of the Lord (Deut.18:5). God preordained, selected, consecrated, and appointment Jeremiah as a prophet before he was born (Jer.1:5). After Paul's conversion, God chose him in a special way to be His apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; 22:14; Rom.1:5).

3. Salvational Election – God's free and sovereign choice of individuals to salvation (Eph.1:4; 1; Acts 13:48; Thess.1:4; 2 Thess.2:13). The focus of this brief study is on salvational election.

Scripture employs the terminology of election in several senses. The Father *chose* the Son to fulfill the task of accomplishing salvation for the elect (Isa.42:1; Luke 9:35; 1 Peter 1:20). The Lord *chose* twelve disciples for the task of apostolic service and mission (Mark 3:13-15; John 13:18; 15:16). In Scripture we find election unto service, and election of certain individuals to salvation. The New Testament is especially clear that God has chosen particular individuals for salvation. ***Salvational election is an explicit teaching of the New Testament.***

Three Major Views on Election

1. Foresight Election - God looked down the corridor of time and in His foreknowledge saw who would accept Christ and then elected them. Thus election is based on faith, on the basis of who would believe in Christ. This is the doctrine of **conditional election**, and is often called the **foreseen faith view**. Many evangelicals consciously or unconsciously hold on to this view of election. It is as though God is saying, "You have decided to choose Me, so now I have a basis to choose you." Thus election is based on the virtue of the sinner; something in the sinner causes

God to choose him. This is a humanistic view of election, far from Scriptural truth. Sinners are unable to respond to God in any positive fashion as they are dead in their sins and trespasses (Eph.2:1). God has to make the first move.

As in the case of Jacob and Esau, the elect are chosen solely on the basis of the sovereign good pleasure of God and not on the basis of anything they have done or will do. Unconditionally and completely, apart from any human merit God elects His own. This is what Paul clearly declared in Romans. "...Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; for though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of Him who calls" (Rom.9:10-12). Paul further explains: "So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy" (Rom.9:16). **God sovereignly elected Jacob and passed over Esau before even they were born.** He chose them without any regard to what they would do in their lives, but purely that God's purpose according to election might stand. This is also supported in Malachi 1, where God deliberately cursed Esau and his descendants. God's love for Jacob was manifested in actively choosing him to receive the promised blessings (Mal.1:2-3). Both Mal.1 and Rom.9 declare **God's sovereign choice of individuals without any foreseen merit in them.** God's sovereign choice of Israel as a holy nation was based on God's love and faithfulness, not in any merit or intrinsic goodness in Israel (Deut.7:7-8).

Election is unconditional. It is based on God's sovereign right as King and Lord, not on the basis of faith or foreseen merit. God's choice was not conditioned by any human activity or instrumentality but was determined solely on the free choice of God. Our faith is never presented as the reason God chose us. If this was the case, then it would be salvation by merit.

The *foresight election view* has a faulty understanding of foreknowledge. **God's "foreknowledge" is misunderstood as God's "foresight."** The Greek word *proginisko* sometimes means to know in advance, to know beforehand. But often it means to have a personal, intimate relational aspect in that knowledge. The parallel Hebrew verb "to know" (*yada*) also expresses personal and intimate knowledge. It is in this sense that Adam *knew* his wife and she conceived and bore children (NASB: "Adam had relations with his wife", Gen.4:1, 25). Israel was the only people out of the families of the earth whom Jehovah had *known*", that is, loved, chosen and entered into a covenant relationship (Amos 3:2). In fact *yada* is translated as "chosen" in all the modern translations (see also Gen.18:19).

"Whom He foreknew" (Rom.8:29) is "virtually equivalent to "whom he foreloved." It means "whom he set regard upon" or "whom he knew from eternity with distinguishing affection and delight" (John Murray, *The Epistle To The Romans*, 317). It is in this sense that the word "foreknowledge" is used in Rom. 11:2 and 1 Peter 1:20). According to *foresight election* the words "whom He foreknew" means by foresight ("foreknowledge" is misunderstood as "foresight") God saw the faith by which some would believe. But such an interpretation fundamentally misunderstands the object of foreknowledge. **It is not a person's faith, but is a person "whom"**

God foreknew. God foreknew the person and not something he or she would do. Election was not on the basis of foreseen merit or faith in individuals.

2. Corporate Election - Election is the choosing of the church, the redeemed community as a group in Christ, but not of individuals. Since it is the church being elected in Christ, when an individual believes in Christ, he is placed in the elect group, and thus he can said to be elect. In this view there are variations. Some would see election as God's call of His elect people to service while others stresses the divine call to be God's redeemed people, prior to the service.

3. Individual Election – God elected individuals in Christ for salvation (Eph.1:4), not on the basis of any foreseen merit in them, but according to His sovereign will and purpose, and those elect individuals form the church.

The Biblical doctrine of election is of individuals (Eph.1:4; 1 Cor.1:27-28; 2 Thess.2:13; Acts 13:48). We come to Christ individually, we are saved individually. We individually experience and claim the redemptive promises of salvation. Elect individuals form the group, the church. **Election is unconditional, pretemporal (before the foundation of the world), unmerited (by grace alone), and individual.**

God chose us (Eph.1:4)

“He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before Him.” One of the greatest spiritual blessings God has given to us is that He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. Eph.1:3-14 highlights the manner in which God blesses believers through the three persons of the Trinity. The spiritual blessings are the election of the Father, the redemption of the Son, and the seal of the Holy Spirit.

Eph.1:4 may be considered as one of the most important verses in the New Testament on the doctrine of election. Certain truths are obvious in the text:

1. **The source of election** - God the Father. “He chose.” God made the choice as to who will be saved.

2. **The object of election** – “Us”, the elect. Not everyone, but only those whom God chose.

3. **The sphere of election** – “In Christ.”

4. **The time of election** – “before the foundation of the world”, in eternity past.

5. **The purpose of election** – “that we should be holy and blameless.”

The verb translated “**chose**” (*eklego*) means “to select”, to pick out”, and is in the middle voice, as in every instance, indicating that choosing is by Himself and for Himself with a personal interest. God made the choice on the basis of the good pleasure of His will (Eph.1:5). God chose us from the whole human race. If God had not chosen me, I would never have chosen Him. It is an astonishing blessing, for it has to do with God's loving choice of me to be His own. It is not

dependent on human faith or deeds, since election happens before the foundation of the world. The object of the choice is “**us**” – the individuals who are chosen. In the context this has reference to Paul and the believers, the recipients of the letter. Election is individual, unconditional and pretemporal. What a comforting thought to the believer!

God chose us “**in Him.**” God chose us in connection or in union with Christ, through Christ’s work of redemption. Apart from Christ there would have been no election or salvation. All of the spiritual blessings we receive center in Christ. In ourselves we are unworthy. The name of Christ excludes all human merit. The verse does not say God only chose Christ and then we chose Him, as some would have us believe. According to this view, God chose Christ as the elect, and that all who believe in Him become elect by their faith in Him (but not individually chosen by God). “If this were the case, believers by their faith would have a legal claim whereby God must choose them” (Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians, An Exegetical Commentary*, 176). But this verse doesn’t say that. It simply states that **God chose us** to be in Christ. Moreover, Christ is God’s elect (isa.42:1; Matt.12:18) to be the redeemer in contrast to sinners being elected for redemption.

The purpose for those chosen by God is to be **holy and blameless**. Believers should reflect God’s character. God did not choose anyone because they were holy but he chose them in order that they might be holy. In his extended Ephesian doxology (1:3-14) Paul thrice asserted that God’s purpose in election is to the praise of God’s grace and glory (1:6, 12, 14).

Election Is A Positive Doctrine

Election is a precious doctrine that leads to wonder and worship. “Salvation is of the Lord” (Jonah 2:9). The origin, the end, and indeed the only possible source of salvation is God. Salvation begins with God’s choice of us rather than our choice of Him. Salvation is of grace and grace alone, so that the glory might be God’s. We exult that our salvation is all of God and all of grace. The doctrine of election draws us closer to God and humbles us before Him. We are forever safe in His love, which motivates us to pursue the holiness to which He called us.

The doctrine of election encourages us in evangelism. God works in the hearts of those He has chosen to bring them to salvation. The ones whom God has chosen are those who respond in faith to the gospel. “As many as had been appointed to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48). Without His choosing and calling, no one would come to Him (John 6:44). God’s election does not exclude the use of means through which He calls, and the proclamation of the gospel by believers is that means. The only way we know the elect is through their response to the gospel. The invitation to salvation is generously open for all and “whoever will” may still come. All people are responsible for their response to Jesus Christ. Scripture does not present God’s plan of salvation as incompatible with man’s will. The sovereign plan includes the actions and responsibilities of man. It is all part of His plan.

Conclusion

“Now everybody finds the doctrine of election difficult. ‘Didn’t I choose God?’ Somebody asks indignantly; to which we must answer ‘Yes, indeed you did, and freely, but only because in eternity God has first chosen you.’ ‘Didn’t I decide for Christ?’ asks somebody else; to which we must reply ‘Yes, indeed you did, and freely, but only because in eternity God had first decided for you” (John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, 37).

Election is an amazing doctrine. It fuels worship and evangelism. It becomes a source of joy, comfort, assurance and security. Let God be God and submit to His Word. Then the doctrine of election will become meaningful and exciting. The only “label” that fits this doctrine is “Biblical.” Don’t try to “label” it in any other way.

Appendix 1

Some Important Verses on the Doctrine of Election

(Verses quoted from the New American Standard Bible. Highlighted for emphasis)

1. Just as He **chose us** in Him before the foundation of the world (Eph.1:4).
2. Knowing, brethren beloved by God, His **choice of you** (1 Thess.1:4).
3. God has **chosen you** from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth (2Thess.2:13).
4. Who has **saved us and called us** with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to **His own purpose** and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from **all eternity** (2Tim.1:9).
5. And so, as those who have been **chosen** of God holy and beloved (Colo.3:12).
6. There has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God’s gracious **choice** (Rom.11:5).
7. Just as it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So then **it does not depend on the man** who wills or the man who runs, **but on God** who has mercy (Rom.9:13-16).
8. So then He has mercy on **whom He desires**, and He hardens whom He desires” (Rom.9:18).
9. For **whom He foreknew, He also predestined** to become conformed to the image of His Son that He might be the firstborn among many brethren; and whom He predestined these He also **called**; and whom He called these He also **justified**; and whom He justified, these He also glorified (Rom.8:29-30).
10. For consider your **calling** brethren.....God has **chosen** the foolish things of the world.....God has **chosen** the weak things.....God has **chosen** the things that are not.....But by **His doing** you are in Christ Jesus (1 Cor.1:26-31).

11. For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are **chosen** that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory (2 Tim.2:10).
12. Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and **choosing** you (2 Peter 1:10).
13. In the exercise of **His will He brought us forth** by the word of truth (James 1:18).
14. As those who have been **chosen** of God, holy and beloved (Colo.3:12)
15. Paul a bond-servant of God, and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the faith of **those chosen of God** (Titus 1:1).
16. For many are called, but **few are chosen** (Matt.22:14).
17. You did not chose Me, but **I chose you** and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit (John 15:16).
18. All that the **Father gives Me** shall come to Me (John 6:37).
19. Of all that **He has given Me** I lose nothing (John 6:39).
20. No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me **draws Him** (John 6:44).
21. **The men whom Thou gavest Me out of the world..... those whom Thou hast given Me** (John 17:6, 9, 11,12; John 10:29).
22. And as many as had been **appointed to eternal life** believed (Acts 13:48).

Appendix 2

The Doctrine of Election: What Do These Verses Really Mean?

(Some Exegetical Insights)

1. Matt.11:25-27: “.....Thou didst hide these things from the wise and intelligent and didst reveal them to babes. Father’s sovereign revealing and concealing of divine truths (truths about Jesus and the Kingdom) as He *pleases* (11:25). This is a deliberate act. “Yes, Father, for thus it was well-pleasing in Thy sight” (11:26) - This was your ***good pleasure, well pleasing, seemed good in your sight***. The Greek word ***Eudokia*** expresses independent volition and sovereign choice. This is the same word used in Eph.1:9 (“good pleasure”; “kind intention as in NASB), a passage that deals with election and God’s eternal redemptive purpose.

11:27: “**Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him**” (“the Son desires” – HCSB; “the Son chooses to” – ESV, NIV; the Son wills” - NASB, NKJV, KJV; “the Son decides” – NET Bible). *Bouleetai* (Present subjunctive of *boulomai*, “to will.”

Boule is used in relation to election in Eph.1:11 (“counsel”). See *Thelematos* from *thelo* (to desire, to want, to will) used in election passage in Ephesians (1:5, 9, 11).

The point in **Matt: 11:27** is that God sovereignly extends His enlightening and saving influence/grace to some persons while justly withholding it from others. It is important to note that universal invitation to all to come to Jesus is followed in **verse 28**: “Come to Me all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” This is **not** inconsistent with God’s eternal purpose in relation to salvation; to reveal His Son to **some** (11:27).

2. Matt.22:14: “For many are called, but few are chosen.” The Parable of the wedding banquet (also in Luke 14:16-24) pictures the unbelieving Israel set aside and the Gospel goes out to the Gentiles. The Gospel invitation goes out to many, but only few are chosen. The meaning is obvious. This clearly indicates a salvation truth. *Kletoi* and *ekletoi* (*called, elect, chosen* are words related to salvation. God extends a general, universal call/external call to many via the Gospel. Those who respond and receive Christ are the chosen ones (heard the special call or internal call). But His sovereign choice is surely compatible with the decisions people make. **There is an election, but individual response is essential. Those who reject the invitation do so willingly, so their exclusion from the kingdom is perfectly just.** The chosen enter the kingdom only because of the grace of God. The special call issued by the Spirit effectually accomplishes the Father’s salvific purpose.

“All who respond to the good news are chosen. The only way a person can tell whether he is chosen is by what he does with the Lord Jesus Christ” (William MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary*, 1286).

“...there is a general call of God to sinners inviting them to receive His salvation, and there is also a special election that brings some to him. At the same time, man is held responsible for rejecting Christ....” (*Ryrie Study Bible*, NASB, 1485).

3. John 6:44 (see also 37, 65): **“No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him.”** There is a divine “drawing” activity that happens in one’s salvation. “No one is able to come” (*dunamai* means “to be able”) implies that man is helpless in himself and does not have the spiritual or moral ability to come to Christ on his own, unless the Father *draws* him. God makes the first move, then only man can move toward God. God is the one who first acted in our salvation. God is sovereign in our salvation. Man does not choose God, God chooses man. Men do not open their hearts to Jesus. God opens men’s hearts and minds to Him (Acts 16:14: “The Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul”). The doctrine of election is part of the sovereignty of God in man’s salvation.

Jesus explains that it is impossible for anyone to believe in Him unless the Father who sent Him *draws* them. Verse 44 is the negative counterpart to verse 37: **“All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me.”** But no one can come to Jesus unless the Father draws them. This *drawing* seems to be selective. The *drawing* has to happen first, then only they can come to Jesus. If the *drawing*

does not happen, they will not and cannot come to Him. The divine initiative in salvation is emphasized.

None at all would come unless divinely persuade and enabled to do so. Verse 45 explains the meaning of the Father's *drawing*. "It is written in the prophets, "And they shall all be taught of God. Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me" (John 6:45). The drawing takes place by a teaching, an illumination implanted within the individual (quoted from Isa.54:13). But the responsibility of men and women in the matter of coming to Christ is not overlooked. ".....and you are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life" (**John 5:40**) - Divine sovereignty and human responsibility in salvation.

John 6:65 also repeats the same truth. "**No one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father.**" Though men and women are held accountable for their unbelief, this verse also reminds divine initiative in salvation, and that faith is never exclusively a matter of human decision. Coming to the son is something *granted* (*given, dedomenon* from *dedomi= to give*) by the Father. It is by divine enablement and persuasion a person comes to Christ. "However much men and women are commanded to believe, and are held accountable for their unbelief, genuine coming to faith is never finally a matter of autonomous human decision" (D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According To John*, 302-303). "The Lord Jesus told men that even the power to come to Him can only be received from God the Father (Macdonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*, 1507).

Helkuo (draws) carries the idea of irresistible force though it may imply resistance to the power that draws. But none of the examples of the usage of this word in the New Testament show the resistance to be successful. The drawing power of God overcomes the resistance and is triumphant. It is the word used for drawing a heavily laden net to the shore, a net filled with a great number of fish (John 21:6, 11). It is the word that is used of Paul and Silas being dragged before the civil authorities in Philippi (Acts 16:19). It is used for drawing a sword from the belt (John 18:10).

Johannine "drawing" is parallel to Pauline "calling." People cannot be saved unless God through the Holy Spirit draws them. God's elective will irresistibly draws whom He has chosen. The sinner is able to choose God because God has made that choice possible. In the verses considered in **John 6** Jesus declares two important truths in relation to salvation:

1. The Father gives people to the Son and draws them to Him, and they come to the Son.
2. The Son gives them eternal life, keeps them and will resurrect them from the dead (a strong assertion of the security of salvation).

Many attempt to dilute the importance and force of this *drawing* by referring to John 12:32 where Jesus claims that 'He will draw all men to himself.' But the context clearly indicates that it is not just the Jews, but also Gentiles will be drawn to Him. **It is all men without Jew, Gentile distinction**; not just Jews. The Gospel and His saving grace will be available to Greeks/Gentiles

also (it is in the context of the Greeks who wanted to see Jesus, 12:20). This *drawing* is without distinction, not without exception.

4. Acts 13:48: In Pisidian Antioch “as many as had been appointed (“ordained”-KJV) to eternal life believed.” The Jews opposed the missionaries and rejected the Gospel thereby judging themselves unworthy of the Gospel (13:46). But the Gentiles heard the Word and all who were appointed to eternal life believed. This statement is significant in the light of the Jewish rejection. If people are saved it is by God’s gracious appointment and choice. **This is one of the clearest statements in Scripture that God chooses men for salvation.** The obvious meaning of this verse cannot be ignored. Belief in Christ is not just a matter of one’s faith but primarily involves divine appointment.

“**Appointed**” is from the verb *tasso*. F. F. Bruce points out that this word is used in some ancient documents in the sense of “to inscribe” or to “enroll” (*The Book of Acts*, 283, Foot note 72). Is the book of life (Phili.4:3; Rev.3:5; 13:8, 17:8, 20:12, 15; Psa.69:28; Dan.12:1; Exod.32:32-33) the list on which the elect are enrolled? This enrolling/ordaining or appointment occurred prior to the people’s believing. This points clearly to the sovereign election of these people.

“Scripture affirms that those who go to hell do so because they judge themselves unworthy of eternal life (v.46). Conversely, the elect are saved because God appointed them for eternal life (v.48). Those truths form a narrow causeway between two deep chasms. To emphasize either truth at the expense of the other is to plunge oneself into the abyss of doctrinal error” (John MacArthur, *Acts 13-28*; 39).

“It is difficult to miss the doctrine of God’s election here; the words “were appointed” come from the verb *tasso*, a military word meaning “to arrange” or “to assign.” Luke used it here to show that God’s elective decree included Gentiles” (Stanley D. Toussaint, *Acts*, The Bible Knowledge Commentary, NT, 390-91).

“This verse is a simple statement of the sovereign election of God. It should be taken at its face value and believed. The Bible teaches definitely that God chose some before the foundation of the world to be in Christ. It teaches with equal emphasis that man is a free moral agent and that if he will accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, he will be saved. Divine election and human responsibility are both scriptural truths, and neither should be emphasized at the expense of the other. While there seems to be a conflict between the two, this conflict exists only in the human mind, and not in the mind of God” (MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary*, 1623).